

## Communication imperialism and dependency: A conceptual clarification

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### Introduction

This paper deals with the conceptual differences among 'media imperialism', 'cultural imperialism' and 'communication imperialism'. The academic discourse in the study of unbalanced international communication has been obfuscated by an absence of consensus in the use of these concepts. Examining the various connotations of different terminologies, the author suggests that we had better use 'communication imperialism' to depict the phenomenon of an unbalanced international communication pattern, in which an active role on the part of the dominating country and a deleterious effect on the dominated one are assumed. The paper also explicates the conceptual differences between 'communication imperialism' and 'communication dependency'. Communication imperialism implies an active role on the part of the 'sender' country in the unbalanced international communication process which has a deleterious effect on the culture of the 'recipient' country. In the case of communication dependency, however, no deleterious effect on the 'recipient' country need be assumed, and the 'sender' country does not necessarily play an active role in creating and perpetuating the unbalanced pattern of international communication. To determine whether a sender state has played an active role in the process, we can examine three aspects: 1) the state policies, 2) the efforts of private sector to export communication elements, and 3) the retaliation of the dominating country against the dominated which tries to break

away from the unequal pattern of international communication. The distinction between 'communication imperialism' and 'communication dependency' is necessary because these two conceptions prescribe different focuses in the study of unbalanced international communication. The use of the term 'communication imperialism' will entail one to focus mainly on the international distribution of power and resources and the deleterious effects of the unbalanced international communication, while the use of the term 'communication dependency' will direct one's research efforts more to the internal situations of the dependent country and no deleterious effects of the unbalanced international communication are necessarily assumed. The author finally makes a distinction between 'involuntary dependency' in which the peripheral country has no choice in not relying on the metropolitan country and 'voluntary dependency' in which the peripheral country can dissociate from the metropolitan country but chooses to rely on it. The share of the blame is larger on the peripheral country in the case of 'voluntary dependency'.

### **'Media', 'cultural' or 'communication' imperialism?**

The concept of 'media imperialism' remains vague and sometimes even confusing. A common consensus has not yet been reached among the concerned academic community about the use of the term, definition or criteria of judging the phenomenon of domination of a country's media activities by another. In the absence of such a consensus, the search for a theory is difficult.

When people refer to the domination of a country's media activities by another, the terms most frequently used are 'cultural imperialism', 'communication imperialism' and 'media imperialism'. More narrowly or specifically, there are also the use of 'electronic colonialism'<sup>1</sup> and 'television imperialism'.<sup>2</sup> Some writers also use the word 'dependency' interchangeably with 'imperialism' as if the two words carried the same meanings.

A central question related to these conceptual chaos is the level of 'specificity' one should use in the study of the domination of communication activities of the peripheral states by a few metropolitan countries.

For some authors, media are only part of the whole social system. If attention is paid only to the media, the total picture of imperialism will be missing. A holistic view of the media's role in international communication is especially stressed by some radical writers.<sup>3</sup> These authors regard media systems as a focal point in the cultural sphere of the dependent countries. But these media systems are inadequate in fostering development in the developing countries because of dependency.<sup>4</sup> They insist that the ownership and control of the media in the context of the power structure both internal and external to the society should be analyzed, and the ideological signification of meaning in the messages as well as its effects in reproducing the class system must also be analyzed in order to understand the transnational media activities.

In short, these authors look at the phenomenon of domination of some countries' media activities by others in a larger context of the international power structure, world economic system and internal class relations. For these authors, the term 'cultural imperialism' or 'imperialism' is a better concept than 'media imperialism' because it does not only indicate a broader scope of the phenomenon studied, but also point to the complexity of the domination of a country's media activities by another. Schiller, for example, remarks, 'It is pointless ... to attempt to measure the impact of any individual medium or message. Each is a contributor in its own way to a systemic process'.<sup>5</sup> He defines cultural imperialism as 'the sum of processes by which a society is brought into the modern world system and how its dominating structure is attracted, pressured, forced into shaping social institutions to correspond to, or even to promote the values and structures of the dominant center of the system'.<sup>6</sup> But as Salinas and Paldan comment, this definition of cultural imperialism remains descriptive and greater analytical effort is needed if it wants to have some explanatory power.<sup>7</sup>

In view of the vagueness of the concept of cultural imperialism, Boyd-Barrett suggests the use of 'media imperialism' so that the phenomenon may lend itself more easily to a rigorous examination. He defines media imperialism as 'the process whereby the ownership, structure, distribution or content of the media in any one country are singly or together subject to substantial pressure

from the media interests of any other country or countries without proportionate reciprocation of influence by the country so affected'.<sup>8</sup> Lee identifies four aspects of international media activity to be studied under the concept of media imperialism. These four aspects are television program exportation to foreign countries, foreign ownership and control of media outlets, the transfer of the dominant broadcasting norms and media commercialism, and the infringement of capitalist world views upon the indigenous ways of life in adopting societies.<sup>9</sup>

Fejes however thinks that the scope of media imperialism should be broadened to include the processes of the transference of communication technology, export of professional models and flow of transnational data. He asserts that 'media imperialism is not simply the flow of particular products of the mass media such as television programs or news stories between the developed countries and the Third World nations';<sup>10</sup> he argues that the focus of media imperialism should not be limited only to mass media ignoring other forms of communication.

This line of thinking leads to the use of another term, namely, 'communication imperialism', in the study of transnational media activities. In his attempt to construct a structural theory of imperialism on the basis of dependency theory, Galtung distinguishes communication imperialism from cultural imperialism. In the study of communication imperialism, the emphasis is on the analysis of the 'feudal interaction structure' of imperialism. The word 'communication' does not only apply to media activities but transportation as well.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, Galtung in this definition treats the means of communication/transportation as pure commodities just like coffee or machines. He places the cultural aspect of communication/transportation in the definition of cultural imperialism. He observes:

... the preceding generation of means of communication/transportation can always be sold, sometimes second-hand, to the periphery as part of the general vertical trade/aid structure alongside the means of production (economic sector), the means of destruction (military sector), and the means of creation (cultural sector). The center's planes and ships are faster ... and when the periphery finally catches up, the center will

already for a long time have dominated the field of communication satellites.<sup>12</sup>

According to Galtung, it is in the realm of cultural imperialism, not communication imperialism, that there exists a division of labor between teaching and learning which reinforces the Center as a center and deprives the Periphery the means of creation rendering perpetually the Periphery a dependency status.

Although different authors have different preferences about the use of the term in describing the phenomenon of a country's media activities being dominated by another, there seems to be three basic concerns commonly shared among these authors. First, there is a concern of the export of both the hardware and software of mass media. Second, apart from mass media, other forms of communication such as satellites, computers, data bank service and transportation are also concerned. Third, nearly all researchers in this field feel the need to examine the cultural impact of the international communication activities upon the developing countries.

The question is only which term is more appropriate to capture the phenomenon of domination of a country's production, creation, and utilization of information by the other. The present author suggests that 'communication imperialism' is a better concept to embody the three basic concerns of international communication.

Although Galtung reserves the term 'cultural imperialism' to include the dimension of cultural impact of media, it is thought that without the dimension of deleterious cultural impact, the term 'media imperialism' or 'communication imperialism' can hardly be justified. If we just treat media activities as pure commodities without cultural implications, when we find the ownership and control of these commodities in foreign hands, we could at best call it 'economic imperialism' but not 'media imperialism'. If we do not make such a distinction, then we may have 'coffee imperialism' or 'light-industry imperialism'. Without incorporating the cultural aspect in the study of media domination, we may end up either confusing the study in this area or dismantling the critical tradition of the imperialism approach.

Based on Boyd-Barrett's definition of media imperialism, 'com-

munication imperialism' can be defined as 'the process in which the ownership and control over the hardware and software of mass media as well as other major forms of communication in one country are singly or together subjugated to the domination of another country with deleterious effects on the indigenous values, norms and culture'.

According to Boyd-Barrett, the reason for using 'media imperialism' is that it will narrow the range of the phenomenon, making it manipulable for analytic purposes. It is true that 'cultural imperialism' is too broad a term which includes a wide spectrum of things ranging from the daily diet of the people to technological development of the society, but 'media imperialism' is also too specific in pointing at only one particular set of phenomena i.e. mass media, which are explicitly related to other communication activities. After all, the chief domain or substance in the transnational communication activities is about 'information', the use of 'media imperialism' may easily lead one to think of only the mass-mediated information although some authors try to broaden the use of the term. The point being made here is that if we have a better and more explicit word 'communication' to capture the phenomenon, we should use it lest the inadequate term 'media' would generate some unnecessary confusion and bewildering discourse in the study of international communication. If communication is to go on fruitfully among the researchers in this area, the meanings of the words 'media imperialism' or 'communication imperialism' should at least be agreed upon.

The fear of isolating the phenomenon from its historical and politico-socio-economic context by using terms other than 'cultural imperialism' is not necessary because basically it is a matter of the *theory* behind the concept rather than the concept of 'communication imperialism' or 'media imperialism' itself. Even if one uses the term 'cultural imperialism', it still can be used to explain the transnational activities ahistorically and atheoretically. It all depends on what theory has been developed and how one develops the theory behind this concept. 'Communication imperialism' is a better concept to describe the phenomenon of domination of a country's communication activities by another because it is clear in delineating the scope of study on the one

hand, but does not over-extend itself to embrace too many domains as 'cultural imperialism' on the other.

### 'Communication imperialism' or 'communication dependency'?

Another confusion in the study of international communication is the mixed use of the concepts 'imperialism' and 'dependency'. Although these two concepts have a close relationship and the theory of dependency is influenced greatly by the theory of imperialism, they have different meanings.

Imperialism refers to 'the extension of sovereignty or control, whether direct or indirect, political or economic, by one government, nation or society over another ...'.<sup>13</sup> The concept of imperialism in its conventional use has an implicit notion of aggression on the part of the imperialistic state. It emphasizes 'the effective domination' or 'the effort to secure such a domination' by a relatively strong state over a weaker people whom it does not control as it does its home population.<sup>14</sup> This implies an active role of the stronger state in the domination of the weaker one(s), though the aggressive act may or may not be cognizant to the imperialist state.

On the other hand, 'dependency' does not necessarily imply an active role of the dominating state. It refers more to a subordination of a weaker state to a stronger one; the stronger state need not have any aggressive attempt to control the weaker one. The dependency theorists seem to agree that the dependency of the Third World nations today on the metropolitan nations is a result of the historical capitalistic development. But how capitalism transforms itself into imperialism does not get the same consensus and whether capitalism necessarily creates dependency is still a debatable issue.<sup>15</sup> As Boyd-Barrett comments:

For the classical Marxists, imperialism is regarded as an inevitable outcome of capitalism. But for the dependency theorists, there is no essential reason why the economic and political interests of the communist superpowers should not sometimes also distort or stunt the autonomous development of poorer nations. Imperialism, in classical Marxist theory, can be super-

seded only by international socialism. In contemporary dependency theory, however, there is a debate as to whether the circle of dependency processes, whereby the structural imperatives of developed economies enslave the weaker, is or is not absolutely vicious, and as to whether significant change is possible within the existing international order.<sup>16</sup>

For the non-Marxists, the phenomenon of dependency is explained through the neo-classical economic principle of comparative advantage and 'unequaled market strength'.<sup>17</sup>

In short, the word 'dependency' does not carry a concise and clearcut meaning at this moment, and it is not equivalent to 'imperialism'. Although dependency 'connotes the subordinate incorporation of peripheral areas in the world economy',<sup>18</sup> it does not carry the connotative meaning of 'imperialism' which implies an active and aggressive role on the part of the dominating country.

Since the connotations of 'dependency' and 'imperialism' are different, the subsequent attention given to the phenomena varies. Communication imperialism points to the active domination of the stronger country whereas communication dependency points to the passive submission of the weaker nation. Since dependency implies a passive role of the dominated nation more than an active role of the dominating one, the passivity of the dominated in resisting the dominating is assumed to be a major cause for dependency. In using the concept of 'dependency', the dependent country can be laid a great share of responsibility for the dependency phenomenon. If the dependency is inimical to the dependent country, the dependent country has a share for the blame. Wallerstein and Frank, for instance, argue that underdevelopment is a result of the alliance between the parasitic elites of the periphery with metropolis' bourgeoisie. Wallerstein points out that because of the early assignment of the developing areas to raw material production for the capitalist world economy, there has emerged a group of non-feudal, capitalist but anti-development elites whose existence and interests rely on external economic forces.<sup>19</sup> Frank argues in a similar fashion:



The special interests created by the dependence of the Latin American bourgeoisie on the metropolis have obliged the sector of the bourgeoisie that once favored bourgeois nationalism to ... join an alliance for the progress of imperialism ... and by this alliance to deepen still further dependence, dependent development and underdevelopment.<sup>20</sup>

In point of fact, quite a few writers<sup>21</sup> urge a shift of emphasis in the study of international communication activities from the process of export and dissemination of media influence to the process of adoption and absorption of this influence. Such an argue is based on the observation of large variations in the kind and degree of communication dependency among the Third World nations, though the exporters of communication activities remain the same few advanced industrial countries.

Cardoso & Faletto are certainly correct in pointing out the need to analyze how different sectors of 'local classes allied or clashed with foreign interests, organized different forms of state, sustained distinct ideologies or tried to implement various policies or defined alternative strategies to cope with imperialist challenges in diverse moments of history'.<sup>22</sup> Cardoso challenges the assumption that imperialism unifies the interests and reactions of the dominated nations and deprives the dynamism in dependent economies. He argues that this assumption is oversimplified and misleading. Based on the growth data of the Third World after the Second World War, he argues that capitalist penetration both exploits and develops the Third World. The facts of industrial growth and development cannot be ignored though the pattern may be uneven and more appropriately called 'dependent development'. Dependency does not necessarily imply negative impacts only.<sup>23</sup>

It has so far been suggested that a distinction should be made between 'communication imperialism' and 'communication dependency' because they carry different connotations on the one hand, imply different focuses in the study of international communication activities on the other. We should use the concept 'communication imperialism' only when an active role of the dominating country and a *negative cultural impact* of the international communication activities on the dominated one are implied.

### Criteria for judging 'active role' and deleterious effect

Whether a dominating country has played an 'active role' in controlling the international communication activities can be determined by an examination of three aspects of the communication activities. First, we can examine the state policies in respect of communication with other nations. For example, the Voice of America and Radio Moscow have the explicit objectives of influencing the recipient countries by transmitting the socio-political values of the United States and the Soviet Union. Second, we can examine the communication activities in the private sector of the dominating countries. Attention should be given to the intensity of the efforts paid by the private sector to export media content, control foreign media, transfer metropolitan communication norms and practices, or control international news and data flow. If the private sector has made a rigorous attempt to market and sell their communication products to the dominated country, we may say that there is an active part played by the dominating country. But this active role alone may not be taken as evidence of the existence of communication imperialism, because communication imperialism does not only imply an active role, but a deleterious effect on the recipient country too. The third aspect we can examine to decide on the existence of an active role on the part of the dominating country, is the retaliation of the dominating country applied to the dominated one. If the retaliatory actions by the dominating country in sanctioning efforts of the dominated to dissociate from the dominating is out of proportion, it is an indication of an active role on the part of the dominating country in the process of domination. It is manifested in, for example, cuts of aid to the dominated country not following the dominating country's ideas in building a particular kind of communication infrastructure. We may use money value lost on both sides as the indicator for the 'out-of-proportion' retaliatory measures.

Deleterious effects of international communication can be determined through an examination of the communication activities; to see whether they transmit and cultivate a profile of preferences, desires and values unsuited to the economic and social needs of the recipient countries. If they do, we can say that a

deleterious effect occurs. For example, the promotion of conspicuous consumption of Coca-cola in Sri-Lanka, which is a tea producer whose tea is a much cheaper beverage, can be counted as having deleterious effect because conspicuous consumption reduces savings for investment, which is inimical to development.

On the other hand, if it is merely a reliance of one country on another for the supply of the hardware and software of communication, without involving 'active' domination and control on the part of the stronger nation, then we had better call this kind of unbalanced international activities 'communication dependency'. It is a situation in which the dependent country has choices to dissociate from the metropolis, yet still chooses to rely on the metropolitan countries. This situation is not a necessary corollary of the capitalist world system. It can occur in other kinds of global system. Moreover, the international communication activities do not necessarily have deleterious effect on the recipient state. The 'dependent' state can choose to dissociate from the metropolis if it dislikes such an association.

### 'Involuntary dependency' and 'voluntary dependency'

Speaking about the option of a state in not associating with the metropolis, we should also deal with the case in which a dominated country has no choice in dissociating from the dominating one. If the reliance of the recipient state on the sender state is due to practical difficulties of the recipient state, as in the case when it is too poor to be self-reliant, and if the sender state does not take an active part in creating and perpetuating the unbalanced international communication, such reliance would better be called 'involuntary dependency' as distinguished from 'voluntary dependency'. As the sender country does not take an active role in maintaining the unbalanced communication pattern, 'communication imperialism' is not an appropriate term because the derogatory connotation it carries tends to obfuscate the discussion on the phenomenon. However, if the lack of choice on the part of the recipient country is due to an active role of the sender country in keeping the unbalanced exchange to the detriment of the recipient country's culture, we should then call it 'commu-

nication imperialism'. On the other hand, if the recipient country has choices to dissociate from the sender in the unbalanced international communication, yet chooses to rely on the sender and subject itself to the control of the sender in the supply of communication elements, we should call this 'voluntary dependency'.

'Involuntary dependency' differs from 'voluntary dependency' in that in the former case, the dominated country has no choice other than relying on the dominating one for the supply of communication elements for external as well as internal use, while in the latter case, the dominated country has choice to be self-reliant and dissociate from the dominating country, yet chooses to be dominated. 'Communication imperialism', on the other hand, should only be used when an active role of the dominating country and a deleterious effect of the unbalanced communication pattern are involved.

### **Various focuses of concern**

These distinctions are important because they have different implications for the focuses of concern in the study of unbalanced international communication. In 'communication imperialism', the obvious concern will be the international distribution of power and resources. The imperialist country's role will be emphasized more than the colony's. Moreover, a negative tone is embodied in this term as it is assumed that the imperialist country's will and values are imposed on the colony, resulting in distortion and prohibition of the development of indigenous cultural values.

The focus of 'involuntary communication dependency' will be primarily on the recipient state's internal situations such as the economic infrastructure and distribution of resources. Major attention will be given to the internal factors which deprive the dependent state of the choice to be self-reliant.

The focus of 'voluntary communication dependency' will be on both the internal and external conditions of the dependent state. The research questions would be: Why the peripheral state still chooses to depend on the metropolitan state though it has choices not to? What are the internal conditions contributing to

the continuation of the dependency? And what are the external conditions and mechanisms fostering such a voluntary dependency? In both types of dependency – involuntary and voluntary – the impact of the unbalanced international communication can be deleterious or beneficial. Communication dependency does not necessarily imply a harmful effect on the culture of the dependent country.

## Conclusion

The reason why we should use the term 'communication imperialism' rather than 'media imperialism' or 'cultural imperialism' is that 'communication imperialism' embodies more clearly the domains of the study in unbalanced international communication, not limiting the focus to media only. This concept, on the other hand, does not overextend itself to embrace too large a scope as the term 'cultural imperialism'. The distinction between 'communication imperialism' and 'cultural dependency' is also necessary if the discourse among researchers in this field is to be more fruitful. If we can agree to the distinctive use of 'communication imperialism' and 'communication dependency', much effort will be saved from arguing over definition and more attention could be given to the substance and evidence. Overall, in the study of unbalanced international communication, there are three dimensions to which attention should be given. They are (1) the role of the interacting states; whether it is active, neutral or passive; (2) the nature of the dependency of the peripheral state; whether it is reliance or compliance; and (3) the effect of the unbalanced communication pattern on the dependent state; whether it is deleterious or beneficial. All these three dimensions are essential to the building of a theory for the unbalanced pattern of international communication. A clarification of concepts on the basis of these three dimensions will help achieve the goal of theory building in the study of unbalanced international communication.

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## Notes

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