MEDIA CULTURE & SOCIETY

Media imperialism revisited: some findings from the Asian case

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The context and the issues

The debate over the implications of Western, particularly American, dominance over the international media export trade has been a long-standing one within communications research. Indeed, ever since the UNESCO-sponsored study of media trade conducted by Nordenstreng and Varis in 1974 demonstrated that there operated a one-way flow of cultural production from the developed to the developing world, this phenomenon has not only evoked impassioned responses but has also played a critical role in the emergence and development of the 'media imperialism approach' which dominated analyses of international media developments through the 1970s (Reeves, 1993; Sinclair et al., 1996).

While this perspective drew numerous scholars who identified several defining features of media imperialism which, in their opinion, were widely manifest in the developing world, ranging from the adoption of communication vehicles established in the advanced capitalist world to the transfer of metropolitan industrial-organizational arrangements and broadcasting norms and practices, the one component that they universally associated with the phenomenon was extensive penetration by Western media content, typically in the form of advertising and film and television programming (Boyd-Barrett, 1977; Golding, 1977; Tunstall, 1977; Katz and Wedell, 1978; Lee, 1981). More specifically in this context, these

Media, Culture & Society © 2000 SAGE Publications (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi), Vol. 22: 415–432
[0163-4437(200007)22:4;415–432;013260]

scholars asserted that the iniquitous flow of cultural production from the First to the Third World resulted in a situation whereby the media of advanced capitalist economies were able to substantially influence, if not actually determine, the nature of cultural production and consumption within Third World countries. This, they stated, not only resulted in a cultural hegemonization of these countries, but also encouraged the rise of a consumerist ideology within them (Hamelink, 1983). In other words, adherents of the media imperialism tradition held that a small group of Western countries not only controlled the international media trade but used it to transmit their particular cultural and economic values, particularly individualism and consumerism, to large numbers of developing nations around the world.

Hence, the flow of moving images, in their opinion, while purporting to simply be a carrier of entertainment, in fact served as a mechanism for the wholesale transfer of meaning and values to the Third World, causing the transformation and refashioning of the region's indigenous cultural milieu in the cultural likeness of its dominators. Consequently, fears of 'cultural invasion' and 'cultural homogenization' were frequently voiced by proponents of the media imperialism thesis and arguments made for a Third World 'cultural disassociation' as the only way to protect vulnerable indigenous cultures that would otherwise be almost certainly effaced (Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1990).

As a theoretical model, media imperialism thus essentially articulated a vision of Western cultural dominance and imposition, created by a ceaseless flow of cultural products that invaded and overwhelmed the developing world. In recent years however this paradigm has come under increasing criticism from diverse perspectives. For instance, some scholars who criticize media imperialism on empirical grounds have argued that in the current global media environment which is characterized by a plurality of actors and media flows, it is no longer possible to sustain the notion of Western media domination. Indeed, they emphasize that the emergence of many developing nations such as Brazil, Mexico, India and Egypt as both major producers and global exporters of audiovisual materials, has not only altered any one-way flow of Western media content but has effectively undermined the 'hegemonic' model represented by media imperialism (Tracey, 1988; Reeves, 1993).

Others have attacked the media imperialism position for its reliance on the so-called hypodermic model of media effects and its implicit assumption that media content has a direct, unmediated impact on audience behavior and world view (Fejes, 1981: 287; Liebes and Katz, 1990; Biltereyst, 1991; Naficy, 1993). These theorists, many of whom subscribe to variants of reception theory, argue that audiences actively interpret, negotiate and even resist media content and consequently the existence of the type of widespread cultural domination portrayed by media imperialism is open to question.

And finally, yet others have contended that the media imperialism position is problematic because it tends to romanticize and fetishize 'national culture' as 'essentially necessary, progressive and desirable', and to discount the fact that culture that is sought to be protected as 'national' is not only often unrepresentative of the entirety of the diverse and heterogeneous elements that constitute individual societies, but may actually militate against and homogenize grass-roots cultures in the name of national unity (Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1990; Waisbord, 1998).

Yet, despite such attacks on its conceptual foundations and its consequent fall from favor within academic circles, the media imperialism thesis has nevertheless retained considerable resonance within the political discourse of developing countries, particularly those of Southern and Eastern Asia, where it has become expressive of a kind of neo-nationalism. Indeed, with the onset of globalization and the concomitant growth in foreign programming delivered to the region via satellite based services such as Rupert Murdoch's STAR TV, this perspective has been widely adopted by different agents ranging from political figures and government agencies to media watchdog groups, who argue that the exponential growth of foreign media content within their national media systems is likely to result in catastrophic cultural and social consequences.

For instance, Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore, speaking at the Asian Media Conference in November 1998, emphasized that it was necessary to 'limit the unrestricted inflow of Western media within Asia, in order to preserve and retain the fundamental values of Asian society' (Yew, 1998: 26). Similarly India's ruling Hindu nationalists have attacked foreign satellite television networks, arguing that 'their growing presence undermines Indian traditions and promotes Western-style decadence' (Sharma, 1998: 13), while in China, authorities have called for restrictions on the increasing presence of Western programming, on the grounds that it serves as an instrument of ideological penetration and cultural pollution (Zhao, 1998). In fact, so widespread is this perception that even the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) recently issued a statement expressing the need to 'formalize a united response to the phenomenon of cultural globalization, in order to protect and advance cherished Asian values and traditions which are being threatened by the proliferation of Western media content' (Coates, 1998).

But while the assertions regarding the pervasive presence of Western media content within Asia are clearly wide ranging, the question is, are they also accurate? Are Asian media systems in fact being relentlessly overrun and overwhelmed by imported programming originating in the Western hemisphere? This study contends that they are not, and presents empirical evidence to demonstrate how a complex combination of counterforces ranging from national gate-keeping policies and the dynamics of audience preference to competition from local media, effectively inhibit the domination of the Asian mediascape by Western audiovisual production. In other words, this study thus attempts to question the assertions made by nationalist purveyors of the media imperialism model and argues that the current claims about the pervasiveness of Western cultural products and the onset of media imperialism via the inflow of imported content, appear to be vastly overstated in the Asian context.

However, the study by no means implies that policy-makers can be sanguine about the Asian media landscape. Indeed, this study, in its conclusion, suggests that there are in fact several deeply troubling developments (many of which have arisen out of the emergence of new technologies of transmission and the deregulation of broadcasting systems) such as the rampant growth of commercialization and decline of public broadcasting, the overwhelming dominance of entertainment oriented programming as well as the existence of numerical plurality rather than genuine diversity of program genres and formats that constitute a significant challenge to national media systems in Asia and merit the urgent attention of policy-makers. This position regarding the issue of media imperialism in Asia is now developed in greater detail through a detailed examination of the various counterforces, that is, national gate-keeping policies, dynamics of audience preference and forces of local competition that have successfully limited the inflow of Western programming in the region.

National gate-keeping policies

Manifest in forms that range from explicit bans on foreign programming and equity restrictions on the foreign investment in the media to ceilings on foreign media imports and active support of indigeneously produced programming, gate-keeping policies have traditionally been deployed by nation-states to mediate transnational electronic broadcasts (Sinclair et al., 1996). Underlying these actions is the perception that the mass media constitute the cultural arm of nation-building, that they provide a focus for the political and cultural integration of the nation by acting as a source of common meanings, agendas and imagery.

Indeed, according to Schudson (1994), states have always viewed broadcasting as a powerful mechanism of political and cultural control and have consequently developed extensive policy frameworks to regulate both its internal as well as its external flows. It is then hardly surprising that in post-colonial Asia, where nation-building has historically been a critical issue, states have adopted a variety of gate-keeping mechanisms to restrict the inflow of media, particularly from the Western hemisphere.

In China, which is the largest potential market for global media conglomerates, the government, for instance, undertook a comprehensive effort at gate-keeping which was reflected in the Chinese Propaganda Department's media policy which was circulated in late 1994. This policy contained a series of prohibitions popularly known as the 'Six Nos'. These were: no private media ownership; no shareholding of media organizations; no discussion of a press law; no discussion of the commodity nature of news; no joint ventures with foreign companies; and no openness for foreign satellite television. And since then according to Zhao (1998), the Chinese Communist Party has taken a series of steps to limit foreign televisual content.

First, the government has imposed restrictions on the unauthorized production, sale and installation of satellite reception equipment and has stipulated that owners of satellite dishes must register their equipment with the authorities and that those found using unauthorized dishes will be fined and their dishes confiscated. Further, the Ministry of Radio, Film and Television has ordered three domestic satellite broadcasters to switch from the satellite Apstar 1 to Apstar 2 from which STAR TV can only be transmitted via encrypted channels and has also prohibited Chinese cable stations from showing foreign programming directly on a 24-hour basis (Hughes, 1998a). And finally, the Ministry is working to limit Western media products on domestic television channels through the establishment of ceilings on foreign media imports, and even though these have not yet been articulated, typically television stations do not exceed an informal limit of 20 percent for fear of provoking governmental interference (Chan, 1996).

In addition to such strategies of cultural protectionism which constitute a critical dimension of China's response to the presence of foreign, specifically Western audiovisual materials, the country has also sought to confront the inflow of such materials by encouraging domestic media production, much of it designed specifically to counter Western programming. In fact, in order to reduce its so-called 'cultural deficit' China has not only undertaken a concerted effort to double its domestic media production in the decade 1990–2000 but has made a concerted effort to increase international media sales and exports (Ai, 1991, quoted in Chan, 1996; Hong, 1998).

While China has thus developed an extensive compendium of gate-keeping policies designed to limit Western media, other Asian nations such as India are following suit. Like China, in recent years India has faced a considerable challenge from foreign delivered satellite programming and countering this 'invasion from the skies' has similarly emerged as a major governmental priority (Ninan, 1995). As part of its effort to counter this 'invasion', the Indian government has devised two legislative measures designed to restrict the inflow of foreign content into the country. These are: the Cable Networks Regulation Act that was issued in 1995 and the Broadcasting Bill that is in the process of being introduced into Parliament.

In terms of provisions, the Cable Networks Regulation Act restricts foreign equity ownership within cable networks to 30 percent, and also requires all cable operators to be Indian citizens. Moreover, this Act, which was introduced only days before Murdoch's STAR TV launched its pay-TV channel, provides for the mandatory transmission of two channels of the state-owned Doordarshan network and contains a stringent programming code that allows the government to prohibit the transmission of foreign programs and advertisements that are deemed violent, indecent or otherwise objectionable (Cable Networks Regulation Act, 1995).

The Broadcasting Bill which has been introduced to deal with satellite channels and other new mechanisms of program delivery and distribution, is an omnibus legislation that seeks to control and limit external media forces. Thus under the provisions of the Bill, not only do all private broadcasters have to obtain licenses from the government-controlled broadcasting authority but licenses are to be granted only to companies that are incorporated in India and have a majority Indian ownership. In fact, according to the Bill, media companies operating in India cannot have more than 20 percent foreign equity participation. Moreover, while Indian-owned satellite channels are to be allowed to access up-linking facilities from within the country itself (a move that will significantly reduce their costs), foreign broadcasters are prohibited from doing so. Finally, the Bill also proposes the imposition of quotas or ceilings to limit the quantity of foreign programming on satellite channels (Broadcasting Bill, 1998).

In addition to the establishment of such regulatory bulwarks which are in the forefront of the Indian government's efforts to combat the inflow of Western media, the former has also tried to address the problem more indirectly through a set of initiatives designed to foster indigenous media production. For example, it has undertaken the expansion of the state-owned Doordarshan network through the introduction of several new channels including a children's channel, a channel devoted to cultural issues, an educational channel and a channel aimed at the rural population. These channels, which primarily carry domestically produced programs, are transmitted throughout the country (Mullick, 1998).

Besides increasing the number of terrestrial television channels, the government has also established a separate satellite channel to further stimulate indigenous programming. Known as the 'Metro Channel', this entertainment oriented channel functions very much like a commercial station with domestic producers being allowed to buy day-parts and broadcast programming (Ray and Jacka, 1996). Finally, the Indian government has approved a variety of tax exemptions and subsidies for domestic media production. While these steps have sometimes been interpreted as signaling a shift towards the liberalization of India's state controlled electronic media, in reality, however, these initiatives have a protectionist goal, which is to encourage and support the emergence of a national media production industry that can effectively compete with Western broadcasters and limit the inflow of their products into the Indian market.

As in the Indian case, the government in Indonesia has also taken a variety of steps to restrict the entry of foreign media. One such step is the issuing of the revised Broadcasting Bill that reiterates the government's long-standing commitment to monitoring all foreign satellite broadcasts and filtering out all those deemed 'politically, culturally and socially sensitive'. The Bill also imposes quota restrictions which prohibit broadcasters from transmitting imported programs for more than 30 percent of their total air time and stipulates that those who do so, are liable to have their licenses cancelled (Staff, 1998).

Moreover, as in India and China, the Indonesian government has sought to limit the influence of Western media through the provision of extensive state support to the local media industry. Indeed, over the last few years the Indonesian government has aided the establishment of as many as four private channels in which foreign equity participation is disallowed. These channels which receive considerable government subsidies operate under a mandatory requirement to broadcast at least 70 percent locally produced programming (Cohen, 1993).

Such parameters that constrain foreign programming are also visible within other Asian nations. For instance, Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam and Brunei all prohibit the private ownership of satellite dishes on the grounds that these are likely to bring in unregulated, socially and culturally detrimental programming. In fact, in these countries Western satellite delivered programming is only available in the form of censored re-broadcasts over tightly controlled cable television networks (Chan, 1994). Moreover, Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam and South Korea also impose restrictions on Western media imports, which typically do not apply to imports of regionally produced programs (Tang, 1998).

For example, in both South Korea and Vietnam, only 20 percent of total television programming can be imported (Vanden Heuvel and Dennis, 1993). In Malaysia this figure is currently about 30 percent, but according to the Malaysian Information Ministry's Master Plan, by the year 2000, 80 percent of programming broadcast in the country would have to be locally produced or have local content and only 20 percent imported programming will be allowed (Latif, 1998).

However, while regulatory regimes comprise an important part of these nations' gate-keeping strategies, the latter also include the encouragement of local media production. For instance, Singapore has developed its own satellite broadcasting service. The new service, Singapore Cablevision (CBV) began transmission in 1992 and mostly broadcasts domestically produced programming in Mandarin, English and Malay (Hanson, 1994).

In addition, the government-owned Television Corporation of Singapore or TCS, has recently launched an all news channel called Channel News Asia or CNA in an attempt to provide news with 'a genuine Asian flavour' (Seneviratne, 1998). Similarly, in Malaysia too the indigenization of broadcasting software is being encouraged through tax incentives and subsidies to domestic producers (Karthigesu, 1994).

This emphasis on the development of gate-keeping policies is even manifest in the economically liberalized context of Taiwan, where the three major television channels – the Taiwan Television Enterprise (TTV), China Television Service (CTS) and China Television Company (CTC) – are all controlled either directly or indirectly by the government. While partial deregulation in the 1980s led to the establishment of a fourth channel which broadcast foreign programming, this channel was also eventually incorporated by the government under the Cable Television Ordinance (Hong, 1997). Moreover, under the country's current broadcasting laws, at least 70 percent of the programming on terrestrial television stations and at least 25 percent of the programming on cable channels has to be locally produced and all imported programming has to be first cleared by the Government Information Office or GIO, the government agency responsible for making and enforcing broadcasting regulations (Chan, 1996).

Finally, in conjunction with these national efforts, the area's premier regional body the ASEAN has also outlined a raft of initiatives designed to give Asian governments 'greater control over the airwaves'. Notable among these measures is the establishment of a satellite television channel which will be beamed via the Malaysian satellite MEASAT and will transmit 6–8 hours of regionally produced programming on news, current affairs, sports and entertainment to member nations (Tang, 1998).

A variety of gate-keeping policies that range from outright bans on the ownership of satellite dishes, censorship and imposition of quotas on imported programming to the active fostering of indigenous cultural production are thus being used across Asia to restrict the influx of foreign media organizations and content and are even proving successful. For example, in India, broadcasters such as STAR TV have not only been unable to launch Direct to Home (DTH) services but have had to conform to the Indian Censor Board.

In China, such policies have enabled the government to restrict the transmission of 'politically unsuitable' Western programming such as the BBC World Television while in countries like Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia the once ubiquitous American sitcoms and series that had dominated the televisual landscape are significantly less visible (Vanden Heuvel and Dennis, 1993). Thus rhetoric regarding the increasing influence of global media and the concomitant erosion of the authority of nation-states notwithstanding, national political systems in the region continue to play a definitive role in local media developments, particularly in terms of restricting the flow of media production from the West.

The dynamics of audience preference

While national gate-keeping strategies have emerged as a significant restriction on the entry of Western media and the consequent development of media imperialism in Asia, the growth of the latter has been restrained as much, if not more, by the dynamics of audience preference. Indeed, despite pervasive and wide-ranging claims regarding global cultural homogenization and the destruction of indigenous cultural subjectivities, cross-cultural studies almost uniformly indicate that, given the option, viewers tend to actively privilege national or regional programming over its imported counterpart and in fact rarely turn to imported programs when local alternatives are available (Straubhaar, 1991; Tracey, 1985, 1988). As Sinclair et al. (1996: 10) put it,

> . . . although US programs might lead the world in their transportability across cultural boundaries, and even manage to dominate schedules on some channels in particular countries, they are rarely the most popular programs where viewers have a reasonable menu of locally produced material to choose from.

This view is also endorsed by Ken Lemberger of Columbia Tri Star Pictures, who says that 'over the last several years local television production has become far more popular in Asia and our assessment is that the market for local language and local culture programs will grow substantially over the next ten to twenty years' (Carver, 1998: 1).

In fact, this is demonstrated by various surveys of the respective positions of local and overseas programs in the top 20 programs, which show that the former occupied over 90 percent of the top 20 list in the majority of Asian countries (Television Business International, 1996; Wang, 1993). For example, in China, which has been a major market for STAR TV, the most popular programs are locally or regionally produced Mandarin and Cantonese soap operas and period drama series such as the CCTV's production *Ke Wang* (Aspirations), which was originally broadcast in 1990 and has since been aired three times by popular demand, as well as its recent adaptation of the Chinese classic *Outlaws of the Marsh*, which was one of the most watched shows of 1998 (Brent, 1998).

Similarly, in neighboring Taiwan it is action series and dramas either made within the country or imported from Hong Kong that routinely draw the highest numbers of viewers (Chan, 1996), while in Indonesia seven out of the ten top programs on the leading channels are domestically produced (Ryanto, 1998). This trend is also manifest in other states including Singapore, Malaysia and South Korea where local programming dominates the ratings. Even in cosmopolitan Hong Kong, it is Cantonese language programs that draw over 90 percent of the prime-time audience and, in recent years, the shows that have sent the local ratings index soaring are soap operas such as *Journey to the West* and period drama series like *Pao the Judge*, which pull in an average of 2.5 million viewers per episode (Chung, 1998; Sullivan, 1998).

In comparison, the audiences for Western productions like *Seinfeld* and *Melrose Place* attract fewer than 200,000 viewers per episode, a figure that is not even statistically significant (Sullivan, 1998). For this reason, Hong Kong's dominant terrestrial broadcaster, TVB, is exploring the possibility of increasing the percentage of Cantonese programs on its English language channel, Pearl (Schloss, 1998).

In India too, where STAR TV had initially seemed to have had considerable success in penetrating India's urban audience with American-made soap operas such as *The Bold and the Beautiful*, not only do local channels such as DD1, DD2 enjoy the greatest reach, but it is locally produced programs that draw the largest audiences. According to ratings produced by the Indian Marketing Research Bureau (IMRB), it is Hindi films and Hindi film based shows that top the viewing charts in all television homes, including cable and satellite homes. These are closely followed in terms of popularity by religious and mythological serials such as the *Ramayana* and *Shri Krishna* which attract substantial audiences, often even exceeding those of Hindi films. By contrast, Western drama series, soap operas and films broadcast by STAR TV draw a very small percentage of the audience (Thussu, 1998). This is illustrated by the fact that while the state broadcaster Doordarshan reaches about 33 million people every week, and the privately owned satellite channel ZeeTV which primarily carries Hindi programs, reaches about 16 million each week, STAR Plus is watched by 1.39 million viewers on a weekly basis (*Cablequest*, 1998).

In fact, so wide ranging is the preference of Asian audiences for locally or regionally specific programming that transnational broadcasters such as STAR TV have begun to localize their programming schedules, replacing Western productions with shows made specifically for Asian audiences in Asian languages. Causally, this audience preference for local media products arises at least partially as a result of linguistic reasons. This is because while Western programming tends to be in English, the latter is not the language of choice across most of Asia. For other than a comparatively small Westernized English-speaking elite, the majority of Asia's inhabitants tend to be unfamiliar with English and consequently tend to prefer local or regional programming which is usually presented in a language that they can comprehend.

However, audience preference for local programming is not simply based on linguistic concerns but is equally affected by cultural considerations in the Asian context. This is demonstrated by the case of India where, despite the presence of a relatively large English-speaking population, local programs remain significantly more popular than imported Western ones. This is not surprising, given that studies routinely indicate that the processes of viewing are crucially mediated both by discourses rooted in language, class, gender, ethnicity and social experiences (Morley, 1980; Livingstone, 1998) as well as by the existence of 'cultural discount', or the tendency of viewers to resist content originating outside their own culture (Hoskins and Mirus, 1988).

In other words, they suggest that audiences tend to naturally gravitate towards programming choices that appear most relevant or 'proximate' to their own context and thus allow them to seek the pleasure of recognition of their own culture (Straubhaar, 1991; Sinclair et al., 1996). As Junhao Hong (1998: 46) puts it, 'ultimately people like to see something close to their lives'. And in Asia, where audiences display a marked preference for locally or regionally produced shows that affirm the norms and sensibilities of their particular cultural universe, this tendency is not only evident, but also plays a powerful role in limiting the influx of Western media products.

Forces of local competition

While audience preference and national gate-keeping policies constitute relatively established barriers against the unrestricted influx of Western programming within Asia, another emergent force in this battle is local competition in the form of indigenous media organizations. The growth of such organizations is significant because they possess many of the elements on which the international comparative advantage of Western, especially American, audiovisual producers has traditionally been based. This is consistent with Hoskins and McFayden's (1991) prognosis that over time many countries that imported media from the United States would develop the comparative advantages historically enjoyed by it.

For instance, like their Western counterparts, who have benefited from their unique access to large domestic markets that offer vast economies of scale and scope, these organizations also have sizeable local and regional markets. In fact, geo-linguistic regional markets spread over many countries have become increasingly important components in the business strategies of Asian media producers who have begun to undertake program sales across national boundaries to diasporic communities.

Further, while not as established as their Western competitors, these media organizations have had considerable success in generating advertising revenues and, finally, they also enjoy certain advantages that are not usually available to the former. For a start, Asian media organizations often have close political connections with regional governments – a fact that gives them considerable operating leverage despite the existence of stringent regulatory policies across the region. Second, these media organizations are in a position to provide large quantities of local programming that consistently proves more popular than variants imported from the West. As a result, they are not only far better equipped to give audiences what they want, but are in a position to compete against Western media organizations seeking entry into Asian markets.

Among the media entities actively engaged in this task is the Hong Kong-based Television Broadcasts or TVB as it is better known. Originally a terrestrial broadcaster, TVB now has a superstation that transmits its programs via satellite to as many as 40 countries ranging from Taiwan, Malaysia and Indonesia to Vietnam and even China, where its programs are shown both on private cable and government-run television stations (Kraar, 1994). In addition, TVB has a Mandarin language channel (TVBS) aimed primarily at Taiwan and is also in the process of launching a direct to home (DTH) satellite channel targeting that country (Hughes, 1998b).

However, it is not simply ubiquity that makes TVB the potent force that it is. Instead, its real strength lies in its ownership of the world's largest library of Chinese-language programming as well as its ability to regularly produce over 6000 hours of Chinese programs (Karp, 1993; Chan, 1996). Underpinned by such programming, TVB has emerged as a formidable competitor to the principal Western broadcasters in Asia. For instance, it has not only vastly exceeded STAR TV's penetration in Hong Kong but has also equaled its reach in Taiwan which is one of STAR TV's largest markets (*Cable and Satellite Asia*, 1997). Moreover, operating in conjunction with its Taiwanese partner Era International, TVB is also in the process of launching a direct-to-home satellite service with 15 program channels and has leased four transponders on the Malaysian satellite Measat 2 for this purpose (Hughes, 1998b).

Western broadcasters are also being challenged within Asia by local competitors like Taiwan's Rebar Group that has emerged as a major producer and distributor of programming. In fact, currently Rebar's subsidiary, United Multimedia, is not only Taiwan's largest multi-system operator, reaching over 800,000 of the country's 3.2 million cable television households, but is also building a platform of domestic and regional programming that will be marketed to Chinese-speaking audiences throughout the region (*Cable and Satellite Asia*, 1997).

In the South Asian context, a similar role is being played by media corporations such as India's Zee TV. Widely recognized as the most successful private channel in the country, Zee's growth is largely the result of its programming schedule which has an overwhelmingly local character both in terms of language as well as content and thus appeals to a far broader segment of the Indian population than STAR TV. This is amply illustrated by the fact that, while Zee TV reached over 6 million households on a weekly basis, according to a survey conducted by the Indian Market Research Bureau (IMRB), STAR Plus was watched by an estimated 1.4 million households during the same period. Thus even though a part of Zee is owned by Rupert Murdoch in partnership with Subhash Chandra of the Indian business group Essel, the latter has served as a constant source of competition for STAR TV both in the Indian market as well as in Bangladesh and the Middle East. Moreover, this competition is only likely to intensify, particularly if recent speculations regarding the collapse of the contentious partnership between Murdoch and Chandra prove to be accurate.

In addition to organizations like TVB and Zee TV which constitute the most evident competition to Western media in Asia, other media entities that represent a potential source of competition include the recently revived Chinese Entertainment Television Ltd (CETV). Owned by Hong Kong-based magnate Robert Chua, this 24-hour 'no sex, no violence' Mandarin-language channel was originally launched in 1994 and has obtained official permission to begin broadcasts in China (Hughes, 1998a). Other media organizations include the many small production companies that have mushroomed throughout Asia and are supplying programming to both government run and privately owned domestic channels in countries such as China, India and Indonesia.

From this discussion it is thus evident that there exists considerable competition to Western broadcasters within the Asian region, with home-grown media producers witnessing considerable growth. In fact, despite the recent economic crisis in Asia, local media companies such as the Hong Kong-based TVB have maintained a stable position in terms of revenue and TVB has even been rated a good defensive investment by Goldman Sachs, due to its low level of debt. In comparison, the company estimates that STAR TV has absorbed nearly $2 billion in losses ever since it was bought by News Corp. in 1993 and has negatively affected News Corp.'s operating revenues by almost $80 million in 1997 and 1998 alone (Sullivan, 1998; Parkes, 1998).

This situation is not entirely unfamiliar for Western broadcasters, the majority of whom have been struggling to find their feet in Asian media markets. Indeed, while optimistic predictions of the early 1990s held that there would be a sizeable growth in annual revenues from sales to Asian countries, this increase has failed to materialize and for several years now the revenues from the region have remained stagnant, constituting between 10 to 15 percent of the total annual revenue from foreign sales. Moreover, as a result of the recent economic turmoil in Asia, media imports from the West have all but ceased and there has been a surge in the production of cheap local shows (Guider, 1998). Finally, in addition to manifesting a strong pattern of domestic growth, whereby indigenous producers supply over 75 percent of all programming in Asia (Waterman and Rogers, 1994), the latter have also begun to target diasporic populations in overseas markets. For instance, TVB has moved into North America, acquiring stakes in two Canadian cable services serving Chinese speaking subscribers, besides operating cable channels in the Los Angeles and San Francisco areas. Similarly, the Korean broadcaster MBC has established a channel aimed at Koreans in the United States while South Asian broadcaster Zee TV has entered into agreements with satellite television companies to transmit its programming in the UK and USA.

Media imperialism in Asia: a case re-evaluation

Based on the evidence presented here, Asia seems to present relatively little evidence of the wholesale destruction of its indigenous cultural subjectivities and media production by what Michael Tracey has called the lava stream of programming from the mouth of the volcano that is Hollywood (Tracey, 1988: 56). For while transnational media organizations constitute an undeniable and often aggressive presence in the region, their domination is restricted by the interplay of national gate-keeping policies, the dynamics of audience preference as well as the forces of local competition – and indeed, this active sense of engagement needs to be recognized and worked into existing theoretical constructs such as those related to media imperialism.

However, at the same time it is essential to recognize that the media situation in Asia offers little scope for complacency on the part of policy-makers. Indeed, even though the widely feared takeover of Asian media by content originating in the Western hemisphere has not occurred, they nevertheless manifest a variety of problematic trends. In this regard, one of the principal issues that characterizes the media in Asian countries is a pattern of increasing commercialization and a concomitant challenge to public broadcasting. This pattern is visible even in countries where considerable governmental control has traditionally existed over the media. In fact, it would appear that the entry of market based forces into the area of entertainment oriented programming, whether by allowing private companies to supply programming to state owned services as in the case of Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore or by permitting them to establish independent services that compete directly with state broadcasters as in India, is being actively encouraged in the region as a means of restricting foreign content.

While this has engendered a growth in the number of channels and programs available, it has simultaneously produced an intensified competition for revenues, which has meant that audiences are increasingly viewed and targeted as consumers rather than as citizens – a development that is bound to have serious consequences for nation-states with fragile and unstable polities.

Further, while there has been an evident proliferation in the quantum of programming with the entry of private operators on the audiovisual scene, the bulk of the available programming tends to be purely entertainment oriented, with comparatively little content devoted to educational, cultural or non-commercial children's programming. Not surprisingly, news and public affairs programming receives particularly short shrift in most countries, partly because market operators find it unprofitable and partly because many Asian governments, while willing to permit domestic, privately produced entertainment oriented shows, continue to exercise stringent control over news production and dissemination.

Finally, even in the case of entertainment oriented programs while there is considerable plurality in numerical terms, and this is often touted as a 'sign of enhanced choice', the apparent abundance is quite limited, with successful programming being based largely on the cloning of successful genres and formats – as a result there is little genuine diversity in much of the programming, except the fact that it is local rather than imported in nature. Collectively, trends such as these have crucial implications for the contemporary processes of media production and consumption in Asia and it is therefore imperative that the policy-makers confront them, instead of focusing the public discourse almost exclusively on what would seem to be the increasingly remote – in empirical terms – threat of media imperialism and cultural domination via the inflow of Western audiovisual content. Similarly, at the theoretical level, the media imperialism approach too needs to redefine its analytic framework and shift its emphasis from the implications of the export of Western, particularly American, content into the developing world, to the impact therein, of the emergence of the US-style commercialized model of broadcasting which is limited in terms of programmatic innovation and diversity and which contributes little to the creation of a meaningful public sphere.

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