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The Taming of the Electronic Shrew: Localizing the Global Spread of Television

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Abstract
A common assumption maintains that the global outreach of mass media inevitably leads to deleterious consequences for native communities. Indeed, different scholars have argued that awareness of the outside world from television results in the homogenization of local cultures. However, images viewed through the electronic peephole radically transform not only an understanding of the outside world, but the way indigenes define themselves and their relationship to each other. By presenting subaltern audiences with an idealized other, television compels the emergence of an objectified self. "Who are 'we'?" would not have been asked—or asked in the same way—were it not for the "Who are 'they'?" necessitated by the introduction of television. Paradoxically, contrary to most fears, television actually helps to create rather than destroy a cultural identity by forcing subaltern viewers to re-define themselves in a dialogical relationship to the dominant society.

Key words: Globalism; Identity; Localism; Subaltern; Television

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INTRODUCTION
In his study of urban and rural television audiences in Brazil, Conrad Kottak (1990) found that television impact should be interpreted as a phenomenon that occurs in distinct stages. The first stage is characterized by strangeness and novelty as new viewers are usually transfixed by the mysterious box. During Stage I, the medium rather than the message is the mesmerizer (p.139). Once viewers become more accustomed to and comfortable with television, they enter Stage II. Here, according to Kottak, they begin a process of selective acceptance and rejection, interpretation, and reworking of TV messages (Ibid.). In the next stage, as community saturation and length of exposure increases, statistical measures of its impact become less obvious and accurate because television's presence differentiates less and less among residents (p.143). Stage IV encompasses the cumulative effect of viewing television on adults who have spent their entire lives in a society pervaded by TV and the mass phenomenon it spawns (Ibid.).

1. TV AND MASS PHENOMENON
The complex ways in which international audiences have adapted foreign images to fit their own cultural views are well demonstrated by Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz's often cited study of the television program *Dallas*.[1] To summarize, the researchers compared the "decodings" of four different ethnic groups in Israel: Arabs, Moroccan Jews, recent Russian immigrants, and kibbutz members (1990). An additional comparison was made with second-generation Americans living in suburban Los Angeles. Liebes and Katz found that each cultural group negotiated with the program uniquely and was characterized by different types of readings, different

[1] Likewise, Ien Ang (1985) found that Dutch women interpreted the program through their own feminist agenda in opposition to the supposedly embedded message of patriarchy while Eric Michaels (1988) showed how Australian Aborigines reinterpreted *Dallas* through their notions of kinship in a way quite contrary to the show's intended meaning.

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levels of involvement, and different mechanisms of self-defense (1990, p.12).

The researchers reported substantial differences among the ethnic communities—both in how they watched the program and how they interpreted it—and maintained that reception patterns clearly correlated with ethnic distinctions. Both the Arabs and Moroccan Jews, who were the most culturally distant from *Dallas*, interpreted the program referentially by relating the story to real life. The Russians, on the other hand, demonstrated an awareness of the program as being separate from reality and questioned the accuracy of the representation. The Americans and the kibbutz groups also employed a more analytic framework, as their retellings of the episodes utilized an existing knowledge of characters to speculate on future complications.

Beyond the general conclusion that reception is an active and selective process, the data suggest specifically how various sociocultural groups make their own sense out of television programs like *Dallas*. Liebes and Katz attributed the lesser involvement in the thematic content by the "Western" audience members to their higher level of familiarity with the society portrayed in the program. In essence, the American, Russian, and kibbutz groups relied on different interpretive strategies for analyzing the program than their Arab and Moroccan counterparts because of their greater socialization in the genres of television

Predictably, viewers in cultural contexts where television has only begun to make a foothold have not developed the same level of visual sophistication. In 1999, Bhutan became the last country in the world to legalize television. Less than two years after this remote Buddhist kingdom welcomed the arrival of modern communications technology, young Bhutanese girls learn dance steps from MTV and the theatrical violence of the World Wrestling Federation unexpectedly gained a devoted audience of Buddhists (Bloom, 2001, p.21).

Bhutan's moral guardians and information brokers have decried television's social contamination. Kinley Dorji,[2] editor of the weekly newspaper, is deeply troubled about the deleterious impact of TV on what he calls a "pristine society": "We've been the last Shangri-La. And suddenly you have an electronic invasion…We've been pried open quite dramatically" (Bloom, 2001, p.21). But the nation's citizens, and particularly the younger generations, have enthusiastically welcomed the new technology. Television is a service that virtually everyone can afford,[3] and set ownership has become a social priority.

In the early stages, Kottak noticed that attitudes toward TV among media-deprived villages were overwhelmingly positive (1990, p.140). In contrast, negative attitudes toward television increased with higher income and with years of exposure. Generally speaking, opinions about television vary with social class and educational level as cultural elites throughout the world have expressed more negative sentiments about TV than the masses.[4] Those accustomed to living with television take it for granted as its novelty declines and its status-differentiating value diminishes.

The varying importance attributed to television is visually apparent in Peter Menzel's collection of photographs, *Material World: A Global Family Portrait* (1994), which captivatingly captures the wide discrepancies in material goods among inhabitants of different countries throughout the world.[5] Amidst the diversity is a familiar presence:

> Presiding over this ceaseless exchange is the television tube, dragging families away from the dinner table in Mongolia, mesmerizing Albanians with dubbed Italian versions of "Starsky and Hutch," funneling Los Angeles gangsta rap to families walled inside the invisible barriers around Soweto, South Africa. (Menzel 1994, p.9)

Five of the thirty profiled households responded that the TV was their "most valued possession."[6] The privileged position of the television is clearly evident in the photographs themselves:

[2] As a graduate of the Columbia School of Journalism, Dorji himself is well acquainted with the modern lifestyle.

[3] Bhutan's most successful cable operator provides 45 channels for just $5 a month, making access widespread: "Even if they live in a hut, or a temporary shed, they can all watch the same programs for an affordable price" (Bloom 2001, p. 21).

[4] For example, the Minister of Education in Brazil (where Kottak conducted his research) has stated: "Commercial television is imposing on the youngsters and children of our country a culture that has nothing to do with Brazilian culture….Thus, instead of being a creative element of the diffusion of Brazilian culture, television appears as a privileged vehicle of cultural import, a basic factor in the 'de-characterization' of our creativity" (cited in Katz, 1977, pp.116-117).

[5] Basically, the methodology (which is described in the span of half a page) consisted of a photographer moving in or near a "typical" family. Over the course of a week, a database on the family was assembled from a list of 66 questions, such as: what is each family member's most valued possession, what is a typical breakfast, have they ever been robbed, and how many hours of TV do they watch per day (Menzel, 1994, p.11).

[6] In response to the question regarding wishes for the future, the Guatemalan family hoped for a TV set while the Italian and Israeli families desired a VCR. The families in China, Mexico, and Albania—who already listed the television as their most prized possession—aspired to one day own a bigger TV set.

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Figure 1
China: Material Possessions of the Wu Family
Source: Menzel, 1994, p.56.

Figure 2
Mexico: Material Possessions of the Castillo Balderas Family
Source: Menzel, 1994, p.144.

All of these families posed directly next to their TV sets as if it was a member of the family. Of course, the other feature these households share is that they live in countries where television is still a relatively recent phenomenon and set ownership remains rare.

In countries where owning a TV has become commonplace, however, representative families never mentioned the television as a valuable possession. As the photographs indicate, televisions in more developed nations are largely relegated to "background" status:

Figure 3
Albania: Material Possessions of the Calkoni Family
Source: Menzel, 1994, p.192.

Figure 4
Iceland: Material Possessions of the Thoroddsen Family
Source: Menzel, 1994, p.162.

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Figure 5
Great Britain: Material Possessions of the Hodson Family
Source: Menzel, 1994, p.210.

Figure 6
United States: Material Possessions of the Skeen Family
Source: Menzel, 1994, p.136.

Here, the TV occupies a more marginalized standing because it has been fully incorporated into the living environment, or what Pierre Bourdieu has called the "habitus."

The habitus—"the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisation" (Bourdieu, 1977, p.78)—is defined by a set of discriminating values and practices by and through which one's own culture can be distinguished and defended from those above or below one socially. This cultural habitat is also a set of absorbing values and practices by which the new and the unfamiliar can be incorporated and internalized as part of the familiar and taken for granted in the form of lasting dispositions to think, feel, and act in determinate ways (Bourdieu, 1977, p.261). The habitus is the cultural residue of historical changes as they affect an individual's or a family's class, status, and power. But it is a residue that is also generative of identity and difference through the application in practice of structuring systems of perception and taste (Silverstone, 1994, p.115). The habitus itself is an

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expression of the various forms of capital—cultural and economic—which define the conditions of possibility.

In his classic work, *Distinction* (1984), Bourdieu underemphasized, to the point of invisibility, the significance of the media in general, and television in particular, in articulating taste, style, and culture. This lacuna is remedied in a set of recently published lectures titled *On Television* (1998). His most important assertion is that television provides far less autonomy than people even imagine by seizing a virtual monopoly on public space. The demand for higher ratings and, by extension, advertising revenue imposes a form of "invisible censorship" which imposes limits on the public's vision of what constitutes reality and what correspondingly constitutes politics in this reality.

An especially unfortunate consequence of the ratings mindset, according to Bourdieu, is the premium placed on speed over thoroughness, sensationalism over substance, and quantity over quality. He contends that television's culture poses a serious danger for all the various areas of cultural production and is "no less of a threat to political life and to democracy itself" (1998, p.10). While television offers "a great deal of promise as a tool for the democratic dissemination of information," Bourdieu writes, "it has hardly ever fulfilled this promise" (1998, p.45). He compares what is presented on television to "cultural 'fast food'—predigested and prethought culture," (1998, p.29) or, if you will, a mass-mediated McDonald's.

2. GLOBALISM

Marshall McLuhan prophesied the worldwide coalescence of human awareness into a single community that he would call the "global village." According to McLuhan, the developed world is experiencing a transformative convergence of computing and communications technology whose impact will rival that of the replacement of muscle power by machines (Wright, 1990, p.84). During the intervening years since McLuhan made his now famous proclamation, mass media have certainly become global in nature. Satellite transmissions across continents and oceans are now routine such that major sporting events such as the Super Bowl or the Olympic Games are seen by hundreds of millions of viewers worldwide (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003, p.337). The Internet connects users from around the world by enabling instant communication with the click of a mouse. Indeed, technology has reduced the significance or even erased the notion of physical distance.

At the same time, however, the makings of a global village have not yet come to fruition. McLuhan's vision suggested an even playing field occupied by equally influential actors with equal access. Instead, the globalization of mass media has been neither democratic nor egalitarian as centralized conglomerates of unprecedented size and influence have dictated mass media ownership and control (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003, p.343). Media ownership has become increasingly concentrated so that, today, only six multinational conglomerates dominate the mass media industry (Bagdikian, 2000).[7]

In terms of content, foreign imports continue to dominate local programming. Last but certainly not least, media are not equally accessible around the globe because of widening economic inequalities.[8]

The fear is that the globalization of media will result in the homogenization of local cultures. There is already a common perception that American products dominate the world's markets.[9] Coke and Pepsi battle for supremacy across every continent. It seems as if there is no place left on earth where one cannot purchase a Big Mac. Indeed, the threat of globalization is often perceived as a force that will erode or, worse, dissolve cultural differences and variety.[10] Benjamin R. Barber, author of *Jihad vs. McWorld*, predicts that the former will be defeated by the latter because of the long-term capacity of global information and global culture to overpower parochialism and to integrate or obliterate partial identities (1995, p.82).

[7] The "Big Six" include: Vivendi's Universal, Viacom's Paramount, AOL Time Warner's Warner Brothers, Disney, the News Corporation's 20th Century Fox, and Sony. In addition, the industry giants also own two of the leading "independent" film companies, Miramax (Disney) and New Line (AOL Time Warner). An even bigger monopoly exists in the music industry where only five companies account for the vast majority of U.S. music sales: Vivendi/Universal, Sony, AOL Time Warner, Bertelsmann, and EMI (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003, p.35). By frequently purchasing or merging with their competitors, the largest media companies continue to grow in size and reach. This process of conglomeration and integration fuels the "rich get richer" ethos of the media industry.

[8] The majority of the world's citizens still cannot access basic information about what is happening in their own countries never mind global events as four-fifths of the world's 5.6 billion people do not even have access to a television (Rubin, 1997, p. 21).

[9] In his essay, "One World of Consumers," William Greider worries that there will be no place left in the world for Americans to hide from themselves. From Burger King restaurants in Malaysia offering Islamic dressing to a Buddhist temple in Bangkok decorated with discarded plastic bags, "the action in the developing countries is like a loop of old film that continuously plays back our own history for us" as the aspiring poor mimic the American prosperity based on industrialization and mass consumption (1999, p.28).

[10] In an article titled "Can Authentic Cultures Survive New Media?" Elihu Katz responds that traditionalism and new media are fundamentally incompatible: "Modernization brings in its wake a standardization and secularization of culture, such that the traditional value and arts—those that give a culture its character—are overwhelmed by the influx of Western popular culture. Rock music and comic books and Kojak threaten not only local tribal cultures but the great traditions of societies such as Thailand, Israel, and Iran" (1977, p.113). Massive commercial exports of American culture have given the United States hegemonic influence over the listening, reading, and viewing habits of young people the world over.

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3. LOCALISM

The presence and pervasiveness of American-made goods do not necessarily signal the death of local, regional, or national identities because the act of cultural transfer is never met with total acceptance. Ideas and values originating in the media undergo a process of diffusion, which is neither automatic nor indiscriminate (Banerjee, 2002, p.521). The sheer presence of Western cultural goods does not necessarily entail profound cultural transformations or impact.

In his book, *Cultural Imperialism*, John Tomlinson challenges the notion of a neat correlation between the economic and the cultural: "No one really disputes the dominant presence of Western multi-national, and particularly American, media in the world; what is doubted is the cultural implications of this presence" (1991, p.57). Tomlinson dismisses the assumption held by many observers that what occurs is simply an imposition of wants, tastes, and desires upon the brainwashed global consumer. Such a conclusion disregards what the individual or group might bring to the act of consumption.

In particular, the dual flows of objects and images via commodity consumption and mass media do not institute a global monoculture. Theodore Levitt argues that consumption habits promoted by the globalization of media produce "heteroconsumers": "People who've become increasingly alike and indistinct from one another, and yet have simultaneously varied and multiple preferences" (1988, p.8). Likewise, the power of the media is not something that is simply imposed on unwitting audiences. Media messages require construction and are subject to revision. Audiences resist the imposition of preferred meanings by actively reinterpreting media messages in contrary and even subversive ways. While the products of American media may be washing up in every hamlet, village, and nomad's tent in the world, the way people choose to understand them varies from place to place (Scott, 2000, p.11).

Ironically, globalization appears to engender a form of localism. Increasing global integration does not simply result in the elimination of cultural diversity but rather provides the context for the production of new cultural forms that are marked by local specificity (Ang, 1996, p.155). The "local" is usually considered to be an authentic source of cultural identity as long as it remains unsullied by contact with the "global." Instead of being conceived as two distinct and opposing realities, the global and the local are mutually reinforcing. Often, the "local" itself is produced by means of the "indigenization" of global resources and inputs (Morley, 1991, p.15).

Contrary to proponents of Coca-Colonization and McDonaldization, globalization does not lead to homogenization. While there certainly is no debating the global outreach of Western-made products, their introductions are subject to local appropriation and domestication that are channeled in some directions and not others. To be sure, the world's consumers have taken advantage of their newfound economic and political freedom to pick and choose the products that *they* find most appealing (Foster, 2002, p.151).

4. AGENCY REVISITED

There is a danger, however, in taking the agency argument too far. All of this talk about empowerment and freedom of choice has become increasingly appealing and trendy whenever discussions in academic circles turn to native peoples and their continuing survival. In our politically correct climate, it is not only popular but prerequisitory to acknowledge the decisive voice and deed of "the native" as a conciliatory gesture to atone for the sins of our forefathers. Indeed, to refute the dogma of indigenes as agents of their own destiny in part or degree is essentially to reject the natives themselves and risk being branded with a scarlet "C" for "colonizer."

Of course, it is comforting to believe that, despite centuries of forced assimilation, natives have still been able to pick and choose what they want to incorporate into their cultures and reject everything else while maintaining their essentialness along the way. There is something deeply satisfying in the notion that the tools of colonialism may be grasped by their supposed victims and turned on their creators (Wilk, 2002, p.176). The colonized native is similar in this way to one of those inflatable punching bag dolls: no matter how many times or how hard you hit it, the doll bounces rights back up—all the while with that goofy grin implanted on its face.

In more recent years, a powerful backlash has been brewing against this tendency to celebrate the ability of subaltern audiences to produce divergent or resistant readings of mass media texts (Gibson, 2000, p.253). As David Morley writes, "much recent media work is marred by a facile insistence on the polysemy of media products and by an undocumented presumption that forms of interpretive resistance are more widespread than subordination" (1993, p.14). A number of scholars have pointed out quite simply that active viewing is, by itself, not political resistance (Gibson, 2000, p.256). In the end, the social and historical conditions within which audiences generate such meanings, not to mention the actual political import of such televisual resistance, become obscured in favor of an optimistic celebration of audience autonomy (Ibid.).

What is needed is an approach to audience research that pays simultaneous attention to both the ability of audiences to generate creative and divergent meanings, and the wider national and global determinants that constrain and limit some meanings while enabling

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and encouraging others (Gibson, 2000, p.258). To accomplish this dialectical feat, we clearly need a way to conceptualize how the wider structures of economic, political, and cultural power are configured and organized as well as an understanding of how this totality is reproduced within, and perhaps even transformed by, the practices of everyday life.

Ironically, globalization appears to engender a form of localism.[11] Increasing global integration does not simply result in the elimination of cultural diversity but rather provides the context for the production of new cultural forms that are marked by local specificity (Ang, 1996, p.155). The "local" is usually considered to be an authentic source of cultural identity as long as it remains unsullied by contact with the "global."[12] However, the "local" itself is often produced by means of the "indigenization" of global resources and inputs (Morley, 1991, p.15). As Barber points out, the global culture is what gives the local culture its medium, its audience, and its aspirations (1995, p.18).

However, the transition from global *versus* local to global *and* local is contingent upon having enough time to absorb and acclimate to outside forces. In fact, Jayasinhji Jhala contends that an authentic indigenous aesthetic is not necessarily located at the point of first contact, but after native groups have already domesticated and internalized new technologies and made them their own (1998, p.384). To a large and unexpected extent, localism challenges the imperative of globalization by compensating for the standardization and perceived loss of identity that is said to accompany it.

CONCLUSION

The world-wide dissemination of U.S. produced material—together with the ideological values these are often said to carry—are seen by many to crowd out locally produced content and, in the process, to threaten the autonomy of local, regional, and national cultures. Not only does the spread of American media all over the world not result in the homogenization of local cultures, such a process will eventually lead to an increased awareness of how indigenous peoples define themselves and their relationships with each other. By presenting subaltern audiences with an objectified "other," television compels the emergence of an objectified "self."

[11] Lawmakers in Israel unanimously approved a bill that would require that half the songs on national radio stations be in Hebrew, the official language. Said the bill's sponsor: "We are putting up a protective wall against the flood of foreign culture….We're part of the global village, and the minute you bring up the younger generation to listen only to foreign music the youth won't have any relationship to Israeli music. Part of the essence of setting up an independent state was to establish our own culture here. The bill is a cultural statement" (Greenberg, 1998, p.10).

[12] One must be careful not to equate the "global" as the site of cultural erosion and the "local" as the site of pristine cultural authenticity. Instead of being conceived as two distinct and opposing realities, the global and the local are mutually constitutive.

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