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JANET WASKO

What is Media Imperialism?

During the 1970s and 1980s, the debate about media imperialism erupted in the field of communication studies. A good deal of critique and discussion followed during the next few decades, as academics and policy makers continued to debate the feasibility of the concept. Meanwhile, global media expanded and changed in various ways. Is media imperialism still a viable concept in an increasingly globalized, diverse media system? Or has a new form of cultural imperialism developed? This essay discusses how these concepts have been defined, how they have been challenged and redefined, and their current relevance.

1. Background of the Cultural Imperialism Debate

Of course, the story of cultural imperialism is not new and is an inevitable component of imperialism more generally. Imperialism involves the extension of power or authority over others in the interests of domination and results in the political, military, or economic dominance of one country over another. We have seen countless empires that extended their power and domination over various regions of the world. The analysis of imperialism has been extensive, including Lenin's argument in the 1920s that imperialism was 'a special stage of capitalism' (Lenin 1939; see Cain/Harrison (2001) for an overview of historical discussions of imperialism).

And since cultural imperialism almost inevitably accompanies political and economic imperialism, the concept also has been analyzed by a wide range of writers and theorists. For instance, Goonatilake (2005) has traced the development of Western cultural imperialism since the 14th century,

focusing especially on the Iberian conquest of Latin America and the imposition of Catholicism.

The debate about media imperialism emerged after World War II as new media technologies were introduced and Western, especially US, cultural products spread around the world. Gienow-Hecht (2002) has identified three trends in the evolution of the cultural imperialism debate. “First, the cold warriors deplored the absence of an active and forceful cultural diplomacy among U.S. officials. In contrast, their descendants, the critics of cultural imperialism, described the export of American culture as thinly veiled global capitalist exploitation. Finally, a third group of countercritics challenged the concept of cultural imperialism with a variety of different arguments.” (Gienow-Hecht 2002: n.pag.)

This article will only briefly mention the policy and diplomatic discussions of cultural imperialism, and will instead focus on academic discussions. The first section describes academic attention paid to the media imperialism concept from the 1960s through the 1980s, followed by the critiques of the concept during this period. The next section discusses more recent developments in the media/cultural imperialism debate, followed by a summary and some conclusions.

2. Early Discussions of Cultural/Media Imperialism

As Gienow-Hecht argues, the discussion started ‘in political think tanks’ and policy arenas after World War II. Mattelart (1994) pointed to the use of the term ‘cultural imperialism’ by policy people during the 1960s, specifically the French politician, Jacques Rigaud, and US diplomat, Zbigniew Brzezinski.

Focus on the concept continued in particular within the debates over the New World Information Order, especially within UNESCO as represented by the McBride Commission Report in 1980 (UNESCO 1980). A number of other UNESCO studies in the 1970s and 1980s documented the one-way flow of media products from developed Western countries to the underdeveloped, Third World (Nordenstreng/Varis 1974). In other words, these studies identified the existence of unbalanced, unidirectional flows of TV program materials and foreign news. The authors explained: “There is

no need – in fact, no justification – for a question mark after the title of this publication [*Television Traffic – A One-Way Street?*]. Globally speaking, television traffic does flow between nations according to the ‘one way street’ principle: the streams of heavy traffic flow one way only.” (Nordenstreng/Varis 1974: 52) Another UNESCO study by Guback/Varis (1982) further documented the global imbalance.

The second ‘trend’ identified by Gienow-Hecht developed in the early 1970s as communications scholars presented additional research documenting an imbalance in the flow of media products, research which denounced this uneven development. While there had been some attention to the cultural domination after WWII (see Innis 1952), critical media scholars intensified the analysis and debate in the 1970s. Schiller traced the influence of American media products and technologies around the world, as part of US economic and political strategies (Schiller 1971, 1976). The dominance of US media products was confirmed as well in other studies (such as Golding 1977; Mattelart 1979; Smythe 1981; Boyd-Barrett 1981-1982; Desousa 1982; Boyd 1984).

Based on these developments, scholars began to identify a model of imperialism that integrated the media. Galtung included media and communication when he wrote about *structural imperialism* in 1970 (Galtung 1971), explaining that his “point of departure [was] two of the most glaring facts about this world: the tremendous inequality, within and between nations, in almost all aspects of human living conditions, including the power to decide over those living conditions; and the resistance of this inequality to change. The world consists of Center and Periphery nations.” (Galtung 1971: 8) Galtung also identified five types of imperialism: economic, political, military, communication and cultural.

From within media studies, one of the people most often identified with the cultural imperialism debate was Herbert Schiller, an American professor who contributed to the early development of critical media studies. Schiller described *cultural imperialism* in 1976 as “the sum of the processes by which a society is brought into the modern world system and how its dominating stratum is attracted, pressured, forced, and sometimes bribed into shaping social institutions to correspond to, or even promote, the values and structures of the dominating center of the system” (Schiller

1976: 9-10). This description is one of the most commonly cited definitions of cultural imperialism.

Tunstall similarly described cultural imperialism as a situation in which “authentic, traditional local culture [...] is being battered out of existence by the indiscriminate dumping of large quantities of slick commercial and media products, mainly from the United States” (Tunstall 1977: 57).

Attention to cultural imperialism also developed from within some of the areas of the world where the process was taking place. Scholars from Latin America contributed a good deal to the debate, including Beltran, who wrote that it is “a verifiable process of social influence by which a nation imposes on other countries its set of beliefs, values, knowledge, and behavioral norms as well as its overall style of life” (Beltran 1978: 184; see also Burton/Franco 1978; Lent 1979; Becker et al. 1986).

Dorfman/Mattelart (1971/1991) addressed the issue in their classic *How to Read Donald Duck* – subtitled, ‘Imperialist Ideology In The Disney Comic’. The study analyzed the representation of the Third World, as well as other depictions in Disney comics distributed in Latin America, and found messages that promoted the ‘American way’ as the ‘best way’ (Barker 1997).

While most of these discussions employed the term ‘cultural imperialism’, the focus was mostly on the distribution and effects of the media. While cultural imperialism may also include other forms of culture (language, literature, education, religion, etc.), it may not be surprising that a good deal of attention has been focused on the media’s increasingly important role in the process.

In later work, Tomlinson (2001: 34) drew attention to this distinction, but also explained that media theorists contributed a great deal to the discourse on the broader concept of cultural imperialism. “Though their discussions of media imperialism often remain tied to the particularities of media institutions and forms, they are always, if sometimes unwittingly, in the thick of the conceptual and normative problems of cultural imperialism”.

Although some media researchers later criticized the focus on the media (for instance, see Sreberny-Mohammadi 1997: 50), Barker (1997: 183) explained: “[...] cultural imperialism is understood in the terms of the imposition of one national culture upon another and the media are seen as

central to this process as carriers of cultural meanings which penetrate and dominate the culture of the subordinate nation”.

Some scholars actually used the term media imperialism, as in Boyd-Barrett’s definition in 1977: “the process whereby the ownership, structure, distribution, or content of the media in any country are singly or together subject to substantial external pressures from the media interests of any other country or countries, without proportionate reciprocation of influence by the country so affected” (Boyd-Barrett 1977: 117).

While ‘media imperialism’ or ‘cultural imperialism’ have been the most commonly used terms, other terminology has been suggested. For instance, McPhail defined *electronic colonialism* as: “the dependency relationship established by the importation of communication hardware, foreign-produced software, along with engineers, technicians, and related information protocols, that vicariously establish a set of foreign norms, values, and expectations which, in varying degrees, may alter the domestic cultures and socialization processes” (McPhail 1987: 18). Christian (1989) discussed ‘electronic imperialism’ referring mostly to television. Meanwhile, Sui-Nam Lee identified *communication imperialism* 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” (Sui-Nam Lee 1988: 74). Meanwhile, Hamelink argued that “the impressive variety of the world’s cultural systems is waning due to a process of ‘*cultural synchronization*’ that is without historic precedent” (Hamelink 1983: 2-3), thus emphasizing the homogeneous culture that resulted from cultural imperialism. Moreover, Sarti (1981), Link (1984) and many others discussed *cultural dependency and domination*, which somewhat softened the negative connotation implied by the notion of ‘imperialism’.

3. Early Critiques of the Media/Cultural Imperialism Concept and Critical Responses

Obviously, many scholars disagreed with the arguments associated with the concept of cultural or media imperialism. Within media studies, most

of these critics represented the mainstream or dominant paradigm, as the idea of cultural imperialism became associated with critical approaches to the study of media, which were actively opposed during this period (see the 'Ferment in the Field' issue of *Journal of Communications* 1983). While it was difficult for mainstream researchers to argue that there was not an imbalance in the flow of media/cultural products or that US media products and services were not spreading rapidly around the world (for instance, see Hoskins/Mirus 1988), other lines of criticism developed. The next section will present examples of these critiques, followed by critical researchers' responses to them.

3.1. Early Critiques of the Media/Cultural Imperialism Concept

A range of responses were offered to counter early media/cultural imperialism claims. Many positivist researchers criticized the cultural imperialism thesis as inexact and inconsistently defined. Chaffee (1991) argued that most of the key terms were treated as primitive concepts, or that it was assumed that their basic meaning was understood. It also was argued that as a theory, it lacked explanatory power and needed to be advanced beyond the level of pure description (Ogan 1988; Sui-Nam Lee 1988). Ogan further asserted that the economic component of media imperialism could be expressed in statistics, but that the cultural component was much more difficult to measure (Ogan 1988). Others maintained that the theory did not hold true in all situations of the phenomenon that it attempted to explain (Sinclair et al. 1996).

One of the major complaints about the cultural imperialist argument has been the question of reception. Several critiques noted that the theory has not adequately acknowledged an audience's ability to process information and interpret messages in different ways, based on their individual backgrounds (Liebes/Katz 1990; Ang 1985; Sui-Nam Lee 1988). This argument is related to the increased emphasis by many media researchers on an 'active' rather than 'passive' audience, not only within a mainstream 'uses and gratifications' model, but also coming from a variety of scholars identifying with a cultural studies approach to understanding media.

In fact, Roach (1997: 47) argued that, by the end of the 1990s, discussions of cultural imperialism had been "subsumed under the rubric of 'cultural studies' and its key concepts: the active audience, audience 'resist-

ance' to media messages, and polysemy". Roach also observed the way that 'resistance' came to be used by postmodernists in the field of communications, as articulated by two prominent writers in the field of comparative literature: Edward Said and Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o. Both writers still validated the notion of cultural imperialism, but used the term 'resistance' to refer to the struggles against colonialism and imperialism in the countries of the South.

Meanwhile, Fejes (1981) argued for a more careful understanding of the notion of culture: "While a great deal of concern over media imperialism is motivated by a fear of the cultural consequences of transnational media [...]. All too often the institutional aspects of transnational media receive the major attention while the cultural impact which one assumes to occur, goes unaddressed in any detailed manner" (Fejes 1981: 287). Others argued more strenuously for a 'media effects' approach and more audience research (Salwen 1991).

Another argument challenged the notion of a homogenous culture that was developing globally (Lee 1980). Meanwhile, other scholars defended American culture as appropriately universal. For instance, Tracey discussed the interconnectness of world media systems as a 'patchwork quilt' (Tracey 1988), but also argued that "the real genius of American popular culture is to bind together, better than anything else, common humanity with such universal elements as the wholesome innocence of Disney characters or the tragic dramatic structure of *Dallas*" (1985: 40).

Other researchers looked at music and argued that popular music worldwide is a complex mix of local, national and international influences, as "meanings are negotiated between domination and diversity, cultural erosion and enrichment" (Laing 1986: 331; see also Robinson et al. 1991).

3.2. Responses to criticism of the media/cultural imperialism thesis

It is interesting that the debate about cultural imperialism within media studies took place more or less around the time that more general paradigm debates were erupting. Though many critical scholars were involved in these debates, Herb Schiller was probably the most active in countering these critiques. Schiller responded directly to the criticism from active audience proponents in 1989:

Assuredly, this was a finding most agreeable to the producers [of American media content] and one that sharply rebuffed the worriers who championed a new international information order. How heartening to the cultural message makers to learn that cultural imperialism does not exist! Each audience receives and makes its own message. Liebes concluded: “The idea of a simple ‘American’ message imposing itself in the same way on viewers all over the world is simply not valid.”

But who would have made such a claim in the first place? The transfer of cultural values is a complex matter. It is not a one-shot hypodermic inoculation of individual plots and character representations. It involves the much more difficult to measure acceptance of deep-structured meanings that may not even be explicitly stated. Can the transfer, for example, of acquisitive or consumerist perspectives be simply quantified? (Schiller 1989: 149).

In another article by Schiller (1991: 24), he responded further to active audience theorists, asking “How can one propose to extract one TV show, film, book, or even a group, from the now nearly seamless media-cultural environment and examine it (them) for specific effects?” He went further to question how a researcher could identify the specific source of an idea, value, or reaction. According to Schiller, an individual’s response to the television series “Dallas”, for example, may be the result of “half-forgotten images from a dozen peripheral encounters in the cultural supermarket” (Schiller 1991: 24).

White (2001) points out that this was one of the basic arguments used to counter the challengers of the cultural imperialism concept. In response to those who argued that audiences are inherently active and/or resistant to media messages, Schiller contended that these researchers are basically trying to apply cultural imperialism to the micro-level or to individual audience members, even though cultural imperialism “is designed for application to macro-level situations such as the flow of information between countries” (White 2001: n.pag.).

Schiller also criticized the methodology of active audience researchers. As White observes: “Clearly, cultural imperialism cannot be studied from a purely positivistic quantitative perspective. Implicit in [Schiller’s] critique [...] is the notion that cultural imperialism is a long-term process and therefore cannot be analyzed with ‘one-shot’ analyses. An examination of cultural imperialism requires longitudinal analyses with media audience

cohorts” (White 2005: n.pag.). Other researchers offered further evidence of media imperialism through studies of global and regional media flows. (For instance, see Meyer 1987, 1988; Hamelink 1990; Boyd-Barrett/Thussu 1993).

Interestingly, confirmation of one of the tenets of the cultural imperialism argument was from Harvard business professor, Theodore Levitt, who published an essay in 1983 entitled ‘The Globalization of Markets’, where he argued that, “[t]he world’s needs and desires have been irrevocably homogenized”. Levitt distinguished between multinational corporations, which change depending on which country they are operating in, and global corporations which use the same products and policies everywhere. “The multinational corporation operates in a number of countries, and adjusts its products and practices to each – at high relative costs. The global corporation operates with resolute constancy – at low relative cost – as if the entire world (or major regions of it) were a single entity; it sells the same things in the same way everywhere [...]. Ancient differences in national tastes or modes of doing business disappear” (Levitt 1983).

4. Recent Thoughts on Media/Cultural Imperialism

The last few decades have seen significant shifts in the global political economy, as well as even more media expansion. The collapse of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe’s communist regimes was supposedly influenced by the ‘lure’ of Western products and culture. Together with the continued process of globalization, a neo-liberal agenda – promoting deregulation, privatization and commercialization – has opened global markets to new media technologies. Consequently, media/cultural imperialism continues to be redefined, but also critiqued, within academic circles. The next section presents a sample of this rethinking, followed by some examples of the continuing critique of the concept.

4.1. Rethinking Media/Cultural Imperialism

While Schiller and others continued to identify American political, economic and cultural dominance through the 1990s (Schiller 1991), a good

deal of theoretical development and research emerged around the turn of the century to refine or reformulate the notion of cultural imperialism, especially in the light of continued global media expansion and technological development (see Mattelart 1994; Golding/Harris 1997).

Critical scholars have continued to document the flow of media products (especially entertainment programming) from Western, and especially U.S.-based media conglomerates, around the world (see Herman/McChesney 1997; Germann 2004; Miller et al. 2005). While local and regional media production has expanded, especially with new media outlets such as cable television, it is still possible to see an enormous output from Western media to developing countries, and in some cases (for instance, motion pictures), US media still dominate foreign media programming (see, for instance, Fu 2006).

Nevertheless, rather than focusing on direct ideological effects from foreign media programs and other cultural products, many researchers have stressed other forms of influence (see, for example, Schiller 1996, and Sreberny-Mohammadi 1997). As Boyd-Barrett noted in 2006: “Early media imperialism theories focused on US television exports at a time when such exports were set to decline in many local markets. Covert influences such as ownership, business models, professional values, content formatting, audience preferences, cultural hybrids and technologies, were insufficiently considered” (Boyd-Barrett 2006: 42).

Along these lines, Thomas (1999) pointed out that the neo-liberal policies promoted by the World Trade Organization were shaping domestic practices and informing attitudes about communications priorities. Using India as an exemplar, he specifically highlighted issues relating to intellectual property and the pressures of liberalization on local communications industries, including information technology, broadcasting, film and the press. Thomas concluded that, “despite new opportunities to reverse one-way flows, the systemic and systematic incorporation of countries like India into the circuits of globalization inevitably leads to them becoming mere appendages of transnational powers” (Thomas 1999: 289). Along the same lines, Crabtree/Malhotra (2000) found influences on the organization of media in India.

Meanwhile, Chadha/Kavoori (2000) resisted the argument that Third World countries have been flooded and overwhelmed by western cultural

products, but agreed that the problem lies in the increasing commercialization and challenges to public broadcasting in many Asian countries. Chen (2004) also found important influences through transnational cable channels in Asian markets such as Hong Kong. Meanwhile, Van Elteren (2003) rejects the notion of cultural imperialism, yet acknowledges ‘the global diffusion of consumerist beliefs and practices’, primarily propagated by the US.

A closer look at cultural production has been undertaken by critical researchers, as well, with calls for a more nuanced argument about the flow of media products. For instance, Curtin (2003: 2002) looks at specific media capitals and argues for an “empirically grounded analysis of the temporal dynamism and spatial complexity of the global media environment”.

More recently, Jin (2007) considered the argument that some national or regional cultural distributors have become dominant in various regions of the world and have avoided the domination of foreign cultural producers. While Korea has become an active producer of media products for the East and Southeast Asian cultural markets, Korea’s media industry is still strongly influenced by the US, specifically in the form of joint ventures, direct investment and program affiliations. Jin concluded that “the transnationalization of domestic culture industries is nothing but another form of intensified cultural imperialism” (Jin 2007: 767). Jin argued that “the cultural imperialism thesis is not only applicable to the flow of cultural products, but also to other aspects of the film and television industry, such as the institutionalization of Western ways of life, organizational structures, values and interpersonal relations, and language” (ibid: 767).

Meanwhile, research supporting a cultural imperialist argument has focused on audience reception of Western cultural products. The Global Disney Audience Project (Wasko et al. 2001) looked at the popularity and attitudes towards Disney products and media in 18 countries and argued that cultural products (such as Disney’s) can themselves represent, or be associated with, certain values, such as consumerism, commercialization, etc. Meanwhile, Gray (2007) offers an interesting example of *The Simpsons*, an American television program that may not always represent ‘American values’.

Griffin (2002) and Classen (2005) also consider ideas about cultural imperialism in the light of developments related to 9/11 and terrorism.

Griffin concludes that “For media scholars, perhaps the events of the past year will serve as a reminder that we still know very little about the cultural impact of transnational systems of media technology that propagate social norms and public aspirations. Global upheaval, rather than global peace, seems to be accompanying the expansion of global markets” (Griffin 2002: 20).

Another term used for this process has been ‘soft power’ – a term apparently first coined by Dean Joseph Nye of the Harvard Kennedy School of Government in the late 1980s (see Nye 2004), but adopted by certain neo-conservative American policy-makers. Nye argued that soft power is perpetuated through a newly globalized economy and the use of new information technologies, rather than forceful domination.

Another example of rethinking has been Boyd-Barrett’s (2006) observation that the earlier focus on television and content distracted attention from the emergence of microprocessor-based computer networking technologies, their significance for the development of ICT industries, and the profound influence these have exerted on US economic and foreign policies. Boyd-Barrett documented the continuing dominance of US corporate power, US-based transnational corporations and, among them, of ICT industries, within the global economy and found US dominance continued in most spheres of computing and telecommunications at the turn of the 21st century.

In addition, the development of the theory of cultural imperialism also continued to benefit from links with other approaches, thus refining and expanding the concept. While early discussions of cultural imperialism were mostly within the field of media studies, the academic debate has expanded into other fields. For instance, Hamm/Smandych (2005) gathered essays on cultural imperialism spanning a wide array of social and physical science disciplines, and argue that cultural imperialism is ‘a rather holistic concept’.

Furthermore, dependency theory continues to play an important role in providing evidence of a world system that still consists of dominant nations at the core and poor countries at the periphery, despite the pronouncements from free market economists who argue that we are moving towards a fully integrated, global system.

As noted previously, cultural imperialism is also an on-going issue in the area of post-colonialism. Drawing on Foucault's concepts of discourse and power, Said and other post-colonialists have extensively examined the cultural component of imperialism (see Said 1993, for instance). Nevertheless, as Christophers (2007) points out, postcolonial studies and the critique of American cultural imperialism, despite addressing similar themes, have developed largely in isolation from one another.

It is encouraging, however, to note that some discussions of cultural imperialism have returned to classic Marxist theory in analyzing the concept. For instance, Kueneman (2005) recalls Marx's observation about the ruling class and ruling ideas, and provides a contemporary view of cultural imperialism: "As the brokers of political and economic power pursue their agendas, there are consequences in the cultural domain. Some of these are incidental, many are unintended, and some are best understood as direct attempts at cultural imperialism. The cumulative effect of these cultural changes contributes to the undermining of local cultural diversity and difference and the imposition of a monocultural view that is capitalistic, materialistic, intolerant of difference and local autonomy, and a threat to the ecosphere" (Kueneman 2005: vii-viii).

Expanded methodological approaches have also been suggested and used in the study of cultural influence, as well, including a variety of qualitative audience research methods and critical reception analysis (see Biltereyst 1995; Sarikakis 2005).

4.2. Continuing Criticism of Media/Cultural Imperialism Concept

Buonanno (2005) has observed that the critiques of media imperialism have continued from different perspectives, but have only been somewhat effective in neutralizing the idea of a threat and have not developed very much beyond that.

Tomlinson (1991) presented an extensive critique of cultural imperialism, viewing it as a critical discourse that represented another (non-Western) culture in dominant Western cultural terms. He identified four ways to discuss the concept: as media imperialism, as a discourse of nationality, as a critique of global capitalism or as a critique of modernity itself

(Tomlinson 1991: 19-28). He included a number of specific criticisms that other researchers continue to develop.

One of the critiques has focused on national or regional cultural producers' growing strengths, especially focusing on Brazil's dominant role in Latin America (Straubhaar 1984; Biltereyst/Meers 2000; Sonwalker 2001). Straubhaar has proposed an 'asymmetrical interdependence' thesis, stressing contraflow and cultural proximity that has been supported by other researchers (Straubhaar 2002; Sinclair et al. 1996; Bicket 2005). Other studies have focused on examples such as India (Sengupta/Frith 1997; Thomas 1999) and China (Wu/Chan 2007; see also Sinclair/Harrison 2004).

Another criticism focuses on national governments' role in resisting media imperialism. For instance, Xiaoming (2000) examined the development of satellite broadcasting in China and argued that a national government may regulate satellite broadcasters as well as domestic broadcasting. Chadha/Kavoori (2000) also looked at the role of national gate-keeping in resisting media imperialism.

Other critiques have involved the expansion and extension of media technology, often with enhanced interactive characteristics. Many argue that the expansion of technologies such as telecommunications, computers, and satellite technology, but especially the Internet, have become more widely available, in addition to allowing greater interaction between sender and receiver than was available through previous communication technologies. White (2001: n.pag.) concludes that "the cultural imperialism argument that has been framed in terms of center nations with power over disempowered periphery nations must be reevaluated as the advanced media slowly penetrate into developing nations".

There has also been continued focus on audiences' preferences for local or national cultural productions rather than foreign imports, or in other words, Straubhaar and others' notion of cultural proximity (see Sepstrup 1989; Biltereyst 1991; Sui-Nam Lee 1995; Elasmár/Hunter 1997; Thusu 1998). Banerjee (2002: 217) has repeated arguments about the 'resilience' of cultures, arguing that "cultural change has to be understood as a dynamic articulation between local and transcultural forces". While mainstream media researchers still suggest various media theories to explain cultural domination (for instance, Willnat et al. 2002; Ware/Dupagne 1994), Strelitz

(2004) has pointed to ‘centuries of cultural mixing’ between cultures that challenge the notion of a ‘pure’ indigenous culture.

Another line of critique has been whether the US deserves the role as the dominant cultural imperialist (for instance, see Hutchinson 1997; May/Wagnleitner 2000; Chalaby 2006). Interestingly, some Americans have not rejected the concept of cultural/media imperialism, but embraced it fully as an important part of American foreign policy. In a provocative piece in *Foreign Policy* magazine, David Rothkopf (1997) argued that America should embrace cultural imperialism, which is the ‘innocent result’ of globalization. Although his definition involved allowing individuals in other nations to accept or reject foreign cultural influences, he pointed to the consumption of news, popular music and film as a form of cultural dominance that he supported. Rothkopf also made the point that globalization and the Internet were accelerating the process of cultural influence. He noted: “Globalization is a vital step toward both a more stable world and better lives for the people in it. Furthermore, these issues have serious implications for American foreign policy. For the United States, a central objective of an Information Age foreign policy must be to win the battle of the world’s information flows, dominating the airwaves as Great Britain once ruled the seas” (Rothkopf 1997: n. pag.).

Along these lines, Hamm/Smandych (2005: ix) point to “compelling evidence of the close connection between cultural imperialism and the global power structure and the political and economic objectives behind current American attempts at global domination”. But they also argue that imperialism is “not an American invention, and it will probably long outlive the current American empire”.

5. Summary/Concluding Thoughts

As the globalization of media continues, the debates about the consequences of cultural impact will inevitably continue, as well. Gienow-Hecht (2002: n. pag.) describes the current state of the discussion of cultural imperialism: “At the turn of the twenty-first century, a rather heterogeneous group of scholars argued that local resistance either modified or completely stymied imports as part of a global process. Begun as a purely political

debate, the discussion has expanded into an increasingly academic dispute over culture as an instrument of power that either ‘functioned’ or ‘did not function’”. In an effort to summarize the debate at this point, it may be possible to say (perhaps simplistically) that:

- Media and communications products are still often distributed through an uneven flow, albeit in a way more complex than was the case before. Foreign media products continue to have influence, although reception/resistance may be different for different cultures.
- Western, especially US media products, may still promote a specific lifestyle, including consumption and other Western values.
- Western, especially US media products, may still dominate some global media markets, especially for film and some other entertainment products.
- Western, especially US-based, transnational media and communication conglomerates, still influence global markets, through ownership of media/communications outlets, as well as the supply of capital.
- Through political and economic power, the US and other Western countries continue to push developing and Third World nations towards private, commercial-based media and information systems.

While this discussion has focused mostly on the academic debate surrounding the concept, it is important to further explore this concept as it has been developed in international and national policy arenas. For instance, UNESCO has recently drawn attention to the promotion of cultural diversity as a ‘new ethical imperative’ through an international treaty, the *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions*, expressing concern “that the neo-liberal international trading regime may have the consequence of reducing the public expression of cultural differences” (see Harvey 2006: 15). And, while it may be understandable that the academic debate continues to evolve, as the global expansion of media itself shifts and changes, it should be important in the future for researchers to unite academic and policy debates of media/cultural imperialism to influence further any effective promotion of cultural diversity.

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Abstracts

During the 1970s and 1980s, the debate about media imperialism erupted in the field of communication studies. A good deal of critique and discussion followed during the next few decades, as academics continued to debate the feasibility of the concept. Meanwhile, global media expanded and changed in various ways. Is media imperialism still a viable concept in an increasingly globalized, diverse media system? Or has a new form of cultural imperialism developed? This essay discusses how these concepts have been defined, how they have been challenged and redefined, and their current relevance.

Die Debatte über Medienimperialismus entwickelte sich in den 1970er und 1980er Jahren im Umfeld der Kommunikationswissenschaften. Die darauf folgenden Jahrzehnte waren durch kritische Diskussionen geprägt, im Rahmen derer AkademikerInnen über die Brauchbarkeit des Konzeptes debattierten. In der Zwischenzeit breiteten sich Medien auf globaler Ebene aus und entwickelten sich in vielfältiger Weise weiter. Ist Medienimperialismus in einem zunehmend globalisierten und diversifizierten Mediensystem noch ein gangbares Konzept? Oder haben sich neue Formen von Kulturimperialismus herausgebildet? Dieser Aufsatz diskutiert, wie diese Konzepte in der Vergangenheit definiert wurden, auf welche Weise sie kritisiert und neu definiert wurden und worin ihre aktuelle Relevanz liegen kann.

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