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## **Reconsidering Geocultural Contraflow: Intercultural Information Flows Through Trends in Global Audiovisual Trade**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The main purpose of this paper is to review and reevaluate the concept of cultural-linguistic contraflow as it relates to global media trade, taking into account the work of Straubhaar, Robertson, Appadurai, Sinclair, and others, as well recent global developments, and especially the vast increase in global media trade since the end of the Cold War. The purpose is to gain a fuller understanding of the emerging global system of information flow and trade in broadcast materials. Case studies involving a number of bilateral and multilateral media trading relationships are re-examined. This examination provides support for Straubhaar's asymmetrical interdependence thesis, within the context of a developing bifurcation in global cultural interchange between the "global popular" in movie production and "glocalization" in television production.

When the highly acclaimed *Economist* magazine a few years ago devoted one of its "School Briefs" sections to a discussion of globalization and the international trade in television programming, it focused

on the role of economics and culture in the developing trends of global trade, as well as the continuing American dominance of the market. Nevertheless, it concluded that, when it comes to television, “Almost everywhere, the programmes audiences like to watch the most are their own country’s” (“A world view,” 1997, p. 72). Furthermore, it suggests that “the globalisation of media may underwrite a globalisation not merely of Mickey Mouse, but of the many cultures valued by people who are separated by distance from their geographic or ethnic origins” (p. 72). These remarks, taken together, speak to a development in the globalization of media products that goes far beyond outmoded beliefs in U.S. economic and cultural imperialism: the desire of people around the world to watch television programming that originates from a cultural or geographic background close to their own. They also express a point-of-view that has gained considerably greater prominence in the field of international communication in recent years. At the same time, postcolonial studies and reception theory have also failed to fully explain recent developments.

Instead, the focus has shifted steadily to a more critical structuralist approach, one that focuses on international information flows and media trade, and their interaction with cultures and societies around the world. This process, incorporating the concepts of cultural-linguistic contraflow and cultural proximity into discussions of global media trade, provides a useful framework for characterizing and interpreting in cultural terms not only the extent but also the nature of international information flows through trade in television programming. However, outside of the continuing work done by Joseph Straubhaar (1991, 1997, 2002) and a few others (see below), relatively little has been written about this subject in recent years. Now, in a world that has moved beyond the post-Cold War period into an even more uncertain new era, it is a good time to reconsider the work on contraflow and cultural proximity (what Straubhaar styled “asymmetrical interdependence”) and contribute some fresh ideas, in the hope of stimulating more debate and research on this topic. That is the intent of this paper, whose purpose is to review the major theoretical debates relating to international and global media trade, taking into account recent global developments – involving not only the World Trade Organization but also, where relevant,

the rise of regional trading blocs. Within this context, this paper looks at a number of bilateral and multilateral media trading relationships to see whether, and to what extent, such relationships can be explained in terms of cultural-linguistic contraflow and cultural proximity.

Although the present study's focus is on trade between and among nations-states and world regions, it recognizes the powerful and ongoing debate over the power and impact of global media flows and transborder data flows (TDF), and the concurrent deep impact of globalization. Not all commentators agree on the extent and nature of that impact (Ferguson, 1992). Some would agree, in general terms, with Herman & McChesney's (1997) assessment that the impact on local and national cultures and societies of the seemingly unstoppable force of globalization has been at best mixed and at worst pernicious. The central effects of this trend, according to this view, have included "larger cross-border flows of media outputs, the growth of media TNCs [transnational corporations] and the tendency toward centralization of media control, and the spread and intensification of commercialization" (Herman & McChesney, 1997, p.8). However, even Herman and McChesney note some more positive aspects to globalization, such as the rapid dissemination of popular culture and humanitarian values, and pressure on "stodgy" and unrepresentative state broadcasting systems to improve their services.

## **Beyond Cultural Imperialism**

While this paper acknowledges the enduring resonance of the cultural imperialism thesis – and its characterization of the power of news agencies (Boyd-Barrett, 1980; Boyd-Barrett & Thussu, 1992) and TransNational Corporations (Herman & McChesney, 1997; McChesney, 1999, 2004), it contributes to the general critique of that thesis, recognizing the importance of a multi-level approach to global communication research, involving sub-national, supranational, and global as well as national levels. In broadly critical structural terms, this paper takes as its starting point the critique of cultural imperialism implicit in, for example, Straubhaar's (1991) typology of cultural-linguistic groups in the context of asymmetrical interdependence in media trade, as well as, more broadly, the recharacterization of

globalization along geolinguistic and cultural-linguistic rather than universal lines (Sinclair, 1996; Straubhaar, 1997, 2002; Wilkinson, 1995). The readers edited by Sinclair, Stuart Cunningham and Elizabeth Jacka (1996, 1998) are particularly relevant. Also appropriate to the present discussion is important work on diasporas (Appadurai, 1996), “glocalization” (Robertson, 1992), and cultural hybridity and creolization within the context of globalization (Garcia Canclini, 1995). Consideration of the historical context is also key to an understanding of recent and current developments in communication and media studies (Thussu, 2000).

The very idea of globalization, and its universalist assumptions, has come under fire in recent years. Cunningham, Jacka, & Sinclair (1998), writing from an Australian perspective, point out that “Globalization has already become a cliché that it is high time to move beyond, and analysis of the new patterns discernible in global television show a useful way in which this can be done” (p. 188). They note that shifting the focus of attention from global forces to the “regionalization of markets gives greater insight into what is happening in the world than does the hollow rhetoric of globalization” (p. 189).

These new patterns referred to above have been described in various ways, involving key facets such as asymmetrical interdependence, cultural proximity, glocalization, and so on. They point to a quite different way of thinking about how global media flows work in the world. In a nutshell, the shift is from the universal to the particular or the middle-range. Straubhaar (2002) also posits that, in addition to globalization, we need to consider “regionalization” as a powerful force to explain the cultural trade in television “into multicountry markets linked by geography, language and culture” (p. 184). These markets might best be described as “geocultural” or “cultural-linguistic” markets (Wilkinson, 1995) given the tendency for such post-imperial markets to be geographically spread across the globe (Straubhaar, 2002); i.e., they can be considered “proximate” in either geographic or cultural-linguistic terms, depending on patterns of past immigration, colonization, reverse migration, or other intimate cultural interchange.

In contrast to the more “totalizing” or universal approach associated with traditional critical structuralists such as Schiller (1969) and Galtung (1971), John Tomlinson (1997) posits a different, decentered model for thinking about global information flows – one that eschews stable core and periphery. “Instead of settled and confident centres of economic and cultural power exercising global hegemony, a better image may be that of a decentered network, in which power is diffused rather than concentrated and the patterns of its distribution are unstable and shifting” (Tomlinson, 1997, p. 140). This model of an unstable, decentered, world system has become increasingly popular in recent years (Giddens, 1994; Carcia Canclini, 1995; Castells, 1996). However, more needs to be done at the confluence of institutional and cultural factors, to provide more complete case studies of media operations within this new environment.

## **Global popular vs. cultural hybridization/"glocalization"**

Of course, all the popular approaches to recent and current trends in global information flows – cultural and structural imperialism, cultural studies, information society, and so on – have their merits and their drawbacks. It often seems difficult to propose an approach to international and global communication that allows conceptual space for at least some aspects of all of these perspectives. Yet it is necessary to make the attempt. One way of squaring this particular circle is to adapt Simon During’s (1997) concept of the “global popular” to this overview, as a useful distinguishing concept that allows us to consider multiple approaches to intercultural communication. Certainly, the term “global popular” is often used to refer to what is presented as the homogenization of popular cultural production and reception worldwide. Based on Western economic power and new technology, the concept typically describes the increasing power and reach of U.S. and western culture, leading – it is argued – to the undifferentiated adoption by indigenous entertainment industries of U.S. media forms. We thus often identify the term with huge global blockbuster movies – examples that come to mind include “Titanic,” “Harry Potter,” Arnold Schwarzenegger’s “Terminator” series. However, global television has also created a new category of

“global events”, including the Olympic Games, the World Cup, Tiananmen Square, both Gulf Wars, Princess Diana’s death and funeral, and so on.

However, the term need not, and should not, be applied universally to all types of media. This distinction becomes clear if we recall During’s caution that

the global popular is not to be identified with cultural globalization (or transnationalization) *tout court*. Cultural globalization takes many forms and has many different effects, some of which work in the opposite direction to the global popular. Globalized cultural technologies and networks of production have, paradoxically enough, generated more and more locally produced and consumed works from news shows to soaps. (During, 1997, p. 809)

Thus, if we can accept that a space still exists in global communication for consideration of truly global popular media – within which a more traditional cultural imperialism thesis can still usefully be applied – we can then put that to one side for the time being, and focus instead on a different “level” of communication flows: not the “higher” level of the global popular, but on the “lower” level of hybridized and glocalised transnational media. If the global popular is movie-oriented and resides in the form of the big-budget Hollywood blockbuster, the glocal is television-oriented and resides primarily in the soap opera and other relatively low-budget television content. The distinction is crucial to an understanding of cultural-linguistic information flows. While the global popular remains firmly rooted in the realm of U.S. domination of the movie industry, the “lower” level of transnational cultural and economic interchange is much more diverse and is becoming steadily more important (having emerged from a near-zero point only within the past quarter century or so). It is within *this* increasingly important subset of global information trade that cultural-linguistic contraflow should be placed. This is where cultural proximity, absent the overwhelming economic forces of the global popular, come more clearly into play.

## Reevaluating contraflow through trade in television programs

It is clear that the effort to characterize and understand transnational media trade and information flows has become considerably more complex in recent years. The trade in television programming, as distinct from trade in movies, forms a large and rapidly growing international market. It is also a market that has long been dominated by the United States. Technological developments in the television industry – both at the production and particularly at the output stages – have largely accounted for this expansion. The growth of cable and satellite transmission capability, and the consequent expansion of channel capacity, has vastly increased the demand for television programming, first in the United States and then in Europe and much of the rest of the world.

Some broad claims about television trade flows can safely be made. First, and most importantly, the United States remains by far the world's largest exporter of television programming, although its relative prominence in the global market has shrunk slightly over the past two decades or so (see below). What's more, U.S. imports of programming remain stubbornly low, at approximately 2 percent of the U.S. total, although there are signs that American broadcasters and cablecasters are buying significantly larger quantities of programming from other countries, particularly the United Kingdom and Latin American broadcasters (Clarke, 1997, p.103; UNESCO world culture report, 1998; Wildman & Siwek, 1988).

Outside the United States, British broadcasters have been the most successful in exporting programming around the world (Tunstall & Machin, 1999). France and, to a lesser extent, Germany are also significant global producers; but perhaps the most interesting development identified by the UNESCO surveys has been the rise of regional trading areas dominated by one or two producers. Thus Brazil and Mexico have become important exporters to the rest of Latin America, while Egypt exports to much of the Arab world, and Hong Kong supplies the Southeast Asian market (UNESCO statistical yearbook, 1998; UNESCO world culture report, 1998; Wildman & Siwek, 1988). Of course, U.S. exports to all these regions remain

very important, but that country's absolute impact has begun to be offset by these other producers at the global and regional levels.

Other factors seem to support the idea that the impact in Third World countries of U.S. and other imported programming is waning, although the evidence is sparse. Wildman and Siwek (1988), for example, cite a survey in Brazil which indicates that "the fraction of broadcast hours devoted to imported programs is larger than the fraction of a nation's audience that watches the imports, at least in countries that have significant domestic production industries" (p. 41). In other words, domestic programming was attracting larger audiences during prime time, while American shows were being relegated to "daytime and late-night spots where the smaller audiences could not support Brazilian-produced programs" (p. 44).

## **Three Brief Case Studies Considered**

Having set out the broad parameters of the debate surrounding the issue of contraflow in global television trade, the next step is to take a closer look at real-world examples of the process in action. To this end, the remainder of this paper is given over to consideration of three brief case studies of triangular sets of – bilateral and trilateral – trading relationships in television programming. These case studies are designed to act more as a helpful heuristic exercise rather than a fully fleshed-out theorization based on clear and extensive data. It is at most a preliminary study, which is offered for consideration, comment, and inspiration for further research to be undertaken in this area.

Each of these cases looks at three separate nation-states involved in triangular trading relationships, such as the U.S., France, and Britain, and compares bilateral trade within the triangular relationship – for example, the United States and Britain, and the United States and France – to see what can be gleaned from the comparison. However, an important proviso needs to be made. Meaningful comparisons can best be made between countries that at least have the economic capacity to produce a basic level of programming. It is probably not constructive to consider asymmetrical trading relationships between,



say, the United States and Nauru, or France and Tonga. Such small island states are unlikely to be able to produce significant programming at present to offset media imports. However, it is a contention of this paper that even fairly small states with limited resources, such as those found in sub-Saharan Africa or in central America, could theoretically produce news and entertainment programming of reasonable quality that would appeal to domestic audiences, given the rapidly falling costs of producing such material. The bilateral and multilateral media trading relationships described below have thus been chosen to highlight the theses of active audience and cultural/regional preferences and proximities.

## **Case study 1: The United States, France, and Britain**

This first three-way relationship involves three first-world nation-states: the United States, Britain, and France. Within the three-way media trade relationship between these countries, the media trading relationships between, on the one hand, the United States and France and on the other, the United States and Britain, are particularly interesting because they allow us to compare the impact of U.S. television exports on two countries of roughly similar size – Britain and France – which have quite different perceptions on the role of media in society. What's more, two of these countries, Britain and the U.S., could be said to be culturally more proximate, while another pair – Britain and France – are geographically more proximate.

The Franco-U.S. relationship deals with two countries that hold significantly different interpretations of the role of broadcast television in international trade, and in society generally. In the United States, television products are seen primarily (in fact, almost exclusively) as economic products to be bought and sold, no different from automobiles, washing machines, or agricultural goods. By contrast, in France television products, while also of course having a commercial element, are regarded primarily in cultural terms (Kauffmann, 1993). This development has emerged in tandem with a strong mercantilist and state-interventionist approach to media policy in France (Palmer & Tunstall, 1990).

This fundamental conceptual difference has led to a series of disputes between the two countries, within the context of trade negotiations leading to the formation of the WTO. France has been very influential, both on its own and through the EU, in raising European production quotas in order to keep American products out. Basically, France feels a need to protect its media market – and, more generally, its very culture – from increasing incursions from the United States.

While the Franco-U.S. trade relationship in television products has been somewhat prickly in recent years, that between Britain and the United States has been much less so. Cultural proximity has much to do with this, as does a broadly similar conception of the role of television in trade. It hardly needs stating that the media trade relationship between Britain and the United States is one of the longest and most involved in the world. Although Britain's traditional pursuit of a public service-broadcasting ethic – both in its public *and* private sectors – stood in sharp contrast to the U.S. commercial, laissez-faire model, the two systems have undoubtedly had an impact on each other, although the dominant influence has been from the U.S. to the UK (Scannell & Cardiff, 1991). In fact, it has been argued that the global U.S.-dominated media system is not simply American, but is Anglo-American. This is the tack taken by many global media scholars, such as Boyd-Barrett (1998), Tunstall (1977), Tunstall & Machin (1999), and Thussu (2000).

Inevitably, given the growing disparity in wealth and power between the two countries over the course of the past 80 years, U.S. influence on Britain has been significantly greater than the opposite case. Still, it is probably not too much of a stretch to say that America and Britain, between them, set the framework for broadcasting for much the world during the early and middle parts of the 20th Century. What is of greatest concern to this paper, however, is the situation today. While the balance of trade in media products remain strongly in favor of the United States, British film and television products have been steadily gaining ground in America, especially in the expanding cable sector (Clarke, 1997).

In the United States, the media have traditionally been guided with a light hand by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). While, in theory, the government was deemed to own the airwaves in the name of the people, in practice the private broadcasters have been free to develop an aggressively commercial media model. On the other hand, the British broadcasting system was (and, essentially, still is) conceived of as a public service entity – even at the commercial level, though recent legislative changes in the UK have undermined the commercial public service ethos to some degree. Under this heavily government-regulated system, broadcasters must fulfill a public service mission in place of, or in addition to, a purely commercial moneymaking role. This means plenty of programming for minorities (variously defined), including generous provision for news, documentaries, religious programs and children's television. This model, with the publicly funded British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) as its keystone, essentially remains in place. It is, however, coming under increasing pressure from a combination of intensifying commercial forces, new technology, and powerful free market forces. Indeed, for the past 20-plus years both Conservative and Labour governments have pushed strongly for increased competition, both within the existing networks and in terms of creating new channels to compete for market share (Tunstall & Palmer, 1990).

Perhaps because of the pressure to cut costs and bring in more revenue, the BBC and ITV have in recent years turned increasingly to overseas markets to sell their products. In this endeavor they have been particularly successful in the United States, where they have taken advantage of the burgeoning range of cable channels now available to U.S. television audiences. Such cable channels – many of which are specialist in nature, covering such diverse subjects as nature shows, historical documentaries, and comedies – require fresh, untapped sources of material to fill their schedules, and since such sources are limited even in the United States, British shows are often bought to fill the gap. The flow of British television shows into the American market has helped to offset the broader deficit in media trade that Britain has traditionally suffered in relation to the United States (Clarke, 1997).

In terms of television imports into France and Britain from the United States, the situation has altered significantly in recent years. Until the late 1980s, both countries imported a similarly small minority of programming – between 10 and 15 percent – from the United States (UNESCO, 1989). However, with the advent of satellite television and a broader multichannel environment, both countries have seen a marked increase in television imports in recent years. This shift has been most marked in the UK. In this case, the large-scale expansion of satellite television – allied with a more modest but still significant rise in the number of cable households – has led to a proliferation of multichannel households. This expansion has in large part been fueled by access to U.S. programming. In particular, BSkyB, the News Corporation-owned satellite broadcaster, has been responsible for sucking in huge quantities of American material for its multiple channels (Tunstall & Machin, 1999).

The flow in audiovisual traffic between the U.S. and Britain has not been completely one-way. For example, the BBC continues its long-standing co-production relationships with the U.S. A&E cable network and Boston public broadcaster WGBH. Meanwhile, the BBC's joint project with the Discovery channel has facilitated not only the creation of BBC America, a commercial cable channel showing only BBC and other British-produced fare, but also the airing of some of the Corporation's vast library of natural history programming on various U.S. Discovery channels, including Animal Planet (Thussu, 2000). As for BBC America, this channel has become increasingly successful in recent years, and is now available in almost 40 million households ("The British Behemoth," 2004).

France, in contrast to the UK, has been much more forceful in pressing for a cultural exemption clause to global trade agreements – and in fact won just such a clause in the negotiations over the creation of the WTO. What's more, France has fought hard within the EU to retain common European quotas to protect media products from being overwhelmed by outside, i.e., American, fare. In spite of this, France has seen a steady and sustained increase in its exposure to American media products, for many of the same reasons as pertain to the UK

## Case study 2: The United States, Canada (Quebec/English Canada), and Mexico

This three-way relationship is interesting because the three countries involved are signatories to the NAFTA agreement. This threesome is illuminating for a number of reasons. One of the countries identified falls into two broad yet clearly distinct cultural categories – Quebec and English-speaking Canada. Two of the countries – Mexico and Canada – are both geographically proximate to the United States and have roughly similar levels of economic power. These similarities provide clear points of comparison, especially since one country – Canada, or more specifically English Canada – is culturally much more proximate than the other. Schlesinger’s concept of “communicative spaces” provides support for the notion that two such differentiated spaces exist in Canada: one for the French-speaking part of the Canada, which for practical purposes means Quebec; and another for the majority English-speaking population of the remaining nine provinces. (One could also include an Inuit communicative space in the far north of the country, but the small size and influence of that region makes such an inclusion unnecessary in this context.)

Canadians – or at least those who are not of French-Canadian extraction – have long struggled for a sense of nationhood. To the extent that they have found a unified sense of self-identity, it has been more in matters of practicality than of the heart. As one commentator puts it, Canadians

lack a language that is uniquely our own, a long history, folklore, or myths. I’d say one thing we have counted on in their place is a set of socially constructed institutions: the railroad, the CBC, our network of social programs, maybe the post office. These are real, not mythical entities, but they serve a reassuring function. They not only deliver TV shows, pension cheques, or the mail – they give us the sense of a cohesive society (Salutin, 1995, p. 40).

Canada as a whole, and many of its English-speaking inhabitants in particular, have found it hard to create for themselves a strong, unifying sense of identity, given the geographic and cultural proximity of the United States. In fact, in many ways the culture of English Canada is very similar to that of the

Douglas Bicket,  
State University of New York, Geneseo,  
April 2005 14

United States. One way in which this has manifested itself is in the very high audience figures in English Canada for U.S. television shows. While concerns about national identity and distinctiveness vis-a-vis the United States have plagued English Canada, this has been much less of a problem for French Canadians. The role of French-Canadian culture, and the production and transmission of that culture, has become a matter of great importance to Quebecers. As Lockerbie states, “In many ways culture has taken over from religion as the institution which expresses Quebec’s distinctiveness within Canada and binds it together as a homogeneous society” (Lockerbie, 1987, p. 14). Furthermore, Quebec’s large, culturally distinctive population has been translated, in political terms, into a powerful political force – the *Bloc Québécois* – fighting for Quebec’s interests at the federal level. One result of this is in the far greater audience figures for home-grown television shows in the Quebec media market (see below).

Quebec has seen an upsurge in its cultural production in recent years. This renaissance of cultural production initially coincided with *la révolution tranquille* in the 1960s, which resulted in a sympathetic political structure for the promotion of Québécois culture. Film has traditionally been the most important medium for Quebec in this respect. Lefebvre & Barrowclough (1981) put the beginning of an essentially Québécois cinema at 1956, when the federal National Film Board of Canada moved its offices and production facilities from Ottawa to Montreal (Lefebvre, 1981, p. 8). This led to the creation of a French-language section, which was to provide the basis for much innovative film-making by young Quebec directors such as Claude Jutra and Michel Brault.

Apart from the NFB, Quebec directors have received generous funding – for both documentaries and feature films – from Telefilm Canada (formerly the Canadian Film Development Corporation) and from Quebec’s own film institute, the *Société Générale des Industries Culturelles* (SOGIC). Through this institute, and through its vigorous support for continued federal financing, the Quebec government continues to be heavily involved in motion picture investment, funding cultural production to the tune of \$10.9 million every year (*The Canadian Encyclopedia*, 2000). Overall film production in Quebec reached \$240 million in 1994, with homegrown Quebec films accounting for \$148 million of that total (Brendan,

1995, p. 45). Despite some cutbacks in federal support in the early 1990s, particularly through Telefilm Canada, Quebec cultural production still remains an enormous – and very profitable – enterprise. As one writer in *Variety* put it, “Producers here feel the almost-limitless appetite for indigenous fare gives the Quebec industry a stronger, more secure bases than [other Canadian] regions dependent on U.S. shoots” (Ferrier, 1993, p. Q8).

Television has received less direct support from the Quebec government, although French-language production continues to be publicly funded through the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. However, television production in Quebec also remains profitable, thanks again to Quebecers’ fondness for the home-grown product. According to *Variety*, whereas the top 10 TV shows in English Canada for the 18-49 age group were all American-made, the top 10 shows in French Canada are, without exception, made in Quebec (Ferrier, 1993, p. Q8). Furthermore, a significant proportion of Canadian programming – 8 percent – originates from France (UNESCO World Communication Report, 1989; Varis, 1983), suggesting that French-language production is finding a linguistically homogeneous audience in Quebec.

For English Canada, the situation is somewhat different. The United States continues to dominate large segments of the mass media industry in Canada, with most of the motion pictures, television shows, and publications originating in America. In the interest of preserving its national cultural identity, Canada has striven to protect its mass media through tax polices and trade barriers (Wilson, 1996). Although Canada fights to maintain these protections, which included the negotiation of certain exemptions for Canadian media in the NAFTA free trade area, it has come under increased pressure to drop them, particularly from the United States and the WTO (Fraser, 1997; Barlow & Clark, 1997). What’s more, recent high-profile court defeats for Canadian attempts to limit the importation of – overwhelmingly English-language – media products from the United States has called into question the whole issue of cultural protectionism within the context of NAFTA, the Multilateral Agreement on Investment, and the WTO (Goldfarb & Gauthier, 1998; Jack, 1999; Scoffield & McCarthy, 1999)

The question remains about the extent to which the Canadian government should continue to protect the Canadian media market, either by subsidizing television production in Canada (for example, through the CBC) or by limiting imports of media products through a hotly contested cultural exemption clause. While it seems that Quebecois French-language production has been more successful, it appears that domestic, English-Canadian production might be much more tenuous in the absence of a protected Canadian market. What's more, the cultural proximity of English Canada to the United States calls into question the ethical rationale for maintaining cultural protectionism. All the same, the situation is not completely one-sided. Canadian companies have also become highly successful exporters of television programs, especially family programming, to the United States and other countries. Such programming typically combines American-style production values with "an international point of view that appeals to overseas viewers" (Kelly, 1996, p. M11). However, it is perhaps telling that foreign consumers of such products often are not aware that these products emanated from English Canada.

Moving on to Mexico's relationship with the United States, some salient points of comparison with the U.S.-Canadian situation become clear. First of all, Mexico's economy has been transformed as a result of the liberalizing influence of NAFTA (Hakim, 2002). The sharp cultural divide between "Anglo-America and "Latino" Mexico necessitates the maintenance of two separate cultural spheres. This places Mexico in a position more analogous to Quebec than English Canada. What's more, in terms of media trade, Mexico has developed links with countries to its South, becoming, like Brazil, a powerful regional center for media production (to Latin America). This has helped to offset its still-substantial media trade deficit with the United States. One more factor that need to be considered is the steady rise in Mexican media consumption in the U.S. is the rise of a Spanish-speaking Mexican diaspora in that country – especially in the South-western states, from California to Texas. The existence of this diaspora – which is on the point of becoming the largest "minority" in the U.S. and which will eventually constitute the majority group in America's largest state, California – has encouraged the rapid rise of Spanish-language channels such as Telemundo and Univision. While much of the content of these



channels is produced in the U.S., a significant proportion still emanates from Mexico (Mosco & Schiller, 2001). The cultural role of diasporas in helping to offset U.S. (and Western) dominance in media trade will be discussed in more detail in relation to India, Britain, and the U.S. (below).

### **Case study 3: Brazil, Portugal, and the United States**

The previous examples highlighted in this paper have dealt with broadcast television trade flows between pairs of developed countries. The case of Brazil and Portugal, however, provides an interesting example of a bilateral media trade pairing where the “developing” country (Brazil) has achieved a position of relative dominance over the First World, former colonial power. In fact, Thussu (2000) offers Brazil’s TV Globo as one of two key examples of contraflow of cultural products from the South to the North (the other is the Indian film industry, popularly known as Bollywood). And when one compares the trade relationship between Brazil and Portugal on the one hand and the United States and Brazil on the other, some very interesting points arise. There are some specific reasons for this that have little to do with traditional notions of dependency theory and have more to do with interdependence between and among trading states.

Brazil has long been a focus of attention in this area, thanks in part to the work done on that country by Straubhaar (1991, 1997, 2002). Straubhaar (1991) first focused on the example of Brazil to develop his interpretation of asymmetrical dependency, and it is an instructive example. From a position of near-zero production, Brazil from the 1960s built up an industry on the back of its quasi-monopolistic enterprise, TV Globo. He points out that, even though the Brazilian television industry was clearly influenced by the U.S. model, mainly in terms of an overtly commercial and capitalist conception of television, Brazil nevertheless has managed to create a television industry that is markedly different from that of the United States, at least in content if not necessarily in form. Even though the United States continues to set the broader formal constraints of Brazilian media – thereby helping to maintain its asymmetrical advantage – it no longer narrowly determines the content.

As with the United States and Britain, and Quebec and France, Brazil and Portugal share a common language but are separated by an ocean and thousands of miles. However, unlike the other aforementioned countries, all of which are fairly prosperous, Brazil is still considered a developing country (although Portugal, for its part, is generally regarded as one of the least-advanced of the developed countries).

The interesting thing is that trade between Brazil and Portugal is heavily weighted in favor of Brazil – the opposite of what would be expected if one was to follow traditional dependency theory. In fact, Brazil now competes with the United States as Portugal's prime source for imported programming. While Portugal has not been able to penetrate the Brazilian market on any kind of scale, this can be explained in part by Portugal's relatively late entry into television broadcasting (later than Brazil, for example) and the current lack of government support given to television production in that country (Traquina, 1995).

While Portuguese television broadcasting has yet to develop significantly, Brazil has shown that it can overcome, at least partially, some of the constraints that hold back developing countries from competing with more developed countries. It has done so even though its development has been heavily influenced by the United States, resulting in a form of commercial media operating in a laissez-faire capitalist economy (Straubhaar, 1991). Despite this, Brazilian television – dominated by the quasi-monopolistic TV Globo – introduced a number of local innovations within the commercial television format, the most prominent of these being the creation of the now-famous *telenovelas*, an essentially Brazilian adaptation of the standard U.S. soap opera format. The *telenovela* format has spread to most of Latin America and even parts of Europe. From the 1970s these telenovelas began to be exported overseas, including Portugal. Since then Brazil – as well as other Latin American producers such as Mexico – has found success adapting American variety and sit-com genres to the local market, producing popular shows first for domestic audiences and then for export. Straubhaar sums up the change in the shift in Brazilian audience preferences for American-produced shows to domestic products.

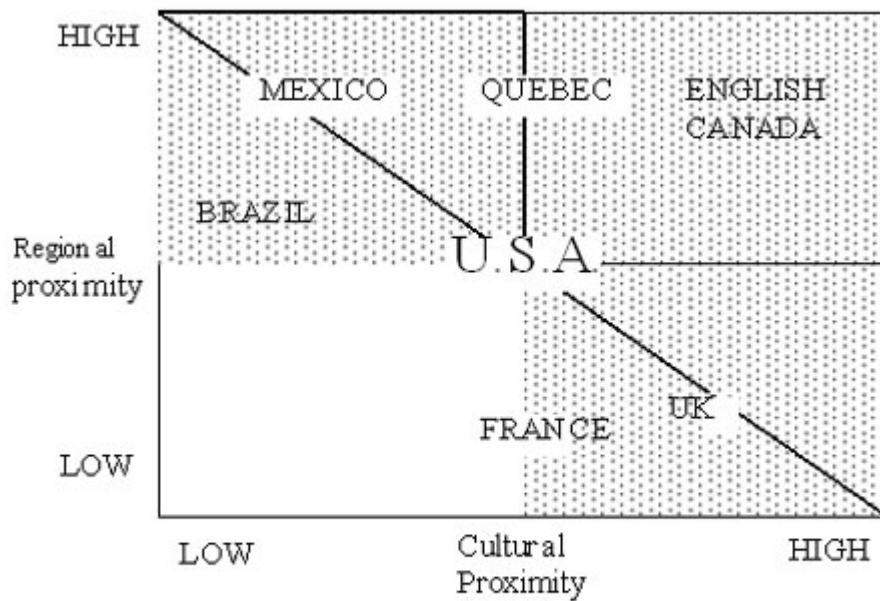
TV Globo's programming strategy reflected this preference by filling prime time with *telenovelas*, music, and comedy; creating increasing quantities of national programming for mornings and afternoons; and pushing U.S. imports into off-hours and a few prime-time slots reserved for U.S. genres, such as a few action series and periodic films, that retained an audience (1991, p. 50).

Meanwhile, Brazil has begun to penetrate even the U.S. market – at least its rapidly expanding Spanish-language segments – in recent years. Again, as Wildman & Siwek (1988) were among the first to recognize, it has been the telenovelas that have led the way in this small-but-growing assault on the American television scene.

Overall, then, the picture that emerges of the Brazil-U.S. trade relationship in television programming is one of falling, but still significant, Brazilian dependence on the United States and a minuscule but rising American demand for what Brazil has to offer.

## Mapping the Relationships

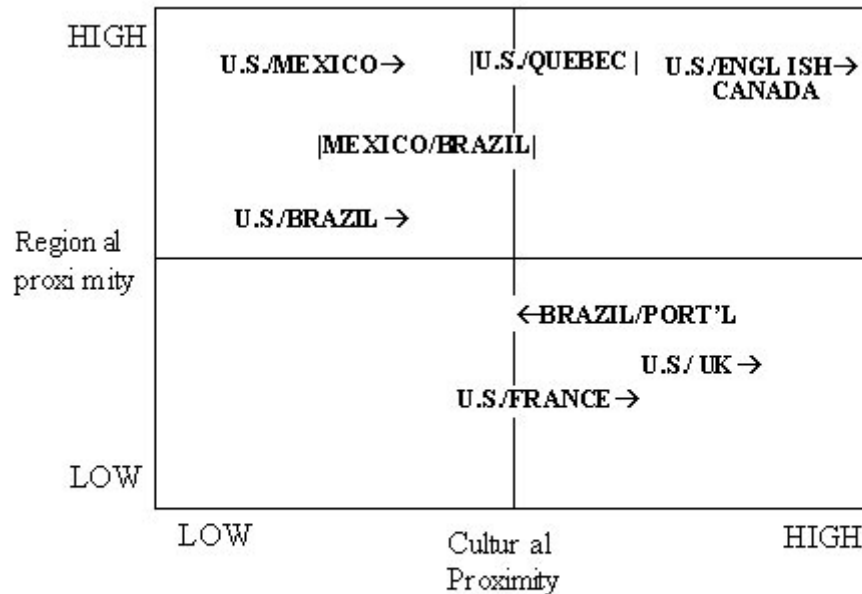
From the information presented in the preceding section, we can begin to make some tentative claims about the relationships that have developed among these countries, and about bilateral trading conditions in the broader spectrum of international trade in broadcast materials. Generally, we can say that trade relationships between countries form through the interplay of three important factors: economic power, regional proximity, and cultural proximity. All these factors affect, to a greater or lesser extent, the general trade environment within which bilateral trade between countries will take place. The intention of this paper, as previously stated, is to focus more closely on the factors of regional proximity and cultural proximity.



**Figure 1. Model of cultural/regional proximity, in relation to the U.S.**

Figures 1 and 2 map out these relationships in a visual format. Both figures divide the map into four zones, bounded by “regional proximity” on the vertical axis and “cultural proximity” on the horizontal. These axes are meant to be approximately scaled, so that, for example, a country that is placed higher on the vertical axis displays a higher level of regional proximity. **Figure 1** shows various countries’ rough cultural and regional proximities specifically to the United States, which is represented as lying at the center of the figure. Thus, for example, Britain displays relatively high cultural proximity and low regional proximity; in the case of Quebec, the positions are reversed. India (notwithstanding the aforementioned role of diasporic communities) shows both low cultural and regional proximities.

**Figure 2** is similar in design but allows for a multivariate format, with pairings of countries (representing possible bilateral trading relationships) mapped out across the four zones of the figure. Thus we can see that, for example, pairings of countries that combine high cultural proximity with low regional proximity include not only the United States and Britain, but also Brazil and Portugal, and Quebec and France.



**Figure 2. Model of cultural/regional proximity, country pairings**

Of course, like all such devices these models are limited in their usefulness. They can provide only a rough guide to what invariably are very complex sets of circumstance in the realm of bilateral trade relations. However, they do have the advantage of helping to visually represent some of the most pertinent variables that contribute to understanding real-world trading relationships in television product – namely, cultural proximity and regional proximity, and various mixes of the two. One important variable that the models do not indicate is that of economic size of the countries concerned. (A model that would take this factor into account would have to visually represent economic size, making it overly complex.) In any case, this paper holds that relative economic size should not unduly affect a country’s ability to create television product, as long as that country has achieved a threshold level of economic size that

allows it to produce cheap, local television. More important to the equation, in economic terms, is whether a country is geographically *and* culturally proximate to a much larger and more powerful neighbor (such as English Canada is in relation to the United States). In that case there is a greater likelihood that the smaller country's domestic media production could be overwhelmed, on a permanent basis, by imports from the larger country. (A similar argument could be made for other pairings of countries such as the UK and Ireland, Australia and New Zealand, Argentina and Uruguay, or even Germany and Denmark.)

## CONCLUSION

As a review work, this paper reexamines – and, in places, reevaluates – the notion of geocultural contraflow and asymmetrical interdependence in international television trade flows, providing support for Straubhaar's asymmetrical interdependence thesis and subsequent work on global media trade based on cultural-linguistic proximity. What's more, the mapping of a number of important bilateral and trilateral media trade relationships, while exploratory, nevertheless produces some illuminating and useful points that help to inform the ongoing debate over the nature and extent of media imperialism.

What does seem clear from the review and analysis is that strong disparities in media trade remain, and are likely to continue for some time. However, the future is not as dystopian as some media imperialists would suggest. One contention made here is that trade disparities are most likely to continue into the long-term when two countries that are highly disparate in economic size and power are both regionally and culturally proximate (the U.S. and English Canada is the prime example given here). However, where strong cultural distinctions remain between a larger and a smaller cultural entity (such as between the United States and Mexico or Quebec), it is likely that the smaller entity will still support an independent media and cultural sector – as long as its economic size is such that it can support a basic level of economic output in media as in other parts of the economy. This is not to reject the media imperialism thesis outright; nor is it to accept reception theory or the central tenets of information theory

at face value. Rather, it is to recognize situations when cultural imperialism does not apply, as we attempt to understand the complexity of media trade and cultural interaction in an era of globalization.

The biggest question mark in relation to geocultural/cultural-linguistic contraflow in media trade remains the United States. The world's last remaining superpower also appears, at least on the surface, to be free of any need for interdependence in programming. But surface appearances can be, and in this case probably are, deceiving. While U.S. imports in television material are only slowly edging up (if at all) there is little doubt that U.S. producers of television programs (and, to a greater extent, movies) are becoming steadily more dependent on overseas sales of its products. Of course, for the moment the United States remains dominant in the world trade flow of television programming, but its influence has already begun to wane; as it continues to do so a clearer picture will emerge of more balanced, interdependent, multilateral trade flows in all visual media products. As U.S. producers rely more heavily on exports, they will likely continue to find markets for these products; but their share of the global market will probably continue to fall as other countries – first in Europe and then elsewhere – boost production of their own programming, and then go on to sell their products beyond their borders. In this developing environment, characterized by the condition of asymmetrical interdependence, countries such as Brazil and Mexico will still confront many economic and other factors that disadvantage them in the game of global competition with First World media powers. But these disadvantages will be at least partially offset by cultural factors in their favor – such as their own audiences' preferences for the domestic product over the import – and would not prevent them playing a steadily greater part in the expanding international trade in television programming.

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