

**The Politics of Transnational Television:
Beyond the Cultural Imperialism Question**

by

Austin Ogbe Ogunsuyi

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THE POLITICS OF TRANSNATIONAL TELEVISION:
BEYOND THE CULTURAL IMPERIALISM
QUESTION

A DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

THE POLITICS OF TRANSNATIONAL TELEVISION: BEYOND THE CULTURAL IMPERIALISM QUESTION

The central focus of this study is to provide an improved basis for articulating the politics of transnational television¹ and its potentials for improving relations among nations. In this context, the politics of transnational television means the decision-making process that determines the degree of freedom of the press tolerated by individual governments and how that could affect broadcasting mode and attitudes toward other nations.

The motivation for this research stems from a conviction that the cultural imperialism² perspective on the nature and modes of transnational television are erroneous and therefore susceptible to a wide and often misleading theoretical assumption, with wide ranged implications.

In reevaluating the concept of cultural imperialism, some fundamental questions are raised to determine to what extent its arguments are true. Using the elite theory of

¹ In this context, transnational television means the activities by media organization to broadcast beyond the boundaries of their resident countries. Examples include the Cable News Network and British Broadcasting Service.

² Cultural imperialists argue the nature of broadcasting across national boundaries manifests a level of cultural domination for exploitation.

power in various societies, aided by Johan Galtung's model of a global communication in four worlds, we see a pattern of global television that suggests a similar motivation underlying media ownership in all societies.

We acknowledge, with the support of a literature review and other data sources, the existence of a global systemic order where technology rich nations dominate technology over poor nations. But there is also substantial evidence to prove some of the poorer nations exercise some degree of autonomy. This makes it more difficult to explain cultural imperialism simply as a relationship where developed and developing nations are arranged in dominant/subordinate or top/down order.

Through a strategy of original intent,³ we are able to show the elite in various societies acquire television mainly to satisfy their political, economic, or social interest. Media attitudes, therefore, are largely the ideological expression of local elite who determines foreign policy.

³ The principle of original intent implies that much about a phenomenon can be deduced from the original intention of those who designed or established a particular order.

Dedication

To my colleagues and friends at Bendel Television BTV, Benin City who gave their life and time in a pioneering effort to set a new standard for television broadcast in Africa.

The list is endless but here's a brief: Lola Ebueku, Eric James, Leo Omodiale, Dayo Illori, Ayo Opkaku, Alaba Jamgbadi, Emmanuel Ozono, Moji Danisa, Justina Omorodion, Francesca Ijebor, Adesuwa Osunde, Stella Okereke, Sandra Obaseki, Antonia Ovberejor, Richard Arasanmwan, Rita Ojomoh, Sidi Eholor, and many others.

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Making the transition from journalism to political science has not been an easy endeavor. In considering a befitting tribute to my exciting days as a journalist I thought it appropriate to reexamine the relationship between communication and politics. In particular, I wanted to study misconceptions and hopefully establish a better frame for understanding the dynamics between the mass media and political development.

This task would not have been possible but for the insight and support I received from many quarters.

Among those I owe special gratitude are my thesis advisor, Dr. Hashim Gibrill and the Political Science Department Chairman, Dr. William Boone. I am also grateful to Dr. Taqi, Dr. Marvin Haire whose work helped inspire this research.

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List of Abbreviations

ABC	American Broadcasting Company
ARAMCO	Arabian-American Oil Company
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CATVN	Central American Television Networks
CBC	Canadian Broadcasting Corporation
CBS	Columbia Broadcasting Service
CCIR	International Radio Consultative Committee
CTV	Cable Television
DBS	Direct Broadcast Satellite
EBU	European Broadcasting Community
EEC	European Economic Community
FCC	Federal Communication Commission
GATT	General Agreement For Trade and Tariffs
IBU	International Broadcasting Union
INTELSAT	International Telecommunication Organization
INTERPUTNIK	International Organization of Space Communication
IPDC	International Program For The Development of Communication
ITA	International Television Authority
NATO	North Atlantic Trade Organization
NBC	National Broadcasting Company
NHK	Nippon Hosni Kyoshi
NHR	Japan Broadcasting Corporation
NWDR	Nordwest Deutscher Rundfunk, German Television

NWICO	New World Information and Communication Order
OCOAR	France Overseas Television Arm
OIR	Organization Internationale de Radiffussion
OIRT	Communist Radio-Television Organization
ORTF	L' Office de Radio-diffussion Television Franchise
PTA	Popular Television Authority
RAI	Italian Government Joint Stock Company
RCA	Radion Corporation of America
TV	Television
TWW	Television West of Wales
UAR	United Arab Republic
UNESCO	United Nations Educational and Scientific Commission
U.N.	United Nations
U.S.	United States of America
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republic
USAIA	United States of American Information Agency
VCR	Video Cassette Recorder
VOA	Voice of America
WN-TV	Western Nigeria Television

Chapter One

Introduction

To most people, television remains a medium that educates, informs, and entertains. But to many social scientists, the medium tends to have a greater effect on society than its generally accepted role. For instance, many scholars will argue the medium influences, to a large degree, the manner in which members of a society relate to one another.

The growth of the medium has somehow raised the level of anxiety among those who fear it has the potential for social mobilization and control. These interpretations of the medium's impact have not been limited to domestic affairs alone. It has often transcended national boundaries. At some levels, television is viewed as the medium that has brought closer the realities of global interdependence in a systemic world.⁴

In the second half of the twentieth century, the realization of the overwhelming influence of the medium unleashed a natural desire among individuals and groups to gain a foothold in the industry. At the same time, this awareness heightened the anxiety of many incumbent

⁴Lee Chin-Chuan, Media Imperialism Reconsidered, (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications Incorporated, 1979), 67.

governments. They, for good reason, feared that owning and/or controlling the medium would guarantee staying in power.

Consequently, several perspectives elaborating the potency of the medium evolved, generating a mystique about its unlimited influence and disastrous consequences. In order to determine the truth behind many of these assumptions, a flurry of investigations into all related aspects in its entire spectrum were under taken. Results of many studies reinforced existing fears and unleashed a voracious instinct to control the medium for self or group preservation.⁵

Over the years, it became clear the drive to own the medium could be associated with an overriding drive by individuals or groups who capitalize on their exceptional positions in their societies. In a largely capitalistic world economy, the privilege to acquire has been largely limited to a group of people who, either through inheritance or personal achievement, have come to be known as members of an elite group.

Elite have come to be understood through different ideological perspectives. In The Politics of Elite Culture, Abner Cohen explains:

⁵Ganley, Oswald and Gladys Ganley, To Inform Or To Control? The New Communication Networks, (New Jersey: Ablex

According to Marxist or conflict theory, the power mystique is subtle, particularistic ideology developed by a privilege elite to validate and perpetuate their domination and thereby to support their own national interest. The cult consists of various techniques of mystification, implicit in philosophy, religion, art, drama and life style.⁶

Contrary to this theoretical assumption, Cohen suggests the liberal school of thought does attempt to offer an opposing view. According to Cohen:

The elitist or consensus theory of stratification maintains that all social order is necessarily hierarchical, and that leadership is a specialization necessitated by the division of labor in all societies. The theory has long and varied ancestry; it appears in one of its crudest forms in the contract theory of Hobbes, who argues that to escape from the solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short "life in a state of nature," men entered into a contract agreeing to surrender their freedom to a sovereign who represents their general will and who maintains social order in their own interest if necessary against their individual wills.⁷

An examination of how an elite group uses the media and television industry to shape our perception of society will invariably go a long way in helping us to understand how the elite everywhere use the medium to maintain control in societies. We hope to utilize this information in this study for a better understanding of politics, which will ultimately help us better understand the nature of global

Publishing Corporation), 25.

⁶Abner Cohen, The Politics of Elite Culture, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981) 5.

⁷Ibid.

television at all levels.

Statement of the Problem

The major problem of this study is to challenge the theoretical premise of existing studies in the field of transnational television. It is the conviction of this study that the theoretical bases of many past studies on television or the related area were either partially deficient or have become inadequate.

At a glance, it seems the difficulty of past studies to adequately address the issues lies in an overemphasis of purely abstract theoretical concepts as the bases for investigation, rather than paying greater attention to the role of "man in the society." Examples of these glaring misconceptions, as we shall show later, pervade the entire spectrum of global communication theory vis-à-vis relations within and between nations.

We shall, therefore, try to present a model that will enable us to determine the most functional means of articulating global communication and, in particular, television. From the focus of this study, "Politics of Transnational Television," we hope to prove it is only through the study of "the activities of man in society" that we can best explain the nature of institutions he has put in place. It is inevitable this study would tend to challenge

other existing explanations on the subject, either in part or wholly.

Incidentally, two of the most prominent arguments in the field are adversarial, a situation where the foremost viewpoint has generated an opposition. These viewpoints include those who advocate a free flow of information as the natural order society should follow for the greater good of all and those who insist on a global communication order based on the free flow of information doctrine, which amounts to cultural imperialism.⁸ But a major problem these viewpoints are unable to avoid is in the larger theoretical commitments. The forerunner in this debate comes out of the Western liberal tradition, which holds as superior forms of social, political, and cultural arrangements that support its liberal convictions. The opposition, often regarded as the radical viewpoint, comes out of the neo-Marxist perspective. Although both viewpoints have their strengths and weaknesses, they collectively exhibit potential flaws as bases for articulating the entire impact of human institutions, such as television.

This study hopes to highlight these deficiencies and lay a foundation that will reflect the realities of the final decades of the twentieth century. We will do so

⁸Herbert Schiller, Communication and Cultural Domination, (White Plains, New York: M.E Sharpe Incorporated,

through a more innovative theoretical framework for looking at global communication principles in the years ahead.

Conceptually, this problem is best considered first within a global reality of staggering disparities between the developed and developing countries. We must adequately understand the various facets involved in this research problem, conditioned by a global mass communication technology that accepts as normal a universal system of political and economic inequities. At this point, it is necessary to streamline some of the urgent questions motivating this study: 1) What necessitates the study of the politics of transnational television? 2) How can the study of the politics of transnational television enhance a better understanding of communication between nations? 3) How can a better understanding of the dynamics of the politics of transnational television bring about global peace and progress?

The first question points to a need to reexamine the existing theory and practice of global communication, particularly in general and transnational television. There seem to be in existence certain conditions that tend to support the fact the prevalent global communication process promotes conflicts rather than fosters harmony. This assumption has, as its basis, a humanist belief that through

the promotion of harmony, rather than exacerbating conflicts, nations of the world would be less prone to confrontation or hostilities. To attribute the entire global conflicts to the nature of communication alone, less television, could be very misleading. But as previous studies in this area have failed to bring about either a comprehensive theoretical basis for the understanding or improvement of the politics of transnational television, further studies must be engaged. It is instructive to note that although it has been nearly two decades since the United Nations tried to resolve the question of imbalance in communication between nations, the situation has worsened rather than improved.⁹ Invariably, the inequities in global communication have become another platform for reevaluating the overall question of inequality among nations. Apparently, these conditions are more likely to promote environments inimical to peace. But as we are considering the transmission of broadcast materials at one end and the reception of its message at the other, two levels of activities must be in process. It is not unconscionable to speculate that, due to the nature and effect of transnational television, individuals at the national

⁹Sean McBride, Many Voices One World: Communication and Society: Today and Tomorrow, (New York: UNESCO Unipub 1983). This publication followed the resolution of the New Information and Communication World Order passed by the

government, corporate, and multinational corporate levels in both developing and developed countries presently perpetuate conflicts. This aspect in the evaluation of the communication study needs further attention.¹⁰ Consequently, in the process of determining how much or little of transnational television is optimal, the motivation of such individuals must be instructive to our overall understanding of the likely effect or defect of cross-cultural television to international relations.

The second question has as its focus the environment and proclivity of those who determine the nature of transnational television. In the post-World War II global realities, states have become primary actors in studying international relations. To understand the nature and potentials of state, we must seek to study those institutions through which the state functions. Our present concern is the politics of transnational television. The primary institutions we should evaluate are those of governments represented by leaders in the bureaucracy and ministerial departments. In The State in Advanced Capitalist Society,¹¹ Ralph Miliband warns us against treating one part

United Nations in 1974.

¹⁰Ibid. Most studies in this area have emphasized the free-flow doctrine or raised the cultural imperialism question. Both studies are unilateral and, therefore, need to be enhanced.

¹¹Ralph Miliband, The State In Advanced Capitalist

of the state, usually government, as the state itself. In seeking to understand the nature of politics, we must strive to comprehend the various levels of interest groups and institutions that determine the nature of the state and, hence, transnational television. Here, depending on the outlook of the researcher, a pluralist or elitist paradigm might be espoused. Unfortunately, the strength of one of these arguments turns out to be the weakness of the other. However, we hope to give an objective study of the countervailing social and human forces within a state to expose the real nature and motivations of those involved in the decision-making process in transnational television.

The objective of the third question is to satisfy some normative questions any serious scholastic study must ultimately address. Fortunately, the major focus of international relations since World War II has been seeking avenues toward promoting peaceful coexistence among nations. This study joins in that aspiration by considering the extent to which international communications can bring about peace and progress.

Incidentally, the concept of peace for some nations has been the source of distress for others. For example, what industrialized nations consider free and fair practice has often turned out to be a root cause of frustration and

disability among developing nations. A case in point was when, in the early 1970s, President Surkano of Indonesia decreed the uncontrolled beaming of television programs from the industrialized nations to the Third World as potentially dangerous. President Surkano explained that such unbridled transmission from the industrialized nations raised the aspirations of those in the Third World beyond the limits their governments could fulfill.¹²

By deductive reasoning, one solution to this potential source of distress, which might ultimately translate into larger hostilities, might be to emplace some measure of control over the manner of transnational transmission, as well as stem the tide of rising imbalance between foreign and local programs in indigenous stations in the developing countries.

But by its very nature, the motivations of transnational television seem located elsewhere, beyond the realm of mere humanistic postulations. It seems to be propelled by other factors, which include political, economic, and social interests. Restraining the flow of information would, therefore, necessitate an appreciation of those variables we must confront. As the global socialization process matures in the 1990s with its growing capacity to prescribe a common standard, a picture of a

¹²Ibid.

global village with a homogenous tendency cannot be ruled out. An image of this evolving global condition leads us to consider the need or interest of those who subscribe to broadcast materials and the commensurate capacity of the providers to deliver the commodities.

Somehow, the problem has not been so much the inability of entrepreneurs to provide a variety of television services but the growing concern by less endowed nations to compete in the same market with their richer counterparts. The extent to which capitalist, political, or social motivation determines the present manner of communication will be instructive to our better understanding and thus prescription of solution to associated problems. Given the complex and interwoven nature of these problems, we cannot help but look beyond these questions into more specific aspects of the problematic: 1) Who are those responsible for the production, transmission, and reception of transnational television? 2) What factors contribute to their tendencies toward a conflictual rather than harmonious relationship? 3) At what point is this manner of communication likely to enhance cooperation or aggravate conflicts among nations? At the most basic levels, communication could be considered dysfunctional where it exacerbates interpersonal and communal conflicts and functional when it fosters

cooperation and progress.

We must not overlook that, in the twentieth century, a pertinent global reality is the tendency for most societies to measure their progress and development by the levels of growth with how much technology they can boast of. No other medium brings this reality closer than transnational television. Apparently, this situation has often been most detrimental to less developed societies because television wet their appetite for the luxuries and sophistication of other lands. The resultant feeling of deprivation ultimately reflects how those in developing societies value their existence and judge the competence of their leaders.

Critics of the free flow will argue that unhindered transnational broadcast would more likely promote disillusionment among those in developing societies, which could lead to a negative assessment of the local leadership and culminate in political instability. But the developed nations, who often support the free flow of information doctrine, maintain free access to information is a fundamental right of all human beings.

The core of the first and second questions presents an opportunity to further investigate the role of the major actors—individuals and corporate that manipulate global television. In this regard, Ralph Miliband in The State in

Capitalist Society¹³ and Abner Cohen in The Politics of Elite Culture¹⁴ adequately support the viewpoint that identifiable groups in society control the realm of politics, economics, and socio-cultural environments of the larger society. Johan Galtung's "Social Communication and Global Problems"¹⁵ elaborates the process of domination of the global communication system first by Western societies, followed by regional domination by regional powers. Men within national boundaries—the elite groups of industrialists, politicians, and military cadre—ultimately dominated it. By deductive reasoning, it becomes clearer to appreciate that the process of global domination starts with local ambitions of individuals within state boundaries, which can then expand to the regions and eventually to the world at large. An appreciation of these facts set off a more balanced and objective outlook for evaluating the process of transnational television. It exposes the true nature of those who determine how it is used. Through this explanation, the affairs of men are seen to be conducted within the current state structure, where men in positions

¹³Ralph Miliband, The State in Advanced Capitalist Society: The Analysis of the Western Society of Power, (New York, NY: Quartet Books, 1987).

¹⁴Abner Cohen, The Politics of Elite Culture, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

¹⁵Johan Galtung, "Social Communication and Global Problems," Communication For All: New World Information and Communication Order, edited, Philip Lee, (New York,