

**MEDIA AND THE
POLITICS OF CULTURE**

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**The Case of Television Privatization
and Media Globalization in
Jamaica (1990-2007)**

Nickesia S. Gordon



Universal Publishers
Boca Raton

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The Case of Television Privatization and Media Globalization
in Jamaica (1990-2007)*

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DEDICATION

For my muse, my darling Nakai.

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I wish to express my deepest appreciation to my family, especially Waddington, and friends, for being my biggest cheerleaders and for believing in me unconditionally. I also wish to thank Dr. Patricia McCormick from whose clever intellect I have benefited greatly.

ABSTRACT

There is a great deal of discussion about media globalization, particularly television, especially as it is being driven by the spread of satellite technology and cable. While certain schools of thought view this trend as promoting cultural heterogeneity and the diversification of programme content, this book argues otherwise. It discusses the influence of globalization on Jamaica's television industry. Specifically, it looks at how market liberalization, a twin force of globalization, has led to government divestment of the television sector and increased private ownership and consolidation within this sector. It revisits the cultural imperialism debate within the context of media globalization and locates Jamaica's position within this milieu. It suggests that old concerns relating to cultural imperialism are still relevant in new ideas such as cultural proximity and programme modeling. The book also discusses the implications that increased private ownership of television media in Jamaica have for public broadcasting services, especially in an age of consolidation. Finally, the book examines current media policies and discusses whether or not they are adequate to address the present media environment in which the market model of media management encourages anti-competitive behaviour among media firms.

Key words: (Jamaica, content homogenization, cultural imperialism, programme modeling, Jamaican television, globalization, media privatization)

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CARIMAC	Caribbean Institute of Media and Communications
CPTC	Creative Production and Training Centre
CVMTV	CVM Television Ltd.
DANIDA	Danish International Development Agency
FCC	Federal Communications Commission
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IMF	International Monetary Fund
JBC	Jamaica Broadcasting Corporation
JIS	Jamaica Information Service
JLP	Jamaica Labour Party
JNN	Jamaica News Network
LOVETV	Love Television
NCB	National Commercial Bank
PBCJ	Public Broadcasting Corporation of Jamaica
PNP	People's National Party
ReTV	Reggae Television
RJR	Radio Jamaica
SALs	Structural Adjustment Loans
SAP	Structural Adjustment Programme
STV	Subscriber (cable) Television
TNCs	Trans National Corporations
TVJ	Television Jamaica
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
US	United States
WTO	World Trade Organization

CHAPTER 1.

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of globalization has spawned myriad developments in a number of arenas namely the social, political, economic and cultural. As an industry that is inextricably linked to all four spheres just mentioned, media have witnessed tremendous changes under the auspices of globalization. These changes have primarily been facilitated through privatization initiatives engendered by market liberalization, the handmaiden of globalization. As part of the adjustment to market liberalization imperatives, media have been reinvented on the political and economic front through massive mergers, giving birth to the term ‘media globalization’ and the business entities known as transnational corporations (TNCs). Socially and culturally, the reinvention of the industry has intensified old debates and given rise to new questions. One of these debates is the relationship between media and cultural imperialism and one of these questions pertains to the changing relationship between media and public information.

This book locates its inquiries within the context of the cultural imperialism debate and the concerns regarding media, globalization and private ownership. A key assumption is that increased private ownership of television media in Jamaica perpetuates cultural imperialism in more subtle forms. This may be best understood through the lens of cultural proximity, a concept popularized by Joseph Straubhaar in the 1990s, and programme modeling, i.e. the adaption of imported television programme formats on local television. These two concepts are treated as opposite sides of the same coin used to

literally and figuratively, buy out, the public sphere and hijack local programming. Within this context, the book further sets out to investigate the implications of increased private ownership of television media in Jamaica for local programme content as well issues of national development and public information. Research has shown that the privatization of media in general has been accompanied by a redistribution of content from the public sphere to the private sphere (Price, 2002). As a corollary to this observation, it has been argued that privatization has been equally accompanied by an erosion of public information by corporate speech (Schiller, 1996).

The ownership structure of media is directly related to their function in the Jamaican society (Brown, 1976). The current ownership structure of the Jamaican television media is private and employs a market driven model of management. It is not surprising then that such media see themselves as operating in much the same fashion as media facilities of more developed societies such as the United States. These media are driven by corporate interests and funded by advertising dollars, a set up that fundamentally affects programme content. Corporate interests do not necessarily reflect the voice of viewers but, as Cuthbert (1976) points out, mirror “the point of view of [these] powerful interest groups” (p. 91). Therefore, what becomes available on television is often unoriginal, repetitive and as one media critic argues, “execrable” (Bart, in McChesney, 2004, p. 196), as networks seek to maximize their profits and snare advertiser-coveted demographics.

However, media patterns of more developed societies do not serve the needs of less developed countries such as Jamaica. This is because the “mass media in any nation are circumscribed to and limited by the political, economic and social conditions in which they exist” (Cuthbert, 1976, p. 90). Notwithstanding, the majority of Jamaica’s television content remains imported, primarily from the U.S. Imported programming hardly reflect local dynamics and only complement economic and cultural dependency perspectives held by the West about ‘Third World’ countries (Mody, 2000). As Pfennig (in Hermann and Kabel, 1979) noted 28 years ago:

The adoption and internalization of the goals embedded in this culture, notably those involving the type, direction and speed of material process. Since a number of these goals, particularly in the time-span desired, require continued inputs from abroad,

dependency on countries and their aspirations, becomes almost unavoidable. In this sense, the acceptance of the values of a few home countries may lead to 'self-colonization' (p. 48).

As media become increasingly privatized in Jamaica, these issues are particularly pertinent, especially in this age of globalization where borders are growing increasingly porous and corporate speech is replacing public voices. What does increased private ownership of TV media mean for the distribution/circulation of public information in Jamaica and how has media globalization influenced the capacity of television media to perform in a developmental role? How has public broadcasting responded to or has been affected by escalating private ownership? These are some of the questions tackled throughout the book, which confronts commonly held assumptions about the influence of media globalization on the cultural rights of developing nations such as Jamaica.

Media and Cultural Rights

The porosity of cultural boundaries engendered by media globalization has given rise to concerns over cultural sovereignty and cultural rights. While such concerns have been dismissed by proponents of globalization as unfounded, for developing countries such as Jamaica, the economic reality of which precludes the development of strong local productions and so fosters reliance on imported programming, these concerns are quite relevant. Research has shown that where local productions are weak, inroads made by foreign media can be dangerous (Lee, 2003). Media privatization exacerbates this reliance given that it encourages the inflow of imported content on the principle that within a free market system, there should be no barriers erected against the free flow of cultural products across borders. Most importantly, as private media rely heavily on advertising dollars for economic viability, there is a constant stream of cultural goods originating in North America and Europe that inundate the local scene by way of paid television commercials. These cultural products are rife with images reflecting cultural values and expectations concordant with the countries of origin and are at odds with the cultural and economic realities of receiving countries. By creating a taste for things North American, private media funded by advertising dollars facilitate the expansion of TNC markets and aid in their growth as well as economic and political influence. In this sense,

privatization is viewed as not just a structural shift in media but also an ideological one as well.

The imperatives of media globalization, espousing the virtues of a free market economy, position lesser developed countries as “secondary markets of cultural commodities” (Reeves, 1993, p.12) while privileging the developed countries of the West as the arbiters of these cultural products. This cultural dominance is greatly manifest in the world of television where international communications continues to be characterized by a one way flow of information (Meyer, 1988, Dunn, 1988, Reeves, 1993, Mody, 2000). Toward the end of the 1990s and beginning of the new millennium the media landscape has witnessed significant transformation with the creation of huge transnational corporations (TNC) with global reach. These TNCs have been created through the mergers of various media corporations with each other and at times, with telecommunications firms. The AOL Time Warner merger of 2001 is an example of this trend. These developments have heightened the concerns of cultural domination, especially in a context where many developing countries can ill afford to properly finance their media industries and so rely heavily on imported content. Accordingly, it is this background of the recorded imbalance in the terms of exchange governing the global media scene that sparked the discussions in this book. The medium of television was chosen as the medium of focus because it is the one most affected and transformed by globalization. It is also the medium most deeply implicated in facilitating globalization as a cultural process (Sinclair, 2004).

Theoretical Framework

Privatization of media, particularly within the context of the so called developing world, can hardly be discussed without being situated within the broader milieu of globalization and its effects. Such a framework, that is, the theoretical underpinnings of globalization and its consequences, elicits a review of key issues including globalization and culture, media consolidation and privatization/market liberalization policies. Of key interest to this discussion are two theories of globalization, namely, cultural imperialism and cultural hybridity.

Banerjee (2003) sees the cultural imperialism perspective on globalization as forming the dominant perspective used to explain the implications of globalization and impact on national/local cultures, especially during the 1960s and 1970s when countries from the developing world began voicing their concerns over what was per-

ceived to be a one way flow of information and cultural goods from North to South or from West to East. The central argument of the cultural imperialism view is that there is an inherent cultural domination of Western societies over less advanced nations embedded in the globalization phenomenon. This domination is established, proliferated and reinforced by mass media, which disseminate the ideological perspectives of the West through the diffusion of specific values, consumer goods and lifestyles (Banarjee, 2003). This domination in the cultural diffusion process is made possible through the control that Western media corporations have over communications flow through majority ownership of communication and information technologies (Schiller, 1996). The results of this ideological project, according to the cultural imperialism perspective, are cultural conformity/homogenization and the undermining, displacement and even disappearance of indigenous cultures that are on the receiving end.

Cultural hybridity theory, on the other hand, aided by a post-modern theoretical sensibility, contends that globalization, instead of overpowering indigenous cultures and engendering a mono-culture, leads to cultural hybridity or heterogenization. Postmodernism conceives of the individual as a de-centered subject possessing multiple identities that may be mobilized in different cultural contexts and the cultural hybridity theory rests on this very axiom. After all, at the heart of the debate about the effects of globalization on culture is the issue of identity. As Sinclair (2004) observes, “cultural identity is not a zero-sum game” (p. 75), meaning that it is not credible to believe that mere exposure to global commercial popular culture is enough to drive out or reduce deep realities of cultural difference. These two perspectives present a framework within which to examine the flow of international communications within the current Jamaican media sphere as well as analyze the meanings embedded in present programming structures. They will be further elaborated on in chapter three, which discusses the ideas of cultural proximity and programme modeling as they pertain to imported television content. The book maintains that both programme modeling and the concept of cultural proximity, when applied to media globalization, operate as subtle forms of cultural imperialism.

Background to Jamaican Media

At present, the Jamaican media are predominantly privately owned. There are sixteen radio stations including *BBC Radio*, *FAME*

FM, Hot 102 FM, Irie FM, KLAS FM, Kool FM, Love FM, Mega Jamz, Music 99, Power 106 FM, Radio 92 FM, RJR 94 FM, Roots FM 96.1, Zip FM, Radio Mona and TBC FM. There is also the Jamaica Information Service Radio (JIS Radio), a publicly owned radio production facility which relies on government mandated airtime on national stations for broadcasting its programmes. Most of these privately owned stations burst onto the scene in the late 1990's after changes in media regulation which allowed private entrants into the media sphere. Prior to 1990, the airwaves were dominated primarily by two rival stations, Jamaica Broadcasting Corporation Radio (JBC) and Radio Jamaica (RJR). The former was government owned while the latter was a privately owned competitor. RJR was Jamaica's first commercial radio station and began operations in May 1940 (Virtue, 2001). It was then known as Radio Jamaica Rediffusion and was owned by Rediffusion of England. However, in 1977 the then PNP led government bought out the majority controlling shares of RJR from its owners in pursuit of its objective of making television programming more educational than commercial, a move it felt would better serve the developmental needs of the newly independent state. While retaining some of the shares of the newly acquired RJR, in that same year the government sold the remainder to national organizations such as trade unions, churches and other institutions representing the interests of the people (Salmon, 1996). Eventually, RJR emerged as a completely privately owned entity and eventually acquired the assets of its old rival, JBC Radio, including the sister television station, JBC TV in 1997. Today, RJR, or the RJR Communication Group as the entity is now known, is the largest media entity in Jamaica, owning three of the island's 16 radio stations as well as the largest of the island's three television stations.

Regarding television, there are three national television stations, namely *Television Jamaica (TVJ)*, formerly *JBC TV*, *CVM Television (CVM TV)* and *Love Television (LOVETV)*. TVJ is the largest and oldest of the three and began its operations as *JBC TV* in 1963. In 1993, *CVM TV* came onto the scene as a competitor to the then government owned *JBC* with a mandate to fulfill a 50/50 balance between local and imported programming (Virtue, 2001). *Love TV* followed later in 1998 and provides religious programming for a Christian demographic. *Subscription Cable Television (STV)* provides access to a range of programming from North America to local subscribers and at times operators produce their own in house programming which air on community channels. The government voice

is represented by the *Jamaica Information Service Television (JIS TV)* and, like its radio counterpart, does not have direct broadcast capacity. *JIS TV* programmes receive airtime on the other three stations during time mandated for government broadcast.

Finally, there are eight major newspapers. These include two national dailies, *The Dailey Gleaner* and *The Daily Observer* and one national weekly, *The Sunday Herald*. The remaining five include, *The Star*, a subsidiary of *The Gleaner*, *The Western Mirror*, *The Mandeville Weekly*, *The News* and the *North Coast Times*. *The Gleaner*, established in 1838, is the oldest newspaper in the English Speaking Caribbean and predates the *New York Times* by 17 years (Virtue, 2001). The Jamaica Press (JAMPRESS) is the text arm of the JIS which mostly supplies press releases and photographs of government activities and policies.

Socio-Political Background of Television Media in the Caribbean

When Jamaica's first television station, the Jamaica Broadcasting Corporation (JBC) was established in 1963, one year after independence from Britain, it was with the explicit mandate of fostering nationalism through local productions that would reflect the cultural and social complexities of the new nation (Nettleford, 1979). It was with this in mind that the Manley government of the mid to late 1970's, through its policy of Democratic Socialism, attempted what Nettleford (1979) referred to as "people control" (p. 128), of media in Jamaica. There was an impetus to gear programming toward social development policies with the government establishing a subvention that would ensure economic viability and reduced dependence on advertising for economic survival. However, this effort was as short lived as the Manley government's flirtation with Socialist ideology made his party very unpopular nationally as well as internationally and they were soon voted from power. Not only was there a bias in the media towards profit-making, which countered any attempts by the government to effect 'change in the distribution of economic and social power within the society' (Salmon, 1996), but the advent of a new government in 1980, the Seaga-led Jamaica Labour Party (JLP), brought with it a new state attitude toward local media. There was a general tightening of the budgetary allowances toward the JBC, instituted by the government's decision to accept conditional Structural Adjustment loans beginning in 1981.

Historically, there has been little to no interest in the production of local television programming in Jamaica. This was because at the time that television facilities were being established in 1963, they were being done so by international consortiums or multilateral corporations whose primary concern was making a profitable return on their investments (Hosien, 1976). As such, it was not viewed as being important to create those facilities that would be necessary for local programme production (Hosien, 1976, p. 12). Thus, a commercial exigency characterized local media from the outset. In the words of a former programme manager, “television was introduced in this [Caribbean] region primarily for profit. Its objective was to transmit foreign programmes with a limited amount of locally produced material” (quoted in Hosien, 1976, p. 14).

However, as mentioned before, there was an overt mandate to produce more educational than entertainment programmes, especially during the Manley regime of the 1970s. There was an emphasis on the production of public information, however limited, as media was a tool used to promote culture as an instrument of development policy (Nettleford, 1979). Privatization of television media in the 1990’s has totally eclipsed any such developmental role given the commercial imperative of advertising backers. As Mody (2000) asserts, under privatization, operations of the media are financed by advertising and are focused on private profit maximization. Subsequently, television stations continue to import North American programmes that will attract the right demographic groups that will appeal to advertisers. Many North American television programmes are viewable on local TV stations, sometimes in real time. These include “CNN News,” daily soap operas such as “The Bold and the Beautiful” and “Days of our Lives,” and crime/drama series such as “Without a Trace” among others. Chapter two tracks in more detail the general evolution of television in Jamaica and the politics of development which has helped to shape its current structure.

As previously mentioned, the ownership structure of media is directly related to their function in the Jamaican society (Brown, 1976). Subsequently, given that television media are predominantly privately owned, their function as well as what is available on air reflects the interests of powerful business investors. Commercial media funded by advertising dollars do not care to identify these political and economic conditions in the Jamaican power structure nor in their own systems that may negatively influence a public/national agenda. Profit and issues of national interest such as education, food security

and inequity in the power structure, do not necessarily complement each other and may even be at odds with the private interests of those who control and have influence over the media. This has direct implications for programme content, public information and national development in Jamaica.

The remainder of the book comprises a presentation of the historical milieu within which broadcasting regulation evolved in Jamaica. This is outlined in chapter two, which contextualizes the book's analysis regarding the operations of television media in Jamaica, especially after deregulation of the sector. It presents an overview of the structural outlay of the broadcasting industry and investigates the functions of the primary broadcasting regulatory apparatus, the Jamaica Broadcasting Commission. This chapter also explores the existing regulations as they pertain to both commercial and non-commercial television and Subscriber Cable Television (STV).

Following this, chapter three explores the contentious issue of the link between media globalization and cultural imperialism. It outlines the various theoretical underpinnings guiding globalization and media privatization as well as examines the two sides of the globalization debate, that is, from the perspective of the cultural imperialism critics who argue that globalization results in cultural and economic domination, and from the viewpoint of the cultural homogenization proponents who see globalization as creating hybridity. Chapter four then does a comparative programme analysis of the content aired on all three national television commercial stations pre and post deregulation, to determine whether or not privatization has had any influence on the ratio of imported to local programming, especially since deregulation of the industry was encouraged partly on the premise that it would boost local content. Finally, chapters five and six delve into the issues of programme modeling, content homogenization, consolidation and the implications for regulation and public media respectively.