

10-1-1978

Global Communications And Cultural Imperialism

Abdul Vendi

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dh.howard.edu/newdirections>

Recommended Citation

Vendi, Abdul (1978) "Global Communications And Cultural Imperialism," *New Directions*: Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 9.

Available at: <https://dh.howard.edu/newdirections/vol6/iss1/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Howard @ Howard University. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Directions by an authorized editor of Digital Howard @ Howard University. For more information, please contact digitalservices@howard.edu.



Global Communications And Cultural Imperialism

By Abdulai Vandi

The relationships between Western nations and Third World countries hinge, to a large extent, on the communications that pass between the two political-cultural blocs. The importance of communications has come under increasingly intense scrutiny as a consequence of many factors; principally, thoughtful persons throughout the world have become aware that "the forces that influence consciousness are decisive determinants of a community's outlook and the nature and direction of its goals" (Schiller, 1976: 1).

As this awareness has grown, it has become clear that communications, more than economics or politics, determine the attitudes of the people of one country toward those of another: domination of thinking, one might say, establishes a more effective form of control than economic or political domination from outside.

Most importantly, the communications domination equates with cultural domination in many cases. Where Western nations such as France, Great Britain, Japan, the United States, and West Germany are concerned, trade normally follows the path worn into the Third World—Africa, Asia, and Latin America—by the communications process. But even before that can happen, communications have prepared the way for acceptance of great-power goods and services: a kind of cultural preparation of the ground. Behind the entire network of Western processes and influences lies a "marketing system developed to sell industry's outpouring of (largely inauthentic) consumer goods" that is also used to sell, globally, "ideas, tastes, preferences, and beliefs" (Schiller, 1976: 3).

How this system of international communications and information functions, and what its effects are, requires deeper examination if alternatives are to be isolated and their validity measured.

Critical Assessment of the Flow of Cultural Materials and Information

In today's context, as the world approaches the final two decades of the 20th century, cultural materials flow across international boundaries and oceans in immense quantities, often in the form of purely communicational materials and information. The cultural core of such materials is unmistakable; they reflect the interests, beliefs and ideas of the societies that spawned them, and purvey messages that are designed to mold attitudes.

Historically, certain trends have influenced the flow of these materials. In the period immediately following World War II, the principle of *laissez-faire* applied almost universally in the world of communications and cultural exchange. Against that background, the media in the United States quickly gained supremacy over the media of other countries. Between 1948 and 1968,

new communications technology—computers, space satellites, television—combined with a powerful and expanding corporate business system, assisted the push of the United States into the center of the world economy. Without public pronouncements, private, American-made media products and United States informational networks blanketed the world. (Schiller, 1977: 112)

The past decade has seen a gradually intensifying change in attitude toward the established American hegemony in both the informational and cultural arenas. The right of the media to invade the privacy of the home, without control or supervision, has come into question as the world's new nations have shown growing concern for their national and cultural sovereignty. The feeling has become more and more general, and has been expressed explicitly, that the nation whose mass media are dominated from outside is not really a free state. Freedom for one party, in brief, may mean continuation of inequality for another:

Freedoms . . . which are formally impressive may be substantively oppressive when they reinforce prevailing inequalities while claiming to be providing generalized opportunity for all. . . . Not surprisingly, individuals, groups, and nations are seeking means to limit the freedom to maintain inequality. Measures aimed at regulating "the free flow of information" are best understood in this perspective. (Schiller, 1977: 114)

How cultural domination is secured presents a study in conquest by verbal and visual infiltration. The American media, since World War II, have taken over areas of the world once served by the French and British news agencies. At least four trends have become observable in recent years: The American media gain influence over foreign media, sometimes to the point where the foreign agencies do little more than transmit American press or program materials; an international (or transnational) information elite develops; mass media contribute to the spread of an Americanized world-culture; and, finally, the media help to shape an interdependent, but Americanized, world. (U. S., 1977: 26).

Exchange processes controlling the distribution of television and film programs and materials provide a special case in point illustrating how cultural domination becomes effective. The pattern as exemplified in the international TV marketplace has been described by a United States government committee report:

. . . the high technology medium was developed here and soon saturated the national market; shortly thereafter it sought foreign expansion. Some foreign governments, particularly in less-developed countries, indirectly encouraged its spread by contracting for U. S. technical assistance, and even permitted American financial investments in local TV. (U. S., 1977: 21)

"Made in America" films have appeared

34 on foreign screens as a result of the operation of similar dynamics. American companies have enjoyed larger budgets for film production and distribution than foreign companies; of crucial importance, they could offer foreign producers "an integrated global distribution system for their films" (Guback, 1977: 26), a situation that has forced many Latin American and other foreign producers to go through major American companies to have their films distributed within their own continental market regions.

The results have been predictable, American companies in recent years have forged what amounts to a monopoly on moving picture distribution throughout the world; "American products not only numerically dominate the universal flow of pictures but become the models of the international commercial culture" (Guback, 1977: 26). American-made films are shown in more than 100 foreign countries, and approximately one-half of all the theatrical revenues of American film manufacturers come from abroad.

Movie and television exports have unquestionably outstripped the press and radio as instruments of what has been called "cultural homogenization" in foreign countries. Because the products for export are commercially oriented in nearly all cases, "everywhere local culture is facing submersion from the mass-produced outpourings of commercial broadcasting" (Schiller, 1971: 112). But even those products that bear the stamp of official U.S. government authorship—of the United States Information Agency in particular, USIA—carry the American cultural message. TV shows produced by the USIA have been shown in as many as 97 different foreign countries, but are not usually identified as USIA products (Schiller, 1971: 81). [The USIA is now called International Communications Agency, ICA.]

Transfer of Communications Technology

The problems involved in transferring

communications technology from one country to another can only be described as mountainous:

Most of these [small and poor states] are unable to finance independently the establishment, maintenance, and operation of broadcast facilities. They rely increasingly on either foreign capital to both install facilities and provide programming in a package deal, which quickly turns the broadcast structures into miniature Western (or, Eastern) systems, or on a supply of low-cost foreign (mostly American) material which originally was produced to the specifications of commercial sponsors. (Schiller, 1971: 114)

Even more seriously, such transfers of technology involves the importation into host nations of programming that "has not been made with the requirements of the importing nation in view, and, if anything, it presents images and styles of life that are wildly out of keeping with the social necessities of most of the 'have-not' states" (Schiller, 1971: 114).

Two factors characterize and explain the contemporary Western effort to export communications technology. First, the profits to be gained are enormous: "... from 1960 to 1973 the dollar value of [the communications goods and services exported by the United States alone] ... has tripled; those exports, worth over a billion dollars, favorably affect the U.S. balance of payments position" (U.S., 1977: 6). Second, the recipient nation becomes the communications and cultural dependent of the exporting nation once the technology transfer has taken place. Technology exported under the rubric of "free flow of information" becomes "the channel through which life styles and value systems can be imposed on poor and vulnerable societies" (Schiller, 1971: 9).

It can be maintained, nonetheless, that if a country is to become politically and economically autonomous, it must possess the tools of communication. "It is understandable that the ... technology of

broadcast communications should appear strikingly impressive to leadership groups in states still trapped in economic stagnation but desperately striving for improvement" (Schiller, 1971: 109). Also, and logically, the governments of these nations want to tell *their* stories as effectively as the purveyors of communications and information from the outside.

Education of the populace has to become one of the key purposes of the new communications establishment if illiteracy and all the ills that attend it are to be eradicated. Yet even where good intentions originally underlie efforts to expand the communications technology of a given country, events sometimes intervene to tilt the scale toward the negative side.

The case of Ghana has been cited. In this country, the original plan was to operate the national television system with more than 80 percent Ghanaian programming. "The planners were determined not to develop the appetite for cowboy pictures" (Shayon, 1977: 51). In time, however, it proved impossible to support the TV system with the revenues from the annual license fees—\$12 per set per year—levied on the country's 15,000 set owners. To close the revenue gap, the Ghanaian television system began to accept advertising, whereupon the advertisers insisted that popular shows be shown. What the planners feared had occurred: the "horse opera" began to appear repeatedly on Ghanaian TV screens. In a short time Ghana's television service was providing only 40 percent of the programming used on the national system.

Such occurrences reinforce the belief, now becoming more common in Third World nations, that the development of national communications systems must be a total process. They can—must—be international in the sense that much technology has to be imported. But importation has to be both selective and reciprocal.

In expanding communications systems, the governments of the "have-not" nations are more and more refusing to adopt on

wholesale basis plans advanced by Western nations and are, instead, attempting to fit new technological developments into schemes that take into account national or popular interests and priorities. Efforts are going forward right now to ensure that communications expansion answers mass and individual needs; the human element is receiving attention, while economic goals and strategies also figure in the overall planning.

Reciprocity presents another problem. Impersonal, heavy-handed dissemination of unsorted materials by means of the press and the electronic media has been seen increasingly as ruling out interpersonal feedback of any kind; it also rules out response, with the result that adequate communications technology may be available, or may be made available through the international transfer process, while an obvious lack of genuine communication exists.

The United Nations Development Support Communication Service (DSCS) has been viewed as a step forward. Based in Bangkok, the agency stresses human understanding of, and participation in, development programs. Technical communication factors involved in local management, training, and community level development programs are considered as part of an effort to analyze popular behavior; communications technology that would be shovel-fed to many whose lives have been disrupted by Western modernization is to be avoided. Known as a "third-generation communications project," the DSCS has built on earlier experiences that involved abortive efforts to develop the Third World with audiovisual equipment first, and training personnel afterward.

Still another indication that many Third World and some developed nations have begun to scrutinize the meaning of technology transfer may be found in the reactions to satellite communications. In theory, the new system offers an almost miraculous means of beaming television

programming across as much as one-third of the earth's surface. In fact, the satellite method "has created another paradox of . . . communication: the contrast between the worldwide potential of this technological advance and the alarm and controversy the prospect has provoked among nations" (Riegel, 1977: 68).

The controversy turns on the feeling, common among Western European nations as well as Third World countries, that the communications satellite system would give the United States yet another means of violating national sovereignty—politically, socially, culturally, and in other ways.

The apprehensions of those who object to unrestricted acceptance of the satellite system have been seen as clustering in three main areas: (1) fear of propaganda and provocation, especially through use of material that would increase tensions domestically or with other nations, cause disunity, or disturb domestic or international tranquillity; (2) fear of commercial aggression—for example, in material that would arouse desires for different products or a different standard of life, creating unrest, disturbing the economic order, and putting nations at a disadvantage in domestic and world markets; and (3) fear of corruption of culture—for example, by material that would offend traditions, damage values, and attract whole populations to alien cultures and standards that are considered inferior to the native ones (Riegel, 1977: 69).

Such fears are based in legitimate concerns. That direct broadcasting into homes is not yet possible appears only to have intensified the international debate and to have strengthened the determination of many countries to resist this new form of communications imperialism.

In the simplest terms, "the technical problem has been either to increase the transmitting power of satellites, or the sensitivity of receiving antennas, or both, so that television signals can be received by small inexpensive antennas on stand-

ard receiving sets" (Riegel, 1977: 68-69). But in view of the adverse reactions, the likelihood is strong that many countries will find means of discouraging or preventing altogether within their national boundaries the so-called "free flow of information" that the satellites apparently further.

Role of Ideology in Revolutionary Communications

Whatever the divisive effects of the communications satellite, the Third World essentially believes that its best interests involve a policy of non-alignment with either the First or the Second Worlds. This is the core meaning of non-alignment: the Third World nations of Africa, Asia, and Latin America are pursuing a common struggle outside the huge and hungry spheres of influence established by the Western powers on the one hand, and the communist powers on the other. But the policy of non-alignment must be rooted in ideology or it cannot have long-term significance or effect: a war for cultural sovereignty must have the same driving force of belief and commitment behind it that a war for political and military domination or survival must have.

In actuality, the non-aligned nations see the struggle as a war in which the "friends" and the "enemies" of the Third World countries have been difficult to identify. The effort to achieve such identification must nonetheless be made:

Non-aligned countries' allies are progressive writers, artists, thinkers, teachers, mass communications researchers, in the industrialized countries, particularly the United States. The non-aligned's enemies are the multinationals (or transnationals) of the information (or consciousness) industry and their subsidiaries within the "Third World." (van Dinh, 1976: 39)

With such a formula for identifying friend and foe, the war against cultural imperialism can proceed; this war "cannot be won except by a protracted, non-violent (only

36 ideas will be killed) guerrilla warfare" (van Dinh, 1976: 39).

On what basis is this ideology of non-alignment to rest? Most fundamentally, it must proceed in the general direction specified at the Non-Alignment Summit Meetings in Algiers in 1973, and at Colombo in 1976. The tenets that give continuity to this direction include the "masses line" that holds that the masses in the Third World are being exploited and the "classes line" that indicates that the exploiters are the entrepreneurs of the Western market economies; the initiative that promotes the growth of an organic culture without blind rejection of all that is foreign; and, finally, the awareness that culture cannot be divorced from politics.

In this dispensation for the Third World, all revolutionary communications must be steeped in the appropriate ideology. The revolution, after all, has as its primary goal the replacement of the imperialist system of communications that destroys national pride and national identity with a system that unlocks the potential of each Third World nation and allows it to develop independently. The problem is simple:

In the still-unindustrialized countries, struggling to overcome their economic dependency, national independence and social transformation are blocked to the extent that the communications system is controlled by or represents the dominating class, externally or internally based. (Schiller, 1976: 68)

The rhetoric of Third World spokesmen for political independence and cultural autonomy obviously follows the Marxist line. But this rhetoric cannot be presumed to imply any kind of philosophical or ideological relationship between Third World communications and the communications practiced in communist or Marxist-socialist countries. Where communications are employed under communism as a means of control, they are viewed in the Third World as opening a road to liberation—if they really serve the particular nation's basic interests.

The difference is fundamental. Communications, in the communist view, must serve a specific purpose: they must bring the world closer to the universal "socialist" order. Like law and all other social institutions, communist communications within communist countries, and to other nations, are subordinated to the end goal; they have nothing to do with reality or fact: "As the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia has amply shown, propaganda for 'peaceful coexistence' has not made the Russians any less prone to 'big-nation chauvinism'" (Hsiung, 1970: 165).

To the extent to which communications processes and modes of dealing with facts and human materials in the capitalist societies have developed naturally and without conscious ideological purpose, they may be seen as less insidious than communist-socialist means and materials of communication. But the Third World mind can, with reason, perceive Western communications as more dangerous than communist. The reason is obvious: Western press, radio, film, and TV exports reach the Third World as a deluge of more or less tawdry and socially destructive creations—most of them geared to the lowest common denominators of popular Western taste—and all of them designed to serve a commercial purpose. To countries becoming evermore aware that communications and the informational apparatus that transmits them are powerful engines "for great forward drives in the developmental process" (Schiller, 1971: 109), Western-style communications *must* appear to present real dangers. Because nearly all communications, as noted, carry a cultural message, the imports from the West inevitably become examples of cultural imperialism. They place the Third World under "electronic siege;" they raise the spectre of a propaganda machine that will subvert Third World peoples and draw them "under the yoke of a pattern of civilization not conforming to their national patrimony" and unconnected with their "real requirements" (Tunisian Symposium, 1976: no p.).

The View Ahead

The need for alternatives to Western domination of the Third World's channels of communication has never been more pressing.

The communications-cultural component has been enjoying a continuous expansion in all market economies. It seems likely to become . . . a critical, if not the central, locus of the future struggle within and against capitalism. (Schiller, 1976: 69)

Since Western nations such as Canada, Great Britain, and others have begun to scrutinize their national communications establishments and policies, it might be expected that an even more intense search for alternatives would be undertaken in the formerly colonial world; and that search is in fact well underway.

The slogans that encapsulize and give specificity to the ideology of Third World rebellion against Western cultural imperialism suggest some of the alternatives open to African, Asian, and Latin American nations. The key slogans are two in number: *tradition* and *revolution*. In the most basic interpretation, tradition refers to "historical continuity" in the developing countries while revolution means "the transformation of national information structures" along the masses-classes lines (van Dinh, 1976: 39). But the revolution must also raise the complementary banners of self-reliance and internationalism.

Global goals, such as those expressed in the slogans, remain generalizations even though they serve an ideological purpose. More pointed in view of the reality that Western technology with all its evils has already invaded much of the world is this question: Is a viable alternative conceivable? Schiller has suggested one answer:

One possible approach is to reject the prevailing features of Western technology while examining possible alternative directions that technological discovery might have taken if the motiva-

tions and incentives and distribution of social power had been different. . . . In the development of this or that process or product or machine, there are alternatives and different opportunities. (Schiller, 1976: 55)

The implications of a broad new scrutiny of the purposes and uses of Western communications technology in Third World countries are numerous. Deceleration of the race to adopt Western methods, while studying purposes more pertinent to the needs of specific nations, ranks as an important possibility. Establishment of controls over internal communications in accordance with the communist-socialist model could "provide a breathing space, a pause" and "allow selectivity to become a basic operating mechanism for evaluating what may be useful" (Schiller, 1976: 61). As this process goes forward, the institutions and individuals required for assessment of the utility value of particular items of hardware or software could proceed.

The United Nations has sought to assist the Third World's drive for communications-cultural autonomy. In 1972, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) asserted the need for agreements between states on the right to broadcast directly by satellite to national populations. Two years later, the same UN agency approved a plan for 1977-82 that underscored the need for complementing the free-flow-of-information approach with the idea of a more balanced and objective flow between countries, and within and between regions.

Earlier, in 1965, UNESCO had expressed concern regarding the future impact of communications satellites on the world. It discussed the need for "protection of national sovereignty by some kind of program control" (Schiller, 1971: 124). Presently, a UNESCO official commented: "I believe such co-operation (international) must extend beyond the techniques of communication to embrace also

a common concern with the content of what is transmitted" (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 1966: 9). At the same session, the director-general of All-India Radio said:

. . . a whole world let loose on unsuspecting and comparatively less sophisticated people may have far-reaching consequences. Unless these forces are internationally controlled, it will be difficult to say whether the advantages will outweigh the disadvantages. In the ultimate analysis, freedom may have to be interpreted not merely as a removal of censorship, but as a creation of opportunities. (UNESCO, 1966: 7)

Some efforts on the part of Third World nations to overcome cultural domination have been effective; while others have failed. The example of Ghana has been noted. By contrast, Peru appears to have established controls that can effectively protect the nation's cultural sovereignty. In general, the controls were designed to enforce emphasis on national goals, increase media stress on education, ensure attention to cultural, social, and artistic values, and give the Peruvian public a more active role in mass communication processes. The government appeared to have recognized that if changes were to be successful "in other areas of national life, the mass media have to cooperate" (de Sagasti Perrett, 1977: 146).

Other nations have undertaken similar programs of direction and control. India has devised a system of "democratic persuasion to bring about participation and cooperation of all" along with "democratic planning . . . at all levels" (Singh, 1977: 156).

And Malaysia, a nation in the throes of continuing revolution, has instituted strict radio-TV controls designed to inform the public on governmental policies and programs, stimulate interest to achieve government-sponsored changes, promote civic consciousness, foster the development of Malaysian arts and culture, and

provide elements of popular education, general information, and entertainment.

Against this background, international telecommunications policies have remained a matter of intense debate. But effective agreement in the United Nations or elsewhere appears to lie far in the future. Compounding all other difficulties, the United States has steadfastly espoused the free-flow policy despite almost unanimous opposition from the international community. Differences of approach to the communications satellite question have been a focal point of the continuing discussion. But cultural imperialism as expressed in Western domination in the press, radio, and film areas have proved only slightly less disruptive, a fact that will undoubtedly surface at the forthcoming World Radio Conference in 1979.

Among these subsidiary issues, domination of international press coverage by the Western nations—in particular the United States—has become increasingly sensitive. The entire debate has come to be seen as integral to the broader struggle setting the Western powers against the Third World on the questions of "imbalance, distortion, bias, news imperialism" and the "nature of the international media network and of the transmission across national and cultural frontiers of different types of media materials" (Harris, 1978: 81). Third World spokesmen have contended that "steps must be taken to rectify this situation and institute a new information order" throughout the "have-not" regions (Harris, 1978: 82).

The evidence advanced in proof of Third World contentions is preeminently convincing.

Underlying the data [in support of the basic contention] was the basic position that . . . the underdeveloped Third World is largely dependent for foreign news on the international [Western] agencies and that this dependence means that the images of the world received in the Third World are biased

38 towards a Western concept of reality. (Harris, 1978: 83)

A call was issued at the fourth session of the International Association for Mass Communications Research in 1976 for establishment of an independent news pool for non-aligned countries. The goals of the pool, now in existence, had been set out as follows:

The press agencies pool of the non-aligned countries agreed upon by the non-aligned countries is intended to achieve the broad and free circulation among themselves of news, informative reports, features and photographs about each other, and also provide objective and authentic information relating the non-aligned countries to the rest of the world. (Harris, 1978: 92-93)

None of the Third World agencies participating in the pool was to play a dominant role. The pool was not, it was maintained, designed to replace the Western agencies that operate throughout much of the West and the Third World.

Intercommunication between the Third World countries is seen as a way of filling the gaps left by the Western agencies, as a means of compensating for their mistakes and above all as a way of ensuring a regular interchange of information between Third World countries. (Harris, 1978: 93)

The pool was set up to circulate news among Third World countries and to deliver Third World news to the rest of the world on a continuing basis.

Also, the press pool stands as a symbol of far broader differences. These can be summarized in the question: Free flow of information or cultural imperialism? On the basis of the evidence, the former only masks the latter which is the true reality. □

Abdulai Vandi, Ph.D., is assistant professor of Mass Communications, Howard University.

REFERENCE

- DE SAGASTI PERRETT, H. E. (1977) "Mass media revolution in Peru," in G. Gerbner (ed.) *Mass Media Policies in Changing Cultures*. New York: Wiley.
- GUBACK, T. H. (1977) "The international film industry," in G. Gerbner (ed.) *Mass Media Policies in Changing Cultures*. New York: Wiley.
- HARRIS, P. (1978) "The media and international understanding: What pictures of the world are presented by the media," in *Mass Media and Man's View of Society*. Leicester, England: Adams Bros. & Shardlow, Ltd.
- HSIUNG, J. C. (1970) *Ideology and Practice: The Evolution of Chinese Communism*. New York: Praeger.
- RIEGEL, O. W. (1977) "Satellite communication and national power," in G. Gerbner (ed.) *Mass Media Policies in Changing Cultures*. New York: Wiley.
- SCHILLER, H. I. (1971) *Mass Communications and American Empire*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- (1976) *Communication and Cultural Domination*. White Plains, N.Y.: International Arts & Sciences Press.
- (1977) "The free flow of information—for whom?" in G. Gerbner (ed.) *Mass Media Policies in Changing Cultures*. New York: Wiley.
- SHAYON, R. L. (1977) "Television international," in G. Gerbner (ed.) *Mass Media Policies in Changing Cultures*. New York: Wiley.
- SINGH, K. (1977) "Elite control and challenge in changing India," in G. Gerbner (ed.) *Mass Media Policies in Changing Cultures*. New York: Wiley.
- Tunisian Symposium of the Non-Aligned Countries, March 26-30, 1976. Statement, no. p. no.
- United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (1966) Meeting of the Experts on the Use of Space Communications by the Mass Media, Paris, December 6-10, 1965. Report of the meeting, UNESCO MC/52, Paris, March 31, 1966.
- U. S. Congress (1977) Senate. Committee on Foreign Relations. The Role and Control of International Communications and Information. Report to the Subcommittee on International Operations. Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office.
- VAN DINH, T. (1976) "Non-alignment and cultural imperialism," *The Black Scholar*, December, p. 39.