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There is a complex relationship between dominant international media flows and subaltern, contra-flows today that a large majority of people around the world are not aware of. Most people today are so caught up in their daily cultural lives that they do not realize the major impact of global media flows and counter-flows on nationhood and cultural identity. The dominant international media flows are large, rich and powerful with global capitalism on their side. They have the sources, connections and supporters at their fingertips with their many investments and partnerships that allow them to spread a biased, one-way flow of information. In contrast, contra-flows in international media are other flows, some alternative flows of information, ideas/ideologies, media, and communication that participate in a two-way flow of discourse about news, information, politics, culture, etc. They are “contra-“ in that they counter the dominant media flows who control the majority of the news and media outlets today. One big fear with this process of globalization is that the values and images of the dominant international media flows are threatening to choke out the world’s “native flora,” as Appiah (2006) describes it, of other flows of information. The Hindi film Industry called Bollywood, the traditional motion-picture industry of India + Hollywood, is an example of a billion dollar entertainment contra-flow. It is the world’s largest (even bigger than Hollywood) but its influence is largely confined to the Indian subcontinent and among the South Asian diaspora. The issue at hand is that although these other “contra-flows” exist in the mediascape of the world, they are still not big enough, powerful enough, nor developed enough to put a dent in the dominant transnational mainstream media today. In fact, just by having such contra-flows dedicated to specific regions actually reinforces the dominance of international media flows given the limitability of global access. In order to understand further the impact overlapping narratives of global, national and local identities have on the world, I look to Daya Kishan Thussu’s (2006) case study, “Mapping Global Media Flow and Contra-flow,” to critically examine the complex relationship between global media flows. In addition, I ask for further research on implications for a new global media order with respect to advancements in digital technology and growth of broadband, equal reach advantages, and reformed news and entertainment regulations in order to increase global access in all media flows.

Our contemporary society is built around flows. These flows are described by Castells (2000) to include “flows of capital, flows of information, flows of technology, flows of organizational interactions, flows of images, sounds, and symbols” (p. 442). These flows can also be described as “mediascapes,” according to Arjun Appadurai (1996), which are one of five “scapes” or building blocks of culture that consist of many different shapes and sizes and flow in multiple directions, serving as images of cultural processes. He describes these mediascapes to refer, “both to the distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information (newspapers, magazines, television stations, and film-production studios),” (p. 53) and explain how they are available to increasing private and public interests though out the world and to the images of the world created by these media. In other words, they describe the ways in which so many products become available to so many places around the world. These images or flows also supply many complications depending on their audiences (local, national, or transnational) and the interests of those who own and control them. There are dominant international media flows and there are smaller, contra-flows that make up the global spectrum of media flows.

Dominant international media flows are those predominantly coming from the global North (with the U.S. at its core) that are mainstreamed and consumed by heterogeneous global audiences. Contra-flows, or designated “subaltern flows” according to Thussu (2006), follow the dominant flows, stemming from past peripheries of global media industries. As the global society becomes increasingly networked, such flows have continued to grow in size and direction at rapid rates. In Thussu’s (2006) case study, “Mapping Global Media Flow and Contra-flow,” he discusses how digital technology has aided in the proliferation of satellite and cable television and the growing use of the internet, “partly as a result of the deregulation and privatization of broadcasting and telecommunication networks,” (p. 12) and that this has empowered media companies to seek and create new consumers on a transnational level rather than on a national level. As a result, the convergence of television and broadband has opened up new opportunities for the flow of media content.

However, the relationship between dominant global media flows and contra-flows is more complex than people believe. At first, preservationists used to make their case of “the evil of cultural imperialism” by viewing the world system of capitalism as having a center and a periphery; cultural imperialism “structuring the consciousness” of those in a periphery. Kwame Anthony Appiah (2006) describes this in his article featured in the New York Times, “The Case for Contamination.” He states, “At the center— in Europe and the United States— is a set of multinational corporations. Some of these are in the media business. The products they sell around the world promote the creation of desires that can be fulfilled only by the purchase and use of their products” (p. 3), done explicitly through advertising and implicitly through the messages illustrated in film and television. This is also commonly described by Thussu (2006) as the “West to the Rest” phenomenon. However, this initial theory did not match up with the evidence. Researchers whom disagreed with this “cultural imperialism” theory went out to examine the actual content of television media and film in various parts of the world and discovered how American popular culture was adopted by different regional artists and transformed to fit their own cultures’ needs locally. People were responding differently to cultural imports depending on their existing cultural context, thus, proving the cultural imperialism theory wrong, biased, and honestly, condescending.

In order to properly understand global media flows, the world cannot be looked at from a center-periphery perspective anymore. As stated in the article “Media, Culture & Society,” authors Hartmut Wessler and Manuel Adophsen (2008) re-state Sakr and Thussu’s (2007) argument in saying that, “the concept of contra-flow is not only a mere geographical shift of production capacities towards peripheral locations. More important is the appreciation of contra-flow content in Western locations and a certain degree of interaction with dominant media — be it of an appreciative or confrontational nature” (p. 440). Going off this, I use Thussu’s configuration of media flows— the dominant global flows, transnational flows, and geo-cultural contra-flows— to better explain how information is spread via communication channels.

Dominant global flows are large media corporations that have a big impact on society with their extensive reach in obtaining many viewers. The U.S. continues to lead the field in the export of audio-visual products, from news and current affairs through youth programming to feature films, sports and the Internet. Dominant flows include ESPN, MTV, Google, BBC News, Hollywood, CNN and Fox News. An everyday example of dominant flows can be explained when I open up my browser to check my email. I click on the “Yahoo!” Home Screen tab in my browser menu and as my eyes scroll the left-hand column in search for the small graphic envelope symbolizing my “Mail” button, I can’t help but notice the top news headlines of five different Western-based stories listed on my center screen; the top 5 being CNN, Fox News, or Yahoo! stories. These are the dominant media flows that control my news feed everyday, and I am conditioned as a consumer to not question this observation.

Media contra-flows are smaller flows, but they still represent multiple media sites of production, flow and identification. They are important but their impact remains small in comparison to dominant flows. Contra-flows can exist on the transnational level, such as Al-Jazeera, Euro-News, Bollywood, Brazilian shows and Korean drama. With new communication technologies evolving and other sources for information multiplying, smaller, alternative forms of communication, such as minority and protest media, have emerged with active and dedicated followers. Al-Jazeera English, joined in 2006 by the original Arabic-language station founded in Qatar in 1996, is one example of a transnational and alternative contra-flow news channel that contests the monopoly of Western-dominanted global TV news journalism today. It presents a view of the world in a different way from dominant media flows in which it provides objective journalism to America and its viewers rather than subjective journalism, allowing for the views and voices of other people to be heard. It takes the global news and makes it local, and takes the local/regional news and makes it global.

Contra-flows can also exist on the geo-cultural level, which is more linguistic as its purpose is to allow foreigners in other countries to view their country’s media in their own language. For instance, in his article “Reconsidering Geo-cultural Contraflow: Intercultural Information Flows Through Trends in Global Audiovisual Trade,” Douglas Bicket (2005) speaks to a development in the globalization of media products being consumed by foreign people inside another country: “the desire of people around the world to watch television programming that originates from a cultural or geographic background close to their own” (p. 1). Contra-flows are “glocalized” in which the circulation and adaptation of media products is adapted inside and across regions. For example, an Arab living in New York City can open up his computer and read his homeland’s news written in Arabic.

While these contra-flows exist in the global media flow sphere, the problem is that these mix of flows on a glocal, geo-cultural level are not necessarily impacting a dominant flow or driving force. Wessler and Adolphsen (2008) explain this in the case of Al-Jazeera, how this leads to the construction of a “communication bridge between the West and the Arab world” (p. 440); or in my case, to a communication bridge between the West and the Middle East. For my case study, I look at the Indian Film Industry of Bollywood in the Middle East as a major transnational contra-flow operating in a glocalized commercial environment; Bollywood also categorized as representing transnational “subaltern flows.”

According to Thussu (2006), “One result of the privatization and proliferation of television outlets and the growing glocalization of U.S. media products is that American film and television exports witnessed nearly a five-fold increase between 1992 and 2004” (p. 12). Today that number is even higher. The shift from a local and national view of media to a transnational one defined by consumer interest and market revenue became a main component in the growth and advancement of media flows: from North to South, East to West, and South to South. Such contra-flows are happening all over different parts of the world. The wider struggle that media flows and contra-flows form is over information flows which define power relations in the global information economy. The emerging transnational and geo-cultural networks today represent these contra-flows and they operate in both dimensions. Thussu (2006) explains, “The extension of satellite footprints and the growth of Direct-to-home (DTH) broadcasting have enabled Southern media networks to operate across the globe, feeding into and developing the emergent diasporic public spheres” (p. 14). With economic globalization and the growing efforts of movements across populations around the world, major geo-cultural markets based off languages are distinguishing themselves in transnational communication.

The US-led Western media available online and offline and in various forms of information and entertainment are global in their reach and influence given their political and economic power. The US is the leading exporter of cultural products with the entertainment industry being one of its largest export earners. According to UNESCO’s 2005 report on *International Flows of Selected Goods and Services,* between 1994 and 2002 international trade in cultural goods increased from $38 billion to $60 billion (UNESCO, 2005a), demonstrating how trade is heavily weighed in favor of the industrialized world. These dominant global media flows are not only in English but are also in “dubbed or indigenized versions,” (Thussu, 2013, p. 20) those involving creating a new narrative for a film or TV show, since translation of its original content is never word-for-word. These are a form of glocalization, taking a global media format and re-appropriating it to fit a local context. For example, Rupert Murdoch owns News Corp. and STAR TV which are dominant media flows in the West and Australia. However, STAR TV has aggressively adopted an indigenization policy in offering localized channels, being STAR Chinese, STAR Japan, STAR Plus, and STAR News (the latter two for India), that are glocalized contra-flows of their specific region. As a commercial imperative, media content and services have been tailored to specific cultural regions in order to maintain the dominant flow.

The U.S. dominates the global entertainment market due largely to its film industry. Hollywood films are reported to be shown in more than 150 countries worldwide and dominate market share in a majority of the countries in which the films are shown (Miller et all. 2005). In 2005, Hollywood earned more than half of its revenue from overseas (European Audiovisual Observatory, 2005), the worldwide box office being worth $25.24 billion in 2004 with the world’s top ten grossing films being produced by Hollywood (Thussu, 2006, p. 18). This extensive reach of US-based media contributes to the global flow of consumerist messages and helps the U.S. use its “soft power” to promote its national economic and political interests. Soft power is another word for media power and media capital that dominant media flows like the U.S. utilize. Certain countries have more of this soft power than others that they can exercise globally, some regionally, with other countries at the receiving end. Castells (2007) states, “The media are not the holders of power but they constitute by and large the space where power is decided” (p. 242). Media is said to have soft power because it is so powerful that people don’t realize it. It does not involve direct contact of power in which it does not force people to do anything (like the military, which we call “hard power”), but it does persuade people, typically involving the use of economic or cultural influence via the media. The point is that we need to adapt to this and understand how the dominant media flows exert their power and operate in the global sphere of things.

The impact of dominant media flows and their content is that if they own and control too much then therefore they own opinions, resources, and information that goes with them; if we are not having our voices heard or controlling anything, then we are controlled and it is harder for us to make an impact or dent in these huge media flows. However, with transnational television and its ability to transcend linguistic and geographical boundaries, it is extremely important in relation to media flows. Even though the flow of international television programs from the West to other parts of the world has become more pronounced in the era of multi-channel television, there is a small but significant contra-flow from the non-Western world. The one-way vertical flow has given way for multiple, horizontal, subaltern flows to emerge as an ever growing geo-cultural market. What most people don’t realize is that these subaltern flows have created new transnational configurations as they connect with gradually localizing global dominant flows on their own. Thussu (2006) suggests that there is evidence that global media traffic is not just one way (from the West to the rest) even though the former dominant flows are still in favor. He states, “The availability of digital technology, privatized and deregulated broadcasting and satellite networks has enabled the increasing glow of content from the global South to the North, for example, the growing international visibility of Indian films…” (Thussu, 2006, p. 23) like Bollywood.

Given its size and diverse cultural and social precursors, India is one of the few non-Western countries to have established themselves in the global cultural market due to their $3.5 billion Hindi film industry. This is particularly significant due to the fact that they are the world’s largest in terms of production and viewership: “every year a billion more people buy tickets for Indian movies than for Hollywood films” (Thussu, 2006, p. 26). Even though more films are made in India each year than in Hollywood, their influence is largely confined to the Indian subcontinent and among the South Asian diaspora. However, according to Kaur and Sinha (2005), in recent years many “cross-over” films have opened the communication bridge between India and the West.

The emergence of many dedicate film-based pay-channels and advancements in digital technology and the growth of broadband have ensured that Indian films are shown outside India on the regular. They dominate the cinema of South Asia and the South Asian diaspora as well as construct the popular culture based on “Bollywood.” The globalization of Bollywood has made sure than Indian films increasingly be watched both inside and outside their national audience. Thussu (2006) states that, “Hindi films are shown in more than 70 countries and are popular in the Arab world, in central and southeast Asia and among many African countries” (p. 26). This has made it imperative for producers to invest in dubbed/indigenized versions of their films to widen their reach and privilege scripts which interest audiences in foreign markets. Joint ventures between Indian film producers and Hollywood giants have received a boost after the Indian government announced in 2000, “to allow foreign companies to invest in the film industry” (Thussu, 2006, p. 26). A result of this interest is that diasporic film makers, like Mira Nair (director of *Monsoon Wedding*) and Gurvinder Chaddha (director of internationally successful British-Asian films like *Bend it Like Beckham* and *Bride and Prejudice*), have served as a bridge between Western and Indian popular cinema. Thus, rather than defining Indian films in terms of their modernity and desire for nationhood, Indian cinema cannot be understood on a national paradigm and must be more accurately described as a field of visual and cultural production that interlinks diverse sites and countries.

The impact of the global media order is complex as reception of these cultural products is never uniform. The world is complex and we have only begun to theorize about it. Media flows and contra-flows create part of the wider struggle over information flows which define power relations in the global information economy. Soft power is supported by “hard” political and economic power, despite the massive movement of media flows across continents, cultures and communities. The significant examples of subaltern, contra-flows of media serve to show that the world communication is not, in fact, diverse and democratic like some may have previously supposed. This analysis about the reality of global media flows and contra-flows demonstrates a more complex process of globalization, the imbalance between the dominant and subaltern global media flows proving to be real in reflecting the asymmetries in flows of ideas and goods. Even though there is a growing trend towards contra-flow, non-Western media organizations are relatively small and do not have high enough revenues to make a global impact. Despite the growing existence of the Indian film industry as a contra-flow, Bollywood’s share in the global film industry in 2004 valued at $200 billion was still less than 0.2 percent.

At the same time, dominant international media flows are becoming stronger as they continue to shape the global media order and serve as big influences around the world. The question then probes to ask: how contra is contra and contra against whom exactly? It is a question of focus, of where do we get our media content from? Contra doesn't necessarily mean that the media product has to be anti-hegemonic. Soft power is still power and glocalization processes, while important, still reinforce a dominant media order. Ideologically, commercial contra-flows reinforce free-market capitalism by supporting a privatized and commodified media system. Therefore, I contend that people should stop assuming they are “counter-hegemonic” to the dominant media flows for it is unlikely that subaltern flows will have a significant impact on the U.S. hegemony of global media cultures that have grown stronger given the localization of media content, despite the supposed displacing of global media from the center. In addition, as dominant international media flows expands its reach and power, “a hybridized and localized media product,” according to Thussu (2006), “can provide the more acceptable face of globalization and therefore effectively legitimize the ideological imperatives of a free-market capitalism” (p. 28). Or in other words, they can more appropriately describe globalization as a process and more effectively explain the dictatorial ideology of capitalism.

In addition to my conclusion, I believe further research should be done involving implications for a new global media order. This new media order includes developing new advancements in digital technology and growth of broadband in order to increase global access in media flows; it requires equal advantages for all companies, big or small, in reaching people (seeing people as “citizens” and not as “consumers”); and it asks for an establishment of new regulations for mandating all news and entertainment in global media flows.

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