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'We are seeing a New International Division of Cultural Labor'

by Farooq Sulehria |  |  | 

CNN broadcasts to over 130 nations across the principal world languages. The US absolutely bombards Iran with 25 satellite TV networks in Farsi. MTV by 2008 was in 162 countries across 33 languages. US children's channel Nickelodeon is available in well over 150 countries

"Most people who read international news still get it from the major imperial powers' news agencies, delivered in the languages of conquest," says Toby Miller. In an interview with Viewpoint, he explains various aspects of American domination of global cultural industries.

Toby Miller (<http://www.tobymiller.org/>), a British-Australian-US interdisciplinary social scientist, is chair of Department of Media & Cultural Studies at the University of California, Riverside. He is the author and editor of over 30 books, including *Global Hollywood*, has published essays in more than 100 journals and edited collections, and is a frequent guest commentator on television and radio programs.

His teaching and research cover the media, sports, labor, gender, race, citizenship, politics, and cultural policy, as well as the success of Hollywood overseas and the adverse effects of electronic waste. Miller's work has been translated into Chinese, Japanese, Swedish, German, Spanish and Portuguese. Among his books, *SportSex* was

a Choice Outstanding Title for 2002 and *A Companion to Film Theory* a Choice Outstanding Title for 2004. Born in the United Kingdom and brought up in England, India, and Australia, Miller earned a B.A. in history and political science at the Australian National University in 1980 and a Ph.D. in philosophy and communication studies at Murdoch University in 1991. Excerpts:

Tariq Ali says what polite people call capitalist globalization is in fact capitalist banditry. But there are enthusiastic academics that claim globalization is as historic an event as Renaissance or Enlightenment. Your comments?

The 'G-Word' has dominated academic debate across the human sciences for fifteen years now, and is on the agenda of every major corporation, every state, every trade union, every key third-sector entity. If you look at a list of scholarly conference papers today, the big abstract noun of the early 1990s ('postmodern') has simply been erased or written over by 'global.' But like the other markers you mention--the Renaissance and the Enlightenment--globalization is of course a linguistic and policy construction as much as it is a process with a reference point in reality. So the word is indeed frequently used to describe the domination of both large sovereign-states and corporations, and increases in trade and financial interdependence; but in military terms, the United States has maintained its hundreds of aggressive bases for decades; Hollywood has exported its wares for decades; China and India have influenced their neighbors and diasporas for decades; English and Spanish have been world languages for centuries; only since the First World War have passports and visas become norms; states proliferate rather than disappear ever since the Second World War--and so on. The concept I prefer to use is that we are seeing a New International Division of Cultural Labor, akin to what started in manufacturing fifty years ago, such that labor is now exploited globally across all sectors of the economy rather than just in building boats and cars.

Certain media experts claim that globalization has ended the cultural imperialism. The examples of Al-Jazeera, Zee network of India, Bollywood, telenovelas from Brazil and Mexico are now even giving birth to terminologies like 'reverse imperialism'. Do you agree



with this notion that cultural imperialism has been challenged by Southern actors like Zee and Al- Jazeera?

Most people who read international news still get it from the major imperial powers' news agencies, delivered in the languages of conquest—French, German, Spanish, and English. It is certainly true that the large South Asian diaspora, the creativity of Latin American television drama, and state-backed alternatives to the old patterns of domination matter. But: CNN broadcasts to over 130 nations across the principal world languages, with globally-generated as well as regionally-specific content a key to its prominence. In the area of news and current affairs, the US continues to be the major source around the world, while Britain has about a fifth of global exports. This power is exerted via CNN and the BBC on the one hand and news agencies—Associated Press Television News and Reuters Television—on the other. Germany has two major networks across Asia, received by over a thousand satellite systems, with three-quarters of programming in German and a quarter in English. Such inequality in the source and ideology of stories about the Global South reported both elsewhere and back to them, has led to renewed calls for a contra flow of news. Politics in its most formal sense also sees the impact of lopsided transnational networks—the US absolutely bombards Iran with satellite TV in Farsi (25 networks as of 2005, many of which focus on politics), generated by “Persian” expatriates in southern California who define themselves against the Islamic Republic. And MTV? By 2008 it was in 162 countries across 33 languages, with revenue not only from the sale of shows but massive merchandising tie-ins as well—toys, clothes, and, of course, Rock Band, the video game which has sold millions of copies. Its customization to local markets never prevented the egregious Sumner Redstone, its owner, from boasting about MTV’s universal influence. The US children’s channel Nickelodeon is available in well over 150 countries. Young people across Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa are familiar with SpongeBob, and 80% of programming for children outside the white-settler colonies and China comes from the US.

These new actors from South are owned by local elites. Again, they depend on advertisements by multinationals or state funding in case of Al-Jazeera. Your comments?

This is a very important point—but I’d have to say that Al-Jazeera in English has transformed my personal watching of television news. It’s almost impossible to find on US cable and satellite systems, due to corporate ideological proclivities, but on-line, its coverage of the globe and meta-discourse on the news media themselves are excellent. I appreciate that the Al- Jazeera view is an elite one, but its commitment to the kind of journalism I admire makes it stand out next to the dreadful US alternatives, where journalism is a joke rather than a profession.

You have propounded the theory of NICL (New International Division of Cultural Labour) which, among other things, shows Hollywood remains dominating player in film owing to corporate control it enjoys globally. But Hollywood products draw volunteer crowds of spectators which films from other countries do not. How would you explain this dichotomy?

History! And political economy! After world war I, the European film industries were decimated. The U.S. had been a net importer of both film stock and movies until this point, but the option was now there to sell. The state and commerce department began a series of services to push Hollywood exports. World War II offered another shock to European industries, and then Hollywood used the Marshall plan of reconstruction as a tool to require recipients to open up their markets immediately to U.S. cinema. Since that time, a combination of the state exerting economic pressure, the ability to clear production costs domestically, and the use of the NICL has kept Hollywood in its position of global dominance. Externally, the U.S government and industry set up new cartels to market films everywhere, with special agencies created for Anglophone and francophone Africa. Hollywood’s American motion picture export company of Africa, for example, dominated cinema sales to former British colonies from the 1960s, when the continent screened about 350 films a year, perhaps half of them from the US. The idea that this success is purely due to the appeal of the texts themselves misses such factors.

For last few years, Hollywood has been presenting Muslims/Arabs as terrorist villains. It used to be Russians until 1990s. Once, Vietnamese and Japanese were painted badly. Is it a coincidence that Hollywood films present villains from countries the USA goes to war against?

I disagree with the premise here—if you look at the work of Jack Shaheen, you see that Arabs and the Muslim world have been characterized as enemies from the earliest days of Hollywood. This has never changed—they have been the most hated group of people in US action adventure since time immemorial, presumably because of the Judaeo-Christian ethos that has reigned over Hollywood liberalism. In terms of Hollywood’s links to the state, these are real but frequently quite informal—Hollywood does not take orders from Washington, or vice versa, but they are linked in terms of people and ideology. Stereotypes in Hollywood are successfully challenged when major market segments mount complaints about them—for example, Latin Americans worked together to protest the “greaser” genre of the 1920s and its demeaning way of representing Mexicans and Mexican-Americans. The Arab/Muslim world has not mounted a collective state- and corporate-based critique in this way, in part perhaps it is so split between quasi-client states of the US such as Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia and those who remain publicly critical of the empire.

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