

Flow Panel: Global Television Flow

Serra Tinic

In order to generate a more productive dialogue between cultural studies and international communications, I think it is imperative that we first reconceptualize our use of the term "flow" in an era where satellite television, internet streaming, and transnational production and distribution strategies have dramatically altered the global televisual landscape. Despite different uses of the term, both paradigms initially used the concept to describe somewhat seamless, fluid processes — whether in Williams' analysis of television as a meaning system that works by reinforcing the interplay between programs, schedules, and advertising; or in international communications' analytical emphasis on the correspondence between cultural dominance and the literal (and disproportionate) movement of a country's television programming across borders. I would suggest that rupture, disjuncture, and contradiction are concepts that need to be incorporated into any contemporary understanding of global television flows.

Whenever I watch television outside of North America, I am continually reminded of the extent to which Williams' discussion of "planned flow" is contextually specific to the high network era of American broadcasting (and its implications for commercial television in Britain at the time). However, even the briefest interaction with global satellite television indicates that *some* audiences around the world may increasingly be watching "specific programs" rather than watching "television as a system." This is accentuated in countries that employ the practice of block advertising for 15-20 minutes at the end of a program, rather than the North American practice of commercials woven throughout a show. If we combine this with personalized menu options and PVR technology, the overall experience is similar to watching what is now referred to as "television-off-television." Moreover, it is an "off-television" environment that is transnational in scope. Programs from all global compass points — not just the so-called West versus the Rest — are scheduled alongside, or in direct competition with, national television fare. Overall, global television has become more multidirectional and fragmented than the forms of 'flow' customarily depicted in either cultural studies or international communication. And the picture becomes infinitely more complex if we throw multi-platform programming or transnational user-generated/distributed content, including that of the YouTube and BitTorrent varieties, into the mix.

This is not to say that new distribution technologies have ushered in an era of global pluralism and televisual democracy of the 'something for everyone' variety. Analyses of power, issues of access, and cultural representation remain central to all transnational studies of television texts and their reception contexts. However, we need to destabilize the categorical assumptions about nations, peripheries, and cultural identification in order to understand both change and continuity in the circulation of global television. Cultural studies scholars have made important contributions to this dialogue by engaging with critical social theories, including those from anthropology and cultural geography, which question the nation as a unified site of cultural production, expression and identity. Consequently, research within this paradigm acknowledges the

inextricable relationship between global and local forces as well as the sub-national tensions that define domestic cultural production and reception. This has been a primary point of divergence from the international communications perspective. Here, the early engagement with development communications research provided a transmission model of media that assumed that modernization and nation building seemed to flow seamlessly through programming. A central concern, epitomized in the cultural imperialism thesis, was that ‘peripheral’ identities were under constant threat from the inundation of television programming from the dominant ‘core’ countries of the West (read as the United States/Hollywood).

However, international communications — with its more macro-oriented framework and attention to international political economy — reminds us of the enduring significance of the nation as a locus of television policy and regulation, as well as the continuing transnational corporate competition to dominate global media markets. Indeed, these are important counterpoints to my earlier depiction of global satellite television audiences. We need to acknowledge that access to basic television, let alone new media technologies, is unequally distributed both within and across national borders. This compels us to consider the possibility that our present analyses of global television may, at times, emphasize an unacknowledged transnational cosmopolitan class that drives the objectives of multinational media conglomerates.

If we can establish a common vocabulary between the two paradigms, I think it's possible to generate momentum for research that combines the cultural studies focus on the quotidian and discursive aspects of global television with the broader structural concerns of international communications. This synthesis would enhance our understanding of why specific television forms become globally dominant while local genres and narratives persist and, at times, flourish. Perhaps then we can further elaborate the broader implications of: 1) why Turkish audiences are able to surf between domestic programming, Japanese crime dramas, Indian melodramas, and American programs such as *House* and *Grey's Anatomy*; 2) the increasing importance of diasporic audiences in “national” production decisions in India and Mexico to name but two countries; 3) whether or not it matters that American Showtime subscribers think they're watching the BBC when they tune into the Canada-Ireland co-production, *The Tudors*; and 4) the cultural confusion and multiple readings of a Finnish television satire of the song *YMCA* that went viral on YouTube.