

## Locations and Flows: Media Capital in Global Context

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During its formative years the field of international communication was largely dedicated to making comparisons among media systems, using states as foundational units of analysis. With respect to flow, discussions tended to emphasize trade imbalances between nations, especially between Western and “underdeveloped” media systems. Modernization scholars suggested that flows from the West to the rest would stimulate development and democracy, while media imperialism scholars argued to the contrary that such exports contributed to conditions of dependency and underdevelopment among countries of the Third World. Much of the leading scholarship in international communication focused on macro systemic concerns. The everyday operations of texts, audiences, and institutions tended to be of secondary concern.

Among cultural studies scholars, discussions of flow began with inquiries into the nature of texts. In 1974, Raymond Williams famously wondered if audiences could distinguish between discrete units of programming amidst the seemingly continuous flow of sounds and images in American television. U.S. scholars took up these questions and began to reflect on the boundaries of television texts and relations among them. In time, they also began to venture into the field of international media studies, taking with them their training in semiotic and discursive analysis, which they applied to television texts as well as institutional practices, audience activities, and the broader socio-cultural contexts in which media operate.

These scholars acknowledged broad systemic issues, but they also exhibited genuine curiosity about the ways that media institutions operated at a quotidian level. They tried to assess macro assumptions about transnational flow at the level of everyday discourse and practice, and in so doing, to bridge the concerns of international and cultural studies while furthermore engaging with new literatures on globalization, postcolonial studies, and cultural geography. Indeed, scholars such as Arjun Appadurai re-energized discussions about media flow by suggesting multiple and disjunctive patterns of flow with respect to globalization.

My work emerged out of this context and, like many of my colleagues I believe the concept of flow has contributed greatly to our research. Still, I wonder if our characterizations of flow sometimes seem too ambiguous. Flows are indeed complex and disjunctive, but it is nevertheless important to anchor our analyses of flow to particular sites where cultural, social, and economic power condense. Locations still matter, as do nation-states. Flow implies movement from some *places* to others and it suggests imbalances among places.

If we wish to build upon and move beyond modernization, development, and media imperialism theories, we need to develop approaches that are at once alert to the complex and the quotidian but also ones that are adept at foregrounding patterns, systems, and institutions that govern the development of global media. For me, a successful theory should ask such questions as: What are the primary forces that shape media circulation? Under what conditions do television texts flow easily across borders and under what conditions do they not? Why specifically do market forces foster the concentration of media resources in particular places? What are the relations between

centers of production and fields of flow? How do cultural and political forces attenuate and refigure patterns of media flow and consumption? Is it possible to develop media policies that are open and productive—that is, engaged with flow—rather than defensive and prohibitive?

Advancing the concept of *media capital*, I try to encourage multidimensional research of screen media centers—such as Hong Kong, Lagos, and Mumbai—that are influential far beyond their local and national contexts. By comparing institutions, policies, and conditions of creativity in such locales, I believe we can develop a better understanding of the spatial dynamics of media under conditions of global capitalism. Rather than generating a thin catalog of comparative features, this research agenda aims to produce rich, historicized accounts of the ways in which these centers operate within expansive fields of flow.

Allow me to close with one provocative observation that grows out of this research. The most successful media capitals tend to be seaports have been centers of flow within the global system for some time: Lagos 1500s, Mumbai 1600s, and Hong Kong 1800s. We might add other port cities to our list, certainly New York, London, and Los Angeles but also Shanghai, Rio, Miami, and Beirut, as well as more recent aspirants, Seoul, Vancouver, and Dubai. In each of these cities you'll find that palpable manifestations of flow appear in names, languages, streets, neighborhoods, cuisine, art, music, architecture, scholarship, trade, banking, and finance. Flow is embedded and institutionalized in these locales and media capital is only the most recent manifestation of their cosmopolitan status. One observes richness, complexity, and fluidity at work in these cities as well as pattern, structure, and duration. The study of media capital may therefore provide a grounded entrée to more expansive questions regarding transnational media flow.