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Media globalization and diversity

Mutually exclusive or compatible?

An increasing accessibility to television and wish for entertainment programs in all parts of the world has led to program cloning and copying but also to a development of new formats. The questions are: Does media globalization constrain the representation of diversity? Will television consumers in future only be exposed to “universalized” images? How can diversity in representation be implemented?

If diversity is the vibrant Little Red Riding Hood traipsing through the forest, globalization could very well be the big bad wolf, malevolently plotting to swallow up that vibrancy. Indeed, Fisher and Ponniah (2003) group the relentless processes of “capitalism, imperialism, monoculturalism, and the domination of biodiversity” (p. 10) under globalization. The complex character of globalization which involves a “compression of the world” as well as an “intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole” (Robertson, 1995, p. 8) necessarily generates anxiety where societies at varying levels of development are linked in real time, bringing political and economic processes under global scrutiny (Abélès, 2006).

Arguments of the early-mid 1990s that transnational corporations such as Time Warner, Sony, Matsushita, and News Corporation diminish gov-

ernment control over national media and compete with centralized broadcast systems for the urban consumer (Morley/Robbins, 1996; Price, 1995), gain momentum through the 2000s.

Commercialization of television and increasing accessibility

At the end of the first decade of the 21st century, our understanding of media globalization is informed by detailed and sophisticated analyses of the television industry where, for example, Thomas and Kumar (2004) argue that standardized products are low-risk; copycat television is the way to go. Transnational television networks strive toward brand-building and brand value management to attract and maintain advertisers and subscribers (Mukherjee/Roy, 2006). To build a brand name, television networks follow practices of any other corporate environment. They undergo “mimetic morphism” and follow the market leader, “normative morphism” where they choose norms that have become “best practices”, or “coercive morphism” where they are forced to comply with standard practice to stay afloat (Keane, 2004).

The increasing accessibility of television in remote parts of the world, the expansion of the middle class in countries of the Asian, African, and Latin American continent, and the

increasing demand for entertainment programming has led to frantic and large-scale program cloning, developing, collaging (Lee, 2004), and illegal copying or pirating of program formats (Moran, 2004). In an era of media globalization, hybrid representations of global and local, and of traditional and modern, have serious implications for ethnic and gender minorities.

Concerns of copycat television in a globalized media environment cloud the children’s television market as well. Critics argue that formats which have minimal “cultural discount” or minimal native elements such as accents, language, cultural themes and local settings; and that are “culturally odorless”, in that the very local, or the very ethnic is absent (Iwabuchi, 2004), are the ones that dominate the market. For example, Japanese programs carry a high level of cultural discount; yet Japanese animation is highly popular, because like video games, it is culturally odorless. Animation is primarily intended for export with just 1 % of animated films in Japanese. *Pokémon* is now produced in 10 languages (English, French, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Mandarin, Cantonese, Korean, and Greek) and in major media markets across the world. *Super Mario Brothers*, although a Japanese production, was created within an Italian context for greater translatability across cultures.

Scholars of media globalization note that consumerism advances at a hectic pace even in impoverished environments because so-called new and diverse commodities merely repackage time-tested sexist and racist stereotypes. Youth are considered to be the primary consumers of “universalized” or westernized modes of dress, speech, and music, imbibing in these in the same temporal frame all across the world (Walker, 1996; Real, 1996).

Opening up new spaces of expression

Commercialization of media has also opened up new spaces of expression, diversity of formats, genres, and better-produced programming. Decentralization, specialization, and diversification in processes of production and distribution have allowed media professionals to experiment with content as well, drawing into the media stage a discussion of social, political, economic, and cultural issues never witnessed before under more authoritative or communist political environments. Neoliberal market discourse positions young consumers as free agents of choice and shapers of their own destinies. It is provocative to think of disembodied spirits and deterritorialized ideas in a global consumer context (Appadurai, 1990). Transnational media flows in particular, make possible participation in various rituals of selfhood, defaulting youth rites of passage to those unraveling on television. Youth become signifiers of globalization; their agency and autonomy becomes an indicator of the progressiveness of their home societies. Yet suspension of analyses of global consumer culture to the space above which consumption actually happens precludes an analysis of how exactly transactions are made not just between consumer and corporation but within the consumer herself or himself.

Media scholars, with their inherent orientation toward examining the lo-

cation of communication technologies within society, tend to choose theories and methodologies that track responses to such technologies. For example, youth participation in social media such as YouTube, Facebook, and MySpace, and the media that make these possible (computers, cell phones, iPods, Blackberries) are studied for their potential to engender “new patriotisms” (Dolby/Rizvi, 2008, p. 7). Young people are regarded as identifying themselves through consumption of fast food, music, and so on, rather than class identifications, caste, or even religious identifications (Willis, 2003).

While it is true that a globalized media environment makes way for newer formats and greater range of content in previously restricted environments, consumer “freedom” is often not much more than the freedom to choose among a limited range of products and behavioral templates. Variations in freedom based on structural identity positions such as class, caste, nationality, language and so on, are not examined in great depth. Most critical studies focus on gender differences in their examination of diversity, leaving huge gaps in our understanding of how gender experiences intersect with other identity positions to inform the viewing and consuming experience.

The bulk of research that focus on gender differences indicate that greater creative flexibility in television content is usually limited to programs targeted to boys. For girls, television programming delivers a complex politics of consumption, where the body continues to be the primary site through which desire and vulnerabilities are conveyed (Lukose, 2005). The relatively new field of “Girls’ Studies” (cf. Mazzarella/Pecora 2007, for an overview) has critiqued mediated images of ideal girlhood as well as their reception (cf. Durham, 1999); more recently analyzed are girls’ use of interactive media (Clark, 2005) and social networking websites (Thiel,

2007). Girls consuming media are theorized along 2 trajectories which Gonick (2006) labels as “Girl Power” (where girls are seen as assertive and dynamic) and “Reviving Ophelia” (where girls are constituted as vulnerable and passive) strains, respectively. Gonick notes that both strains work together in the production of the neoliberal subject. The first represents the autonomous, self-determining subject, a desirable ideal within a democratic, modern society. The second facilitates anxieties about the subject who is unable to express herself in an individualistic way. Both fend off critical engagement with structural inequities that contribute to differing levels of agency. As youth researchers Hudson (1984) and Walkerdine (2003) have argued, both positions prohibit the subject from achieving autonomy or authorship within her or his own terms of representation.

Diversity is possible in a globalized environment

2 broad points emerge from the above paragraphs: diversity *is* possible in a globalized environment. That is, diversity in terms of program formats, in terms of characters within programs, and in terms of themes and settings. Second, the biggest consumers are rarely authors setting their terms of representation. To develop diversity in representation that reflects not just the imperatives of a profit-driven environment but also and arguably more importantly, the agents “consuming” that representation, we need to re-conceptualize young audiences, particularly girls, as agents of change who are also deliberate “producers” of their conditions (cf. Dolby/Rizvi, 2008). For “useful” diversity to thrive within a corporate environment that places efficiency and profitability on standardization, we have to problematize *who* has control over representation and how strategies for consumption are deployed. The conditions of glo-

balization demand a return to analysis of structural claims on culture. Various phases of fieldwork over the years (cf. McMillin, 2009) have shown that media are used opportunistically by viewers. Specifically, fieldwork among Indian teens during 2003 and 2006, collaborative studies on teens in Munich, Johannesburg, Bangalore and New York (2003 to 2004, cf. also Bulbulia, 2004; Fisher-keller, 2004) and among teens from 40 countries at the 2007 World Summit on Media for Children, demonstrated that young viewers were far from passive victims of media or systems of patriarchy; they could inject a counter discourse, they could lay claim to the cracks in the system that offered them possibilities of transformation.

Boys and girls are in search for models of strength

Regardless of where they were positioned in the world (in terms of nation) or neighborhood (in terms of community, caste, class, gender, and so on), television programming, both foreign and indigenous, provided respondents' relevance for their own development into young adults. Across various countries, both boys and girls were in search of an inner strength that would allow them to rise above their existential struggles. Models of strength were offered through corporate structures that funneled teen desires into a limited range of characters. It is true that young viewers may themselves embody the very restrictive ideologies we seek to disentangle them from, yet it is in the opening up of dialogue among viewer, producer, and media scholar, that we take our first step. If interdependent relationships are what globalization thrives on and through which it is even possible, it is our responsibility, as key players in children's television, to draw out the opportunistic possibilities on all sides of such relationships. Put simply, programming strategies

must be drawn up with a clear "what do you get out of it?" question for each element in the interdependent globalized relationship among media industry, market, and, I would argue, academia. Diversity that works can be engendered when informed feedback is provided by target youth audiences to media producers. Media scholars play an important role in providing an ethical and progressive informed environment for producer-consumer dialogue. ■

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