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The Second British Invasion: This Time, It's Silent. A Study of British Television Industry's Creation of an Anti-Hegemonic Response to America's Global Media Predominance

Submitted by: Ellen Thompson

ABSTRACT

This article investigates the response of a one culture against the hegemony of another culture; specifically, efforts by the BBC against the omnipresence of American television media. Anti-hegemonic measures are often considered only in the context of third-world globalization. It is important to note, however, that some Western cultures are not only aware of, but actively resisting American cultural hegemony. The article highlights the BBC's awareness of, and desire to halt, a massive global television culture shaped solely by American exports. Exports of British content into American markets and beyond are analyzed, as well as the way in which these new markets adapt British content for their own cultural audience. *The Office* is used as an example of British television content that has effectively been exported not only to an American market, but also to over 80 countries. *The Office* and other such exports represent the British desire to not only assert cultural independence from American media hegemony, but a market-fueled interest in becoming a rival television power globally.

Keywords: *glocalization, hegemony, mediascapes*

INTRODUCTION

When the word 'hegemony' is mentioned in a global media setting, often, two stereotypes are enacted. The first is that of a first-world aggressor, almost always Western, and more times than not American. The second is that of a third-world victim, defenseless in its fight against the dominant mother culture being imposed on its inhabitants. However, the reality

of mass communication globally is much more nuanced than this black and white portrayal. It is true that American media culture is a force to be reckoned with. With cultural powerhouses such as Hollywood, a film powerhouse that cannot be denied in terms of its power internationally, America is certainly considered an international media giant. However, those who are inundated with the images and products of this media empire are not passive victims of an unstoppable force. Many across the globe are aware of the unique status America plays in media culture. This includes Great Britain, a cultural powerhouse in itself. The BBC's response to American media hegemony is an example of the awareness of, and resilience of, global powers. The television industry, while often dominated by images produced in America, has a unique look on British screens. With a powerful domestic television market, and a concerted effort to export programs abroad, the BBC defies normal expectations of what it means to be anti-Hegemonic.

LITERATURE REVIEW

When first starting research into this topic, I originally wanted to do a cross-cultural analysis of British and American television programs and portrayals of cultural values through those programs. While I found a large amount of literature relating to British culture, and British television, I found very little on subsequent American topics. As suggested to me, the birthplace of Cultural Studies (Great Britain) accounts for both much of the evidence I acquired, and was unable to acquire.

A good deal of the initial information I found, in regard to cultural comparison through television, focused solely on British television

habits. I found an abundance of material that dealt with meta-analysis of British culture and its manifestation through television, particularly comedy. It seems that Britain's unique past both as a global hegemony, in Imperialist times, and as the birthplace of Cultural Studies, has produced an academic environment wherein there is a desire to define what it means to be British. Articles such as "Core British Values: What It Means to be British" (Mackney, 2008) assert this quest for a solidified identity.

After surveying the disparity in information about the two cultures, I then narrowed my focus to the area of British television, and responses to American television. The same desire for a strong and unified British identity has seemed to foster an awareness of other global powers in the media marketplace. The amount of literature describing and condemning the omnipresence of American media influence bespeaks this.

Yet, despite this information I found, when searching for information on anti-hegemonic efforts, I found little that dealt with the backlash of first-world nations. Most of the published works currently in circulation still subscribe to the idea that the Western aggressors simply impose their own values and norms on weaker, defenseless third-world nations

To begin an analysis of the BBC's media efforts, it is necessary to define the concept that the BBC rallies against. *Hegemony*, according to Marxist Antonio Gramsci, is the state in which:

"one dominant social group in a society has the capacity to exercise intellectual and moral direction over society at large and to build a new system of social alliances to support its aims...the most effective way of wielding power [is] to build consent by ideological control of cultural production and distribution...[and] through its control of...the mass media"

(Thussu, 2006, p. 53)

Essentially, this concept is thought by the BBC to encapsulate the role of American television and its ubiquity throughout the globe. Its influence extends beyond its own political

borders to the point where other television markets cannot help but reflect this hegemonic state.

Another important concept to define is that of *glocalization*. Simply put, this process involves the "blending of local features into global products" (Lull, 2000, p. 252). This tactic is used by both the dominant culture, and the 'victimized' culture, to attain a set of products/services that meet the needs of both the local audience and the global force. A halfway point between local demand and global supply, glocalization is seen as a more humane response to global forces than mere globalization, which is thought to impose foreign values and beliefs on natives cultures.

Finally, *mediascapes* are described as "both [the] distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information [such as] television stations...and the images of the world created by these media" (Appadurai, 1990, p. 35). In a changing global market, with audiences ever migrating, expanding, and blending, the dispersion of media products is evolving. No longer are audiences content to consume media at the behest of the supplier; consumption on demand is now the norm (Baran, 2008). It is also true that audiences are adapting and changing to our ever-globalized world as well (Lull, 2000). The mediascapes that exist today facilitate both the hegemony of American media products, as well as any anti-hegemonic responses therein.

ANALYSIS

The lynchpin program I focus on throughout this paper is *The Office*. First broadcast in the UK via the BBC in 2001, and the corporation's most successful export to date, (Milmo, 2006, p. 22) *The Office* has enjoyed great critical and audience success stateside as well. Now a staple of American television, and with other British exports on the way, the BBC is certainly worth studying.

Upon further investigation, the BBC has quite a bit of influence in America. The offshoot channel BBC America has enjoyed great commercial success as of late; one week's ratings in July of 2009 topping 3.3 million for the airing of a single show. BBC America has carved out quite a niche for itself stateside, with

a lineup heavy with sci-fi imports (PR Newswire, 2009). With plans made already for the 2010 season, the BBC's success in America speaks of a parent company driven to success.

The success of BBC America is due in large part to the company's profit-driven motives. Much like the American hegemonic powers vilified by media critics, the BBC recognizes the power of high-profit ventures, and sees a viable market in American audiences. The overseer of BBC Worldwide America, Garth Ancier, has been quoted as saying "[I] would like to see the top U.K. series exploit their worth over longer periods" (Weisman, 2009, pg. 13). The desire to create and maintain a source of profit drives much of the BBC's efforts to expand its market to the US.

iTunes, a revolutionary software device that has changed the way that global citizens purchase and utilize media products (such as songs, TV shows, movies, etc.) is another market that has recently been tapped for the American market. Those who do not subscribe to the television channel BBC America, which is normally included in the more expensive packages offered by cable and satellite companies, now have access to shows such as *Torchwood*, *Little Britain*, and other popular exports from across the pond (PR Newswire, 2008). Again, the American audience is targeted as a viable source of profit.

Americans, however, are not the only demographic sought by the British television behemoth. Following a 91% increase in ratings for BBC America in the 2007 fiscal year, the BBC is now searching for an expanded global audience. A partnership with the South American media conglomeration Televisa has provided an outlet for the distribution of BBC content in the Southern hemisphere. South African, Polish and Australian markets have already been scouted as markets ready for the introduction of BBC programming. As global channels director Darren Childs states, "Most multichannel is dominated by the American studios. We're providing really for the first time a different voice to the American voice. That's making a real connection" (Schreiber, 2008).

DISCUSSION

It is clear to me that the BBC has just as much investment in the global television marketplace as do the American hegemonic media companies that it is gently nudging out. Aware of, and wary of the influence of American television on foreign markets, the British television landscape has "yet to surrender their screens to the wholesale invasion of American television" (Spencer, 2007, pg. 125). Beyond this, however, a hard look into the motives and actions of the BBC shows that British television is not merely trying to assert its dominance domestically. The expansion of British program to foreign markets is only the beginning of a carefully crafted campaign to introduce British content abroad, much in the same vein of American media giants it clearly opposes.

Great Britain holds a unique position in the global marketplace. A tiny island nation with a population a fraction of America's, the British position is actually one of great power. English is the native language, and originated in that very isle. Now the *lingua franca* of media worldwide, content that is produced in Britain is easily adapted for foreign audiences.

The American market in particular has little trouble understanding and identifying with original British content. *Secret Diary of a Call Girl*, for example, was imported directly to an American audience via cable provider Showtime with little to no editing or tweaking needed. This leaves the profit margin for parent company as wide as possible, as no extra production costs are needed (Adalian, 2007).

Glocalized adaptations, however, are often very lucrative efforts as well. In fact, *Secret Diary* was first considered as an option for Americanized adaptation. Another example of a very successful and profitable adaptation is, of course, the American version of *The Office*. A long running show now in its sixth season, with more than 100 episodes to date, this series has become an American comedy staple. The phrase "that's what she said", thanks to fictional Dunder-Mifflin office manager Michael Scott, has now become a ubiquitous response throughout segments of the American social landscape.

The first globalized adaptation to derive from the original formula of the UK *Office*, however, is not alone in the global marketplace. There now exist five fully-fledged versions of the original, including American, French, German, French-Canadian, and Chilean. With over 80 countries holding access to subtitled versions of the original, there are few areas of the globe that are not at the very least familiar with the concept spawned in Great Britain.

Shows like *The Mighty Boosh*, a quirky and abstract comedy produced by and starring two British comedians, have also been imported to the US with little fanfare, but big results. Originally airing on BBC Three starting in 2005. The show started out not with a bang, but with a small and devoted set of fans who, over the next two seasons, had amassed to the point where characters enacted in the show (for instance, “The Hitcher” or “Old Gregg”) became just as ubiquitous on the island nation as the phrase “that’s what she said” is here.

When imported first to BBC America, *The Mighty Boosh* received little mention, acclaim, and underwhelming ratings. But when added to the Cartoon Network lineup on the late-night time slot (home to such niche shows like the anime series *Full Metal Alchemist*, *Death Note*, or *Cowboy Bebop*), *The Mighty Boosh* found a small but enthusiastic following. Much in the same vein as the popularity of anime shows in the US, with fan bases not a large chunk of the population but very enthusiastic, *Boosh* gained attention and fans within a short period of time, despite its 1 a.m. time slot. And similar to anime fans, who usually start out with one show that opens her eyes to the larger variety of anime available, and even to the culture of Japan where anime originated, *Boosh* can be seen as a prime example of the Uses & Gratifications theory (Baran, 2008) among American audiences.

Part of the BBC’s appeal is that it offers a widely available, but thoroughly unique alternative to American media offerings. Because of the power and size of the American television industry, almost every country in the world is constantly exposed to a stream of American content. Most people in this generation have grown up culturally bilingual,

due to this exposure. Americans are unique in that they are the only sizable example of a culturally monolingual people. The content of the BBC and ITV’s offerings in the US appeals to a set of people, who, much like anime fans, desire a television experience unlike the one that they are constantly immersed in.

Personally, this is where my interest in British television arose. I caught one episode of the (as yet unadapted for American audiences) pop quiz *Nevermind the Buzzcocks*. The humor was of a brand that simply is not offered in standard American fare. My consumption of this media product, available to me (and anyone else worldwide with an internet connection) online, has caused a ripple effect that has opened my eyes to a new culture, gratified my yearning for content I have not been able to find domestically, and has made me a consumer of many British television products.

The Uses and Gratifications theory applies to the exportation of British products and services due to the fact that Britain is *not* considered a global hegemony. It is because I do not often see content such as that produced in the UK that the British programs I watch fulfill an unmet desire. This status as a non-hegemonic nation, however, actually facilitates a quiet but powerful spread of British content that, while battling against the tide of American content, has begun to rival the power and profit of its stateside competitor.

The expansion of the BBC, and to a lesser extent programs from other British networks like ITV, GTV, etc. simply speaks to the concerted effort by British television to assert itself as a ubiquitous cultural force. Because of the global identification and, to some extent, vilification of the ubiquity of American media, the BBC is free to assert their cultural mark without being seen as hegemonic. In fact, though, their influence is expanding quite rapidly, and looks like it will continue to do so in the near future.

CONCLUSION

When the word ‘hegemony’ is mentioned in a global media setting, often, two stereotypes are enacted. The first is that of a first-world aggressor, almost always Western, and more times than not American. The second

is that of a third-world victim, defenseless in its fight against the dominant mother culture being imposed on its inhabitants. However, the reality of mass communication globally is much more nuanced than this black and white portrayal. It is true that American media culture is a force to be reckoned with. With cultural powerhouses such as Hollywood, a film powerhouse that cannot be denied in terms of its power internationally, America is certainly considered an international media giant. However, those who are inundated with the images and products of this media empire are not passive victims of an unstoppable force. Many across the globe are aware of the unique status America plays in media culture. This includes Great Britain, a cultural powerhouse in itself. The BBC's response to American media hegemony is an example of the awareness of, and resilience of, global powers. The television industry, while often dominated by images produced in America, has a unique look on British screens. With a powerful domestic television market, and a concerted effort to export programs abroad, the BBC defies normal expectations of what it means to be anti-Hegemonic. In the words of David Brent (fictional manager in the UK version of *The Office*):

"I don't look upon this like it's the end, I look upon it like it's moving on, you know. It's almost like my work here's done. I can't imagine Jesus going, "Oh, I've told a few people in Bethlehem I'm the son of God, can I just stay here with Mum and Dad now?" No. You gotta move on. You gotta spread the word. You gotta go to Nazareth."

Much like David in his trek to a metaphorical Nazareth, British television must keep up with the ever-changing demands of the global marketplace. When the success of British programs have proven their worth, the time must come when the markets expand to new, untapped lands of profit and success.

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