

The Mass Media and Americanization: Old Truths and New Insights

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In January 1958, two prominent Swedish child psychiatrists expressed concern about what the American TV series *Lassie* might do to the children of their country. Accusing the American producers of serving up “a brutal and rough film reality, where fistfights are always in the air and guns are loose in their holsters,” Gustav Jonsson and Margareta Embring-Jonsson told the management of Swedish television that this “kind of Americanization we had hoped to avoid.”¹ Behind the two psychiatrists’ concern lay perceptions about the effects of American media content in Sweden, and the purpose of this article is to discuss the role of the mass media in the Americanization process. The two basic theories about that role are reviewed, and I will then move on to discuss how in my own research project, an examination of the presence of U.S. media content in Sweden during the twentieth century, I have thought it necessary to re-examine some of the basic assumptions of these theories.

First, it is necessary to discuss the relationship between Americanization and another term surfacing frequently in discussions of the mass media in an international context, cultural imperialism. Essentially, cultural-imperialism discussions have most often focused on the culture of

1. Gustav Jonsson and Margareta Embring-Jonsson, “En hemlivets renässans,” *Röster i Radito-TV* (hereafter, *RiR-TV*), 12-18 January 1958, 25; Jonsson and Embring-Jonsson, “Mindre schablon,” *RiR-TV*, 19-25 January 1958, 53.

the West and its effect on developing countries, whereas Americanization studies deal with the United States in relation to all other countries, including highly developed ones such as Canada. However, the American prominence in the global flow of cultural products places the United States at the center of cultural-imperialism discussions.²

When it comes to theorizing about the media's role, cultural imperialism has been a more central concept than Americanization, as even scholars who deal primarily with the U.S. media tend to use the cultural-imperialism theory as a basis. When the concept of Americanization has been used, studies have generally been vaguer about the functions of the media. Nonetheless, whether the discussion concerns cultural imperialism or Americanization, the same two issues have tended to surface: the power of senders and the response of audiences.

In their treatment of those two issues, theories about the role of the mass media in Americanization and cultural imperialism have, not surprisingly, drawn on theories and research about mass communication in general. Discussions of media and cultural imperialism, in particular, have adhered to a view of the mass media deriving from one of the earliest theories of mass communication, the so-called powerful-media or powerful-effects model, articulated as early as the 1920s.³

What primarily characterized the powerful-effects theory was, according to Melvin DeFleur and Everett Dennis, its view that media audiences were uniform and their members responded to messages in the same way. Moreover, the effects of such messages were seen as immediate and direct. Although early research in the United States focused on recipients in attempts to gauge media effects, studies in an international setting concentrated overwhelmingly on "senders, their motives or their messages," as Michael Salwen puts it.⁴ In general mass communication research, the powerful-effects theory was challenged as early as the 1940s, and the historiography of the field tends to see it as having been

2. Rob Kroes, "American Empire and Cultural Imperialism: A View from the Receiving End," *Diplomatic History* (hereafter, *DH*) 23 (3, Summer 1999):465; Uta G. Poiger, "Commentary: Beyond 'Modernization' and 'Colonization,'" *DH* 23 (1, Winter 1999):45-56.

3. Michael B. Salwen, "Cultural Imperialism: A Media Effects Approach," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* (hereafter, *CSMC*) 8 (1991):29-38; Melvin L. DeFleur and Everett C. Dennis, *Understanding Mass Communication: A Liberal Arts Perspective* (Sixth ed., Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998), 429-38.

4. Salwen, 31; DeFleur and Dennis, 431-38.

replaced by the late 1950s. What took its place was a belief that the effects of media messages were limited and very much dependent on the characteristics of audience members; consequently, scholarly attention shifted drastically, from senders to recipients.⁵

In cultural-imperialism and Americanization studies, however, the rise of the audience-orientated research was a slower process, and the powerful-media model held sway much longer. It is telling for instance, that a classic work dealing with cultural imperialism, Ariel Dorfman and Armand Matellart's *How to Read Donald Duck*, appeared as late as 1971. After offering readers an interpretation of the content of Disney comics, the authors concluded with the assertion that "[u]ndeveloped peoples take the comics ... as instruction in the way they are supposed to live" and the accusation that the presence of Donald Duck meant "the promotion of underdevelopment."⁶

The early 1970s was also, however, when the first studies appeared that paid attention to how audiences in other countries responded to U.S. media content. That focus had attracted widespread interest among researchers by the late 1980s, best shown by the large amount of research concerned with how audiences in various countries responded to the phenomenally successful American TV series *Dallas*. The authors of these studies frequently introduced them in the context of criticism of the powerful-media approach. In the most well-known of them, *The Export of Meaning*, Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz mockingly noted that "[t]heorists of cultural imperialism assume that hegemony is prepackaged in Los Angeles, shipped out to the global village, and unwrapped in innocent minds," viewing it as beyond dispute "that the hegemonic message the analyst discerns in the text is transferred to the defenseless minds of viewers the world over for the self-serving interests of the economy and ideology of the exporting country." Implying the lack of interest shown by previous research in the behavior of recipients, Liebes and Katz told readers that "[w]e wanted to see for ourselves" how viewers responded.⁷

5. Shearon A. Lowery and Melvin L. DeFleur, *Milestones in Mass Communication Research* (Second ed., New York: Longman, 1988), 22; DeFleur and Dennis, 440, 444.

6. Ariel Dorfman and Armand Matellart, *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic* (New York: International General, 1984), 9, 98.

7. Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz, *The Export of Meaning: Cross-Cultural Readings of Dallas* (Second ed., Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 1993), xi, 4.

What the two authors and others found was, essentially, that audience members in other countries bring their personal experience and cultural background to the viewing experience and therefore receive it differently than American viewers do. The *Dallas* studies also stressed that viewing was an active practice; no longer were foreign audiences seen as what Kroes calls “passive imbibers.”⁸

Proponents of the powerful-media theory of traditional cultural-imperialism research quickly responded to the criticism directed at them by scholars advocating an audience focus. Characterizing the theory of active audiences as one where “the audience is supposed to make its own meaning of the messages and images that the media disseminate, thereby playing a relatively autonomous role that is often interpreted as resistance to these messages and meanings,” Herbert Schiller thought that “much of the current work on audience reception comes uncomfortably close to being apologetics for present-day structures of cultural control.”⁹

Still, even critics of recipient studies felt there was a need to revise the classic theory of cultural imperialism to include audience reactions. Although they felt that the emphasis on “the resistant and creative, even subversive, power of audiences can too easily slip ... into a romantic celebration of the cultural insubordination of consumers,” Peter Golding and Phil Harris were critical of the “David and Goliath model inherent in ‘cultural imperialism’”: “Centre dominated periphery, imperialists held sway over dependencies, and all was increasingly held in place by the power of the media above all else. The term cultural imperialism began to limit rather than illuminate discussion.”¹⁰

Among its problems, Golding and Harris stressed, was the assumption that “audiences are passive.” Even Schiller conceded that “[t]here is much to be said for the idea that people don’t mindlessly absorb everything that passes before their eyes.”¹¹ Clearly, recognizing the role of audiences in the global flow of media products was generally seen as essential.

8. Kroes, 463; Liebes and Katz, 19; Alessandro Silj, ed., *East of Dallas: The European Challenge to American Television* (London: BFI Publishing, 1988), 45.

9. Herbert Schiller, “Not Yet the Post-Imperialist Era,” *CSMC* 8 (1991):24-25.

10. Peter Golding and Phil Harris, “Foreword,” in Golding and Harris, eds., *Beyond Cultural Imperialism: Globalization, Communication and the New International Order* (London: Sage publications, 1997), 5.

11. Schiller, 25; Golding and Harris, 5.

Still, the rise of the focus on recipients was not without problems. For one thing, there was frequently, in Schiller's words, a tendency to let "the individual receptor [take] precedent over the cultural producer."¹² Even if audience members are perceived as active rather than passive, the senders and their motives still matter, as do the motives of those closely connected to the producers of media content, such as, in an Americanization discussion, the U.S. government.

One area of my research has examined the assistance given by the U.S. Commerce Department and its Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce during the heyday of the silent film in the 1920s.¹³ It was not a matter of aggressively helping the U.S. film industry conquer foreign markets, as Hollywood had, to a large extent, already accomplished that on its own. Thus, as the 1920s dawned, films from the United States were in a dominant position in several markets: a 1921 article in *Scientific American* claimed that Hollywood films held "first place" in Britain, Western Europe and South America and were poised to do the same in Africa, Central America, Eastern Europe, and Asia. The official trade statistics of the Department of Commerce affirmed *Scientific American's* claims; a few years later, an official of the Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce surveyed field reports from consular officers around the world and was stricken by "the way America dominates the motion picture market nearly everywhere."¹⁴

In light of that success, the Bureau saw as its role to aid Hollywood in maintaining the favorable position of American films abroad. A substantial part of that effort entailed gathering and disseminating information of interest to film exporters. A memo sent to Commerce officials around the world in 1924, for instance, instructed them to pay particular attention to "[n]ew laws and restrictions, actual or threatened; the activities of local producers; censorship regulations, particularly changes; combinations or

12. Schiller, 17.

13. Ulf Jonas Björk, "The U.S. Commerce Department Aids Hollywood Exports, 1921-1933," *The Historian* 62 (3, Spring 2000):575-589.

14. Henry H. Morse to Henry Howard, 8 January 1923, National Archives, record group 151/281 "Motion Pictures, General," (hereafter, BFDC motion-picture records, with the name of the file – such as "General" – in quotation marks); O.R. Geyer, "Winning Foreign Film Markets," *Scientific American*, 20 August 1921; Kristin Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment: America in the World Film Market, 1907-1934* (London: BFI Publishing, 1985), 28; 35-36, 42-43.

re-alignments of film distributors or theater owners; new theatre construction or consolidations; changes in the attitude of the public or the exhibitors toward American and foreign productions, any action threatened, either governmental or public, which would prove inimical to American pictures."¹⁵ The government's findings were published in the Department's own publication, *Commerce Reports*, in more comprehensive publications dealing specifically with the film industry, so-called foreign market bulletins and trade information bulletins, and in the year-book put out by the trade paper the *Film Daily*.¹⁶

When action "inimical to American pictures" seemed probable, Commerce personnel such as commercial attachés went beyond information gathering to assist the industry. Starting in 1925, problems for Hollywood producers usually involved limits on the number of films that could be exported to an individual country, limits usually formalized as quotas. Concerned about the dominance of American films, no fewer than eight European nations instituted such quotas in the late 1920s and early 1930s.¹⁷ The response of the attachés was, while restrictive moves were still only being contemplated, to lobby the government in question against them. In 1926, for instance, the American commercial attaché in London conveyed to the British government that the U.S. Commerce Department was "naturally interested and somewhat concerned" over proposals in Britain to restrict imports of American films.¹⁸

If quota legislation materialized, Commerce personnel frequently took the lead in rallying American exporters and having the normally fiercely competitive companies present a united front in its negotiations with European governments. On occasion they even advocated and launched boycotts as a response to European trade restrictions. Because American

15. Warren Hoagland, memo to "All Commercial Attaches and Trade Commissioners," 24 November 1924, "General" file, BFDC motion-picture records; Ian Jarvie, *Hollywood's Overseas Campaign: The North Atlantic Movie Trade, 1920-1950* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 276.

16. North to George Canty, 9 June 1927; North to Frederick Herron, 10 June 1927; North to Joseph Dannenberg, 31 July 1925; "General" file; North to Charles Baldwin, 13 June 1928, "Australia" file, all in BFDC motion-picture records; *Film Daily Year Book*, 1926-31.

17. John Carter, "Hollywood Has a Foreign War," *New York Times*, 4 March 1928, sec. 10, 13; Thompson, 211-12.

18. North to Mowatt Mitchell, 5 November 1925; "United Kingdom" file, BFDC motion-picture records.

films were popular with audiences and local theater operators, total withdrawals of all films often proved an effective threat.¹⁹

The reasons why Hollywood films deserved government assistance were at least two, apart from the obvious one that quotas were a violation of the principles of open markets and free trade. First, motion pictures offered a way to promote American goods. Testifying before a U.S. Senate Committee in 1925, Commerce Secretary Herbert Hoover claimed that the success enjoyed by the American film industry abroad bore "very materially on the expansion of the sale of other goods throughout Europe and other countries." Expounding on Hoover's point in an editorial in *Commerce Reports*, Bureau Director Julius Klein conjured up an imaginary Argentinean husband who admired the clothes worn by the male stars in a Hollywood film while his equally fictional wife was "in rapt contemplation of the leading woman's gowns." As a result, Klein assured his readers, "two prosperous residents of Buenos Aires now purchase their clothes in New York rather than Paris."²⁰

Equally important – although not mentioned as frequently – was that films played an important role, in transmitting "intellectual ideas and national ideals" from the United States to other nations, as Hoover put it in a 1927 speech. Similarly, BFDC employee Clarence Jackson North claimed that "through American motion pictures, the ideals, culture, customs and traditions of the United States are gradually undermining those of other countries," carrying out a "subtle Americanization process."²¹

The Commerce Department effort to aid Hollywood exports faltered in the early 1930s, and nothing with the same degree of organization has been implemented by the U.S. government since then.²² However, the

19. North to Douglas Miller, 13 November 1926, "Germany" file; North to Herron, 14 April 1927, "General" file; North to BFDC Prague Office, 17 October, 1932; North to Herron, 10 March 1933; "Czechoslovakia" file, BFDC motion-picture records.

20. "Trade Follows the Motion Pictures," *Commerce Reports*, 22 January 1923, 191; *Hearings Before the Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations, U.S. Senate, Sixty-Eighth Congress, Second Session* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1925), 44.

21. C.J. North, "Our Silent Ambassadors," *Independent*, 12 June 1926, 699; *Address by Herbert Hoover, Secretary of Commerce. Introduction by Will Hays, President, Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, Inc. At the Seventh Annual Dinner of the Associated Motion Picture Advertisers, Hotel Astor, New York City, April 2, 1927*, pamphlet, Will Hays papers, Indiana State Library, Indianapolis, part I, reel 32.

22. North to Herron, 26 March 1932; North to Canty, 9 July 1932; "General" file, BFDC motion-picture records.

principles guiding the 1920s effort appear still to be honored. In the late 1980s, for instance, as American film and television producers were facing European Community legislation intended to limit imports of American television programs, U.S. trade officials once again came to Hollywood's aid, filing a formal complaint that the restrictions violated free-trade agreements.²³

If studies with a focus on recipients have tended to downplay the role of senders and their allies as a response to the powerful-media approach, they have, on the other hand, retained the basic assumption of earlier studies that the mass communication aspect of Americanization is a simple one, involving only senders and receivers. The impact of middlemen has, by and large, been ignored. That intermediaries do matter, however, is suggested by several of my studies. Two of them have examined American TV programs on Swedish television in the 1960s and 1970s, and they present a situation where an intermediary, the national broadcaster Sveriges Radio (SR), had an enormous impact on shaping what reached Swedish audiences from across the Atlantic.²⁴

A study of SR policies reveals a process that was both complex and contradictory. Popularity with audiences was taken into account to some extent. What established American TV westerns as regularly offered entertainment on Swedish television between 1959 and 1969, for instance, was the positive response by viewers revealed by a 1959 audience survey.²⁵ That popularity was always balanced, however, against other factors, such as a concern about violence, a concern particularly evident in the case of westerns. In early 1961, for instance, Sveriges Radio decided to end the run of the NBC western *Bonanza*, a phenomenally popular series in Sweden, because "many of the stories have been to [*sic*] unpleasant to be included in our programmes," and it told the Swedish public through the newspapers that "brutality and perverse

23. Paul Farhi, "U.S. to Fight EC Directive Limiting Foreign TV Shows," *Washington Post*, 11 October 1989, F1-2.

24. Ulf Jonas Björk, "Have Gun, Will Travel: Swedish Television and American Westerns, 1959-1969," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 21 (3, August 2001):309-23; Ulf Jonas Björk, "Swedish Television and American Imports, 1956-1978," in Kerstin Shands et al., eds. *Notions of America: Swedish Perspectives* (Stockholm: Södertörn University Press, forthcoming, 2003).

25. Sven-Bertil Norberg, Sveriges Radio, to Brian T. Broolly, MCA, 4 November 1959, Hyrfilmssektionen (TVHF) files, E III, vol. 6, Sveriges Radio archives, Stockholm (hereafter, TVHF, SR); Norberg to Karl Haskel, SR, 29 December 1959, TVHF, SR, E I, vol. 4.

terror elements play too big a role" in what NBC had to offer and made it impossible to broadcast any more episodes.²⁶

The share of American imports was also affected by a perception within SR that U.S. programs were "overrepresented." Consequently, Sveriges Radio deliberately sought to move away from the United States as a programming source and favor other countries, primarily Britain. In the 1965 and 1966 SR annuals, Sven Bertil Norberg, head of program acquisitions, announced, presumably with satisfaction, that there had been "a drop" in the share of American series.²⁷

Public-service monopoly broadcasting was, of course, a highly controlled environment that gave Sveriges Radio as an intermediary a huge influence over what reached audiences. Even in more open-market environments, however, middlemen can have a major impact, as is evident from another research project of mine, which examined American film in Sweden in the 1920-1950 period.²⁸ Again, it was not a matter of U.S. producers reaching Swedish audiences directly. Also involved in the process were distributors and theater operators, and they had their own motivations that shaped the influx of films from the United States.

As elsewhere in Europe, Hollywood enjoyed great success in Sweden. In the last half of the 1920s, three out of every four films shown in Sweden were American, according to U.S. government estimates, and although that share dipped in the 1930s, it remained above 50 percent well into the 1950s.²⁹

The producers of these popular films encountered an environment in Sweden where the leading domestic companies, such as Svensk Filmindustri, were involved in importation and exhibition as well as production. SF and other producers, as well as independent exhibitors, recognized, however, that the production of the domestic film industry would never be enough to meet market demand. Even when producing at peak

26. Norberg to Blackwell 4 February 1961, TVHF, SR, E III, vol. 7; Hemming Sten, "TV-rutan," *Expressen*, 20 January 1960, 20.

27. "TV:s programverksamhet 1/7 1963-30/6 1964," *SR Årsbok* 1964, 364; "Televisionens programverksamhet," *SR Årsbok* 1965, 96; "Hyrfilmssektionen," *SR Årsbok*, 1966, 98.

28. Ulf Jonas Björk, "'The Backbone of Our Business': American Films in Sweden, 1910-50," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 15 (2, June 1995):245-65.

29. Bertil Wredlund and Rolf Lindfors, *Långfilm i Sverige* vols. 1-6 (Stockholm: Proprius, 1979-91); *Film Daily Year Book*, 1926-30.

capacity in the 1940s and releasing some 40 films annually, the Swedish film industry could only supply 14 percent of domestic demand, which stood at 300 films per year. Imports were absolutely necessary and were viewed as a supplement to rather than competition for domestic productions. Moreover, the Swedish film industry had recognized by the 1920s that most of these imports would be American, given the huge output of Hollywood and the popularity that U.S. films enjoyed with Swedish audiences. On a number of occasions, Swedish industry representatives referred to American imports as "the backbone of the Swedish theater business."³⁰

Their loyalty was not absolute, however. As the conversion to sound film presented Hollywood films with language barriers and technical challenges in the early 1930s, publications representing Swedish film industry interests noticed the problems with a certain amount of glee. *Biografbladet*, the voice of the exhibitors, proclaimed that the introduction of sound film had forced Hollywood "to its knees" and would usher in an era of European supremacy.³¹ The examples of film and television both suggest, then, that intermediaries have an impact that warrants attention.

As is evident from the above discussion, my examples are all from the past, and the final section of this article advocates the benefits of an historical approach. First, a long-term view provides a much-needed perspective on the influx of American media content into Sweden. Too often, debates in Sweden about that influx have treated it as an unprecedented phenomenon, ignoring the fact that it is a process that has been going on since the 1800s, when one finds the first instances of Swedes encountering images and stories from America through the media.³²

Second, an historical approach allows for an evaluation of the basic theories of media and Americanization discussed in this paper. It casts doubts, for instance, on the powerful-media model of classic cultural imperialism studies. In the face of more than a century of being heavily

30. "Filmbrist – ett spöke som försvinner?" *Biografägaren* (hereafter, *BÄ*) 15:18 (1940), 1; "Achtung, meine Herren!" *Biografbladet* (hereafter, *BB*) 6:18 (15 September 1925), 794-95.

31. Robin Hood (pseudonym for Bengt Idestam-Almqvist), "Årets sensation: Film-Amerika på knä," *BB* 12:4 (1931), 2-4.

32. Ulf Jonas Björk, "Dear Redskins: The Rise of the Indian Book in Sweden, 1872-1895" unpublished conference paper, Society for the Advancement of Scandinavian Studies (SASS), Salt Lake City, 2002.

exposed to American images, messages, symbols and stories, Swedish culture has proved resilient, and Swedes have not been turned into Americans. At the same time, it seems naïve to suggest that there have been no effects. In *Culture Unbound*, Tom O'Dell makes the point that Swedes have taken elements of American mass culture and shaped them into something uniquely Swedish. Yet pervading O'Dell's discussion are examples showing the highly influential role played by American media when it comes to providing Swedes with cultural material.³³

Regardless of what foreign audience members ultimately do with that material, the fact that they were and still are subjected to it at the expense of influences from other countries (including Sweden) is a point that merits consideration. As Oliver Boyd-Barrett has observed, it surely must matter "whose voices, representations, or stories make it to the main stream media."⁴⁹ Boyd-Barrett's comment suggests that a third basic theory of mass communication may be useful in discussions of the media and Americanization, that of agenda setting. As Bernard Cohen summed up his classic work on the role of the press in international affairs, the media "may not be successful in telling people what to think," but they are "stunningly successful in telling readers what to think about."³⁴

33. Tom O'Dell, *Culture Unbound: Americanization and Everyday Life in Sweden* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 1997), 11, 25, 28, 38, 144, 152, 158, 214.

34. Bernard Cohen, *The Press and Foreign Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), 13;

49. Oliver Boyd-Barrett, "Global News Wholesalers as Agents of Globalization," in Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi, et al., *Media in Global Context: A Reader*. (London: Arnold, 1997), 142.