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CULTURAL PROXIMITY

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Why Audiences Turned to National and Regional Broadcast Television

During the 1960s and 1970s, many studies reported a one-way flow of media, particularly television programs, films, and news, from the US and a few other European countries to the rest of the world. Herbert Schiller (Schiller, 1976), estimated that 65% of all world communications originated in the USA. UNESCO study in 1973 found that over half of the world imported most of their TV shows, mostly entertainment from the US (Nordenstreng & Varis, 1974), while other studies indicated the dominance of four large news agencies (AP, UPI, Agence France Presse, and Reuters) in the production of news worldwide (Boyd-Barrett, 1977) and the strong dominance by Hollywood of world film distribution and exhibition (Guback, 1984).

However, this was not to be a permanent trend in many countries. As early as 1965, the brand-new TV Globo in Brazil nearly failed when it tried a program strategy heavy with US imports on the advice of its joint venture partner, Time-Life (Straubhaar, 1984). It only began to succeed over the next four years as it dumped that strategy and hired local producers to create national shows (Wallach, 2011).

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, several of the larger and/or wealthier countries in Latin America, the Mid-East, and Asia began to produce far more of their own television programs (Lee, 1980; Sinclair, Jacka, & Cunningham, 1996; Straubhaar, 1984). Some, like Brazil, Hong Kong, and Mexico, were beginning to export them, both regionally and globally (Sinclair & Straubhaar, 2013). This surprised Hollywood, scholars, and industry analysts, since up until that time most people supposed that a combination of control over distribution, high production values, and cultural familiarity, dating from the huge outflow and consumption of Hollywood films since the 1920s, would also keep US television programs in prime time indefinitely (Guback, 1984; Toby Miller, 2001). One British critic expected “Wall to Wall Dallas,” US television everywhere across the world (Collins, 1986). In reality, most Latin American countries rejected Dallas and preferred either national or regional telenovelas to US prime time melodramas (Antola & Rogers, 1984). By the beginning of the 1980s, a number of scholars began to observe that, at least in television, international production and flow was beginning to change (Lee, 1980; Straubhaar, 1984).

One theory to explain this was cultural proximity—the idea that audiences would prefer either their own local or national television, or if that was lacking in the genres audiences wanted, television
from similar, nearby cultures (Straubhaar, 1991). However, this theory also seemed to have limits, even in the 1970s–1990s. Audience research noted that upper class or upper middle class audiences in Latin America were more likely to prefer television from dissimilar cultures than were middle class, lower middle class, or working class audiences (Straubhaar, 1991, 2007). A parallel theory from media economics, the cultural discount, made the logical opposite proposition that audiences would tend to discount and avoid programming that was too culturally unfamiliar or irrelevant (Hoskins & Mirus, 1988).

### Dependency on US in Television

Deriving from Marx, for whom culture serves as the ideological support for dominance by capitalist ruling classes, cultural dependency theory looked primarily at the role of media as part of the economic relations of dependency. In this analysis, Third World countries depended on the industrialized world for capital, technology, and most manufactured goods, while exporting low-cost primary products or cheap manufactured goods, which added little benefit to the local economy (Baran & Sweezy, 1968). Speaking primarily of Latin America, Fox (1992) observed that, “Cultural dependency generally was taken to mean the domination of content, financing, and advertising of the domestic media by foreign, specifically US companies.” Audience choices were not really considered, as a logic of economic domination was assumed to prevail. Fox noted that critiques of cultural dependency theories centered upon three areas: (1) the failure of state-directed policy aimed at countering dependency, (2) the allure of free trade, and (3) the apparent success of some large Third World broadcasters, such as Mexico’s Televisa and Brazil’s TV Globo in producing their own programs on a large scale (1992).

Waisbord offers a vision of the historical development of Latin America that builds subtly on ideas like dependency. He defines three eras of television in Latin America in which the relationship with the US is always a defining feature: early US support for and equipment sales to Latin American television businesses, a stage of direct investment that had largely failed by the 1970s with US firms withdrawing, and a stage in which US firms re-enter Latin America through cable and satellite television (Waisbord, 1998a).

### Cultural Imperialism

Cultural imperialism tends to see culture as part of a holistic system, in which imported television programs and films, local adaptations of American entertainment media genres, local as well as imported advertising and commercial media models all combine to encourage increased consumption and acceptance of the framework of consumer capitalism among viewers (Oliveira, 1993; Schiller, 1991). Indeed, if we separate cultural imperialism into economic and cultural layers, despite its holistic claims, we find that the economic predictions of cultural imperialism have largely come true. From the revolutionary days of the late 1950s–1970s, when capitalism was actively contested across the region and defeated in Cuba, most Latin American countries have become capitalist consumer economies, facilitated as much by nationally produced television as by US imports (Oliveira, 1993; Schiller, 1991).

However, in the cultural sphere, imperialism tended to assume a dominance of imported television, which would lead to a homogenization of culture. Tunstall observed: “The cultural imperialism hypothesis claims that authentic, traditional, and local culture in many parts of the world is being battered out of existence by the indiscriminate dumping of large quantities of slick commercial and media products, mainly from the United States” (Tunstall, 1977). These programs were assumed to be attractive because of their higher production values, their quality of acting and writing, and the appeal of their portrayals of US life (Straubhaar, 1981).
National Production

One of the first major empirical arguments against dependency and cultural imperialism rested in the success of emerging Third World producers: TV Globo in Brazil (Straubhaar, 1984), Televisa in Mexico (Sinclair, 1992), TVB in Hong Kong (Ma, 2005), Egyptian national television (Abu-Lughod, 2005), and other stations and networks in pushing imported programs out of prime time, substituting imported programs in favor of local or national television production. Their growth and commercial success came from attracting large national audiences to their nationally produced programs, such as telenovelas, other dramas, music, comedy, and large variety shows (Tunstall, 2008), and successfully drawing the advertising required to support the cost of that programming (Mattos, 1984; Straubhaar, 1984). Further, these countries (Brazil, Mexico, Hong Kong, Egypt) and others, like India, pushed forward to export to other countries within their geo-cultural regions, such as Latin America, East and Southeast Asia, and the Arabic-speaking Middle East (Sinclair et al., 1996), or to cultural-linguistic markets, like the Lusophone linguistic space, where Brazil exported telenovelas to Portugal starting in 1976 and Lusophone Africa after that (Cunha, 2011). Thus, one strong empirical observation against the logic of dominated cultural flows was the emergence of culturally similar regional television markets (Sinclair et al., 1996; Wilkinson, 1995).

Cultural Proximity

The theory of cultural proximity (Straubhaar, 1991) tries to explain why television production is growing within Latin America and other regions of the world at both the national and regional levels. The argument, building on de Sola Pool (1977), is that all other things being equal, audiences will tend to prefer programming which is closest or most proximate to their own culture, starting with national programming, if it can be supported by the local economy. Localized or nationalized cultural capital, identity, and language tend to favor an audience desire for cultural proximity, which leads audiences to prefer local and national productions over those which are globalized and/or American. Cultural proximity is created by a feeling of cultural closeness or similarity, perceived in specific things like humor, gender images, dress, style, lifestyle, knowledge about other lifestyles, ethnic types, religion, and values that seem familiar or comfortable. It could also be seen as a desire to see national cultures reflected on television (Waisbord, 1998b).

A similar desire for the most relevant or similar programs also seemed to lead many national audiences to prefer cultural-linguistic regional programming in genres that small countries cannot afford to produce for themselves. For instance, audiences in smaller countries, such as the Dominican Republic, have shown a preference for national programming. However, when there is a lack of availability within certain genres, there is a tendency to look next to Latin American regional programming, which may be relatively more culturally proximate or similar than those in the US (Straubhaar 1991). This second level of cultural proximity has been embraced as a useful explanation for the rise of regional cultural markets, particularly in television (Iwabuchi, 2001), but has been cited for music as well (Colista & Leshner, 1998). This will be expanded upon below.

Anthropologist Conrad Kottak, a longtime observer of culture in Brazil, observed in 1990 that “common to all mass culture successes, no matter what the country, the first requirement is that they fit the existing culture. They must be preadapted to their culture by virtue of cultural appropriateness [emphasis in the original]. If a product is to be a mass culture success, it must be immediately acceptable, understandable, familiar, and conducive to mass participation” (p. 43). The Brazilian case shows how strong the preference is for national programming. The major channel, TV Globo, produces over 12 hours a day of programming for itself, including over 85% of its prime time programming (Sinclair & Straubhaar, 2013). This kind of production can only be achieved when the domestic market is large enough to support the products and when the cultural industries are sufficiently developed to manufacture them.
Hoskins and Mirus (1988) have also created a useful parallel concept for examining the attraction of national programming to national audiences: the cultural discount.

A particular programme rooted in one culture, and thus attractive in that environment, will have a diminished appeal elsewhere as viewers find it difficult to identify with the style, values, beliefs, institutions and behavioural patterns of the material in questions. Included in the cultural discount are reductions in appreciation due to dubbing or subtitling… As a result of the diminished appeal, fewer viewers will watch a foreign programme than a domestic programme of the same type and quality, and hence the value to the broadcasters, equal to the advertising revenue induced if the broadcaster is financed from this source, will be less… the cultural discount explains why trade is predominantly in entertainment, primarily drama, programming

(Hoskins & Mirus, 1988, pp. 500–501)

**Primary, Local or National, Cultural Proximity**

Cultural proximity has evolved since 1991 into what might be seen as national and regional versions of the theory. At the national level, it seems to have become commonplace that most (but not all) national publics prefer nationally based television programming. Research by Milly Buonanno in Western Europe since the 1990s has shown an evolving preference for national programming, when available (1999, 2002). Similar national preferences seem to have evolved in many parts of Asia. That might initially have been due to fairly strong protectionism (Chan, 1994), but as quotas and other protections were relaxed in the later 1990s and 2000s in many countries, national preferences seem to have persisted, notably in India, China (Sinclair & Harrison, 2004), Korea (Hyun, 2007), Japan (Ito, 1991), and others.

One could argue that the kind of national or local preference predicted by cultural proximity is latent but dynamic, depending on the evolving sense of collective identity in a given cultural space, and how cultural industries evolve in that space. Many countries were created artificially by colonial powers during the colonization process, such as the composition of Iraq from separate Kurdish, Sunni, and Shiite provinces (under the Turkish empire) after World War I (Lapidus, 2014). A survey of “Third World” broadcasting in 1976 showed that using radio and television to try to establish national identity in newly established nations that had not had identities focused on those territories was both a goal of almost all countries and a challenge for many (Katz & Wedell, 1976).

Artificially defined borders can, over time, come to house strongly felt national identities, as in Latin America. Anderson showed how states could often do much with their own tools (schools, holidays, museums, maps, anthems, military service) and could do even more in cooperation with cultural industries and artists to create imagined communities (1983). However, the imagined national communities of Latin America have been evolving since the 1820–1830s, whereas in many other states they date to changes after World War I or World War II, post-colonial struggles in the 1960s–1970s or even later. So, while Latin American countries have national cultures that prefer national broadcasts, many other states have not yet achieved that.

**Secondary, Regional (Geo-Cultural), or Cultural-Linguistic Cultural Proximity**

Cultural proximity is thus very dynamic, as it evolves with both national and transnational developments. It should not be seen as a static, inherent quality, as Iwabuchi (2001) has pointed out. The perceived cultural proximity of Japan to other Asian nations grew slowly after World War II, despite the resentment many other Asian peoples felt toward Japanese colonialism in the war, as it came
to be seen instead as an attractive model of Asian modernity. To some degree, Japan has now been supplanted in that position by Korea (Hyun, 2007).

One of the ways in which potential cultural proximity, based in earlier historical interactions and shared cultural resources, can be developed in the television era is by the growth of a country as an early producer and exporter of television, as in the case of Brazil and Mexico (Sinclair, 1998). The regional aspect of cultural proximity has been a useful insight for scholars in Latin America, where regional television markets grew, starting with the exporting of scripts in the 1950s, and whole programs in the 1970s, including across language lines (Sinclair & Straubhaar, 2013). Brazilian telenovelas, for instance, were exported into Spanish-speaking Latin American countries starting in 1975. Strong intra-regional flows continue (Lopes, 2014), even as content from other regions, such as Korean wave dramas, has begun to show up in some markets. This goes to show that regional cultural proximity still works to some degree, but that genre proximity—like the appeal of melodrama—across cultures is part of a set of competing proximities (La Pastina & Straubhaar, 2005).

Although some authors see cultural proximity as a factor in intra-European television co-production and flows (Trepte, 2008), most European scholars, such as Buonanno (1999), Schlesinger (1993), and others have noted that there is little common cultural basis for TV flow or demand across language and cultural barriers within Europe, despite such ambitious projects to encourage these exchanges as Television Without Frontiers (Presburger & Tyler, 1989).

Ongoing Competition with Imported US Television Programs and Channels

Even though the growth of national television producers and regional producers/exporters may have actualized a sense of cultural proximity by appealing to aspects of identity and history, they have to contend with the continued export power of the US. The US had been exporting television worldwide since the early 1950s (Bielby & Harrington, 2008), building on films, many produced by the same companies, widely exported since the 1920s (Miller et al., 2005). Thus, there has been a long cultivation of a kind of cultural familiarity with the US, particularly in Western Europe and Latin America, which has led some to call the US “everyone’s second culture” (Gitlin, 1998). Buonanno (1999) found that while European countries were producing and consuming more of their own national dramas and other programming, their second preferences were US programs and channels, not regional ones; cultural proximity only applied at the national level (Buonanno, 2004).

While US television programs had receded to the margins of television schedules for the largest television networks in Brazil and Mexico, for competing stations in those countries and for many smaller networks around Latin America US programs were always a widely and cheaply available resource to fall back on. A new stream of US programs and entire cable channels flowed into Latin America and the rest of the world in the late 1980s–early 1990s with the growth of pay TV (Duarte, 2001). While the uptake of cable or satellite pay TV was initially low in most of Latin America (Reis, 1999), it was higher in Argentina (Park, 2002) and Colombia (Forero et al., 2009) due to government limits on the development of commercial broadcast television networks. Pay TV and television over the internet began to grow, as we note below, as more Latin Americans moved into the lower middle and middle classes in the 2000s.

Cultural Capital and Cultural Proximity

This chapter will use cultural capital as a concept to sum up a series of identifiable sets of knowledge and disposition that people tend to use when deciding what they want to watch on television. Earlier work by Straubhaar (1991, 2003) tried to define and demonstrate a number of the cultural factors that also define audiences’ cultural capital in terms of specific things like humor, gender images, dress, style,
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lifestyle, knowledge about other lifestyles, ethnic types, religion, and values. Those factors emerged from in-depth interviews from 1989 to the present. Cultural groups defined by their differences on these kinds of factors often overlap greatly with language groups, which has been emphasized by economists studying the definition of television and film markets (Wildman & Siwek, 1988).

According to Bourdieu (1986), cultural capital exists in the institutionalized state, objectified as educational and academic qualifications. As such, it can be acquired with educational gains but is, however, connected with other forms of capital. Cultural capital can be learned from parents, from peers, from work, but tends to be heavily linked to things learned in formal or informal education (Bourdieu, 1984). Cultural capital is established with an understanding and navigability of the dominant culture, norms, and, indeed, social language in a society (Sullivan, 2001). It can thus vary by social class (Sullivan, 2001).

Television can be understood as a cultural good, or the objectified state of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Certain types of televised content, and origin of television (national, regional, and international) will be more accessible culturally, linguistically, and economically to certain groups and not to others. International foreign television consumption would thus require a material appropriation (assuming economic capital) and symbolic appropriation (assuming cultural capital), which are two forms of cultural goods appropriation described by Bourdieu (1986). This chapter states that linguistic capital would also be necessary for seeking, understanding, and enjoying this particular form of cultural good.

Economic Capital

Economic capital then, is “money or assets that can be turned into money” (Benson, 2006, p. 189) necessary to access a particular cultural good, such as television and, specifically in the case of this study, foreign television. Bourdieu stated that economic capital is at the root of other types of capital (1986), such as cultural and linguistic capitals. They can, however, act independently. In Latin America, the past couple of decades have brought a substantial growth in the economy of many of its nations and, with that, a particular fluctuation of social class, marked mainly by increased purchasing power of the lower middle class.

After a decade with marginal middle class fluctuations in the 1990s, Latin America’s middle class grew exponentially, from 100 million people in 2000 to around 150 million by 2010 (Ferreira, Messina, & Rigolini, 2012, xi). This growth has allowed a whole new segment of the Latin American population to have the economic capital necessary to subscribe to and access multichannel television, and with that more televised cultural goods, including international television. Although this new-found economic capital by a large group of individuals in Latin America does enable them to have considerable new purchasing power, they may not have as much cultural capital or social capital as previous middle classes (Bourdieu, 1986). And indeed, as Benson stated, “the social world is structured around the opposition between two forms of power: economic and cultural capital” (2006, p. 189).

Linguistic Capital

A third capital applicable in identifying an audience’s preferences of television as a cultural good is linguistic. According to Morrison and Lui “Linguistic capital can be defined as fluency in, and comfort with, a high-status, worldwide language which is used by groups who possess economic, social, cultural, and political power and status in local and global society” (2000, p. 473). According to the authors, Linguistic capital has exchange value in markets (Morrison & Lui, 2000). The “disposition about language acquired in the course of learning to speak in particular context,” or linguistic habitus (Chávez, 2014, p. 28), is a form of linguistic capital which can be used as an advantage in social and market contexts. Being part of a contextual speech community or knowing foreign languages well
enough to understand the cultural norms transmitted through them gives individuals access and, in some cases, power and can serve as a commodity.

This chapter argues, however, based on an analysis of survey interviews in eight Latin American countries, that the proportion of people whose identity is deeply globalized is actually still quite small, and that the traditional layers of identity at the local, regional, and national levels are still the strongest for the large majority of people, with the cultural-linguistic region rapidly becoming very important for some cultures.

**Capitals, Class, Viewing Options, and Viewing Choices**

Cultural proximity is also limited by factors largely related to social class stratification. It also evolves with the changing nature of television, which has moved from dominance by a few broadcast channels to a much larger, more fragmented universe of competing pay TV and internet channels, as well (Lotz, 2014). One of the remarkable things about most Latin American countries was that pay TV or multichannel television penetration had been very low (Porto, 1998) by global standards for middle income countries until the mid-to-late 2000s, other than Argentina and Colombia, where multichannel penetration had been much higher, above half, much longer (Straubhaar et al., 2016). However, that seems to be changing, which is likely to have a complex interaction with cultural proximity, which had been notably high in Latin America, both for national and regional television productions (Sinclair & Straubhaar, 2013).

National audiences or other cultural groups originally united by language and/or culture in ways that gave rise to the theory of cultural proximity (Straubhaar, 1991) seem to be increasingly fragmented by economic, cultural, and linguistic capital in the senses defined by Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1991). Economic capital (Bourdieu, 1984) has long given some people in the economic elite of many countries access to multiple television channels, particularly those delivered by satellite or cable, that the vast majority of the population could not afford (Porto, 1998), when they were originally diffusing rapidly in other countries. Changing income distribution in key Latin American countries seems to be expanding these possibilities well beyond the elite. In Brazil, for example, prior to the economic slowdown that began in 2014, estimates were that close to 40 million people had risen from the working class or working poor into the ranks of the lower middle class, where it was now feasible for them to have pay TV or broadband internet, to use internet-based television more easily. Similar economic expansion in China, other BRICS countries, and other middle income countries such as Turkey, South Africa, Nigeria, and others, seem to be producing similar changes in access to media, while some countries once considered developing, like South Korea and Singapore, now have among the highest multichannel, internet, and digital media penetrations in the world (ITU, 2019).

Increased economic capital gives audiences greater access to more kinds of television, which may challenge the kind of loyalty implied by cultural proximity by providing many more alternatives. Increased cultural capital gained from family background, education, travel, etc. may give audiences the cultural knowledge that might make previously unfamiliar, foreign television programs more interesting or relevant. Increased linguistic capital would work in a manner very similar to cultural capital, but based specifically on language learning leading to broader interest in other cultures’ television.

Cultural proximity also evolves with the changing nature of television, which has moved from dominance by a few broadcast channels to a much larger, more fragmented universe of competing pay TV and internet channels (Lotz, 2014). In most countries, at least until the major economic growth of the lower middle classes in the 2000s, only elites or upper middle classes have had the education, employment experiences, travel opportunities, and family backgrounds that give them the cultural (Bourdieu, 1984) or linguistic (Bourdieu, 1991) capital required to seek, understand, and enjoy programs in other languages, from other countries (Straubhaar, 2007). One remarkable feature about
most Latin American countries was that pay TV or multichannel television penetration remained very low (Porto, 1998) by global standards for middle income countries until the mid-to-late 2000s, with the exception of Argentina and Colombia, where multichannel penetration had been much higher for a long time (Straubhaar et al., 2016). People in the economic elite in many Latin American countries had long been able to access foreign programming through subscription services that were mostly unaffordable for the majority of the population (Porto, 1998).

This chapter posits that this wealth enables more parts of the audience to obtain more viewing choices and options increased (until recent recessions caused by Covid-19) across more parts of the population in Latin America, particularly in Brazil, Chile, and Mexico, and in similar countries in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa in most countries. This rapidly increasing economic capital is a major factor in the evolution of cultural proximity.

Conclusion

Cultural proximity at the national or local level seems well established in most countries. Research generally shows that most local or national audiences favor national programming, but not every country has the ability to produce in all genres or to produce enough for all dayparts. As Iwabuchi (2001) cautioned about the dynamic historical construction of cultural proximity, even a general favorable disposition toward national production will not necessarily save it from competition by attractive imported programs, channels, or streaming options, especially when these come in genres historically underrepresented in national production, such as dramatic or comedy series, action adventure series, police and detective series, or feature films.

Cultural proximity at the regional or cultural-linguistic level seems very strong in some regions. Television programs and satellite channels within certain regions, like Latin America (Straubhaar, 1991), East Asia (Iwabuchi, 2001), the Arabic-speaking Middle East (Amin, 1996), and South Asia (Burch, 2002), as well as trans-regional cultural-linguistic spaces like the Lusophone world (Davis, Straubhaar, & Ferrin Cunha, 2016), build on cultural proximity based in common languages, like Arabic or Spanish, as well as similar histories, colonial experiences, etc. However, in some regions, like Europe, there are so many language and cultural differences that intra-regional trade in television has been sparse, despite efforts by the European Union to build a common market in television (Philip, 1993).

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