The Political Economy of Communication
10(1), 59–76

http://www.polecom.org

Transnational Media in a Digital Age

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This contribution updates my previous commentary on transnational media (2017) and highlights the new conditions of global media production which have moved beyond US and Western cultural imperialism. Cross-cultural transnational relations among traditional media producers, as well as internet, digital, and social media companies are identified. In the process of explaining the emerging joint ventures, partnerships, and shared political economy goals of transnational corporations, some of the effusive assertions about digital communication will be critically evaluated.

Some 60 years ago, scholars sought to identify how the US emerged as a global power apart from military dominance. Cultural imperialism theories based on a political economy approach (e.g., Beltran, 1978; Mattelart, 1976; Schiller, 1969, 1976) described the cultural influence of US media in Europe, Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Such research examined international media relations from the 1960s to the 1990s. In opposition, critiques offered by globalization, active audience, network, and cultural studies theorists (e.g., Fiske, 1986; Hardt and Negri, 2000; Kraidy, 2005; Straubhaar, 1991; Tomlinson, 1991) posited that Western dominance was undermined by evidence of polysemy, networks of technology, and increased democratic access to communication. Cultural imperialism arguments largely disregarded the continued role of national governments as well as global media's control of the production and distribution of content. Such debates within international media studies continue—even as the actual conditions and relations of global media production have been transformed by neoliberalism and transnational structures and practices. Transnationalism, as a critical concept (Robinson and Harris, 2000; Sklair, 2001), appeared in international political economy research but neglected the media industry as an exemplar of transnational, cross-border, cross-cultural commercial partnerships and joint ventures. Transnational media perspectives recognize that the development of media production depends on yet transcends national media corporations. Ownership, production, content, and distribution are based on sharing costs and profits. Transnational cultural domination—another way of expressing transnational capitalist media influence—means that individual nations no longer explicitly or exclusively determine film, television, streaming, or social media production. Instead, shared interests and ideologies among capitalist ruling classes, in every nation, informs and influences news and entertainment media. Military interventions, economic sanctions, and public diplomacy may reflect national interests, but the production of energy, pharmaceuticals, autos, agricultural products, consumer goods, and importantly media, have all become transnational capitalist operations.

This commentary offers a historically informed political-economic account of global structures and relations. Under duress, capital makes every necessary and possible hegemonic adjustment to ensure mass consent for market relations. Thus, for example, throughout the mid-20th century once colonialism was resisted and disrupted by the colonized, Asian, African, and Latin American peoples successfully won their national independence. Colonial powers adjusted to neo-imperialism: they accepted formal independence of their subject nations while maintaining economic control over production and natural resources by establishing agreements with local comprador elites (Nkrumah, 1965). In all capitalist nation-states from Europe and the US to the colonial and post-colonial world, capitalists dominated governments, the economy, and civil society. Particular forms of surplus value extraction, capital accumulation, commodity production, and competition are contingent and historical: “They manifest themselves differently in different capitalist modes of development” (Fuchs, 2014: 54). In the US, capitalists owned industry, funded and controlled political parties, and dominated public civic institutions from the Chamber of Commerce and public education to public and private media. The capitalist class recruited, employed, and trained professionals in each sector: politicians to establish and enforce laws protecting private property and corporate profits; managers to organize and oversee labor; and journalists, publicists, teachers, pastors, and directors of non-profits to build public support for capitalist norms.

In other words, capitalists lead not primarily through conspiracy, deceit, or constant violence, but by hegemonic influence—winning consent from allies and acquiescence from opponents, while silencing or coercing any alternatives (Gramsci, 2000). Hegemony provides apparent benefits for politicians, managers, and civic leaders that adopt and internalize the values of individualism, the free market, and deference to institutional authority. Leading capitalists (profiting from the labor of millions) turned to politically organized philanthropy to further project their influence across society and its cultures. Carnegie, Rockefeller, Ford and now Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerburg, and Warren Buffet contribute millions to charitable programs that reinforce the social relations of corporate power and wealth. Globally other corporate rich have used philanthropy to promote their own pet programs: Azim Premji (India), Al Rajhi (Saudi Arabia), Li Ka-Shing (China), Carlos Slim (Mexico), and Dietmar Hopp (Germany), among others (Martin and Loudenback, 2015). Likewise, in each nation, news and entertainment media have contributed to normalizing dominant social norms of the free market, consumerism, and austerity.

Capitalist social and cultural leaders seek consent from the working class and others through entertainment, spectacle, and modest economic or political benefits. Self-gratification, self-realization, and self-fulfillment through commodities are inherent to contemporary consumerist culture. Even a “happiness industry” has developed, encouraging all to take individual responsibility for their own life conditions (Cabanas and Illouz, 2019). In parallel efforts, politicians, media, and educators encourage nationalism and patriotism as “psychic compensation” for the general population. Ironically but effectively, nationalism can be mobilized under a banner of making the nation more competitive. Meanwhile, the wealthiest domestic capitalists strike transnational partnerships with corporate enterprises in other nations. Today, faced with a crisis of overproduction and underconsumption, capital has adjusted by seeking transnational capitalist class collaboration where possible, with hopes of improving their accumulation of wealth.

Importantly, while capitalist nations have often successfully socialized citizens to nationalist, consumerist, and individualist norms and the rule of the market, insurmountable contradictions remain. Labor productivity continually outpaces national consumption—even with consumer loans, planned obsolescence, advertising, corporate mergers, continued neo-colonial exploitation, and a rising US-based global entertainment industry. As the post-WWII boom sputtered in the 1970s, corporations needing to increase profits sought to have public social services privatized at home as they outsourced production to low-wage nations, introduced labor-saving technologies, launched concerted attacks on unions, and built capitalist partnerships across nations to open borders for foreign trade and direct investment (including shared corporate management).

Given that capitalism covered the globe by the late 20th century, in the industrial core of Europe, North America, and Japan, capitalist classes had little choice but to find more robust methods for attaining wealth from the rest of humanity. This occurred through increased accumulation via dispossession of public resources, increased consolidation of global production, and the development of digital communication as a new means for increasing labor productivity. During the 1980s, capitalists and their government representatives in most Western nations implemented policies favorable to unfettered corporate production, investment, and profits. Despite austerity, the cycle of economic growth slowed, so capital reorganized through financialization aided by the digitalization of communication and finance (Harvey, 2005). Neoliberal policy agendas enacted by national governments removed limits on foreign investment, deregulated protections of the public interest, privatized national resources and public services, and invited international mergers, acquisitions, and partnerships that prioritized corporate profits over citizen rights (Artz, 2015: 18–45).

Now, investors, private equity firms, and corporations are directing their employees to develop and produce machines that can produce other machines or parts of machines to increase labor productivity, the circulation of goods, and the accumulation of wealth through financialization and digitalization. Developed under the political and economic policies of neoliberal reform, some call this new transnational era “digital capitalism” (Fuchs, 2019; Pfeiffer, 2021; Sadowski, 2020; Schiller, 2000) because the *forces* of production may be digital and informational, while contemporary society remains capitalist in its *relations* of production based on the exploitation of labor (Fuchs, 2014: 55). Technology remains embedded in the social relations of transnational corporate power, which has developed and employed digital communication as part of its neoliberal policies and practices. Accordingly, this digital technological “revolution” has transformed the conditions of labor, as robotics, artificial intelligence, and machine learning makes possible the automation of many jobs.

Neoliberalism supplants national capitalism and cultural imperialism

Neoliberalism refers to market-oriented policies for eliminating national regulations on prices and trade, reducing government support for public services, privatizing public ownership of programs and resources, and instituting austerity in public expenditures. Neoliberal reforms benefit corporations, investors, and their managers while increasing social inequality. Following WWII, capitalists and their governments created the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. From the 1980s, the IMF and World Bank enforced neoliberal practices. International loans became contingent on Structural Adjustment Programs that required developing countries to balance their national budgets by cutting social services, deregulating trade and investment, and privatizing public programs. Margaret Thatcher in the UK and Ronald Reagan in the US were proponents of the neoliberal agenda; Chile under the Pinochet dictatorship was an extreme example of neoliberal privatization and its social consequences. Ideologically, neoliberalism advocates individual self-interest and unregulated open markets, unhindered by public responsibility. Notably, media were also directly affected in each nation that initiated neoliberal policies. From Asia to Europe and Latin America, neoliberal governments dismantled public media and facilitated private broadcasting and advertising. New profit-oriented channels produced diverse and spectacular entertainment content that attracted audiences and encouraged self-interest and consumerism.

In fact, most capitalist industries have implemented non-national collaboration and partnerships: Fiat-Chrysler merged with Peugeot (an Italian-US-French partnership) (Beresford, 2021); General Motors (GM) has eight joint ventures including Wuling in China (White, 2007); Toyota has a joint venture with Kirloskar Group in India (Ashwin, 2019); Bayer merged with Monsanto in a giant German-US agro-pharmaceutical (Fung and Dewey, 2018); Chinese companies have invested more than US$1.4 billion in US biotech firms (Upton, 2022); Renault-Nissan is a Franco-Japanese automaker; and DreamWorks, Alibaba, and Spielberg formed Amblin Entertainment (an Indian, Chinese, Canadian, American media company) (Participant, 2015). Multiple Nigerian film producers have partnered with South Africa's Naspers/Mnet Africa Magic, which airs in 53 African countries and broadcasts on Sky TV in Britain. Meanwhile, in 2021 Nigeria's largest distributor, FilmOne, signed a deal with Disney (Digital Times, 2020).

What is the logic of such verifiable transnational class relations? Investment, partnerships, joint ventures, and cooperation in rules and regulations do not exhibit primarily competitive impulses. Undoubtedly, GM shareholders would benefit from the demise of Wuling in China, but also, irrefutably, GM prefers profiting immediately from joint ventures with Wuling, rather than being involved in a controversial military conflict. Of course, US military action might directly benefit Lockheed, Rockwell, and General Dynamics as the Ukraine war illustrates.

Moreover, transnationalism cannot be reduced to a US economic strategy for dominance. Globally, corporations from every nation are seeking partners, investors, and joint ventures to expand their production, limit risk, and increase profits. In 2020, the largest free trade agreement in history, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), was signed by 15 Asia-Pacific nations, including Australia, Brunei, Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, New Zealand, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand, and Vietnam—without the US or EU. RCEP encompasses 30 percent of global gross domestic product and more than 2.2 billion people. In 2021, the US was poised to rejoin the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement linking many of those same nations with Canada and the US. In short, by the early 21st century, transnational capitalism was healthy and rapidly growing—sanctions against Venezuela, Iran, and Russia notwithstanding.

Capitalist investment, production, distribution, and profit-sharing now regularly cross national and cultural boundaries. Although distinct national cultures exist, consumerism inflects all of them, from India and Turkey to Brazil. In China, household consumption is at $6 billion annually, the second largest consumer market in the world. In Nigeria, where two-thirds of the population lives on less than two dollars a day, consumerist lifestyles pervade popular culture (Haynes, 2018: 9–11). Whatever their traditional social relations, practices, and cultural rituals, wage labor for corporate profits prevails in most countries and is the daily means of survival. With digital technology, the extended working day brings the expectation of increased labor productivity. The World Economic Forum predicts that 30 percent of jobs will be automated by 2030. However, if labor is the source of surplus value and profit, digital technology only decreases the amount of labor power required. Such increased productivity creates overproduction and other contradictions because all the goods and services produced by automation cannot be fully consumed by a smaller workforce with limited disposable income.

Still, mergers and partnerships are increasingly orchestrated by domestic capitalist interests that collaborate with foreign partners to promote public sector deregulation, market efficiencies, and consumer lifestyles in the faint hope of accumulating more wealth. Meanwhile, media genres render social problems as stories and dramas about individual protagonists. The "structural deficits, contradictions and paradoxes" of social inequality appear as "psychological features and individual responsibilities" (Cabanas and Illouz, 2019: 51). Predictably, the marketing of personal happiness is prominent in neoliberal societies—and a prevalent theme in global entertainment—because it legitimizes individualism in an apparently non-ideological way by "presenting a discourse that conceives one's life as separate from community and which sees the inner self as the cause and root of all behaviours" (Cabanas and Illouz, 2019: 53). In this view, public interests do not exist. Work, education, health, housing, and quality of life are all individual responsibilities and choices. In all nations, national media and transnational media feature storylines in which individual advancement equates with happiness and success. Mexican, Brazilian, Turkish, and Egyptian telenovelas and dramas evidence this tendency. India's masala films emphasize individual interest within the family unit. Even Ne Zha (2019), China's highest-grossing animated film at $725 million, revised an ancient story of redemption to present one "full of individualism" (In Zhejiang, 2019).

More recently, digital communication and artificial intelligence have been deployed in sensors, cameras, and machine-to-machine communication for transportation, and energy use, along with government and corporate surveillance. Internet users have become "prosumers" working for free to create data used and commodified by social media and internet companies (Fuchs, 2014: 57-58). Several decades ago, Dallas Smythe (1977) recognized that television viewers create value for television broadcasters through unpaid labor. By the act of viewing, audiences are sold to advertisers. Today, internet users perform a similar function. Simply using social media and digital communication produces data about user interests, preferences, and behaviors that can be sold by tech companies to advertisers. Notably however, not all digital users are unpaid: celebrities, influencers, commercial interests, and political campaign organizations use digital communication for advertizing, sales, and promotion. For example, over 55 percent of Instagram users are shopping (Yazdanipour, Faramarzi and Bicharanlou, 2022: 188). Thus, "social media and mobile internet use make the audience commodity ubiquitous" (Fuchs, 2014: 59). Indeed, technologies constructed for corporate profit ensure that every keystroke (whether in response to celebrity, influencer posts, advertising, or internet bots) becomes data to be commodified and sold.

In contrast, Manuel Castells (2009, 2012) and Henry Jenkins (2008) argue that social media are tools of democratic communication and collective power in an electronically networked society. Citing the Arab Spring and the Occupy Movement, Castells asserts that the internet mobilizes progressive social movements. For Jenkins (2008), the internet has become a site of citizen/consumer participation, "preparing the way for more meaningful public culture" signaling the emergence of a participatory and democratic culture (239). Both authors overlook corporate control over the structures and use of social media, the internet, and digital applications. This precludes full citizen participation. In fact, social media is mainly commercial and used for mundane entertainment. Fuchs (2014) suggests that Castells and Jenkins, among others, have simply "advanced uncritical and administrative studies of social media and the internet" (57) without adequate attention to advertising, commodity production, and prosumer labor.

Of course, one need not accept either prosumer or internet democracy perspectives to recognize that new global structures of transnational digital production and distribution have altered daily life and culture. In this regard, the internet and digital communication are necessarily based on the "highly paid wage work of software engineers and low-paid proletarianized works in Internet companies, the unpaid labor of users, the highly exploited bloody Taylorist work and slave work in developing countries producing hardware and extracting 'conflict minerals'" (Fuchs, 2014: 60; Albergotti, 2019; Chan, Selden and Pun, 2020). For most citizens in advanced capitalist countries, consumption and consumer goods have become a means for expressing cultural and personal identity—providing limited respite from alienating work whether for wages or the "free" use of the internet and social media. Globalization, prosumerism, and the information superhighway are inadequate catch-all terms that do not address the social relations that characterize this new transnational stage of capitalism. Nor does the hype around digital communication reflect the actual conditions of production in the world. For instance, in the United States—the leading economic power and the center of transnational digital communication—millions are still employed in other industries. In the US, three million workers are employed in information and digital services (55 million globally); three million work in the agricultural industry; almost three million are employed in manufacturing and distribution of automobiles in the US; while 19 million retail workers and 22 million health care workers are employed (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). Even though many of these workers use technology in their daily tasks, simply describing contemporary society as digital capitalism is an overreach. This may be the goal of tech giants constructing their digital infrastructures, but citizens also have other preferences. Capitalist industries and finance have always looked to the world market for resources and consumers, but transnationalism and digital communication are new phenomena which have altered but not replaced the social relations of capital.

Zhao (2008) offers a useful corrective to the "essentialist notion of Chinese culture and a nation state-centered frame of analysis" that loses "any discussion about the domestic class, regional, gender, and ethnic politics of 'Chinese culture'" (40). She notes that focusing on the imbalances of media imports and exports "underplays the active role of various domestic agents in China's reintegration" into capitalist social relations, while "equating the penetration of transnational corporations with cultural assimilation and homogenization." This is seen to constitute a static view of cultural practices and obscures how national media owners reorganize formats for their own profitable purposes (140–141).

In contrast, conceptions of "homogenous" localization (Demont-Heinrich, 2011: 7) that obscure the social relations of production, do not tell us much about, say, Indian transnational Sun TV's thriller–romance "Run" co-produced with British transnational ad giant WPP. We also need more than cultural imperialism to unpack the transnational character of "localized" production decisions, corporate relations, ideological content, and any political or social significance of the series for Tamil culture in India. Categorizing "Run" as British cultural imperialism seems insufficient for explaining and understanding the transnational corporate relations between Sun TV, WPP, and co-producer Vikatan Televistas. It does not reveal much about the cultural impact of this and similar series on daily life or world views. "Run" was produced in Chennai, Hong Kong, and Bangkok as a "rich girl meets poor boy" story appropriate for the Tamil middle class. The consumerist message so important to transnational corporations is shaped by the cultural materials of Tamil India by the decisions and behest of Indian-based transnational media. No British, American or even Western domination is manifest.

Western cultural influence is likewise tangential in Essel's Zee Studio production, Secret Superstar (2017), a musical drama about an Indian gender equality heroine or in the hit movie Dangal (2016) based on an Indian true story of female wrestlers. Disney co-produced Aamir Khan's Hindi story of Dangal, which earned $330 million at the box office to become the highest-grossing Indian film ever (IMdB.pro, nd). The movie emphasizes competition and individual success. In other words, the Hindi and Tamil cultural iconography becomes fodder for the promotion of Indian capitalism—not Western corporate profits or influence per se. Appeals to the principle of equality provide citizens with opportunities to create their own identities, practices, and forms of expression, yet this process does not reside in cultural iconography alone; it depends more concretely on citizens having direct access to media production and dissemination. The "reality of inequities in global cultural relations" (Demont-Heinrich, 2011: 8) is not geographic but socio-economic. Power is not an abstraction; it is obtained through the social relations of ownership and control over the means of producing and sharing, in this instance, media content.

Here, we might pause and consider how cultural imperialism fits within a nation or country. Salih (2020) argues that Turkish dominance over the Kurdish minority should be understood as internal cultural imperialism, because the national government's goal is subjugation and possible eradication of non-Turkish cultures. Extending Salih's approach elsewhere would find internal cultural imperialism at work in France's treatment of Algerian immigrants and the white supremacist domination and repression of African Americans in the US. White artists appropriated black music. Black cultural production was marginalized or coopted by the culture industry. Of course, cultural imperialism could apply if culture, ethnicity, and nationality are essentialized, reified without regard for capitalist social relations. However, if every instance of control, media dominance and public relations, falls into the cultural imperialism rubric, we lose the ability to discern the actual material conditions that organize our world. The hegemonic pull of racism and nationalism benefits the owners and overseers of the economy and political institutions, but reducing capitalist social relations to cultural imperialism misidentifies class relations as geography or technology and obfuscates from the possibilities for democratic social change. Production is a process of manufacture through the theft of surplus value produced by labor, but profits can only be realized through the circulation and sale of goods. Transportation, advertising, and logistics require further labor power to assist in the sale of goods to realize profit. This process is not uniquely American or Western.

To claim a "middle ground" between cultural imperialism and the globalization of culture (Demont-Heinrich, 2011; Kraidy and Murphy, 2008; Mirrlees, 2013; Rogers, 2006) simply synthesizes two flawed approaches. Likewise, attempts to see internet applications as a simultaneous duality of surveillance and democratic opportunity disguise the class contradiction between ownership and control and democratic public access. Hybridization, transculturation, glocalization, cultural flow, the information superhighway, precarious independence, creative economy, overaccumulation and other such concepts do little to unpack actual social relations. These critical perspectives must incorporate the argument that transnational capitalism exercises its class power through corporate ownership and nation-state regulation and enforcement. What is the purpose of finding a middle ground or having a "balanced" assessment of artificial intelligence (AI) and digital communication? Perspectives and theories should arise from the actual conditions of use, not simply from prior theoretical claims.

The truth of our condition is concrete, whether it fits existing and previous perspectives is of little importance—unless they disorient and disarm those seeking strategies to secure equality and justice (as post-modern theories did in the Nicaraguan revolution against dictatorship, Artz, 1997). Findings which contribute "understanding the real contours of the world economy" (Callinicos, 2009: 198) should inform our theories and understandings. Reality has changed. In the early 21st century, the conditions underlying cultural imperialism are receding. Rising TNCC (transnational capitalist class) relations and practices organize media production in most geographic regions, according to the interests and goals of transnational investors, producers, advertisers, and neoliberal political leaders. Empirical evidence from multiple cases illustrates the constraining and enabling conditions of transnational ownership, creative and technical labor, production practices, content (including form, theme, and ideology), distribution, and profit-taking across borders and cultures (Artz, 2022). The concern for equality expressed by cultural imperialism perspectives can best be addressed now through the “redistribution, confiscation, and levelling” of media access and control by non-capitalist social classes and movements (Linebaugh, 2014: 136).

What is transnational capitalism?

Transnational corporations (TNCs) differ from international and multinational corporations by their relations of production. An *international* corporation does business across national borders by selling products produced by workers in one nation to consumers in another (e.g., Comcast’s Universal exports Fast and Furious films to China). *Multinational* corporations owned and based in one nation operate subsidiaries in other nations. The subsidiary has workers producing commodities in and for the domestic national market. Ownership, control, and profits of the subsidiary are retained by the multinational parent (e.g., Disney produces television programs for its wholly owned UTV India, while production decisions and profits remain with Disney US). In both instances, the capitalist class structure provides profits to national capitalist owners based on the technical expertise of cultural workers at home and in the foreign country. Still, the relative benefit that international and multinational corporations receive from the labor of their domestic and international workforces could be deemed by shareholders as insufficient for maximizing profits. Sales of commodities from centralized production will not always keep pace with costs or meet the interests of culturally diverse consumers. Nor can prevailing wage levels at home and abroad always sustain consumer demand. Even where labor organizations have won improved benefits in wages and working conditions, global overproduction has plagued multinationals in the auto, pharmaceutical, home appliance, food, and clothing sectors. Because capitalism needs unending growth, corporations have sought increased labor productivity. Decreased labor benefits at home drove offshore production in countries with lower wages, expanded global markets for an abundance of commodities.

Whatever the creative intent of television producers and filmmakers from around the world, the practices and relations built over the last decade or so indicate that neoliberal transnationalism has become hegemonic. In every country, those media that survived have opted for market-based production, distribution, and narrative content. In the case of film, a remnant of auteur festival productions remains, but they do not reach mass audiences and thus make scant contribution to the emergence of the new global culture marked by consumerism and self-interest.

Most national cinemas are no longer coterminous with their nation-states. National culture cannot be referenced as an essentialist, unitary, all-encompassing category of analysis. Media, news, and entertainment should be understood as relational—a set of processes rather than an essence. In the 21st century, those processes are transnational in scope and action.

In the global search for increased capitalist collaboration, TNCs formed. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD, 2016) defines transnational companies as those with owners and investors in multiple countries jointly managing the operation. In other words, such corporations are capitalist partnerships jointly owned by multiple companies from two or more nations producing goods within several nations. They distribute these “local” commodities in each of the several nations, while sharing the profits among the multiple national owners. For example, Reliance India bought 50 percent of the US studio DreamWorks and entered into a joint venture with Chinese filmmakers to produce movies for all three markets (Szalvai, 2012). TNCs such as Sony, Coca-Cola, Mercedes, and McDonalds insist that “We are not multi-national, we are multi-local” (Iwabuchi, 2002: 90).

Certainly, mergers and acquisitions, joint ventures, and foreign direct investments (investments by one company in a company based in another country) have blurred the national identity of many TNCs that enlist local labor to make local products. In 2008, the UNCTAD identified over 78,000 transnational companies (UNCTAD, 2008). The Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich searched a database listing 37 million companies and investors worldwide and pulled out the leading 43,060 TNCs and the shared ownerships linking them. Researchers "constructed a model of which companies controlled others through shareholding networks, coupled with each company's operating revenues, to map the structure of economic power." They found a core of 1318 corporations that collectively own, through their transnational shares, the majority of the world's large blue chip and manufacturing firms. This represented 60 percent of all global revenue (Adl-Tabatabai, 2017). These TNCs lead a radically different capitalist system than that which emerged after World War Two.

To repeat: these cooperatively constructed structures and social relations of production are no longer nationally based. As might be expected, the largest TNCs have home bases in the most developed capitalist countries. These capitalist owners do not represent a "coherent, homogeneous collective" group that has transcended national states, but they do function through "highly variegated and regionalized formations" with tensions and contradictions (Carroll, 2018). This developing transnational capitalist class has collectively instituted social relations of production with value chains of commodities, cooperatively exploiting and profiting from labor across nations, while exerting their collective political influence on individual nation-state governments. This insight helps us to understand that the media, including digital communication, have experienced "purposeful and strategic restructuring activity" (Knoche, 2019: 288). For all industries including media, transnationalism has become the latest stage of capitalism (Appleyard, Field and Cobb, 2006).

Transnationalism posits that because capitalism controls the economy, the rest of the nation-state, including its politics and culture, will also be heavily influenced. The leading social class relies on the state for regulations, laws, and enforcement protecting capitalist interests, as well as for the assimilation of civil society. Within each nation, the TNCC confronts national capitalists who may still defend national protectionism. Religion, education, entertainment, and popular culture are sites of battle for dominant social relations of power. Across the world, capitalists fund public–private initiatives laden with the values and ideology of neoliberal privatization. Gates, Soros, Ambani, and Jack Ma, Democrats, Republicans, and the Chinese Communist Party advance neoliberal reforms with joint ventures and partnerships. Ironically, even as each support neoliberal reforms to open international markets, they continue to rhetorically and publicly advocate increased international competition to strengthen their own nation's corporate interests.

A vital component of the restructuring of capitalism is the role of transnational media corporations (TNMCs) and their commercial–entertainment–consumerist structures, practices, and communication content (Artz, 2015; Rantanen, 2005). Control of media has always been central to political and cultural power. Now, corporate media directors and publicists dominate media production, news, entertainment, language, vocabulary, signs, symbols, and images. After the Chinese invented paper in the 13th century, emperors tightly controlled printing and banned the first printing press invented by Koreans. From the Roman, Greek, and Ottoman empires to feudal monarchs and the Catholic hierarchy to modern dictatorships and the public relations agencies of contemporary liberal democracies, dominant social classes and their government bureaucrats have sought to control public access to communication, including, most recently, the internet (Stauffer, 2020). Dominant social strata have sought control and regulation over language (Anderson, 2016:

43–46), communication, and media to better socialize and persuade citizens of the values and norms of the dominant national social order—albeit not always successfully.

Media also comprise a global capitalist industry. As major capitalist enterprises that produce and distribute both goods and ideological messages, media are thoroughly pervaded by neoliberalism and embedded within transnational capitalism. Media are corporations owned and operated by investors, banks, private equity firms, insurance companies, fast food and consumer product companies, and other transnational corporate interests. Most major media have boards comprised of extensive interlocks with additional corporations as well as other media firms. Twelve of the largest companies in the world are media corporations, including Alibaba, Google, Tencent, Samsung, Disney, ATT/Time Warner, and Meta/Facebook (Freeman, 2022). Alibaba and Tencent have British, New Zealand, South African, Singaporean, Japan, and US directors on their boards. Media corporations are integral to the global restructuring of capitalism and its drive for increased profits. As political economist Garnham (1987) observed, reproduction of movies and music is expensive compared to the costs of production, so commercial media have a particular compulsion to maximize sales and expand audiences to enhance profits globally through distribution contracts, streaming services, satellite, cable, and pay-TV, or direct television rebroadcasts. In addition to promoting consumer content to diverse national markets, media also lead the neoliberal push for deregulation of global markets.

As for-profit businesses, commercial media produce and distribute commodities for sale and profit. They include magazines, newspapers, movies, audiences, cable and streaming services, and ancillary products connected to media content. Importantly, these commodities are more than just products sold for profit. Each carry symbolic meanings, political messages, and cultural values. In other words, media produce and distribute news, information, and entertaining stories that reflect and promote existing social beliefs and behaviors. In short, media function as an essential component for existing capitalist relations of power.

Capitalist media, globally and nationally, clamor for light regulations, favorable production practices, and flexible working conditions. Nations compete in the global contest for investments and jobs. Thus, commercial media urge national governments to increase foreign investment and partnerships, deregulate and privatize public media, and further commercialize media production and distribution to mass audiences while curtailing labor rights and reducing wages (Artz and Kamalipour, 2003). As transnational partnerships are formed, the social relations of production and distribution practices evolve. Multiple production sites employ wage labor or short-term contractors.

Cultural imperialism, as an accurate description of international relations for more than 40 years, is no longer adequate to explain contemporary media relations and practices because transnational relations now dominate across cultures. As Curtin (2016) concludes,

> …[media] operate according to distinctive cultural presumptions and professional protocols… Dubai is a crossroads for transnational television in the Arab world and its an interface between Arab and global media. Likewise, Mumbai is the media capital of South Asia as is Miami for Hispanic media. Moreover, each of these hubs makes use of service centers within its respective sphere of operations. Telemundo in Miami contracts with producers in Bogota, Buenos Aires, and Mexico City. Mumbai is networked to media resources in Chennai, Hyderabad, and the United Arab Emirates (70).

In short, profit-seeking TNMCs have grown tentacled networks across national borders and cultural identities.

Digital communication media

In his contribution to *Race & Class*, William Robinson (2020) offered an appraisal of giant tech companies as manifestations of transnational capital. While insightful about the consequence of digital technology on capitalist relations and everyday life, his account implied that technology was a determinant influence over the global social order.

Robinson (2020) notes that technology "allowed the transnational capitalist class, or TCC, to coordinate and synchronize global production and therefore to put into place a globally integrated production and financial system," but he demurs on the decision-making by capital. He suggests that the "second generation of digital-based technologies is leading to a new round of worldwide restructuring" (3-4). This formulation seems to slip towards technological determinism rather than emphasizing that under the political-economic control of digital media technology companies materially construct and develop technology in ways that undermine the democratic use of digital media. Dyer-Witheford, Kjøsen and Steinhoff (2019) offer a more materialist assessment of the corporate use of digital communication and AI. Unlike robots, which are machine tools functioning with sensors, AI is comprised of computer software that must be installed as hardware to function. Data experts write algorithms so AI can recognize specific data. The best AI applications require a massive amount of computational power and procedures: "formats have to be standardized, features have to be added, errors have to be excluded and information has to be added" (Copyriot, 2022). These data operations are labor intensive and thus outsourced to low-wage countries such as India and Indonesia. These processes require huge amounts of human labor which creates wealth for a handful of digital companies—and high salaries for machine learning experts and AI data professionals. Dyer-Witheford et al. recognize that digital operations, including robots and AI, are autonomous machines supplementing human labor. If automation abolishes work as some futurists hold, capitalism is subverted because replacing labor not only undermines the production of value, it "liquidates the possibility of basing consumption on waged income" (19). The increase in labor productivity, whether from AI production or workers producing more commodities in less time, reduces the value of individual commodities. The introduction of new machines, including AI operated infrastructures, requires less labor and ultimately reduces the rate of profit. More importantly, fewer workers and lower wages translates into fewer buyers and less profit.

The remarkable restructuring of the global economy through digital communication indicates the actual increase in the exploitation of labor through the use of new technologies—including the exploitation of unpaid labor. The deployment of AI and machine learning for production increases the circulation speed of products. Such is evident with Netflix, Amazon, and Televisa-Univisión's ViX video-on-demand streaming. But increases in productivity are not met with a complementary increase in wages or employment. Hence, an overproduction of goods and services results. As the data-driven economy expands, there will be fewer jobs in accounting, journalism, teaching, retail sales, and other occupations that can be replaced with robots or digital applications, even though labor produces technology and is also needed for maintenance, quality control, and some customer service.

As in-person services are replaced by remote digital services, the capitalist system confronts an internal and insurmountable contradiction. With labor in the aggregate having insufficient income to purchase all of the goods produced by fewer workers and more digitally based production, corporations will be unable to sell their products and secure their profits (or even recover their costs). As Robinson (2020) notes, "[r]educed labor or laborless digital services, including all sorts of new telework arrangements, drone delivery, cash-free commerce, fintech (digitalized finance), tracking and other forms of surveillance, automated medical and legal services, and remote teaching involving pre-recorded instruction" (4). This means fewer workers, less income, and fewer purchases. Such overproduction of goods and services can contribute to financial collapse as witnessed in 2008.

Digitalization may be a general-purpose technology like electricity as it spreads throughout all branches of the economy and society; however, the structure and uses of digitalization are tightly controlled by the owners of digital production and applications. For example, social media are designed to attract attention and induce users to remain online. Companies seek profits by using algorithms as seduction and surveillance tools to reach customers. In other words, social media do not have to be structured to serve commercial needs. For now, social media are not independent of commercial media control. Apps and platforms are privately held and controlled. Access, promotion, and use depend on who owns and regulates technology. Private tech ownership creates techniques to extract data from users. Web pages integrate software to attract and engage visitors. They do this by asking individuals to take trivial or more complex actions to continue using the website. These actions may be as simple as asking users to press play, skip an ad, vote, play a game, enter their location, use a simple tool like a calculator, answer a question, make a selection, search or comment. All such actions generate user data, preferences, and behaviors which can be purchased by advertisers.

Social media and other commercial sites deploy cookies, beacons, and fingerprints. Cookies are bits of data provided or assigned to users by websites to track activity and store information about the user, such as identity and login information. Beacons can be encrypted within the transfer protocol of most internet activity, sending signals. Beacons can be known, as when a home device accepts or sends a notification to a user. They can be hidden by hackers and used to infect personal devices. Firefox Mozilla defines fingerprinting as "a type of online tracking that's more invasive than ordinary cookie-based tracking" (https://www.mozilla.org/en-US/firefox/features/block-fingerprinting/). A digital fingerprint is created when a company makes a unique profile based on the user's computer hardware, software, add-ons, and even preferences. Cookies, beacons, fingerprints, and other forms of user surveillance and data collection are not necessary for digital communication but are developed by tech companies to capture information to be sold for profit to advertisers—and in some cases to government authorities. Importantly, this is not a consequence of technology per se, but the result of ownership, control, and use of the technology by corporations and governments. Additionally, none of this is "immaterial" labor on the part of users, but the result of actual physical human activity including thinking, speaking, and collaborative work in the production of information (Yazdanipour, Faramarzi and Bicharanlou, 2022: 181).

To simply suggest, as Robinson (2020) does, that "new technologies disrupt existing value chains and generate a reorganization among sectors of capital" obscures the decisions made by tech companies to appropriate labor-produced value in order to accumulate profit globally. Importantly, the tech industry has significant working relations with military and security systems around the world. Google supplied mapping technology for the US occupation of Iraq, hosted data for the CIA, built military robots and launched spy satellites for the Pentagon. Just as Hollywood, television programmers, and public schools are intertwined with the military and security agencies, so too are Amazon, Facebook, and Microsoft, among others. The corporate-owned and run tech industry serves finance, the military, and governments worldwide.

Transnational digital media

The specifics of transnational internet corporations reveal that the largest social media companies have global reach and worldwide sources of revenue.

Table 1. Media Revenue 2021

Company	Revenue US$
Alphabet/Google	267 billion
Microsoft	168 billion
AT&T	168 billion
Meta	117 billion
Comcast	116 billion
Alibaba	110 billion
Tencent	83 billion
Disney	67 billion
Bytedance	58 billion
Facebook (Meta)	47 billion
Instagram (Meta)	47 billion
Warner	39 billion
YouTube (Google)	29 billion
Baidu	19 billion
CBS Viacom	13 billion
LinkedIn (Microsoft)	11 billion
Naspers	6 billion
Twitter	5 billion
TikTok (Bytedance)	4 billion

Note: From company earnings reports and https://statista.com

Many of the tech companies which appear in Table 1 garner more income than leading media entertainment companies such as Disney, Comcast, and Warner. These digital giants have transnational ownership and production structures. The largest internet firm, Alphabet/Google recorded $267 billion in 2021 revenue. Its board includes Indian engineer Sundar Pichai, former Stanford University president John Hennessy, former Goldman Sach's officer Marty Chavez, and Indian billionaire Ram Shriram, former owner of an Indian internet shopping site. In addition to several private equity firms, such as Vanguard and Black Rock, Norway's Norge Investment Management controls $11 billion in its minority stake (Ström, 2022).

The Chinese company Bytedance, incorporated in the Cayman Islands, took revenue of $58 billion in 2021. Bytedance owns Tik Tok, the fastest growing and most popular website in the world (Rosenblatt, 2021). Bytedance's Board includes directors from US companies Sequoia Capital, Coatue Management, and the US-EU-Asian Susquehanna International Group. In 2019, Baidu's Tik Tok partnered with the US National Football League (Kuchefski, 2019).

Meta (which owns Facebook) received $117 billion in revenue for 2021. It has multiple shareholders, from competitor Microsoft, several finance and private equity firms, as well as Russia's

Digital Sky Technologies, which has a $5 billion minority stake and Hong Kong investor Li Ka-Shing who owns $700 million in shares.

Telegram, the only large non-profit tech operation, was formed by the Russian-born Durov brothers who now hold French and Emirati citizenships. Telegram is headquartered in Dubai and the Virgin Islands, with data servers in the Netherlands and other EU countries. Telegram has more than 1 billion users. The Duros also own the Russian-based VK that had a 20% investment from South African media giant Naspers until the Ukrainian conflict in 2022.

The two Chinese internet giants, Alibaba and Tencent, are thoroughly transnational in ownership and operation. Alibaba with $110 billion in 2021 revenue has multiple investors, including Yahoo! and Lyft, with board members from Goldman Sachs, Japan's Softbank, and Jerry Wang the US-Taiwanese founder of Yahoo! Alibaba also owns Alibaba Pictures, which owns 30 or more companies, including some major studios such as Enlight Media, Huayi Brothers, Bona Film Group, and Wasu Media. After investing in Skydance/Paramount's *Mission Impossible: Rogue Nation* (2015), Alibaba partnered with Steven Spielberg's Amblin Pictures and other US studio productions, including Apple +, Disney, STX, and India's Reliance Media.

Tencent, one of the highest-grossing multimedia companies in the world, shares investments with Spotify, Vivendi, Nintendo, and Epic Games. Like Alibaba, Tencent has partnerships with Sony, Universal, Warner Bros., and Korea's YG Entertainment. Tencent is also the largest video game producer in the world based on investment. Notably, Naspers, the South African media conglomerate that dominates video streaming in Africa, owns 30 percent of Tencent. Tencent's Board of Directors includes Scottish, British, Dutch, Hong Kong, and South African members. In 2016, Tencent with Foxconn founded Future Mobility to produce electric self-driving cars. And in 2017, Tencent purchased 5% of Tesla. Tencent also has its own film division, Tencent Pictures, which has partnered in major productions with Warner, Sony, Paramount, Disney, Lionsgate, STX, Beijing Enlight, and other transnational studios.

Meanwhile, Baidu, the e-sales internet company is partnered with US Qualcomm, auto industry suppliers Bosch and Continental, and has joint ventures with Warner's Discovery in space technology, engineering, natural history, and more. Baidu's Board of Directors includes members from Google, Uber, Lenovo, US equity firms, and Singapore capital investors. In short, Alibaba, Baidu, and Tencent are less indicative of rising Chinese cultural imperialism and more illustrative of the new transnational capitalist class ownership of entertainment and digital media partnerships.

Overproduction and the contradictions of capitalism

Despite the rapid transnational expansion of digital communication, robotic labor, and AI in machine learning, laborless production will not restore profit levels to transnational capital. This is because labor productivity remains the source of value creation and allows the subsequent theft of profit from labor. Several authors have asserted that AI and machine learning has or can replace human labor in the creation of value (Walton and Nayak, 2021; Wirtz, Weyerer and Sturm, 2020). Without entering into a theoretical debate about labor theory, one result is irrefutable: fewer workers ultimately means fewer consumers for mass products. As Robinson (2020) notes, the first wave of computer technology in the late 20th century triggered explosive growth in productivity and productive capacities, while the new digital technologies promised to multiply such capacities many times over. Consequently, as machinery and technology replace human labor, the ranks of surplus and marginalized humans expand. This aggravates the overproduction of goods and services in the transnational capitalist system, contributing to inequality, poverty, social unrest, and resistance.

Such conditions undermine the stability of the capitalist system, as the discrepancy between what can be produced and who might benefit is widened by a political economy that rewards a handful of transnational corporate owners at the expense of millions. The United Nations, the International Labor Organization and others have estimated that tens of millions of jobs will disappear in the coming years due to digitalization (Robinson, 2020: 7). Thus, fewer workers with lower wages restricts the aggregate demand for goods and services and the revenue streams of major corporations. Media entertainment that assuages public dissatisfaction with amusement, spectacle, and even diverse cultural offerings cannot by itself resolve real life materialities of inequality, injustice, and economic insecurity.

Theories of cultural imperialism, cultural hybridity, and the networked society are inadequate for understanding our current transnational relations, nor do they address the class dimension of social relations of power. In the 21st century, culture is less about foreign nation dominance and more completely about the predominance of a transnational capitalism which enables the exploitation and exclusion of working-class majorities in different national settings.

Author bio

Lee Artz, a former machinist and union steelworker, is a Professor of Media Studies and Director of the Center for Global Studies at Purdue University Northwest. Artz has published 12 books, including *Global Media Dialogues: Industry, Politics, and Culture* (2023, forthcoming), *Spectacle and Diversity: Transnational Media and Global Culture* (2022), and *The Pink Tide: Media Access and Political Power in Latin America* (2017). He has also contributed dozens of book chapters and journal articles on global media, US popular culture, media practices, and social movements. Artz was a founding member of Radio Harbor Country, a network of three community LPFM stations in Southwest Michigan. He regularly speaks on news media, contemporary politics, and popular culture.

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