

India to Indiana: Considering TV's Ideological Power with Global Media Expansion and Flow

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Streaming video-on-demand (SVOD) platforms Netflix and Amazon Prime Video have expanded into global markets in attempts to increase profits. This globalization has met many obstacles, including language-barriers, the availability of high-speed Internet, international censorship, incompatible payment methods, and a flux of rights to their content. However, Netflix's platform is now available in over 190 countries and has more users internationally than in the United States, with Amazon rapidly catching up. Many attribute their respective successes to the proprietary computerized algorithms that generate personalized profiles and organize into taste communities, channeling viewers toward niche content and content toward niche viewers. Thus, this corporate globalizing operates under two main forces of late capitalism: hegemonic expansion and homogenization, and the neoliberal, cosmopolitan lure of flexibility, freedom and choice. However, instead of adopting the purely pessimistic perspective that the globalization of wealthy US media conglomerates like Netflix and Amazon operate as digital colonialism via Western-dominated representations, narratives, and ideologies embedded in their streaming television content, I want to re-frame and complicate our understanding of “the global” in this present process.

Central to this understanding should be a definition of the global as a set of push/pull dynamics and an amalgamation of the uneven flows of content and cultural exchanges with the enumeration systems of computerized algorithms along with the new types of circulating digital culture that are now possible and at work. In fact, the political economy approach to media industries' global expansion can (and must) draw on the questions of cultural studies: How and why do diverse representations and narratives matter not only for viewers but also for the content producers' economic interests? In what ways might global audiences on platforms such as Netflix and Amazon enact agency as user-consumers to demand more diverse content, or is it even possible? Is there room for localized resistance to the hegemony of Western media within US-dominated processes and practices of content expansion and consumption?

Perhaps we are seeing more optimistic global narrative unfold in which Netflix and Amazon's expansion must – and, in fact, does – rely on partnerships in localities and regions to produce content that can attract not only local and regional audiences but that can migrate globally. These two companies have entered into co-dependent relationships with local talent in order to reach and maintain audiences at home and abroad. Not only have we seen successful UK/US partnerships that have produced English-speaking series like *Black Mirror* (Netflix, 2011–) and *Electric Dreams* (Amazon Prime Video, 2017–). Riding on the acclaim of series such as *Narcos* (2015–2017), a US/French funded project primarily directed by a Brazilian and filmed in Colombia, Netflix has also introduced over a hundred other projects co-produced and created with local or region talent in Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. Furthermore, as their expansion continues, Amazon and Netflix are in a heated contest to woo the greatest number international subscribers via content specific to the demands of local markets. Series such as *Sacred Games* (Netflix, 2018–), for example, is the first of eight

Netflix projects in India which hire national talent to tell national stories in Hindi. These stories also escape censorship to which the broadcast television channels and cinemas in India are subject. Although the Netflix subscription price in India still remains relatively high and these stories might not reach many viewers in India, the series are now available to other audiences around the globe. In the end, more non-US-centered content is being made, and it matters. Not does it matter in offering more diverse representations, but Netflix and Amazon are functioning rather like independent art cinemas and curators of international content by salvaging older film and television content produced in nations beyond the US for their global digital offerings to consumers everywhere. Although one might look at all these moves as purely cosmopolitan ventures in neoliberal capitalist expansion by wealthy US-based media corporations, the processes and outcomes, as we can see, are more nuanced.

Therefore, the ideological power of contemporary television has to be defined by what determines “the global” in this moment. The need to define global media is wrapped up in economic imperatives but also becomes a space of ideological messiness. The capitalist impetus of ideological homogenization is perhaps still being undermined by homogenization’s need to incorporate the local in order to expand and survive. Moreover, users of platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime Video become consumers who can create demand through their capital and clicks. These uneven, back-and-forth exchanges between the US and global contexts create possibilities for media with more diverse representations, narratives, and ideologies to exist and to flourish. In fact, new categories and communities of genre and “taste” might begin to emerge to meet the new individualized needs of consumers. Finally, as streaming technology and content continue to evolve and expand in regard to nations, languages, and representations, the potential exists – however small – for televised stories to cross borders between nations and algorithmically-constructed audiences, to create world where the exchanges of ideological content between India and Indiana flow both ways more evenly.