THE GLOBAL COMMERCIALIZATION OF CULTURE

by Herbert I. Schiller

The development of the communication satellite in the early 1960's, and the rapid global expansion of the corporate business system some years earlier established the material conditions for what initially was hailed as the arrival of the "global village." This happy view of affairs revelled in the transcendence of time and space barriers. The achievement, in the McLuhanite perspective, would lead to the emergence of a world community. "Villagers" would be busily interacting with each other. Everyone would benefit, and previously unimaginable new forms of creative expression would flow across the earth.

Included also in this essentially technocratic vision was the expectation that the new instrumentation would enable modernization to overcome traditionalism in many parts of the world. Peoples and nations would step out smartly onto the path of economic development. Actually, the development that has occurred in the last thirty years has, with some exceptions, been uneven, unequal and generally disappointing. And, instead of global interaction, there have been mostly one-directional cultural and informational flows.

In the late 1980's, therefore, the one-world prospect has of necessity been revised and refurbished. The outlook is as confident as ever, but the focus has been shifted away from economic improvement — modernization — to cultural and political progress in human rights, freedom and democracy. This new emphasis has been assisted greatly by the collapse or removal of physical and administrative barriers, especially in central and Eastern Europe. Also contributing to the new thinking is a global circulation of uniform images and messages and even language.

And so, if international economic improvement, notably in the poor world, has remained problematic, the cultural situation at least is seen to be promising. The prospect of a global culture, rich and diversified, is believed to be on its way to materialization. Optimism radiates from some of the more active agents in the worldwide expansion of cultural and informational activity.
A new U.S.-financed communications venture, for example, to wire Poland for cable and supply it with Western programming is explained by the company's owner: "What we're trying to do is export a bit of democracy and way of life to Poland." Similarly, the appearance of the Hungarian edition of *Playboy* magazine in December 1989 is announced in a full-page newspaper advertisement in the United States: "Exporting the American Dream: On November 29th, Hungarians came one step closer to something they've been fighting since 1956 — freedom. Not just political freedom but freedom of the press... *Playboy*... reaches 15,000,000 readers worldwide... So here's to freedom."2

The outlook for the '90's, according to some influential Western voices, is for freedom and democracy. Yet the idea of a looming universalistic culture of unbounded promise can be entertained only by a willful refusal to acknowledge the structural underpinnings of the system now being constructed. This system's foundation, already established in a great part of the world, fuses culture, popular and elite, with marketing. The fusion goes well beyond an instrumental use of culture for business ends, i.e., appropriating completed cultural works and symbols to promote commercial objectives. Of this, to be sure, there is no lack.

But far more is involved. The cultural process itself, and the creativity that is its essence, are increasingly being shaped by marketing considerations. To offer one example: the locational sites and the narrative of a film may be determined today by a commercial objective. Some British films are made intentionally with specific neighborhood backgrounds that are immediately recognizable to American audiences who have been, or may be, tourists. This, it is expected, will make the movie more saleable in the U.S. market and boost tourism in the bargain.

Another instance is the manufacture of toys and games which reproduce television and film characters. It is often unclear which step precedes the other — whether the toy or the movie comes first. In any case, this has become a sizable industry.4 Or again, the recently developed field of music video (MTV), in which "pace and structure is [ever more] closely related to advertising."5 MTV's style, which highlights a frenzied staccato tempo — to attract and hold viewers — has been adopted over a wide range of general television program-making.
In comic books, the commercial dynamic has quite literally taken over the genre. Comics have been incorporating the sponsor of a product into the book's storyline. A Japanese toy-maker, Kyosho, for one, paid a fat fee to Archie Comic Publications for Kyosho remote-controlled cars to be featured in the comic book series: "... the entire storyline revolves around Kyosho remote-controlled toys. Archie and the gang wear Kyosho shirts and jackets... Kyosho marketing executives actually are drawn into the strips, appearing as part of the plot."6

The most venerable museums, no less, hold "blockbuster" shows to attract crowds, and (not so incidentally) appreciate the value of holdings that may one day wind up in the international art auction houses.

Whichever the medium, the message's content and form increasingly are shaped by commercial imperatives. These developments are especially striking in the organization of entertainment (theme) parks and shopping malls — today's main gathering places for Americans and soon for Europeans. In these physical constructions, the spatial and structural environments are specifically designed and built to display (blatantly in most instances, less obtrusively in others) corporate imagery and values. A multitude of signs reinforce prevailing ideology and practices, i.e., goods acquisition, corporate and national loyalties, gender roles and private enterprise myths.7

These phenomena, not all of recent vintage, are being internationalized at a remarkable speed. Political and technological changes account for the acceleration of the process of global commercialization of culture. Economic consolidation in Western Europe under the guidance of big business interests, the breakdown of statism in Eastern Europe, and the multiplication of private satellite broadcasting, cable and telecommunications systems everywhere, combine to push the movement forward. At this historical moment, no significant counter force has yet emerged to challenge, much less turn back, what is happening.

The onslaught moves forward relentlessly. Giant private goods producers and image-making conglomerates are rapidly staking out the world. Transnational manufacturing corporations locate their plants and facilities in markets (countries) around the world. Soon
after come their supportive services in distribution, advertising, polling and public relations.

Now, a new stage in the global informational-cultural condition has been reached. American, and other national media industries, have themselves become major players in the international market. Film and television-producing companies have joined traditional goods producers as heavy exporters. The media are also establishing production facilities outside their home bases. In fact, media and informational products currently constitute one of the few remaining surplus categories in U.S. foreign trade. The expansion of this field of non-material production is growing rapidly.

Trade reports announce the trend. "Hollywood [is setting] up shop in Europe." The major film studios are building numerous production facilities in Britain as a base for expansion onto the continent. The Walt Disney Company, along with its Euro-Disneyland theme park (nearing completion outside Paris), is also planning a production facility there. The head of MCA's Universal movie group declares: "We all see Europe as a major growth area in film and television. The privatization of television means new outlets that will have to be fed. The multiplexing of Europe will enable us to release twice as many movies."8

The U.S. record industry is no less euphoric, enthusing about developments in central and Eastern Europe: "We just found out we sold half a million copies of the Dirty Dancing soundtrack the first week East Germany was open," said the president of MCA records. He added: "I hear much talk about American companies buying radio stations and video retailers there [Western Europe]. The result is they're going to learn about American-style record retailing, and the Continent is ripe for that."9

Transnational media interests — Murdoch, Berlusconi, Maxwell, Bertelsman, Time-Warner, etc. — stalk the world for new outlets for their outputs. Murdoch buys tabloids in Hungary; Bertelsman is active in East Germany; a World's Fair, Expo 2000, is planned for northern Italy under the auspices of giant corporate interests — Fiat, Olivetti, IBM, Coca-Cola, Philips, Mondadori, etc. — they propose to transform Venice into a "floating Disneyland."10

The globalization of corporate cultural activity proceeds uninterrupted and practically unhindered. Does it make any difference that
one national cultural-informational institution after another is privatized and commercialized and that transnational media conglomerates take over national and regional space?

The first and most direct cost may be to the cultural work force itself. Reducing, sometimes eliminating entirely, state support for film, broadcasting, telecommunications and the arts in general, means less work in some cultural fields, and more carefully scrutinized work in others.

The plight of drama in the United States is suggestive of what may be expected of privatized arts activity, left to the play of the market. In 1988-89, for example, only 38 percent of the members of Actors Equity, the actors’ union, worked at all during the year. Actors worked an average of 17 weeks. Average salaries for actors were at poverty levels. Taking these grim conditions into account, one drama critic advised: “If you want to act, learn to type.” The employment situation is not very different in other creative fields. Market-driven commercially-supported arts produce poverty levels of existence for a majority of the creative workforce alongside super salaries for the “stars.”

Much more difficult to estimate are the social costs to the community that accompany sweeping commercialization of the arts and the unlimited entry of transnational entertainment and media conglomerates to national space. Indigenous creative forces are swamped, and inevitably crippled, by the relatively cheap cultural products offered by the big media producers. The production quality of the material also is difficult to match because the producers allocate huge resources to the “packaging” side of goods — the sound, color, music, special effects, photography. The substantive component, the content, can be almost negligible with such fancy wrapping.

The heaviest cost of transnational corporate-produced culture, however, is that it erodes the priceless idea of the public good and the vital principle of social accountability. These crucial but immeasurable social criteria are discarded. In their stead are substituted the illusory promise of consumer choice and the hopelessly narrow standard of production efficiency.

Can the well-being and vitality of the community be left to the international business system, especially its powerful media-enter-
tainment sector, with these markers guiding the direction? When this does in fact occur, as in the case of Canada — the large northern neighbor of the United States, with whom it shares a 3,000 mile undefended military and cultural border — this is the assessment from a highly-placed cultural official: "From my Canadian point of view [the unrestricted operation of market forces] have delivered a whole nation into cultural bondage, to the point where Canadian voices have been drowned out of their own air." Canada, we may be reminded, is no less — and possibly more — industrialized than most European states.

A world without barriers, a free flow of information, free speech everywhere and unimpeded traffic of cultural products — these are longstanding and cherished objectives. The current global condition makes their genuine realization remote. The free flow of information principle has been one of the pillars of American imperial policy for nearly half a century. As it has functioned, it has facilitated a tidal wave of U.S. corporate-produced media product and informational goods to sweep across the globe.

Together with the free flow of information has also come a new interpretation of free speech. In the United States, and more recently in Europe, it is claimed that commercial speech — advertising and corporate opinion on social matters — is just as privileged as an individual's speech. With this legal legitimation, can it be surprising that the corporate voice is the one now mostly heard, and listened to, in national and global arenas?

The removal of national jurisdiction, which is what the process of deregulation and liberalization amounts to, has allowed the cultural situation to be increasingly affected by the revenue calculations of private media and telecommunications entities. In the United States, where the process is most developed, there are these results: children's television programming is largely in the hands of candy and toy manufacturers; incessant commercials; endless mayhem on the screen; the near-absence of social documentaries; the reduction of television news to glitzy two-minute or less sound "bites."

These are the cultural gifts of market forces in the world’s premier communication power. They also are being distributed and copied around the world. Do these cultural deformations offer a suitable model for emulation? A society would be well advised to
review carefully the arguments for an open door for cultural products which are circulated in transnational media circuits.

A national cultural assessment would also make a sharp distinction between the creative work of individuals and the products of cultural industries. This could not fail to bring into question as well the privileges now extended to corporate speech in the North Atlantic region. The efforts to reduce and destroy national broadcasting and telecommunications systems, now well advanced, would not pass unchallenged. National systems, with all their faults, remain the best means for encouraging local and regional creative work. The protection and nurture of local creativity in film, television, music, theater and publishing are not regressive objectives aimed against international understanding and cooperation. They support responsible and necessary measures intended to insure diversity of creative efforts. They defend the public against the drives of private, corporate, large-scale message and image enterprises.

The maintenance, even creation, of cultural and linguistic bulwarks, in this historical moment, fulfill vital social needs. Yet before embarking on this course, one important change in the world scene demands attention. No longer is the global arena dominated by U.S. power, as it was in the early post-World War II years. Though the American presence in the message and image business remains strong, a powerful and expensive transnational corporate order is the main engine of current worldwide cultural and economic activity. The presence and roots of this system already penetrate deeply in Europe, North America and Japan.

Taking this phenomenon into account, nationalist cultural programs are fruitless at best, and at worst trigger xenophobia and chauvinism unless they acknowledge and engage the transnational presence in their national space. In sum, the frontiers of culture in the 1990’s are the local and national efforts to defend and encourage the community’s creative impulses and works against the massive message flows of a world business system and its global media extensions. The outcome is by no means clear.
Notes


“The Global Commercialization of Culture,” reprinted here with the author’s permission, originally appeared in Directions, a semi-annual publication of the Program on Communication and Development Studies at Northwestern University. For information write to: Manjunath Pendakur, PCDS, 317 Annie May Swift Building, Northwestern University, Evanston IL 60208, (708)491-2252.