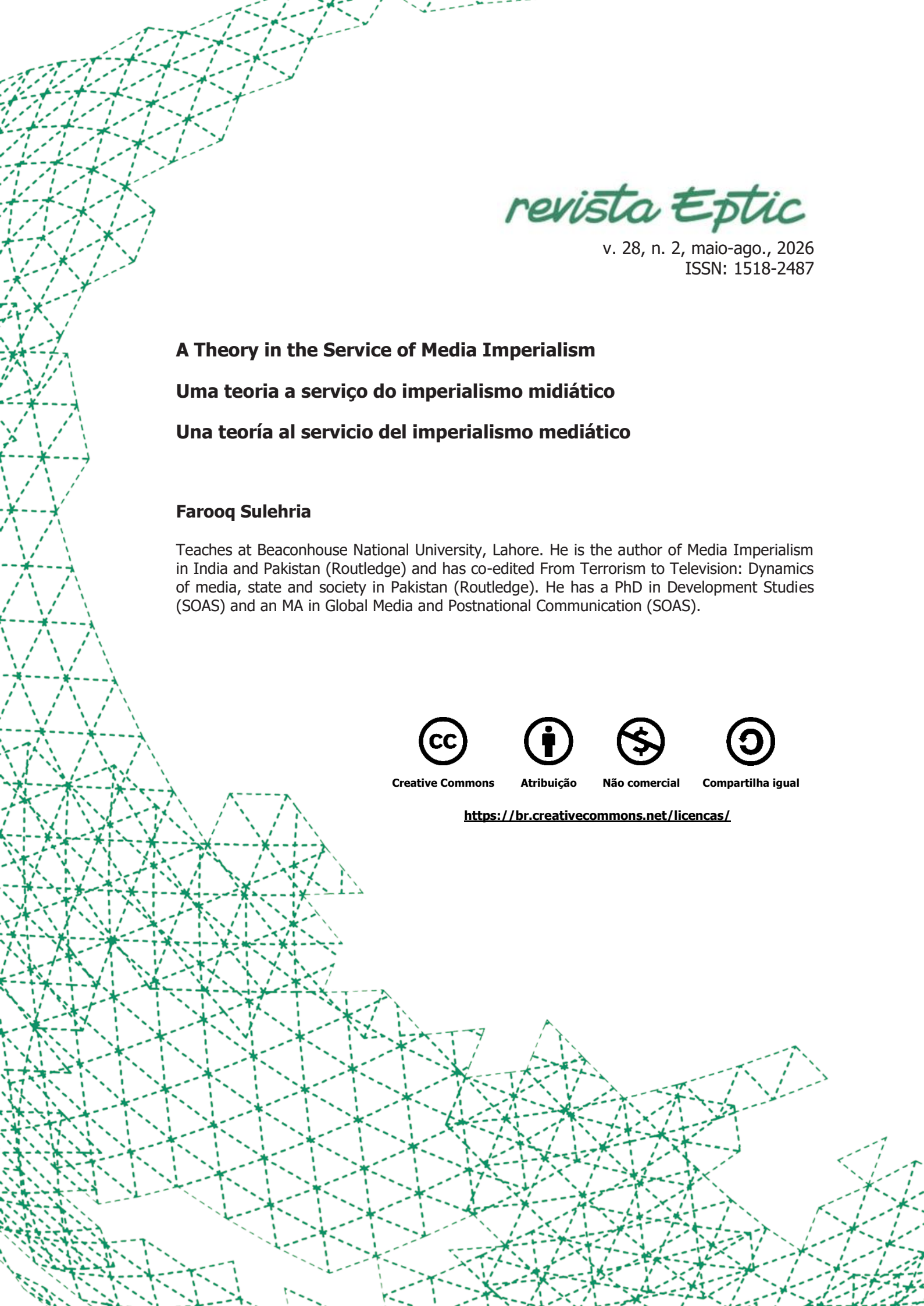




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A Theory in the Service of Media Imperialism

Uma teoria a serviço do imperialismo midiático

Una teoría al servicio del imperialismo mediático

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Abstract

Recently, the debate on media imperialism has been undergoing a revival. To expand the debate, this paper critically analyses Audience Theory since this concept was initially deployed to counter the notion of media imperialism. This paper argues that the Audience Theory empirically, theoretically, and logically goes off on tangents in the case of the media imperialism debate. Theoretically, Audience Theory oversimplifies, if not trivializes, the media imperialism debate because it conceptualizes media imperialism as the 'domination of the West over the Rest' while simply ignoring the dependency factor. Likewise, Audience Theory belligerently refuses to engage with counter evidence or counter concepts.

Keywords: Audience theory, Herbert Schiller, Global Media, Media imperialism.

1. Introduction

The vital debate on media imperialism is witnessing a revival (See, for instance, Mirrlees 2013; Boyd-Barrett 2015; Jin 2015; Mirrlees, 2016; Sulehria 2018; Boyd-Barrett and Mirrlees 2020). To quote, Boyd-Barrett and Mirrlees (2020, 3), “research on media imperialism is still important to international communication and global media studies, and it has flexibly adjusted itself to new media developments.” It is, therefore, topical to revisit the so-called Audience Theory as well. From the perspective of media imperialism debate, re-evaluating Audience Theory is important because the latter was mainstreamed to counter the former to such an extent that every dissenting note has been tyrannically stifled ever since the publication of cult-like *The Export of Meaning* (1990) by Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz.

Already in the 1990s, mainstream media scholarship, ironically deploying Michelle Foucault, offered *fatihah* for Herbert Schiller’s once fashionable media imperialism perspective and laid the dependency perspective to rest. That Professor Herbert Schiller passionately and rigorously countered *The Export of Meaning* is hardly known to a new generation of media students. A near-consensus had been achieved already by the late 1990s that media imperialism was not merely dead but it had never lived ever. Such has been the dictatorship of the mainstream that every other new book on media, 1990s onward, would arbitrarily slingshot Audience Theory at the notion of media imperialism. The unquestioned proof to declare media imperialism dead was the death certificate issued by Dr Tamar Liebes and his PhD supervisor Professor Elihu Katz.

Hence, this essay aims to establish that the death certificate was massively forged through a conspiracy of silence, on the one hand, and a tyranny of the mainstream, on the other. Accordingly, this paper argues the following: Audience Theory is empirically and logically flawed in several ways when it is deployed to counter media imperialism. Theoretically, it credits the claims of simplifiers who have trivialized the media imperialism debate because Audience Theory does not take the dependency factor, an integral characteristic of media imperialism, into account. Likewise, Audience Theory refuses to engage with the notion of power.

To contextualise my argument, I will begin this article by framing and updating the media imperialism debate (Section 2). Next, Audience Theory will be scanned through the empirical lens (Section 3). In Section 4, Schiller’s response to Liebes and Katz will be offered to bring Prof Schiller back to debate and also to historicise the debate. Finally, before offering the Conclusions, Section 5 will briefly theorise imperialism and media imperialism while Section 6 offers an analysis of the entire debate by deploying Lukes’ notion of three-dimensional power. This paper is theoretically grounded in Marxist theories of imperialism. Relevant literature will be reviewed as the debate unfolds below.

2. Framing the Media Imperialism Debate

Informed by a Marxist perspective, dependency school in particular, theories of media imperialism developed out of broader critiques of the “modernisation” thesis propounded by Lerner and his colleagues, notably Schramm (Meyer 1988, 34-35). Lerner (1958), Huntington (1968), and Deutsch (1961) have all suggested mass media as the primary tool in their theories of social mobilisation. The modernisation thesis held that the media were a resource for “backward” countries to leap into the modern communication age (Davison 1965, 139). However, Marxist media scholars were not convinced. Schiller was the first to point out that the communication system propagated by the modernisation approach would lead to dependency. He stressed three prepositions. First, the ECI’s (entertainment, communication, and information) spread must be viewed alongside US foreign policy. Second, the ECI’s

influence is not just economic and political but it also impacts “consciousness”. Third, economic power combined with the global reach of cultural commodities led to cultural imperialism (Schiller 1969, 115-125). Schiller argued that communication technologies were not value-neutral instruments but were imbued with capitalist values; language (for instance, English as global lingua franca); business practices; the genre as well as the content of soap operas, blockbusters, popular music, etc. Schiller saw media as a central element in the global expansion of capitalism centered on the US, fueled by advertising and consumerism. Most importantly, he argued: “cultural-communication sector of the world system necessarily develops by and facilitates the aims and objectives of the general system. A largely one-directional flow of information from core to periphery represents the reality of power” (Schiller 1976, 6). Schiller’s thesis was lent an empirical aura by several subsequent studies proving Western domination of the Third World media systems. It is notable that the dependency perspective, which fired up the debate, as the research framework was largely ignored¹ (See: Galtung and Ruge 1965; Varis 1974, 1985; Guback and Varis 1982; Golding 1977; Katz and Wedell 1977; Meyer 1988).

Boyd-Barrett (1977) for the first time defined media imperialism as “the process whereby the ownership, structure, distribution or content of the media in any one country are singly or together subject to substantial external pressures from the media interests of any other country or countries without proportionate reciprocation of influences by the country so affected”. He identified two “outstanding features” of media imperialism. Firstly, uni-directional media flows from the metropolitan to the periphery. Secondly, metropolitan media influence the periphery. He included Soviet Russia among the “Source Countries” (Boyd-Barrett 1977, 117). This definition was not a comprehensive characterization since it reduced imperialism to the notion of domination. Likewise, capitalism and imperialism were delinked. Hence, both the USA and the USSR were characterized as “Source Countries”. Arguably, the USSR was an empire but not an imperialism since it was a post-capitalist country. Boyd-Barrett’s definition made it easy for his detractors to conveniently dismiss the media imperialism thesis.

Hence, from almost the mid-1980s onwards, the media imperialism thesis came under a sustained attack (see, inter alia, Sinha 2006, 78; Rantanen 2005, 78; Tracey 1985; Fejes 1981, 282). While Golding and Harris (1997, 6-7) urged the necessity “to look beyond the mass media to recognize the scope of symbolic and normative impact of one society on another”, a repertoire of scholarly works [Curran *et al* (1977, 9), Lee (1980, 41), Hafez (2007), McMillan (2007), Rai and Cottle (2010), Garofalo (1993), Sreberny-Mohammadi (1997), Barker (1997), Reeves (1993, 53-59), Price (2008), Sinclair *et al* (2008), and many others] summarily reject the media imperialism thesis from viewpoints ranging from social-democratic and liberal to post-colonial and post-modern. More often than not, critics of media-imperialism theory have invoked the so-called Audience Theory.

The “active audiences” theory (Seaman, 1992) i.e. the audience does not passively receive the messages delivered, and Fiske’s concept of polysemy (Fiske 1987) i.e. texts have a multiplicity of meanings, have been repeatedly employed to dismiss the notion of media imperialism besides challenging the tradition of political economy. *Dallas*, as a case study, is repeatedly cited as evidence of audience resistance and the polysemic nature of the texts. *Dallas* is the subject of a doctoral thesis by (then) Israeli graduate student Liebes and supervised by Katz. Liebes studied the impact of the popular TV programme *Dallas* in Israel, Los Angeles, and Tokyo. This dissertation later appeared in book form, titled *The Export of Meaning* (mentioned above) The explicitly stated objective of this case study was to reject the media imperialism

¹ This is because “the media-imperialism theory was concerned initially with media inequalities between nations, and with how much inequalities reflected broader problems of dependency”, explains Boyd-Barrett (2010, 151).

thesis. According to Liebes and Katz, the US domination of global media cannot be attributed to media imperialism. Instead, they proposed three reasons for the worldwide success of American television: (1) the universality, or primordality, of some of its themes and formulae, which makes programs psychologically accessible; (2) the polyvalent or open potential of many of the stories, and thus their value as projective mechanisms and as material for negotiation and play in the families of man; and (3) the sheer availability of American programs in a marketplace where national producers - however zealous - cannot fill more than fraction of the hours they feel they must provide (Liebes and Katz 1990, 5). *Dallas* was a big hit in Israel but a flop in Los Angeles and Tokyo. Liebes and Katz (1990) hypothesised that to prove that *Dallas* is an imperialistic imposition, one would have to show that "there is a message incorporated in the programme that is designed to profit American interests overseas." In other words, the message is decoded by the receiver uncritically, hence "allowed to seep into their culture" (*ibid*, 4). Their findings showed that the *Dallas* audiences critically decoded the content and there was diversity of interpretation. They claimed that the diversity and criticality in decoding the *Dallas* message by the audiences belie the assumption "that there is one dominant reading that will produce a single, monolithic effect" (*ibid*, 19). Their research shows, to quote *The New York Times* (NYT), "that foreign audiences are not merely blank slates upon which are etched the underlying message of American television programs." Their research, NYT notes, "relates to a larger debate about the so-called American cultural imperialism – the extent to which American programs, art, culture, and other values are exported and overwhelm those of foreign countries" (quoted in Schiller 1989, 149). Besides glorifying a so-called agency of the audiences, protagonists arguing end-of-media-imperialism also highlighted the role of technology in empowering the audiences (see, inter alia, Webster 1986, 80). NYT, in particular, took up the cause of Audience Theory (see, for example, Stevenson 1985; Smith, 1985). Answering such objections at the time, Schiller (1989, 148-49) pointed out that the proponents of an active audience assigns an equal power to the media corporations and the individual meaning producer (more below).

Ever since *The Export of Meaning* has gone to press, mainstream media scholarship has consigned the notion of media imperialism to the footnotes. The fact of the matter is, globalisation's neo-liberal logic has boosted media imperialism like never before (Sulehria, 2018). When conformist media discourses were declaring media imperialism dead, it was flourishing and expanding at a breakneck pace. What explains this antinomy? A probable explanation is the dwindling of Marxist approaches late-1990s onwards in metropolitan academia and a concomitant rise of postmodernism 1980s onwards. Media scholarship in the global South hardly offered any alternative approach. After all, media scholarship in periphery countries, courtesy of dependency, usually reproduces metropolitan trends.

Hence, through a conspiracy of silence, every notion of media imperialism was hushed up. Incidentally, Schiller himself was shot down. His passionate rebuttal of Liebes and Katz (1990) hardly finds any mention. Therefore, in the next section, his rejoinder to *The Export of Meaning* is recapitulated not only to break the silence but also to historicise the debate.

3. Schiller Replies to *Dallas* findings

Schiller at the outset harks back to Katz' previous position. Previously, Katz (1987) had argued that such research traditions as limited effects, campaign diffusion, and gratification had ideological usefulness by playing a debunking role. "Katz acknowledged that these findings were pleasing to media controllers and exonerated them from accountability and blame. This conclusion is as true in 1989 as it was in 1950," Schiller reminds Katz. Schiller identifies, correctly one may add, that Audience Theory is an updated version of limited-effects theory whereby, so-called active audiences are "capable of producing its meanings and resisting those

transmitting to it that it finds objectionable or irrelevant". Secondly, this audience is "heterogeneous, comprised of a large number of social subgroups, each with its history, experience, and interests."

He also acknowledged the new ICTs were ushering in changes in the media consumption practices. "Few will disagree that there are new communication technologies available and that the audience is hardly a monolithic mass. But what do we make of these observations?", he observes. Answering the question, he suggests the following: Firstly, technological change did not radically alter any fundamental reality of power structures in the media realm, locally or globally. "The case for a technologically facilitated audience freedom is simple and straightforward". He invokes, Pool (1983) to establish that new technologies given so weighty a role were essentially multichannel cable systems and home video recorders (Schiller 1989, 146-147).

At the time of writing these lines in 2024, VCRs have become a thing of the past while social media have increasingly reduced cable systems in importance as well.

Schiller pointed out how the technology enthusiasts argued "that fear of the influence of the concentrated media power as a bogeyman is no longer (if it ever was) warranted. People may be distracted by or even surrounded by incoherent symbolic environments, but they are not being socially influenced. How can they be, since they are their own agents of selection?". Answering these technology enthusiasts, he drew attention to the following aspects: "Yet, what is the actual diversity that is available over multichannel systems? To what extent is it a conglomeration of id movies, syndicated reruns, news from the same two or three press agencies, and sports of every description? Has the sponsor disappeared from the cable? Is commercialism and consumerism absent? Where are the sharply drawn social dramas? Has not cable television, no less than the networks, been swallowed by the big information-cultural combines?" (Schiller 1989, 147).

While acknowledging common-sensical claims about the audience's ability as a producer of meaning-making, Schiller dismisses Audience Theory on several counts. In the first place, this theory does not identify: "Where this resistance and subversion of the audience lead and what effects they have on the existing structure of power remain a mystery". Secondly, Schiller argues, Audience Theory serves media imperialism: "How heartening to the cultural message makers to learn that cultural imperialism does not exist! Each audience receives and makes its message." Thirdly, Schiller justifiably highlighted how audience response was impossible to quantify. Notably, Liebes had concluded: "The idea of a simple 'American' message imposing itself in the same way on viewers all over the world is simply not valid." Answering Liebes, Schiller points out: "But who would have made such a claim in the first place? The transfer of cultural values is a complex matter. It is not a one-shot hypodermic inoculation of individual plots and character representations. It involves the much more difficult to measure acceptance of deep-structured meanings that may not even be explicitly stated". For instance, he asks: "Can the transfer, for example, of acquisitive or consumerist perspectives be simply quantified?" (Schiller 1989, 149-150). Lastly, Schiller justifiably indicates that Audience Theory does not undermine media monopolies, an essential condition associated with media imperialism (Schiller 1989, 41).

At times taking a cue from Schiller, in other cases, independently, researchers and scholars from political economy traditions, in particular, conducted studies to test/counter the veracity of Audience Theory. Such studies conducted at micro and macro (read global) levels have comprehensively demonstrated the hollowness of Audience Theory. Not merely empirically, but even theoretically critical media scholars, anchoring their works in political economy tradition, have convincingly questioned the relevance of Audience Theory. The next section outlines these studies and approaches.

4. Fiction of Audience Resistance

Audience Theory has been theoretically challenged as well as empirically contested. For instance, the Global Disney Audiences Project analysed the reception of Disney products internationally and radically undermines the claims made by Liebez and Katz (1990). The project assesses audience reactions to Disney in eighteen countries, representing 53 nationalities. The research found that 98% of 1800 respondents had seen a Disney film. Nearly 82% were familiar with Disney merchandise (Wasko *et al* 2001, 330). While respondents generally felt most positive about (or 'liked') Disney products at a younger age, by and large, they still liked Disney products and continued to come into contact with (or consume) these products as young adults. Furthermore, most imagined a future in which they would introduce their children to Disney products. One of the study's strongest findings was the commonly shared understanding of what Disney means. Respondents generally agreed on the core values represented in the company's products: over 93% of the respondents agreed that Disney promoted fun and fantasy, while over 88% agreed on happiness, magic, and good over evil. These are the same values that Disney company itself reinforces in its marketing campaigns (Wasko *et al* 2001, 334).

Likewise, Harindranath's comparative study of Indian and British audiences, for instance, establishes that British and Indian audiences with similar education and worldview interpreted the content in similar ways (Harindranath, 2003). Similarly, Morley studied *Nationwide*, a BBC current affairs programme, to test audiences' ability to decode. He found that the ability to decode among people with similar class backgrounds say trade unionists, was identical. He concluded that the ability to decode lined up well with one's class background. A highly unsettling finding from the viewpoint of an active audience was that black students could not relate to *Nationwide* at all and switched the TV off (Morley 1980, 115). The career-long research by Gerbner (2002) is yet another evidence that negates the claims made by audience theorists. Gerbner shows that media programming cultivates and shapes the perceptions of the audiences. While, as Boyd-Barrett (2010, 151) points out, "it is not true that the media imperialism theory assumed a hypodermic-needle model of media effects", the problem with audience theory is the lack of an explanation when the "hypodermic needle" in fact works.

I remember watching the Hollywood production *True Lies*, starring Arnold Schwarzenegger, at a cinema in Lahore (Pakistan) in the early 1990s when Hollywood action movies were eagerly awaited and drew big crowds for weeks on. *True Lies* was one such mega-hit. The storyline was typical: Certain "Arab fanatics" had accessed nuclear weapons and Schwarzenegger, working as an undercover agent, was out to liquidate the terrorists. By the time the movie reaches the final sequence, the muscular hero is engaged in a life-and-death battle with the Arabs. As we, the spectators, had already anticipated, Schwarzenegger shot the last Arab dead. That a bird lent a helping hand when the chief villain is finished off, was a subliminal message by director David Cameron that even nature was on the American side. But the house exploded into wild cheers as Schwarzenegger accomplished his mission in a country considered the most anti-American Muslim country in the idiomatic Muslim world (Pew, 2013). In fact, since the arrival of cinema in the colonial world, film sequences where a white hero kills a brown/black villain have often drawn wild cheers. In colonial countries when Africans and Asians went to see American and European films, they would experience a kind of spectatorial schizophrenia (Shohat and Stam 1996, 157): they would relate with Schwarzeneggers against the Arabs.

The audience does count, but not in the way the active-audience theory posits it. Cultural dominance is not exclusively derived from television imagery alone. TV is but one of a panoply of cultural means providing the apparatus of domination and the condition of dependency (Schiller 1989, 151). Unless audiences have access to contrary experiences or discursive resources, they tend to work with the raw material provided. One must take into account that

a message is potentially open to a wide number of interpretations. However, as Abercrombie (1980, 74) claims, "messages are not typically interpreted widely, for people are given a conceptual structure which permits only a limited number of interpretations. To pursue the image from cryptography, if the language message contains a code, it will be decoded in a fairly restrictive way according to a code-book which is effectively socially derived". Moreover, interpretations by readers and viewers are neither autonomous nor necessarily superior to the meanings proposed by writers and producers.

A fundamental lacuna in Audience Theory is to ignore the commodified nature of the audiences. Audience as a commodity is a concept constructed by scholars such as Meehan (1990), Wasko and Hagan (1999), Croteau and Hoynes (2001), and Gandy Jr (2004). First systematically studied by Smyth (1981), the term commodity audience implies a special product of the media industry that is served in response to the demands of advertisers and political strategists (Croteau and Hoynes, 2001). The concept of "audiences as commodities" implies that audiences can be created and uncreated, amplified and reduced. In 2008, for instance, Disney teamed up with News Corporation to launch ESPN Star Sports in India. It invested one billion dollars in the Twenty20 cricket championships. Twenty20 cricket transformed cricket culture when a draft system of player bidding was introduced. Cricket stars flocked from former British colonies to be signed for huge sums (Miller 2010, 105). The Mickey-Rupert duo were able to invent audiences. Such nuances are given short shrift in accounts glorifying the apocryphal resistance of the audience. Similarly, the tradition of audience studies does not take into account the configuration of power. Not merely content that is popular among less consumptive audiences, entire channels were shut down when networks found them financially untenable. Audience Theory also defies even the basics of common sense, let alone any logical investigation: why should, for instance, advertisers go on increasing the advertising budgets if audiences are "resisting"? Also, an audience cannot engage in any so-called resistance when entire discourses and issues are excluded from coverage. In addition, another important concern, even from a moral viewpoint, is that the audience resistance theory does not take into account children. The *theory* does not explain if children are also engaged in guerrilla warfare against the influence of advertisers. Evidence suggests otherwise. In 2002, for instance, children in the USA aged four to twelve spent \$30 billion on purchases using their pocket money. Direct expenditures by children rose from \$6.1 billion in 1989 to \$23.4 billion in 1997. This does not include teen spending. According to a survey, the average 12-19 year old spent \$104 per week in 2001 (Schor 2006, 93-94). Clearly, children are not resisting the way theoreticians of audience resistance want us to believe.

The proponents of the media imperialism thesis have pointed out that the complexity around audience reception is being invoked to obfuscate the continuing reality of Western cultural preponderance (Curran and Park 2000, 6). Schiller thinks that the research work on audience reception "comes uncomfortably close to being apologetics for present-day structures of cultural control" (Schiller 2010a, 257). Artz and Kamalipour (2003, 21), likewise question, "what is progressive about cordoning off human subjects as active receivers who are relegated to meaning-construction of others? Why not have a society and a media that allows subjects to be subjects by producing their own texts?"

Here are some key lessons for Audience Theorists: resistance requires a degree of freedom. There are situations (from North Korea and China to Saudi Arabia and Iran or Afghanistan) where resistance implies public beheadings. Unfortunately, there is a reality beyond cozy metropolitan campuses where the audience stands no chance to resist. One may also point out church, temple, and mosque where a priest's message is readily accepted without any resistance. Above all, in the context of media imperialism debate, audiences either in their active or passive variety cannot annul the dependency situation. The next section explores Audience Theory in relation to the media imperialism debate from a dependency perspective because dependency is a fundamental characteristic of media imperialism. Audience Theory

simply refuses to take dependency critique into account. Skirting around the dependency perspective helps audience theorists reduce the media imperialism debate to domination whereby the West dominates the Rest. No doubt, if media imperialism is reduced to the element of domination, audience studies become a powerful theoretical challenge as is explored in the next section.

5. Bringing Back Dependency Approach

It is rather ironic that the media imperialism debate, initially, was triggered by the dependency approach. Schiller anchored his critique of US domination in the concept of dependency. However, media imperialism's characterisation whereby the notion of media imperialism was reduced to domination, cut the ground from under the feet of the media imperialism thesis. Even when Schiller wrote his rejoinder to *The Export of Meaning*, he did not deploy the dependency lens. Likewise, Boyd-Barrett's characterisation of media imperialism was conveniently dismissed as flawed (see, inter alia, Salinas and Paldan 1979, 82-89). Schiller, credited as the initiator of the media imperialism debate, undermines himself when he claims, "Domination is precisely what cultural imperialism is all about" (Schiller 2010b, 255). If, and when, the media imperialism debate is reduced to the notion of domination, Audience Theory becomes a handy tool to counter Schiller *et al.* After all, the audience resistance on the global scale is more like Bertrand Russell's idiomatic china teapot between the Earth and Mars revolving about the sun in an elliptical orbit but too small to be revealed by the telescope. This paper contends that media imperialism cannot be reduced to the notion of domination. Reducing imperialism to domination is a flawed understanding grounded in liberal notions of imperialism. From a Marxist perspective, arguably the most comprehensive approach to conceptualizing imperialism, dependency is an elemental characteristic of media imperialism. To comprehensively counter Audience Theory, it is vital to conceptualise media imperialism anew. I define media imperialism, on the one hand, as the capitalist exploitation of dependent media markets by the metropolitan West, and on the other hand, as the periphery's explicit dependency on the imperial metropolitan countries whereby Western domination is implicit in the exploitative and dependent status of the peripheral countries. In other words, media imperialism has two basic components: exploitative domination and dependency.

This definition draws on Marxist theories of imperialism. Since the upholders of the media imperialism thesis as well as scholars who dismiss the notion of media and cultural imperialism, have reduced a rather complex concept of imperialism to the notions of domination, control, and oppression, it is important to briefly but explicitly state the Marxist characterisation of imperialism in contrast to non-Marxist definitions. "Imperialism is a word that trips easily off the tongue. But it has such different meanings that it is difficult to use it without clarification as an analytic rather than a polemical term," Harvey (2003, 26) justifiably points out. Even such an astute theoretician as Said runs into multiple contradictions when he grounds his notion of imperialism in liberal traditions. In his seminal work *Culture and Imperialism* Said describes imperialism as a practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory; 'colonialism', which is almost always a consequence of imperialism, is the implanting of settlements on the distant territory. In his support, he quotes Michael Doyle:

Empire is a relationship, formal or informal, in which one state controls the effective political sovereignty of another political society. It can be achieved by force, by political collaboration, by economic, social, or cultural dependence. Imperialism is simply the process or policy of establishing or maintaining an empire.

While Doyle's definition is flawed in view of contemporary imperialism whereby colonialism has ended, Said contradicts himself in the same breath when, having quoted Doyle, he asserts:

"In our time, direct colonialism has largely ended; imperialism...lingers where it has always been, in a kind of general cultural sphere as well as in specific political, ideological, economic, and social practice" (Said 1994, 2). Similarly, Tomlinson (1991, 19), describes imperialism as "a specific form of domination...associated with 'empire'".

However, if imperialism is lingering on, how come colonialism has ended? Said does not explain. Likewise, the USA is an imperial country but has no formal empire. And if domination, as Tomlinson points out, is the defining characteristic, one cannot differentiate between national oppression and imperial exploitation. Pakistan dominates Afghanistan. Does this domination imply Pakistan is an imperialism? Within Pakistan, the province of Punjab dominates Balochistan and other territories. Does this elevate the Punjab to the status of imperialism? Also, historical experiences do not fit into Said's characterisations. For instance, the imperial exploitation of Latin America in the 19th century by England even when Latin American countries had attained formal political liberation is a case in point. One also wonders if empire and imperialism are concomitant, should Roman, Mongol, Islamic, and Ottoman empires also qualify as imperialisms? Such problems remain unsolved in non-Marxist definitions of imperialism. These characterisations even when coined by brilliant theoreticians like Said, remain stuck in the apparent characteristics attributed to imperialism. Hence, always contradictory.

How to untangle imperialism? This term was first used in Britain in the early 19th century in relation to hostile French ambitions and gained greater currency after 1850. It was the emergence of anti-imperialism at the end of the 19th century that strengthened the negative connotations of the term (Bush 2006, 2) especially when Marxist theoreticians, in particular Lenin, linked it to Western capitalist exploitation of the rest and an inter-imperial rivalry endangering the world peace. The 'basic economic dimension that is common to the various Marxist definitions of "imperialism" is as a mode of capitalist exploitation of the rest of the world, beyond the purely political-military concept of "empire" that goes back to the dawn of civilisation' (Achcar, 2010). In short: empire [formal, or informal] + capitalist exploitation = imperialism.

The notion of dependency gained currency in the 1950s and the 1960s. Honed in the context of classical Marxist theories of imperialism, the dependency perspective emerged as a radical critique of mainstream development theory. The dependency theories see the world capitalist system as divided into a centre and a periphery (terminology varies; metropolitan and satellite, or core and periphery, are the alternatives). Frank (1967) and Cardoso & Faletto (1979) are credited as inventors of dependency theory (Love 1990, 143). Frank claimed that "it is capitalism, both world and national, which produced underdevelopment in the present" (Brewer 1990, 161). This is because, Baran pointed out earlier in 1957, capitalism as it concretely arises in the periphery is of a special, truncated form, which inhibits the development of complete capitalism rather than promoting it: "Far from serving as an engine of economic expansion, of technological progress, and of social change, the capitalist order in these countries has represented a framework for economic stagnation, for archaic technology, and for social backwardness" (Baran 1973, 300). Thus, the normal processes of the global economic system cause the gap between the centre and the periphery, while the periphery is reduced to a state of dependence (Brewer 1990, 161).

While the conditions for the form of development that entrenches poverty are international, it is not just that there is one group of countries in the world that happens to be developed and another that happens to be poor. "The two are organically linked; that is to say, one part is poor because the other is rich. The relationship is partly historical – for colonialism and the slave trade helped to build up capitalism, and this provided the conditions for later forms of dependency – but the link between development and underdevelopment is also a process that continues today" (Biel 2000, 78). As Amin (1978) points out, the tendency to pauperisation –

the acute poverty that is both the basis for and product of capital accumulation and thus of 'growth'- was transplanted to the periphery. But it is simplistic to see dependency as an international relationship, for it also requires a base in the social relations within the Southern countries. Specifically, it is internalised in the form of incomplete capitalism. The critique of development theory by Baran makes this clear. The problem is not the absence of development but its presence since, the "key proposition is that capitalism in the periphery arose in a special form" whereby, to quote Baran, "all that happened was the age-old exploitation of the population of under-developed countries by their domestic overlords was freed of the mitigating constraints inherited from the feudal tradition. This superimposition of business mores over ancient oppression by landed gentries resulted in compounded exploitation, more outrageous corruption, and most glaring injustice" (Baran 1958, 76). That is, in the traditional set-up, the tribute received by the ruling class was largely conditional upon the good functioning of the system they ruled. In the context of neo-colonial capitalism, by contrast, they receive what amounts to a kind of tribute arising from the malfunctioning of the system (Biel 2000, 78). This structured and institutionalised capitalist inequality is the key characteristic of contemporary imperialism. By demonstrating dependency as a key characteristic of imperialism, and by implication media imperialism, one solves the problem of the china teapot as will be established in the next section.

6. Discussion

In the light of empirical evidence and theoretical elaborations in the previous sections, three key aspects of Audience Theory draw one's attention.

Firstly, Audience Theory does not offer any explanation about the source of the audience's agency to resist. Oftentimes, vague references to Foucault are cited by audience theorists. However, Foucault's notion of power and resistance, despite its fashionability, is indeed problematic. Even Said, an erstwhile disciple of the Foucauldian theory of power and resistance, later critiqued the French saint of postmodernism (Said 1986; 2005a, 214; 2005b, 268).

The vague and holy audience in Audience Theory consists of individuals. The problem, however, is: these individuals in themselves are products of ideological and economic systems. They all have their ideologies, perceptions, world outlook, biases, cultural understandings, stereotypes, and above all economic interests. The audience is not neutral. To expect that a message will be resisted by a Marxist and Islamic fundamentalist or a misogynist and radical feminist (one may go on building several such binaries) similarly is beyond logical. Reducing the audiences to a monolith, capable of always resisting, is an approach that simply dismisses such useful concepts as hegemony and Orientalism-in-the-Saidian sense. Likewise, oftentimes, various members of an audience are not equally informed. An entire set of audience can be uninformed, misinformed, or ill-informed. In the absence of an informed audience, how resistance will emerge? Also, if an ill-informed or uninformed audience is resisting, would such a resistance deserve the glorified tag of resistance or would it be an expression of ignorance? Is there a mechanism to determine informed resistance and ignorance? Audience Theory does not answer such nuanced questions. Most importantly, as Schiller points out above, audience resistance does not unsettle any monopolies. One cannot conclude either that the interpretation of the message by the audience is superior to what the authors had intended. Equally important: one cannot evaluate the tangible outcome this idiomatic resistance yields.

Secondly, Audience Theory simply ignores the power equation. Why do we need the concept of power in relation to Audience Theory? Suffice to quote Lukes (2005, 69): "social life can only be properly understood as an interplay of power and structure, a web of possibilities for agents, whose nature is both active and structured, to make choices and pursue strategies

within given limits, which in consequences expand and contract over time". Therefore, this paper argues that Lukes notion of three-dimensional power is indeed useful to demystify Audience Theory.

Dahl, in his noted work *Who Governs?* studied power and decision-making in the city of New Heavens in the 1950s. The study was aimed at subverting the Marxist model of class rule. He offered a one-dimensional view of power: A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do. A "one-dimensional, view of power involves a focus on behavior in the making of *decision* on *issues* over which there is an observable *conflict* of (subjective) *interest*, seen as express policy preferences, revealed by political participation" (Lukes 2005, 19). Dahl concluded that the American democratic model was pluralist and there was no elite bossing over ordinary citizens. Dahl's claim was challenged by Bachrach and Baratz (1962;1970).

Bachrach and Baratz's work brought the idea of the "mobilization of bias" into the discussion of power². Thus, the notion of power embraces coercion, influence, authority, force, and manipulation (Bachrach and Baratz 1962, 20-21). This is a two-dimensional view of power: 'power is totally embodied and fully reflected in "concrete decisions" or in activity bearing directly upon their making". They wrote:

Of course, power is exercised when A participates in the making of decisions that affect B. Power is also exercised when A devotes his energies to creating or reinforcing social and political values and institutional practices that limit the scope of the political process to public consideration of only those issues which are comparatively innocuous to A. To the extent that A succeeds in doing this, B is prevented, for all practical purposes, from bringing to the fore any issues that might in their resolution be seriously detrimental to A's set of preferences (Bachrach and Baratz 1970, 7).

Criticizing both these views as inadequate, Lukes (2005, 4) observes: "In both cases, the assumption is that the interests are consciously articulated and observable". And "power...only shows up in cases of actual conflict, it follows that actual conflict is necessary to power. But this is to ignore the crucial point that the most effective and insidious use of power is to prevent such conflict from arising in the first place" (Lukes 2005, 27). Lukes offers a third dimension of power. He argues: Power is at its most effective when least visible...Those subject to it are led to acquire beliefs and form desires that result in their consenting or adapting to being dominated, in coercive and non-coercive settings (Lukes 2005, 1-13). Lukes, therefore, conceptualises power as "a dispositional concept. It identifies a capacity: power is a potentiality, not an actuality – indeed a potentiality that may never be actualized" (Lukes 2005, 9). Likewise, "power" is explicitly relational and asymmetrical: to have power is to have power *over* another or others (Lukes 2005, 73).

The media are relevant to all three dimensions of power. Media can editorialise for a course of action. But more importantly, media help set the agenda of public discussion and political decision-making, and help shape the whole ideological environment towards the winning of a universal validity and legitimacy for accounts of the world which are partial and particular, and towards the grounding of these particular constructions in the taken-for-grantedness of "the real" (Hall 1982, 65; Hackett and Carrol 2006, 21). However, what matters is the third dimension. According to Hackett and Carroll (2006, 21), the third dimension refers to the ideological role played by the media: "the power to shape the very perceptions and desires of subordinate groups, so they do not think to challenge existing social relations because they are taken as natural, beyond history or politics". This ideological role, in turn, blends into the

² Schattschneider (1960, 71) also pointed out: "All forms of political organization have a bias in favour of the exploitation of some kind of conflict and the suppression of others because *organization is the mobilization of bias*. Some issues are organized into politics while others are organized out".

broader concept of *hegemony* whereby the dominant class' ideas become common sense (O'Sullivan *et al.* 1994, 133). In the Foucauldian notion of power, we all have some power to exercise hence class differences as well as phenomenal economic and cultural disparities are reduced to naught. We are made to believe that an African or an Asian viewer, who never went to school let alone privileged enough to benefit from postmodernist metropolitan media scholars, has as much power as Rupert Murdoch and his Times Inc. worth USD 35,000,000,000. "Resistance and rebellion are costly; most subordinates lack the necessary means," Tilly (1991, 4) reminds. Resistance is not as cheap as Audience Theory tries to claim.

Thirdly, and most importantly, Audience Theory simply ignores the dependency perspective. Even if one assumes that a china teapot of Audience Theory is making the round out there, any such teapot does not resist or address the question of dependency. Simultaneously, while Audience Theory was being elevated to a high pedestal, dependency was aggravating. Take for instance the case of India and Pakistan. Until the 1990s, both these countries had one state-run channel each (Let us not get into the boring and one-sided clichéd debate about their performance here from a viewpoint of free expression. Post-privatisation, freedom of expression has been further curtailed in both these countries). Presently, over 500 channels are operating in India and over 90 in Pakistan. Every new channel in India and Pakistan implies a new customer for Western software, hardware, and content besides advertising-related paraphernalia. True, India is a subimperial country, hence, it does not import every part of the television system. Yet, every new channel aggravates the Indian dependency on the West. In the case of Pakistan, dependency is near-total (save content). For a detailed exploration and documentation, see Sulehria 2018. In the case of Pakistan, over \$2 billion is the cost of television system's dependency. No matter how much audiences in India and Pakistan resist, they cannot overturn dependency.

To recapitulate, expanding dependency implies expanding media imperialism. It does not matter whether an audience is resisting or not because the element of dependency is built into the global media system. Without breaking free from imperialism, periphery countries cannot build media systems that are not dependent. To reach such a point, it is not china teapot of Audience Theory that is helpful. On the contrary, Audience Theory mystifies the debate and serves the cause of media imperialism by concealing the fact that media imperialism is expanding.

Conclusion

The debate on media imperialism is understandably reviving because neoliberal globalisation has aggravated the dependency of the periphery media markets on the metropolitan media industries. To deepen the debate, it is also vital to question, critically analyse and re-evaluate the theoretical and empirical challenges deployed to counter the notion of media imperialism. Audience Theory in this regard is indeed an important concept since it has been offered as a conclusive argument by its protagonists to demonstrate the inadequacies of media imperialism as a theory.

However, the mainstreaming of Audience Theory can be explained in two ways. One, it was able to challenge the media imperialism thesis because media imperialism was conceptualised in a flawed manner whereby it was reduced to a vague notion of domination. Since Audience Theory unsettles the notion of domination by attributing agency to the audiences, hence, it won some support. Secondly, mainstream media scholarship, taking a post-modernist turn 1980s onwards, simply marginalised the counter-viewpoints through a conspiracy of silence. Several theoretical constructs and empirical studies convincingly countered Audience Theory which is theoretically flawed on at least three counts. Firstly, it does not look into the source of agency attributed to highly glorified audiences. Secondly, Audience Theory has a flawed

understanding of power. It simply refuses to take into account the economic might, for instance, of the media conglomerates and assigns equal power to a media consumer and media corporations. Hegemony, ideology, or Orientalism in the Saidian sense are conveniently ignored to peddle one-sided debate. Lastly, dependency does not pop up in any debate about Audience Theory. No matter how much an audience resists, audience resistance does not cancel dependency.

Hence, one may conclude that Audience theory has been barking at the wrong tree. There was no tree at all. It was barking at a strawman. Any contemporary debate and research in media imperialism should take the dependency factor into account. The debate cannot be reduced to an abstract notion of domination and counter-domination. In this regard, proponents of the media imperialism thesis also bear a huge responsibility to hone and update their theories in the context of globalisation.

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