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Review: *The Media Were American: U.S. Mass Media in Decline* by Jeremy Tunstall

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The Media Were American: U.S. Mass Media in Decline

Jeremy Tunstall

New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008

pp. 465, index, \$ 74.95 (cloth)

To travelers arriving at any airport in the world, the Americanization of the world as a key ingredient of globalization is unmistakable. From the ubiquitous McDonalds, Pizza Huts, and Burger Kings to the fashionable Nike stores and Starbucks, American cultural influences are omnipresent. Once arrived in the hotel, travelers can catch up on the latest news through CNN, kick back with MTV, and be entertained by Disney cartoons and a wide variety of American TV programs. Three decades ago, this American cultural dominance convinced Jeremy Tunstall to write a book entitled, *The Media Are American: Anglo-American Media in the World* (1977). In it, Tunstall made the argument that most new media were first successfully developed in the United States, and from here were exported to every corner of the earth to a degree that they dominated world communication and culture by the 1960s and 1970s. In his new book, Tunstall employs the provocative title, *The Media Were American*, to alert his audiences to a new trend: as he argues, US media are in decline, and have been for quite some time, giving way to new national and international media trends across the globe.

To be sure, Tunstall is not writing the obituary of American global media influences in this study. In fact, as he highlights, "in terms of billions of audience hours, the United States media have continued to grow on the world scene" (p. xii). However, he argues rather convincingly that the peak of US media domination occurred during the middle of the 20th century, especially the post-World War II decades, and believes that the signs of the *relative* decline since the late 1970s are readily apparent. Tunstall discusses both the more familiar, newer international media developments like Latin American telenovelas, "Bollywood," and Al-Jazeera as well as less well known media trends such as Indian and Chinese soap operas, Egyptian television exports, or the nascent Nigerian film industry. While a jet-setting business traveler can watch CNN, MTV, or familiar TV shows anywhere in the world, thus, this reality might be quite deceiving in terms of media influence. To cite an admittedly extreme example, a viewer of CNN in the Netherlands would be part of a rather miniscule Dutch audience (0.1 percent). Yet this example points to a larger truth nevertheless: in most countries around the world, American TV imports especially are only a small portion of TV programming in the host countries and are usually not among the most popular shows. Tunstall states this point clearly in one of the key arguments of his study: "This book points to the resilience and increasing strength of national culture, national sentiment, and national media" (p. xiv).

As is probably apparent by now, Tunstall does not incorporate all media influences, and it is important to highlight the limits of the book. His study focuses primarily on print media, television, and film, and to a lesser degree on radio. Though he refers to MTV in his discussion, the impact of popular American music is not explored nor does he integrate the Internet or digital culture in his deliberations.

The strongest parts of Tunstall's analysis are those where he focuses on the recent media developments in some of the most populous countries. As he demonstrates convincingly, America's media influence is often directly related to the population size of a country. As a rule, the more populous a country, the more fully developed is its media as well. The ten most populous countries in the world (excluding the United States) make up roughly 60 percent of the earth's population. These ten countries also have some of the lowest rates of American and other foreign TV imports, usually between 5 to 10 percent of all programming (p. 449). By contrast, most of the smallest-population countries, such as Iceland, Ecuador, or Uganda import more than half of all their programs (p. 126).

In addition, according to Tunstall, the world's other most globalized media systems are located in three regions: sub-Saharan Africa, the Caribbean and Central America, and Europe (p. 6). Countries in these regions are among the heaviest importers of American media products, although for different reasons. Many sub-Saharan African countries are currently incapable of producing enough shows to fill the available airtime, and the country with the cheapest, and most readily available, programs is the United States. Europe and Central America have traditionally been the most lucrative markets for Hollywood films and American TV programming. In fact, the leading markets for US media imports are five European countries: the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the famously anti-American France (pp. 250-257). Yet even here, the trends are pointing towards relative decline. In Mexico, for example, the peak of US media influence occurred between 1930 and 1970, and Mexican *telenovelas*, together with Brazilian ones, have largely replaced not just national but also regional demand (390). In Western Europe as well there has been a noticeable increase of domestic productions since the mid-1990s which are pushing US imports off the airwaves (pp. 260-261).

The trend towards nationally resurgent media industries and regional expansion has been most pronounced in Asia, especially India and China. In Part 2 of his study, Tunstall focuses on these "big population countries" and highlights the rapid growth of their respective media industries since the late 1970s. In India, as he argues for example, "the main competition [...] is between the Hindi industry in Mumbai and the main regional industries, especially in south India. This is much more salient than any competition from Hollywood" (p. 150). In China, the challenges and competition are less regionally and linguistically based, since roughly 900 million Chinese speak Mandarin, and more related to access to the media. But China, too, according to the author, has made tremendous leaps in this respect. In 1980, there were only 5 million TV sets in China. By 2005, 330 million households had at least one television (pp. 194, 207). More importantly, China, similarly to India, imports less than 10 percent of its TV programming, most of it from other Asian countries. The US share of TV imports in 2000 was a mere 18 percent, corresponding to an estimated average of 2 percent of overall Chinese programming (p. 229).

In general, Tunstall needs to be commended on his laborious task of surveying these diverse countries and their media environments as well as pulling this widely dispersed information together in his study. Yet there is also much to criticize about his

book. In a somewhat cryptic sentence in the acknowledgements, Tunstall states that the editor of Oxford University Press “dealt diplomatically and effectively with an awkward author five time zones away” (p. xi). Unfortunately, it seems that the author won too many of their disagreements.

The fact of the matter is that this study could have benefited significantly from more editing and cuts. Chapters 3-5 in Part I, for example, are only very loosely tied into the main argument of the study. In Chapter 16, after announcing a focus on three world regions, Tunstall launches into a lengthy historical section on the development of American newspapers and media (pp. 332-347), before returning to the “Asian Media Tigers.” In addition, much of his discussion of specific national media in Part IV deteriorates into broad, general history surveys. Thus, readers are enlightened about whole national media systems in just a few pages: Egypt (pp. 366-373), Algeria (pp. 373-378), Saudi Arabia (pp. 382-385), Peru and Venezuela (pp. 395-400), Guatemala and Colombia (pp. 400-405), Ukraine (pp. 428-431), Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Central Asia (pp. 431-436), Russia (pp. 436-442) and so forth. As mentioned, many of these surveys do not focus on the media themselves but provide broad political and historical surveys. Finally, the writing in these sections is at times sub par and can leave the reader slightly befuddled. Just one case in point has to suffice here: “Many Arabs derive from tribes that lived close to, but not in, both the desert and a nearby town” (p. 362).

In summary, Tunstall’s study should have been shortened as well as edited more carefully, and the author should have stuck more closely to the main argument throughout the book. Despite these flaws, however, *The Media Were American* analyzes a very important global trend and convincingly highlights the relative decline of US media. As Tunstall argues, the power of national media industries has historically followed the economic prowess of countries. As new national and regional economic powers emerge and world politics become more multi-polar in nature, the media are moving along a similar trajectory. As he puts it: “The United States remain at the top of the pecking order but less unambiguously so than previously” (p. 246). And while Tunstall shies away from making clear predictions at the end of his study, it seems that the admittedly uneven trend towards national media powers and regional or non-American imports is likely to persist and even increase in the next few decades.

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