Post Americana: Twenty-First Century Media Globalization

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Abstract

This article shows how neoliberal deregulation, speculation, and financialization unleashed the unfathomable potential of global media, thereby disrupting prior assumptions about the scope, scale, and practices of media industries. After almost a century of American hegemony, the topographies of media industries are today growing more plastic and complicated as media institutions scale their ambitions and operations in an increasingly porous and dynamic environment. This article critically examines the features of US hegemony, the forces that are undermining it, and the emergence of a post-American era that is ineluctably global.

Keywords: Globalization, Disruption, Financialization, Conglomeration, Scale-Making, Policy

In 1941, *Life* magazine publisher Henry Luce invoked the prospect of an “American Century,” urging his compatriots to assume the responsibilities of global leadership, a vision that soon coalesced as an extended era of Pax Americana.² If Luce’s admonition seemed prescient to some, it was perhaps a bit tardy by the standards of Hollywood. For in fact American mass media had already extended their transnational influence in the wake of World War I and would take similar advantage after World War II and the Cold War, culminating in almost a century of cultural hegemony.

Yet today we are experiencing a proliferation of new media options that decenter, disperse, and erode cultural hierarchies and spatial boundaries so that the very concept of singular global leadership seems curiously outré. The manifestations of change are many: Daily media diets have grown more diverse and robust, with more than half the world’s population now living in cities that provide cable, online, and mobile services to billions of citizens. Cinema options have expanded dramatically as part of a middle-class leisure culture comprised of multiplexes, shopping malls, and theme parks, all of which revolve around branded artifacts that transcend national frontiers. Television broadcasting, a medium historically regulated

by the state, has given way to an unruly multiplicity of cable and satellite channels; meanwhile, more than a billion people download or stream audiovisual content on a range of personal devices, including tablets and smartphones. Moreover, viewer behaviors are increasingly driven by what they discuss and recommend on social media, making it difficult for commercial and government institutions to manage the flow of sounds, images, and ideas. Viewers have also become producers (or prosumers), not only in the realm of entertainment but also in news so that media professionals find themselves chasing stories that bubble up as well as those that filter down.

Thus, at a phenomenological level, one senses decentering, dispersion, and an erosion of boundaries. Yet at a broad structural level, these translocal and transnational media flows are in fact facilitated by a convergence of screening practices (e.g., multiplexes), television formats (reality), distribution platforms (streaming), modes of engagement (social media), and stylistic conventions (intensified continuity editing). Institutions of cultural production, distribution, and labor have become globally interconnected in unprecedented ways as well.

Some of these developments were anticipated before the turn of the century, but only in their most embryonic forms. Twenty years ago, satellite television—a transnational mode of *broadcasting*—was emblematic of the fin de siècle media revolution, whereas today's media are characterized by *personalization* via handheld digital devices. Another way to express this distinction is to note that in the year 2000, less than one percent of the world's population had access to a high-speed broadband connection, no one had a smartphone, and it would be four years before the launch of Facebook and nine years before the launch of Weibo. Seismic changes began to take place around the turn of the century and “technological disruption” is commonly invoked as the seemingly obvious explanation for what's afoot.³ Yet a more comprehensive perspective would account for the financial, institutional, and geopolitical forces that have fueled innovation, integration, and differentiation—forces which have in turn significantly altered the topographies of contemporary media. Although many media industries remain tethered to local communities and national societies, today's largest and most ambitious enterprises scale their operations in response to a transnational ensemble of considerations and constraints.

The arrival of the twenty-first century is therefore a momentous conjuncture that calls for a historically informed political economy that exposes the forces, fissures, and spatial dynamics of contemporary media industries. In particular, this article shows how deregulation, speculation, and financialization unleashed the unfathomable potential of *global* media, thereby disrupting prior assumptions about the scope, scale, and practices of media industries. After almost a century of American hegemony, the topographies of media industries are today growing more plastic and complicated as media institutions scale their ambitions and operations in an increasingly porous and dynamic environment. This article critically examines the features of US hegemony, the forces that are undermining it, and the emergence of a post-American era that is ineluctably global.

The American Century

Although ours is indeed an era of technological transformation, the broader context is framed by the denouement American cultural hegemony and most likely the end of an

imperial era. The long history of empire—be it Mayan, Chinese, Ottoman, or British—has featured recurring waves of military conquest and economic exploitation complemented by the spatial extension of cultural influence in art, architecture, language, entertainment, and cuisine. The American Century was distinctive, however, because it was punctuated by three *world wars* that vanquished preexisting imperial powers and stimulated a series of technological innovations that helped to consolidate the transnational preeminence of American popular media.

Before World War I, American cinema was a relatively domestic industry that relegated overseas distribution to Anglo counterparts who plied the shipping lanes and commercial exchanges of the British Empire. Yet during the 1920s while their European competitors were recovering from the ravages of military conflict, the Hollywood studios wasted little time establishing overseas offices and expanding their distribution operations.⁴ The war also provided a pretext for the US government to bring orderly innovation to radio research, banish British interests from the American airwaves, and organize what would become of the world's most powerful broadcasting oligopoly.⁵ Intentionally or not, World War I was good for business.

Tellingly, Hollywood glamor was featured on the cover of *Life* magazine while inside Henry Luce editorialized on behalf of American geopolitical hegemony.

US government relations with film and broadcasting companies grew tepid during the 1930s,⁶ but their interests realigned during World War II, and in the war's aftermath, major media companies were handsomely rewarded for their patriotism. Movie studios benefited from free trade policies, language dubbing services, and other forms of assistance.⁷ Wartime support for innovation in radio technologies and propaganda techniques established a framework for the rollout of national television, the rise of international telefilm distribution, and the development of satellite technologies.⁸ Once again, World War was good for business, and indeed American media became a global leader during the second half of the twentieth century, a preeminence that was nevertheless controversial in many parts of the world.

During the 1960s and 1970s, challenges to US cultural hegemony mounted, culminating in an international campaign for a New World Information and Communication Order, which attracted broad-based support at the United Nations until it was scotched by the Reagan-Thatcher governments, both of them committed to a neoliberal project of global economic restructuring and military escalation.⁹ The success of this Anglo-American alliance was perhaps most explicitly confirmed by the fall of the Berlin Wall, which augured the end of the Cold War and a dramatic expansion of capitalist enterprise, facilitating the ambitions of media companies that openly espoused their aspirations to bring Mickey and Batman to every village and neighborhood. Here again, war was good for business. Moreover, government-funded research during the Cold War had fostered the development of everything from microchips to network infrastructure. By the end of the century, American military and cultural institutions had secured seemingly uncontested influence around the world.

Yet in only a few years, this preeminence began to unravel, first with the bombing of the World Trade Center in 2001 and then with a protracted war on terror that would, over the course of fifteen years, squander tens of thousands of lives and more two trillion dollars while wreaking havoc across much of the Middle East and Central Asia.¹⁰ The war furthermore burdened the US economy, which fell into recession the very same year as the Trade Center bombing and again lurched into a calamitous financial crisis only seven years later. The stock bubble that initiated this cycle of decline was fueled by a speculative fever concerning the potential capacities of new computer and communication technologies, which emblematically was realized by the merger of America Online and Time Warner, the second largest in corporate history. Tellingly, this alliance between old and new media was first concocted during a conversation between two companies' CEOs when they first met in 1999 while attending a celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the People's Republic of China (PRC).¹¹ AOL Time Warner fashioned itself as a transmedia, transnational conglomerate that envisioned a future stretching well beyond the bounds of American empire. That plan foundered, as did the war on terror, but together they marked a significant coda to the American Century, one with implications for media industries today.

Post Americana: The Waning of US Hegemony

This very brief sketch of the interconnected histories of US media and military interests is useful for two reasons. First, it reminds us that geopolitics—at a very deep structural

level—shaped the contours of competition, collaboration, and craft in twentieth-century media industries. Second, it directs our attention to the recent decline of American cultural influence as being spawned not by “technological disruption” but rather by other factors, such as “China’s rise” (the PRC entered the World Trade Organization [WTO] in 2001), “fundamentalist jihad” (the World Trade Center was attacked 2001), and the increasing vitality of media institutions and users that operate in the interstices of the dominant global system (Nollywood scored its first transnational hit, *Osuofia in London*, in 2003; The Pirate Bay was founded in 2003). In other words, we have good reason to wonder whether, despite the enduring magnitude of US-based media conglomerates, the American Century is waning and the rules of the game are changing as the United States squanders its tactical and financial resources on trade disputes and the “war on terror.”

It is worth noting that this transitional moment is very much a product of calculated, orderly, and sustained endeavor. Not only are China, Russia, Turkey, and others challenging US strategic leadership, they are also challenging its cultural leadership. The PRC has, for example, self-consciously employed its policy apparatus to exploit the scale of its domestic media market en route to transforming and dramatically enhancing its film, television, gaming, and internet industries.¹² Moreover, Arab regimes and media moguls have avidly competed for cultural influence across the Middle East and North Africa, while at the same time the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) has honed a sophisticated propaganda apparatus via online and social media.¹³ Informal media institutions are posing challenges as well, including DIY producers, youth culture communities, and transnational pirates that have exploited the potential of a global communication infrastructure that was overbuilt during the hyperspeculative era of the 1990s dotcom boom.¹⁴ As the bubble burst at the turn of the century, telecommunication prices spiraled downward and remainder technologies flooded the market, opening the door to innovation and transnational cooperation among institutions and groups that had historically been at the margins of media production and distribution, Nollywood and ISIS being two of the most notable examples.¹⁵

One should of course be cautious about crafting a premature obituary for American media companies that have proven resilient in the face of previous challenges. For example, during the 1930s, German and Japanese film and broadcasting industries impressively enhanced their capacities at home and abroad.¹⁶ Similarly, during the Cold War, elaborate and sophisticated circuits of exchange existed among media institutions and actors in Second World and nonaligned nations.¹⁷ In other words, American media hegemony was never a stable and fully accomplished project, but was rather a participant in, and beneficiary of, larger geopolitical objectives. It waxed during much of the twentieth century and then began to wane in the face of novel challenges posed by new transnational competitors from Asia, Africa, and the Arab world. It was also affected by strategic shifts in Washington, as the Bush administration’s singular war on terror gave way to multilateral foreign policy during the Obama years and then to the neo-isolationist policies of the Trump administration. How, then, will US media industries fare in an era of diminishing US geopolitical power and where will new centers of cultural energy and innovation emerge? Moreover, what do these changes augur with respect to media competition, collaboration, and craft?

Speculation and Financialization: The Seeds of Decline

Before we explore these questions more closely, we should add another layer of analysis by circling back to the Reagan era to reflect on the collateral impact of financial deregulation, which spurred the development of new financial instruments and fostered the interconnection of securities markets around the world via sophisticated data networks. This policy shift had an especially profound effect on the strategic ambitions of major corporations, unleashing a wave of mergers and acquisitions that refigured the competitive and spatial terrain of media industries.

It is notable, for example, that Ted Turner (scion of an Atlanta billboard entrepreneur) and Rupert Murdoch (scion of an Adelaide newspaper publisher) rose to global prominence during the 1980s on a tide of “junk bonds,” a novel form of corporate financing that allowed smaller companies to quickly leverage the scale of their operations by offering risky high-interest bonds.¹⁸ To attract investors, Turner and Murdoch concocted lavish fantasies of a global village woven together by satellite television channels and eager transnational advertisers. As with any speculative enterprise that operates at the boundaries of imagination, their fanciful rhetoric at once invited admiration and emulation as well as criticism. And since their companies were highly leveraged and their bonds came due at regular intervals, the only way to stay solvent was for them to deliver ongoing and prodigious expansion of their enterprises. Each financing round was therefore tied to new acquisitions and each acquisition was complemented by flamboyant rhetoric about the potential of media globalization and corporate conglomeration. Despite carrying a heavy load of debt, they both succeeded: Turner was able to launch the first truly global television news service, and Murdoch was the first Australian to muscle his way into the inner circle of the American media oligopoly.¹⁹ Both benefited from deregulation and novel forms of financing while also benefiting from the unfathomable potential of global media markets.

Their rhetoric and financial strategies became infectious. In 1990, a group of Chinese investors led by Li Ka-shing, then Hong Kong’s wealthiest billionaire, launched Asia’s first privately owned telecommunications satellite, its footprint stretching from the Pacific to the Mediterranean and from Siberia to Sarawak. Although originally intended for corporate clients, Li’s son, Richard, seized the opportunity to use the satellite platform for building Star TV, a transnational television service aimed at the world’s most populous and diverse continent. Like his counterparts from Atlanta and Australia, Richard Li fashioned himself as a McLuhanesque visionary, stoking the embers of media revolution by making bold pronouncements about the twilight of mass broadcasting and the dawn of pan-Asian premium television. According to Li, Star promised to erase spatial barriers and national frontiers, bringing together far-flung audiences who were yearning to participate in a continental turn toward global modernity.²⁰

Such inflated claims and colorful rhetoric generally play a role in conjuring the potential for “spectacular accumulation,” according to Anna Tsing who notes that spectacular discourse has historically been a fundamental component of gold rushes, stock bubbles, and land grabs.²¹ It has also been a recurring feature of media revolutions, especially at moments

when the potential capacities of new technologies are so uncertain. Along with popular taste, patent claims, and political interests, spectacular discourse is a central factor in shaping the development and *value* of enterprises that operate at the leading edge of each new media innovation.²²

In accordance with this precedent, Richard Li assiduously fueled the fantasy of pan-Asian television to orchestrate the aspirations of transnational advertisers, corporations, and media enterprises. Star TV promised to ultimately reach three billion people, a truly colossal audience. Yet even if it rallied only a fraction of the whole, its potential was stunning enough to garner the attention of advertisers and media competitors, as well as Rupert Murdoch who, after an extended courtship, took control of Star in 1993 for US\$870 million, which at the time was a stunning price for a very speculative venture.²³

Indeed, the gold rush was on, as the 1990s became a decade of feverish deal-making that included the launch of pan-Arab satellite television services, the transnationalization of Bollywood film and Indian television, and the acquisition of two major Hollywood studios by Japanese electronics manufacturers. Anxious about the future, major American media corporations pressed for the passage of a new US telecommunications law, arguing that it was necessary to strip away regulatory restraints so that American companies could bulk up the size and scale of their operations in the face of growing global competition.²⁴ A wave of megamergers ensued, leading to a speculative bubble that popped during the dotcom meltdown at the turn of the century, a moment that was indelibly symbolized by the disastrous merger of Time Warner and America Online. Although that merger became a cautionary example, it nevertheless represented a broader transformation of expectations about the structure and performance of leading corporations in the media industries.²⁵

As conglomerates grew in scale, many engaged in new forms of financing and all became beholden to “shareholder value” as the preeminent principle of corporate governance. Rather than seeing their companies as serving a diverse set of stakeholders (e.g., owners, managers, workers, customers, publics, and communities), this new approach contended that corporations should weigh their strategies and administrative priorities based solely on the potential monetary return to investors. Critics say this “Copernican revolution,” which affected other industries as well as media, was spurred by policy changes during the 1980s that not only transformed corporate priorities but also elevated the influence of the financial sector in almost every aspect of commercial enterprise, what they refer to as financialization.²⁶ Today, hedge funds, investment banks, and institutional investors hold a supermajority of shares in most major corporations and they have consequently become reference points for decisions about resource allocation and corporate strategy. Indeed, executives constantly cultivate relations with financial analysts who represent the interests of these elite investors to the exclusion of other stakeholders.

Just as importantly, financialization has emerged in tandem with the growing scale and complexity of corporate conglomerates that now dominate national, regional, and global markets. Therefore, one of the key functions of shareholder value is to rationalize corporate structures and behaviors that are essentially unfathomable. It does so by celebrating quantitative metrics and short-term profitability over foundational investments in research, human resources, and the communities where corporations operate. Shareholder value seeks to evaluate each constituent element of the conglomerate through an endless

iteration of divisional profit and loss (P&L) reporting exercises that attempt to impose discipline on a sprawling enterprise. This fetishization of quantitative metrics has inexorably shifted priorities of the modern corporation from the production of goods and services to the *performance* of profitability and the *celebration* of shareholder value.

Consequently, today's corporate managers find themselves responding to the implacable and sometimes mercurial demands of financial analysts, hedge fund managers, and institutional investors. The resulting tsunami of performance metrics and data points obscure as much as they reveal, but they nevertheless provide justification for decisions large and small. In the media industries, financialization mercilessly pressures employees to do more with less, privileging commercial calculation over creative purpose and wringing out cost economies that show little regard for creative sacrifices or safety risks. These escalating demands are often insensitive to the realities of the workplace and they furthermore raise questions about the financial legerdemain that keeps the entire system in motion.²⁷

Thus, speculation, conglomeration, and financialization are key structural elements of media globalization, driving the expansion of media enterprises around the world. Whether it is Rotana in Dubai, Reliance in Mumbai, or CJ Entertainment in Seoul, film and television companies are increasingly employing a similar set of protocols and performance metrics. These logics are also at work in gaming, digital, and social media industries, which feature such leading companies as China's Tencent, France's Ubisoft, and Russia's Yandex. Just as importantly, many executives feel compelled to gather disparate enterprises under a single corporate umbrella, whether it is Televisa or Alibaba.

Twenty-First Century Media Industries

With these transformations in mind, we can delineate some of the features that distinguish media industries of the twenty-first century from their counterparts during the American Century. First, as mentioned above, financial instruments and circuits of distribution have changed dramatically since the 1990s. Not only are Hollywood films conceived, financed, and circulated transnationally, so too are Arab television shows, Korean pop songs, and French video games. Of course, many other cultural products still serve local and national audiences, but transnational financing and development have escalated dramatically, driven by competitive pressures and facilitated by new technologies. The geography of distribution is also being powerfully influenced by the expansion of streaming platforms, such as Netflix, Amazon, Tencent, and iQiyi. And even though US and Chinese technology giants are currently dominating the initial rollout of streaming media, the history of satellite television suggests that future topographies will more likely be determined by interfaces, programming, cultural affinities, and complementary services than by technological supremacy.²⁸

Second, the social relations of media production have stretched across space, following a trend that began in the feature film industry with the escalating costs of blockbuster entertainment that relies heavily on digital special effects. As budgets ballooned to hundreds of millions of dollars, major producers began to cultivate transnational partners and pools of labor. They also exploited currency and wage differentials, and tapped into a growing

network of tax and resource subsidies provided by governments that were seeking to develop their local media infrastructures. Today, cities like Vancouver, Prague, and Hyderabad compete to offer “world-class” facilities, workers, and subsidies to entice film, television, and video game producers from near and far, thereby fostering a more geographically mobile and protean mode of production.²⁹

Third, professional practices are likewise cross-pollinating, not only in studios and postproduction facilities but also in other aspects of the media industries. For example, MIPCOM (Marché International des Programmes de Communication) stages an annual gathering in the south of France that serves both as a venue for television programming sales and as a communal gathering where media executives from around the world share techniques, insider tips, gossip, and industry folklore. Similarly, film festivals (e.g., Busan) and awards ceremonies (e.g., African Movie Academy Awards) provide contexts for deliberation about aesthetic and professional practices, and they have become important sites for the transnational promotion of projects, talent, and celebrities.³⁰

Fourth, as media professionals interact in transnational venues and platforms, much of what they learn and observe filters back to national and local contexts where textual features and production techniques are imitated or adapted, resulting in hybrid content that is reimagined for different publics. Remarkably, adaptations move “up” and “down” as well as “across.” That is, content and aesthetics not only circulate widely, they are also refashioned to address different topographies of imagination. And they create new topographies. What was once a Latin American regional media market has recently become interwoven with the very substantial and prosperous Latinx market in the United States, resulting in a new hemispheric scale of popular imagination, creation, and circulation. A foundational genre of this media sphere is the telenovela, whose formal characteristics have changed dramatically as a result of globalizing forces and has in turn influenced producers outside the Americas, in places such as Istanbul, Lagos, and Beijing.³¹

Finally, we are witnessing new patterns of interaction between media users and producers, as well as among users themselves. Once seen primarily as consumers, today viewers and fans amply express themselves in a variety of ways and media producers systematically monitor this discourse, creating feedback loops that shape story lines and characters. Moreover, online commentary and recommendations have become fundamental factors in the popularity of media texts and in the expansion of media options.³²

In China, for example, social media sites such as Weixin, Weibo, and Tudou have stimulated an explosion of awareness about foreign titles and domestic niche offerings, which used to be unavailable in mainland mass media. Netizens also volunteer for subtitling teams that each year make thousands of foreign titles almost instantly available.³³ Moreover, user-generated content has mushroomed, again blurring the distinctions between media creators and consumers, and blurring distinctions between cultural points of origin.

Some audiences engage with these texts for purposes of entertainment and play, but research has also shown that storylines and favorite characters can become touchstones for political deliberation and activism.³⁴ Despite the prosocial potential of such endeavors, major corporations worry about unlicensed circulation of copyrighted material, arguing that they are

losing vast amounts of potential revenue. Although these claims are generally inflated, the scale of unlicensed usage is significant and organizations like The Pirate Bay not only indulge in piratical behaviors but also promote alternative perspectives on creativity, popular appropriation, and intellectual property.³⁵ Setting aside the particulars of these debates, it is important to note that peer-to-peer sharing has exponentially increased the translocal and transnational availability of media content.

Researchers have historically focused on media's capacity, or putative mission, to reinforce local and national ties, but we are now seeing the ways in which media worlds emerge, scale, and diminish in response to a relentless tug of actors and forces.³⁶ Although local and national media continue to thrive in many parts of the world, some of the largest and most influential media institutions insistently aim to develop content and services that address protean audience configurations and diverse topographies. These tendencies are what critics are attempting to explicate when they employ concepts such as media scape, sphere, region, and zone.³⁷

Post-American Media Are Global Media

Life magazine published Henry Luce's editorial in February 1941, a time when most Americans remained tentative about pursuing a more assertive role in world affairs. They preferred instead to imagine their country as an exception to the imperial regimes of Europe and Asia. Yet Luce contended that an American Century was inevitably dawning. He noted that the United States was already a leading force in business, technology, and popular culture, and it should likewise assume a preeminent role in world affairs. He wrote this, of course, on the eve of Pearl Harbor, an event that significantly altered the trajectory of US policy for the next fifty years. And just as World War I proved to be good for the American film and radio industries, so too would World War II augur the country's rise to superpower status and an even closer alignment between foreign policy and commercial media.

As the scale and operations of US media expanded during the 1950s, they did so in the midst of a calculated campaign to capture the "hearts and minds" of populations around the world. The government was seeking allies for its Free World alliance and Hollywood was pursuing renewed access to overseas distribution and exhibition territories. Moreover, by the 1960s, international telefilm syndication became one of the most profitable and rapidly growing aspects of the motion picture industries. US companies became world leaders who adhered nevertheless to *inter*-national protocols, scaling their products for a national domestic market and subsequently licensing them to lucrative overseas "aftermarkets."

This led to decades of relatively uncontested dominance until media industries then took another momentous turn during the 1980s, as a group of ambitious entrepreneurs—emboldened by neo-liberal deregulation, financial innovation, and economic restructuring—fashioned fantasies and built corporate empires based on the speculative appeal of global (as opposed to international) media. Not only did they profess to believe in the promise of global television, they also advocated the wisdom of markets over politics, even suggesting that national sovereignty was withering under the blistering advance of commercial satellite television.

Critics have argued that such hubris was ill-informed and that the ultimate effects of neoliberalism have been limited and disparate. Some even question the concept's utility for analyzing the political economy of places like Indonesia, Nigeria, and Ukraine.³⁸ Yet neoliberalism as a *political project*—one that was only partially and contingently realized—nevertheless engendered the very substantial changes outlined in this article, thereby transforming the conditions and contours of scale-making in media industries worldwide. Deregulation—the signature policy principle of neoliberalism—made it possible to conceive, finance, and establish institutions that disrupted conventional geographies of creativity and cultural exchange. It also encouraged and informed the development of “disruptive” satellite, cable, computer, broadband, and mobile technologies. The criticism that neoliberal logic was never fully realized in China, Indonesia, or Saudi Arabia obscures the fundamental ways in which neoliberalism made it possible to alter the scale at which media institutions are now imagined and operated.

After the turn of the century, the political project of neoliberalism was tellingly manifested in another way as well. National and local political leaders, sensing new challenges, began to refashion questions of cultural sovereignty (which previously had been secured via import quotas, censorship, and technological constraints) in terms of industrial policies aimed at growing creative capacity. With foreign media becoming more prevalent in domestic contexts and the scale of transnational conglomerates growing rapidly, policy-makers shifted attention to the creative economy, both to shore up cultural influence among resident populations and to participate in the increasingly global competition for high-paying jobs.³⁹ It became a truism of policy discourse that US leadership in the sciences, computing, and aerospace was twinned to its global leadership in popular music, film, and television. Policy documents then began to lump media jobs together with sophisticated white-collar employment, making them emblematic of a society's status and prosperity with respect to its peers. Economic and cultural survival increasingly seemed to be predicated on engagement with global media institutions and the demonstrated ability to secure a share of the action during the production of marquee blockbusters like *Titanic* or *Grand Theft Auto*.

At the same time, domestic media institutions, whether public or commercial, were encountering competitive conditions that stimulated awareness and adaptation of foreign professional practices and techniques, such as reality formats, martial arts stunt sequences, and first-person shooter games. Although adaptation and remediation have historically been common practices of media industries worldwide, the velocity of appropriation escalated as domestic markets grew more porous and competitive, and as the audience's awareness of foreign media grew more expansive. Even in cases where domestic policy and industry practices remained focused on national or local priorities, they nevertheless became more alert to and engaged with forces and influences from afar.

Post-American media industries are therefore situated within plastic and multipolar topographies where each player refigures cultural texts and institutional operations according to shifting scales of opportunity and constraint. And even though current conditions continue to reward politically connected, religiously affiliated, or nationalistic media, they are just as

likely to reward institutions and talent that can identify an engageable and distinctive topography that is not homologous with, nor identified with, a particular nation-state. Indeed, the most innovative enterprises, technologies, and texts tend to be plastic. In this sense, post-American media are fundamentally global and scalable.⁴⁰ Indeed, one of the most striking features of media institutions today is the way in which they self-consciously scale and re-scale their operations as they imagine the shifting topographies of the content and services they offer.

Bhaskar Sarkar has invoked the concept of plasticity to describe the dynamic qualities of contemporary aesthetics, but his argument resonates as well with the foregoing analysis of media industries. Sarkar contends that globalization

materializes from the mobile encounters between mutating nodes—as networks of shifting relations between entities that are themselves in process of becoming. A constellation of relations in conditions of chronic mutability, the global is best thought of as a fluid emergence rather than as a stable totality. What is at play here is rather distinct from a dialectical process: for the latter would lead to the sublation of difference into sameness, and eventual homogenization, whereas the global-as-emergence results from the transitory and contingent connections between singular local nodes.⁴¹

Thus, the distinction between American and post-American media is perhaps best understood as the passing of what Herbert I. Schiller so ably critiqued in his landmark 1969 monograph, *Mass Communications and American Empire*. In this and subsequent publications over the course of two decades, Schiller detailed the interconnected elements of US military, corporate, and cultural power, which prevailed throughout the Cold War, achieving peerless influence in the final decade of the twentieth century. Yet since that time, we have witnessed the waning of Pax Americana and the emergence of multinodal media industries that service complex new topographies of cultural production, circulation, and use.

Critical analysis of this overdetermined moment enriches our understanding of the disruptive forces at work in today's media industries, but it should also caution us to remain alert to facile presumptions that we have taken a turn toward happy diversity and personal empowerment. Although we are indeed witnessing the unraveling of an American superpower and a proliferation of possibility, we are also seeing the logic of financialization inexorably permeating the discourse and operations of media institutions large and small. In this sense, the global emerges not as the singular accomplishment of a national hegemon but rather as the multifarious and capillary effects of power under the sign of shareholder value.

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- ² Henry R. Luce, "The American Century," *Life*, February 17, 1941, pp. 61–65. The title of this article indexes the concept of Pax Romana, the 200-year "peace of Rome," an era of Roman military, social, and cultural influence over a vast terrain and a period of "relative" peace and stability. In the modern era, Pax Britannica (1815–1914) and Pax Americana (1944–2003) are seen as analogous moments of British and American influence. My use of "Post-Americana" points to the entangled histories of American military and cultural power and to the demise of American influence in the twenty-first century.
- ³ Technological disruption is a pervasive trope in mainstream and scholarly discourse, suggesting that new technologies have the power to transform everything from family interactions to market relations. It is derived from two core concepts: technological determinism (the notion that technology is an autonomous force that drives social change) and disruptive innovation (a concept in economic and management studies). Technological determinism is common in popular press accounts and futurology, such as Stewart Brand. *The Media Lab: Inventing the Future at M. I. T* (NY: Penguin Books, 1988). Yet one finds elements of this perspective even in the work of critical media scholars such as Tim Wu, *The Master Switch: The Rise and Fall of Information Empires* (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010) and Jean Burgess and Joshua Green. *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture* (Medford, MA: Polity, 2009). As for the management literature on disruption, one of the first and most influential works is Clayton Christensen, *The Innovator's Dilemma: When New Technologies Cause Great Firms to Fail* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1997).
- ⁴ Kristin Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment: America in the World Film Market, 1907–34* (London: British Film Institute, 1985); Ian C. Jarvie, *Hollywood's Overseas Campaign: The North Atlantic Movie Trade, 1920–1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Ross Melnick, *Projecting Power: Global Film Exhibition, Local Conflicts, and Hollywood Cinemas as Cultural Embassies, 1925–2013* (NY: Columbia University Press, forthcoming).
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