

# Reconsidering Empires and Imperialisms in Media and Communication History

A bilingual pre-conference (English & French) sponsored by the  
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Communication technologies and empires are profoundly intertwined and their relationship has been a hot topic for media scholars and communication historians. The work of Harold Innis (1950), who famously analyzed how ancient empires were shaped by specific media technologies (and their bias) inspired many generations of researchers. Focusing on more recent forms of imperial power, Headrick (1981) has shown that media and technology played a central role in European imperialism. The railway, steamship, and submarine cables are examples of the numerous technologies that eased the imposition of colonial rules and served the communication of imperial regimes. More recently, research focusing on media and empires have looked at the British (Kaul, 2006), Portuguese (Garcia, Kaul, Subtil & Santos, 2017), and French empires (Brulant, 2021).

While the advent of the global media system in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries is often associated with the rivalry among imperial powers (France, Germany, Britain, and later, Japan and the United States) (Griset, 1991; Hills, 2002; Tworek, 2019), communication and history scholars have developed a nuanced conception which also emphasizes the complex interweaving of national interests, transnational media corporations, regulatory bodies, and local forms of resistance in empires (Thussu, 1998; Boyd-Barrett, 2016; Winseck & Pike, 2007; Ribeiro, 2014; Tudesq, 1992).

Empire and imperialism are not only objects, but also plural concepts generating many streams of critical research. The notion of “media empires” proved to be useful for approaching many phenomena, including the penetration of American television networks in South America (Frappier, 1969), specific commercial ventures (Kellner, 2012; Tryon, 2020), and the growing interconnections between media technologies (Holt, 2011). The concept thus raises interesting methodological questions for media scholars and communication historians as it involves both a very local approach to fieldwork or its delocalization, a focus on a specific media or their complex interweaving.

The concept of “cultural imperialism” gained traction in the late 1960s, especially in Latin America (Pasquali, 1963; Dorfman & Mattelart, 1971), and had profound consequences in the field. The concept not only provided the major conceptual anchor to the New World Information and Communication Order movement of the late 1970s, but it also raised criticisms resulting in new approaches. In many respects, the “active audience” thesis, as epitomized by the famous *Dallas* studies (Ang, 1985; Katz & Liebes, 1990), took shape as an alternative to the critique of cultural imperialism and set the stage for the never-ending political economy vs. cultural studies debate.

In *Empire*, Hardt and Negri (2000) theorized the empire as an emerging form of political power succeeding to the decaying forms of imperialism. In Hardt and Negri’s new “deterritorialized” empire, media and communication played a different role than in their Innisian predecessors. Acknowledging the decentralized nature of media networks and the lesser role of State power over the media, Hardt and Negri emphasized both their power over visibility (and invisibility) and their role in the “communication of fear,” as media creates “forms of desire and pleasure that are intimately wedded to fear” (2000, p. 323).

In the last decades, communication research may have moved away, at least in part, from such critical standpoints. For example, as Arouagh and Chakravartty (2016) recently argued, the dominant narrative of new media “revolutions” largely replaced an earlier critical focus on media and imperialism in the aftermath of the Arab Spring and social media-based political movements. A return to such critical perspective seems particularly needed since past discussions about empires and imperialism were limited and contributed to a “largely Eurocentric understanding of cultural imperialism” (Arouagh & Chakravartty, 2016, p. 560).

The current marginalization of critical research can be understood in the larger context of the history of communication research, which has profound imperialist undertones and implications. Wilbur Schramm’s conception of communication research was considered as a universal model to be imported and transplanted in every country, including China (Lin & Nerone, 2015). At first, subfields such as “international communication” and “communication and development” were devoted (to some extent) to achieving cultural imperialism (Samarajiva, 1987).

As media and communication research enters a “post-disciplinary” era (Waisbord, 2019), the concern over empire and imperialism seems to have migrated to subfields such as postcolonial studies, decolonial studies, and subaltern studies. While media scholars and historians are slowly engaging in a dialogue with these fields (Robinet, 2018; Derfoufi, 2018), these encounters once again raise new epistemological and methodological challenges (Merten & Krämer, 2016). Post-colonial perspectives recently emphasized the complex forms of intercultural communication taking place in the aftermath of empires (Lüsebrink & Moussa, 2019). Building on the work of Edward Said (1993), other research focuses on

*l'impensé colonial*, that is the discourses, representations, and imaginaries that perpetuate and legitimize colonial rules (Ezra, 2000; Bancel, Blanchard, Thomas & Pernsteiner, 2017; Demougin, 2018). Research in the subaltern studies tradition focuses on identity formations that challenges dominant and totalizing perspectives about “nation” (Dube, 2010).

Held in Paris, this ICA preconference aims to explore the many crossroads between media, communication, empire, and imperialism. Given that the French empire was among the most powerful in the history of humankind – from the early days of the Carolingian Empire to nowadays’ archipelago of *départements and territoires d’outre-mer* – and that Paris is full of imperial traces and sites, papers related to the French or Parisian contexts are especially welcome.

We invite papers that address topics such as:

- + the history of media and communication research as a form of cultural and scientific imperialism;
- + the history of “media empire,” old and new;
- + media and communication as constituents of imperial power or as sources of resistance;
- + under-studied hypothesis such as the connection between imperial power and the communication of fear;
- + the history and circulation of concepts such as imperial media, media imperialism, media empire, cultural imperialism, etc.;
- + media and communication phenomena in the “long shadow of empire” (Alhassan & Chakravartty, 2011);
- + connections between media and communication history and fields such as postcolonial studies, decolonial studies, and subaltern studies;
- + methodological and epistemological challenges raised by the concepts of “empire” and “imperialism”;
- + forms and practices of “imperial nostalgia” (Lorcin, 2018; Mitchell, 2021), reminiscences and traces of empires (monuments, statues, museums, etc.);
- + representations, discourses, and imaginaries perpetuating colonial forms of domination;
- + identity formation and performance in imperial context.

Abstracts of 350 words (maximum), in French or English, should be submitted no later than January 15, 2022 (by email: [Historypreconf2022@gmail.com](mailto:Historypreconf2022@gmail.com)). The event will be held in the heart of Paris (*2e arrondissement*) and will be easily accessible through public transportation (“Bourse” metro station).

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