

International Circulation and Communication Distortions in Global Capitalism

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- *Inequality in the processes of the production, distribution and consumption of industrial communication resources, bearing the international panorama in mind, is expanding in the current phase of capitalism and giving rise to an updating of the debate about the need to adopt public policies in the now globally articulated areas of communication and culture. At a time when the 25 years of the MacBride Report and the proposal for the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) are being reanalysed, media and technology distortions are expressed in a complex manner through a lack of equity in the distribution and use of news and communication resources, but also because the content in circulation usually refers to global culture.*

The current climate is marked by the disproportion in the infocommunicational flow between rich and poor countries that involves not just a change in traditional cultural products but also the exchange of corporate information, a space that has been growing since the final decades of the 20th century with the acceleration of capitalist globalisation. With digitalisation, the imbalances in this sector are multiplying and promoting all the already-existing distortions. As in the past, relationships of supremacy today sustain the global media system, which justifies public information and

communication policies as indispensable. These policies, however, should be conceived as parts of a broad project that aims not just to achieve cultural and digital inclusion but also bring overall society together, within the frameworks of a project of society that should be built with more equity and space for dialogue.

The geographic origin of the cultural good in circulation is a datum that should be considered, in its relationship to cultural identities, in a broad sense and for what it represents in micro- and macroeconomic results, although it is not the only element that has to be analysed. Given that domination is not exclusive to outside forces and that these processes are reproduced vertically and horizontally, there is no informational charge, on the part of national productions, with a superiority of principles or an effectiveness of democratic commitment, and the same thing happens with important symbolic goods. In fact, the main question is that the products of both national and international cultural industries carry global culture as a leading brand, expanding the trading form and the incorporation to consumption. Similarly, an enormous digital abyss is separating and increasing the economic distance between North America, Europe and parts of Asia, on the one hand, and Latin America and Africa, on the other.

During the Cold War, free circulation mainly proposed the adhesion of citizens, while today it has given rise to an expansion of businesses. Even if it had repercussions that went beyond private economic circles and was aimed at conquering the supporters of capitalism, the free circulation of information was inserted in the sphere of the same liberal spirit that proposed free trade. The formal justification, however, was political, based on article 19 of the UN's Declaration of Human Rights, the goal of which was freedom of expression and communication. In the mid-1980s, the discussion lost force, coinciding with the

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weakening of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco), whose action in the debate on communicational inequality was extremely important - particularly with the approval of the MacBride Report, whose 11 principles were to establish the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO).

Free Circulation

A New World Information and Communication Order that makes the debate topical again is therefore more important today. It is even more emblematic in 2005, when the second phase of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) will be held in the city of Tunis. The free circulation of information is not the same as freedom of information. On the one hand, there is the question of content, in which the control of media actions essentially by private logics establishes guidelines and restricted agendas that impede many social actors (particularly those associated to grassroots movements) from setting out their demands. On the other hand, because they concern media paid for by consumers, there is a limit in the reception process, in so far as a large part of the population (particularly in poor countries) are unable to meet the economic conditions to offset its costs and are therefore excluded from the right to enjoy these symbolic goods.

It is in this problematic situation where the origin and partiality of what is processed as information lies. In other words, free circulation does not result in cultural diversity. Also, because it is not a truly free circulation, because it depends on the superior economic power of those who can participate with greater qualitative and quantitative capacity, it can do away with many cultures, or downsize them and make them hybrids within the sphere of capitalism, something which, whichever way you look at it, undermines diversity. It is thus clear that this circulation is unequal and is part of the general trend of capitalism which, in and of itself, is exclusive and boosts imperialist positions, even though, in the circumscription of global capitalism, other possibilities and agreements of integration, exportation and the consumption of material and symbolic products are feasible.

Before the maintenance and expansion of inequalities, it is essential for public agents to act on the market. In reality,

although without the same mobilising force, Unesco is one of the few centres with global goals for formulating alternative policies. They include the Draft Convention on the Protection of the Diversity of Cultural Contents and Artistic Expressions (Unesco 2004, 1), based on the idea that “freedom of thought, expression and information, as well as [...] the pluralism of the media, guarantee [...] the full development of cultural expression and the possibility that the immense majority of people have access to it”. The Convention, which has to be approved by the Unesco General Conference and then adhered to by the member countries in order to be valid in national territories, can reinforce the struggle for the democratisation of culture and communication. The proposed measures include reserving a space for national cultural goods and services; assuring independent cultural industries access to production and distribution markets; promoting the free flow of ideas and cultural goods, helping non-profit organisations; and promoting public-service institutions.

Logically enough, actions by states and supra-national bodies such as Unesco tend to concern the difficulties of the poorest regions, as rich countries, mainly the US and the members of the European Union in general, have enough strong organisations to benefit from the dispute in global capitalism. Also, the consequences that capitalist activity has on culture are more perverse in under-developed countries, where it is standard for the media to be controlled by oligopolistic groups organised on a family basis and with political ties. In the case of Brazil, the historical delay in terms of public control over media events was recently shown when the attempts for change in this sector, proposed by the government of president Luis Inácio Lula da Silva, such as an Audiovisual Act and a National Council of Journalism, were strongly contested by the media, to the point that they lost their essence and in some cases sunk without trace. As also happens in Argentina, the main Brazilian TV stations are heavily in debt (particularly externally) and this makes them incapable of tackling the future investments needed to accompany technological change.

In Venezuela, the open confrontation between president Hugo Chávez and the cultural companies reveals the difficulty in implementing anti-hegemonic projects. However, in late 2004, the government won an important legal victory

when the Television Act was approved, which was harshly criticised by the dominating international sectors. The Venezuelan media is carrying out a systematic anti-Chávez campaign that includes the participation of the global media, as occurred in the attempted coup d'état of April 2002. Then, practically the whole of the media were betting on Chávez falling, but he held onto power thanks to extensive continent-wide negotiations. On the other hand, community radio stations, articulated by the internet and allied with mobile phones, mobilised the population, which shows the potential for criticism and resistance that communication should have.

Communication Policies

More than before, it is essential today to adopt national, regional and global communication policies in the face of the high disparity of the infocommunicational flow between rich and poor countries and, in particular, because the messages are usually linked to dominating matrices, independently of their origin. The world needs a clash of the democratisation of communication, conceived by the MacBride Report (1987, 289) as “the process by which (1) the individual becomes an active element and not just a simple object of communication; (2) the variety of messages that are exchanged grows constantly; and (3) the level and quality of social representation in communication also grows”. This democratisation should be processed with social control, with viability via public policies that break up the concentration of media ownership and upon the media up to demands from civil society. All of this involves regulatory frameworks that recognise the economic abyss in the heart of populations and the cultural diversity that sets them apart, and which allows the monitoring, critical assessment and inspection of the content of media companies.

However, public policies are increasingly the topic of debate and generally framed as State interference in private business. On the one hand, economic neoliberalism condemns all State action on the market, accusing it of reducing business competitiveness, something which can only be fully provided by the free market. On the other hand, liberal political thought also opposes the control of cultural

content because of the fear of a return to censorship. Mattelart (2002, 156), as always, sums up well the question of the current difficulties about the proposal and adoption of public policies:

“Freedom of communication does not have to be the object of any ban. Reservations that could be made in relation to this concept of freedom would immediately be branded by pressure groups as attempts to restore censorship. Only sanctions exercised by the consumer on the free market can govern the circulation of cultural and news flows. The principle of self-regulation takes legitimacy away from all attempts to formulate public, national and regional policies on this matter. They do not find a reception or even questions about the role the State should play in coordinating the information and communication systems in order to preserve public channels of expression in relation to the logics of segregation before the market and technique, not even those related to the function of civil-society organisations as a decisive pressure factor for demanding this arbitration from the public authorities. The world is metamorphosing into ‘consumption communities’. In short, the word ‘community’ has never been used in such an indifferent and empty way”.

The configuration of public communication policies (which have to emerge from the confrontation between civil society, State and market) run up against the lack of mobilisation which the issue raises, in part because cultural businesses have not promoted them. The monitoring work carried out by the Communication, Political Economy and Society research group, together with the main television news shows, newspapers and magazines in Brazil, shows that the media do not report on the media. In other words, big media-related topics about ownership, access, guidelines and forms of spreading news are almost never dealt with and generally rejected in favour of stories about the private lives of artists and promotional acts relating to the company or its owners (Brittos 2004). Thus the public debate about contemporary issues (and particularly one so essential as the building of structures and lives in a world as complex as that of communication), which cannot get off the ground today without the collaboration of the media, are harmed because, if they are not shown on TV, there is little left

of society's participation in the building of regulatory frameworks.

This problem generates a vicious circle in which the absence of news about the media stops interest from being generated in the issue, which is not characterised in terms of regulation, an instrument which could contribute to a different position being adopted, and there is public control of the content in cultural industries, with the presence of the State and the representation of the public in general. Also, we are aware of the historical drama of partiality that usually surrounds news coverage, especially in the case of industrial communication (because of the historical commitments of cultural companies and because the media space is a precarious space as it presents constructions of reality and a discourse related to reality but is not reality, because when facts are presented, they are built, which involves suppression and distortion). In the process of formulating public policies, government decisions should adopt an interactive dynamic built on the social terrain. In other words, the action of the non-hegemonic over media technology should complete the cycle for its real social, as well as market, incorporation. In this incomplete mediation of media topics, where the drawing of reality that is shown does not include all the nuances, it is also up to the alternatives to pressure the cultural industries with their proposals to offer them to society.

Despite this, the State intervenes increasingly less in economic cycles. The State's role in global capitalism is changing: it is moving away from direct economic activity and qualitatively changing its regulation to reorientate it towards shoring up markets and increasing privatisation. There is also a retreat in the public and private policies of the redistribution of income, a decline in mass production, a rise in productivity, a growing vertical disintegration of businesses, which choose to contract third parties instead of doing all the work inhouse, and general flexibility, manifested mainly in terms of investment spaces (in the wake of liberal economic policies), occupation (rupture of the rigidity of the work relationship), production (more versatile and profitable systems, such as just-in-time and segmenting) and consumption (giving a view to the greatest variety available). In all of this process, technology allows a nimble exchange of information, more business efficiency and a wealth of goods produced by companies, which

includes the economy as a whole that reaches the communication and information industries in particular.

We are currently seeing the recovery of US hegemony, as shown in the military field by the attacks on part of the Arab world and in the cultural field by the penetration of US films. The cultural autonomy of the majority of countries is largely subordinated to the production and distribution plans of the groups that operate cultural businesses and the strategies of powerful international conglomerates. All these processes enter the sphere of capitalist restructuring, the initial framework of which was the US's unilateral decision in 1971 under then-president Richard Nixon to stop fixing gold to the US dollar, which meant the Bretton Woods model was dissolved and international currency thus ceased to exist. The Bretton Woods institutions dated back to 1944 when, under pressure by the US, the WW11 allies held a financial and monetary conference (in the US city of Bretton Woods, New Hampshire), where they decided to define the dollar as the international currency in exchange for a commitment from the US to ensure the dollar could be converted into gold.

Having revoked the fixed exchange-rate system established by the Bretton Woods agreement, exchange rates then began to fluctuate, depending on economic fundamentals (such as the rate of inflation, public debt and trade balance) and purely speculative operations. The measures adopted after the 1970s can be summed up in a new international division of work and an increased strengthening of the biggest corporations, because they had lower relative costs. With the promotion of competition, given that the market tends to act under less guidance from the State, the big companies increased investment in technology with the automation of tasks and the interconnection of units, which went on to act in a greater number of places. There was a structural and historic change in the nature of capitalism, which resulted in the increasing importance of markets and reached dominating companies, which had to adopt to compete and confront each other on a greater number of markets.

The State's regulatory ability was undermined by the emergence and consolidation of world markets of production, distribution and consumption led by powerful international conglomerates which move amounts that generate powers able to wear down the action of public

organisations. They depend directly on global factors such as technological innovations, the handling of cultures, interest rates and monetary policies, which makes it hard for internal authorities to act. In this new dynamic, capitals are internationally disputed by States, which also implement actions to capture them, through tactics aimed at increasing the attractiveness of their internal markets and the competitiveness of their corporations, something which includes deregulation and privatisation. The neoliberal strategy consisted, before the fall in internal demand in the central countries, of a rise in productivity through 'industrial restructuring, mergers and acquisitions' and the rupture of the 'organised work power, to reduce the dispersion of profits, and the closure of the 'windows of opportunity' that had opened up to a number of Third World countries through policies to replace imports" (Chesnais 1998, 145). These ideas were disseminated and accepted as a new global order, suitable for giving rise to a new period of broad development.

As well as neoliberalism, contemporary globalisation affects the power of categorical decision-making in the state/nation, as external actions involve more intensity internally and State steps have more international repercussion, observation is recommended and, not rarely, discussion beyond borders. Globalisation policies, "inspired by the Anglo-Saxon ideology of competitive individualism, the free market and cosmopolitan capital", "tended to give a new impetus to a 19th century logic – that of the domination of the economy over society, the market system over the state" (Braga 1998, 140). In the current system, the States are revealed as a lesser force than the international financial market, mover of amounts able to change the situation of national societies and which, although criticised from various points of view, are the centre of attention of economic and political agents, which makes independent action difficult and generates uniform policies. We can see an emptying of State power in the regulation of its economy and the formulation of independent economic policies.

Information Society

In the new capitalist reality, information is the big added value to goods. However, transformed, the work orga-

nisation is still in the capitalist fashion and its greater sophistication, through new technologies, does not eliminate the essence of its position with regard to capital. There is a displacement of capitalism over other areas and places that were until recently, to a greater or lesser extent, removed from the dispute over capitals, as well as a push in the direction of a new moment, which is being renewed and is not overcome by the intervention of socialism which rather has failed in almost every country where it has been tried. This capitalist repositioning includes the profound changes being experienced by the world panorama of communications, where the participation of private capital in many areas and countries is new and the sector is stimulated by the surge and proliferation of technological innovations, which motivate economic and cultural changes.

That is why the elevation of technology does not correspond with a circumstance redressed as a unique or at least supreme value in social restructuring. For Bernard Miège (1999, 26), the existence of an information society is "as unthinkable today as it was yesterday", given that it is one thing to reveal significant changes and identify the emergence of new 'paradigms' and another "to conclude with the passing of a new era" of humanity, and that the impression that things relating to information have affirmed their supremacy is misleading, as the elements of continuity with the capitalist industrial society continue to be very strong, even where production is being automated. If the features of continuity are superimposed on those of rupture, there is an evolution within the system itself, not a revolution. In terms of social organisation or forms of production, capitalist hegemony continues (and is even stronger), in the same way that the traditional media coexist with the media that arose during the final decades of the past century, even though there is a general trend towards digitalisation.

Despite the innovative features paired with modern economic systems, an effective revolution has not been identified. There has been a change promoted in the sphere of capitalism, whose actors have revealed an undeniable ability to adapt, related also with the appropriation of technology as a whole, including that which may occasionally have appeared to deviate from the hegemonic model. "The transformations recorded and announced in the field of information and communication technologies

(ICTs) during the last two decades of the 20th century were penetrating the collective consciousness with the underlying idea that we were facing a 'new model of revolution', the culmination of which would be the emergence of a new world" (Prado; Franquet 1998, 16). That is why the idea of an information-based revolution is so widespread. The information society, according to Becerra (1998, 36) is a new form of production development (informational) where the source of production and the strategy of expanding capital are based on technological innovation linked to the centrality of data processing, as well as the growing inequality in profit distribution. But the question is whether the growth of the news and technology flows that allow this expansion are developing and being included in the industrial pace. The main problem with the idea of admitting the arrival of the information society is that it was conceived as a definitive change in the direction of an opposite course.

Castells (1999, 46) presents a special distinction between the information society and the informational society: the former indicates the role of information in society, but in a broad sense, as the communication of knowledge, a decisive aspect in the history of humanity, through to "medieval Europe which was culturally structured and up to a certain point unified by scholasticism"; the latter involves a specific historical period "in which generation, processing and transmission become one of the fundamental sources of productivity and power because of the newly emerged technological conditions" in this social formation. When the term 'information society' is applied with the meaning of the contemporary centrality of the communicational phenomenon, reservations should be made, emphasising that the industrial society and its insertion in a capitalist production system was not overcome. However, even if a reservation is made on the use of the term, it is important to specify that the idea of 'information society' does not necessarily require a value judgement of positive appreciation, but it does require a confirmation of a new place for information in society and corporations.

If disseminated indistinctly, technological constructions join together at the same time as they reproduce, participate in daily individual and collective challenges and transmit much of their logic to the context in which they are developed. Thus, the process of technological innovation usually produces ruptures, even if partial ones, relating to

the forms of creating precedents, connected with the processing of new aesthetics, which can be absorbed creatively, subverting that which is put and even creating new parallels with non-homogenous proposals. However, as a happy medium capitalism establishes technology regulations that favour the process of competition between individual capitals. These ruptures tend to be peripheral or to be incorporated in market terms. As the information/communication dichotomy becomes a key element in contemporary capitalist production rationality, this configuration has produced a serious interpenetration and not a replacement of industrial activities by informational ones. The importance of information and communication in contemporaneity is not denied, but their autonomous role is questioned.

Thus, if we consider cultural production in capitalism, historically determined by this mode of production, a problematic reading of the structure/superstructure model, which historically relates the economic, political and ideological spheres, is imposed. It could be said that, as the connection of culture companies advances with the rules of working inherent to the market, or with the structure, they disconnect from the direct superstructural relation or the obligation to ideologically serve capitalism, although the ideological level does not disappear, as it is delineated from the (renewed) commitment with the consumer society. In this course, we have to agree with Garnham (1983, 22), for whom, on the basis of "monopolistic capitalism, the superstructure is industrialised and invaded by the structure" and the distinction between structure and superstructure is not respected, "not, as post-Althusserians tend to think, because the structure is transformed into a new autonomous superstructural discourse, but because the superstructure is included by the structure".

Cultural Circulation

This industrialisation of the superstructure represents the advance of capitals over the world of culture, which necessarily involves the absorption of management techniques inherent to traditional industry by the production and distribution markets of symbolic goods. The advance reaches work relations and also control methods of the

conception and development of communicational elements, although the randomness of the realisation of these products continues to exist, and although the same certainty over their results does not exist in comparison with traditional economic areas. This movement is included in the logic of a capitalism still in expansion, an unfinished model, which is in keeping with the criticism of the ideas of a new society before the changes of recent decades, emphatically those connected to technological innovation and the repositioning of information: the basis continues to be the same, although with the incorporation of other techniques there is an expansion of the capitalist rationality for other areas of profitability, including the cultural one. In other words, the changes are produced under the aegis of the industrialisation that advances and is transformed, but does not end.

The drama of infocommunicational imbalances is not limited to the geographic question, but it is limited to the commitment of the messages in circulation. It involves a global culture committed to capitalism, in its macroprocess of reproduction, without that necessarily meaning the appropriation of references from other cultures or response to the system. Benjamin Barber (2003, 41) speaks of the 'McWorld' culture based on the United States. He says this "American world culture, the McWorld culture, is less hostile than indifferent to democracy" and that its goal is a "universal consumer society that would not be composed of tribes or citizens, all potential bad customers", but only by consumers, which form a new race of men and women. This content, by predominantly circulating around all the hegemonic networks, creates an imbalance as the alternative channels are not just infinitely reduced but also lack the resources to reach the public at large (or to conquer it using attractive content).

The question here is the model of production; there exists a hegemonic form of developing cultural products, which includes elevated economic investments, but also experience in development, the control of the whole of the processes of production and distribution, the getting-together of adequate equipment and the presence of adequate professionals. It is clear that these conditions tend to disseminate by the cheapening of technological resources, and especially the diffusion of qualified professionals. However, the expansion of some elements usually

mainly favours other companies active on the market, which do not occupy the top two positions but are moderately capitalised to take advantage of the new situation. On the other hand, non-hegemonic organisations, which act in the alternative communication space, find it hard to promote themselves to the point of producing a model similar to the dominant one and which is recognised as superior by the majority of consumers, which prefer it not just occasionally as they become loyal in this space. This public thus ends up recognising a form of making culture which has meaning for it, even if offered with other media, in the same way that the internet surfer is increasingly guided by websites and products offered by the traditional cultural industries .

However, this hegemonic model does not represent the uniformity of the whole of the cultural reality, as it is broad enough to include a set of different models, connected to the capitalist production of communication. It is the different models that guarantee the business specificity, i.e., the ability to compete with some differentiation on the part of the diverse organisations and, even more, on the part of the different products of a same company. The more quantitative and qualitative components the techno-aesthetic model brings together, the greater attention the organisation will get from the public. From there, the businesses are distributed in popular preference, both in terms of the general and segmented markets. In reality, the relationship here is also dialectic, and is resolved on the basis of the 'standardisation' and 'differentiation' formula characteristic to cultural production. To win the consumer, the symbolic good should respect a set of features inherent to the hegemonic reality, necessary so they can be recognised by the public. When this stage has been finished, some slight differential element should be presented, because if the product is absolutely equal to the others it will not represent anything new that warrants the act of purchasing, paying or simply paying attention (which shall be exploited to the full on the advertising market).

Although the problem has various sides, the imbalances connected to the geographic space of the content and the inequality in the distribution of information and communication technologies persists. Because it involves audiovisual products, the US domination is divergent, and there is little space even for other developed countries in the confrontation with the force of the Hollywood industry,

present in the collective imagination of a great many people across the planet and forms the par excellence example of what is conceived as global culture (to agree with the previously discussed ideas of Barber) is formed in this sector. What happens is that the major American studios dominate the model with great security - they know how to make films within moulds that are easily assimilated by the public like no other industry in any other country. That is why they are capitalised, and they unite technology and human resources to produce a film product that is absorbed by the collective imagination of consumers as something expected, recognised or desired. This, however, does not eliminate the creation and production space of other countries, like India, which has a great many viewers, nor all the other types of public, who form niche markets and are interested in art films. Also, the US success (and of all industry, cultural or not) rests on the conjugation of well-structured production strategies in conjunction with privileged ways of accessing consumers, which distributes the product to the right place and in the right amounts, usually to the detriment to local filmmaking.

The capitalist hegemony is thus to a large extent North American, because, in terms of mass culture, the US, having the advantage of precedence, works mainly with the same elements, which go on to become part of the global culture and are integrated in the global collective memory. Thus its economic strength, as the biggest producer and exporter of industrialised symbolic goods, is fundamental. "The global commercial media are dominated by around 10 vertically integrated conglomerates", mainly American, and

their essential features are "their financial interests in advertising and their absolute mercantilism" (Herman; McChesney 1999, 170). This relationship between the US and global culture does not, however, exclude taking advantage of references from other different cultures, Western or not, which are reinterpreted in this absorption.

Market Spaces

To build and make it a leader abroad, a strong domestic market is needed that allows a great number of entries of resources, essential for covering the high costs of filmmaking. Costs should be paid within the country of production, so that the prices practised internationally are competitive. The US manages to do all of this extremely well, both when it involves the public paying directly (films) and when it is advertising that supports the media. Following this reasoning (and even though this work has not ended in particular with a reasoning of critical and theoretical analysis of society and media phenomena) Table 1 shows the main features of the US production/export equation - America being the country that invests the most in advertising, with three times the total of the next country listed on the table and more than 10 times that of the third. If we accept the strength of the advertising market as being indicative of the possibility for the strength of cultural industries, the figures speak to the supremacy of the US, even over other Northern countries, and show the absence of Africa on the list, which confirms the continent's exclusion from the global stage.

Table 1. The 20 Most Important Advertising Markets in 2003

| <i>Country</i> | <i>Total advertising budget (millions of dollars)</i> | <i>Total television advertising budget (millions of dollars)</i> | <i>Advertising per capita (dollars)</i> |
|----------------|---|--|---|
| US | 231,448 | 52,821 | 812,669 |
| Japan | 37,037 | 15,711 | 290,943 |
| Germany | 17,221 | 4,153 | 208,993 |
| United Kingdom | 15,418 | 4,737 | 259,126 |
| France | 9,123 | 2,833 | 154,105 |
| China | 7,489 | 3,349 | 5,828 |
| Italy | 7,071 | 3,783 | 121,914 |
| South Korea | 6,307 | 2,336 | 133,340 |
| Canada | 5,392 | 1,775 | 173,376 |
| Spain | 5,128 | 2,137 | 127,246 |
| Brazil | 5,048 | 2,470 | 28,536 |
| Australia | 4,383 | 1,579 | 224,769 |
| Mexico | 3,655 | 2,036 | 35,904 |
| Holland | 3,156 | – | 197,250 |
| Russia | 2,744 | 1,300 | 19,003 |

Source: Grupo de Mídia de São Paulo. *Mídia dados 2004*. São Paulo, 2004, p. 586.

It is obvious that Europe is the continent with the greatest number of countries among the main advertising markets: of the 15, six are European (or seven, if we count Russia). But the strength of Asia should also be noted, as three are found in Asia (four, if we count Russia). Of the rest, two are from North America, one from Central America and one from South America. Oceania only has one country. If we study the investment of the advertising budget in television, we can see a number of changes in position. Holland drops off the list, for example, and China overtakes France; Brazil moves into eighth position and, within the European Union, the UK overtakes Germany. When we analyse advertising investment per capita, China, the sixth biggest country in terms of investment, comes in below the others on the table. In this case, the developed countries overtake the developing ones, and Brazil and Mexico are found below most of the European nations. However, gross numbers, although owing more to territorial extension and population

than market strength, offer a big enough scale for a country to have a large-enough advertising budget to invest strongly in its cultural products and then export them.

The problem of flow distortions is reproduced when the new information and communication technologies (ICTs) are examined. Table 2 shows the US at the top again, this time in terms of the number of internet users, but China is now second (compared to sixth on the table of the most important advertising markets). Of the 10 countries, four are European, which can be explained by the high investment in expansion programs for digital instruments implemented by the European Union and its members. However, this list is due in part to the size of the population of the countries, as also occurs with Table 1. When you tackle the question relatively, considering internet penetration among the population, the US maintains its leadership, but China falls to the last position and is overtaken by countries that do not appear on the list. So, the thing that puts China second in

terms of user numbers is the fact that it is the most heavily populated country on the planet, even taking into account the way that access to internet technology is controlled there. Brazil, with a terrible distribution of wealth, also tumbles down the list to come in ahead only of China, with 10.8% of its population online. The European countries have indices of between 40% and nearly 60% of the population connected to the internet, which shows what a good decision it was to promote policies to recover the digital distance that initially separated Europe from the US. Africa is once again absent from the list.

The imbalances between rich and poor are clear when we see that the 10 countries that top the list have an internet penetration level of 25.2%, when the other countries in the world do not exceed 6.1%. These 10 countries together have 69.2% of Internet users across the planet, while the others only represent 30.8%, in accordance with the same source from Table 2. The problem is too serious to be resolved by isolated actions like the distribution of computers with internet access in one region or another¹. In tackling the issue of the lack of internet access, there is a previous principle, i.e., education, which should be treated first. As Dominique Wolton (2000, 97) said, the limit lies in *competition*. Access to all 'information' does not replace the *previous* ability to know which bits of information should be asked for and what to do with them. Direct access does not suppress the hierarchy of know-how and knowledge. Perhaps it is an exaggeration to believe that only network access can make the teaching of populations viable. In capitalism, damage usually has a common basis, and the problem of education, in a broad sense, is not resolving by maintaining the economic injustice. These imbalances in the use of media technologies and the circulation of media products are related to contemporary capitalism and require structural changes if they are to be eliminated.

Final Considerations

The critical and explanatory legacy of the NWICO discussions were to all intents and purposes abandoned in recent decades, with public and private agents supporting market solutions, as if ICTs alone were able to guarantee plurality and balance in access and in cultural and media

flows. As time goes by, the expectation of the elimination of the communicational and digital abyss based on the appearance of the information society is disappearing and the conviction is being created that a new technological level is only possible with the action of public policies and the consequent action of civil society². Inequality between the strength of cultural industries, advertising markets and digital interactive consumption in the rich and poor countries shows that neoliberalism and global capitalism only make the differences more profound, before the imbalance between North America and the European Union (and part of Asia), on the one hand, and Latin American and especially Africa, on the other.

The problem goes beyond geographical divisions and the limits between north and south, but despite occasional improvements, such as the worldwide exporting of TV soap operas by Latin American countries, particularly Mexico and Brazil, the map of media/digital inequality tends to reproduce the deficiencies that divide the different regions of the planet. 25 years after the MacBride Report, the news hegemony of the developed world is not just still in place, but rather has expanded with the incorporation of new technologies, other trade-development models and different references from the designated lifestyle world to capture and make customers more loyal. The debate generated by the NWICO does not end with the information society, but rather renews the need for the formulation and adoption of public policies which should be increasingly established and promoted before global logics, because if production and consumption refer to media/operational strategies that were thought out and reproduced internationally, so too does the possibility for reaction and non-hegemonic development involve movements articulated at the worldwide level.

Table 2. The 10 Countries with Most Internet Use in 2004

| <i>Country</i> | <i>Users</i> | <i>Population</i> | <i>Population that uses the internet</i> |
|-----------------------|--------------|-------------------|--|
| US | 201,661,159 | 293,271,500 | 68.8 % |
| China | 87,000,000 | 1,288,307,100 | 6.8 % |
| Japan | 66,763,838 | 127,853,600 | 52.2 % |
| Germany | 47,182,628 | 82,633,200 | 57.1 % |
| Great Britain | 34,874,469 | 59,595,900 | 58.5 % |
| South Korea | 30,670,000 | 49,131,700 | 62.4 % |
| Italy | 28,610,000 | 57,987,100 | 49.3 % |
| France | 24,352,522 | 60,011,200 | 40.6 % |
| Canada | 20,450,000 | 31,846,900 | 64.2 % |
| Brazil | 19,311,854 | 179,383,500 | 10.8 % |
| The ten top countries | 560,876,470 | 2,230,021,700 | 25.2 % |
| Rest of the world | 252,055,22 | 4,160,125,787 | 6.1 % |
| World total | 812,913,592 | 6,390,147,487 | 12.7 % |

Source: Éxito Exportador. *Estadísticas mundiales d'Internet* (Internet World Stats) Available at: www.exitoexportador.com/stats.htm (accessed: 10 April 2005).

Notes

- 1 Because one of the companies sponsoring these actions is Microsoft, the main agent in the process of the private appropriation of knowledge in the field of digital communication media, it is hard to believe that these initiatives could offer an effective solution for eliminating the so-called digital abyss. If these companies wanted to solve the problem, they would be signing a death warrant for their businesses.
- 2 Finally, the question includes historical inequalities, connected with macrostructural weaknesses.

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