Entertainment Goes Global: Mass Culture in a Transforming World

Lear Center Entertainment Goes Global Project

Johanna Blakley, Ph.D.
Assistant Director, Norman Lear Center

January 2001

The Norman Lear Center

Founded in January 2000, the Norman Lear Center is a multidisciplinary research and public policy center exploring implications of the convergence of entertainment, commerce and society. On campus, from its base in the USC Annenberg School for Communication, the Lear Center builds bridges between schools and disciplines whose faculty study aspects of entertainment, media and culture. Beyond campus, it bridges the gap between the entertainment industry and academia, and between them and the public. Through scholarship and research; through its fellows, conferences, public events and publications; and in its attempts to illuminate and repair the world, the Lear Center works to be at the forefront of discussion and practice in the field.
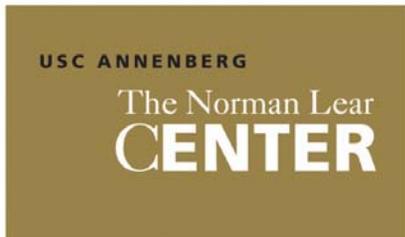
Entertainment Goes Global

The Norman Lear Center launched this venture in 1999 to explore the implications of the globalization of entertainment. Since then, the Lear Center has held roundtable discussions on the topic and received a grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to research the health effects of American entertainment abroad. Martin Kaplan, director of the Lear Center, moderated a high-powered Writers Guild of America panel called, "We Hate You, (But Please Send Us More *Baywatch*): The Impact of American Entertainment on the World." In May 2004, the Lear Center took the debate to the Tribeca Film Festival.

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Entertainment brings pleasure to billions around the world, but it has been accused of harming our children, shortening our attention spans, trivializing culture, vulgarizing taste, sanctioning violence, polarizing audiences, and undermining communities. Entertainment has been attacked for making a mockery of art, for promoting cheap thrills before thoughtful reflection, for appealing to the lowest common denominator. Many have bemoaned the fact that popular culture has been taken seriously at all, that a dissertation might deconstruct Madonna or perform a psychoanalytic analysis of "South Park." And who can blame them for their complaints? As Richard Dyer points out, part of the meaning of entertainment is its "anti-seriousness," its rejection of "morality, politics, and aesthetics" – it's not art, it's "just entertainment."[2]

And here is where our ears prick up, our critical sensibilities engage. Anything people tend not to talk about is certainly something worth thinking about. It may be that the common experience, the one that lurks just below our cognitive radar, most deserves attention. Particularly since it is grabbing the attention – the "eyeballs," as it were – of a constantly expanding global audience.

Despite the obvious cultural and economic impacts of entertainment, it has not been embraced by academia as a useful entry-point into the analysis of world culture. Entertainment has not been used as an intellectual framework, a point of view, a lens, or a perspective for better understanding culture, society, and all else human in the world's industrial economies. But

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[2] R. Dyer, *Only Entertainment*, Routledge, 1992, p. 2.

entertainment is at least as old as the singers of the ***Iliad*** and ***Gilgamesh***, and arguably older than the cave paintings of Lascaux and the children's games of the Ice Age. The trouble with entertainment has been apparent since Plato, who warned us in the ***Republic*** that people are manipulable and irrational when they fall under the thrall of a talented bard.   Aristotle, of course, took the other side, arguing that the screams of horror from the thousands in the Theatre of Dionysus are necessary for ***catharsis***. People love "imitations," he says, and learn from them. The dramatic unities he prescribes are in fact a textbook for tricking an audience into believing that illusion is reality.

Is Greek tragedy entertaining? Yes. So is Hamlet. Sophocles wanted the audience to vote his play the best in the festival. Shakespeare wrote for the box office and competed with bear-baitings for groundlings' shillings. The idea of entertainment has belonged as much to high culture as to popular culture. What Dickens did to hold his audience is different from what MTV does, but both have the same intent – to hold our attention.

The costs, of course, can include vulgarization, trivialization, and far worse pathologies of culture. Aristotle was as worried about the harm engendered by "spectacle" as Plato was about oral epics. "Bread and circuses" was the notorious Roman formula. What is the formula today? What are the costs? Who benefits? The museum and the amusement park are both looking for audiences. To examine symphony, dance, and theatre in the same context as politics, gambling, and wrestling is to reveal new facets of both and to invite fresh insights about creativity, consumption, and culture on a global scale.

Audiences around the world are inundated with entertainment content at the local, regional, national, and global levels. It is incumbent upon academia to take the globalization of entertainment seriously, to direct academic resources to the study of a phenomenon that affects every man, woman, and child in every industrialized nation – and now developing nations as well. We must find and create the tools to answer the complex questions that arise in this era of accelerated cultural interchange.

The pure economic power of the U.S. entertainment industry is impossible to ignore. The U.S.

exports approximately $8 billion worth of entertainment product each year. The most popular TV show in the world is "The Bold and the Beautiful," with 500 million viewers in 98 countries. Even in closed societies such as Iran, bookstores are filled with Persian translations of novels by John Grisham, Danielle Steele and Sidney Sheldon.[3] Hollywood earns roughly half of its revenues overseas, up from 30% in 1980. In 1999, the top four grossing movies at the international box office were **Titanic**, **Jurassic Park**, **Star Wars: Phantom Menace**, and **Independence Day**.[4] Each of them made more money abroad than domestically, with **Titanic** earning more than twice as much overseas.

But contrary to popular belief, the U.S. is not the only player in global entertainment. Three of the top five music companies in the world are not U.S.-owned; in the film, broadcasting, and media industry, several of the top players are not U.S.-based, including Rupert Murdoch's News Corp, Bertelsmann, Sony,[5] and now Vivendi/Universal. The Indian film industry is the largest in the world, churning out up to 800 films each year that are watched by 3.5 million people everyday.[6] The Pokemon phenomenon generates the most popular TV show, film and game in the U.S.,[7] and "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire," a British show, plays in 31 countries, including India, Israel and Finland.[8] Statistics like these have not gone unnoticed in the academic community or the popular press, though the focus is usually not on "entertainment" but on "media." And, as is typical of academic institutions, studies tend to be narrowly compartmentalized by nation, media, and entertainment form. Locating resources on the globalization of entertainment, conceived in its broadest sense, is surprisingly difficult: There are no textbooks, no exhaustive Web sites, and no comprehensive bibliographies that address this crucial intersection of cultural forces. As an academic field of study, global entertainment does not yet exist.[9]

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[3] J. Lancaster, "Barbie, **Titanic** show good side of 'Great Satan'," **The Washington Post**, 27 October 1998, p. A-1.
[4] Table from B. Fuson, "Six pics lead the assault on all-time top 50; all-time box office champs," **The Hollywood Reporter**, 28 December 1999.
[5] P. Farhi and M. Rosenfeld, "American Pop Penetrates Worldwide," **The Washington Post**, 25 October 1998, p. A-1, 26, 27.
[6] I. Merchant, "Kitschy as ever, Bollywood is branching out," **The New York Times**, 22 November 1998, Arts and Leisure Section.
[7] Anonymous, "Pokemon v. Globophobia," **The Economist**, 20 November 1999, p. 36.
[8] B. Bearak, "Many, Many in India Want to Be a Millionaire," **The New York Times,** 30 August 2000, pp. A-1, A-4.
[9] In **The Entertainment Functions of Television** (LEA, 1980), editor Percy Tannenbaum explains in his introduction appropriately titled, "An Unstructured Introduction to an Amorphous Area") the way in which "entertainment" has been overlooked as a facet of media consumption. Since then, Dolf Zillmann and Jennings Bryant have created a helpful overview of behavioral explorations of entertainment consumption in "Entertainment as Media Effect," in **Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research**, ed. J. Bryant and D. Zillmann, LEA, 1994.

Academic responses to various facets of global entertainment have changed drastically over the last forty years, reflecting for the most part huge changes in technology, media infrastructure, and entertainment content. In the 1960s, a theory was born that assumed the developing world should imitate the West. The cornerstone of the theory lay in good communication as a way to fix what some had described as the most important social problem of the time, the modernizing of the world. This "communications and development" theory hinged on the implementation of modern media systems in impoverished countries. The transition from tradition to modernity, based on a model of the Western World, was crucial to the theory, which devalued tradition in economically undeveloped countries.[10]

From the late 1960s onwards, this development theory gave way to the argument that "modernizing" developing countries, rather than creating self-sufficiency, merely fostered dependency within an exploitative system of global economic relations.[11] This dependency was aided by a one-way flow of technology and media hardware coupled with the continuous flow of Western cultural products into poor countries. Academic work produced in the mid 1970s to the late 1980s tackled the effects of this one-way flow on everything from newspapers to television programming. Critics of the development theory were especially anxious about "cultural imperialism" or "media imperialism," which was often equated with American values such as consumerism and individualism. They argued that Third World countries were developing even more slowly than they would have if they had not been forced to adapt to an alien culture and its technological manifest destiny. From this theory spawned the fears of "cultural homogenization" and "cultural synchronization."[12]

Proponents of the cultural imperialism theory are often "anti-globalization" activists as well. They decry a future of bland copycat culture, where each country's distinctiveness melts away under

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[10] *De-Westernizing Media Studies*, edited by J. Curran, and M. Park, Routledge, 2000, p. 4-5. An overview of key theorists in this area is provided here.
[11] Ibid.
[12] A. Sreberny-Mohammadi, "The Global and the Local in International Communications," in *Mass Media in Society*, St. Martin's Press, 1996, p.179. Resources in this area include H. Schiller, *Communication and Cultural Domination*, International Arts and Sciences Press, 1976; O. Boyd-Barrett, "Media Imperialism: Toward an International Framework for the Analysis of Media Systems," *Mass Communication and Society*, edited by J. Curran, M. Gurevitch and J. Woollacott, London, 1977; J. Galtung and M. Ruge, "The Structure of Foreign News", *Journal of Peace Research*, 1965, pp. 1, 64-90; T. Guback and T. Varis, "Transnational Communication and Cultural Industries" in *Reports and Papers on Mass Communication*, UNESCO, no. 92; T. Varis, "Global Traffic in Television", *Journal of Communication*, 1974, 24, pp. 102-109; "The International Flow of Television Programs," *Journal of Communication*, Winter 1984, pp. 143- 52.

the force of a world dominated by American popular culture – where McDonald's, Hollywood and Coca-Cola tread with impunity.[13] At the other extreme, some believers in the cultural imperialism theory laud an American cultural hegemony as the New World Order – "the best model for the future."[14] Still others have argued that such quintessential American messages of freedom, individuality, self-sufficiency, and independence open people's minds to an unprecedented collage of ideas and influences.[15] They argue that American cultural content does not make people subjects of American ideology but empowers them to develop their own identities. So Egyptian middle-class women see in American soap operas that the possibility exists to marry for love or to live independently of the extended family.[16]

Fearing globalization and cultural imperialism, many countries created protectionist policies to maintain control over indigenous cultural content and to foster a type of "nationalism" among their own entertainment producers. The trend continues to this day. French producer Marin Karmitz noted that "sound and pictures have always been used for propaganda, and the real battle at the moment is over who is going to be allowed to control the world's images, and so sell a certain lifestyle, a certain culture, certain products, certain ideas."[17] France and Canada aggressively implement protectionist policies, but American entertainment still dominates their markets. Seventy-five percent of the television watched every night in Canada is of foreign origin; four out of five magazines sold in Canada are foreign; foreign films take up 96% of screen time at Canadian theaters, and 70% of the content on Canadian radio stations is non-Canadian. Most of this foreign material hails from the U.S.[18]

In the late 80s and early 90s, media scholars started to discredit the cultural imperialism hypothesis. These scholars argued that the theory failed to see the complexity of global flows,

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[13] B. Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld*, Random House, 1995; *Here, There, and Everywhere: The Foreign Politics of American Popular Culture,* edited by R. Wagnleitner and E. T. May, University Press of New England, 2000.

[14] D. Rothkopf. "In Praise of Cultural Imperialism," *Foreign Policy*, 107, 1999, p. 44.

[15] J. Micklethwait and A. Wooldridge, "Globalization; French have a word for it, but they'd be wrong," *Los Angeles Times*, 14 May 2000, M-1. In *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, Thomas Friedman (Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2000) argues that the advent of MTV in Europe and the fall of the Berlin Wall is no coincidence. Rock music played an important part in the wave of rebelliousness that swept the country's youth.

[16] *Mass Media in Society*, p. 193.

[17] D. McMahon, "Echoes of a Recent Past: Contemporary French Anti-Americanism in Cultural and Historical Perspective," *Columbia International Affairs Online*, January 1995, p. 5. The full text is available here: https://www.cc.columbia.edu/sec/dlc/ciao/wps/msd01/mcd01.html (June 2000).

[18] G.G. Schenkel, "How Europe's Governments Oppose Globalization in the Entertainment Industry," Working Paper, Columbia Business School, 1998, Industry Overview section.

including the occurrence of "reverse colonization" (exemplified by Brazil's successful export of TV programming to Spain and Portugal).[19] Nor did it take into account the "localization" of cultural exports, the growth of national producers and international exporters in the Third World,[20] and strong local resistance to cultural domination. Scholars such as Jesus Martin-Barbero mobilized Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony to discredit the idea that the media is capable of forcing dominant ideology down the throats of the masses. Using a hegemonic model, which assumes that dominant class interests are not uniformly imposed on the subaltern classes but selectively adopted and adapted by them, Martin-Barbero argues that, in the realm of popular culture, audiences have the power to resist and transform dominant cultures through a complex process of "mediation."[21]

In world television development, media scholars argue that the legacy of the West was not so much ideological influence but an economic model built upon "the exploitation of entertainment content so as to attract audiences which could then be sold to advertisers."[22] American content may have filled the airwaves in the beginning, but it has been replaced gradually by local content. In 1990, a landmark study investigated audience decodings of "Dallas" across three continents.[23] While the study concluded that the show was popular internationally primarily because it represented universal themes and situations, the study downplayed the fact that "Dallas" had been actively marketed in the test countries and few local offerings were then available. Now that local markets have more material to put on the air, American offerings, for the most part, have become non-primetime filler.[24]

It is not disputed that nations have an unbalanced flow of information from America into their television sets, cinemas, radios and computers. But despite this influx of expensively produced, well-packaged material, local entertainment products have become increasingly popular in home

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[19] **De-Westernizing Media Studies**, p.6. Another intriguing example of "reverse imperialism" is the booming Spanish-speaking market in the U.S.: most of Univision and Telemundo's prime-time shows are Mexican-produced.
[20] **Mass Media in Society**, p. 181.
[21] J. Martin-Barbero, **Communication, Culture and Hegemony: From the Media to Mediations**, translated by E. Fox and R. A. White, Sage, 1993. See also A. Gramsci, **Selections from Cultural Writings**, Lawrence and Wishart, 1985.
[22] **New Patterns in Global Television: Peripheral Vision**, edited by J. Sinclair, E. Jacka, and S. Cunningham, Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 9.
[23] T. Liebes and E. Katz, **The Export of Meaning: Cross-Cultural Readings of "Dallas,"** Oxford University Press, 1990.
[24] S. Cunningham and E. Jacka, "Neighbourly Relations? Cross-Cultural Reception Analysis and Australian Soaps in Britain," in **Media in Global Context: A Reader**, edited by A. Sreberny-Mohammadi, D. Winseck, J. McKenna, and O. Boyd-Barrett, Arnold, 1997, p. 300.

countries. While the U.S. remains dominant in certain categories, such as blockbuster action movies, it has been losing ground to regional producers as media markets become more and more fragmented. In 1984, studies showed that few national systems had self-reliance in television programming. However, UNESCO statistics in 1994 show that India and Korea now have the highest amounts of domestically produced television, about 92% of television programming. Indian viewers are most loyal to domestic programming (99% of daily viewing), and Latin Americanproduced *telenovelas* attract larger audiences than American soap operas in Brazil and other Latin American countries.[25] In Ghana, low-budget horror movies that incorporate traditional folkloric and religious themes often beat out American competitors.[26]

Far from discouraging commerce and culture, many scholars have argued that globalization has spurred local economies and allowed national cultural content to blossom. When given a choice between American programming or local productions, viewers in France prefer local fare. In Spain, 58% of the total $1 billion in music sales are generated by Spanish and Latin American artists.[27] According to Anthony Giddens, "globalisation today is only partly westernisation. Globalisation is becoming increasingly decentered – not under control of any group of nations, still less of the large corporations. Its effects are felt as much in Western countries as elsewhere."[28]

Since World War I, entertainment products have been exported wholesale from America to the rest of the world, providing international audiences with images of American tastes and values. Only now, in this age of globalization and with the pressure on U.S. movie producers to break even, the product *must* be made to appeal to an international audience. These days, it is the international box office receipts that make an American film a blockbuster, and some critics argue that Hollywood is so smitten with its international audience that it has effectively removed American sensibilities from its films:

> The more Hollywood becomes preoccupied by the global market, the more it produces generic blockbusters made to play as well in Pisa as Peoria. Such films are driven by

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[25] *Mass Media in Society*, p.188. Other percentages of note: Sweden 81%, Netherlands 78%, Hungary 70%. The U.S. is not included as it does not belong to UNESCO.
[26] A. O. Scott, "The Whole World Isn't Watching," *The New York Times*, 30 January 2000, Sunday Magazine, p. 12.
[27] Anonymous, "Moreover: Culture Wars," *The Economist*, 12 September 1998, p. 99.
[28] *De-Westernizing Media Studies,* p. 7.

> special effects that can be appreciated by people with minimal grasp of English rather than by dialogue and plot. They eschew fine-grained cultural observation for generic subjects that anybody can identify with regardless of national origins. There is nothing particularly American about boats crashing into icebergs or asteroids that threaten to obliterate human life.[29]

Just as Hollywood films are being tailor-made for international consumption and competition, local producers are finding ways to "indigenize" American cultural imports to suit their own tastes. As early as the 1970s, local producers were creating domestic imitations of American generic models. These new, hybrid cultural products reflected local customs and values and were engineered to compete against American imports.[30] Japan is often considered the first country to "glocalize" its entertainment products to fit its own national predilections.[31] These cross-fertilized products have gradually replaced American fare, which has come to suffer from "cultural discount," the diminished appeal of products rooted in an unfamiliar culture and produced in a foreign language.[32]

The current situation for global entertainment is as conceptually complex as it is economically vibrant. In a world of converging media, the potential value of tapping into transnational subsets of the new global market – that is, audiences that reside in different regions and countries but share a common identity, language, or affinity – is greater than ever before. This audience defies national boundaries and often uses the Internet and satellite TV to carve out its own cultural niche, quite independent of physical location. While entertainment companies have used the Internet primarily as a promotional tool in the past, most analysts predict that the Net will revolutionize distribution by allowing customized content to be delivered directly to individual

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[29] C. Trueheart, "Made in America: The Global Impact of US Culture," *The Washington Post*, 27 October 1998, p. A-19.
[30] *New Patterns in Global Television*, p. 13.
[31] J. Straubhaar, "Distinguishing the Global, Regional and National Levels of World Television," in *Media in Global Context: A Reader*, edited by A. Sreberny-Mohammadi, D. Winseck, J. McKenna, and O. Boyd-Barrett, Arnold, 1997, p. 290.
[32] *Global Television and Film: An Introduction to the Economics of the Business*, edited by C. Hoskins, S. McFadyen and A. Finn, Oxford, 1997, p. 32.

audience members.[33] Each member of this global audience has multiple social identities, which are nurtured and defined by the range of entertainment available to them. "An Egyptian immigrant in Britain, for example, might think of herself as a Glaswegian when she watches her local Scottish channel, a British resident when she switches over to the BBC, an Islamic Arab expatriate in Europe when she tunes in to the satellite service from the Middle East, and a world citizen when she channel surfs on to CNN."[34] Such examples challenge the opposition between "foreign" and "local," "dominant" and "subaltern" cultures and reveal the complex re-negotiation of identity and values that audiences experience as entertainment goes global.

Some have claimed that the term "globalization" is no longer adequate to describe the intensely fragmented and complex situation we now face. Ien Ang argues that we have moved on to a "post-globalised world rife with regional realignments and fracturings, nationalist and ethnic separatisms, and, in parallel, a proliferation of overlapping and criss-crossing media vectors which undermine a unified and singular notion of the 'global'."[35] While the point is well-taken, "globalization" is still a helpful term describing a process that has fundamentally restructured the institutions that shape our everyday lives. Anthony Giddens recently described it as a three-fold phenomenon that deflates the role of the nation, inflates local identity, and creates new regions across nations.[36] All three of these effects are readily apparent in the globalization of entertainment. But far from simply responding to the forces of globalization, entertainment has become one of the more powerful industries driving the global economy and shaping cultures around the world.

Several crucial research questions arise when we focus our attention on the study of globalization and the entertainment dimension of contemporary culture. Chief among them is the need for a theoretical framework for the study of something we might call "cultural blending": how do people respond to the layered levels of culture to which they are constantly exposed in entertainment media? Is the local level more powerfully felt than the regional, national or global?

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[33] M. Clough, "Can Hollywood Remain the Capital of the Global Entertainment Industry?" in the series **Engaging Americans in a Globalizing World**, Pacific Council on International Policy, 2000, p. 21.

[34] **New Patterns in Global Television**, p. 25.

[35] I. Ang, "Globalisation and Culture," **Continuum**, 8(2), 1994, p. 325.

[36] A. Giddens, "Globalization and Communication," lecture at the USC Annenberg School for Communication, October 2000.

How do these different levels compete for attention (which is the ***modus operandi*** of entertainment)? What effects do they have on cultural identity? While previous studies concentrated on national audiences, it is essential that we move beyond the confines of national identity to account for audiences that exist across national boundaries. Is there a global youth culture? What other "taste cultures" can we isolate and define?

There are hundreds of additional specific and practical questions that arise out of this rubric of inquiry. For instance, there is a paucity of empirical research on how audiences respond to TV programs, films, toys, fashions, sports, etc., produced by ***non-dominant*** cultures. How are these cultural products negotiated differently than those produced by dominant cultures? A great deal more research should be done on TV at the local and regional level, where we can see "reverse colonization" (e.g., the successful export of entertainment materials from Brazil to Portugal or Australia to Britain) at a grass roots level.

All of these questions acknowledge the fragmentation of the global entertainment ethos, but we should not dispense with the idea that there may be a common strain, a point of convergence. It is time to develop a more nuanced approach to global monoculture, one that accounts for cultural resistance, reverse imperialism, and the complex interplay of regional, local, national, and global entertainment. If globalized culture is a "shared discursive space," [37] then how might we characterize that culture or that space? What are its rules, its tendencies, its contradictions? Who belongs and who doesn't? If, as many have argued, the content of American pop culture has created a space where people with very different cultural backgrounds can argue, engage, and share cultural predispositions of their own, then how might this common ground be exploited for humanitarian purposes? Has American pop culture operated as a successful facilitator of intercultural communication, or has it dictated what can be discussed? Have its generic forms provided a permanent, and ultimately restrictive, foundation for future entertainment genres? Or is American pop culture steadily receding in importance as it becomes a back-drop for other more vibrant cultural exchanges? Will foreign policy become cultural diplomacy? And will English be its language?

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[37] H. Naficy, ***The Making of Exile Cultures: Iranian Television in Los Angeles***, University of Minnesota, 1993, p. 2.

Related to both of these clusters of questions is the issue of technology. Because globalization occurs through technology, the two are inextricably linked. Technological innovation has changed the face of entertainment by drastically lowering the cost of production and distribution, while increasing worldwide demand. Because these innovations take place so quickly, it is difficult for scholarship to address some of the crucial questions that arise. First and foremost, what role will the Internet play in the evolution of global entertainment? How will the move to satellite distribution of films further extend the power and reach of American culture? What will the cultural effects be when *Titanic 2* is released simultaneously around the world? Alternately, how has technology enabled smaller content providers to flourish? How has it strengthened cultural identities and values at the local and regional levels?

While TV and film are still the most influential media forms, video games also have great impacts on global audiences. More than 215 million computer and video games were sold in 1999, and it is estimated that American computer and video game publishers lost $3 billion worldwide in 1999 due to software piracy.[38] How will the shift from passive to interactive entertainment change global entertainment and global audiences? With the advent of increasingly sophisticated translation software and high-speed networks, will there be more opportunities for cultural exchange than ever before as online gamers interact with each other across social, political, and linguistic boundaries in real time? It begs the question: Is the world becoming more technologically adept because of its tremendous appetite for electronic entertainment? Is entertainment driving technology? And if it is, is it also driving globalization?

The study of entertainment is an excellent focal point for an analysis of the movement of ideas and transformations of culture on a global scale. Only entertainment is a broad enough category to adequately frame a discussion of global culture. A decade from now, it will be commonplace to use entertainment as an intellectual framework; that result is guaranteed by technology and globalization.

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[38] "Computer and Video Game Industry Data Updated for 2000," Interactive Digital Software Association, 2000. The full report is available here: http://www.idsa.com/fastfacts.html (October 2000).