Global media flows: A qualitative review of research methods in audio-visual flow studies

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Abstract
Recent developments in the online distribution and consumption of audio-visual content have brought relevant changes to the transnational flow of content. Thus, the need for a theoretical and methodological rejuvenation of flows research has been signalled. The aim of the present study is to analyse the different flow studies throughout time, following a series of parameters such as research question, methodology and scale of study. This article is a systematic literature review of 30 flow studies on film and television programmes, published between 1974 and 2014. The methods used by the studies are brought into focus and discussed thoroughly, in light of the method of data collection, the type of data used and the method of data analysis. Main findings show an evolution towards more detailed research, to include more contextual factors, an increased use of secondary data, as well as more focused regional and comparative studies.

Keywords
Cultural studies, film, flows, flow studies, international communication, media imperialism, methodology, political economy, systematized literature review, television
Introduction

The debates started in the 1960s over the ‘free flow of information’ and the imbalance in global communication flows have shaped the discussion on the topic for decades to come. Starting with the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) project within the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and its development through a series of subsequent studies (see Nordenstreng and Varis, 1974; Varis, 1985), the strand of media and communication research focused on international flows of content has since evolved, within a changing global political and economic context, having been discussed by various schools of thought. At the onset of flows studies, three perspectives emerged as most notable: political economy, cultural studies and economic analysis. Although flow studies still build upon these established theories and concepts, new strands of theory generated by media economics, international communication, cultural globalization and media innovation studies have brought valuable additions to the field. Albeit a very diverse range of views can be subsumed under these umbrellas, they introduce complementary and fresh insights to the traditional communication studies investigation of media production and distribution, questioning the very concept of content flow in the process. According to Storsul and Krumsvik (2013: 13–14), these approaches ‘may provide media researchers with better tools – not to see completely new things but to investigate aspects of new media that would otherwise not be so accessible’. Each theory has made use of different methodologies and relied on diverse empirical data. Both qualitative and quantitative research methods have been employed in order to support the claims and to identify explanatory factors.

The present article discusses flow studies published over several decades, from the beginning of the concept to recent years. The article takes the form of a systematic literature review and focuses on the transnational flow of film and television (TV) programming. These are both established targets in flow studies that have historically been investigated on a global scale and have been chosen due to the similarities identified in their cross-border distribution process. Taking into consideration recent developments in the distribution and consumption of audio-visual content, online delivery of film and TV programming has blurred the conventional lines between countries yet again and thus brought relevant changes to the transnational flow of content. This generates the need for a theoretical rejuvenation of flows research that takes into account the new media landscape (Winseck, 2011). To this end, the article will first contextualize the topic and concentrate on the main theories that have framed audio-visual flows research. The main focus falls on the methodologies used in flow studies, in an effort to determine what the different methods that have been used to study audio-visual content flows, throughout time, are. Hence, in the second part of the article, the focus shifts to a historical account of the methods used in a series of flows studies, analysed through several parameters (see Methodology section). The objective is for the answer to this question to guide us towards future research that would determine whether these methods can still be applied to the study of flows today,
or, if not, what new methods could be applied. Literature has already signalled the need for original methodological approaches that would not only go beyond national frames of analysis and interpretation but also ‘encompass new phenomena (…) and undertake grounded research that questions old paradigms and provides material for new theorization’ (Thussu, 2009: 22–27). In this context, our findings aim to establish how, or whether, the methods that have been previously used could still be of use in the study of online audio-visual flows; whether they could simply be adapted to new means of distribution and consumption or whether they have to be reinvented altogether in order to be applied to the new media landscape.

In focusing our study on film and TV programmes, we have chosen to leave out research targeting other types of transnational flows, although there are a number of studies conducted on news (e.g. Chang et al., 2009; Kim and Barnett, 1996; Thussu, 2007; Wu, 2003), TV formats (e.g. Esser, 2010; Moran and Keane, 2005; Waisbord, 2004) or music (e.g. Abramson, 2002; Garofalo, 1993; Magaldi, 1999), that offer interesting perspectives on the flows discussion. However, these are different in geographical and methodological scope; their distribution and consumption have traditionally been studied separately from film and TV programmes. Furthermore, the discussion of news, formats or music as ‘foreign’, as well as their import and export, is framed differently in media and communication studies.

Empirical research in patterns of international media flows has consistently revealed the position of power held by U.S. distributors, both in the TV programming market and in cinema. Although few scholars dispute these findings, they do, however, disagree on the reasons behind the dominance of U.S. media products over the globe (Dupagne and Waterman, 1998). Thus, their research into global media flows becomes revealing in the elements they choose to investigate and the theories they formulate.

Moreover, the emergence of digital technologies has brought about new distribution platforms as well as determined new consumption patterns and business models for media producers and distributors which may significantly impact the discussion on global media flows. Some authors evaluate contemporary developments rather positively, pointing at how the so-called technological revolution abolished spectrum scarcity and reduced barriers between content creation and technology (Küng, 2013: 9). They further claim that the process of creative destruction in the cultural sphere will generate nearly unlimited choice and diversity in the flow of media contents and TV services, shifting control over media choice to consumers (Jezierski, 2010: 7). Other scholars (Doyle, 2013; Grece et al., 2014) take on a more critical and prudent approach, highlighting the unpredictability of the ramifications of technological development. In addition, the ideas behind the NWICO project continue to influence debates on the promotion of cultural diversity to this day, as demonstrated by the importance that the World Summit on the Information Society ascribed to the Internet in securing cultural diversity and a transcultural dialogue (Hepp, 2015: 227).

Research into media and communication flows has definitely not ceased since its inception, yet the fast changes taking place in both the media landscape and the
encompassing political economic global context, due to increasing digitalization and internationalization, signal a clear need for theoretical revision, and most likely methodological adjustment and innovation.

Theoretical approaches to communication flows

Starting with the UNESCO debates on the unequal flows of global communication, political economists (e.g. Schiller, 1971, 1976; Smythe, 1981) have discussed these imbalances within the framework of dependency and imperialism (Biltereyst and Meers, 2000: 393). Critical scholars have put forward the concepts of media and cultural imperialism, warning against cultural hegemony, a dominance of the West, or the ‘centre’, over developing nations, or the ‘periphery’, and an imbalance of power driven by commercial interests (Hamelink, 1983; Mattelart, 1979) and supported internationally by the U.S. Government (Guback, 1969). The one-way flow was seen as a new form of imperialism, going beyond economic and political domination, into the cultural realm, a threat to annihilate indigenous culture and local cultural industries, through a process of ‘Americanization’.

Contrary to the strong cultural imperialism thesis, Katz and Wedell (1977) argued that TV systems in developing countries followed three stages of institutionalized development. In a first stage, developing countries imported most of the equipment and personnel to run their newly founded TV systems from the United States. Consequently, local professionals learned and developed their own expertise. Finally, the locals took over the system and continued developing their own programming. Thus, their thesis rejected the arguments proposed by critical political economy at the time and suggested that these steps would, in time, lead to a diffusion of global production centres and increase heterogeneity in terms of content.

By the mid-1980s, the debate expanded when new developments occurred in the study of global flows. The cultural imperialism discourse received increasing criticism, as transformations in the world TV system pointed towards conceptual inadequacies, and shifting theoretical paradigms, including postmodernism, post-colonialism and theories of ‘active’ audiences (Chalaby, 2006; Sinclair et al., 2002: 6; Tomlinson, 1991). New studies also identified ‘a trend towards greater regional exchanges’ (Varis, 1985: 53), as opposed to the clear one-way street that had previously been central to the flows debate. Different branches of the political economy school continued to point out the imbalances in global flows but moved away from the radical views that accused U.S. corporations of purposefully threatening local cultures in order to stimulate consumption of their own cultural products and services (Dupagne and Waterman, 1998). Moreover, scholars began discussing two-way flows and focusing on expressions of resistance from the ‘periphery’, believed to counteract the ‘hegemony’ of the West. This process was seen as a democratic, pluralistic levelling between nations (Boyd-Barrett, 1998: 158), and the new transnational networks, either regional or global, have been referred to as ‘counterflows’ or ‘contra-flows’ (Thussu, 2007).
From the 1980s onwards, a new strand of research was brought into focus by the cultural studies school of thought, which shifted the focus from the macro level of power relations between nations and corporations to content and the audience. Audience reception studies, mainly focused on the consumption of popular U.S. TV programmes at the time, found that foreign media products were often subject to local reception processes, and that audiences were engaged participants, rather than passive receptors (Ang, 2005; Liebes and Katz, 1990). Meanings were created within local contexts, as audiences decoded media texts through their knowledge and cultural background.

Also among those questioning the validity of the media imperialism thesis in the 1980s, a group of scholars offered economic arguments for the dominance of U.S. media flows internationally. According to Oh (2001: 32–33), different points of focus have been identified within the approach: Wildman and Siwek (1988) discussed the relative sizes of global linguistic markets as a critical variable in the media trade; Waterman (1988) connected the domestic TV infrastructure to the supply-side market size; while Hoskins and Mirus (1988) focused on the interaction of demand-side market size and the ‘cultural discount’ factor, which claims that audiences prefer media products in their native language, or that reflect their cultural values, in the process creating protective barriers for local or regional programming. Economic models developed by the economic analysis approach stated that the relative sizes and media spending levels of the home versus the export market are instrumental in determining a competitive advantage to larger countries over smaller ones (Dupagne and Waterman, 1998). In this context, the U.S. market represented the ultimate example of the ‘home-market effect’ (Linder, 1961), a notion through which larger, wealthier countries develop strong media industries and account for significant proportions of exports.

The approach further claims that as wealthier nations meet the basic needs of their citizens, society’s consumption state can expand into cultural and recreational goods and services. This explains not only the increase in the consumption of media products, such as film, but also the demand for foreign content (Waterman, 1988). Large and wealthy markets are also better equipped to develop a vibrant domestic media industry and to sustain reciprocal exchanges with exporters (Hoskins and Mirus, 1988; Wildman and Siwek, 1988). In contrast, media markets in developing nations struggle to match imported products in terms of quality and therefore are more prone to import from wealthy, established markets (Fu, 2006).

Throughout the following decades, elements from the theories previously discussed have come together in more complex and nuanced flow studies that propose new concepts for the analysis of global distribution and consumption patterns. Thus, Appadurai (1996) points to the opposite of Westernization: the absorption of global elements through a process of ‘indigenization’, turning them into ‘heterogeneous disjunctures’ of national and local culture. Closely related to this, the term ‘glocalization’ is used to convey ‘the tailoring and advertising of goods and services on a global or near-global basis to increasingly differentiated local and particular markets’ (Robertson, 1995: 28). Similarly, the notions of ‘localization’
(Straubhaar and Duarte, 2005) and ‘hybridity’ (Garcia Canclini, 1995; Tunstall, 1978) are used to analyse the multiple layers of culture that media products consist of, through the mixing of new global elements, and traditional local ones. Meanwhile, the notion of ‘cultural transduction’ approaches the processes of modification and redefinition that cultural products sustain as they cross borders and markets (Uribe-Jongbloed and Espinosa-Medina, 2017).

Combining both international communication and cultural studies perspectives, Straubhaar’s (2007) research in Latin America finds that audiences make an active choice to view certain programmes, and that when regional or national programming are available, they will favour those over foreign imports. He frames the results through the notion of ‘cultural proximity’, where viewers seek to recognize and relate to familiar cultural elements, such as language, ethnic appearance, humour, historical reference and so on. Local markets remain relevant; however, ‘regionalization’ also emerges as a relevant concept, within the frame of geo-cultural or geo-linguistic markets – geographical regions united by a shared cultural, linguistic and historical heritage, which function as coherent mediascapes (Hesmondhalgh, 2013; Sinclair et al., 2002).

Although these studies demonstrate a preference for the local, the dominant position of U.S. products is still clearly acknowledged. Scholars thus propose the term ‘second culture’ (Gitlin, 2003), claiming that although there is a first preference for culturally proximate content, viewers’ second choice will most likely be American, due to a variety of reasons, including their wide availability, ease of recognition or lack of strong cultural identity. Media producers and distributors also make strategic choices in terms of content in order to be able to export it as widely as possible internationally (Fu, 2006: 814). In this context, scholars have also discussed the notion of ‘delocalization’ (Straubhaar, 2007), consisting of strategies designed to exclude cultural specificities of media texts in order to give them increased international appeal.

Economic analysis claims that the revenue potential of a programme influences the programme’s budget, which tends to predetermine its commercial success. As quality is highly correlated with the budget invested in a production, U.S. products are likely to be of high quality and therefore more attractive to audiences (Jayakar and Waterman, 2000; Lee, 2007). In addition, the highly competitive and commercial environment of the U.S. film industry determines the scope and variety of its production output, which subsequently facilitates the film’s or TV programme’s acceptance both nationally and internationally (Xu et al., 2013). Additional factors taken into consideration are the production in English and the vertical integration of Hollywood studios with distribution stages (Oh, 2001). Scholars have claimed that these market mechanisms are more visible in the film trade than in the TV programme trade, also because of government regulation such as quotas, which are more likely to be imposed on TV programming, rather than film trade (Oh, 2001; Wildman and Siwek, 1988).

The traditional political economy school has received its fair amount of criticism, especially with regard to its simplistic and extreme views, as well as lack of empirical justification (Chadha and Kavoori, 2000). Contemporary political economy of
communication continues to support the thesis of a global system of domination in the economic and political domain, which is mirrored by existing patterns of global communication flows (Sinclair et al., 2002). However, it has attempted a more complex and dynamic understanding of the media industries, as ‘the study of the social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources’ (Mosco, 2009: 2). It has been claimed that the cultural imperialism thesis has managed to survive every shift of theoretical paradigm, from modernization and dependence theory to globalization theory, and still continues to be ‘hugely vital’ (Hafez, 2011: 83).

Discussing the notion of ‘new imperialism’ in relation to media and information, Fuchs (2010: 56) claims that media are still characterized by qualities of imperialism such as concentration and transnationalization, which points to the imperialistic character of media within the new imperialism, but not of the existence of media imperialism. In recent decades, scholars have indeed identified a new shift in the global capitalist system, which points towards intensified transnational collaborations (Robinson, 2017; Sklair, 2016), such as a wide variety of global interorganizational partnerships (Dicken, 2006).

Tomlinson claims that ‘What replaces imperialism is globalization’ (Tomlinson, 1991: 175) – a bold statement which nevertheless points towards the complexity of cross-border communication that can no longer be discussed within simple frameworks of national or imperial structures (Hepp, 2015: 15–16). Critics of cultural globalization discourses respond, in a similar vein as cultural imperialism was questioned, on the basis of theoretical, empirical and normative grounds (e.g. Sparks, 2007). Lack of evidence (Hesmondhalgh, 2013) and neglect of economic power (Hardy, 2014) are recurring critiques, highlighting critical political economy of media’s ‘continuing relevance in foregrounding questions of inequalities in the distribution of cultural resources and the organisation of cultural markets’ (Hardy, 2014: 165). When discussing the concept of globalization in relation to media flows, Hafez (2011) warns against the assumption that this is necessarily related to processes of homogenization, or Americanization, as concepts like these ‘cannot capture the contradictory diversity of media globalization because they assume that an initial impulse has constant and uniform effects’ (p. 5). He also links the topic of media globalization to the notion of network as discussed by Castells (2000), where communication flows are varied and naturally unevenly distributed throughout a communication network, such as satellite TV or the Internet (Hafez, 2011: 5–6). In the same global media context, Straubhaar (2008) proposes a model based on hybridity and multi-layers that coexist and interact, claiming that social class and geography strongly structure audiences’ access to different channels, as media institutions themselves are becoming increasingly multi-layered, as they reach further geographically.

**Methodology**

Although the importance of research within global media flows has repeatedly been signalled, an empirical systematization has never been formulated.
Furthermore, the different theoretical approaches discussing global media and communication flows have led to a diverse use of methods and research contexts, some focusing on the text, others the macro level, while others focused on effects and gratifications (Liebes and Katz, 1990). Scholars have identified two categories of empirical studies in media flows: one that is descriptive but comprehensive in coverage of countries and another that is more analytical and focuses on the causal relations between factors related to media flow (Oh, 2001: 33).

The article takes the form of a systematic literature review, which has been defined as a form of secondary study that uses a well-defined methodology in order to identify, analyse and interpret available evidence related to a specific research question (RQ) in a way that is unbiased and (to a degree) repeatable (Kitchenham and Charters, 2007). Review articles have originated in the medical sciences field (Gülpınar and Güçlü, 2013) but have successfully been applied to other domains (Majumder, 2015; Tranfield et al., 2003). The review protocol is guided by the following RQ: ‘What are the different methods that have been used to study audio-visual content flows, throughout time?’. In order to answer it, the article will (1) compile a list of flow studies within the field of communication studies (see Online Appendix 1) and (2) analyse these studies looking at (a) the RQ, (b) the methods used and (c) the data used. Reaching these objectives will provide the basis for answering the second, more evaluative question regarding the application of these to current flows studies conducted in the online environment.

The article consults 30 studies (see Online Appendix 2). Although the sample is not an exhaustive account of flow studies published in the chosen period, it is a good overview of the research conducted in the field of global flow studies, providing valuable information with regard to the specificities and the results of the different types of studies. The selection procedure was based on systematic database searches, together with the snowballing method (Jalali and Wohlin, 2012). A comprehensive literature review aims to cover relevant literature on the topic and is not confined to one research methodology, one set of journals or one geographic region (Webster and Watson, 2002: xv). The first step was a mapping of relevant literature on flow studies, through online database searches – on Google Scholar and Web of Science – on the basis of different combinations of the following keywords: flows, flow study, counterflow, contra-flow, audio-visual, media, film, television programme, media imperialism, cultural studies and economic model. The initial screening yielded a series of media and communication flow research based on single, multiple or comparative case studies. During this screening, we did not consider methods that relied on non-empirical methods such as theoretical reviews or desk researches. Among the results, a series of established research in the field was chosen as a start set (Wohlin, 2014). Through both backward and forward snowballing methods (Wohlin, 2014), an increasing number of relevant flow studies were identified and added to the sample using studies that have been consistently referred to and acknowledged in specialized literature (e.g. Ang, 2005; Nordenstreng and Varis, 1974; Straubhaar, 2007; Varis, 1985).
The review is qualitative (Tranfield et al., 2003: 216), where numbers are used strictly to indicate variances between the studies in the sample. The chosen 30 studies were placed in a table chronologically, along with the corresponding indicators. The findings resulted from a visual analysis of the matrix, through which the different indicators were counted, and certain patterns developed throughout time became evident. This process was complemented by a close reading (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum, 2011) of the studies, through which the research results, as well as their contextual factors, were identified and analysed towards a more in-depth understanding of the evolution of flows research in time.

The qualitative analysis of the flow studies builds upon the following indicators: year of publishing, RQ(s) and/or hypotheses, methodology, medium and scale of study. In order to frame the scale of the study, a distinction has been made between a single case study, multiple case studies, small N comparative analysis (regional), small N comparative analysis (global) and large N comparative analysis (see Table 1). The threshold between a ‘small’ and a ‘large’ study has been set by the authors at 20 countries, building on the methodological approaches discussed by Esser and Hanitzsch (2012).

The methodology is discussed according to the following categories: method of data collection, type of data and method of data analysis. Each category is divided into a series of subcategories (see Table 2), which are presented in the matrix as
indicators on which the subsequent analysis is based (see Online Appendix 2). Thus, the method of data collection includes the following subcategories: investigating flows via desk research, using data derived from surveys/questionnaires and through field research – such as ethnography, interviews and focus groups. The type of data collected by the studies is divided into the following subcategories: the study of flows using product characteristics, audience data, import/export figures of flows and contextual data. And finally, the methods of data analysis employed by the studies have been clustered under the following subcategories: mapping, assessing and investigating flows on the basis of statistical analysis, content analysis, programme analysis, field research and audience reception study.

The categories and subcategories were created on the basis of the extensive literature review and close reading of the texts, in an effort to include all the different types of methods and data that have been used in flow studies, in a systematic way that would facilitate the analysis. Therefore, although our sample of flow studies does not claim to be exhaustive, the categories on which our analysis is based represent a comprehensive account of methods identified in the research of audio-visual flows.

### Table 1. Scale of study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale of study</th>
<th>Single case study</th>
<th>Multiple case studies</th>
<th>Small N comparative analysis (regional)</th>
<th>Small N comparative analysis (global)</th>
<th>Large N comparative analysis</th>
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### Table 2. Methodology.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Methods of data collection</th>
<th>Type of data</th>
<th>Methods of data analysis</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Desk research</td>
<td>Product characteristics</td>
<td>Statistical analysis</td>
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<td>Surveys and questionnaires</td>
<td>Audience</td>
<td>Content analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Field research</td>
<td>Import/export</td>
<td>Programme analysis</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Context</td>
<td>Field research</td>
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<td>Audience reception study</td>
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Main findings

**RQs and hypotheses**

Having reviewed the sampled studies, a first observation is that not all of them refer specifically to media ‘flow’ in the title or RQ. However, the focus on cross-border distribution of audio-visual content, the import/export of media products and their
conceptual foundation all point towards a seamless continuation of flow studies throughout time. The snowballing method has thus enabled our sample to compile a wide diversity of theoretical concepts, which is reflected in the variety of research objectives, and hypotheses the studies base themselves on.

Throughout time, there is a trend towards more detail and increased specificity, starting from more general questions regarding the composition and direction of global flows of content (e.g. ‘What is the composition of television programmes in different types of societies?’ (Nordenstreng and Varis, 1974: 7); ‘What is the proportion of imported programs?’ (Katz and Wedell, 1977: xi)) to questions regarding the characteristics of the content that is exported as well as its consumption and decoding by audiences (e.g. ‘Is a programme like Dallas universally understandable? And, if so, how?’ (Liebes and Katz, 1990: 150). More recent studies, and particularly those that test economic models, investigate in even more detail, as they try to identify and confirm correlations between a wide range of indicators related to cinema and TV programme flows (e.g. ‘Do movies of certain genres exhibit less cross-culture predictability than movies of other genres? If yes, which genres suffer more from lack of predictability? Are they the same genres that suffer more from the problem of cultural discount?’ (Lee, 2006: 265)).

Studies published in the 1990s introduce questions regarding the difference in flows between public and private channels, thus reflecting the rapid changes in the media landscape with regard to the rapid commercialization of broadcasting in many parts of the world (De Bens and de Smale, 2001). New developments in the media landscape are also reflected by the focus brought onto exports from emerging media markets, such as Latin America, India, Greater China, Japan and so on, also with a clear focus on geo-cultural and geo-linguistic markets, that are increasingly discussed after 2000. Similarly, in single case studies, the aim is to identify the characteristics of certain emerging media markets and the media products that have been successfully exported to other parts of the world (e.g. Attallah, 2002; Cunningham and Jacka, 2002; Lozano, 2011; Pendakur and Subramanyam, 2002).

Although, as seen in the previous section, flows theory has long moved away from the media imperialism discourse, it is interesting to point out that the notion is consistently brought back into discussion by some of the studies. In some cases, this is done by formulating a clear connection: either attempting a revision – e.g. ‘Media imperialism revisited’ (Chadha and Kavoori, 2000: 415) and ‘(...) the contra-flow argument: a reappraisal’ (Biltereyst and Meers, 2000: 393) or discussing results from the theory’s perspective – e.g. ‘this chapter seeks (...) to discuss the implications of the findings in light of the basic tenets of media imperialism’ (Chan, 2002: 127). While, in most others, it is simply discussing or questioning the ‘hegemony’ of U.S. content.

**Methodology**

Following the evolution of methods of collection throughout time, our findings point to a shift from studies based on primary data to an increased use of
secondary data. The first studies in our sample were primarily based on collected empirical data, such as surveys and questionnaires, that were also complemented by secondary data, at times. This is, of course, understandable for what was at the time a brand-new research field in media and communication studies. In time, studies have increasingly based their analysis on desk research, thus making use of secondary data such as market reports, institutional data, policy documents, regional/global trade agreements, mapping of channels, box-office data and so on. On the other hand, only one of the studies is based solely on field research (e.g. ethnography, interviews, focus groups), while several others combine field research with the other two methods.

With regard to the type of data collected, it comes as no surprise that all studies have included some variation of product characteristics in their data collection. This refers to aspects such as genre, country of origin, content and so on, and is closely related to the method of analysis. Similarly, the large majority have gathered data on elements of import/export, which includes any data regarding the distribution of products, as well as retail sales, trade agreements and so on.

As the matrix clearly shows that the majority of studies have also taken into consideration contextual data, the close reading of the texts points to an increase and diversification in the contextual information used by the studies. To this end, the more recent studies take into account a considerable number of factors: the economic model also considers language, ‘cultural distance’ between countries, national quotas and so on, while programme analysis studies take into account an increasing number of contextual factors – either related to the economic situation of the exporting/importing country (e.g. population, country gross domestic product, English fluency) and to its media ecology (e.g. TV set penetration, broadcast systems, mode of operation: public/commercial, revenue sources for available media system, per capita advertiser revenue, tax revenue) or related to its national media policy (e.g. trade agreements, regulatory programming quotas). In our study, the Waterman and Rogers’s (1994) study is the first to test an economic model of TV programme flows, thus focusing on economic determinants to analyse the results of their findings, claiming that before only political and cultural actors had been taken into consideration for similar research (p. 91).

A large number of studies also have integrated data on audiences, which includes ratings, market shares, box-office data, viewer profiles and so on. Antola and Rogers (1984: 187) are the first, in our sample, to mention the importance of adding context, such as data on media ecology in this case, and audience ratings to their study, compared to the studies that had been conducted before them.

Just over half of the studies use a programme analysis – a quantified analysis of the product country of origin – as their primary method of analysis. Statistical analysis is the second most used method, by 12 of the 30 studies, and it is exclusively used for the testing of hypotheses formulated in line with the economic analysis perspective. The matrix shows a clear distinction between the type of studies that use quantitative methods, and those based solely on qualitative methods. The former may, at times, combine or complement their study with qualitative
research, as a secondary method (e.g. Waterman and Rogers, 1994), or base their statistical analysis on findings provided by established qualitative studies (e.g. Xu et al., 2013). The latter, however, will entirely base their analysis on qualitative methods and data and mainly correspond to the political economy school, cultural studies, international communication or globalization studies.

At the other end, content analysis, field research and audience reception studies have only been employed by 5 studies or fewer, of the 30 consulted. The reasons for this may include the extensive scale and resources that go into conducting interviews, ethnographic research, observation, focus groups and so on, therefore making them more difficult to implement. An additional reason might be that out of the conceptual perspectives discussed, it is mostly cultural studies that employ audience reception studies and extensive field research, such as ethnography, while the others focus more on production and distribution of content. Scholars thus highlight that ethnic and cultural communities are all different enough to generate a wide variety of decodings, within any given society, and it is through audience reception analysis that it becomes possible to compare readings within that community of analysts and between the community of analysts and the communities of audiences (Liebes and Katz, 1990: 8).

With regard to scale of study, the sample is quite diverse. Nearly, a third of the studies consists of large N comparative analyses, small N comparative analyses (mainly at regional level) and single case studies. In general, the studies have good geographical coverage of all parts of the world. However, the region of Africa is taken into consideration considerably less than others, and when included, it is only in studies that have a global scope. For earlier studies, this could be explained by the scarcity in, or even lack of, production facilities or financial means for the media industry in many African countries, which only picked up later into the 1990s (Hepp, 2015: 136–137). This could also be determined by the lack of data in the region as well as financial and infrastructural difficulties in undertaking field research in the area. On a certain level, this confirms Castells’ (2000) observation that although new information and communication technologies have facilitated and intensified cooperation and exchanges in the global network, there are still areas of the globe that are excluded from the network.

Discussion

Previous to commencing this study, we had considered that there might be a diminishing interest in flow studies in the past decades. However, one of the first things our systematic literature review has proven is that flows studies are still conducted in many parts of the world, with reference to a diversity of established media and communication theories and concepts. What has changed, among other things, in adapting to a dynamic global political and economic context, is the way they are framed and presented. While they are not all clearly defined as ‘flow studies’, they still build on the same established theories and essentially investigate the same topic as the initial studies. In a similar vein, core concepts such as cultural imperialism, and
hegemony and counter-hegemony have also evolved, become more complex, encompass more media and communication theoretical perspectives and also borrow elements from complementary fields such as economics, sociology or anthropology.

One of the main conclusions of our research is that flow studies have evolved into very complex investigations that take into consideration an increasing number of factors. In particular, recent studies integrate more and more contextual factors that, we believe, are instrumental for the framing of the import and export of audio-visual content within a certain geographical region, national infrastructure or media ecology, as media systems ‘have to be related to their cultural location, and their processes of transculturation described accordingly’ (Hepp, 2015: 227). To this end, we see a more targeted focus of research within certain parameters, such as geo-linguistic markets, or comparative analyses between media markets that share certain contextual elements. The question does arise, however, whether this focus on detail reveals or, rather, obscures general flow trends. The answer may lie in the scale of study as well as its aim. Single case studies, economic model analysis, or audience reception studies do not aim to cover a global scale; they are developed within the specifics of the type of parameters mentioned above. Nevertheless, increased focus better reflects the developments in the global media landscape and provides valuable information that considers the complexities of transnational collaborations, where the filming locations and languages of a media product may offer little information as to the ‘origin’ of the production company(ies), and the product itself.

This also leads to the question on whether more descriptive (e.g. programme analysis), large, global scale studies are still relevant today, in researching online audio-visual flows, considering they may not be able to also integrate important contextual factors such as a country’s broadband coverage/speed, elements of digital literacy, media policy, regional distribution networks and so on. A historical perspective may shed light on this shift, as early flow studies were international in focus mainly due to the global ideological antagonisms that defined the 1970s demarcations between the first, second and third world order, which arose out of the Cold War and decolonization. As the 1990s brought a collapse of these clear divides, flow studies have adapted to global developments. However, the conceptualization of audio-visual flows may still need further reconsideration. To this end, we believe increased attention needs to be paid to commercial global and regional collaborations between media companies as well as the dynamics of geo-cultural markets and their implications.

It is also interesting to consider whether more recent flow studies, and specifically the ones revisiting the media imperialism thesis, deliver on their goal and manage to take the research a step further. A first observation is that elements of economic/trade and political domination are still very much part of the hypotheses and findings of these studies, albeit in a more nuanced way that takes into account a multitude of determining factors. What has diminished is the focus on ideological domination, especially in certain regions, although elements of U.S. ‘soft power’ are still discussed in the literature (see Hafez, 2011).
Scholars warn against equating U.S. imports to hegemonic, ideological and generally negative, while considering local and national programs as counter-hegemonic, non-ideological and positive (Lozano, 2011: 699), as ‘In ideological terms, commercial contra-flows champion free-market capitalism, supporting a privatized and commodified media system’ (Thussu, 2007: 28). Furthermore, Artz (2017: 99) claims that the concept of contra-flow is only a variant of transnational realignment, rather than a progressive form of national resistance to foreign cultural domination by the West, and that the use of national markers to analyse global media influence is made more difficult by the rise in transnational partnerships, mergers and joint ventures. To this end, research that considers the cultural complexities of audio-visual flows, without diminishing the attention given to imbalances in commercial power and the dynamic nature of ideology would further strengthen the field of flows studies.

As our findings have pointed towards an increased use of secondary data, this may have both positive and negative effects on current flow studies. As we have previously signalled the importance of integrating a growing number of contextual factors in the analysis of audio-visual flows, access to reliable data from financial statements, industry reports or policy documents is undoubtedly instrumental. However, we may also consider the value of empirically collected data by the research team itself in order to avoid any commercial or political influence that may have framed the initial process of data gathering or interpretation. Considering the study of online flows, secondary data may be both a blessing and a curse. Accurate data on Internet flows, online distribution or consumption patterns can prove difficult to obtain first hand by scholars, as there is no systematic data collection process, and much baseline research is required (Winseck, 2011: 6–7). On the other hand, although industry reports on the topic are being conducted, these are increasingly difficult to come by, as the case of Netflix has repeatedly demonstrated (Gray, 2017). New delivery platforms, such as over-the-top players, compete in a fast-changing market, where data are essential in developing and winning over consumers. Therefore, it may become increasingly difficult for research to make use of the industry’s distribution and consumption data, for the study of online audio-visual delivery.

Although significant changes have occurred in the political economy of media since 1980s, developments in media and communication technologies as well as the global capitalist system have made the flows discussion even more relevant. The complexities of transnational media have added to the lack of transparency in the origin of media products distributed and consumed all over the world. Furthermore, flows studies need to develop a new way to analyse the new hybrid and localized media products as both evidence of transnational commercialization but also expressions of audience autonomy (Artz, 2017: 100).

The advent and continuous development and spread of new media and communication technologies are discussed in close connection to new business models, new consumption patterns and a general reframing of the global media landscape through processes such as internationalization, digitalization and convergence.
Nevertheless, digital networks are just as prone to concentration and domination as legacy media. Concentration through a small number of nodes in the network media environment enables economic, political and cultural control, mirroring a function of money and power (Winseck, 2011: 39). Lotz (2017: 2) points to the personalized delivery of online content as an essential transformation from scheduling to curation, while Lobato (2018) considers the continuation of flow studies on delivery platforms such as Netflix an essential step in critically assessing the level of content diversity in online catalogues. This renders the flow of content just as relevant for research as it was upon its foundation as a theoretical concept. A first challenge in the process is to identify the most suitable tools for that.

References


