**Michael Curtin, “Hollywood Paris: Comparing Capital”**

Update, February 2017

Over the past ten years, I have been analyzing the institutional dynamics of media globalization, focusing especially on circulations and exchanges between transnational “media capitals,” such as Hollywood, Bollywood, Nollywood, Miami, Beirut, Dubai, Hong Kong, and Beijing. Recently, my work has focused on tensions between the logics of commercial media vs. official (public/state/hybrid) media. I have also been studying the globalization of media labor and the networking of film and television production infrastructure.

My work uses Hollywood as a key point of reference given its paramount status as a commercial media capital but I have also devoted much of my time to the study of non-Western media in order to build a set of comparisons and contrasts between transnational centers, circulations, and spheres of distribution (e.g., Arab television; African videofilm; Bollywood blockbusters; Chinese palace dramas). Unfortunately, due to resource constraints, I have had little time to consider European media capitals as part of my analysis. Therefore the PICS project offers me the opportunity to probe more deeply into the historical evolution and current status of Paris as 1) a transnational media capital; 2) a distinctive blend of official and commercial media institutions; and 3) a significant node of screen media labor in the globally networked production infrastructure.

I am especially interested in studying the ways that French media institutions and policies have evolved over the past three decades in response to globalizing pressures. In addition to structural issues and political economy, I will consider such topics as genre transformations, talent circulations, and professional practices. My research will pay special attention to the Paris-Hollywood axis but also make comparisons to other transnational media capitals as appropriate.

**Media Capital(s)**

As mentioned above, I’m especially interested in this research collaboration because it offers me the opportunity to study one of the most successful forms of state intervention on behalf of a national media industry. The French government has historically been a very substantial supporter of national film and television institutions while also allowing space for the development of commercial media institutions. It has done this through officially funded institutions, infrastructure, and training programs as well as policy guidelines, import quotas, and subsidies. Such policies have at times been criticized for favoritism, censorship, and protectionism, but they have nevertheless sustained a generally open, innovative, and prolific set of professionals and institutions. The government has furthermore been at the forefront of efforts to build relationships with partners throughout Europe, and more recently to develop collaborations with counterparts in Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Very significantly, French media, which once viewed Hollywood as a threat, are increasingly looking for was to forge relationships with US producers and distributors who have begun to overcome their historical provincialism in search of new spheres of operation. As the two move closer together, it invites reflection on the distinction I make between official and commercial media capital.

As national borders have grown more porous and media circulation has amplified, we have witnessed the emergence of new transnational centers that I refer to as *media capitals*—some of them informed by commercial logics, others by official influences. The spatial configurations of media have, therefore, changed significantly. These transformations are driven not by technologies, but by the deployment of technologies in the service of political, social, and economic actors that concentrate in particular locales. “Media capital” as a hermeneutic device directs attention to key features of this new era of multicentric media globalization.

The concept of media capital connotes another level of analysis as well—one that focuses on processes of accumulation that relentlessly reorganize spatial relations, at turns erecting or erasing barriers and concentrating or dispersing resources in the spheres of production, circulation, and exchange. For example, during the early 20th century, broadcasting policies helped to establish national media markets and fuel the growth of media corporations, some of which remain influential today. But toward the end of the century, those same corporations and their competitors chafed at national constraints and aimed to “unlock the potential” of more expansive markets. Initially, national policies facilitated processes of accumulation, but after national markets matured, these policies were perceived as constraints on the most powerful actors. Spatial configurations and media technologies are therefore manifestations of these historical moments of capital accumulation. This, however, is not to say they are epiphenomenal. For as Bourdieu (1986) suggested, capital takes various forms—financial, social, and cultural—that are subject to distinctive and sometimes conflicting logics, which are nevertheless convertible. That is, social and cultural capital can be turned into financial capital and vice versa. Significantly, he argues that we should understand capital as multifaceted and contradictory yet nevertheless operating within an analytically coherent field.

In the context of media globalization, I would offer a slightly different formulation, suggesting that the spatial dynamics of media concentration, influence, and dispersion are shaped by interactions between commercial and official capital, both of which are animated by processes of accumulation that operate through actors, institutions, and technologies to continually refashion space to capture, accumulate, and sustain power.

In recent decades, the spatial and processural dynamics of capital have breached the relatively stable boundaries of national media, hastening a scramble to refashion the institutions and geographies of production and circulation. During the 1980s and 1990s, satellite television augured this momentous shift, sparking fears at the time of cultural homogenization under the auspices of Batman and Mickey. Yet rather than a singular Hollywood hegemony, we live today in a multinodal and networked global media environment of commercial and official media capitals that invite us to compare their distinctive qualities.

Commercial media capital tends to flourish where companies show resolute attention to commercial calculation and mercurial audience tastes. The bottom line for successful firms is always popularity and profitability, engendering hybrid aesthetics that tap cultural influences from near and far. Employing an industrial mode of production and distribution that is fashioned around stars and genres, motion picture enterprises aim to manage cultural volatility and make texts intelligible to diverse audiences. Although often criticized for pandering to the lowest common denominator, commercial firms are relentlessly innovative as they avidly pursue the evanescent nuances of fashion and pleasure. Profitability is derived from structured creativity that feeds expansive (and expanding) distribution systems. Thus, marketing considerations are woven into the conceptual stages of project development, ensuring that profitability is purposefully articulated to the protean logics of popular taste.

Commercial media capital therefore tends to thrive in cities that foster entrepreneurial endeavor and cultural experimentation (Florida, 2005; Scott, 2000). It is also worth noting that the most successful commercial media enterprises emerge in port cities with long histories of transcultural engagement (Lewis & Wigen, 1997). Far from the centers of state power, these cities (e.g., Los Angeles, Lagos, and Mumbai) are in many cases disdained by political elites, since their products often probe the boundaries of censorship and good taste. Therefore, commercial media capital tends to situate itself, both geographically and metaphorically, at arm’s length from the state.

Official media capital is, on the other hand, guided by national elites and therefore tends to be more monological and territorial.[[1]](#footnote-1) As a category, it encompasses various institutional forms, but generally refers to the deployment of media resources that substantially accommodate national interests as opposed to market forces. If commercial media capital tends to operate out of cities that serve as cultural crossroads, then official media capital tends to be based at the confluence of national political power. In its most radical form official media capital is an instrument of propaganda, subordinated to political rather than popular agendas. It may otherwise be employed as a tool of social and economic development, aimed at constituting and mobilizing a productive national populace (Lerner, 1958; Schramm, 1964). Less obtrusively, official media capital may take shape as a public service that aims to overcome failures of the market and/or foster a common cultural heritage (Garnham, 2000; Scannell, 1996). Public service media embrace the overall objectives of the state, but may be insulated from explicit political pressures and operate in the context of a public charter. In Europe, the Soviet system evolved as one of the first modern iterations of propaganda media, whereas French film and television have largely been sustained by policies that emphasized public service. In both countries, policy makers also embraced social and economic development priorities, as was true in most European nations during the 20th century. Thus, official media can take various forms, but generally they aim to *guide* audiences according to a set of political principles rather than *follow* popular tastes in pursuit of market opportunities (Hilmes, 2011).

Yet these categorical distinctions between commercial media capital and official media capital do not constitute a simple binary; rather, they should be considered as points on a continuum. Hollywood and Beirut are obvious examples of cities where commercial media capital prevails, whereas at the other end of the spectrum, media institutions in Moscow and Riyadh could be considered emblematic of official media capital. In between lie cities such as London, Paris, Beijing, and Dubai, where official and commercial forces intertwine. Moreover, it’s worth noting that Hollywood’s institutional practices have never been purely commercial, and media in Moscow today employ market mechanisms to achieve official objectives. Therefore the distinction outlined above should be used as a hermeneutic device designed to reveal the ways that media in many parts of the world has since the 1990s been overdetermined by escalating tensions and interactions between commercial and official media capital. Such an approach offers a more refined and contextual understanding of processes of globalization and transnationalization.[[2]](#footnote-2) Specific comparisons of French and US media should therefore offer an especially fruitful avenue of analysis.

**Work Schedule**

**2017:** Historical and field research. Data analysis.

**2018:** Write and publish results.

1. “Official” is inspired by Seton-Watson’s (1977) analysis of official nationalism. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This research project focuses on cultural and entertainment media. News reporting, publishing, and social media, are riven by similar although distinctive tensions. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)