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Elmo Everywhere: A Critical Analysis of Glocalization

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Elmo Everywhere: A Critical Analysis of Glocalization

Overview

Adaptations of *Sesame Street*, the popular American children's entertainment-education program, are broadcast in approximately 150 countries. These adaptations, which feature Muppets and story lines that are adapted to each country's cultural context and development needs, are the result of collaborations between the American company, Sesame Street Workshop, and local governments and/or local media companies. However, the spread of *Sesame Street* beyond the United States is not a recent phenomenon. For example, the Muppets landed in Brazil (*Vila Sésamo*) in the 70s and in China, (*Big Bird Looks at the World*) in the 80s. Sesame Workshop reports that these local versions have been immensely successful as forms of entertainment education (Sesame Workshop. org). For example, a 2009 Associates for Community and Population Research (ACPR) report indicates that viewing *Sisimpur* (Bangladeshi version) has accelerated the development of literacy and math skills among Bangladeshi children (Lee, 2009), and viewers of *Kilimani Sesame* (Tanzania's version of *Sesame Street*) have a better understanding of malaria transmission prevention after watching the show (Borzekowski and Macha, 2010).

By adapting *Sesame Street* to the country's local context, these international collaborations are engaging in a process media theorists term "glocalization." (Moran, 2006). The documentary, *The World According to Sesame Street*, gives us a glimpse into how this glocalization process unfolds, making it a useful text teaching students about the intricacies of cross-cultural, international collaborations.

Students often view entertainment-education media companies as noble and selfless given that these companies aim to improve literacy or produce content with pro-social messages. When media companies partner with stakeholders in the Global South, such perceptions of benevolence become more acute. However, the ways in which these collaborations, although well-meaning, might reinscribe the Global North-Global South binary need to be explored. Thus, a critical analysis of glocalization can complicate the viewpoint that glocalization is an always-empowering strategy. This lesson plan aims to achieve such a complex understanding of glocalization by using discussion strategies to help students critically examine the process of producing glocalized, international content.

This lesson plan also highlights the role of public television in providing access to entertainment education in international settings and offers students an opportunity to compare the role of public television at home and abroad. Specifically, while many international versions of *Sesame Street* are shown on public broadcasting channels, allowing for broad access, in the United States, *Sesame Street* first airs on HBO and is then broadcast on PBS nine months later. In this model of stratified access, those who can afford an HBO subscription have first access (Steel, 2015). By contextualizing *Sesame Street's* move to HBO within a global context students begin to understand how media industries are involved in creating and maintaining the Global North-Global South binary within the United States as well.

Rationale

Glocalization refers to ways in which media companies localize their content by infusing design, narratives, and content with local elements. In contrast to the top-down cultural imperialism approach, where media from the Global North are pushed into markets of the Global South without any attention to the audience's culture, glocalization is seen as a culturally competent practice that emphasizes the role of culture in audience engagement. In the context of entertainment education, best practices dictate that local perspectives should be sought and integrated into the content development process, especially when cultural outsiders are developing media. Such inclusion is a much-needed change from earlier top-down approaches and marks a move toward more interactional approaches to social change initiatives.

This participatory approach emphasizes “public and community access to appropriate media, participation of people in message design and media production, and self-management of communication enterprises.” (Singhal, Cody, Rogers, and Sabido, 2004, 380). Although participation continues to be the desired goal, the way in which participation occurs is often complicated by power dynamics (Huesca, 2003). For example, participation of local communities is often limited to assessing their response to a program in order to test program appeal and effectiveness. In such cases, participation is narrowly conceptualized and local communities have no control over the content development process itself. Alternatively, community members may be involved in the production process as consultants in order to ensure that the program aligns with local culture and needs. In such cases, although community members are included in the production process, they are reduced to acting as repositories from which program designers can draw knowledge and expertise. Thus, the radical features of participation, which emphasize that local communities control the production process as well as have access to the final product and channels of dissemination, remain far from being realized. In this manner, media companies and producers can easily appropriate participatory approaches so that their radical features, such as equal partnership, are circumvented. Instead, participation becomes a tactic to ensure “inclusivity” in the production process or a tool to ensure “buy in” but still retain control (Huesca, 2003).

International productions of *Sesame Street* emphasize participation during every stage of the process. Participation is enacted through co-production, where local consultants are involved in determining and creating content (no more than 50% of any international version replicates American version's content) (Palmer, Chen, and Lesser, 1976), from the Muppets that will be included in the show to the issues that the show will emphasize. Glocalization through co-production, thus, functions as a way of ensuring cultural relevance and avoiding cultural imperialism. However, whether or not local media companies are complete and equal participants in co-production is a question worthy of further analysis.

The question of equal partnership can also be explored by analyzing the media channels used to broadcast the co-produced content. In particular, such an analysis can highlight how ownership of media channels impacts access to content. The international scenarios can also be contrasted with how *Sesame Street* is broadcast in the United States. In 2016, *Sesame Street*, which was previously broadcast on PBS, began broadcasting on HBO. The move was prompted by

decreasing revenue for the company, a result of decreasing federal funding and profits from ancillary products such as toys and DVDs, which made its broadcast on public television financially unfeasible (Steel, 2015). Consequently, Sesame Workshop entered into a contract with HBO. The deal ensures that new episodes will first broadcast on HBO and nine months later on PBS. Although *Sesame Street* continues to innovate and expand its content to include messages of tolerance and equality, this deal has meant that *Sesame Street*'s first audience is a relatively elite section of the population who can afford a premium cable subscription. Putting this American broadcast model in conversation with the model used to broadcast Sesame Workshop's international content opens the door to a deeper understanding of how media companies from the Global North operate in a globalizing economy and provides an opportunity to begin discussions about the value of critical perspectives for understanding the operations of media industries.

Classes on Media Industries or Global Media are a natural fit for this lesson. Instructors can decide the extent of theoretical emphasis based on class level. I have used this lesson successfully in lower-level classes where I provide an overview of theoretical concepts before opening up discussion. To tailor the lesson for upper-level classes, I recommend that students read the Miller (2010) and Moran (2006) articles referenced in the lesson plan so that they can take a more active role in building connections.

Timeline

This lesson is designed to cover one class period of 1 hour and 20 minutes. Prior to class, students should watch the documentary *The World According to Sesame Street*. To ensure equitable access, I recommend ensuring that the college library has a copy of the documentary. Alternatively, one class period can be devoted to viewing the documentary or students can rent the documentary from Amazon. The instruction period is discussion-based and during this session, students identify and critique the co-production process discussed in the documentary.

The instruction period begins with a 15-min session during which a definition of glocalization is introduced and students discuss how co-production is the primary way via which glocalization is achieved by Sesame Street Workshop. Next, students are asked to work in small groups to identify points where the co-production process was conducted in a culturally competent manner. In the same small groups, students are also asked to identify points where co-production process encountered challenges or needed improvement. This step takes around 15 minutes. Next, the entire class joins in a 20-minute discussion to explore the reasons behind the labeling of specific encounters as successful or needing improvement. As students provide reasons, the instructor guides them to explore how local traditions or issues are presented as problems and how participation, although emphasized consistently, occurs according to rules set out by the American company. Next, the role of public television internationally and in the United States is compared (15 minutes). Students identify the channels used to broadcast international versions, and then compare the international broadcast models with the one used in the United States, where *Sesame Street* is first broadcast on HBO, a cable channel. Finally, during the last 10 minutes, students are asked to articulate ways in which the co-production process and local partnerships can be reworked to make it a more egalitarian process.

Lesson Plan

Objective

Understand “glocalization” in theoretical and applied terms and examine how power relations can be maintained through the process; be able to articulate alternatives or solutions

Before viewing

Before viewing the documentary, I recommend framing the documentary by giving students some background about *Sesame Street*'s role in the United States (Michael Davis' *Street Gang: The Complete History of Sesame Street* is a good resource for this purpose). Instructors can also pull up the Sesame Street Workshop website (<http://www.sesameworkshop.org>) in class to show students the current work being done by the company and the global spread of *Sesame Street* adaptations. To spark interest in the documentary, play trailers of some international versions (also available on the website or YouTube). Finally, I recommend asking students to focus on the process of co-production during their viewing and to take notes. To ensure focused viewing, students are asked to write their responses to the questions provided in the viewing guide (Appendix A) and bring their responses to class.

In-class discussion

Introduction

Step 1: Understanding glocalization

- Begin the class period by introducing students to the concept of glocalization by drawing on Kraidy's (1999) definition of glocalization as a blending of global and local elements and perspectives.
- Next, contrast the term with the concept of cultural imperialism, which refers to the intrusion of Western culture into non-Western cultures, leading to their displacement or negation.
- Emphasize that Kraidy (1999) also argues for doing away with the idea that the global and local are mutually exclusive and instead suggests that the blending of international and local perspectives is ubiquitous.

Step 2: Applying the concept of glocalization to contemporary examples

- Provide students with examples of how glocalization operates in other spheres as well and ask students to discuss why these companies might engage in glocalization. I use examples of corporate glocalization such as McDonalds and Starbucks menus to explain how these companies have tailored their offerings to local contexts.
 - In India, Starbucks serves food such as kabab sandwiches and chilli cheese toast while still offering similar beverages and using the same terminology of “tall,” “grande,” and “venti” for beverage sizes.
 - McDonalds in India does not serve beef products so a cheeseburger is a drastically different product in India, although the concept of “Happy Meal” is still used.

- Takeaway message: These examples are useful for helping students understand the economic reasons for glocalization when it is used as a conscious strategy by companies and opens the door for uncovering the economic dimensions of *Sesame Street* co-productions during later discussion.
- To help students understand how American media can be glocalized as well, and to push against the idea that glocalization involves localizing media or products from the Global North exclusively, discuss the example of *Ugly Betty*, the American adaptation of the Columbian hit telenovela *Betty la Fea*.
 - Takeaway message: This example challenges students to think of globalization as a uni-directional process involving the spread of American ideas and products to other countries once that can be multi-directional. (I recommend that instructors read Jade Miller's (2010) article for additional information on presenting this media text as an example of glocalization. In upper-level classes, students can compare the international circulation of *Betty la Fea* with the global circulation of *Sesame Street* to understand how media products are enmeshed in networks of global capitalism.)

Step 3: Deepening understanding of glocalization

- Ask students to explain why dubbing of American programs is not typically considered as an example of glocalization.
 - Ideas of cultural competence as central to the glocalization process typically emerge from student responses.
 - Students should be able to identify that the inclusion of local cultural elements, cultural knowledge, and perspectives of local communities as necessary for culturally competent glocalization.

Small group discussion

Students are then asked to form small groups of 3-4. The questions listed below are provided to guide discussion in small groups.

- How does Sesame Street define co-production? How similar or different is this definition from glocalization?
- Identify specific scenes from the documentary that illustrate successful co-production.
- In the scenes identified above, discuss the role of local culture and local communities.
- List some challenges that complicate the co-production goal.
- Identify instances where the co-production process faltered and if it can be improved.
- Discuss who controls the co-production process.
- Drawing on your responses, assess Sesame Street Workshop's cultural competence in the co-production process.

During discussion, I usually walk around the groups, clarifying questions and getting a sense for common ideas across groups. At this point, I often hear students say it is challenging to identify areas where co-production could be improved. If I encounter this concern, I ask students to focus on the various challenges to co-production discussed in the documentary and to focus on the reasons provided in the documentary for these challenges: is local culture portrayed as inherently less sophisticated? Are differences among local groups taken seriously? Who plays "teacher"

during co-production? After about 15 minutes, I ask a representative from each group to come to the board to write the scenes they identified in two columns- Column 1: Co-production executed successfully and Column 2: Needs improvement.

The entire class then engages in open discussion about the scenes identified on the board. We first discuss how co-production ensures that the curriculum is tailored to local contexts and local children's needs, thus avoiding cultural imperialism, which is characterized by the idea that Western products are superior and do not need to appeal to local contexts. Students point out that the cultural resonance achieved through co-production is not surface level: reworking the "street" to a culturally relevant space like a marketplace for the Bangladeshi version and creating original content in local languages are common examples that emerge from discussion. Involving local experts in Muppet development, from design to purpose, is another area that students identify as a sign of cultural competence. Students point out that the creation of a Bengal tiger as a Muppet for the Bangladesh version and a girl Muppet "Kami" to teach children about HIV/AIDS in the South African version are the result of co-production. Instructors can draw on Moran's (2006) article to offer additional insight into the co-production process. In upper-level courses, students are encouraged to compare the co-production process depicted in the documentary with the process described in the article.

The discussion then shifts to areas where co-production process needs improvement: common topics identified by students include noticing that representatives did not always speak the local language, lack of knowledge about immigration processes, and expectations that work culture operate along American norms. Some students also point out that local puppets are not used in the Bangladeshi version and that the co-production process used is itself developed by Sesame Street Workshop. I encourage students to identify reasons why local puppets might not have been used or why Sesame Street executives might insist on using the process they developed. As students respond, they begin to make inferences about how international versions of Sesame Street are not merely exercises in altruism but also a way of opening up global markets to the *Sesame Street* brand. Students can begin to delve into issues of copyright and revenues earned from merchandise marketing as well. At this point, students begin to demonstrate critical awareness of the complexities involved in co-production as the path to globalization.

Next, students compare local and international productions of *Sesame Street* to understand the role of public television in disseminating entertainment education (15 minutes). First, students visit <http://www.sesameworkshop.org> to find information about current local partnerships and methods of dissemination. Depending on time and access to computers in the classroom, the instructor can either guide students through the website or students can navigate the website in small groups.

Note: To help students navigate the website, instructors could recommend specific locations that students should explore. First, click the "Where we Work" tab and then click the "View all locations" link. Places for which additional information is available are clearly indicated. At the time of writing this lesson plan, information about the channel on which a co-production was aired could be easily found for the following locations: Nigeria, Germany, Egypt, Tanzania, Palestine, China, and Northern Ireland. Although this list is not exhaustive, it provides a sense of the mix of ownership models for channels that air the international versions. In some cases,

students might have to do an additional quick Internet search of the name of the channel or the name of the co-production to figure out the ownership model for the channel.

Two lists should be created: one of locations that use public broadcasting networks to air *Sesame Street* and one of those that use private networks. Students then identify the benefits of airing the program on public television. At this point, instructors should highlight the role of access and connect it with Sesame Workshop's mission of spreading education to those who might not have access to quality education. Next, students are asked to contextualize *Sesame Street's* move from PBS to HBO in the United States by answering the following questions.

- Is this move part of a larger global trend toward privatizing media?
- What is the impact of this move on *Sesame Street's* mission to provide educational programming to underserved communities?
- How might federal funding or private donations for education-based shows be beneficial?
- What are some challenges associated with relying on federal funding or private donations?

Closing discussion

During this phase, students are asked to come up with strategies they might use if they were in charge of the production process (internationally and domestically) so as to make the process more egalitarian and increase access. Solutions range from designing information campaigns to educate people about public television to emphasizing the value of learning local languages and highlighting the need for local experts and possibilities for profit sharing. Finally, I close the discussion by emphasizing two points.

1. Sesame Street Workshop does enact "successful" glocalization but the co-production process itself, while encouraging participation, still ensures that participation occurs along the terms set by the American company.
2. To become media literate, we need to understand the various funding models used by media companies because it can help us evaluate how media industries are implicated in maintaining inequalities at home and abroad.

Teaching materials

Readings

Miller, Jade L. 2010. "Ugly Betty goes global: Global networks of localized content in the telenovela industry." *Global Media and Communication* 6, no. 2: 198-217.

Moran, Kristin C. 2006. "The global expansion of children's television: A case study of the adaptation of Sesame Street in Spain." *Learning, Media and Technology* 31, no. 3: 287-300.

Optional reading for instructors: Davis, Michael. 2008. *Street gang: The complete history of Sesame Street*. New York: Penguin.

Documentary

The World According to Sesame Street. 1991. Directed by Linda Goldstein Knowlton and Linda Hawkins Costigan Participant Productions, 2006. DVD.

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The World According to Sesame Street. 1991. Directed by Linda Goldstein Knowlton and Linda Hawkins Costigan Participant Productions, 2006. DVD.

Biography

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Marissa Joanna Doshi (Ph.D., Texas A&M University) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication at Hope College. Her research draws on feminist perspectives to examine media and technology practices. Her work has been published in journals such as *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, *Communication Research*, and *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*.

Appendix A

Viewing guide for *The World According to Sesame Street*

- Who made this documentary? What are some of the reasons why this documentary might have been made? Who is the audience for this documentary?
- What reasons are provided for developing international adaptations of Sesame Street?
- What reasons are provided for partnering with local organizations/companies?
- Identify two scenes that stood out for you. Why?
- Focusing on interactions between Sesame street executives and local partners, identify examples where collaboration was executed well and examples where collaboration was not as successful.
- What questions do you have after viewing the documentary?