

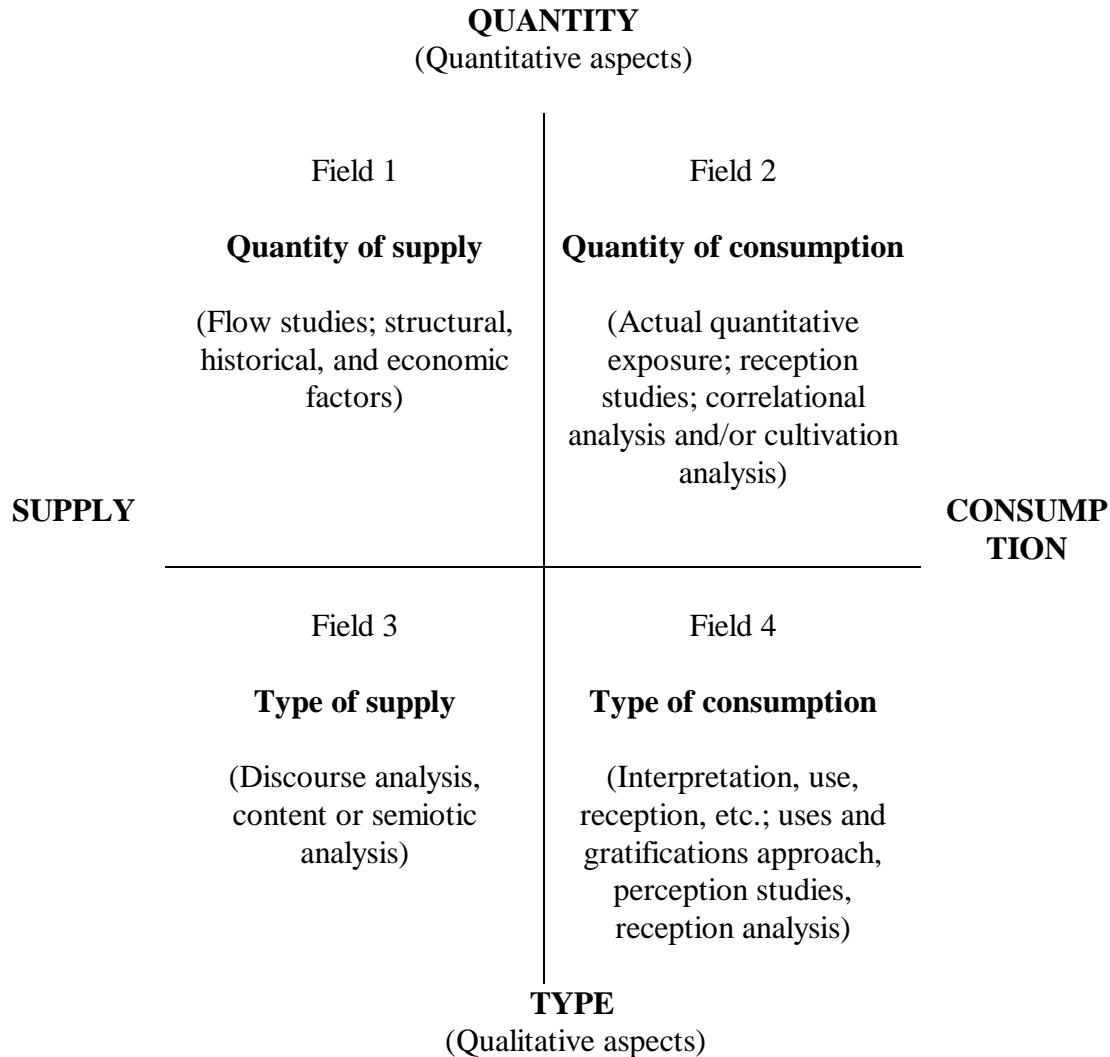
Mexican research on the consumption and appropriation of foreign media contents in Mexico

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Over the last three decades, research and analysis of transnational communication flows and their reception by different publics, has increased and consolidated. However, scholars have not answer yet many of the fundamental questions about these processes, especially of the reception of foreign contents. There are two main reasons for this situation: on the first hand, dependency and cultural imperialism theories favored flow studies over reception studies (cf. Biltereyst, 1995; De la Garde, 1993; Fejes, 1981). On the other hand, the sectional nature of most of the studies, and their focus on particular countries or cities (except for the few comparative world or regional flow studies like the ones coordinated by Nordenstreng & Varis, 1974; Straubhaar et al., 1994; Varis, 1984), have not been sufficient for a wider understanding about the magnitude of the supply over the years, and about its reception and consumption by publics belonging to different countries.

In sum, of the four axes identified by Biltereyst (1995) for the classification of the studies about the role and power of transnational communication (see Figure 1), the one explored the most has been the one related to the flow of transnational messages, while the other three have been scarcely studied empirically (p. 254). If this is the case at the world level, the situation is even more so in the case of Latin America, where for a long time the dependency and cultural imperialism approaches prevailed.

Figure 1
Analytical bi-dimensional model of approaches and research trends in the study of international communication



Source: Daniël Biltereyst (1995). Qualitative audience research and transnational media effects: a new paradigm? *European Journal of Communication*, 10 (2): 245-270.

This paper review and discuss recent theorizations and research findings about the supply and consumption of transnational television contents in Mexico, and compares them to

findings in other parts of the world and of Latin America. Although the literature review may not be exhaustive, it includes many of the main empirical studies about the state of the field in this country.

Transnational television supply

The unevenness of communication flows between countries has created historically speculations about their consequences over the culture and the identity of nationals in the affected countries. If a particular country (typically a developing country) receives a significant volume of foreign contents (originated mostly in industrialized countries like the United States), then the phenomenon of cultural imperialism is expected to occur.

Imports, a product of hegemonic cultures, are accused of eroding the values, customs and world visions of the inhabitants of the recipient countries (cf. McAnany & Wilkinson, 1997, p. 4). Efforts for the establishment of a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) have been based on the assumption that unevenness of communication supplies represents a threat to the sovereignty and integrity of developing nations. One way for evaluating the possible impact of these asymmetrical flows, from the seventies to date, has been the diagnosis of the supply and the magnitude of the unevenness of the flows according to the geographical origin of media messages.

According to the studies by Varis (1984), Mexico imported in 1973 39% of its television programming. By 1983, ten years later, that percentage had diminish to 34% of the total time of transmission, although in prime time, that percentage rose to 44%. These percentages were lower than the ones found by Antola & Rogers (1984), who found in 1982 that 50% of total transmission hours in Televisa's four national channels were imported. However, when ratings were taken into account, both researchers found that only 33% of the audience-hours were devoted to imports. Antola & Rogers concluded that while imports from the United States were still important in Latin American

television, their percentage was lower than the one in the seventies, and their ratings inferior to the ones got by national or other Latin American productions (p. 199).

Straubhaar et al. (1994) arrived to similar conclusions in their longitudinal comparative study (1962 thru 1991) of Latin America (Brazil, Dominican Republic, Colombia and Chile) and the Middle East: local television production had increased gradually and US imports had decreased.

A diagnosis by the [Centro Internacional de Estudios Superiores de Comunicación para América Latina](#) CIESPAL, based in Ecuador pointed out that 62% of television hours transmitted in 1991 were from the United States (Estrella, 1991, p. 82). It didn't specified the specific percentage of imports in Mexican television, but it did emphasize Mexico's importance as exporter of television contents to the rest of Latin America: 53% of total Latin American television imports were Mexican.

Today, with six national television channels (four owned by Televisa, two by TV Azteca), 500 cable grantees ("Concesiones televisión cable", 2003, May 9), more than 150 television channels of Mexican origin ("Boom de canales", 1997, January-February), one [Multipoint Distribution System](#) (Multivisión), and two DTH systems (SKY and DIRECTV), the supply of transnational television contents—in particular U.S. contents—is bigger than ever. This expansion of the supply is a product on the one hand of the general phenomenon of globalization and the continuous development of new technologies for the production and distribution of audiovisual contents, and on the other of Mexico's integration since 1994 to an economic agreement with the United States and Canada. Mexican scholars, in response to this, have intensified their analysis of the degree in which audiovisual flows between the three countries are unbalanced and favor the United States in particular (Blanco, 1996; Crovi, 1995; Díaz, 1995; Figueroa, 1996; Lozano, 1995/96; Olvera, 1995; Sánchez Ruiz, 1995).

Table 1 offers a general view of the findings of the majority of recent analyses of the supply of foreign television contents in the country. While the studies have different

methodological designs and were carried out in different periods of time, they do provide a general overview of the magnitude of television imports in Mexico. Unfortunately, most of these studies study the percentage of imports in open air TV stations; paid-television has not received similar attention despite the likelihood of finding bigger percentages of imports in it. Table 1 shows, for example, that U.S. channels represented in 1995 from 60 to 95 percent of the total number of channels in different paid television systems. In Mexico, however, paid television is still not widespread and reach only around 20% of households (30% in Monterrey), justifying the emphasis of Mexican scholars in open air television.

Table 1
Percentage of foreign programming in Mexico by type of system and city

<i>Study</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>% of foreign contents</i>		<i>Cities included in the study</i>
		<i>Open TV</i>	<i>Paid TV</i>	
Sánchez Ruiz (1992)	1981	30		
Sánchez Ruiz (1996)	1983	34 ^a (29) ^b		D.F. & Guadalajara
Sánchez Ruiz (1996)	1984	31 (24)		D.F. & Guadalajara
Sánchez Ruiz (1996)	1990	31 (23)		D.F. & Guadalajara
Crovi (1995a)	1994	35		D.F.
Figueroa (1996)	1994	49	82	D.F.
Blanco (1996)	1994	48	74	Irapuato
Sánchez Ruiz (1996)	1995	47 (37)		D.F., Guadalajara, Leon & Uruapan
Crovi y Vilar (1995)	1995	42		D.F.
Orozco y Viveros (1996)	1995	48		D.F.
Díaz (1995)	1995	28 (19)	78(66)	Monterrey
Lozano y García (1995)	1995	35 (28)		Monterrey
Sánchez Ruiz (1995)	1995	44 (33)		Guadalajara
Lozano (1995/96)	1995		59% 95% 60%	Percentage of channels in Cablevisión, DF originated in USA Number of channels in Multivisión, DF originated in USA Number of channels in Monterrey originated in USA
Lozano y Huerta (2001)	1999	46,37,38,37 (40,32,32,32)	48% ^c	Four weeks of 1999, one for each trimester

^a Percentage of foreign programming

^b Percentage of U.S. programming

^c Average for the four weeks

Regardless of period of time and place, foreign contents represented between 30 to 48% of total programming time. In other words, imports were important, but half or more of the total television time was occupied by national or local productions. Table 2 shows that in prime-time, television imports were even more widespread, increasing the percentage of audience members exposed to them. However, in most studies local productions accounted for at least 50% of total prime-time supply, opening the possibility for the viewers to focus their attention either to the foreign or to the local programming or a combination of both. Some scholars like Sánchez Ruiz (1996, p. 55), however, worry about these percentages, arguing that they show a steady decline of local contents, going from 70% to the actual 50%. Conceding this, it is however clear that Mexican television programming is not wholly dependent on foreign contents and that local programming is still high. This situation is explained better by Straubhaar's (1991) concept of asymmetrical interdependence and of cultural proximity, and by Wilkinson (1995) arguments about the existence of mechanisms of linguistic and cultural affinity in the contents of national and regional productions making them more attractive for Latin American audiences than U.S. productions. Also, these findings confirm that what Antola & Rogers (1984) found in the early 1980's about the growth of national productions and regional imports, was still valid in the nineties. However, we cannot conclude by the latter that the actual contents of local and regional productions have significant ideological differences with U.S. productions. Modeling (the imitation of U.S. structures, genres, and contents) is evident in many Latin American messages and they are also conditioned by their focus on ratings and profit (cf. Crovi, 1995a, p. 192).

Table 2
Percentage of foreign programming in Mexico by type of system and city: prime time

<i>Study</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>% of foreign contents</i>		<i>Cities included in the study</i>
		<i>Open TV</i>	<i>Paid TV</i>	
Sánchez Ruiz (1996)	1981	48		
Sánchez Ruiz (1996)	1983	46 ^a (44) ^b		D.F. & Guadalajara
Sánchez Ruiz (1996)	1984	46 (40)		D.F. & Guadalajara
Sánchez Ruiz (1996)	1990	46 (34)		D.F. & Guadalajara
Blanco (1996)	1994	55	71	Irapuato
Sánchez Ruiz (1996)	1995	52 (42)		D.F., Guadalajara, León & Uruapan
Lozano y García (1995)	1995	50 (42)		Monterrey
Sánchez Ruiz (1995)	1995	50(38)		Guadalajara

^a Percentage of foreign programming

^b Percentage of U.S. programming

The relative balance discussed above, however, is not evident when comparing the genres of television contents. There is a clear predominance of American imports in fiction (series, movies, sitcoms, cartoons), while variety (musicals, comedy, reality shows, talk shows, games, general interest, and documentaries) programs coming from the U.S. occupied between 5% in the metropolitan channels of Monterrey up to 41% of total time in Guadalajara's metropolitan channels. Imports, in contrast, were much lower in the news genre (less than 10% in all cases), and in sports (only from 11% to 28% of total hours came from the U.S.). These findings show that although there seems to be a good balance between imports and national productions in Mexico, significant imbalances exist per genre, fiction being the most dependent on foreign contents, despite the sizeable number of telenovelas (Mexican soap operas) transmitted in Mexican TV. This situation may be changing in the last few years. The last reference (Lozano & Huerta, 2001), was the most recent one and the most comprehensive one, including four weeks (one for each

trimester) in the analysis, and it showed the lowest percentage of fiction contents imported of the period studied (47%), although this figure is still a significant one.

The situation in Mexico is similar to the situation in many other countries, due to the hegemony of American television flows precisely in these genres (see Biltereyst, 1992, p. 518; Murciano, 1992, p. 161). These findings in recent Mexican studies about the supply of television contents in the country indicate that efforts to balance the flow should focus precisely in that category (fiction), and that research on the processes of reception and appropriation of foreign messages should also focus on fiction. Biltereyst (1992, p. 518) has argued that

American fiction has become the model par excellence of fictional entertainment. Moreover, as drama possesses an extensive arsenal of techniques to modulate a concrete imaginative symbolic world, it may be considered as a culturally important and highly persuasive 'artifact'.

Meanwhile, in an international context where nation-states are in great pains to control the circulation of electronic media contents within their borders (Morley, 1992, p. 65), and where some countries had felt forced to impose quotas of 50% for national programming to avoid the danger of total predominance of foreign programming (Schroder, 1993, p. 125), Mexico seems to have a comparative advantage with its solid local television production: without any quota policies occupied 50% of total hours of transmission on open-air TV stations.

Table 3
Percentage of foreign programming in Mexico by genre in open TV

<i>Study</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Fiction</i>	<i>Variety</i>	<i>News</i>	<i>Sports</i>	<i>Cities included in the study</i>
Crovi (1995a)	1994	62	28	9	23	D.F.
Sánchez Ruiz (1996)	1995	77 ^a (60) ^b	37 (33)	6 (6)	11 (6)	D.F., Guadalajara, León & Uruapan
Crovi & Vilar (1995)	1995	71	38	0	23	D.F.
Lozano & García (1995)	1995	89 (72)	6 (5)	6 (6)	23 (23)	Monterrey
Sánchez Ruiz (1995)	1995	74 (59)	41 (38)	7 (7)	16 (9)	Guadalajara
Lozano y Huerta (2001)	1999	47 (45)	16 (12)	0	28 (28)	D.F, Guada- lajara & Monterrey (four weeks)

^a Percentage of foreign programming

^b Percentage of U.S. programming

Studies like these about the flows and the supply of foreign messages in Mexican television are vital and valuable. However, they are clearly insufficient when trying to grasp the ideological implications of their contents. Qualitative content analyses based on semiotics or discourse analysis, and the theorization about the polisemy and the existence of preferred and alternative meanings in texts (Moore, 1990), makes it inadmissible to say that the origin of a cultural product determines automatically its **ideological content**. Unfortunately, studies like these are almost non-existent in Mexico (as in the rest of the world). Scholars like Lozano (1995/96) and Sánchez Ruiz (1995) have pointed out the need to develop this line of research in the country, but to date work is still scarce.

Consumption of foreign contents in Mexico

Different studies on the reception and consumption of television in Mexico coincide with findings of cultural studies research in the rest of the world (cf. Biltereyst,

1992; Caron y Belanguer, 1993; De la Garde, 1993): viewers tend to prefer local over foreign television contents (Blanco, 1994; De la Garza, 1996; De la Peña, 1998; Díaz, 1995; Figueroa, 1996; García, 1997; Lozano, 1995/96, 1997, 2003; Sanchez Ruiz, 1994/95).

Mexican reception studies show that the former conclusion is valid mainly at the general level, since the specific segment of youths shows more complex tendencies. Within general TV viewers in Mexico City and Monterrey, for example, very few imports have been included in the lists of the most watched programs by the audience (García, 1997; Lozano, 1995/96, 1997, 2003; Sanchez Ruiz, 1994/95). Among junior high and high school students of Monterrey, Irapuato, and Mexico City, in contrast, American programs like *The Simpson's*, *Prince of Bel-Air*, and *Beverly Hills 90210* were mentioned frequently as the preferred programs, particularly amongst the students with the higher SES (Blanco, 1994; De la Garza, 1996; De la Peña, 1998; Díaz, 1995; Figueroa, 1996; Lozano, 1997). It is difficult to make valid comparisons between the different studies, because of differences in their methodologies (some are probabilistic, some are not; some use sample sizes with explicit confidence levels and margins of error, others lack information about this), and in the dates surveys were done (between 1991 and 1999). We can only conclude, according to the available evidence, that a great number of youngsters watch American contents, although the exact quantity varied from 24% of lower SES youngsters in Irapuato (Blanco, 1994), up to 83% of upper SES youngsters in Mexico City (Figueroa, 1996). However, most studies concluded that lower and middle SES students did like local television programs more than foreign programs (De la Peña, 1998; Díaz, 1995; Figueroa, 1996; Lozano, 1997). This suggests the existence of processes and cultural practices associated to the SES level able to generate clear differences in the consumption of television messages, and the ways the position of each individual in social structure influences the interpretation and meaning assigned to the different television contents (Gonzalez, 1994).

It is possible that these same tendencies are true also for other segments of the population, and even in the aggregate of all of them as reflected by ratings. Future research may help answer these questions, promoting a better understanding of the processes of exposure and reception of foreign television contents in Mexican audience studies.

In the last section we discussed the scarce and limited analysis of the ideological content of foreign television programs in Mexican research. The same is true for the qualitative study of their appropriation by different groups and subcultures. Recently, scholars like Martha Renero (1997) have done some empirical research in this line, with findings similar to the ones obtained by culturalists in other parts of the world. Unfortunately, these studies are still rare, as well as limited and too exploratory¹.

Conclusions

This paper discussed some of the main theoretical arguments and recent research findings about the supply and consumption of transnational television contents in Mexico.

With respect to supply, the different studies reviewed here coincide in pointing out that those foreign contents in Mexican television represents between 30 and 46% of total programming. While this suggests a balance between local and foreign productions, more specific analyses show that in some genre, like fiction, dependency on foreign contents is much greater, while in news and sports local programs are very strong. This is true for open TV. Studies about paid television in Mexico are dramatically scarce, where the situation could be significantly different. However, paid television is available for only between 20 to 30% of Mexican viewers, making research on open television still relevant.

¹ Renero (1997) reports the different processes of negotiation and appropriation of meaning in the series *Beverly Hills 90210* among junior high students attending a private religious school in Mexico City. She concludes: "in the observed uses and in the verbalized discourses about these uses, we find symbolic struggles of a tactical nature, to have the right to get pleasure from their preferred television program, as well as an intense negotiation of meanings by comparing what they see in the screen with their own real conditions of existence, their former experiences and their projects for the future" (p. 4).

The dominance of imported fiction in Mexican television genres, however, reflects a world reality and not a specific situation in Mexico. Straubhaar et al. (1994, pp. 138-139) have explained this about world flows:

Some American and international genre maintain a higher profile. Maybe because of production costs, the production and exporting of documentaries, action, animated series and films, seem to continue being dominated by industrialized countries.

In sum, research on the supply of television contents in Mexico shows that although local supply is large (an even larger than foreign supply), American imports account for significant percentages of total programming, especially in fiction, where they represent high percentages. In this sense, the findings reinforce the conclusions of Straubhaar et al. (1994, p. 117) about the tendency of the largest Latin American television stations to have high volumes of local production, while new or smaller stations (like TV Azteca) favor imports due to their lower cost. The assumed cultural affinity of Latin American contents, according to Straubhaar et al.' (1994) concepts of relevance and cultural proximity, and Wilkinson's (1995) concept of linguistic cultural market, will make us expect a good number of television contents coming from that region in Mexican television. However, the specific findings of the studies about the television supply in Mexico show very low percentages of Latin American imports and an almost total dominance of foreign contents by the United States. The concepts of cultural affinity and common linguistic and cultural market may be useful to explain the successful export of Mexican television programs to Latin American countries, but they do not seem to apply for the opposite case. Reasons for this could be many, including the magnitude of the internal market in Mexico (100 million inhabitants), policies and measures adopted by the Mexican government over the years which facilitated historically the vertical and horizontal growth first of Televisa and later of TV Azteca, and proximity to the United

States that makes the importation and adoption of new technological developments in media production faster and easier.

Finally, in respect to the volume of American television supply in Mexico (between 30 to 46 percent of the total supply), the language barrier seems to be still an important factor for the predominance of local productions. If we take into account that in Anglo Canada, despite its economic development and public policies in favor of its national cultural industries, some analyses show that U.S. imports account sometimes for 95% of prime time programming (cf. Starowicz, in McAnany & Wilkinson, 1997, p. 8), Mexican television percentages of U.S. programming below 50% seem to be an excellent deal. In this sense, American television programs seem to experience a “cultural discount” in the Mexican context, becoming less attractive to audiences who speak a different language or who “find it difficult to identify with the style, values, beliefs, institutions and behavioral patterns of the material in question” (Hoskins & Mirus, in Sinclair, 1997, p. 45). However, an almost 50% dependence of Mexican television in imports from a single country can be seen as worrisome, requiring discussion and the establishment of communication policies promoting geographic diversity and ideological pluralism.

Regarding consumption of foreign messages, the Mexican research studies discussed above show a clear dominance of local productions in the preference of audience members in general, with the exception of upper class male youngsters who tend to like U.S. contents more than Mexican contents. These findings are similar to the results of studies in other regions of the world, where scholars have found that local audiences tend to prefer local productions over foreign productions. Straubhaar et al. (1994) explain this with the concept of “cultural proximity”: the preference for contents close to the audience’s own culture. Quebec’s case is very similar to the Mexican case. The high volume of American contents in its television supply is not followed by a proportionate consumption (in both countries the percentage of American imports is higher than the percentage of the population who watch them, except for younger audiences, cf. De la

Garde, 1996, p. 246). In both cases there is a tendency towards higher consumption of U.S. imports dubbed to the local language (French in Quebec, Spanish in Mexico), than with subtitles. In both cases, also, youngsters seem to like U.S. imports in a greater degree than other age groups. According to De la Garde (1996, p. 271), however, the findings show that when youngsters become older, their viewing habits change in favor of national contents. This does not discard potential effects of this juvenile consumption of foreign worldviews and values, but at least suggests that afterwards they will not continue consuming foreign contents.

Recently Sinclair (1997) posed the following question: “if national culture deserves to be defended, then, how much and what kind of defense is appropriate in an era of trade liberalization?” The answer of the Australian scholar suggests the possibility of reconciling protectionist measures with an international regime of free trade. In the same vein, we could say that Mexican research findings about the supply and consumption of foreign television point to the need of establishing policies and mechanisms able to achieve a greater balance between the foreign and the local across all genre, as well as a wider diversity of imports, to avoid the current dependence in a single country: the United States. Sanchez Ruiz (1995) has argued that the clear asymmetry in audiovisual flows between Mexico and the United States, favoring the latter, demands revision of current policies and the establishment of new ones geared toward allowing national cultural industries to compete and to increase production of contents in the genres dominated today by the U.S. imports.

Regarding audience studies, the findings show that through imported fiction contents, audience members are exposed systematically to ideological worldviews very different from their own. Most scholars agree that the complex processes of negotiation of symbolic contents and factors mediating their interpretation and appropriation avoid an overt and generalized manipulation of viewer’s attitudes and values. However, as Ang (1990) and Morley (1992) have warned, we should not forget that preferred meanings

tend to prevail over alternative meanings, and that viewers, in the process of negotiation, assimilate some features of the dominant contents. Future studies should pay more attention to the analysis of these dimensions of the appropriation process and to the evaluation of the magnitude of the ideological transformations potentially stemming from generalized and systematic exposure to foreign audiovisual contents.

For now, research evidence suggest that in the context of globalization and liberalization experienced by Mexico in the last few years, proliferation of foreign television contents and their consumption by different segments of the audience will co-exist with a strong volume of national productions with equal or greater popularity than imported messages.

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Dr. José Carlos Lozano

Centro de Investigación en Comunicación e Información
Tecnológico de Monterrey
CI-225-B.1
Ave. Eugenio Garza Sada 2501 Sur, Col. Tecnológico
64849 Monterrey, Nuevo León, México
Tel. (52-81) 8158-2268
<jclozano@itesm.mx>