The End of the American Media Empires (with Michael Curtin)

[opening music]

Dr. Juan Llamas-Rodriguez (JLR): Welcome to the Global Media Cultures podcast. I am your host, Juan Llamas-Rodriguez. Today, we are discussing the end of the American century. Our guest is Dr. Michael Curtin, distinguished research professor of Film and Media Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and an associate researcher at the Center for Sociological and Political Research in Paris.

Until recently, he was the Duncan and Suzanne Mellichamp Chair of the Global Studies at UC Santa Barbara and the director of the 21st Century Global Dynamics Initiative. For the past 30 years, he has published widely on media industry, labor and policy issues focusing especially on the interplay between global, national and local actors.

His books include *Precarious Creativity: Global Media, Local Labor* and *Playing to the World's Biggest Audience: The Globalization of Chinese Film and Television*. He's the executive editor of the global-e newsletter and co-editor of the British Film Institute's International Screen Industries book series. Michael, welcome to the Global Media Cultures podcast.

Dr. Michael Curtin (MC): Thank you, Juan. Thank you for inviting me.

JLR: I would like to start by asking you, could you describe what your scholarship is about and what do you see as its importance and its implications?

MC: Well, a couple of things. The long arc is actually that it goes back to the 1980s. I was actually a journalist in the late '70s, in the early 1980s, and during that period of time, I was really interested in the ways in which journalism has certain conventions that sort of drive how stories get written. And in a way as journalists, we often feel that the story is written before we even begin to go out and gather material for it, in the sense that the conventions are there and they're very explicit.

And so I was fascinated by that and I was also fascinated as a journalist about these larger institutions that drove cultural production. And so that's what got me to thinking about going to graduate school and actually doing some research in these areas. And when I was in graduate school, I had some wonderful people that I worked with, and I also had the opportunity to take

a seminar with a scholar named Stuart Hall. And you'd probably run across his work at various points in your course.

He was at the University of Wisconsin where I did my PhD, and he did a special seminar one year and I was in the seminar. I had the opportunity to work with who I think was truly one of the most brilliant scholars of the last century. He was thinking, unfortunately he's past, but he was thinking particularly in terms of conjunctural analysis. The ways in which things that happened in the world are not determined by any single cause. It isn't just the forces of economics nor politics, nor culture that drives social and cultural phenomena. But it's in fact the conjuncture of these things at specific historical moments.

And that really has driven my work from the very beginning, this notion of conjuncturalism, the way that certain trends and forces come together in a way that often is unexpected, but nevertheless, it is structured. And so we can think in terms of the kind of serendipity of the moment but we also can see larger trends and forces at work across time and space.

And that's the way that I think about media and the way that I think about culture. And so I think my work is very much in that tradition. I started out, the first book that I wrote was about documentary television in the way that it was affected by the Cold War, thinking both in terms of the particular of how did documentaries get made, what were the conventions of the texts, who was doing the actual production, who were the audiences that were watching it but also thinking of this broader, broader picture of Cold War superpower struggle.

And so that was the very first book project that I worked on. And since that time, I've continued to be fascinated by this relationship between the global and the particular. And I think that in my work is an especially important component.

Another thing is that at a certain point, I started to realize that the conditions of cultural possibility, what gets made as far as artifacts on television, music, whatever, the conditions under which they become possible are very much governed by institutional practices and frameworks. And those two are cultural accomplishments, right? We shouldn't just think of a media corporation as a thing or as an economic entity, but also as a cultural accomplishment.

We shouldn't just think of policies as regulations handed down by governments but also as cultural accomplishments. So that's very much a part of my thinking about my research and I came to feel that increasingly, I needed to hone and focus more and more on institutions and practices. And so that's where I've hung a lot of my investment of energy and resources, which

is the study of media institutions, industries, companies, regulatory institutions and structures, things like that.

JLR: And I think all of these aspects both thinking conjecturally, there is not a single cause. And also focus on media institutions and media industries as not just a thing that produces media, but also a thing that is being produced by all these social forces. Both of these things are very much part of what this article that we're discussing today is doing.

So specifically, the article is called “Post Americana: Twenty-First Century Media Globalization,” which is published in *Media Industries Journal* in 2020, just a year ago. Could you give us a brief history of this particular essay in terms of when you began working on it, how did the ideas originate and change in the process of writing it?

MC: So I would say that I began writing it 40 years ago. There is a way in which this is sort of like an attempt in one article to pull together a number of threads of things I've been thinking about for a very long time. But what was the impetus for writing this particular essay? I was invited to Hong Kong to a conference there that was bringing together scholars from around the world. And I was asked to do a keynote address for the conference.

That challenge itself made me sort of think, "Well, we're going to have scholars from around the world. We're going to be in Hong Kong. We're not in a western context." And we're also in a context where I've done a lot of research in my time about Chinese media industries and about the sort of transnational flows of culture and influence throughout East Asia and Southeast Asia.

And so one of the things I really wanted to do was to specifically address what I think is happening at this moment which is that we are certainly seeing the dawning of the new era in media. And I think it was an appropriate place to be talking about those things because I think East Asia has been a cradle of innovation. There's been a tremendous amount of interesting stuff going on, everything from video streaming to peer-to-peer music sharing, you name it.

So much has happened in East Asia, and I wanted to take that into account but I also wanted to talk about what I think are the momentous shifts that are taking place that are opening the door to new valances of power in the world of media cultures worldwide.

JLR: It's interesting because it is very much one of those articles that it is trying to explain and theorize the current moment, which comes with this onset of fraught possibilities. But it is very much informed with, I think as you put it as you started writing it 40 years ago but thinking from multiple years and also thinking historically. I think a lot of the things that you point out

are these are some shifts that had been happening in the decade since, and how did those knowing about that history helps us make sense of the current moment.

MC: The background of this is there are certain debates that are going on about media that I'm trying to address, I'm going to address specifically but others are resonating and percolating in the background. So we think about on one hand, there's this trend toward the proliferation and differentiation of media. We see that happening in many parts of the world, but we also see these trends toward consolidation and standardization.

So how do we hold these two ideas in our hands at the same time and how do we address them? There's also the political dynamics. People think about media in terms of hegemonic power or other forms of embedded power versus interstitial power dynamics, political dynamics. Hamid Naficy has written about the ways in which there is this kind of global system that has a certain kind of structural patterns and whatever. But there are people who operate in the interstices and in the cracks and the crevices and against the grain of hegemonic power.

And so there are these political dynamics. And then there's another thing that I wanted to talk about which is very explicitly addressed is the rise and demise of American power and influence. So that's there. And then scholarly debates between some scholars say, "Well, you know ..." and this has been an ongoing debate and some people just got tired of it and moved on, but between cultural studies and political economy. How do you make cultural studies and political economy resonate with each other or engage in meaningful conversation and productive conversation?

And then finally, there is the other trend that we see in scholarship and then debates is between this notion of globalization and globalism on the one hand, to people talking in terms of post-global or anti-globalism and anti-globalization. And are we seeing, has the global passed? Have people just moved on? At one time, people were talking quite a bit about globalization and globalism and then it exhausted itself. It was in popular discourse. It was in scholarly discourse. And we don't see too much of that anymore.

Did we resolve those issues? Did we just move on? Have we reached another moment? And all of those things need to be addressed as well. So all of these things were kind of in the background of what's going on with the article.

JLR: And a lot of these debates are not easily resolved. In some ways, the generative part of it is holding the debate or the different sights and conflicts, holding them together as you're working through these questions?

MC: Yeah, absolutely. And I think one of the things that we learned in life is that the most productive moments are often the most uncomfortable moments, when both things are happening at once. That's especially generative because the world is never just black and white. It's always these conflicting, contending forces and instances that are operating in the same context at the same moment.

JLR: But one of the claims that you make in the article that is supported by work that has been done in terms of changes in the history of film industries, and then media industries broadly, throughout the 20th century is how world war was very fruitful for media production in many ways. I think the way you phrase it is "world war was good for business."

And there are multiple world wars throughout the 20th century. How have these been helpful in shaping American media production throughout the century even as the conflicts were themselves different and the position of the US in the world changed throughout the 20th century?

MC: If we go back to the early part of the 20th century, the very early embryonic years of cinema, Hollywood is emerging as a very potent, productive force. But there were also film industries in Germany, in France and Italy that we're equally productive. Japan was starting to produce its own films. There was filmmaking that was taken off in India. And one of the things that happened with the end of World War I is essentially the European studios are laid waste for a variety of reasons.

But obviously, Germany lapsed into economic decline in the immediate aftermath. The wars of the studios there basically had a very difficult time in the early part of the 1920s. The French studios that were the most successful in the world before the war, Pathé and Gaumont, studios like that, they also were affected by the war. They were the battleground of World War I. The British studios likewise, they emptied out their investment and production and focused on distribution.

So the American studios really stepped into that moment and become very powerful in the Interwar Era. The other thing that was happening is remember that Britain was the most powerful empire before World War I. And with that imperial power went control of telegraphic communication around the world. And when it came to electronic media at that time leading up to the war, people really thought that broadcasting was really not even on the horizon before the war.

People thought that the most powerful uses of radio telegraphy and particularly telegraphy at that time rather than audio transmissions, they were thinking at that time that the most useful ways to engage with those technologies was for strategic communication. So sending information about what's happening with financial institutions, with crops and weather, maritime trade, things like that.

Well, the British controlled that. They pretty much controlled the whole ball of wax before the war. And after the war, the Americans as the price of their continuing engagement with the UKs and ally, basically said, "Okay, we're going to have our own sphere in which we're going to develop our radio industries," and out of that grew the development of American media oligopolies that would become very powerful in the 20th century.

Likewise with World War II, a similar kind of thing. Again, the United States comes out of the war the least affected by the way. It has a very powerful film and television industry in the post-war period, has very powerful radio industries which become very influential in global propaganda wars through the post-war period.

And so coming out of the war, what we get is not only has the United States emerged as the great superpower that would then be in conflict with Soviet supremacy in the east, but it becomes a global leader. And that global leadership is not just military or political or economic, it's also very much cultural. So the government is very interested in seeing American influence around the world and the idea not simply of American power but the American way of life as it manifested itself in cultural forms has been important.

And then finally, at the end of the Cold War, when the Soviet competitor is vanquished and there is this moment where we hail a kind of a new world order as President Bush put it at that time, in the 1990s, that's the very moment when American media corporations start taking in a more global way than ever before, wanting to embed themselves more thoroughly around the world as huge media conglomerates that would be the ultimate competitors to any other firms from other parts of the world whether that's Europe or Japan or whatever.

And so in each instance, at the end of the war whether it was World War I, World War II or the Cold War, the United States very importantly emerges as a very ... American media industries emerged as a very important component of American power and leadership.

And so that's where the article starts, is let's never forget that history, which is a history that a scholar named Herbert Schiller did a very good job of mapping out with this before. But the

question the article asked is what about the 21st century? Is something different? Has something changed?

JLR: And in following with marking the wars as moments where after the war, the US emerges not only victorious but then came some sort of notoriety and more power both culturally and politically and economically. What's interesting once you move into the 21st century, is actually positioning the war of the 21st century, the war on terror as one of those moments that is marking the sort of decline of that US supremacy.

And one of the things that I found fascinating is you mentioned both the war on terror but then the AOL Time Warner merger as two moments that in some ways could be thought of as separate. But together, they sort of marked this code out to the American century. So why do you think those two moments are helpful to think about that sort of decline at the 21st century?

MC: Hubris, in the sense that all empires move into a moment of decline when their reach exceeds their grasp. At the point in which they've overextended themselves, they've gone too far. They've become too full of themselves. They're too self-absorbed. There's excessive waste within the system and there's excessive abuse at the outer reaches of the empire which starts to manifest itself in resistance.

And whether we're talking about the Qing Dynasty, Ancient Rome, Egyptian ... We see this time and again with empires that they get to a point. The British Empire, Britain was at the absolute peak of its power right before World War I and it almost was that way in which class antagonisms throughout the empire and at home became very, very problematic and that the faith in the class system in British rule had exceeded its usefulness in some way.

And there was a certain kind of sloth and self-confidence that had built itself into the system only to be surprised that, well, the empire is slipping away, right?

JLR: Right.

MC: And I think it's a similar with the United States and why these two things. Well, the war on terror really rocked the American system. And so there's the war on terror as sort of the backlash against what happened with the World Trade Center.

But there's also these other's powers that are emerging and whether it's China or Turkey or a revived Russia, you're starting to see ways in which there's a multi-polarity in the world that's afoot at the very time when the United States begins to obsess on the jihadist Other, right?

JLR: Right.

MC: And so as American platform policies pours huge amounts of money into fighting this war in Afghanistan, in engagement in Iraq where literally billions and billions, tens of billions, hundreds of billions of dollars are going down the drain. Thousands and tens of thousands of lives were being squandered. The very time when all of that is happening, there are other changes going on in the world that are far more subtle.

And so just as there was kind of an obsessive fixation on superpowers struggle in the Cold War, there was an obsessive fixation on this war on terror which was unnecessarily the best way to take on the issues at that time. It proved excessively expensive and counter productive in many ways.

So that's what I mean by hubris in some sense. But there's also a certain hubris in the idea that Time Warner, which was the most influential media company in the United States as far as film and television were concerned, music as well during that period of time, merges with America Online which at that time was the most influential and powerful telecommunications and computer communication company, the online of America.

Both of them thinking increasingly as global institutions coming together as one, one institution stretching back to the early years of the 20th century, the other upstart of only a decade or so which was long on promise and uncertain in its value and its contribution. These two come together and are going to be the juggernaut that vanquishes all media competitors worldwide.

And within a matter of only years, the whole thing collapses and it was the both biggest corporate merger up to that time and certainly the biggest media merger up to that time and the biggest corporate and media disaster in American history, right?

JLR: Right.

MC: So that collapse was in a sense also an act of hubris and yet, I won't go into this too much but we're back to that moment again. Media industries for the next 10 years, everybody ran around shaking their heads, wagging their fingers and saying, "Oh, they reached too far. The

conglomerate was too big. There are no synergies between these various components of the corporate leviathan. They can't work together. Ultimately they'll devour themselves."

There were all these tales to be learned in the wake of that collapse and yet, we're back to doing the same thing today. So I don't mean to get sidetracked onto that, but there has been this kind of continuing thing where American media corporations just can't get past their addiction to the kind of capitalistic crack, the idea of building these huge conglomerates.

And that was that moment. So these two things, I think, opened the door for transformations in the media topographies worldwide.

JLR: Yeah, but also at the same time, as you started to point out, there are factors outside of the US that are contributing to the changing landscape. New national powers that are emerging, new regional formations that are taking hold, that have nothing to do with US but they also affect the general landscape around the world. So what are some of these changes that are happening at the same time?

MC: Whether we're talking about the printing press or we're talking about the emergence of cinema or we're talking about radio and then film and TV, time and time again what we've seen is that these institutions grew and flourished in relationship to nation states. And so it was very conventional within the context of media studies to think in terms of national media.

So there's Brazilian cinema or there's Egyptian radio or there's Chinese music or whatever. And so we do this almost as a reflex. We constantly go back. There's this constant recourse to thinking in terms of media as national institutions. And to some extent, that makes a lot of sense.

But then we start to think about places like India where there are 14 major language groups. And we find that as we go across different parts of India, that there are different musical traditions. There are different cinematic traditions and on and on and on. And so we see that within the context of the nation, that the nation is not necessarily a settled way in which to think about media, but also we see transnational circulations.

And this has become one of the things that's become most prominent not only kind of peer-to-peer sharing which really got our attention in many ways, the ways in which people started going online and sharing media with each other around the world. So we see this way in which the mixing across borders is not simply people sharing things with each other, but the ways in which media professionals are very cognizant of things that are going on in other

locations, of forming collaborations with producers in other locales, are mixing genres and sensibilities, professional practices. All these things are happening across borders and in new ways.

And I think one of the things that I try to draw attention to in the essay is the way in which media institutions now and especially commercial enterprises that produce and circulate media have to adapt their topographies to the audiences and locales in which they operate. And these are constantly shifting. They don't just exist within national boundaries, they often spill across those boundaries and involve levels of cross-fertilization which are unprecedented.

Now, does this mean there was a kind of happy diversity? No. On the one hand, there is greater diversity. There is greater mixture. There is a greater interaction between producers and consumers, audiences, peer-to-peer sharing, all these kind of stuff going on, but there are also large structural patterns that obtain as well. If it's a commercial enterprise, they are thinking in very similar terms as far as the way they organize their activities and scale things up.

And that's in relation to some of the stuff I'm talking about regarding financialization and shareholder value. So for all the diversity that we see, we're seeing the way in which media enterprises have similar kinds of accounting conventions, similar ways of raising money, similar ways of every project that's ever conceived that's a commercial media project always has to imagine where it's going to be sold, what is the audience. So, you can't actually finance it until you can imagine where it's going to be sold.

And the terms in which people think about that now are increasingly similar regardless of how fluid the topographies of media might be. And so we're seeing this proliferation and multiplication in the ways in which media circulate, but we're also seeing a conventionalization of the kind of protocols that shape the fundamental thinking around financing production and distribution.

JLR: Right. And I think one of the things that's important to keep in mind here as you were mentioning peer-to-peer networks is for people who are doing political economic studies or study of the economics of media industries, it seems from the outside to be a technologically-driven change. It was the development of peer-to-peer networks, the technological disruption, the emergence of streaming giants that expand around the world as if that is the cause, the originary cause that creates all of these changes.

But I think once you start thinking through the different geopolitical structures and economic structures, you stand to see that these go hand in hand. There are new technologies coming up

but there are also new ways that the economy is being organized that shapes these decisions as well, right?

MC: Yeah, absolutely. And it's back to what we were talking about as far as cultural production, like you have to imagine the uses before you can finance a new media project. You also see that capitalism does its similar thing with respect to technology. The uses are imagined for the way in which they'll facilitate the reproduction and accumulation of capital.

So, these things emerge out of these kinds of historical context, not simply as the result of technological disruption but as a result of historical shifts that take place over time between institutional actors, financial capital and culture as it operates on the ground.

JLR: Yeah, for sure. And all of this affects the ultimate, sort of like the things that we watch or the things that we listen to in terms of the creative production of media. But as you were pointing out earlier in terms of thinking about cultural studies and representations, and then political economy, what is happening at the institutional industrial level. Understanding those broader contexts and those changes, and those cycles as you mentioned of hubris ambition and collapse, helps us to better understand why we get those sort of the media technologies and then the media contents that we do in these particular moments as well.

MC: Yeah, which takes us back to two things. One is this whole notion of the conditions of possibility, what is culturally possible to do? And it isn't as if it's all imposed. There's obviously contestation and dynamic quality to it. And the other thing is back to the whole notion of conjuncture, back to that whole notion of the multiple forces that are at work at any time.

And so I think in that sense, once we can be thinking in those terms, we get a richer sense of how culture operates and how this relationship between the hegemonic and the counter-hegemonic, the dominant and the subordinate and the subalternate, how these things actually operate.

JLR: Well, following on the idea of thinking about the political economic aspect or the economics of media production, one of the things that you talked about in the articles is how deregulation and speculation impacted a lot of the media conglomerates that we have now or the media structures that we have now.

And one of the things that I think is really interesting about this, so this is thinking about people like Ted Turner, Rupert Murdoch, Robert Lee, and how they built what are now basically media empires, or what were media empires at various moments in the last few decades, through

financial deregulation on one hand and then speculation both as financial speculation. But also, I want to think as very apropos for media is speculation as this sort of creating these fantasies of globalization of the McLuhan global village.

Can you tell us a little bit more about that? Because I think you do a good job connecting these three men without making it about a great man theory of history but rather as a helpful examples to think about how these processes take place.

MC: It isn't necessarily a great man, it's because capitalism needs stories and it needs actors. And so capitalism is a process of accumulation but the way that process of accumulation operates oftentimes is in relationship to narratives about what is valuable. And oftentimes, the ... and Anna Tsing and her work has very productively pointed to this in her book, *Friction*, the way in which oftentimes the most lucrative sorts of investments are in the most uncertain environments. And nothing is more important in those environments than stories about the potential value that is there.

So whether we're talking about pharmaceuticals or whether we're talking about software, whether we're talking about land speculation, is this property going to be valuable? Are people going to go there? It's the speculative quality that can only be sold by certain capitalist actors who paint fantasies about potential. And the potential of global media was the fantasy that has been sold time and time again over the last four or five decades. So it isn't the fantasy of the national family, it's the fantasy of the truly compelling global media artifact, which is more valuable than huge fleets of automobiles being reproduced by Hyundai or being produced by Toyota or whatever.

What's truly, truly considered to be valuable is this fantasy of the blockbuster film, of the Netflix miniseries that can be infinitely circulated in context around the world. So, it's that imagination of that kind of cultural form and performance as having a global purchase and building institutions that can regularly do that. And that's the dream of these global media enterprises. That's the fantasy that's sold time and time again.

And so do you put that together and how do you finance that? Well, you finance it by going to markets and selling the dream. And you're selling the dream in a context in which the institutions haven't been built or the cultural artifact is extremely uncertain. And you take it to market and you spin these stories.

And that's very much been the story of global media over the last 40 years. So, the idea that we would build global television satellite networks, that we would roll out regular blockbusters to

multiplexes, that we'd be able to create a streaming environment. And Netflix is a really interesting phenomenon that we see that's transforming media institutions around the world, not simply because it's imposing itself, not because it's the dominant force in places around the world but because it's disrupting the relations that had existed before, which were often national or local or whatever.

And they find themselves now in competition with what they imagine to be the Netflix juggernaut, whether it will continue to be successful or how successful, and whether it will be able to extend its reach beyond the elites that it currently reaches and reach a broader group of viewers, is still completely uncertain, which is why Netflix's value is very significantly inflated among its ability to produce returns today. It's all about Netflix's promise in the future. And Netflix promise is the promise of a global streaming video service that brings everybody under the tent.

And so there again, we get back to narrative and the narratives that exist around media institutions.

JLR: Yeah. Well, as for me, one of the aspects that is so crucial about thinking about media studies broadly and to media industries in particular is that it is the means of production for producing these narratives that we consume. But also they are produced by narratives themselves, by stories. It's the cycle of creating the story that will create the capital, that will then create the stories to maintain that capital in the future.

So, you allude to this in various parts throughout the article in terms of another significant change in media, is the social relations of media production, how the labor is differently distributed around the world, how we have a lot of outsourcing going on, how cities around the world offer particular forms of facilities and worker and subsidies, things too that change how media is produced. And I know that's also a big part of what you've been writing in the last few years as well, so it doesn't all fit into this article.

But can you talk more about this, about how this is also significant trend and change in how media is produced today?

MC: If we go back 50 years, media institutions with the exception of news, media institutions were considered relatively inconsequential. They were entertainment, so if it wasn't news, it was entertainment. If it was news, it was consequential. But if it was entertainment, it was inconsequential. Why was it inconsequential? Well, it was a very ... Andreas Huyssen talked about the kind of feminization of popular culture, the ways in which those things that were

popular could not be great art. And those things that were popular were part of the everyday and therefore, inconsequential. They were entertainment, distraction, et cetera, et cetera.

So, if we go back 50 years and we say, "Well, what were media institutions at that time?" Well, there was the news and that was revered, and it was part of the structures of power, but entertainment was not. It was marginalized in many ways and feminized in many ways, and in that sense was not considered to be an industry. It was nothing like steel. It wasn't like steel. It wasn't like automobiles. There was nothing tangible about it. It was about celebrity and fashion and things like that.

Well, start moving forward to about the 1980s and 1990s, and you see that there is an increasing sense that media becomes twinged with this whole notion of ... What would we say ... post-industrial intellectual labor and cultural labor. All these things become trend. It's like computer software,biotech and entertainment, they all become part of the kind of culture economy.

And at that point, it becomes sort of like, "Okay, if you live in parts of the world that had seen earliest iterations of industrialization and wealth," which is basically Europe, United States and Japan, "you see that these economies were moving into a post-industrial phase." They're not producing chemicals, steels and cars as much as before. It's not as consequential a part of the economy. Many things are being outsourced to cheaper labor markets. And so how are these economies going to find their way forward?

And the answer was this creative economy. The answer was they had the best jobs in the world, the ones that never could be outsourced supposedly were the jobs that were a product of intellectual labor. And thus, the entertainment industry becomes embedded within this larger discourse about the creative economy.

And so what happens in this transition is that culture moves to the foreground and societies around the world start to aspire to be part of this creative economy because they are considered to be high wage jobs, high financial return on investments, spectacular returns in some cases. So, economies around the world start competing for this kind of creative industries and they start subsidizing them.

And so what we start to see is that what had been thought to be the good jobs, the high paying jobs that could only exist in those locations that had high education levels and had the kind of investment in intellectual infrastructure that you see in very wealthy countries, we start to see that some of that starts getting dispersed to different parts of the world. And so if we look at

something like animation or video games or VFX, visual effects which are a very big and important part of every kind of motion picture production taking place today, those things are being distributed to locations around the world.

And the production of cultural artifacts is not only bubbling up from other places but it's taking place. It's moving. We're seeing a kind of mobilization of production where you can go and shoot in Tunisia, and Greece, and whatever. And you can produce and you can do editing in Hollywood and you can do music and post-production in London and Prague. And you can knit all these together into a finished product. And so we've seen a kind of dispersion, but we've also seen a kind of networking and a whole set of hierarchies that had become embedded in these exchanges that are taking place.

The world has become a much more complex and richer place in some respects because of this, but we've also seen the way in which workers within these industries are becoming subject to the very same logics that drove down wages and working conditions in industrial labor. So, the creative economy was the way out but increasingly, many of the jobs in the creative economy are starting to look like jobs that were impoverished in other industries whether it was textiles or automobile production or whatever.

JLR: It becomes, again, the story of cycles, right? There's a rise in thinking the creative economy will be a different type of economy but really it's just trapped in the same cycle, so it drives down again wages and traps workers in similar kind of conditions as anybody used to.

MC: As there is greater flexibility about moving across borders and as there is a global telecommunications infrastructure put in place, there is a constant attempt by capital to find the most inexpensive conditions of production that it can. So as the world becomes a more fluid place, it becomes a place that's imminently suitable to the very flexible reconfigurations in the deployment of capital technology, personnel, et cetera, to realize the greatest return on investment. And that's the relentless logic of capital accumulation of work.

JLR: We have so far the labor aspect, the financialization aspect, the way that there is both consolidation but also diversification. But how do all of these economic structural changes, geopolitical structural changes end up also impacting the techs or the media that we watched? Because this is, I would say, it's all important to think about in terms of how media industries are being consolidated. But this also could be seen from, to go again to the cultural studies political economy intuition, but we can also see this in the techs themselves, in the kinds of media that we are consuming today as opposed to, say, 50, 60 years ago.

MC: Yeah. There are so many things to be said there. That's the thing is we get back to the diversity that exists. So, the blockbusters become ever more prominent and ever more powerful. We see franchise films dominating around the world. We see Netflix genres and the conventions of production starting to not only affect what goes on Netflix but producers that are attempting to produce television in other parts of the world start adopting the conventions of Netflix in order to compete with Netflix.

We see the ways in which techs become affected that way. We see the ways in which popular music around the world start to cross-fertilize but we also see the way in which there is a constant absorption into this global machine of the music industry and the ownership of musical rights around the world being in fewer and fewer hands. So for all the diversity that we have, there is this recursion to a certain way of accounting for what is to be considered valuable, what is to be invested in, what is culture and how is it produced and circulated.

I'm not saying that all kinds of culture become a product of this kind of capitalist logic because there are many kinds of culture that resist it, that operate in the interstices, that operate in opposition to it that are the very things that take on and challenge that hegemonic culture. But we see that that kind of play is very much at work.

And one of the things we notice about hegemonic capital is this constant adaptation and absorption of the qualities of the local. But we also see the ways in which local producers and artists adapt from global conventions and refigure them in a really imaginative ways. So those things that are part of the hegemonic machine also can become resources on the ground in localities where whether it's a martial arts in a Nollywood video film or whether we're talking about the ways in which popular music on the streets in Mexico City has taken on a kind of a novel inflection and becomes embedded within the local and part of the local becomes resources for the local.

So, it's that play back and forth between the global and the local that is constantly to be this sort of thing that we as students and scholars of media have to be thinking about, that it's never always and forever the accomplishment of power by those at the top nor is it always a matter of unconditional possibility by those who were in the counter-hegemonic position but it is in fact the play between the two.

JLR: Right. And thinking to the relationship between the hegemonic power and then the localized power, there's something to be said about difference in repetition. If all of this consolidation is in some ways standardizing what the telenovela looks like now, what a Latinx narrative will look like. That standardization could be seen as a loss because everything looks

the same but it also sets the standard where difference can be creative, where local creatives can input their own.

MC: Exactly. And I think it is one of the great challenges.

JLR: In the conclusion to the article, as one of those takeaways or where do we move from here, you suggest how we can think about or how we begin to think about media in current moment or in the decades to come. And I think you've alluded to this in a few times so far, but it's the moving away from the national as a container that can be undifferentiated, or assuming that there's just one global media hegemon but rather thinking about the interstices, thinking about the counters to the hegemon and thinking about networks, the emergence of different networks.

What does this mean in terms of how, let's say, we as researchers carry out our research forward in terms of global media and let's say, how students can think about media, how media in the contemporary moment and in the decades to come might look like?

MC: I think one of the things that fascinates me is the way in which we need to think about places where things come together. And this has been part of the reason why I've been fascinated by thinking about cities, by thinking about in terms of cities and media capitals, as I refer to them, cities that become cultural leaders instead of thinking simply in terms of nations.

This isn't to say that nations are inconsequential or that we've bypassed the national moment but instead that if we're thinking in a more fluid context, we need to think about the places where resources and people and ideas come together. And they become cities like Bombay, Mumbai as it's known by some. We think about cities like Hong Kong. We think about cities in places around the world, Lagos in Nigeria. We think about London. These are places where there's this kind of concentration and accumulation over time and interaction and exchange. They're almost always port cities because they have a tradition, a history of being open to exchanges.

So, if we think about the difference between national capitals, which are centers of political power and we think about port cities which are centers of people coming together, goods in people crossing and interacting with each other and moving through and coming to, we think about this as very different kinds of environments rather than kind of monological power being asserted out from the national capital. We think about port cities as conditions of possibility of places where things can happen.

This is where people move to because they have big dreams. They move to those places because there are exciting things going on as far as music and culture and enterprise and things like that. So, I think as scholars, we need to pay attention to those kinds of places where things get exciting and dynamic like that. And I think some cities achieve a greater level of prominence than others but I think we also see the ways in which cities network with each other, that there are multiple levels at which these kinds of nodes of engagement are connected.

So, the centers of influence and power are never just about being absolutely dominant. It's always relational. It's always the way in which they articulate with other places. They draw resources and ideas from other places. They refigure them and they fashion them and send them back out. And so it's that kind of constant turnover of the cultural and the dynamic qualities of culture that are so important in these kinds of cities.

So, I think as scholars and researchers and students, looking to those kinds of places for seeing where the greatest possibilities are as far as creativity and production and the future of media.

JLR: Right. The places where things come together might point to where things might go later on.

MC: Exactly. That's a wonderful way to put it. I would say the only final thing is that for your students that are listening, you can see that I've been studying this stuff for a long time, and I find it endlessly fascinating. I hope that as they think in a richer sense about how media are produced and circulated, they become equally fascinated by all these because it is, I think, one of the richest areas of study and well worth their time and certainly enhances our appreciation not only of how our world works but also the cultural artifacts that we engage with and the ways in which we experience and appreciate culture.

I would say that in that sense, I'm still as excited about all of this stuff as I was when I began thinking about it seriously about 40 years ago.

JLR: Michael, thank you so much for joining us.

MC: Thank you, Juan. It was a pleasure.

[closing credits music]

JLR: This episode of the Global Media Cultures podcast was produced by me and edited by Alan Yu, and closing credits music by Cloud Mouth. This project is supported in part by the

School of Arts, Technology, and Emerging Communication at the University of Texas at Dallas. Global Media Cultures podcast introduces media scholarship about the world, to the world. I'm Juan Llamas-Rodriguez. Thank you for listening.