US Embassy Support for Hollywood’s Global Dominance: Cultural Imperialism Redux

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Hollywood’s global market power has been attributed to several factors, but little attention has been given to the support it receives from the US government, and State Department embassies in particular. However, the release of over 250,000 US diplomatic cables by WikiLeaks in 2010, has provided scholars with an opportunity to examine this aspect of US government support for Hollywood’s market power in detail. This article will explore how the State Department’s global network of embassies support Hollywood’s economic interests. I conclude that this State/Hollywood relationship is evidence of contemporary American cultural imperialism.

Keywords: Cultural imperialism; Hollywood; WikiLeaks; film piracy; US embassies; intellectual property rights (IPR); Free Trade Agreements (FTAs)

Hollywood dominates the international film industry, with the six largest studios (Disney, Fox, Paramount, Sony, Universal and Warner Brothers) accounting for $22.4bn of 2016’s total global box office take of $38.6bn (Motion Picture Association of America, 2017). Several factors, ranging from Hollywood’s inherent popular appeal to audiences, its ability to absorb major financial losses, through to the vast distribution and exhibition networks it controls, account for much of its global market dominance and have been documented in detail elsewhere (Crane, 2014; Gomery, 2004; Miller, Govil, McMurria, Maxwell, & Wang, 2004; Thompson, 1985; Walls & McKenzie, 2012). But
this is only part of the story, and in recent years, scholars increasingly have recognized
the range of support that Hollywood receives from the US government (Miller et al, 2004; Miller & Maxwell, 2006; Mirrlees, 2016a; Wang, 2003;), a relationship which
would lead Jack Valenti, the former President of the Motion Picture Association of
America (MPAA), to state that “Hollywood and Washington are ‘sprung from the same
DNA’” (Alford, 2009, p. 153–154). As Miller argues,

Some crucial facts are forgotten in this terpsichory of diplomatic and
business hypocrisy…[Hollywood] has been aided through decades of tax
credit schemes, film commission assistance, State and Commerce
Department representation… (Miller, 1996, p. 75)

This article uses data from the US diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks in
2010, to investigate the relationship between the US Department of State (commonly
referred to as the State Department), or more specifically, its global network of
embassies, and Hollywood. The State Department was established by Congress in 1789,
and is the federal executive department responsible for implementing US foreign policy.
It oversees more than 270 embassies, consulates and other diplomatic posts worldwide,
each one functioning as the hub of America’s foreign policy initiatives in their respective
host state (United States Department of State, 2016). Until recently, the State
Department’s connection to Hollywood has been examined only in a handful of articles,
which focus on the years immediately following the Second World War (Colman, 2009;
Herman & McChesney, 1997; Jarvie, 1990; Lee, 2008; Schiller, 1992; Swann, 1991;
Trumpbour, 2007). Yet the WikiLeaks release has provided an opportunity to explore
how the support given to Hollywood by US embassies operates in the twenty-first
century, and sheds light on the State Department’s specific interest in free trade
agreements (FTA) and intellectual property rights (IPR). I argue that the links and
connections revealed by this material represent the close alliance between the US State
and Hollywood capital, as theorized in contemporary iterations of American cultural
imperialism.
I first began to research this process with an exploratory paper in 2017, which mapped out the operations of US embassies in support of Hollywood’s market dominance. I concluded that the increase in the volume and potency of this activity not only supported Victoria de Grazia’s (2005) notion of a modern American “market empire” (Moody, 2017), but also extended the concept by emphasizing the role of the US state in the creation and maintenance of this empire. A full description of my methodology can be found in that initial scoping paper, but in essence, the research presented here has been based on specific keyword searches of the full database of 251,287 diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks, now hosted on its website, with key names re-referenced and supplemented by additional relevant terms that appear frequently in the documents. The extant material tends to focus on two main areas, which can be divided into firstly, concerns regarding the penetration of American/Western ideology and values into international territories, and secondly, the effects that other countries’ policies and actions have on the profitability of Hollywood productions.

My previous work addressed the first collection of documents, but in this paper, I develop my argument further by investigating the latter theme, the US State Department’s support of Hollywood’s economic interests around the world. I focus on examples of the US embassies supporting Hollywood’s economic interests drawn from embassy cables released as part of the WikiLeaks tranche of documents. These cables highlight how the US embassies monitor states in perceived IPR violation, enforce FTA and IPR agreements that are often detrimental to the countries they are ratified with, and pursue punitive measures against countries that do not comply with its edicts. Overall, I argue that the US government often circumvents its own “free trade” mantra by intervening to tilt the market in its favor. The case made here supports recent attempts by researchers to revise and update the cultural imperialism thesis by paying closer attention—conceptually and empirically—to the role of the US State in bolstering and boosting Hollywood’s economic interests around the world.
Cultural Imperialism Revisited

The concept of cultural imperialism emerged in the 1960s as a means of understanding the new dynamic of international relations after World War Two, especially the role of the US in the Cold War. As Mirrlees argues,

In the post-WWII period, the U.S. Empire did not pursue the direct domination of territories, economies, and polities like bygone colonial Empires, but rather, sought to build, integrate and police a world system of integrated states that shared its model: the capitalist mode of production, the liberal democratic state form, and the consumerist “way of life” (Mirrlees, 2016b, p. 5)

Oliver Boyd-Barrett identifies four versions of the concept, each differing subtly from one another, which were developed in the decades that followed WWII (Boyd Barrett, 2015, p. 2), distinguishing between his own work (Boyd-Barrett, 1977) and that of Harold Innis (1950), Herbert Schiller (1969), and Jeremy Tunstall (1977). Each of these versions at their core, adopted the fundamental principle of the state intervening in cultural affairs to help exert and extend governmental power, but for all their similarities, it was Schiller’s views which would have the greatest influence. Schiller defined his concept, first outlined in his Communication and Cultural Domination, as

the sum of the processes by which a society is brought into the modern world system and how its dominating stratum is attracted, pressured, forced and sometimes bribed into shaping social institutions to correspond to, or even promote, the values and structures of the dominating center of the system (Schiller, 1976, p. 9)

For Schiller, this “dominating center” was the US, and his theory of cultural imperialism presents the US as the world’s pre-eminent global influencer. As Sparks
observes, Schiller claims that first, “the media and cultural apparatuses of the USA, aided by the government, dominate the international trade in media”, and second, that the “result of the continual consumption of this US-made material is effective propaganda for the ideas and values of the USA” (Sparks, 2012, p. 284). These two propositions are at the core of most concepts of cultural imperialism.

However, since the 1990s the concept has “been thoroughly discredited and more or less fallen out of mainstream usage” (Sparks, 2012, p. 281), as the competing theories of globalization, presented by Appadurai (1997), Liebes and Katz (1990), Strabhaar (1991), Thompson (1995), and Tomlinson (1991) “tended to discount the role of the state in favor of the relations between the global and the local” (Sparks, 2012, p. 282). By 1991, even Schiller was arguing that in the wake of the end of the Cold War, “American cultural imperialism is not dead, but it no longer adequately describes the global cultural condition” (Schiller, 1991, pp. 14–15); although he did later restate his theory in his final publication before his death, Living in the Number One Country (Schiller, 2000). Despite the theory’s critics, there have been a handful of revisionist articles in recent years (Boyd-Barrett, 2015; Maxwell, 2003; McChesney, 2001; Mirrlees, 2016a; Mirrlees, 2016b; Morley, 2006; Mosco, 2001; Murdock, 2006), which have sought to engage with Schiller’s original concept and reignite the wider project of cultural imperialism for the twenty-first century. For example, Dal Yong Jin has argued that despite much evidence contrary to the cultural imperialism thesis, such as the strength of indigenous media in countries supposedly dominated by the US entertainment industry, in fact, the US has merely evolved in its approach, “diversifying” and increasing its dominance “since developing countries lifted bans on foreign ownership and foreign investment as part of the globalization process” (Jin, 2007, p. 765). He concludes that US dominance “now operates not only at the level of content but also at the level of form” (Jin, 2007, p. 767).

Likewise, Sparks has outlined a detailed revision of the theory, “that is not subject to the kinds of criticisms that were applied to Schiller’s version” (Sparks, 2012, p. 294). While there is not the scope in this paper to cover his reappraisal in detail, it is important
to note his definition of “what may properly be termed cultural imperialism”, which he succinctly identifies as “the use of state power in the international cultural sphere” (Sparks, 2012, p. 293). Therefore, when revisiting contentious examples from when the concept was at its height in the seventies and eighties, he argues that “the close and open alliance between the US State Department and the MPPA in ensuring that trade treaties guaranteed free access to national audio-visual markets, clearly fall within our revised category of cultural imperialism” (Sparks, 2012, p. 294). I argue that the WikiLeaks cables reveal that this State Department activity has continued to the present day, and that it also occurs outside of these formal, public trade negotiations, operating as part of a systematic series of US government interventions into the international film industry.

Finally, it is also important to emphasize that in Sparks’ view, it is “not a necessary condition for cultural imperialism, or for the cultural consequences of imperialism, that they have a particular kind of impact upon their audiences” (Sparks, 2012, p. 293). While this paper will present evidence of US State Department embassy support for Hollywood’s economic interests, I will not be making any direct claims of influence on specific films or filmmakers. Instead, it is my contention that the WikiLeaks cables provide a strong evidence base for the support of these revisionist theories, by revealing several ways that the US State Department supports Hollywood. In the following section, I identify four different ways that US State Department embassies support Hollywood’s economic interests, as indicated by the WikiLeaks cables: first, as scouts for new Hollywood markets; second, as promoters of FTAs; third, as monitors of IPR; and fourth, as influencers in their respective host nations. I derive examples from the cables to give evidential weight to each of these strategies of US State support for Hollywood and to indicate the range of activities in which US embassies were engaged.

Function One: Embassies as Scouts for New Hollywood Markets

The first way that US embassies support Hollywood is by monitoring and assessing local and national market conditions. The fundamental role played by any
American embassy is to report back to the State Department on the activities of its host state and their implications for US commerce and international relations. This activity is detailed in several cables from the WikiLeaks release that merely observed issues relating to American economic interests, describing events that might have had some future bearing on the profitability of Hollywood films and filmmakers. For example, in 2010, an embassy assessed the potential opportunities for Hollywood/Bollywood co-productions in Mumbai and outlined the potential difficulties Hollywood faced in making a blockbuster production with a studio partner in India:

Though not without challenges, major US studios have started to try to capture a piece of this potentially lucrative market, in the world's second fastest growing economy. US studios ranging from Sony, Disney, and Warner Brothers have co-produced Hindi movies, attracted by the growth potential and opportunities in Indian cinema. While big budget Hollywood action films—dubbed in vernacular languages—have done relatively well in India, success has eluded Hollywood-Bollywood co-production partnerships so far. The unpredictability and low success rate of Bollywood films makes the industry risky even for veteran industry stakeholders (WikiLeaks, 11 February 2010: 10MUMBAI51)

For the Hollywood studios, the financial rewards from this market were potentially huge, But the cables point out that a barrier to these financial rewards was the cultural nationalism of the Indian screen industry Sanjeev Lamba, the Chief Executive Officer of the largest Indian film company, Reliance Entertainment, explained to the embassy that the Indian cinema landscape was "fiercely domestic" and Hollywood films accounted for only “three to six per cent of the Indian film industry's total revenues” (WikiLeaks, 11 February 2010: 10MUMBAI51). While acknowledging that interest in big budget Hollywood productions was increasing, Lamba noted that Avatar (James Cameron, US, 2009) generated $7 million at the Indian box office, compared to the $42 million received by 3 Idiots (Rajkumar Hirani, India, 2009), the most successful
Bollywood film that year (WikiLeaks, 11 February 2010: 10MUMBAI151). Reliance’s Chief Operating Officer, Jawhar Sharma, argued that instead of aggressively marketing existing Hollywood productions in India, the studios should seek Indian filmmakers to remake productions in Hindi, claiming that if the US was to succeed in India, the studios had to “re-orient their strategies, rescind control and empower local people” (WikiLeaks, 11 February 2010: 10MUMBAI151), a policy adopted by Reliance itself with a $325 million investment in Steven Spielberg’s production company DreamWorks (WikiLeaks, 11 February 2010: 10MUMBAI152).

However, the cables show that embassy scouting was not merely conducted in areas of obvious, significant commercial potential such as Mumbai, but would extend, as an investigation from 2009 demonstrates, to territories without a solid grounding in film production, such as Tajikistan. The embassy recounts a meeting with a “film industry worker” from Los Angeles, Jon Green, and a Tajik filmmakers’ association. The group was screening films in the Tajik capital Dushanbe’s only cinema, but this had recently been taken over for government use, so much of the conversation focused on ways to market and screen their productions. The cable describes a dichotomy in the Tajik filmmaking community, split between older filmmakers who approached film as a hobby, and the younger generation who saw this as a potential career, and who had ambitions to have their films screened outside of Tajikistan. These younger filmmakers were said to “indicate an affinity for Hollywood blockbusters,” while “eschewing Tajik cultural influences” (WikiLeaks, 16 July 2009: 09DUSHANBE855). Despite this, they were critical of the amount of violence in American cinema, and Green believed there to be many obstacles to the production of any Hollywood films in the country.

While on the surface these two examples may appear to be mundane State Department assessments of the opportunities for American filmmakers in India and Tajikistan, on closer reflection, they give insight into the granular level of economic detail that US embassies are interested in and highlight how embassies scout local and national market conditions for Hollywood. One might expect the Hollywood majors or
the Motion Picture Association of America would spearhead this scouting, but the cables show the embassies to be on the frontlines of this effort, conducting interviews with leading figures in Bollywood. US interest in the affairs of Tajikistan, a small Central Asian state, speak more of the State Department’s perception of Tajikistan’s strategic importance in the region than its potential as a new market for Hollywood, but the fact that these elements are considered in tandem with each other highlights how US foreign policy and Hollywood’s film trade interests are linked.

**Function Two: Embassies as Promoters of FTAs**

A second way that embassies support Hollywood is by promoting free trade. An example of this can be seen in the Casablanca consulate’s assessment of the Moroccan government’s measures to stimulate its film industry, which included a range of tax exemptions for international producers. The intention was to capitalize on the success of its Souss-Massa-Draa region as a location for Hollywood productions, and the ambassador spoke positively of Morocco’s “moral tolerance,” which had enabled it to attract Hollywood productions that neighboring countries had rejected. It was felt that this, coupled with the US-Morocco Free Trade Agreement that had been ratified in 2006, ensured that more Hollywood productions would locate in the region in future (WikiLeaks, 19 November 2009: 09CASABLANCA210).

In contrast, countries that had developed cultural policy tools to protect the erosion of their indigenous film industries from audio-visual free trade (and Hollywood’s dominance) were subject to extra scrutiny and, often, direct intervention. A cable from 2005 discussed the New Zealand government, which had announced three years earlier that assistance would be provided to its creative industries, ending the country’s previous market-led cultural policy. A subsidy for large-scale film and television production, which covered 12.5 per cent of the production costs in New Zealand, was also added in July 2003. Deputy Chief of Mission at the New Zealand embassy, David Burnett, was critical of the government in his comments in the cable, quoting an OECD economic
survey that concluded “film production subsidies set ‘an unhelpful precedent’” (WikiLeaks, 29 April 2005: 05WELLINGTON342). Arguing for the prominence of a market-driven economy, Burnett claimed that the scheme would “not create a conducive environment for business to expand, create new jobs and improve labor productivity” (WikiLeaks, 29 April 2005: 05WELLINGTON342). These comments were made within the context of ongoing discussions about the establishment of a FTA between the US and New Zealand, one of many that was being negotiated at the time, often with cultural subsidies and legal protections forming the main barrier to talks.

In the same year, the US had started to lobby South Korea to reduce its quota of indigenous films shown in its cinemas from 40 per cent to 20 per cent of annual screenings, before it would even begin FTA negotiations. As Jin notes, “the Korean government had to use the screen quota system as a scapegoat in order to facilitate the FTA” (Jin, 2011, p. 657) which became its biggest bilateral trade agreement since NAFTA when it was finally ratified in 2012. Concerns that similar concessions would have to be made over the New Zealand cultural industries are partly why, to this date, New Zealand has not ratified a FTA with the US. As these examples demonstrate, embassy activity was focused on promoting audio-visual free trade against cultural protectionism in other countries, to produce an economic environment that was more conducive to Hollywood.

**Function Three: Embassies as Monitors of Hollywood’s IPR**

The third way the embassies support Hollywood’s market dominance is by monitoring Hollywood’s intellectual property rights (IPR). By far the most commonly discussed issue regarding Hollywood’s economic interests was that of IPR, specifically relating to copyright violations, or in the parlance of many of the US embassies, “piracy” (a hotly contested term which the US State Department prefers not to use in public, should it appear to glamorize copyright infringement). As Miller et al explain, “copyright and the control of IP have underwritten Hollywood's internationalism because they
stabilize the market and render it predictable, a crucial factor given the tremendous costs of feature film production” (Miller et al, 2004, p. 113), and thus the State Department’s role as a global IPR monitor was crucial to maintaining a solid foundation for the industry.

Numerous cables attest to these concerns, covering specific IPR situations in Australia (WikiLeaks, 7 February 2010: 10CANBERRA95), China (WikiLeaks, 13 February 2009: 09CHENGDU30), Great Britain (WikiLeaks, 27 February 2008: 08LONDON612; 25 April 2005: 08LONDON1171) Malaysia (WikiLeaks, 25 February 2010: 10KUALALUMPUR130), Spain (WikiLeaks, 21 January 2010: 10MADRID67), Sweden (WikiLeaks, 28 October 2009: 09STOCKHOLM676) and Taiwan (WikiLeaks, 22 February 2010: 10TAIPEI178), with the issue referred to in other cables about dozens more countries. Most bizarrely, and indicative of the scope of the embassy cables, was a report from Ankara in 2008 regarding plans by the Mayor of the Turkish city of Batman, to sue Warner Brothers for unauthorized use of the city’s name in Christopher Nolan’s *The Dark Knight* (US, 2008). While it is easy to dismiss this report as frivolous, it is indicative of the importance assigned to copyright infringement that the Deputy Chief of Mission in Turkey, Doug Silliman, argued that this was a positive development, which represented the spread of awareness of IPR enforcement issues (WikiLeaks, 20 November 2008: 08ANKARA2008), and thus could potentially help US efforts to strengthen IPR in Turkey.

Much State Department activity in this area has its history in Section 301 of the Trade Act, which was amended in 1984 to “make it clear that the President had the authority to deal with states that failed to provide ‘adequate and effective’ protection for US intellectual property” (Drahos & Braithwaite, 2002, p. 88). The Section 301 order assigns one of three distinct categories to countries in breach of US guidelines on IPR, in the following order of severity: watch list, priority watch list, and priority foreign country, and the annual report published by the Office of the United States Trade Representative (USTR) identifies countries whose intellectual property enforcement (or
more precisely, lack of enforcement) is perceived to harm US trade. It has been estimated that the cost of piracy to the film industry was $1.42 billion in 1998, dropping to $1.29 billion in 2001—although, as a percentage of overall piracy losses, this represented an increase from 14 per cent of total revenues in 1998 to 15.4 per cent in 2001 (Wang, 2003, p. 29).

Much of the embassy cable material documents the US State Department’s chagrin at the allegedly vast scale of illegal copying, and this is coupled with withering criticisms of the failure of non-US states to properly enforce US derived IPR legislation. Thus, in 2004 the Sao Paulo embassy would complain that the then relatively new government of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva had “not yet developed a comprehensive national strategy” for dealing with film piracy (WikiLeaks, 27 February 2004: 04BRASILIA445), and in a later cable, it asserted that “59 percent of films sold in Brazil are pirated, [but] the police regard movie piracy with a lower priority despite precincts dedicated to fighting IPR violations” (WikiLeaks, 26 February 2008: 08BRASILIA254). Likewise, Bolivia’s La Paz embassy claimed that 87% of the Bolivian population bought pirated films, music, software and books (WikiLeaks, 26 February 2010: 10LAPAZ368). Furthermore in 2010, it was alleged by the San Salvador embassy that El Salvador had opened 128 cases relating to music or movie piracy (WikiLeaks, 26 February 2010: 10SANSALVADOR252), and that this came after the closure in 2008 of the Blockbuster video franchise in the country, also blamed on piracy (WikiLeaks, 9 April 2008: 08SANSALVADOR429). Brazil and Bolivia were both included on the USTR “Special 301 Report” list, and over 970 of the cables published by WikiLeaks referred to the term “Special 301,” with many of these reports dealing directly with IPR infringement relating to Hollywood.

Russia was regarded as especially negligent in this area, with the Moscow embassy advising in 2009 that the country retain its Priority Watch List status, describing it as “years behind” implementation of IPR enforcement commitments it had made in 2006 (WikiLeaks, 4 March 2009: 09MOSCOW521). According to the MPAA, some
licensed Russian DVD duplication plants produced illegal copies of films throughout the night, prompting several Hollywood studios to suspend their licensing agreements and establish their own facilities in the country. As the embassy put it:

Russia’s inconsistent enforcement record, failure to curb piracy at notorious markets, lack of political leadership on IPR issues, and growing piracy problems in the regions, are all telltale signs of the endemic IPR problem (WikiLeaks, 4 March 2009: 09MOSCOW521)

Much of the criticism of this perceived lack of leadership was directed at the Russian Minister of Culture, Aleksander Avdeev. The embassy claimed Avdeev had “not made any efforts to address IPR issues” and had not appointed a Russian co-chair for a joint US/Russia IPR Working Group (WikiLeaks, 4 March 2009: 09MOSCOW521). However, this was tempered by bans on camcording in cinemas and the sale of DVDs in train stations, which the embassy believed had led to a decrease in pirated material and a sharp rise in the purchase of legal DVDs.

The cables also depict a tense, fractious US relationship with Canada, predicated on what was regarded as the increasingly vexatious problem of Canada’s record of IPR violations. In 2005, the Canadian Motion Pictures Distributors Association (CMPDA) made the remarkable claim that “of all theaters which are used for camcording new-release movies, 40 percent are in Canada, with the majority of that 40 percent coming from just two theaters in Montreal” (WikiLeaks, 4 October 2005: 05OTTAWA2970). Later cables demonstrated that Canada was unwilling to make recording with a camcorder in a cinema a criminal offence (WikiLeaks, 20 October 2006: 06OTTAWA3179), however, by December 2006 the CMPDA had revised its 40 per cent figure down to a more realistic 18 per cent, or in other words, 54 illegal camcorder recordings in Montreal out of 295 worldwide (WikiLeaks, 12 December 2006: 06MONTREAL1220). A later cable provided further data, stating that in 2003 there were only “three reported incidents of illegal camcording, whereas in 2005 there were 57
reported incidents” and added that as of May 2005, “nearly 50% of the world's pirated movies, and 78% of illegal camcording in Canada, could be traced back to seventeen Montreal theaters” (WikiLeaks, 28 March 2006: 06MONTREAL365). By February 2007, one of Canada’s biggest exhibitors, Cineplex, also expressed concerns about this issue at a digital video conference (WikiLeaks, 13 February 2007: 07MONTREAL58), itself in response to communications between Bruce Snyder, Twentieth Century Fox’s President of Domestic Distribution, and Cineplex’s Chief Executive, Ellis Jacob.

The cables highlight Canada as a hub of illegal camcording activity, and suggest that Hollywood executives and State Department officials were displeased with the Canadian state for failing to counteract this copyright violating practice. The documents also suggest that the embassies were not merely monitoring engagement with IPR in other countries, but were in several instances directly intervening politically and ideologically within other countries to ensure that Hollywood’s copyright was being upheld.

**Function Four: Embassies as Influencers on Host Governments**

The final way that embassies support Hollywood is by influencing key figures in their respective host nations, so that market conditions are more conducive to Hollywood. In Abuja, the Director General of the Nigerian Copyright Commission, Adembambo Adewopo met with embassy staff and praised them for the IPR training programs they had organized along with the United States Patents and Trademark Office, of which eighteen Nigerian IPR officials had attended over the previous year. He implored the embassy to encourage US companies to “establish a presence” in the country, in the wake of a decision by the MPAA to advise its members to withdraw from distribution in Nigeria over IPR enforcement concerns (WikiLeaks, 4 April 2008: 08ABUJA619), and the embassy acknowledged that it would have to increase its activities in the country if it was to attract any support for stricter controls. The Panama City embassy also reported similar IPR interventions by the US in 2006, detailing “embassy sponsored equipment
donations to Panama's inter-institutional IPR Committee, MPAA sponsored movie screenings, [and] judicial exchange between members of Panama's judiciary and U.S. District Court” (WikiLeaks, 21 February 2007: 07PANAMA258). In Nicaragua, the Managua embassy, in line with the Nicaraguan government, developed proposals for IPR enforcement in the region, after outlining that the “US entertainment industry faces an uphill struggle in Nicaragua in the face of rampant piracy” and that 13,000 video cassettes and 19,000 CDs were seized and destroyed by Nicaraguan police in 2005 (WikiLeaks, 11 May 2006: 06MANAGUA1043). Working with the Nicaraguan Minister of Trade, Alejandro Arguello, as well as Nicaraguan artists and businesses, the embassy helped to create a “home grown defense of Nicaraguan culture through an anti-piracy campaign” (WikiLeaks, 2 February 2006: 06MANAGUA256). However, at Arguello’s request, the embassy did not advertise its role in the operation (WikiLeaks, 2 February 2006: 06MANAGUA256), arguing that a low profile would be best to avoid “the antibodies that will attack should the IPR legislation be perceived as a purely US interest” (WikiLeaks, 2 February 2006: 06MANAGUA256).

But it was in Canada, which embassy monitoring had identified as having an especially problematic approach to IPR, in which efforts were most pronounced. In early 2007, the Montreal embassy stated that it would “continue to engage in outreach with Canadian stakeholders across a wide range of sectors to emphasize that copyright protection benefits Canadian artists” (WikiLeaks, 31 March 2007: 07MONTREAL150), and the consulate in Toronto had met with the Ontario Attorney General, Michael Bryant, to “urge a strengthening of intellectual property rights enforcement,” with a further intention of raising the profile of “IPR enforcement concerns with Ontario provincial and municipal officials responsible for enforcing and prosecuting IPR violations” (WikiLeaks, 16 March 2007: 07TORONTO120). These measures included a plan to “seek appointments with Toronto area Police Chiefs to encourage them to strengthen efforts” (WikiLeaks, 16 March 2007: 07TORONTO120). The Consulate General followed this up with a presentation of US IPR policy at a four-day anti-counterfeiting conference in Toronto (WikiLeaks, 5 December 2007: 07TORONTO466). A later cable
in March 2007 from the Ottawa Embassy suggested that unless the Canadian government made substantial progress on the issue over the next few weeks, Canada would be elevated to the Special 301 Priority Watch status (WikiLeaks, 9 March 2007: 07OTTAWA448).

This recommendation had followed a letter from the US ambassador, David H Wilkins, to the Canadian Prime Minister, Stephen Harper, on 31 Jan 2007, in which Wilkins announced his plans to meet the Minister of Heritage, Bev Oda, and the Minister of Industry, Maxime Bernier, on the matter, promising that “The United States is committed to supporting Canada’s efforts to create an intellectual property rights framework that promotes a high standard of protection, that encourages innovation, and that spurs economic growth in Canada” (WikiLeaks, 26 April 2007: 07OTTAWA765). On 1 June 2007, Canada introduced legislation to criminalize the act of recording films being shown in a cinema (WikiLeaks, 5 June 2007: 07OTTAWA1076), and it is clear from the WikiLeaks releases that US embassy pressure was extremely influential in getting this issue raised in the Canadian parliament.

In the intervening period, the US embassy in Ottawa met with University of Ottawa Law Professor, Michael Geist, on 12 April 2007, to discuss Canada’s IPR arrangements. They recorded that while his views were “generally at odds with U.S. policy,” nonetheless they were “taken seriously by the Canadian public, academia, and members of the Canadian government” (WikiLeaks, 18 April 2007: 07OTTAWA691). The detailed account of the meeting portrayed Geist as a staunch defender of existing Canadian law and someone who believed Hollywood was exaggerating the problem of illegal recording in cinemas. The embassy cast Geist’s views as reflecting “deeply ingrained Canadian preferences to protect and nurture homegrown artists” (WikiLeaks, 18 April 2007: 07OTTAWA691).

Geist appeared frequently in the Ottawa embassy cables, such as in a reference to his opposition to IPR law in a cable from May 2007, which confirmed that legislation to
criminalize camcorder recordings in cinemas was imminent (WikiLeaks, 11 May 2007: 07OTTAWA887). A cable from October 2007 discussed the announcement by the Canadian government of a three-step strategy to strengthen the protection of IPR – and mentioned Geist again, referring to his analysis of the Canadian government’s reference to “conformity with” the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) Internet Treaties, rather than “ratification of” (WikiLeaks, 22 October 2007: 07OTTAWA1955). Geist was referred to again in a cable outlining the Canadian Government’s Bill C-61 (which was an attempt to amend Canada’s copyright laws), in which he compared it with the heavily criticized US Digital Millennium Copyright Act (WikiLeaks, 12 June 2008: 07OTTAWA794). These accounts further demonstrate the actions US embassies take in support of Hollywood’s economic interests.

Of all the Canadian cables, the most revealing one outlined the US frustration at what it perceived to be Canada’s lack of action regarding its IPR laws. It confirmed that Prime Minister Harper had promised President Bush in August 2007 that Canada “would pass copyright legislation,” and that “senior GoC officials, especially Industry Minister [Jim] Prentice, repeatedly assured the ambassador and senior Mission Canada officers that the copyright bill would be introduced ‘soon’” (WikiLeaks, 27 August 2007: 07OTTAWA1639). To keep track of the progress of this legislation, the Ottawa embassy arranged for Ailish Johnson, an analyst in the Canadian government’s Privy Council Office, to brief embassy staff as to the content of letters from Harper to Prentice and from Harper to the newly appointed Minister of Canadian Heritage, Josée Verner, in which he asked both to introduce a copyright bill by the end of the year (WikiLeaks, 27 August 2007: 07OTTAWA1639). Geist was once more mentioned in this cable, in a description of a meeting chaired by Doug George, the Director of Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada (DFAIT)’s Intellectual Property Office:

George cautioned that if Canada were retained on the 301 Watch List—or even elevated to the Priority Watch List—it could affect future Canadian cooperation on IPR as well as give ammunition to Dr. Geist and his
acolytes, who see a revised copyright bill as a ‘U.S. plot’ (WikiLeaks, 29 February 2008: 08OTTAWA311)

The C-61 copyright amendment bill was eventually superseded by Bill C-32 in June 2010, and subsequently by Bill C-11, which received Royal Assent in June 2012 and contained many of the measures that the US embassy had lobbied for (such as strict DRM enforcement). That the embassy had arranged for briefings to be received from an analyst in the Canadian government, suggests that there was substance to the claims from “Geist’s acolytes” that this was in fact a “US plot,” and the evidence presented in these cables demonstrate that at the very least, US lobbying on this issue was intensive and went as high as the Canadian Prime Minister.

**Conclusion**

In this article, I have shown that the US State Department has coordinated its embassies in support of Hollywood in four key ways:

1. Embassies function as scouts, gathering data about the political, social and economic conditions in countries that Hollywood has, or may have, a business stake in.
2. Embassies promote audio-visual free trade agreements that are heavily weighted in Hollywood’s favor.
3. Embassies monitor Hollywood’s IPR enforcement or violation in other countries.
4. Embassies attempt to influence the political and business leaders of other countries to embrace Hollywood’s interests, via training programs, equipment donations, and lobbying.

This overview of the many ways that US State Department embassies support Hollywood’s economic interests in countries around the world problematizes existing
theories of globalization, which present state sovereignty in decline vis-à-vis “globalizing” media companies. The WikiLeaks cables suggest that instead, the US state supports Hollywood’s economic interests in other countries using a variety of strategies and tactics. While these embassies were aggressively pursuing FTAs and IPR reform as part of a wider project to “liberalize” international film markets, the evidence presented here demonstrates that their own actions were intended to facilitate this market in America’s favor. While they were not always successful, this activity problematizes attempts at explaining Hollywood’s dominance solely as a product of its wide public appeal or as a result of laissez-faire economic policy. Hollywood is the international leader in cinematic entertainment, but the WikiLeaks cables show how this dominance is supported and maintained by the US State Department’s global network of embassies. American cultural imperialism—the global market power of Hollywood studios and their products facilitated and legitimized by the geopolitical power of the US state—continues.

References


