Globalization of the Media: Does It Undermine National Cultures?

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This essay aims to find out whether globalization of the media tends to undermine national cultures. Current arguments about the relationship between media globalization and national cultures are presented and analyzed. A study of the different functions performed by global media within the context of different economic, technological and cultural situations, from a cultural perspective, was carried out in order to examine the different ways globalization of media can influence national cultures. Media might play a necessary and active role affecting a nation's culture, but is improbably to be called a "sufficient condition" for cultural resistance or submission. Whether the globalization of media undermines national culture or not also depends on how strong a particular national culture is. On the positive side, economic and technological globalization of media not only recharges the existing media strengths, but also allows new media bodies to emerge and grow. The essay uses the case of India to exemplify that the driving forces behind global cultural homogenization can be weak under some circumstances and that global media may be indigenized in some cases. The national and regional media groups in India, such as Zee TV, develop quickly. Thanks to cultural factors, they have an edge over foreign competitors and play a very important role in the preservation of Indian cultural identity.

"Internationalization" is a fashionable, mysterious, and magic word on everyone's lips. For some people, it is what we must do if we wish to be happy; for others it is the cause of much angst. Most agree that the trend toward internationalization appears to be irreversible, and it is a process that is bound to affect all in one way or another. Although we accept the situation as significant, there are some problems with the term, itself. Does globalization turn our planet into a world society, a "global village"? Or, conversely, does it disintegrate the nation-state system, and dissolve stable national identities? Some theorists support the idea that a global village will encourage universal citizenship and allow national cultures to interact. Others argue that the flow of media from the rich states to the poorer countries may aggravate the already existing power gap between them, or that imported media cultures may threaten the native culture of the receiving country. The terms "internationalization" and "globalization" have somewhat different foci of meanings. The former usually refers to standards and rules, while the latter often identifies social, migratory, linguistic, and economic practices of global integration. For simplification, the terms will be used interchangeably in this paper, which will use the experience of India's media industry to analyze the influence of media internationalization on national cultures.

Globalization

In the most general terms, globalization is "the rapidly developing process of complex interconnections between societies, cultures, institutions and individuals world-wide" (Tomlinson, 1997, p. 170-171). Or, as Robertson (1992) puts it, globalization refers to the

entire world system, the global human condition. According to Harvey (1989), it is a process involving a compression of time and space, and in the 20th century, the relationships between time and space have developed in unforeseen ways. "Specifically, time has been separated from space and both have been dramatically compressed, with time becoming shorter and space being shrunk" (Monge, 1998, p. 144).

Globalization shrinks concepts of distance between existing cultures by dramatically reducing the time taken to cross distances that physically separate them. Therefore, the world seems smaller, and in a certain sense brings human beings in closer contact with each other. On the other hand it can also stretch social relations, "removing the relations which govern our everyday lives from local contexts to global ones" (Tomlinson, 1997, p. 170-171).

Media Globalization Theories: McLuhan and Giddens

It has been argued that the globalization of media will result in the decentralization of power and permit more bottom-up control. Marshall McLuhan provides two important concepts: "the medium is the message" and "the global village" (Marchessault, 2005, p. 213). This insightful phrase "global village" was chosen by McLuhan to highlight his observation that an electronic nervous system, the media, was rapidly integrating the globe - i.e. events in one part of the world could be experienced from other parts in real-time. What human experience was like when we lived in small villages.

Wheeler (1997) argues that the new media challenges the one-way flow of information by enhancing interactivity.

> Thus, the production of knowledge is decentralized and democratized. Through such decentralization, technologies prevent dominant authorities from managing the flow of information. In turn, the new technologies allow for the globalization of the media economy, compress time, make spatial relations horizontal, relocate information and undermine the role of nation states…The globe's citizens may engage in a shared culture, a global village, which undermines the previously hierarchical, uniform or individualizing methods of ideological control. (p. 182-183)

Giddens points out the tensions that exist between globalization and localization. According to Giddens, globalization is "the intensification of world-wide social relations which link distant locations in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa" (1990, p. 64). As we might have noticed, people become more conscious of both shared opportunities and shared problems. For example, the news of world events is frequently contextualised according to the local situation. However, Scholte (1996) argues:

> Globality introduces a new quality of social space, one that is effectively non-territorial and distance-less…Global relations are not links at a distance across territory but circumstances without distance and relatively disconnected from particular locations. Globalization has made the identification of boundaries and associated notions of "here" and "there," "far" and "near," "outside" and "inside," "home" and "away," "them" and "us" more problematic than ever. (p.145)

Cultural Globalization and Cultural Imperialism

Because of the American monopoly in communication research since the Second World War, some people viewed mass media as a channel of Westernization. The flow of media from the West to less developed countries was regarded by the developed West as good not only for the recipients but also for the senders who saw it as an integral part of their fight against socialism and totalitarianism. But this ethnocentric view of global communications has drawn a critical response from international scholars and receiving countries. During the Cold War and the numerous resistance movements within many semi-colonial areas, the issue became an inevitable argument. New media imperialism seemed to succeed more easily than the previous international propaganda because of its form of ordinary entertainment and the willingness of mass audiences to enjoy popular culture.

According to detractors of globalization, global communications are mostly connected with notions such as cultural imperialism and media imperialism; they see global communications as a vehicle which aims at controlling, invading or undermining other cultures. The transmitted cultural or ideological pattern has often been seen as an invasion of Western values, particularly those of America (McQuail, 2000). Cairncross further claims, "In countries other than the United States, people fear a future in which everybody speaks English and thinks like an American, with cultural diversity engulfed in a tidal wave of crass Hollywood values" (2001, p. 266).

While some people criticize Western media exports as predatory, others support it as an expression of the free market and regard the imbalance of flow as a characteristic of the wider media market, which has benefit for all (Noam, 1991). Free-flow theorists tend to assume that global media has little predatory effect because the audience is voluntary, claiming that global media content is culturally neutral and ideologically innocent (Biltereyst, 1995).

However, receiving countries have often complained of media imperialism, arguing that global mass media is having negative effects on the culture and traditional values of their citizens. The idea is that cultural autonomy is undermined by imbalance in the flow of mass media content and, therefore, its national identity in an age of globalism is in danger of being subverted. McQuail points out, "The unequal relationship in the flow of news increases the relative global power of large and wealthy news-producing countries and hinders the growth of an appropriate national identity and self-image" (McQuail, 2000, p. 222). Such views have even been supported by other leaders of western countries. Jacques Chirac has frequently spoken in developing countries about the negative effects of American culture as transmitted through its mass communications machinery.

Supporters of the idea that globalized media is cultural imperialism also view global mass media as a process of cause and effect, pointing out that the media conveys opinions and ideas from one place to another, from senders to receivers. But media does not work so simply, except in certain cases of planned communication. We have to consider the active participation of the receiving end -- the audience that shapes the media content (Liebes & Katz, 1990). The audience has as much power to shape media content through assigning meaning to it as media producers do through creating it. The aims of media suppliers are also no longer the only element that can determine the characteristics of the information flow within the media. The media must also respond to the wants and needs of the receivers.

However, recently, new voices have supported media globalization. Where, a few

countries previously dominated global media channels, now other countries and cultures are able to take advantage of them, as well. According to Sreberny-Mohammadi, "cultural imperialism was based on a situation of comparative global media scarcity, limited global media players and embryonic media systems in much of the Third World" (1996, p. 177-203). The situation has changed substantially in recent years, and the mix of players has become ever more complex.

Cultural & National Identity

Those opposed to media internationalization believe that imported media undermines the development of the national culture of the receiving countries. On the other hand, Rupert Murdoch, CEO of The News Corporation, giving a speech before the Singapore Broadcasting Authority, argues:

> Consumers want choice and lots of it. They want to be empowered. It's our job to empower them… We cannot be cultural imperialists, imposing Western notions of decency and openness on countries that have different histories, totally different values and different cultures. (Demers, 1999, p. 58)

We can also draw lessons from the European case. Most European nations have stopped claiming cultural sovereignty and relaxed the cultural controls on the media. Now, many European citizens share cultural information from other European countries and, to some extent, from all other countries. This has become an accepted principle of European countries:

> … [Cultural identity] is not something that is easy to manipulate by acting on the mass media, nor does it seem to be much influenced by media culture. It survives and flourishes in many a form, and the general expansion of television, music and other media have added some widely (internationally) shared cultural elements without evidently diminishing the uniqueness of cultural experience in different nations, regional and localities of Europe. (McQuail, 2000, p. 237)

In the case of Western Europe, internationalization is not the result of imperialism but of self-determination. From this viewpoint, media is not destructive to national culture, but helpful for a nation's cultural development and dissemination. Some modern theorists offer evidence in support of the hypothesis that "media-cultural 'invasion' can sometimes be *resisted* or redefined according to local culture and experience" (McQuail, 2000, p. 237). For example, after Vietnamese music was crossbred with a North American producer, a new cultural hybrid came into being.

Some theorists, such as Liebes and Katz (1986, cited by McQuail, 2000), argue that audiences may interpret the same alien media content differently depending on their own cultural backgrounds. In "The Export of Meaning: Cross-cultural Readings of *Dallas*," the authors present an analysis of how this American soap is seen in other cultures. The viewers were asked to re-tell an episode of Dallas. Arabs and Moroccan Jews recounted the basic linear story paying particular attention to action-based sub-stories. Russians, on the other hand, spoke of the episode in terms of themes, messages, ideological content and perceived

manipulative intent. Americans and kibbutzniks told the story from a psychoanalytic perspective. They analyzed the characters' intrapersonal and interpersonal problems (Liebes & Katz, 1993). The study showed that people from different cultures decode the same drama differently.

The cultural damage from globalized media might be overstated. Let us admit that there are many American cultural goods distributed around the world. But research provides evidence that home-produced programs top the ratings (Silj, 1988, cited by Tomlinson, 1997); furthermore, imported media operates at a "cultural discount," judging by its popularity among local audiences (Hoskins and Mirus, 1988, cited by Tomlinson, 1997). Morely and Robins find just such a conclusion regarding the reception of American television in Europe:

> US imports tend to do well when domestic television is not producing comparable entertainment programming - and whenever viewers have the alternative of comparable entertainment programming in their own language, the American programmes tend to come off second best. (Morely and Robins, 1989, p. 28, cited by Tomlinson, 1997, p. 181)

It is part of the everyday experience of the British audience to watch British soap operas like *Coronation Street* and *East-enders*. Their cultural specificity makes them more popular than American drama imports such as *Dallas*, which depend on their lack of specific cultural reference to attract an international audience (McGuigan, 1992). For this reason, it can be argued that the presence of American programs on non-American TV channels does not necessarily cause overwhelming damage to national cultures or threaten national cultural identity.

The Case of India

During the 1990s, Indian media experienced its efflorescence. The most salient example of such Indian media influences is the advent of Bollywood, India's version of Hollywood, which has grown quickly in popularity since the 1950s, and especially so in the 1990s, when India joined the countries embracing globalism. Indian media products increasingly began to be seen as an instrument of Indian cultural/media imperialism within South Asia, similarly to how American products were perceived starting in the 1960s. This challenged the linear West-centric perspective in this globalization age.

In the early 1990s, Indian television channels had their highest audience ratings within the region and forced foreign channels to adjust their programs so as to fit into the Indian national and local culture (Sonwalkar, 2001). At the same time, a UNESCO report shows that India has been one of the lowest importers of international programming. In 1990 only 8 percent of the Indian television programs were from foreign sources (UNESCO, 1994, cited by Sonwalkar, 2001). India's import of foreign media has further dwindled since 1992 due to the rapid development of domestic channels and the growth of domestic production houses. The national experience of India indicates a transition in the previously unbalanced cultural flow: "Between 1975 and 1991, the flow of cultural goods from the developed to the less developed countries has gone down and the flow from [less developed countries] to [developed countries] has increased" (Ambirajan, 2000, p. 2146).

Technological Reasons

International communications systems redistributed among regions and countries have been growing more and more complicated since the boom in information technology. The earlier theory of "blanket effects" of western media products is now being criticized for failing to account for this much more complex cultural interaction. Due to the effects of globalization, technology is being transferred at a much faster rate from the West to the rest of the world; and new knowledge, ideas and notions spread quickly. Yanal (1999) argues that "thanks to the multi-pronged channels of globalization, the gap between the haves and the have-nots today has a fairer chance of being narrowed at a faster rate than has been the case so far" (cited by Sonwalkar, 2001, p. 507). The one-sided, incomplete picture given by critical theorists of the US and European media influences on the Third World has ignored those cultural flows not originating from the west.

Cultural Reasons

Indians prefer to be entertained in their mother tongues (Malhotra, 2000, cited by Sonwalkar, 2001), with Hindi being the most widely spoken. This has forced the main foreign satellite channels such as *Star TV* to adopt Hindi-language programming. Patrick Cross, the managing director of the BBC World Service, said that his corporation had plans to introduce programs in Hindi (Mitra & Anjan, 2000, cited by Sonwalkar, 2001). This is the first time the BBC has shown interest in local language broadcasting outside the UK, although England has had an intimate and protracted relationship with the Indian subcontinent.

Still, the foreign organizations who have made attempts to reach Indian audiences through adopting Hindi in the development of programs have so far failed to make a profit. For example, early entrant *Star TV* continues to lose heavily on its Indian operations, even after it adjusted its programming and shifted popular English language soaps like *Baywatch* and *The Bold* to *Star World* to make way for Hindi shows (Ninan, 1999, cited by Sonwalkar, 2001).

In the localized backdrop of India, the concept of imperialism acquires new meanings. "…Within South Asia, the notion of Western-based media imperialism is being replaced by the Indian-based version. Within India, the pre-eminent position hitherto enjoyed by Hindi in the national cultural discourse until recently has given way to the suzerainty of local languages" (Sonwalkar, 2001, p. 506). In the case of India, internationalization of media clearly does not tend to undermine national culture. Reversely, the strong local and regional media in India play a very important role in protecting their national culture.

The Case of Zee TV

In the early 1990s, the viewership of foreign channels like Rupert Murdoch's *Star TV* dwindled in India after the emergence of local channels such as *Zee TV*. The audiences turned to channels with culturally familiar programming and now prefer increasingly localized cultural content. This can be seen from the program viewership pattern of eight major Indian cities during a single global event – the turn of the century. Although the global channels carried special live telecasts of the first millennium ray, the audience did not switch to them

on 31 December 1999 and 1 January 2000, as had been expected. In major southern Indian cities such as Bangalore, Chennai and Hyderabad, new, local language channels dominated the airwaves (Sonwalkar, 2001).

National and regional channels may play a crucial role in the resistance to the international media invasion. The private, national *Zee TV* group offers programs in several southern Indian languages and some new channels in Bengali, Punjabi and Marathi. Its success witnesses the fierce competition in these market niches.

Zee TV is the largest commercial satellite channel in India; through its success, we can see the degree of *indigenization* of media around the world. Recognizing this, Murdoch's *News Corporation* picked up a 49.9 percent stake of *Zee Group* in 1993. It is believed by Indian analysts that the money was used by Subhash Chandra, the *Zee Group* chairman, to expand the channel further. At the time when the partnership began, few could foresee that Charndra's media entity would grow strong enough to buy out Murdoch's stake by September 1999, and that it was Chandra, not Murdoch, who would emerge stronger and richer in this competition. From "a less than shoestring operation…to without a doubt probably the most successful story in broadcasting history" (Channel 4 Television, 1995, cited by Sonwalkar, 2001, p. 511), *Zee TV* has become the main multimedia group covering various services. "His status as a media baron was barely a year old, Murdoch was already a legend, the world's best known media predator. But the irony is that in Chandra, he was to meet his match" (Ninan, 1999, cited by Sonwalkar, 2001, p. 511).

Zee News, which has 51 percent of the total viewership, is the most watched news channel in India. *Star News* has 38 percent of the viewership (Ninan, 2000b, cited by Sonwalkar, 2001, p. 514). Language may well be the most important reason for *Zee News'* popularity. The channel uses *Hindustani*, a mixture of the Hindi and Urdu languages spoken in most of north, west and central India and understood by many in other parts of India. However, the use of Hindustani is less widespread in southern India. To solve this problem, *Zee News* uses English for most titles and subtitles, a combination that can still attract viewers with a working knowledge of Hindustani. Besides language, the *Zee* newscasters use Indian dress, which helps to improve the Zee News image and root it in an Indian cultural ethos. On the contrary, *Star* newscasters' slickly westernized appearance and English ethos are widely criticized as contributing to its lower viewership (Sonwalkar, 2001). *Star* has learned a very good lesson from this experience and adjusted its strategy.

Spider-Man 3

The globalization of *Spider-Man 3* provides another salient example of the *indigenization* of mass media. *Spider-Man 3* is currently the biggest-ever Hollywood hit in India. By the end of May, 2007, *Spider-Man 3* had already collected 570 million rupees (US$14 million, €10.5 million) across India, according to the Economic Times. The previous biggest Hollywood hit in India was *Titanic*, which collected 555 million rupees.

A major reason for *Spiderman 3*'s popularity in India was *Sony Pictures'* decision to simultaneously dub the movie for release in four major Indian languages – Hindi, Tamil, Telugu and Bhojpuri. This was the first time that a Hollywood film was dubbed and released in regional languages on the same day as its worldwide release.

Conclusion

Internationalization of media can influence national cultures in different ways. However, the cultural hegemony of media exporters is unlikely in and of itself to result in cultural domination. "Media may be a necessary, but are unlikely to be a sufficient, condition for cultural resistance or submission" (McQuail, 2000, p. 238). International media's effect on local culture should always be examined within the context of different economic, technological and cultural situations. Economic and technological internationalization of media not only recharges the existing media strengths, but also allows new media outlets to emerge and grow. In the case of India, the national and local media players grow increasingly stronger; due to cultural factors, they have an edge over foreign competitors. The national and regional media groups such as *Zee TV* develop quickly and play an important role in the development and perpetuation of Indian cultural identity.

Whether the internationalization of media has the potential to undermine national culture depends on how strong a particular national culture is. Circumstances exist, of course, under which national culture is damaged by aggressively marketed foreign media imports. However, the theory that local cultures will be drowned out and completely disappear under a tide of Western/American media at present does not appear to hold, at least not in the case of India. This is partly because of the strong cultural identity of groups in India. The cultural preferences of Indian viewers are so strong that foreign imports are put at a clear competitive disadvantage relative to the regional and national media produced. In fact, the strong national culture forces more savvy international media conglomerates to tailor their output so as to fit into the local cultural setting.

In conclusion, depending on the circumstances, the driving forces behind global cultural homogenization can be weak. In all cases, imported media is never a sufficient condition to dominate local cultures. Other intervening factors must coincide, such as a weak national identity or the political and/or economic suppression of local media and local culture. In any case, local cultures are likely to redefine the semiotic and social meanings of imported content. The internationalization of media needs not necessarily undermine national culture; rather, global media is always indigenized. To what extent that indigenization occurs is a more complex question than many critical theorists make it out to be.

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