Do Global Communications Inevitably Lead to Cultural Homogenization?

https://www.e-ir.info/2013/02/01/does-the-development-of-global-communications-inevitably-lead-to-cultural-homogenization/

CALLUM MARTIN, FEB 1 2013

Does the Development of Global Communications Inevitably Lead to Cultural Homogenization?

The development of global communications has led to the establishment of 'world messenger' services such as CNN, a chain of restaurants globally recognised by their golden Ms, and a worldwide appreciation for Michael Jackson. But to establish whether these phenomena are indications of an imminent homogenization of culture, the evidence of these cultural commodities' presence, and their implications for and influences on local cultures, needs to be explored. Conversely, there is a suggestion that global communication technologies may create the opposite, and instead strengthen local cultures. Nonetheless, both these positions have developed from the framework of the globalization dialogue, which itself may need to be questioned to determine whether it reflects reality, or is purely a Western experience and reminiscent of the imperial age, and perhaps no longer relevant.

Initially, the sheer massive presence of Western cultural goods throughout the world makes the case for inevitable cultural homogenization, or more specifically, 'Americanization', a probable one. Developments in global communications have made the exchange of goods and ideas near instantaneous and unimaginably easy. From the inescapable presence of McDonalds and Hollywood movie posters, to the Western clothing brands with social prestige and the World Bank's dictation of plans and patterns of development throughout the world, the limitless amount of evidence of American-led cultural commodity domination makes "the case for seeing cultural globalization as 'Americanization'… a persuasive one" (Tomlinson, 2005: 176). Advocates of this view usually cite the global presence of the US television and film industries (Ferguson, 1992: 72) and infer the influence this media hegemony has on a native culture. Critics of this view note how it reduces culture to its material goods. "It makes a leap of inference from the simple presence of cultural goods to the attribution of deeper cultural or ideological effects" (Tomlinson, 1999: 84).But if John Street's suggestion that "people who regularly read a paper come increasingly to share its politics," (2001: 108) is based in fact, then there is reason to believe that the same could be said of television's effect on culture. Despite this, it could be argued that instead of influencing culture, the most media does is "reinforce pre-existing views and values" (Street, 2001: 108). That is, people interpret the media through their own pre-existing value systems. Although often cited as an example of Americanization, Coca-cola, for example, is attributed with an array of meanings and uses within particular cultures distinct from the manufacturer's original intention. In Russia, Coke can smooth skin, in Haiti it can revive the dead, and in Barbados it can turn copper into silver (Tomlinson, 1999: 84). This shows that the horde of evidence of global consumption of American commodities is not necessarily evidence of cultural imperialism and homogenization. When applied to television, this idea suggests that whatever the cultural origins of the programme, the audience will interpret them within the context of their own culture, as "media artefacts do not always result in… cultural assimilation" (Ferguson, 1992: 72), but instead only highlight the differences between cultures. But commercial television and feature films are inventions of American origin, and thus any television culture, irrespective of its content and influence, can be viewed as a cultural homogenization of sorts: that of a *television culture*. As Don Ayteo of MTV notes, "We've revolutionized the way Indian kids devote themselves to leisure… We've created a youth culture where there simply was none before" (Street, 2001: 223). From this perspective, the globalization of the media can be viewed as "a 'web' which enmeshes and binds in all cultures" (Tomlinson, 2005: 176).

Alternatively, TV has not only produced a homogeneous television culture, but has provided a platform enabling local cultures to strengthen and diversify. A clear example of this is in Reeves's notions of the*Third Cinema* and *People's Theatre*, whereby people develop 'folk and alternative media' "opposed to 'commercial cinemas'' values, theories, and stylistic approaches" (1993: 235). Thus, the development of global communications has enabled people to showcase and strengthen their cultures and traditions, or even to develop a national identity. The creation of the Internet has made this even more the case, as individual people are increasingly becoming their own media force, separate from "the dominant institutional order of communications" (Reeves, 1993: 235) and thus less under its influence. Nonetheless, the Internet is essentially a Western platform, as it retains 'Western' values of individualism and freedom of expression. Despite its diverse cultural utilization, the Internet still encourages a uniform set of ideals. Tunstall even suggests that it is because of these values that "make the imported media culture so popular" (1981: 58). "Unpopular characteristics" such as the subservient position of women and caste inequalities in "authentic culture" make people embrace the imported culture. This suggests a gradual cultural homogenization, as, apparently, everyone wants the same thing. Not only is Tunstall guilty of presentism and univeralism – assuming that his culture's morality is superior and eternal and universally desired, but he also fails to recognise other possible factors in America's media prevalence, such as its economic strength as an exporter and other countries' economic or other insufficiencies in making their own media.

The simplistic notion of an American-led TV culture also ignores "the pluralisation of cultural production centres around the world" (Tomlinson, 2005: 180). *TV Globo* in Brazil and the Mexican company *Televisa* dominate their own markets as well as export to the rest of the Hispanic world (Tomlinson, 2005: 180); Egypt exports to the rest of the Arab world; India's film industry has audiences throughout Asia and Africa; and in the Scandinavian markets Sweden reigns (Tunstall, 1981: 62). In fact, the 'global audience' devotes 80% of its viewing time to domestic, national media and only 20% to media from outside its borders (Street, 2001: 210). Thus, the initial assumption by advocates of a cultural homogenization theory not only overstates the influence of foreign cultural commodities, but also the prevalence of these commodities, as, in the case of television, "it is home-produced programmes which top the ratings" (Tomlinson, 2005: 180). This suggests that globalization is not the process of domination necessary for cultural homogenization, but "a decentred network, in which the patterns of distribution of power are unstable and shifting" (Tomlinson, 2005: 185). But this critique of cultural homogenization ignores Hollywood's influence on these non-American film industries. According to Street,

"Nations with proud traditions of film-making independence like France, England, Sweden, India, Indonesia and Japan are in fact gradually succumbing to the irresistible lure of product that is not only predominantly American but, even when still indigenous, is rooted in the glamour of the seductive trinity of sex, violence and money, set to a harmonizing score of American rock and roll" (2001: 222).

That is to say, there is an increasing tendency for "media around the world to be put into primarily American packages" (Tunstall, 1981: 273).

But is this a case of cultural homogenization, or one of *transculturation* and *hybridity*? The globalization dialogue has led to the idea that each nation has a single, monolithic culture that needs to be protected. The GATT (General Agreements of Tariffs and Trade) rounds are a prime example of this, as they show globalization's perceived threat of cultural extinction through their "immigration, trade and cultural policies which restrict or manage the access their citizens have to external sources of media and culture" (Street, 2001: 221). Canada, France and most of Scandinavia have erected tariff barriers and imposed quotas to limit the number of foreign television imports, and throughout recent history states such as Singapore, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia and Iran have all banned satellite dishes to limit outside influence. This shows that there is, at least, a fear of cultural assimilation and homogenization among political powers. But most cultures simply do not correspond to the inorganic Westphalia state system, as they both transcend borders and can be innumerable within them. Thus, it is far more appropriate to view global culture as a phenomenon 'between' rather than 'within' countries. From this perspective, cultures are hybrids, consisting of components borrowed from one another, and global communications simply "lead to greater cultural hybridization" (Street, 2001: 227). Hip-hop is a music culture viewed almost entirely as Black American, and more specifically a part of the urban Black American culture of those living in the deprived area of the Bronx, New York. In reality, hip-hop is the product of a complex hybrid mix of Afro-American, Caribbean and Hispanic musical cultures (Tomlinson,

2005: 182): a hybridization that could only occur through global communications. With this in mind, the American influence on the TV and film industries does not necessarily induce a homogenized global culture, but rather a diverse hybridity of cultures: a "cultural mixing and hybridization rather than with direct cultural imposition" (Tomlinson, 2005: 182).

The point of cultural identity as national identity, already briefly mentioned, is also worth further analysis. Tunstall argues, "The problem of cultural identity is part of a larger problem of national identity" (1981: 57). But in human history, the nation state is a relatively recent experience, and so it is no surprise than human interaction through culture predates and does not fit into these imagined borders. India has nearly 20 languages and an enormously diverse wealth of religious traditions and cultures. As John Street asks, "Is it realistic to see mass media corporations, however big, imposing a single culture?" (2001: 226) This point also highlights the "North-North", not North-South, nature of the globalization dialogue (Ferguson, 1992: 73). India and many other victims of European colonisation throughout Asia and Africa do not fit into the Western model of synonymous national and cultural identities. "Africa is the continent where national identity is least strong of all" (Tunstall, 1981: 57). That is not to say that it is culturally weak or more susceptible to cultural imperialism, as Tunstall suggests, but instead the carving up of the continent by its colonisers forced its many cultures into borders and synthetic national identities irrespective of their peoples' realities. Thus, globalization theory, and by extension the theory of cultural homogenization, "might just be another theory through which the West formulates world history in terms of its own experience" (Tomlinson, 2005: 177). Nonetheless, due to the history of Western Imperialism, it would be "almost perverse" to not recognise the patterns of neo-colonialism – in the form of cultural imperialism – here. To the extent that sub-Saharan Africa does participate in the global media market, "they do so within delivery systems created and maintained by the global [Western] corporations" (Street, 2001: 225), and it is clear that some initiate media movements and flows, while others are receivers and "are effectively imprisoned by it" (Tomlinson, 2005: 177). From this perspective, global communications are just an extension of neo-colonialism in the form of cultural imperialism – a forerunner to cultural homogenization.

Furthermore, the age of imperialism and colonialism was partnered with a period of scientific thought inspired by notions of racial superiority and inferiority. The British model of imperialism made it possible to "scientifically" distinguish between civilized, advanced cultures, and uncivilized, backward cultures. Linguist Friedrich von Schlegel, for example, believed that Indo-Germanic languages were superior to the Semitic-African languages, a reflection of the culture, society and mind of their speakers (Said, 2003: 98). This shows how "Europe constructed its identity by relegating and confining the non-Europeans to a secondary racial, cultural… status" (Tomlinson, 2005: 177). But as global communications continue to eliminate physical distance, these cultures are coming into direct proximity with one another, and the West's established cultural confidence and certainty is in decline. From this perspective, the notion of an inevitable cultural homogenization is just and echo of the West's colonial past. And as it is becoming increasingly 'multi-cultural' – due primarily to immigration – and undergoing a "significant decline in its cultural power," (Tomlinson, 2005: 185) the image of cultural homogenization and imperialism – that of the domination and subordination of cultures – is becoming increasingly irrelevant.

Nevertheless, the neoliberal nature of globalization and its tools – global communications – do maintain the conditions of the imperialist domination and subordination. Globalization has allowed wealthy countries to exploit the poorer, by pushing them to eliminate trade barriers, whilst keeping up their own (Stiglitz, 2002: 6). Although "capitalism has no 'loyalty' to its birthplace, and so provides no guarantees that the geographical patterns of dominance… will continue" (Tomlinson, 2005: 187), there are measures taken by the wealthier, more powerful states to maintain the status quo. Stiglitz refers to the Uruguay Round – a part of the GATT agreements – and its strengthening of intellectual property rights, stopping developing countries from producing affordable life-saving drugs, effectively condemning thousands to death (2002: 8). It has also resulted in dangerous workers' exploitation, where globalization had resulted in poor countries' labour force being forced into low-paid, often dangerous, factory jobs, as their old jobs become obsolete. This not only highlights the uni-directional flow of influence, but more broadly, it highlights global communications' influence on the spreading, homogenized culture of capitalism. Whether the commodities are uniform in flavour or not, the developments in global communication are producing "a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country" (Tomlinson, 1999: 76). The expansionary and imperialist nature of capitalism, accelerated by developments in global communications, has brought cultural life

in more and more areas "within the grasp of the cash nexus and the logic of capital circulation" (Tomlinson, 2005: 179). This view of globalization and global communications points to a variety of cultural homogenization through an overarching culture of capitalism.

The cultural homogenization theory relies largely on Western conceptions of the world, such as the Westphalia system, as well as ignoring large parts of the world that are mostly excluded from the ambit of these communications. Thus, the theory can be seen as a primarily Western-centric perspective, distorting the reality for large populations of the globe. It also relies heavily on the idea of a media presence and influence that are simply not grounded in hard evidence. It implies that cultures are distinct from one another, when in reality they are far more interdependent and are formed through hybridization – a process that global communication developments are accelerating, and thus creating a more diversified and colourful patchwork of cultures. Initially, the argument of cultural imperialism suggests that Western dominance is leading to the 'Americanization' of weaker states, but it also highlights the imperialistic tones in the cultural homogenization argument, as it deconstructs 19th century Europe's attempt to create cultural security and certainty by subordinating the cultures of their colonies, concluding that the cultural homogenization dialogue is an outdated, irrelevant reverberation of imperialism. Nonetheless, global communications have increased the spread of capitalism, and in this respect, it would appear that cultural homogenization is inevitable in the form of a commodity, capital culture.

References

Ferguson, M. (1992) The Myth about Globalization. *European Journal of Communication*, *7*(69), pp. 69-93. doi: 10.1177/0267323192007001004

Reeves, G. (1993) *Communications and the 'Third World'*, Routledge: London.

Said, E. W. (2003) *Orientalism*, Penguin Modern Classics: London.

Stiglitz, J. (2002), *Globalization and its discontents*, Penguin: London.

Street, J. (2001) *Mass Media, Politics and Democracy*, Palgrave Macmillan: Basinstoke.

Tomlinson, J. (2005) Cultural Globalization and Cultural Imperialism, In Mohammadi, A. (Ed.), *International Communiation and Globalization* (pp170-190). SAGE publications: London.

Tomlinson, J. (1999) *Globalization and Culture*, Blackwell Publishers: Cambridge.

Tunstall, J. (1981). *The media are American. Anglo-American media in the world*, Constable and Company: London.

—

Written by: Callum Martin
Written at: University of Salford
Written for: Cristina Archetti
Date written: November 2012