

The cultural imperialism thesis



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In contemporary society, globalization has become an inevitable trend of the development. In 1985, Theodore Levitt first proposes the concept of globalization; it is used to describe the changes and development in the global economy. Since then, the concept of globalization gradually blends into other scientific areas and it rapidly becomes a popular topic in academia. Compared to the disputes on economic and political level, the conflicts of culture are more subtle and more profound. Tomlison (1997) points out that due to the imbalance of economic strength, accordingly, in cultural domain it is divided into dominant and vulnerable, that is the reason why cultural imperialism has been proposed. Therefore, maintaining the independence of their own culture in the exchanges of globalization has become the reason people questioned the cultural globalization. As Lechner (2012, p. 340) confirms that 'Modern media are carriers of globalization', global cultures are spreading through the media, such as the Internet and satellite television, it is the media which can turn the planet into a global village and make people feel closer than ever before. With the advancement of media and cultural globalization process, recent developments in this field have led to a renewed interest in whether the cultural imperialism thesis can be regarded as a way to understand media globalization, and it has been a controversial and much disputed subject in present society.

This essay begins by tracing back some debates and the history about media globalization and then it will go on to demonstrate an understanding of the cultural imperialism and the key elements of it. After explaining some main critiques of the cultural imperialism thesis, this paper seeks to prove that as an increasing number of countries gradually recognize that it is important to

protect and develop their local culture, the cultural imperialism thesis seems to be an unsuitable way to understand media globalization in the current international environment.

Media Globalization

Most scholars believe that globalization must be associated with media and communications, the definition of globalization indirectly acknowledged this point. Giddens (1990, p. 64 cited in Sreberny-Mohammadi, 2000, p. 118) defines globalization as “ the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa”. What exactly links the distant localities? The answer will be the media. Due to the progress of media technology, the contact and communication between people from different places becomes more convenient, as Jameson (1998, p. 55) points out that “ globalization is a communicational concept, which alternately masks and transmits cultural or economic meanings”. It is McLuhan (1964) who first recognise the role of media, although he proposes the term ‘ global village’ which seems to be a negative way to understand globalization. His merit is to illustrate the effect of communication technologies in our social life. Referring to media globalization, it seems that the development of it can be grouped into different historical periods by three significant forms of mediums. To begin with, distances are no longer barriers to transnational communication because of the emergence of the telegraph. According to Thompson (1995), it was cable networks which connect Europe with China, Australia and South America, making mega mass audiences get information around the world. In the second place, Tomlinson (2004) states that the

industrialized countries had been linked by satellite television. It had broken through the time and space limitations so that worldwide audiences can sit in front of televisions and watch the same events or soap operas at the same time. More exactly, that is the reason why teleplays like Dallas can be widely spread. Finally, as modern technology is advancing at a rapid speed, as a media carrier the internet has completely changed the way people get information. It brings information from different nations and diverse areas of the world to the individual computers or laptops.

The performances of media globalization can be partitioned into three aspects. Firstly, as an important representation of the diverse national economy and culture, media products are spreading across the globe. People just need to press some buttons on the remote control or keyboard and then they will be able to access the media products they want from almost any country via satellite television or online media, such as news, TV programs and soap operas. As for many Chinese young people, they concern about Western technology news to learn about the latest electronic products, their mp3 players are playing the popular songs of Lady Gaga and Adele; American TV series are their favourites, such as Vampire Diaries and The Big Bang Theory. Media globalization means not only the dissemination of media products, but also the promotion of media commercialization which is becoming the universal media form. That is to say besides the media productions themselves; the proliferation of Western media form includes the type and form of programs and professional points and convention. Take Chinese TV program as an example, media studio buys overseas manufacture model and then transform the program to fit the viewing habits

of Chinese audiences. China's Got Talent is the most successful case which comes from Britain's Got Talent; it has recorded audience rating for three times.

The second aspect of media globalization is the dominant position of transnational media company and market. The merger and acquisition of media companies have produced the large-scale media group; for instance, the seven main global media giants which are Disney, AOL - Time Warner, Sony, News Corporation, Viacom, Vivendi and Bertelsmann (McChesney, 2000). Assisted by the supranational strength and nation-state strength, these media groups sweep across the globe through various technologies and agencies. Since the nation is no longer the provider of media service, the restrictions are released in media ownership and broadcast communications domain. Globalization embodied in terms of ownership structure, production, distribution and consumption of new transnational media systems. Through mergers and acquisitions, the media system which used to have distinctive national characteristics is becoming related to multinational media groups. Similarly, the production and consumption of media, such as film and advertising production and consumption has been globalized as well. Take Thomson Reuters as an example, since Canadian media giant Thomson Corporation merged with the British Reuters Group; it has become the biggest global financial information provider and the new company surpasses the majority of other competitors (BBC, 2007).

Lastly, transnational media are dominated by global and regional production centres, and the information, productions and representations created by it are flowing through digital communication networks. In the meantime, the <https://assignbuster.com/the-cultural-imperialism-thesis/>

counter-flow exist restrictedly, the ruling media assimilates the contents and patterns of media from other countries selectively. Such as film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, a story from China, but it is made by Hollywood. Similarly, the story of animation film *Mulan* which created by Disney is based on Chinese history. Although the culture and resources are taken from Chinese, the expression is global, and the producer remains a company of the United States.

The essence of ‘ cultural imperialism’

Before discussing on the essence of cultural imperialism thesis, I attempt to explore some key elements primarily.

Media: McQuail (1994) claims that the media is a window for people to see the outside world, a guide to help the public understand mass experiences, a platform or a truck to transfer information. However, McLuhan (1964) did not agree with the idea that the media is only regarded as a tool for carrying materials or information, in his view, ‘ the medium is the message’. Every emergence of new media, no matter what the specific contents spread, the media form itself brings some information to human society and it may make some kinds of social changes. McLuhan (1964, p. 7) further explains that the ‘ personal and social consequences of any medium-that is, of any extension of ourselves-result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology’. The aim he raises the proposition ‘ the medium is the message’ is to remind people that the impacts caused by any media are more remarkable than their specific contents. In other words, what media can transmit is far more than the specific content; he tries to draw people’s attention off from the content to <https://assignbuster.com/the-cultural-imperialism-thesis/>

the media itself. McLuhan (1964) also highlights that 'media are the extension of man', users of media also are the contents of media because they are creating contents, in particular the users of the Internet. In his view, Internet users differ from other media consumers; no matter what they do on the Internet they always create contents. People are owners who can actively manage media and give orders. In the cultural imperialism thesis, the media establish connections between developed countries and developing countries, it can be separated into two categories, one is the productions of print media, television, radio and film; the other is consumer goods such as Coca Cola, McDonald. Through these approaches, Western countries can spread the information which they want to convey around the world.

Media culture: Since the media play an increasingly important role in people's daily lives, contemporary society is integrally entering into the media society, media and cultural communication has become a normal and major landscape for general public. In the concept of cultural imperialism, media culture is a culture of consumerism; the centre of it is capitalist values. Sklair (2012) proposes that there is a definite link between consumerism and global capitalist system which controlled by the capitalist multinational corporation in the 20th century. The special mission for global capitalist system in the third world is to promote consumerism and to allow consumers indirectly considering their consumption ability with overlooking their own productive capacity. For instance, developing countries import commercial television and programs from developed countries, transmitting western TV series, horror films, detective stories and cowboy movies, making

people face a world which may have passed for years or did not exist in their real lives. Such media productions have a detrimental influence upon people in developing countries, eroding the national identities, restraining people's creativity and spirit of participation.

Imperialist countries: Western developed countries, especially the United States. Nonetheless there are merely few numbers of these countries. After years of capitalist operations, they possess the majority of the world's resources and accumulate enormous wealth which results in the unbalanced development of the world. Schiller (1991) confirms that they own not only 'hard power' in political, economic and military domains but also cultural 'soft power' which is preponderant as well.

Developing countries: most of these countries had been independent after World War II; they fell behind the western developed countries in political, economic, military and cultural fields. It can be said that they are still depending based on the economy of developed countries. In terms of developed countries, the developing countries are huge consumer markets which they can instil Western culture and values and get benefits from.

Control: Western countries heavily impact developing countries by making use of cultural imperialism; it is best characterized by settling differences with other nations and preserving from violation or infraction. Essentially, the core of cultural imperialism is Western countries, the circulation of global media productions shows an obvious imbalance-they circulate in one-way flow from western countries to the rest of the world (Varis, 1974). Due to the fact that Western countries control media systems and products, cultural

imperialism enables third world countries make their economic, social, and political policies and public values similar to western standards.

As a result, it seems that the five elements of the cultural imperialism thesis can be integrated in a structure chart:

Transmitter → Imperialist countries

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Communicating content → Media culture (culture of consumerism)

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Channels of communication → media

→ →

Audiences → Developing countries

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Communicating effect → Cultural globalization

Schiller (1976) stresses that cultural imperialism is not an isolated phenomenon; it is a part of the modern imperialism process. It has several practical characteristics in three aspects. First of all, the powerful countries in the economic domain, based on their powerful economic and capital strength, expand their economic, political and cultural influences to the rest of the world through the market. It results in a dominated and dependent relationship between the developed capitalist countries (especially the United States and Western European countries) and the developing countries (the Third World countries, such as countries in South America, Asia, and

Africa). The products and fashion styles of developed countries propagate to other countries through the market, it may lead to specific patterns of demand and consumption, so that cultural values, attitudes and behaviours of developed countries can be consolidated and supported.

Furthermore, cultural imperialism is an expansion of cultural values, that is to say dominating global culture through products or commodities which contain cultural values. In recent years, the Western national export cultural products to developing countries and make them accept their values, this causes the invasions in cultural survival and development areas in developing countries. For example, although China is one of the net exporters of films besides the United States (Morley, 2006), in the film market of Chinese mainland, the domestic films are heavily impacted by Hollywood films. Whenever Hollywood blockbusters like *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* is showing at major cinemas, the box offices of the Chinese domestic films in the same period are always poor. Since Chinese has been aware of the cultural soft power stands for a country's overall image, one of the departments of authority called State Administration of Radio, Film and Television take several measures to support domestic movies, such as 'the month of home-made films protection'. That means each year, in a relatively settled time, there is only few import films, almost all of the films shown in cinema are domestic. Although this is done to protect the domestic films, this approach still causes controversy. While confronting these impacts, developing countries not only face the threat of industrial colonization form, but also face a lack of creativity of the cultural industry.

Finally, cultural imperialism achieves cultural expansion through the dissemination of information products. In contemporary society, the strong cultures of western countries come to pervade people's daily lives by means of mass media and popular cultural products such as radio, television, advertising, pop music, popular culture. Take the United States culture as an example; it permeates almost every aspect of our daily lives. A new Hollywood blockbuster could always start a watching boom around us; The pop music of American superstars such as Lady Gaga and Rihanna is playing among most Chinese pubs and shopping malls; an increasing number of young people become fans of the US TV series; and the NBA show is an eternal topic for basketball enthusiasts.

Main critiques of the cultural imperialism

With the continuous development of the globalization process and rise of audience studies, as the person who first proposes the cultural imperialism thesis, Schiller meets enormous challenges from other scholars. Especially after the end of the Cold War, the cultural imperialism thesis has caused more controversies.

To begin with, there are increasing numbers of theorists recognizing that the international communication process is a complex structure, the one-way flow explains of cultural imperialism oversimplifies this complex process of information flow. According to Cunningham (1996), media globalization is no longer a one-way flow of media and cultural products from the western countries to the rest of the world. In recent years, India has become to a major out-sourcing exporter, movies made by Bollywood have aroused extensive concerns. For instance, as one of the most popular movies, 3 idiots <https://assignbuster.com/the-cultural-imperialism-thesis/>

has evoked worldwide repercussions. BBC (2010) reports that ' it has broken records for Indian films in the US, Australia, South Africa, Pakistan, Fiji and Kenya'. In the American well-known film website IMDB, this film wins a score as high as 8. 2 points; in Rotten tomatoes, there are 92% of the audiences thinking that it is worth watching. In addition, the rise of Korean popular culture has aroused the widespread interest not only in the Asian countries, but also in the Western countries. In a lecture of the University of Leicester, the professor takes Girls' Generation which created by S. M. Entertainment as an example to illustrate popular culture. These examples showed that global media and cultural propagation is a multi-directional flow process.

Secondly, the communication process is a complex structure, there is no definite uniformity between encoding and decoding, and the similar information can be decoded by the different audiences in different ways. That means audiences in the Third World may selectively accept information and values which made by western media corporations. Tomlinson (1997) criticizes that using media imperialism expresses the cultural imperialism thesis is not proven. He believes that the media is neutral; and it is just an intermediary of the communication process, it is neither a kind of ideology nor the core of modern culture. He also notes that audiences should not be regarded as passive receptacles of media productions; they cannot be dominated by media. Schiller (1991) concurs and further explains that there are a part of active audiences, they understand the information in their own ways, by their own judgment, most importantly, their understanding considered to have significance in cultural hegemony resisting. Above all, it seems that each audience has a different understanding of the same media

products, and their attitudes are based on their own cultural background and experiences. They accept information which they identify with and in the meanwhile, excluding those they dislike and disagree with. To some extent, the decoding activities of active, critical and resistant audiences weaken the effect of cultural imperialism gradually.

Lastly, the cultural imperialism thesis seems to overlook the continuing significance of national media systems and protectionism. Because of the fact that films of the US occupy 80 per cent of the European film market, While European movies only gets 2 per cent of the American market (Morley, 2006). In order to protect domestic films and television programs from the impact of the U. S. like products, some European countries (Canada and France) announce to restrict American imported media products (Tomlinson, 1997). With mention to the Middle East countries, as a representative of the Saudi Arabian national media system, Orbit thinks that a BBC program about criticizing the Saudi Arabian human rights has violated the law and culture of Muslims, then it banned the import and use of satellite dishes in 1994 (Sakr, 2001). To sum up, in the contemporary global environment, since an increasing number of countries realize to defend their cultural security, the force-feed type of the Western media productions spreading is becoming useless. The national media systems and protectionism play an increasingly important role in resisting the instillation of western cultures and values.

Conclusion

As a central topic of the political and academic debate in the present age, different scholars have diverse views and opinions about globalization. Held (1999) provides an overview of various perspectives on globalization, he

states that all the views can be divided into three classes: Hyperglobalizers, Sceptics and Transformationalists. Differing from other two perspectives, transformationalists highlight that firstly there is no single reason resulting in globalization; moreover, as Giddens (1990 cited in Sreberny-Mohammadi, 2000) states that the outcome of the globalization process is uncertain. I agree with this viewpoint and in my opinion globalization is a complicated process, it cannot be easily defined as positive or negative, it must be understood in more complex ways.

Above all, I argue that globalization is a process which is open and full of conflicts, its essence is to establish a system for culture of exchanging and communicating, consequently, it may create a new media pattern. Media globalization is an objective reality which caused by the development of economic globalization, and the emergence of it is an objective historical process of media development. The cultural imperialism thesis is a negative way to understand media globalization, and it oversimplifies this complex process of information flow. In this process, exchange, collision and convergence between different cultures are overall based on maintaining their own independence, it is a two-way process instead of a one-way course which makes majority of countries become similar to the Western style. In the process of media globalization, communication and integration of various cultures will not lead to cultural assimilation; in contrast, diversification which emphasizes the differences and diversity is the expected trend of human culture. Multicultural, not only refers to the cultural diversity, but also means the differences in deep-seated level of culture and these differences can be recognized on a global scale. It is a kind of cultural imperforation

when it only assimilates or controls cultures of other nations but does not accept and absorb outstanding achievements from other national cultures. The real media exchange is accepting and absorbing the outstanding and advanced cultural elements, it is not only from basic structure but also the inherent quality and spirit.