

The impact of global media on identity



Nowadays, major changes are taking place in the information and communications media as a result of new technological forms being delivered to us. Morley and Robins (1995) seem implicitly take this view when they write about our senses of space and place [] are being significantly reconfigured (Morley and Robins, 1995: 1). They are exemplifying the ‘ new communications geography’ constituted by global networks and information flow which result in proliferated crisis of the national sphere.

The changes described are effects of an ongoing process called globalization which we are all aware of as nowadays it is one of the main buzzwords. Moreover awareness extends to the fact that we are living in times of growing cultural globalism where global media has a significant impact on our lives. Therefore the aim of this paper is to discuss the relationship between global media and its impact on national identity and culture.

For some, through Western domination there is a homogenization and ‘ sameness’ forming across the world. Global culture is being shaped by international entertainment conglomerates and for that reason becomes standardized. A discussion in the first part of the paper as a result will be formed around this topic. In contrast, the second part of the analysis will focus on the works of other writers who believe that we are living in the age of hybridised cultures, which borrow elements from each other but irremediably remain distinct.

For the purposes of this paper we must establish what is meant by terms identity and culture. Identity will refer to portrayal ones’ hold for them and

with which they identify, while culture should refer to ‘ a variety of practices which generate meanings’ (Barker, 1999: 9).

Creation of the Global Media

The time after the 1980’s led to major changes in terms of new communication technologies, digitalization of information and increase in deregulations and privatization in different sectors, including media.

Privatization mostly affected United States what brought a direct impact upon the degree of exclusivity of the markets, allowing other players to improve their own standards and overall ‘ stamp’ economically (Morley & Robins, 1995).

The free market allowed other organizations to gain more dominance in the global arena.

All of the changes resulted in other countries privatizing their telecoms (Thussu, 2006).

The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) conducted a push toward creation of protected markets of World Trade Organization (WTO) which is holding up the structure of the free flow of information. WTO also led the way for penetration of Western markets to Asia and Latin America (Thussu, 2006). The crucial benefit of this was that key players were not more able to wholly dominate the markets to a significant degree as was the case prior to such legal regimes.

The progress in technology and telecommunications made possible the transfer of extremely large data to any part of the world within seconds what

unquestionably had a huge impact on economy and trade. Additionally, the growth of digitalization and new technologies like computers, mobiles or satellites allowed fast and cheap communication around the world. It had an impact on growing international businesses which could be now operate by electronic marketplace (Herman & McChesney, 1997).

Privatization and ongoing competition in satellites caused the domination of few nations within the market. USA and Britain being main controllers even of Intelsat which is an intergovernmental association providing international broadcast system created in order to run a global satellite system offering satellite capacity on a non discriminatory basis (Morley & Robins, 1995). Once again, this proved that the countries with advanced technology have the ability to set and implement the policy agenda.

As the global carriers enlarged in number, the United States run operators had to privatize their own satellite systems in order to make the market for satellite services more commercial. These changes made the Transnational Companies (TNC) the highest beneficiaries what resulted in drastic changes in the shape of the new world economy. As expected the biggest world media conglomerates started planning on how to get the highest profit which as a consequence, inspired debate about the deterioration of media plurality and democracy (Thussu, 2006).

As a result of these changes a global media sector was formed which made individuals all over the world aware and able to gain knowledge about other countries. Media became a key and for many the only one medium to discover the world.

Global Media and Homogenization of Culture

The discourse of cultural homogenization presents globalization as ‘synchronization to the demands of a standardized consumer culture, making everywhere seem more or less the same’ (Tomlinson, 1999: 6). This view sees the impact of global media in the cultural sphere in a very pessimistic manner. Frequently, many believe it to be a powerful tool with an aim to destroy cultural identities (Tomilson, 2003). The kernel of truth stems from the era before global media when there was a strong in form local connection between geographical place and cultural experience which were defining cultural identity. That was a time where individuals identity was just something which they simply ‘had’ as an existential possession or heritage. Globalization therefore ‘has swept like a flood tide through the world’s diverse cultures, destroying stable localities, displacing peoples [‘] homogenization of cultural experience’ (Tomilson, 2003: 269). This anecdote indicates therefore that globalization is some form of destruction for cultural identity and a threat to particular forms of ‘national identity’.

Homogenization of cultures therefore in a stronger manner means, the appearance of one single culture embracing all people and replacing the variety of other cultural systems that have been present. In a broad sense, this pessimistic idea of the creation of one global culture is called ‘cultural imperialism’ (Tomlinson, 1999). This theory also was one of the earliest based on cultural globalization which discussed the flow of American values, for example, consumer goods and lifestyles all around the world. Cultural imperialism hence focuses on American domination over Europe – of the ‘West over the rest’ for creation of global culture. There are two visions

created out of this view about the global culture. The first is the focus around the Westernization of the world. And the second will be idea of global culture being dominated by capitalism (Tomlinson, 1999). Both of those will be now discussed.

Westernization is seen as a drive toward standardization of lifestyle around the world. It is ' a global spread of a social and cultural totality' (Tomlinson, 1999: 90). Europe produced a single world market ' integrating even the most savage communities into the one machine' (Latouche, 1996: 19). One-way cultural currents ' flood from the countries of the Centre over the entire planet' (Latouche, 1996: 20). From the ways how people dress and what they eat to the music that they listened to, culture flows from centers of creation into the Third World through the mass media (newspapers, radio television, films, books, video). All of it is produced and spread worldwide by monopolized, powerful transnational media groups as a result of changes in global media (previously discussed) after 1980's. This flood of cultural products therefore only ' indicates' desires and needs of its recipients. Latouche is calling this process a ' propaganda' as it ' strangles all cultural activity among the passive recipients of these messages' who read it as the way how they are supposed to live (Latouche, 1996: 21). For Latouche Westernization is thus anti-cultural and driven by desire to create a world of uniform culture. To succeed in their goal the destruction of all other ways of life (that is non-western) is necessary. However, there is a paradox situation in here. West by trying so hard to homogenize the world shall result in loss of its own socio-cultural advantage.

Those who believe cultures to be directed towards the process of homogenization also consider it to follow capitalism and therefore the global economy which it defines. These views led phrases like ‘McDonaldization’, ‘Coca-colonization’ or ‘Disneyzation’ to be born. In particular mentioned concepts refer to the worldwide homogenization of societies throughout the impact of multinational corporations, where all of them are originally exported from America (Pieterse, 2004). In this matter, globalization is connected with market economy, where particular brand images are standardized and distributed all around the world. Many aspects of what one may describe as ‘cultural’, from food to global currency can be considered. These are the perfect examples of global capitalist monoculture and cultural synchronization.

McDonald has come to occupy a central position in American not only in the business industry, but also in popular culture. It is one of the most powerful and influential developments in our society as it succeeded worldwide. The reason of its high achievements is connected with the fact that it offers consumers, workers, and managers efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control which is necessary in the business industry. As such a powerful institution, it has an impact on a wide range of undertakings and of course the way of life of many individuals in and around the world and its impact is still accelerating. ‘Another irrational effect of McDonaldization is increased homogenization’ (Ritzer, 2000: 135) as any McDonald restaurant you go to, no matter where it is around the world you know what to expect. You know what kind of products will be offered to you and you can be certain that they will be prepared for you in the same way everywhere (Ritzer, 2000). On the

other hand, there are many nations which invaded the McDonald's business model to develop indigenous versions. Therefore by some it is seen more as a global localization or hybridisation rather than homogenization. This will be discussed in the latter part of this paper.

Globalization as hybridisation and deterritorialization

Prior to understanding the concept of hybridisation it is wise to make clear that it does not refer to total deprivation of own national identity. Contrarily it emulates a potential of benefiting from other cultures and incorporating new knowledge with the old one side by side.

We cannot discuss the aspect of hybridisation without analysing the deterritorialization of cultural heritage. By deterritorialization is meant not only 'the travel and transformation of culture' but also 'everbroadening horizon of mundane experience' (Tomilson, 1999, cited in Xue, 2008: 113). Therefore, this flow of deterritorialized cultures allows transforming other cultures more accurately producing new ones by hybridity (Xue, 2008). The deterritorializing character of the globalization process is 'its property of diminishing the significance of socialgeographical location to the mundane flow of cultural experience' (Tomlinson, 2003: 273). What has to be understood from these definitions is that there was a transformation made in our usual model of cultural existence which now brings globalized influences into our locally situated in our countries 'lifeworld'. For example, many different satellite channels broadcasts different genres which are likely to influence general perception of individuals taste. Fashion TV for instance demonstrates the mainstream transfer of 'what's hot, and what's not',

signaling fashion trends from major fashion runway shows across the world and therefore influencing individuals style (Tomlinson, 2003).

Pieterse (2004) sees hybridisation as the 'solvent between the polar perspectives' (Pieterse, 2004: 57) as this concept gains the meaning from relationship between homogenization and polarization. Within society there is a group of people called 'cosmopolitans', who are open-minded to embrace some changes, are able to settle in other cultures or are willing to completely lose their personal identity (homogenization). On the other hand, there are 'fundamentalists' who believe that the world should stay with traditions and cultures remaining unchanged. These beliefs can be called 'polarization'. As a result people who believe in hybridization neither deny changes completely, nor absorb fully in new cultures they were introduced to. They essentially form a stance on the mid-point (Pieterse, 2004).

Hybridisation brings transformations to cultures. It is the 'cut 'n' mix' of cultural forms in the process of globalization. It refers to the growth of culture which it occurs when a cultural product incorporates and combines different cultural practices (Pieterse, 2004). There is a lot of evidence strengthening the thesis which now will be analysed.

As mentioned earlier, McDonalds, in terms of homogenisation of society, can also act as a good example of hybridization. Fusion cuisine means the creation of indigenous versions on terms of the choice of foods in order to adapt to local conditions. In Norway there is a sandwich called 'McLaks' with grilled salmon, while in Japan you may order 'chicken Tatsuta' with fried

chicken, cabbage spiced with soy sauce and ginger. Italy provides pasta with their burgers, while in Germany you may order a beer with your meal (Ritzer, 2000). All of these are unique cultural adaptations which hence acknowledge that food choices must be tailored to meet a variety of needs expected in specific cultures around the world.

By the same token restaurants also adapt the way it operates to local social environment. As stands, in Hong Kong food chains are tailored around the need for teenagers to hang and socialize. Conversely in Taiwan it is a rare public space not dominated by men as it did not develop from traditional Chinese cultural structures where men have more rights than women (Ritzer, 2000). ' This blending of local features into global products has been called – glocalisation' as the global and local is reinforcing (Lull, 2000: 252).

Another conglomerate which is dominating in the world is Viacom, the owners of MTV. The channel distributes in over 82 countries and actively promotes: ' think globally, act locally'. In the different countries it is broadcasted, ' tailored' versions of the channel are offered to meet the tastes of customers. For instance, through the aspect of localization MTV Asia came to existence as a result of joint venture between Rupert Murdoch's Star television and Viacom in 1992. The language used by network is ' Hinglish' ' which is a hybrid language of Hindi and English (Herman & McChesney, 1997).

' Globalization as a process of hybridization gives rise to a global m'lange' (Pieterse, 1993: 1) where the cultures are mixing and borrowing some elements from each other.

Conclusion

For the past 20 years we were facing dramatic changes in our world being result of globalisation processes. Improvements in technology and telecommunications made free flow of information possible. The world market became dominated by USA and some of the Western countries. Privatization had an impact on more competition and the formation of strong TNCs. Western countries became powerful through investments in infrastructures. Developments in communication services paved the way for global media therefore open the door of the world for many people what resulted in either hybridization or homogenization of national identities and cultures. Some may see it as negative changes, others will disagree. There are also those who as Tomlinson believe that ‘ globalization produces a globalized culture rather than a global culture’ (Xue, 2008). However no matter what point of view one will chose there is no doubt that global media are affecting many nations and their identities and cultures.

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