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Globalisation And Localisation

- Dynamic Processes Of Cultural Change

Debates on media globalisation and its cultural implications have taken on a new significance in the face of vast changes in communication technology and easy accessibility to diverse information channels. This article sketches some of the major theoretical perspectives on the study of media globalisation and its consequences on national cultures, and provides a critique of the major weaknesses and problems of these conceptual models. It concludes with a discussion of frameworks, especially that of intercultural communication which the author contends is perhaps most suitable to understand the process of cultural integration and disintegration.

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A recent work on contemporary television in Asia contends that 'globalization' is a highly contested concept and means different things in different situations and to different people. (French and Richards, 1996). The term 'globalization' is viewed in three distinct categories :

"First is its corporate form as supra-national business organizations with a structure of ownership and control organized to operate on a global basis... second, globalization can be seen as corporate ideology, not in the sense that its basis lies only in the corporations, but in the sense of an ideology that has been established to serve the interests of the corporations, and which sets the terms of the debate such that the growth of global culture is accepted as given....the third dimension of globalization is as a process with an empirical dimension -- in other words as a process which can be observed. Globalization is often characterised by major social, cultural and institutional change, whose token persuasiveness demands investigation." (French and Richards, 1996: 33-34)

Earlier debates on the significance of the term 'global' showed a strong tendency to interpret the term global in its "homogenization and uniformity" aspect and this has definitely

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been the case in the 1970s when most of the media imperialism literature appeared. (Featherstone, 1990). In this interpretation and understanding of the term 'global', international flows in information and communication were seen to be a one-way, non-reciprocal flow of information and cultural domination emanating from the industrialized nations, especially the U.S., and 'imposed' on the Third World.

In the late 1980s and through to the 1990s, the term 'globalization' was considered in its wider and more dialectic sense. The process of globalization was interpreted as not merely a process of homogenization but simultaneously as a process of heterogenization. The global cannot be isolated from the local, they sustain each other dialectically. They are both an integral part of the trends of global reality and the shifts that have come to characterize the world today. The term globalization, therefore, invokes both the poles of this dialectic relationship and any study of its implications would therefore have to examine the forms and structure of this dynamic relationship. From this perspective, the term 'global' naturally modifies the terms of the debate, giving it a more complex meaning and stressing on the interplay between localities in a larger context rather than on the one-way, non-reciprocal sense of the term.

Global Media And Third World Development

Gerald Sussman and John Lent noted that "published work on the role of communication and information systems in the Third World has been dominated since the end of World War II by a 'developmentalist' bias, originating primarily in the United States, that viewed mass media, and later telecommunications, as central to the reproduction of the 'developed' political, economic, cultural and institutional behavioural structures of the West" (Sussman and Lent, eds, 1991:2). Debates on the cultural impact of media globalization stem from Third World criticisms of the Western treatment of the media as instrumental in catalysing economic development. It was theorised that by facilitating the Third World access to Western values, Western ideas and technologies via the media, the traditional and backward societies of the Third World could be better prepared for the process of modernisation.

This perspective, based on conventional economic development theory, has come under serious criticism (see Gunar Myrdal, 1972) primarily for the failure by planners to consider social and cultural factors as significant to the process of economic development. (Hartmann et al., 1989: 20). As a number of critics have illustrated through detailed case studies, economic models and concepts appropriate to industrialized Western nations do not always fit in with the conditions prevailing in Asian and other

contexts. Moreover, traditional and largely rural societies have very complex institutions and social situations which play a decisive role in the process of development.

In their case study of the impact of the mass media on village life in India and the implications for development, Hartmann and his colleagues (1989) noted that in most aspects mass communications are far less important sources of information than interpersonal communication. Their study revealed that generally, the exposure of villagers to mass communications was fairly low, thereby underlining the fact that access to media is also not as widespread as imagined.

In the Asian cultural context, it is necessary to distinguish between audiences and to examine carefully their social surroundings and cultural practices in their specificity. It is theoretically flawed to assume that all cultures have the same access to media or that they have similar representation in the media or modes of media consumption. In India, for example, social structure and structural conflict are powerful agents for conditioning cultural attitudes and behaviour. Asian countries even between themselves are marked by great cultural, social and economic differences.

A micro-analysis of social structure and economic factors is thus relevant to the study of the global media impact on national cultures. The cultural imperialism position, much touted in the 1970s at the height of debates for a New World Information and Communication Order, did not undertake these detailed micro-social analysis and tended to see audiences in Western Europe and Asia in the same manner. At best they grouped Asian countries under the label "traditional societies", occasionally distinguishing the audiences between rural and urban. As Hartmann and his colleagues argue: "Too often such discussions treat the people as an amorphous mass; where distinction is made between social strata, it is usually between the city-based elite and the rural masses. This leads easily to the assumption of a harmony of interests among the rural population. There is little warrant for such an assumption in history or on general sociological grounds and ... our village studies illustrate well that village society is highly differentiated in terms of access to resources and by caste and other divisions, and that village society is characterised by competition for resources among different interest groups". (Hartmann et al., 1989: 256).

Hartmann and his colleagues note: "Information, ideas and values originating in the media acquire currency by a process of diffusion. This process is neither automatic nor indiscriminate; diffusion tends to follow the pattern of social interaction already structured by caste, class, age and sex. Information and ideas on

their own are seldom sufficient to alter these structures. The effects of communication should not be thought of only in terms of the spread of information. One of the more important effects is to gradually alter the cultural climate and to introduce new values in a slow, diffuse way". (Hartmann et al., 1989: 263).

Research in international communication has also been marked by a paradigm shift from the determination of media structure and content to an emphasis on the critical importance of audiences in the process of media consumption and interpretation. The user-centred communication model asserts the need to shift the focus of study from the unbalanced flow of information to the search for the meaning that a group of people assign to information. Audiences are perceived to be active 'interpreters' of media contents and messages and not as passive receivers who can be easily manipulated. The process of decoding media messages and the audience's capacity to generate their own meanings is considered here as a primordial factor for understanding the impact of media on culture (see Morley, 1986; Ang, 1985).

The same media contents are interpreted in very different ways by various audiences. (Liebes and Katz, 1993). Reception studies in fact have pointed out that media users tend to selectively assimilate media messages and that this process of selection and interpretation is operated through their own specific cultural perceptions and experience. Essentially, this school of thought or approach has stressed on the need to understand the experiences of an audience rather than just assuming the influence of media messages on them.

Studies have also revealed the existence of strong national and local cultural resistance to global or international media programming. (See Dowmunt, ed., 1993). Others have also demonstrated that global media have often helped to revitalize national and local cultures through a process of re-embedding (see Sahin and Aksoy, 1993; Mohammadi, 1990).

An emerging theory of 'glocalisation' is being adopted to explore the dynamic interplay between the global and the local. Originating from the notion of global localization, a strongly used business strategy in Japan, the glocalization theory provides "a viable alternative to the thesis of media imperialism ... (and) seems to point out a path to a nuanced understanding of the nature and process of media flow and cultural change in the contemporary world". (Wang, 1997: 19). This theoretical position refutes the dichotomies that have marked the understanding of the global and the local and perceives these two forces as being inextricably bound together. "Ethnic and cultural fragmentation and modernist

homogenization are not two arguments, two opposing views of what is happening in the world today, but two constitutive trends of global reality". (Friedman, 1990: 311).

The term 'glocalization' does not signify only the narrower notion of homogenization but captures the dialectical process which characterizes the tensions between the global and the local. One of the main proponents of the glocalization thesis, Roland Robertson explains : "The global is not in and of itself counterpoised to the local ...rather, what is often referred to as the local is essentially included within the global". (Robertson, 1995: 35). The concept of glocalization thus becomes useful to examine processes of globalization and localization which characterize the world today. Glocalization could be defined as "the dialectic moment of globalization and localization in social and cultural change". (Wang, 1997: 20).

What is clear with these emerging theoretical perspective is that cultural change has to be conceived of in terms of processes of dynamic integration and disintegration which occur not only at an inter-state level but transcend the state society unit (Featherstone, 1990: 1). Globalization essentially involves trans-national or trans-societal cultural processes which take different forms. Localization involves intra-societal or intra-national cultural processes which define and strengthen local cultural practices. Sometimes, these practices are those that have already existed over a long period of time but there are also instances where dormant local cultural forms and traditions are revived and redefined. Thus, the weakness of the cultural imperialism thesis lies in its conceptual neglect of the rich diversity of popular local discourses, codes and practices which are an integral part of the present cultural scenario.

The interconnections and communication between cultures is an integral part of the cultural map of the world today. Although there are areas on the world cultural map which still remain relatively free from external cultural influence and interaction, these areas constitute the exception rather than the rule. In this context, a useful theoretical framework for analyzing the process of media globalization and cultural change is the intercultural communication approach.

Beginning in the late 60s, intercultural communication has developed as a powerful framework for understanding the meeting and interaction between cultures (see Gessner and Schade, 1990; Banerjee, 1994). Cultural pluralism and interaction is an uncontested reality today and it is necessary to examine the nature and consequences of this interaction. The problem with

Inter-Cultural Comm Approach

the global/local terminology and conceptual models is that they tend to be too general for clarifying the articulations between different cultures. Even seen in their dialectic dynamics, they tend to polarize the cultural process in two extreme movements.

In recent years, global and local cultures have become so intertwined that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between them. Often, global cultural practices are appropriations or extractions of certain local cultural practices which have been decontextualized and spatialized. The same happens to local cultures which in their interaction with other cultural practices and forms, imbibe and inherit new forms which revitalize and modify them.

Historically, we have been used to conceiving culture territorially or confined to a definite geographic space. This territorially bound notion of culture becomes problematic because social relationships and interactions, which constitute the foundations of any culture, are becoming more and more spatialized and transnational. "The less social relationships are confined within territorial boundaries, the less so is also culture; and in our time especially, we can contrast in gross terms those cultures which are territorially defined (in terms of nations, regions, or localities) with those which are carried as collective structures of meaning by networks more extended in space, transnational or even global". (Hannerz, 1990: 239).

It is important to understand that if there is an acceleration and multiplication of contacts and exchanges between cultures, the same process is also occurring within the boundaries of any given culture. The explosion of the nation-state as the strict boundary of a culture has given rise not only to trans-national cultural forms and processes but also to local cultural forms which seem to be asserting themselves and seeking for their soul and identity. It is this rapid diversification and emergence of new cultural spaces and their interaction which has led to the ambivalence of cultural processes and their analysis.

The intercultural communication approach or perspective is useful because it permits us to look into the interaction between cultures and examine the dynamic processes and forms that are created through this interaction. Using this theoretical perspective, it is possible to conceptualize the contemporary cultural scenario as an interplay between two major trends or processes. On the one hand, there is a rapid progression all over the world of a certain number of common cultural practices. These practices, which I refer to as the "transcultural" dimension of culture, are relatively independent from the culture to which one belongs or to one's native culture and comprises leisure activities, media consumption, eating habits, dressing habits, etc.

The term 'transcultural' has also been called 'transnational' culture or 'third' culture by some theorists. On the other hand, there is an increasing embedding of local and singular cultural practices which are linked to historical processes and the inculcation of values and codes, which are by definition difficult to share by those who have not imbibed them as their cultural heritage. I refer to these practices or this dimension of culture as "patrimonial" culture (Banerjee, 1994).

The process of globalization in its larger sense can be conceived as the dynamic articulation between the transcultural and the patrimonial. Everywhere in the world, this articulation is being experienced and witnessed and in order to comprehend the phenomenon of media globalization and its impact on culture(s), it is crucial to examine these interconnections, interactions and articulations. The international media landscape clearly supports this theoretical position and, unlike what was believed for a long period of time, global media players and their channels and products have not been able to ignore these articulations. The regionalisation of satellite TV channels in the Asian context has proved once again that globalization does not entail a homogenization of cultures. In fact, it is the satellite TV channels (for example, STAR TV) which have had to adapt their programmes and strategies to the various national audiences' needs, expectations and specificities.

While a certain number of transcultural trends have certainly emerged in Asian societies and TV programs such as "Baywatch" have captured a certain part of the Asian audience, cultural specificity, whether it be at the local or national levels, has not disappeared. As a number of micro-social analysis and various studies have indicated (Hartmann et al., 1989; Dowmunt, ed., 1993; Banerjee, 1994), transnational media have been forced to change their initial strategies which were based exclusively on foreign programming and content in order to use local material, programming and content more adapted to specific national or local cultural audiences. Most transnational television broadcasters and media channels have in fact been forced to take into account both the specificities of national audiences as well as the emergence of transcultural trends and forms.

In today's process of time/space compression and human movement, it is difficult to determine the future of national cultures. The cultural house is thus open and we are being somewhat forced to become cultural travellers, living on different floors at different times. However, these changes have underlined more than ever before, the importance of national cultural and

media policy. Cultural change does not occur without cultural conflict. Every culture seems threatened, not necessarily for its survival, but for finding a new synthesis and identity in this moment of change. Once exposed to foreign cultures and media contents, national and local cultural spaces are forced to question themselves and perform some soul searching. In this situation, the means of expression available to a culture to seek itself and disseminate its forms and essence becomes crucial. This, especially at a time when the traditional means and modes of cultural appropriation and constitution have undergone a significant decline. The family, school, religion as well as other means of socialisation are no longer what they used to be : guardians of practices and values, promoters and protectors of long established codes and symbols. The turn towards the media as a vital component of cultural continuity and development is inevitable especially in the dawn of the digital age.

It is here that cultural and media policy intervenes. The objective of such a policy should be clear and simple : to let the winds of all the cultures blow freely across the cultural house, without dimming out the lights on any of the the floors. Policy in these areas should consist of "a concerted effort, based on a clearly defined national cultural policy to disseminate at the national level the local, indigeneous, authentic cultural values, so that the external values which inevitably filter into the society through the pervasive mass media will come to enrich and supplement the cultural heritage rather than supplant or subvert them with all their alienating consequences". (Ansah, 1988: 10).

Faced with competition from transnational media, most Asian broadcasters and policy makers have reacted and taken hasty measures to combat or compete with these powerful media operators. They have neither the means nor the technological know-how to indulge in such competition and the result has often been a systematic commercialization of public service broadcasting and a degeneration of the quality of its services. Instead of attracting audiences with low-quality, easy-to-digest commercial fare, they should have opted for developing national and local programming. The strength of public service broadcasters in most countries lie in their access to and knowledge of local and national cultural practices, traditions and cultural forms. It is here that they can make a significant contribution and difference.

Unfortunately, in most Asian countries, public service media have been used by governments as tools for propaganda and self-promotion. Cultural policy also has been short-sighted and has generally been used to promote the interests of dominant classes and dominant cultural groups. This has had a negative effect on the growth and development of all the local and minority cultures

which are an integral part of what has come to constitute national cultures. In many Asian nations, the constitution of a national culture has been achieved through the suppression of local cultures and this has led to the impoverishment of national culture as a whole. The enrichment of a national culture can only be achieved by the promotion and development of all its diverse cultural constituents.

The principal objective of regulatory authorities and policy makers at the national or local levels should be to boost and dynamically activate the national and local content of programming industries. Regulation, restriction and a policy of protection are certainly not the most effective means for the long-term development of national cultural industries. It has been observed in a number of studies that in general, audiences prefer national or local programming to foreign content. This, however, does not imply that public service media can continue to provide audiences with uninteresting and irrelevant programming. This has in fact been the principal weakness of most public service broadcasters who have contented themselves in transmitting mediocre and often trivial television programs.

In the present context where audiences have the choice not only between a variety of national or local channels but also a number of transnational or foreign television programs (which themselves are increasingly turning towards the regionalization of their programs) public service broadcasters are being forced to question their approach and strategies and wake up from their stupor. Some national broadcasters have resorted to protective and regulatory measures to get some respite, but this can only be a short-term solution. Others have adopted the commercial stance and are trying to take advantage of their established experience of local markets to keep the transnational broadcasters at bay. Only a few public service broadcasters have been able to make the right diagnosis of the problem and strive to develop national cultural industries and are providing audiences with interesting local cultural programming. The considerable success of *Doordarshan*, the public service broadcaster in India, is an interesting example of this approach (Banerjee, 1996).

The process of globalization can only be meaningful if it enriches national and local cultures. 'Patrimonial' cultures should blossom and flourish while transcultural practices and forms of expression develop. As I have argued, this process will not be automatic or natural and needs a significant effort on the part of national cultural industries and governments. Cultures resist, but some cultures have also perished in the evolutionary march of human society. The house of culture will stand the test of time, but in what form and in what structure is a question which will

provide theorists with mystical puzzles and questions for a long time to come.

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