

# Globalization of Culture through the Media

Marwan M. Kraidy

University of Pennsylvania, [kraidy@asc.upenn.edu](mailto:kraidy@asc.upenn.edu), 2002

The received view about the globalization of culture is one where the entire world has been molded in the image of Western, mainly American, culture. In popular and professional discourses alike, the popularity of Big Macs, Baywatch, and MTV are touted as unmistakable signs of the fulfillment of Marshall McLuhan's prophecy of the Global Village. The globalization of culture is often chiefly imputed to international mass media. After all, contemporary media technologies such as satellite television and the Internet have created a steady flow of transnational images that connect audiences worldwide. Without global media, according to the conventional wisdom, how would teenagers in India, Turkey, and Argentina embrace a Western lifestyle of Nike shoes, Coca-Cola, and rock music? Hence, the putatively strong influence of the mass media on the globalization of culture.

The role of the mass media in the globalization of culture is a contested issue in international communication theory and research. Early theories of media influence, commonly referred to as "magic bullet" or "hypodermic needle" theories, believed that the mass media had powerful effects over audiences. Since then, the debate about media influence has undergone an ebb and flow that has prevented any resolution or agreement among researchers as to the level, scope, and implications of media influence. Nevertheless, key theoretical formulations in international communication clung to a belief in powerful media effects on cultures and communities. At the same time, a body of literature questioning the scope and level of influence of transnational media has emerged. Whereas some scholars within that tradition questioned cultural imperialism without providing conceptual alternatives, others have drawn on an interdisciplinary literature from across the social sciences and humanities to develop theoretical alternatives to cultural imperialism.

## Cultural Imperialism and the Global Media Debate

In international communication theory and research, cultural imperialism theory argued that audiences across the globe are heavily affected by media messages emanating from the Western industrialized countries. Although there are minor differences between "media imperialism" and "cultural imperialism," most of the literature in international communication treats the former as a category of the latter. Grounded in an understanding of media as cultural industries, cultural imperialism is firmly rooted in a political-economy perspective on international communication. As a school of thought, political economy focuses on material issues such as capital, infrastructure, and political control as key determinants of international communication processes and effects.

In the early stage of cultural imperialism, researchers focused their efforts mostly on nation-states as primary actors in international relations. They imputed rich, industrialized, and Western nation-states with intentions and actions by which they

export their cultural products and impose their sociocultural values on poorer and weaker nations in the developing world. This argument was supported by a number of studies demonstrating that the flow of news and entertainment was biased in favor of industrialized countries. This bias was clear both in terms of quantity, because most media flows were exported by Western countries and imported by developing nations, and in terms of quality, because developing nations received scant and prejudicial coverage in Western media.

These concerns led to the rise of the New World Information Order (NWIO) debate, later known as the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) debate. Although the debate at first was concerned with news flows between the north and the south, it soon evolved to include all international media flows. This was due to the fact that inequality existed in news and entertainment programs alike, and to the advent of then-new media technologies such as communication satellites, which made the international media landscape more complex and therefore widened the scope of the debate about international flows.

The global media debate was launched during the 1973 General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in Nairobi, Kenya. As a specialized agency of the United Nations, the mission of UNESCO includes issues of communication and culture. During the conference, strong differences arose between Western industrialized nations and developing countries. Led by the United States, the first group insisted on the "free flow of information" doctrine, advocating "free trade" in information and media programs without any restrictions. The second group, concerned by the lack of balance in international media flows, accused Western countries of invoking the free flow of information ideology to justify their economic and cultural domination. They argued instead for a "free and balanced flow" of information. The chasm between the two groups was too wide to be reconciled. This eventually was one of the major reasons given for withdrawal from UNESCO by the United States and the United Kingdom-which resulted in the de facto fall of the global media debate.

A second stage of research identified with cultural imperialism has been associated with calls to revive the New World Information and Communication Order debate. What differentiates this line of research from earlier cultural imperialism formulations is its emphasis on the commercialization of the sphere of culture. Research into this area had been a hallmark of cultural imperialism research, but now there is a deliberate focus on transnational corporations as actors, as opposed to nation-states, and on transnational capital flows, as opposed to image flows. Obviously, it is hard to separate the power of transnational corporations from that of nation-states, and it is difficult to distinguish clearly between capital flows and media flows. Therefore, the evolution of the debate is mainly a redirection of emphasis rather than a paradigm shift.

It has become fashionable in some international communication circles to dismiss cultural imperialism as a monolithic theory that is lacking subtlety and increasingly questioned by empirical research. Cultural imperialism does have some weaknesses, but it also continues to be useful. Perhaps the most important contribution of cultural

imperialism is the argument that international communication flows, processes, and effects are permeated by power. Nevertheless, it seems that the concept of globalization has in some ways replaced cultural imperialism as the main conceptual umbrella under which much research and theorizing in international communication have been conducted.

## Media, Globalization, and Hybridization

Several reasons explain the analytical shift from cultural imperialism to globalization. First, the end of the Cold War as a global framework for ideological, geopolitical, and economic competition calls for a rethinking of the analytical categories and paradigms of thought. By giving rise to the United States as sole superpower and at the same time making the world more fragmented, the end of the Cold War ushered in an era of complexity between global forces of cohesion and local reactions of dispersal. In this complex era, the nation-state is no longer the sole or dominant player, since transnational transactions occur on subnational, national, and supranational levels. Conceptually, globalization appears to capture this complexity better than cultural



imperialism. Second, according to John Tomlinson (1991), globalization replaced cultural imperialism because it conveys a process with less coherence and direction, which will weaken the cultural unity of all nation-states, not only those in the developing world. Finally, globalization has emerged as a key perspective across the humanities and social sciences, a current undoubtedly affecting the discipline of communication.

*A McDonalds advertisement from the 2000 Beijing Chaoyang International Business Festival illustrates how global that particular aspect of Western culture has become. During its first ten years in China (1990 to 2000), the food chain expanded to include 270 stores in 50 Chinese cities. (Reuters NewMedia Inc./Corbis)*

In fact, the globalization of culture has become a conceptual magnet attracting research and theorizing efforts from a variety of disciplines and interdisciplinary formations such as anthropology, comparative literature, cultural studies, communication and media studies, geography, and sociology. International communication has been an active interlocutor in this debate because media and information technologies play an important role in the process of globalization. Although the media are undeniably one of the engines of cultural globalization, the size and intensity of the effect of the media on the globalization of culture is a contested issue revolving around the following question: Did the mass media trigger and create the globalization of culture? Or is the globalization of culture an old phenomenon that has only been intensified and made more obvious with the advent of transnational media technologies? Like the age-old question about whether the egg came before the chicken or vice versa, the question

about the relationship between media and the globalization of culture is difficult to answer.

One perspective on the globalization of culture, somewhat reminiscent of cultural imperialism in terms of the nature of the effect of media on culture, but somewhat different in its conceptualization of the issue, is the view that the media contribute to the homogenization of cultural differences across the planet. This view dominates conventional wisdom perspectives on cultural globalization conjuring up images of Planet Hollywood and the MTV generation. One of the most visible proponents of this perspective is political scientist Benjamin Barber, who formulated his theory about the globalization of culture in the book *Jihad vs. McWorld* (1996). The subtitle, "How Globalism and Tribalism Are Reshaping the World," betrays Barber's reliance on a binary opposition between the forces of modernity and liberal democracy with tradition and autocracy.

Although Barber rightly points to transnational capitalism as the driving engine that brings Jihad and McWorld in contact and motivates their action, his model has two limitations. First, it is based on a binary opposition between Jihad, what he refers to as ethnic and religious tribalism, and McWorld, the capital-driven West. Barber (1996, p. 157) seemingly attempts to go beyond this binary opposition in a chapter titled "Jihad Via McWorld," in which he argues that Jihad stands in "less of a stark opposition than a subtle counterpoint." However, the evidence offered in most of the book supports an oppositional rather than a contrapuntal perspective on the globalization of culture. The second limitation of Barber's book is that he privileges the global over the local, because, according to him, globalization rules via transnational capitalism. "[T]o think that globalization and indigenization are entirely coequal forces that put Jihad and McWorld on an equal footing is to vastly underestimate the force of the new planetary markets .... It's no contest" (p. 12). Although it would be naive to argue that the local defeats the global, Barber's argument does not take into account the dynamic and resilient nature of cultures and their ability to negotiate foreign imports.

Another perspective on globalization is cultural hybridity or hybridization. This view privileges an understanding of the interface of globalization and localization as a dynamic process and hybrid product of mixed traditions and cultural forms. As such, this perspective does not give prominence to globalization as a homogenizing force, nor does it believe in localization as a resistive process opposed to globalization. Rather, hybridization advocates an emphasis on processes of mediation that it views as central to cultural globalization. The concept of hybridization is the product of interdisciplinary work mostly based in intellectual projects such as post colonialism, cultural studies, and performance studies. Hybridization has been used in communication and media studies and appears to be a productive theoretical orientation as researchers in international media studies attempt to grasp the complex subtleties of the globalization of culture.

One of the most influential voices in the debate about cultural hybridity is Argentinean-Mexican cultural critic Nestor Garcia-Candini. In his book *Hybrid Cultures* (1995), Garcia-Candini advocates a theoretical understanding of Latin American nations as

hybrid cultures. His analysis is both broad and incisive, covering a variety of cultural processes and institutions such as museums, television, film, universities, political cartoons, graffiti, and visual arts. According to Garcia-Candini, there are three main features of cultural hybridity. The first feature consists of mixing previously separate cultural systems, such as mixing the elite art of opera with popular music. The second feature of hybridity is the deterritorialization of cultural processes from their original physical environment to new and foreign contexts. Third, cultural hybridity entails impure cultural genres that are formed out of the mixture of several cultural domains. An example of these impure genres is when artisans in rural Mexico weave tapestries of masterpieces of European painters such as Joan Mira and Henri Matisse, mixing high art and folk artisanship into an impure genre.

In media and communication research, the main question is "Have transnational media made cultures across the globe hybrid by bringing into their midst foreign cultural elements, or have cultures always been to some extent hybrid, meaning that transnational mass media only strengthened an already-existing condition?" There is no obvious or final answer to that question, because there is not enough empirical research about media and hybridity and because of the theoretical complexity of the issue. What does exist in terms of theoretical understanding and research results points to a middle ground. This position acknowledges that cultures have been in contact for a long time through warfare, trade, migration, and slavery. Therefore, a degree of hybridization in all cultures can be assumed. At the same time, this middle ground also recognizes that global media and information technologies have substantially increased contacts between cultures, both in terms of intensity and of the speed with which these contacts occur. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that transnational mass media intensify the hybridity that is already in existence in cultures across the globe. Consequently, the globalization of culture through the media is not a process of complete homogenization, but rather one where cohesion and fragmentation coexist.