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Media Globalization through Localization

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In recent years we have come to witness interesting, albeit somewhat puzzling, developments in the world of media communications: the transnationalization of national, and even local, television in several parts of the world, local appeal as a success formula for television but not for cinema, the digitalization and convergence of both old and new information and communication technologies (ICT), and media globalization and localization as concurring phenomena (see for a recent account Wang, Servaes & Goonasekera, 2000).

These developments have painted a communications landscape that is quite different from what we were familiar with. They pointed to new directions for changes and exposed significant inadequacies in the framework of analysis that was employed in the past. It is only with a good look at the industry, the audience, the product and the policies that we may be able to demystify some of the clouds surrounding media globalization and to assess its impacts.

What is New?

As an idea, globalization is not a product of the 1990s, or even the 20th century, as some researchers have pointed out (Hall, 1995;
Gardels, 1997). Held, McGrew, Goldblatt & Perraton (1999:414) conclude that “globalization is neither a wholly novel, nor primarily modern, social phenomenon. Its form has changed over time and across the key domains of human interaction, from the political to the ecological. Moreover ... globalization as a historical process cannot be characterized by an evolutionary logic or an emergent telos”.

Over the years the word has increasingly been used to refer to a process through which the entire human population is bonded into a “single system” (Wallerstein, 1990, 1997), a “single society” (Albrow, 1990), or “the structuration of world as a whole,” as defined by Robertson (1990). This “single system,” then forms the framework for individual activities and nation-state operations. It is conceived both as a journey and a destination—with arrival at the globalized state a finality (Giddens, 1990; Featherstone, 1990; Ferguson, 1992) which constitutes a unit of analysis in its own right.

This vision of an era of global communications seems especially pertinent when changes in other spheres of human societies are taken into consideration. The 1990s, with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the explosive growth of the World Wide Web as preludes, have been marked by the collapse of the physical, virtual and institutional barriers which had kept people apart over the previous several decades. The ever closer trade relationships among nation-states, the growing number of transnational corporations, ICTs, internet and discussions on e-commerce and e-governance, the emergence of global health and environmental issues and a common style of consumption of material and cultural products have all helped to bring about what is described as the “globalization” of our world. In other words, this perspective
considered globalization as the widening, deepening and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness in all aspects of contemporary social life.

**Globalists, Traditionalists or Transformationalists?**

But beyond a general awareness and agreement of this global interconnectedness, there is substantial disagreement as to how globalization is best conceptualized, how one should think about its causal dynamics, how one should characterize its structural, socio-economic consequences, and which implications it has on state power and governance. This debate, which has been summarised in a number of books edited by Held and others (1999, 2000), has developed three different theses on globalization: a (hyper)globalist perspective, a sceptical or traditionalist perspective, and, a transformationalist perspective.

These perspectives could be summarised as follows (Cochrane & Pain, 2000:22-23):

1. **Globalists** see globalization as an inevitable development which cannot be resisted or significantly influenced by human intervention, particularly through traditional political institutions, such as nation-states.

2. **Traditionalists** argue that the significance of globalization as a new phase has been exaggerated. They believe that most economic and social activity is regional, rather than global, and still see a significant role for nation-states.

3. **Transformationalists** believe that globalization represents a significant shift, but question the inevitability of its impacts. They argue that there is still significant scope for national, local and other agencies.
The globalists could be divided in optimists and pessimists. The optimists, with neoliberal arguments, welcome the triumph of individual autonomy, and the market principle over state power. They emphasize the benefits of new technologies, global communications and increased cultural contacts. Neo-Marxists tend to be more pessimistic in their globalist discourse. They emphasize the dominance of major economic and political interests and point mainly to the uneven consequences of globalization. However, both groups share the belief that globalization is primarily an economic phenomenon.

Traditionalists believe that globalization is a myth and emphasize continuities between the past and present. There is nothing really new. Whatever the driving forces for globalization, they contend that the North-South “gaps” increase. All we are witnessing is simply a continuation and progression of evolutionary change.

The transformationalists can be found somewhere in-between. They recognize the complexity of the phenomena and try to move beyond the sometimes arid debate between the globalists and the traditionalists.

Our interpretation of this classification is that the globalist and the traditionalist perspectives are both very extreme in their views. The globalists advocate that the world changes towards a more homogenous global culture and towards all kinds of new global structures. The traditionalists take the other extreme stance and advocate that nothing really revolutionary is happening. Still in our opinion, the transformationalistic perspective is not so much a compromise between the two as it is a less extreme and more modest interpretation of what is happening. Transformationalists
argue that the world does go through changes—in a sense as she has always gone through changes—but they do believe that some of these changes form a conglomerate of changes that does account for something to be interpreted as new.

Elsewhere, Lie (1998) made an inventory of such a conglomerate of changes in a cultural atmosphere and identified the following components: (1) the interrelated processes of the emergence of interdisciplinarity, (2) the increasing role of the power of culture, (3) the birth of a new form of modernization, (4) the changing role of the nation-state, and, (5) the emerging attempts to address the link between the global and the local. The total conglomerate of changes accounts for something new, but especially the last issue of linking the global with the local was identified as a central point of change. But how can this conglomerate of global changes be linked to development and political-economic and social change at local levels and from within local levels?

**Homogenization, Polarization, or Hybridization?**

This more general typology can also be found at the communications and culture level. The globalist perspective assumes a unified, homogeneous global culture. From a neo-Marxist and functionalist point of view (Wallerstein, 1990; Chew & Denemark, 1996; Hirst & Thompson, 1996), globalization, a product of capitalists’ drive to expand markets and maximize profits, only serves to perpetuate the hegemony of the few Western powers. The world of communications has become a perfect stage for the workings of capitalism. Once a single system, there will be no longer a need for every nation to maintain its own communications industry (Mittelman, 1996).
Others, especially those with a sociology and cultural studies background (Featherstone, 1995; Hall, 1992; Robertson, 1992; Said, 1993; Waters, 1995), have emphasized the plurality of cultural development as a result of the anti-colonialism movement. Instead of losing one’s “sense of place” because of increasing global influences, the importance of locality was underlined in the constructing and deconstructing, embedding and disembedding of social forces.

As pointed out by Featherstone (1995:6), globalization suggests simultaneously two views of culture. The first, taking a monoculturalist point of view, treats globalization as the “extension outward of a particular culture to its limits, the globe,” through a process of conquest, homogenization and unification brought about by the consumption of the same cultural and material products. The second one, adopting a multiculturalist stand, perceived globalization as the “compression of cultures.”

The monoculturalists’ interpretation of globalization is often noted for its resemblance to the modernization and media imperialism theories (Servaes, 1999). Both focused on the economic and technological forces in change, and suggested a one-way unilinear impact of Western—or American to be specific—media on their audiences.

Economic incentives and technological developments have also been believed to be the major driving forces for globalization (Featherstone, 1995:7; Robertson, 1990:22). For the communications industry, the purported globalization process was fueled by yet another factor: policy deregulation. Although many would argue that nation-states are still capable of keeping things under control, this control is undeniably much less than it used to be (Servaes & Wang, 1997; Wang, 1997).
Globalization, Localization or Something Else?

While the meaning of globalization remains ambiguous, “media globalization” or “global media” have quickly become cliches in communications studies. Two questions can be raised about the use of such terms, however. First, what is meant by a globalized communications industry, and secondly, can we assume that a genuine globalization of the industry has already taken place? More precisely, what is the direction of changes that we can observe now—globalization, localization, or something else?

All too frequently when the term “global” is used in conjunction with the communications media or industry, it refers primarily to the extent of coverage, with the popularity of satellite television and computer networks serving as evidence of the globalization of communications.

Indeed never before in human history has a single television channel been available in over 150 nations, nor has there been any communications medium which managed to attract hundreds of million of users. However, as Ferguson has pointed out, the linkages brought about by the so-called globalization process are largely confined to OECD and G7 member countries, which constitute one-third of the world population. And even when a medium, e.g., CNN, can put over 150 countries on its map, the rate of penetration and actual consumption can present rather a different picture. As Street (1997:77) has said, the fact that a product is available everywhere is no guarantee that it achieves the same level of popularity, let alone acquires the same significance, meaning or response (Featherstone, 1990:10). It is no secret that CNN’s audiences normally account for only a small fragment of a nation’s population.
However, the meaning of a globalized industry would be seriously distorted if other dimensions were left out of the discussion. These dimensions, including the dynamics of the market, modes of production, the contents and messages transmitted, are closely related to the perception of the role and function of communications in the globalization process, the direction of change in the industry, and ultimately, the cultural images presented by the theories of globalization.

There is no denying that competitive pricing is a major reason for the availability of American and Japanese programs in most parts of the world. However if prices were the single most important factor at work, those companies which produce the cheapest and most attractive products, with the most extensive global distribution networks and best promotional skills would have become the sole suppliers for the global market, leaving very little to the smaller, less competitive national and local players.

To critical theorists, communications media can be viewed as industries which commercialize and standardize the production of culture (Kellner, 1989). This definition highlights an important property of the media: a business that produces, distributes and sells marketable products. But the recognition of this property is not to overlook the media’s other equally important characteristic: its being cultural.

Cultural products, more than any others, reflect the cultural values of their producers and the social reality in which they were produced. Viewing a television program or listening to the radio, therefore, cannot be seen as a simple act of consumption; these acts involve a rather complex process of decoding cultural meanings. Although competing prices may contribute to the wide availability of certain cultural products, the purchase of cultural
products differs from the purchase of typical consumer goods in that considerations such as product quality may bear little significance in the decision to watch, or not to watch, a television program.

The cultural products market, therefore, does not operate on economic forces alone. Following a similar logic, communications technologies, the other purported major force for globalization, also have their blind spots in explaining all changes—a conclusion which we can derive, without too much difficulty, from the discussion of the significance of “place” and “local cultures” in the literature on globalization.

Some neo-Marxists view globalization as a process where the feeling of belonging is no longer connected to different places; they argue that the sense of belonging is to one single global society. Therefore it is fair to say that the local culture and the local “place” is still more important to most people than the global. “Even if cultural globalization, as Giddens pointed out, is an important part of globalization and even if local culture is constantly challenged, there are few signs of one homogenous global culture” (Lie, 1998:144).

Therefore, most scholars today see globalization as interlinked with localization. But although scholars agree that globalization and localization are linked, sometimes referred to as glocalization, there still remains a lot of uncertainty and discussion around the question on how these two concepts are linked.

Viundal (2000:6) describes this linkage by using the analogy of a tree: “As the tree grows stretches out and widens its horizon, its roots at the other end also need to grow stronger. In my case, going to Australia, stretching out my branches, as a way of
globalising, my awareness of my cultural background and roots as a Norwegian have at the same time grown stronger, as a sign of localising. Consciously or unconsciously my culture might have been challenged or changed due to my exposure to other cultures, but in this process my Norwegianness also tends to be confirmed".

This coincides with what Giddens (1995) pointed out about human nature. He suggested that humans want, or maybe need, a place to belong to, but that humans at the same time want to reach out to what is found outside this "place".

**Cultural Identity**

What globalization really is and what it means to human beings with regard to (cultural, national, ethnic ...) identity is a matter of discussion. Thomas Eriksen (1993:150) starts from the assumption that identity is locally constructed, and that "people still live in places". This indicates that the connected world is a stage where people with different cultures and identities meet.

Therefore, cultural identity has become a crucial concept in the debate on globalization. If we adopt Lull’s (1995:66) definition of culture—"a particular way of life shaped by values, traditions, beliefs, material objects and territory"—and Anderson’s (1983) idea of imagined communities, we have to accept culture and identity are an evolving process positioning the individual as an active participant in the consumption of information. The subconscious references and choices that we make on a daily basis that attach meaning to the information we receive, which is related to our concept of self and other. This view emphasizes the exchange of meaning taking place in the local consumption of global messages. As Katz (1980) notes, context and the individual reading of the message become the focus with a shift from "what
the media do to the people to what the people do to the media.”
Globalization is thus restricted to describing the expansion and coverage of the means of communication, not its consumption.

**For Example: Pokemon**

In the case of Pokemon, aspects of Japanese culture could be transmitted to other countries where the game has been introduced. However, cultural transmission is seldom prominent in such exchanges. Pokemon has undergone a cleansing of its cultural aspects to make the game more appealing (marketable) to its overseas recipients, an attempt to hide its “Japan-ness”. “We tried not to have violence or sexual discrimination or religious scenes in the U.S.,” says Kubo of Kubo Publishing (on the Pokemon website). “Some graphic sequences involving punching were taken out. The names of the characters and monsters were westernised.” The production of popular culture and cultural mixing makes the original source of consumer goods irrelevant (Iwabuchi, 2000).

This demonstrates the trend of globalization through localization. The global market is an aggregation of local markets and maximization of market share is obtained by penetrating as many local markets as possible. This is done by the merger of, or cooperation among, transnational corporations of different countries of origin (Iwabuchi, 2000). Local subsidiaries often specialize in giving transnational products a “local” feel.

Thus, though the potential for cultural enrichment through globalization is great, in reality most products are stripped of their cultural values in order to make the product more marketable. This “cultural striptease” makes products in potential more appealing to more cultures. But, this does not necessarily mean that the product is simplified. The product is differently encoded by the
producer (or better sub-producer) and is encoded in such a way that it becomes more multi-cultural interpretable. It offers the possibility for multi-cultural interpretations. Such a process leads of course to the loss of national or cultural identity of the original product, and in this way simplifies processes of intercultural communication. But, taking the other end of the communication process into consideration, it does not mean that the phenomena is part of a homogenous world wide pop culture. The active process of cultural localization includes a process of interpretation that accounts for local cultural embedding of multi-cultural products.

Advertising is everywhere, cultivating particular attitudes to problems or creating problems where none existed previously (Young, 1990:2). When advertising is aimed at children, the emotional and irrational drives of young children can be exploited. Minors are not capable of defending themselves against such an onslaught. In this case, the advertiser is seen as the seducer and the child is cast in the role of the innocent (ibid:18).

In the case of Pokemon advertising, transnational communication could be considered exploitative. Pokemon has steadily maintained its popularity through its television series and movies. This is especially true of the after-show section of its TV series called ‘Who’s that Pokemon?’ which is used to advertise new monsters for children to add in their collection.

Even in the case of the official Pokemon web site, it is used for advertise new products and as a place for children to purchase or auction Pokemon products.

Pokemon is the latest in a series of fad toy preferences for children. These fads are the result of transnational communication through advertising, the linking of cultures through globalization,
the penetration of local markets through localization, and the targeting of children by advertising. These fad toy preferences probably have little long-term effects on culture or society. Though many problems have arisen around the Pokemon craze, these are generally viewed as symptoms of general cultural troubles, not the cause.

**Future Research Directions**

The theories of globalization have been challenged, criticized and modified, but few would deny that they do offer a fertile ground for research. In Lie and Servaes (2000) we adopted a convergent and integrated approach in studying the complex and intricate relations between globalization, consumption and identity. Such an approach would allow problems to converge at key crossings or nodal points. Researchers then are rid of the burden of studying linear processes in totality, e.g., production and consumption of global products, and instead are allowed to focus on the nodal points where processes intersect.

Several such nodal points were identified, including production, regulation, representation, consumption, action and local points of entry into the communications flow. The nodal points approach highlights the richness of globalization as an area of research, however it is also important to note that all these dimensions do rest on certain axial principles. They do point out important features of the world cultural industries and converge on several points.

In this purported era of global communications, culture remains an important factor, either facilitating the transnationalization of national or local cultural industries, or impeding further growth of global media. Global media may be largest in terms of coverage,
however their size shrinks significantly if measured in terms of viewing rate. In many regions of the world the most important development in the communications industry has not been the further dominance of global media, but the emerging of cultural-linguistic media (mainly television) markets. As the influence of transnational television tends to rest on a quite superficial level of cultures; no global culture or global identity—not in the fullest sense of the words—has been fostered.

As Hall indicated, it is human nature to want a place to which one feels he or she belongs; however, it is perhaps also human nature to want to reach out to the strange unknown world outside of this “place.” Audiences may prefer home programs, but these are not all they watch. While some national programs are successful because of their distinct cultural characteristics, others may achieve similar success by promoting foreign values. It is the capitalist nature of the industry that made American products available everywhere. But this capitalist character failed to make them accepted everywhere.

It is difficult still to determine if communications has helped to offer a “place,” as suggested by Featherstone, where cultures meet and clash, or has in fact enhanced the cultural context in which individuals find the “place” that they feel attached to. Perhaps a closer analysis will show that here again, communications serves as a double-edged sword; and which of the two roles becomes more prominent will be extremely variable, from situation to situation.

The danger here is treating culture and language as another set of powerful, determining factors in communications studies, thus undermining the importance of others. In fact, no single factor, nor a group of factors, can fully explain what has, is, or will, take
place. Globalization may be inadequate to describe the current process of change, but neither would localization nor regionalization suffice. As co-production further blurs distinctions between the global and the local, it is important to note that the two are dialectically opposed conceptually, but not necessarily in reality.

During a dynamic process of change, it is the interaction of factors that brings about endless possibilities.

References


