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Global Media Corporations and the Nation-state: Balancing Politico-economic and Socio-cultural Globalization

Amos Owen Thomas

Socio-cultural change is an invariable concomitant of the politico-economic globalization being embraced by most countries. Yet the interrelated roles of global media corporations and nation-states in the process of globalization have been relatively untouched in global business research. This article examines the role of the global media industry as a cultural change-agent, even a source of cultural imperialism. Drawing on a critical analysis of literature from other social science disciplines, this article argues that media corporations are not solely responsible for the socio-cultural upheaval that accompanies politico-economic globalization. There is also insufficient evidence for the homogenization or Westernization of cultures via the media. Still, given the sensitivity of nation-states to national culture, this article concludes that the impact of the convergent media, information and communications industry needs to analyzed in the wider context of the globalization of their politico-economic and socio-cultural environments.

Awareness of the interdependence of nations and societies within a world system is reflected in the widespread use of the term 'globalization' in business circles currently. With the relentless integration of nation-states into a global capitalist economy, the growing perception of global shrinkage through convergent communications technologies, and the seeming spread of Western culture via the mass media, the concept of globalization gained mileage in the late twentieth century. Yet the concept remains unclear because both the academic use of the term across different disciplines and the popular usage of the term in various professional fields have resulted in a plurality of meanings, albeit related. Globalization has been conceived in contemporary academic literature generally as a process of linking individuals and organizations which transcends the boundaries of the system of nation-states that comprise the manifest world politico-economic system. Yet it can also be conceived as a socio-cultural process through which events in one end of the world have consequences for individuals and communities in another through the mediation of convergent communications technologies.

Thus socio-cultural change appears to be an invariable concomitant of politico-economic globalization embraced by most countries. This article begins with an examination of the unique sensitivity of governments towards the global media industry as cultural change-agents by drawing on a critical analysis of literature from other social science disciplines, before suggesting ways in which both parties might be researched as collaborators, rather than adversaries.

Politico-economic Integration

Contemporary thinkers have grappled with the issue of what the lynch-pins of economic and political globalization today are, with varying degrees of clarity and succinctness. Referring to the three major ideologies as economic nationalism, liberalism and Marxism, Gilpin (1987: 25–88) traces all controversies of political economy to their differing conceptions of the relationships between state, society and market. Coming from an international relations perspective, he also identifies a liberal hegemonic power, namely the US, as the catalyst for a somewhat democratic world order and global marketplace which encourages interchange and interdependence. Similarly, Giddens (1990: 70–95) conceives of globalization as arising out of the differentiated interaction of four factors: capitalism, the interstate system, militarism and industrialism. For him, the process is a natural outgrowth of modernization when traditional social institutions are superseded by global ones. Achieved through better communications technologies, this phenomenon results in a greater sense of world citizenry or of interdependence on a global basis among individuals.

McGrew (1992: 65–66) sketches three paradigms in the analysis of globalization: realism/neo-realism, liberal pluralism and neo-Marxism. Realism/neo-realism sees nation-states as still the dominant actors, and sees order as attained by balance of power, largely military, between hegemonic states. Liberal pluralism acknowledges the rise of multinational corporations, international organizations and other forms of transnational relations or movements, and the decline of nation-states as primary actors. It considers technological and economic interdependence to be aiding globalization, with communications especially responsible for the erosion of national boundaries. Neo-Marxism perceives the capitalist world system as dominant and thus constraining nation-states, multinational corporations (MNCs) and other transnational organizations to act in the interests of the dominant capitalist classes. For McGrew, globalization is essentially economic integration into the capitalist system of global production and exchange.

According to Amin (1982) the only alternatives to globalization left open to developing countries are to isolate themselves from the capitalist world system, or seek to have the terms of international trade radically revised. The former alternative was tested by some countries such as those of the former Second World which sought to set up a socialist-communist world system and found it wanting. Meanwhile, the latter solution is currently being pursued via the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and the resultant World Trade Organization (WTO) with greater impetus since the end of the Cold War. But dependency theorists are skeptical of the value of GATT for developing countries, especially those in financial strife and coming increasingly under the

control of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) which are themselves driven by US foreign policy. Raghavan (1991) considers the Uruguay Round of GATT to be an attempt by the developed countries to control world trade and provide opportunities for their multinational corporations to dominate Third World markets. In what he describes as recolonization he anticipates developing countries forfeiting their already limited economic sovereignty in their desire for integration into the capitalist global economy controlled by the industrialized First World.

More recently Greider (1997) offers eye-witness accounts from around the world of the dire social consequences of unfettered global capitalism's search for cheaper labour and unsaturated consumer markets. He also points out that global corporations are vulnerable to the relentless evaluation of their operations by financial capital markets, which place little value on longer-term social and environmental responsibility. Gray (1998) argues that free-market policies are unworkable in many developing countries because they do not have the historical structures which characterize mature developed countries. Yet like many such accounts, there is an unwillingness to recognize that many developing countries are suffering not entirely because of their forced involvement in the global capitalist system but at least partly because of their failure to establish basic political and economic stability within their own countries.

In contrast to the 'world-systems' view of a monolithic global capitalism and in lieu of Marxist and non-Marxist periodizations, Lash and Urry (1987) offer a three-stage model of the development of capitalist economies: liberal, organized and disorganized.

The present 'disorganization' of capitalism in the industrialized nations they attribute to globalizing processes from above such as the formation of multinational corporations and international financial markets. They also implicate decentralizing processes from below such as the decline of mass industries, devolution of government and dispersion of populations, and transformation from within, such as the growth of the 'service class', their quaint description of white-collar professionals. Robertson (1992) sees the 'world-systems' theory as merely a reaction to the inadequacy of the modernization theory which had used developed nations as the basis of comparison for developing countries, but which failed to demonstrate political and economic relations between the two systematically.

More relevant to this argument of the present article is another multi-causal thinker, Rosenau (1990) who attributes globalization largely to communication technologies. With the onset of the post-industrial age he sees also that nation-states are acting as co-players along with multinational corporations, non-government organizations (NGOs) and other inter-governmental bodies on the world political stage. Increasing globalization seems also to make a mockery of domestic economic policy in the West because the latter generally fails to consider developments in other countries, particularly in the Third World. To Haferkamp and Smelser (1992) this is quite evident in the intransigence of the economies in the developed world to domestic policies in the 1990s designed to create growth and employment. These policies fail because they do not recognize the changed global political and economic environment of which the nation is a part. Another particular consequence

pointed out by Inglehart (1990: 5–14) and widely acknowledged by other thinkers is the declining political interest in nationalism and increasing popular support for supranational entities and ethnic identities.

Among business writers and consultants, Ohmae (1990) points to the rise of what he terms instead the 'interlinked economy' of the triad of the US, Europe and Japan joined by Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore; a re-arranged core and semi-periphery though he does not use that analysis. Thus he argues for minimalist intervention from national governments, new inter-government organizations emphasizing interdependence rather than competition, and the gearing up of business to maximize the benefits of operating in a borderless world as global corporations. Thurow (1993) sees the same triad of nations leading the global economy in the twenty-first century as in the twentieth, though in dire competition. He holds out hope for the newly industrializing countries (NICs) in Asia through a Pacific Rim trading bloc but is less optimistic for Latin America and de-cidedly pessimistic about Africa. Likewise Naisbitt (1995: 14–32) makes much of the 'mega-trend' of moving from nation-states to networked cities and regions.

As an ardent capitalist, Drucker (1993: 141–156) sees minimal regional and global inter-governmental organizations as neces-sary only to deal with challenges such as pol-lution, terrorism and arms control in the post-Cold War capitalist era. Though they would invariably undermine the nation-state they would not supersede it, and he explains the resurgence of tribalism, violent or pas-sive, as a search for cultural identity in an increasingly globalized post-capitalist soci-ety. Mulhearn (1996) has demonstrated the globalization of the world economy through such indicators as the increasing integration of world markets, the emergence of global economic institutions such as IMF and GATT, the growth of internationally-oriented businesses, as well as a protection-ist backlash by regional economic groupings. More currently, Friedman (2000) offers an upbeat anecdotal account of the benign impact of globalization across the world, at government, business, society and personal levels. He concludes rather ethnocentrically with a plea for sustainable globalization led by the US modeling a 'third way' between free-market capitalism and social democracy, and prescribing the concept around the world. Whatever the merits or demerits of their popular accounts of the present and future of political and economic globaliza-tion, such populist authors can be influen-tial among executives and officials around the world and therefore indirectly of corpor-ate strategies and government policies.

The understanding of economic and pol-itical globalization has progressed beyond prescriptive modernization theories and critical dependency perspectives, perhaps towards a more pragmatic approach in understanding the interrelated processes of political, economic, cultural and social change worldwide. A major contribution of the world-systems theory has been that it compelled social thinkers to move beyond societal level analysis and see global factors which had an impact on social change within nation-states. Certainly in recent years gov-ernments of diverse ideological persuasions have been instrumental in promoting the glo-bal integration of their national economies in return for anticipated or real economic benefits and thus their own political longev-ity. This results in their participation in re-gional organizations and inter-governmental

bodies, their involvement with multinational corporations, and their use of improved communication technologies. In the process these very governments seem to lose control over their ideas and culture unwittingly, the measure of which only future research will confirm.

Socio-cultural Change

It is generally accepted that it was the communication of new ideas via print in vernacular languages rather than esoteric sacred languages or local dialects which helped form nation-states out of more traditional socio-political entities. Anderson (1983) detailed how the modern nation-state had its origins in the arrival of print which coincided with the growth of capitalism. People who participated in a socio-linguistic market for print media such as books and newspapers began to feel connected with all others who did, leading to the formation of nation-states on the basis of common language. Thus citizenship is an artificial construct, inasmuch as the nation-state is, which detaches people from other more real local identities and forms a new pseudo-community of strangers. Cultural authenticity is often based on xenophobia for, as Hobsbawm (1990) indicates, ideas of primordial ethnic identity have dubious roots and nationalistic self-determination seeks to recover irrecoverable history. While national culture was quite an unproblematic concept and taken for granted in the 1960s-70s, it became increasingly questioned as an artificial construct towards the end of the twentieth century.

Dismissing the nation-state as a myth used by capitalism to deflect criticism from its hegemony of the global system, Sklair (1991) conceptualizes the latter as comprising three inter-linked levels: economic, political and cultural-ideological, associated respectively with multinational corporations, a transnational capitalist class and global consumerism. He attributes this global capitalist system with having improved significantly the standard of living of billions through a form of materialist socialism, though he questionably says this was without imposing a political and cultural ideology. In actual fact there has arisen a capitalist class worldwide, often including the elite of developing countries, that identifies with the global capitalist system particularly through its culture-ideology of materialism and consumerism. Despite the superficial non-homogeneity of nation-states which comprise our world this socio-economic elite of both developing and developed countries have more in common with each other than with the lower classes of their own countries (Levitt 1983).

Global marketers and media-owners have long been in the forefront of targeting this lucrative cross-border market segment through their advertising and promotion. But the need to differentiate between the 'hard' power of economic clout and 'soft' power of cultural co-option by the developed world which developing countries face, especially in their determination to be globally competitive and yet culturally autonomous, has been spelt out by Ferguson (1993). She also cautions cultural thinkers and industry practitioners alike to differentiate between 'surface' identities which may reflect global consumerist trends and 'deep' identities which reflect the persistence, even renaissance, of ethnicity, religion, gender and the like. Ferguson deems the dominant myth among marketers and media-owners of global

cultural homogenization to be as simplistic as the concept of national cultural purity.

Other social thinkers seem less interested in analyzing the obvious economic and political factors contributing to cultural globalization such as imperialism and capitalism, than in mapping the cultural consequences on individuals, society, nation-states, even humanity as a whole. Spybey (1996), for one, is concerned particularly with how the globalization of political, economic and cultural institutions affects participants in every social system in a process he terms 'reflexive modernity'. He thinks that the individuals exposed to information through these globalizing processes have greater expectations of lifestyle choices and personal fulfillment, including consumerism as well as alternative lifestyles and social causes. On the other hand, Morley and Robins (1995: 43-69) speak of the difficulty of defining cultural identity in an era of postmodern geography where spaces are defined increasingly by electronic connectedness rather than physical proximity. The ready availability of transnational media, information and communications enhances such exposure to cultural globalization especially by the younger generation. Questioning the simplistic notion of a global village, Ang (1996) argues that the ubiquitousness of television in everyday life, available from transnational, regional and local sources, contributes to the chaos of communications and by implication cultural processes in postmodern societies.

If globalization does not necessarily imply socio-cultural homogenization, then the question arises whether the concept of postmodern society prevalent in the First World has as much currency in the countries of the Third World. Knox (1995) delineates the role of world cities such as London, New York and Tokyo as centres of economic and cultural importance in the world-system, even though they are palpably different from each other on any of those dimensions. He also hints that with the growth of the global information economy these cities may be superseded by cities currently further down the hierarchy but more technologically adept. So on the one hand, postmodernism might well be irrelevant in the Third World which could be said to be still largely premodern, let alone modern. Yet on the other hand, King (1991) quite rightly asks whether Singapore and Calcutta early this century might have presaged the cultural diversity and social polarization said to be symptomatic of all postmodern societies. The multicultural characteristics of those cities of the colonial world then have been seen only more recently in cities of the First World as a result of postcolonial migration and the renaissance of subnational ethnicities. Perhaps the world-cities of the early twenty-first century may be those which are less encumbered by the infrastructures of long historical development, and which like Singapore, Bangalore and Hong Kong have made a concerted effort to become information technopolises through rapid implementation of new communications infrastructures.

Though globalization is not simply socio-cultural homogenization, Appadurai (1990) thinks it has certainly been accelerated through new electronic communications which then incorporate the global into local culture and politics. He has been responsible for delineating the cultural flows which accompany globalization. These include 'ethnoscapes' of business travelers, expatriates, immigrants, and refugees, 'technoscapes' of machinery, technology and software, 'finanscapes' of capital and secur-

ities, 'mediascapes' of images and information via print, television and film, and 'ideoscapes' of democracy, human rights and other Western ideologies. The phenomenon of cultural globalization has been accelerated through new electronic communications, including television broadcasting. The electronic distribution of images worldwide or what Appadurai terms 'mediascapes' could well be agents for the spread of 'ideoscapes' or ideologies of Western nation-states, political movements or corporations.

There has been considerable ethnographic research done on Indian television, for instance, which suggests quite considerable impact of the medium on society and culture. Singhal and Rogers (1989) document how the remarkable success of a Mexican soap opera in promoting social/educational themes was replicated in India with the similar development of an indigenous soap opera called *Hum Log*. Research by Trivedi (1991: 89–95) found all the usual disruptions to social life that he sought to investigate, but notably those in the 'upper class' sample were most inclined to think that television had little or no impact on Indian culture as a whole. But much past research on television in India has concentrated on short-term effects of exposure to television, while ignoring long-term exposure to other forms of mass media such as popular music, local films and drama, radio and newspapers and their metamorphoses. Although Brosius and Butcher (1999) document the impact of the cultural context on domestic television and vice-versa, they downplay the wider context of politico-economic change in India. Whether newer, transnational communications media such as satellite telephony, cable television and the Internet might be constituents of a global 'mediascape' which taps also into local

'ethnoscapes', particularly in newly industrializing countries and big emerging markets (BEMs), remains something further research in global business might seek to uncover.

Communications and Media Convergence

The impact of the medium of television on societies which have had a long tradition of print media has intrigued many social thinkers. In their seminal essay, Adorno and Horkheimer (1972) criticized the cultural industry, for mass-producing cultural products in the service of capitalist economies. As such, they claimed these products were unartistic and generic, pandering to the mass taste, and discouraging of intellectual response and that all forms of popular culture, including the mass media, traced their roots to the rise of the middle-class in Europe. Being rather elitist, they saw the media both as the means to subjugate the masses as well as the undoing of civilization as they idealized it rather belatedly in the industrial age. In their view, with industrialization mass culture became a product for a mass market or audience, produced by a cultural industry. By inducing passivity and addiction in audiences, thus making them amenable to domination by the political and economic elite in society, the capitalist system of mass production and consumption sustained itself. Government leaders and the social-political elite of developing countries today tend to share this disdain of mass culture particularly of foreign origin or of a hybrid foreign/local nature. Paradoxically these leaders and elite are keen to harness the tools of mass media to control the masses through promoting a subservient national culture.

As a leading technological determinist, McLuhan (1964) made the categorical claim for which he was famed that 'the medium was the message' or that instant communication which characterized the new electronic media was re-tribalizing human society. Through television the world had become, in his estimation, an electronic 'global village' where there was extreme awareness and curiosity about other cultures. But it is unclear whether McLuhan was implying that television was globalizing culture since, among other things, the process has not been accompanied by greater social harmony and tolerance. Perhaps he meant only that all viewers of television were participants in a televized culture regardless of what they watched or where they were located around the world. In any case McLuhan had no shortage of critics who accused him of coining clever metaphors, overstating the case, and developing unprovable theories. Yet to this day, purveyors of new communications technologies are fond of citing his 'global village' and 'medium is the message' metaphors in promoting the benefits of their technology while ignoring the more negative connotations he implied by them. Certainly McLuhan made no overt comment about ownership of the media and control of the technology, and could be assumed to have imbibed an uncritical right-wing view towards economic development and social change.

In contrast, Martín-Barbero (1993), in theorizing on media effects talks not about the cultural hegemony of certain social classes but rather about mediation or, in other words, how the masses use the media and incorporate them in their everyday lives. Operating in the cultural context of Latin America, he dissents from the view of West-

ern homogenization as the only form of modernity and cites the diversity of cultures globally out of which the masses formulate their own culture. Smith (1992) suggests that today's global culture may be said to be an artificial construct 'composed of myriad imaginations, flashed onto our consciousness by the media.. a culture of the mass media, above all of television...'. Still, ethnic and national cultures seem to remain the strongest filters of the transnational images we receive via television. Writing likewise of contemporary communications in the Third World context, Reeves (1993) agrees that interpretation by audiences might reflect class and sub-cultural affiliations and challenge the 'preferred readings' of the text. However he reminds us that 'the whole, continuous development of the media, and their conventions, institutional arrangements, values of practice, and role in the construction and reproduction of ideology and culture was always constrained by their capitalist nature' (1993: 151). Therefore a critical theory approach to understanding media does well to be counter-balanced with political economy one, and the study of global media corporations might better adopt the middle path of a 'cultural industries' or competitive analysis approach.

Updating the McLuhan critique, and doing so in similar cryptic style is Postman (1985) who proposes that the message of the medium of television is entertainment. Regardless of whether its content is news, politics, education, religion or whatever, increasingly television in Western culture entertains rather than informs in any depth. He believes that the problem is not what people watch but the fact that they watch, and so the solution must lie in how they watch. Thus there appears to be some resignation

by Postman to the pervasiveness of television in the developed world, and an attempt to reach some form of accommodation with it without losing one's integrity. Perhaps there are lessons in this approach for developing countries as television, whether domestic or transnational, comes to dominate their contemporary culture.

Later, Real (1989: 17–30) announced the onset of 'super media', defined as the combination of satellites, fibre optics, microchips, decoders and other such technologies of transmission, which further distort our sense of time and space, of certainty about information, of identity and of community. D'Agostino (1995) perceives the further intensification of this phenomenon when via transnational satellite television we are privy to happenings around the world to a greater extent than in our own neighbourhoods where we live isolated. His conjecture is that virtual reality will not displace television, which is being reincarnated via computers and electronic information highways, while video games might become the dominant recreation diversion of what he terms a 'post-television culture'. Whether these ideas are immediately applicable in the diverse cultural contexts of the developing nations in Asia, Africa and Latin America, and how this might be investigated are issues which are as yet unclear.

Rejecting both optimistic and pessimistic views of media impact, Baudrillard (1988) expounds the view that the mass media do not simply distort reality but are a new social reality. Television images which distort time and space, he believes, have caused our culture to consist primarily of simulations. Consumer lifestyles provide people with their identity in society rather than their role in the economic production system and thus people are incorporated into the 'simulacra' they surround themselves with. In a somewhat technological-determinist style reminiscent of McLuhan, Baudrillard proclaims that the media, especially television, overwhelms with information and renders impossible any true feedback from its audience even by polls, and thus are a form of pseudo-communication. The only way that the masses can avoid the influence of the media, according to him, will be to avoid watching it themselves or to be shielded from it by authorities. The former is an unlikely scenario since the masses worldwide seem to find the media an irresistible form of entertainment and information, while the latter is what some governments in Asia have endeavored to do with transborder television with dubious success (Gunaratne 2000).

Although Herman and McChesney (1997) recognize some passing national and regional resistance around the world, they consider the US commercial oligopoly model as archetypal of media globalization. This view would be challenged as myopic by researchers from Europe, Latin America and Asia in particular. Seeing global television as a symptom of wider processes of globalization and postmodernity, Barker (1997) makes the point that globalization is not to be read as uni-directional from the West but is indeed multi-directional, even multi-dimensional. As if demonstrating that proposition, Sinclair, Jacka and Cunningham (1996) propound a concept of geo-linguistic audience markets and subsidiary centres of television production in the developing world. This has implications for the increasing prevalent phenomenon of diasporic communities such as the Overseas Chinese, Non-Resident Indians, Hispanics in North America, Arabs

in Europe and the like. While Albarran and Chan-Olmsted (1998) analyze the dynamics of global media economics, as with many edited anthologies there is much fragmentation by national markets and insufficient development of general principles. While Browne (1999) makes a long-awaited attempt at the comparative study of electronic media, it is confined to developed countries and ignores the issue of culture. In devoting a sizeable section to globalization trends in regional and national contexts in Asia, perhaps a recent compilation by French and Richards (2000) advances the arguments of this present article for bridging the politico-economic and socio-cultural in analyzing the increasingly globalized media industry.

Conclusion

Ambivalence about the massive socio-cultural change which follows economic development in developing countries often causes their more nationalistic leaders to blame developed countries, especially their media, for the imposition of foreign cultures. Yet this apparent global homogenization process need not necessarily be seen as deliberate cultural imperialism by developed countries of developing countries and their multinational corporations, but simply as a correlate of modernization which developed countries themselves had experienced much earlier and incorporated into their cultures, including their media. Cultural imperialism may not be a new phenomenon, dating only from the European colonial era, and only from the West towards the East, for it has existed at virtually any time societies have had contact whether through political or military force, or through commerce and trade. Postcolonial nations may be said to be

proto-globalized societies given their cultural syncretism and cosmopolitan character, particularly in their urban metropolises. The concept of cultural imperialism presupposes the primacy of the nation-state and nationalism, but if nation-states are themselves 'imagined communities' comprising, in reality, multiple ethnic groups dominated by one such group or social class, then there might be just as much cultural imperialism from within the nation-state than from without. Is national government alarm at global media then just a smoke-screen for their own cultural domination of their multicultural societies?

While globalization leads to some measure of homogenization of cultures, there is often a concurrent counter-movement towards heterogeneity through the rediscovery and reassertion of the local, as seen in the ethnic renaissance and conflicts which have characterized the world of the late twentieth century. While the print medium may have contributed to the development of the modern nation-state, television and other electronic media seem to have taken this process much further towards the formation of globalized societies, through by-passing the need for literacy and using visual images to entertain instead. Perhaps via global media corporations and satellite technologies, the social and cultural impact of television may be coming full circle by uniting disparate ethnic communities in different nation-states, whether geographically close or distant, thus creating 'global villages' of quasi-homogeneous cultures. Since media, information and communications industries make possible or heighten transnational networks of individuals and communities which then become dependent on them, the issue that might yet be addressed by future global

business research is whether they are a cause or an effect in the politico-economic and/or socio-cultural globalization of nation-states. If global media corporations are not solely responsible for cultural upheaval, then perhaps progressive governments might even be able to collaborate with them to manage the pace of economic and social change.

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