

Globalisation and Homogenisation of Culture: The Role of Mass Medias in Developing Countries

Nahavandi Firouzeh

In many ways, the process of modernisation of developing countries, and, moreover, the process of westernisation that is linked to it, has always been pushed and reinforced by mass medias (newspapers, radio, movies, television...)¹. Nowadays, the new technologies of information and communication (NTIC) are deepening this process. The communications revolution has made the world a global village.

Medias facilitates globalisation. The problem is that the contemporary phenomenon of globalisation means globalisation of liberal capitalism and materialistic modernity. In many ways, one can say that it is the “evil” characteristics of capitalism and modernity that benefit more from this process and are spreading all over the world. That brings about the issue of neutrality of technology and its role in the globalisation process.

This article deals with the homogenisation of culture and the role of medias and focuses particularly on homogenisation of consumerist culture.

MASS MEDIAS AS ATTITUDES BUILDERS

In the past, religion and educational system (family, school) played a major role in inculcating in people, and especially in the young ones, the values of societies. Progressively, mass medias have replaced them, a process known and already discussed in length in the Western countries². David Riesmann in its classic work *The Lonely Crowd* has analysed the process by which medias, in modern societies, creates the extro-determined man: the man who tries to conform to the images of happiness transmitted by the medias and is unconsciously in search of the conformity dictated by the money-grabbing requirements of a consumption society.

The issue of mass culture has also been worked out in depth.³³

However, for developing countries the impact of medias goes far beyond, changing attitudes. It is not only the spread of new attitudes but also of visions of life that are completely unfamiliar and even alienating. A materialistic culture and consumerism are spread through mass medias. A mechanistic and individualistic way of life replaces the traditional

ways. In that sense, the homogenisation brought about by globalisation is superficial as it is limited to material level and consumers goods. It is consumer culture that is artificially promoted by mass medias.

THE POWER OF MEDIAS

The power of medias in homogenisation of culture lies, first of all, in a false belief that technology is neutral, and that leads societies to accept its onrush with passivity and without considering the social and political changes it may brings.

Marshall McLuhan has discussed the issue of technology two decades ago, when he said, “medium is message”. He emphasized the systematic changes that medium catalyses. What really matters is not the content of a message but the way it is transmitted and, even more significant, the media by which it is transmitted. In other words what McLuhan emphasized was that medias are not neutral technologies, as they influence the way of thinking, acting and reacting in societies. MacLuhan insisted on the correlation between technology and culture.

Certain technological inventions change society far more than any political decision. That is surely the case of television or computers in developing countries, although the latter are less important because they have not already touched everyone and because the phenomenon, at the present time, is deepening the gap between the rich and the poor more than anything else. In that sense, the belief and the optimistic statement that “television will unify global consciousness and bring peace and understanding everywhere” has facilitate its adoption and its expansion. Since the 18th century, the belief in progress and science has solidified the idea that new technology is synonymous with general advancement of society. Today, because of satellite television, more than 75% of world population has access to daily television reception (253 tv/1000 people). As for computers and Internet linkage, the percentage fails to 7,42/1000 people (0,02 for low income countries)⁴.

As Jerry Mander writes, in our individualistic society, we are not practiced in making judgments beyond our personal experience⁵. He shows in his

article how the introduction of television was a conscious action of cultural conversion in the Mackenzie Valley, south from Artic Circle. In the 1960s, the Canadian government decided that the Natives had to become Canadians and one of the means of this evolution was offering free satellite dishes and television sets. As television was just arriving, the programs were not produce locally and came from the States and western countries.

Very soon values presented in television shows turned out to be the opposite of the local values bound to survival in a harsh surrounding, that is community cooperation, sharing, and nonmaterialism. The introduction of television brought new needs, disinterest in native language, but also desire of cars even though communities had no roads. Disdain for traditional work, fishing or hunting, destruction of relations between young and old and a stop to storytelling followed. So, concludes Mander, television is clearly the most efficient instrument ever invented for global cultural cloning, and it is the path breaker for what follows: cars; paved roads; Western franchise goods; loss of traditional skills, economies converted from self-sufficiency to corporate export. Television serves as the worldwide agent of imagery for new global corporate vision.

Secondly, the power of medias lies on their strength to open the population of developing countries to the outside world, without any resistance. Something that neither colonisation, which was lived as an aggression, nor neo-colonialism has succeeded to do so widely. Contemporary cultural homogenisation, colonialism some thinkers would say, is distinct from practises of the past as it is oriented toward capturing mass audiences, not just converting elites. Today, political interests are projected through non-imperial subjects. The mass medias, particularly television, invade the household and function from inside and below as well from outside and above.

As Western transnational corporations are given full access to all countries by way of liberalisation, the cultural transmission conveyed in Western medias overpower local medias. Western States and enterprises are integrating most of the countries of developing world in a cultural area that is almost dominated by them. In some way, the domination of rich countries is being consolidated, as they are the ones to have the power to inform. The growing penetration of mass medias among the poor in developing countries and the increasing messages that provide them experiences of individual consumption is the challenge of cultural homogenisation. Medias create illusions of international and cross-class bonds.

Through television a false intimacy and link is established between the stars and the poor. Traditional bonds with family and community are being destroyed while new bonds with markets are created through new needs and aspirations.

THE POWER OF INFORMATION INSTRUMENTS

Information and transmission of ideas need infrastructure, technical tools that are directly linked to a country financial resources. What can be generally observed is that Western news agencies are dominating the market (Associated Press, United Press, Agence France Presse...) It is a kind of monopoly that makes it hard for developing countries to do anything but accept information coming from the formers. Many countries do not possess any national news agency. The same process can be highlighted for television programs as Western countries like United States of America or France export most of the programs, the former to Latin America or East Asia, the latter to Africa. Meanwhile, foreign radios are also heard everywhere in the world, like Voice of America, BBC, Radio France International...

There is a process of invasion without reciprocity that is deepening as long as information industry is getting sophisticated and is acquiring new means and tools. In the film industry, for example, the print of American culture is quite astonishing. With some conglomerates controlling distribution, projections space, licences for later use etc. competition of ideas and images is disappearing. With or without resistance, some countries that were proud of their movies industries, like France, Sweden, India or Indonesia are inclined to accept American productions and, further, local productions adopt American themes. In that sense privatisation leading to the weakening of state support to movie industries, at a time when liberalisation is also weakening non-protected productions, makes it quite impossible for small local producers to compete.

Protectionism in some countries is no more sufficient to counter this threat; for example, in Indonesia movie industry has been sacrificed in favour of textile industries at the time of global negotiations between Indonesia and USA.

In India, one of the most prolific countries for movies, 78 out of 124 imported movies are Americans.

THE POWER OF MESSAGES

Financial power not only leads to control the

instruments of information but also to influence the messages delivered to developing countries. This had already been pointed out in the Unesco Conference of 1976 in Nairobi, where developing countries accused Western partners of hiding information from them, or of providing them with truncated or distorted information or even with propaganda⁶.

There is no doubt that, except at times of wars, revolution or calamities, nothing much is shown in West on developing countries; it is a question of interest of course, but it gives an image of developing countries having only problems, a thing that in itself is far from the truth.

In addition, information being a constructed object, it can be consciously distorted or not by choice of images, sequences or what it is focused on. In that way, information is also a vision of the world. The best example is the way USA covered the Gulf war or the "war against terror". It can be said that agencies of the North shape public opinion in Western countries as well as in Southern ones.

Developing countries import, by way of mass medias, knowledge, cognitive orientations, political and economical values and social systems belonging to the countries controlling medias.

The role of television is very important in this regard. By way of Western soap operas, movies, shows and Hollywood productions screened everywhere and viewed by large audiences, it is Western families behaviour, Western work project, Western aspirations which are proposed to developing countries public. The main message behind that is promotion of individual. The diverting way in which all are presented is much more attractive and persuasive than juridical dispositions.

Even though people can be said to have the choice to react and to adjust, it is clear that all this Western or Western style production give birth to new aspirations, and also lead to change of economic and social behaviours.

In Africa, for example, storytelling under the shadow of old trees reflected common heritage but was also a link between people. With television there is no historical context.

Movies are also a central point of market ideology. In that way television is the medium of globalisation as it is the lonely individual who is the target. Television, by giving continuous access to image, is the window on a global world. It is the symbol of a global consumerist culture⁷.

PROBABLY THE BEST EXAMPLE IS MTV

MTV is a fascinating illustration of the influence

of American television and music industry. Created in 1981, the first objective of this cable network was to present and give space to marginal productions. Meanwhile, it has been transformed into the marketing tool of music industry. With this channel, the frontier between leisure and advertising has vanished.

The main consumers are young, mostly under thirty. The messages are complex, sometimes subliminal. They offer an idea of freedom and disdain of authority. They catalyse consumption; reinforce "we are the world" identity. It's a feeling of connectedness to a larger world. In video clips violence is the rule and sexual attitudes are very oriented. One finds a very sportive representation of sexual intercourse. Men are sexual machines and women whores.

Youth is celebrated and life is presented as consumption.

HOMOGENISATION OF CULTURE

Homogenisation is one of the important issues of globalisation. Medias, satellites, and videocassettes support it. After the collapse of Soviet Union, the toppling of the Berlin Wall, and the embrace of market ideology, the entire world has become politically unipolar with United States dominating in most areas. In many ways, the planet is being wired, due to US economic power, into American production: music, movies, news, television programs.

The impact of this process on communities cultural diversity has not probably yet been completely understood.

Its main characteristic and the strongest tool is that the majority of consumers of this homogenized culture are young people. Families and traditional social structures are loosing or have already lost their educational role.

Pop stars have emerged as moral authorities. They don't ask much, only to consume.

Resistance to this phenomenon seems useless. It can clearly be seen in Islamist countries where forbidding American culture only deepen the wish to get it. Islamic Republic of Iran, where American productions are forbidden, is a country where everything is circulating undercover.

Many artists and thinkers are worried about the implication of this homogenisation on their national production and of course about the threat it can be for job opportunities. In 1956, Leo Bogart had already pointed out the homogenisation of industrial societies in *The Age of Television*: television, industrial societies and a "medium" culture would have led to the disappearance of local cultures. Today, from all

over the world, artists go to USA where the financial and technical means are better. It clearly means that industrial musical production can lead to the disappearance of traditional music. This means also the loosening of all ties between public and artists that were also a trait of collective identity.

In developing countries as well as in Western countries, television has become an instrument of education of the masses and especially of young people. In the 1940s, Herta Herzog already established, in a research on radio series, the impact of these programs on women's behaviour, especially the less educated ones. It was emphasized that the latter seek models for interactions and behaviour in public. Listening to radio series functioned as following a moral authority. Today, in the same way, television programs present models of behaviour that are characteristic of a liberal and consumerist society.

The young people use them in such a way that they have the illusion to participate in a global village. In 1960s, Joseph Klapper spoke of escapism, i.e. an occupation that diverts someone's attention from the real problems. Identification to movie characters appears then to function like a "social narcotic". It can end up in a loss of the sense of reality.

Films and television series provide overwhelming images of luxury and power.

That is because they focus mostly on the rich, the beautiful, the powerful, whose lives are endless action and glamour.

By contrast, the traditional ways of life seem almost primitive and inefficient. The one-dimensional view of modern life becomes a slap in the face. Working hard, in the field or elsewhere, getting tired and dirty for small amount of money or even nothing seems shaming for young people and creates a deep gap between generation and loss of respect toward parents⁸.

The problem is that most of the people watch television without any real experience of Western life. All they see is the material side.

This can lead to the development of a feeling of inferiority, to the rejection of one's culture and to a eagerly will to embrace the consumerist monoculture.

Young people in developing countries, even though not having the financial power, try to wear jeans, shoes, sunglasses of famous mark. They have the mobile and the CD record player that give the illusion to participate in global culture.

This is the phenomenon I have noticed, during my field studies in Central Asian States. The collapse

of Soviet Union, among other things, materialized into full access to Western medias programs. By way of television, an idyllic image of capitalist society was presented. First of all, it was in full contrast with Soviet propaganda against capitalist societies that used to show only the dark sides of it. In the 1990s, the contrary happened, as there was mostly a one-sided image of glamour of capitalist societies that was reflected in the television series. This image modified also the self-perception in Central Asia, and accurately in towns. A lot of people imagined that they had been exploited and cheated at a time when in West everybody was living happily and richly. These images are interpreted as an example of what can be reached by entering market economy and liberalism. In the absence of personal experience medias function as powerful means of cultural homogenisation and instrument of globalisation for developing countries public, as in Central Asia.

It can be emphasised that in developing countries most of the people participate to global culture through embellished images carrying consumption dreams that won't ever be reached. Escapist television programs show illusions from another world.

Daniele Archibugi noted in an International conference on Globalisation and Citizenship, organized by United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, in 1996, that at the end of the twentieth century, advances in information and communication technologies created new worlds in people's mind: new hopes, new knowledge of how others live, new fears.

The way global flows of information affect patterns of identity and solidarity in different cultures obviously depends on the content of those flows. This is why the images of consumption can lead to a negative self-perception, and also only to consumerist attitudes.

People no more compare themselves to their peers, to their neighbours, but to an utopistic image of stars. Community ties are broken.

Consumerism generates hunger for material status symbols, new material needs.

The cultural homogenisation that occurs through medias also contributes to political passivity. Although hundreds of millions of children and teenagers around the world listen to the same music and watch the same films there is no global consciousness appearing, other than a passion to consume.

The illusion of being connected to cultural currents has nothing to do with the creation of a new

global identification.

Whether mass culture, or homogenised culture fills the vacuum left by the collapse of traditional family life, the atrophy of civil life and the loss of faith in politics or whether it provokes it, it is nonetheless a threat for participation to a democratic society. Television is getting the most powerful and influential force for mass education in most developing countries. Even though it already has this role in industrialised rich countries, the consequences are more destructive as the values are not the reflections of an evolution of thought but a complete and in this sense disruptive intrusion.

KEYWORDS Developing Countries. Homogenisation of Culture. Mass Medias. Television

ABSTRACT Medias facilitate globalisation. Particularly, television by giving continuous access to image is the window of a global world. This article focuses on homogenisation of consumerist culture. It takes into account the role of medias as attitudes builders and emphasise that in developing countries most people participate to global culture through embellished images carrying consumption dreams that won't ever be reached. Nowadays, the illusion of being connected to cultural currents has nothing to do with the creation of a new global identity.

NOTES

- 1 Let's not forget that at the time of the Second World War, Germany and Allied Forces both used medias for their propaganda in the colonies and as a way of destabilising enemy. Images or description of luxury in Europe then

- flowed in Africa.
- 2 Klapper, Joseph T., *The Effects of Mass Communications*, New York, Free Press, 1960.
Chalvon, M.; Corset, P.; Souchon, M.; *L'enfant devant la television*, Paris, Casterman, 1979.
Chombart de Lauwe, M. J. and Bellan, L., *Enfants de l'image. Enfants personages des medias. Enfants reels*, Paris, Payot, 1979.
Schramm, W., Lyle, J. et Parker, E., *Television in the life of our children*, Stanford, Stanford U.P., 1961.
- 3 Schramm, W., *Communication in Modern Society*, Urbana, Un. of Illinois Press, 1948.
Bell, D. et Brzezinski, Z., *Between Two Ages*, NY, Viking Press, 1970.
Bell, D., *The Coming of Post-industrial Society : Adventure in Social Forecasting*, NY Basic Books, 1976.
Bogart, L., *The Age of Television*, 1956, NY, F. Ungar Pub. Co.
Morin, E., *Le cinéma ou l'homme imaginaire*, Paris, Ed. de Minuit, 1958.
Mac Luhan, M., *Understanding Media*, London, Sphere Books, 1967.
The Global Village, NY, Oxford, U.K., 1992.
- 4 Moles, A., *Sociodynamique de la Culture*, Paris, Mouton, 1967.
- 5 UNDP, *World Report on Human Development*, 2000.
- 6 "Technologies of Globalization" in *The Case against Global Economy*, San Francisco, Sierra Club Books, 1996, pp. 344-359.
- 7 Francis Balle, *Medias et Société*, Paris, Éditions Montchrestien, 1984.
- 8 Barnet Richard and John Cavanagh "Homogenisation of Global Culture", in *The Case Against Globalisation*, *op. cit.*, pp. 71-77.
- 9 See H. Norbert-Hodge, "The Pressure to Modernize and Globalise" in *A Case Against Global Economy*, *op. cit.*, pp. 33-46.

Author's Address: Nahavandi Firouzeh, CECID – Institut de Sociologie – Université Libre de Bruxelles, Avenue Jeanne 44, CP 124 – B – 1050 Bruxelles – BELGIQUE
E-mail: fnahavan@ulb.ac.be