Chapter 2
The Globalisation of the Media: 
Towards Cultural Homogeneity?

Shefali Virkar
University of Oxford, UK

ABSTRACT
In every sphere of human endeavour, human behaviour and interactions are becoming increasingly interrelated and mutually interdependent. The 1990s witnessed the emergence of a pan-global commercial- and mass-media market, and the rise of a handful of mammoth commercial media organisations; which today have established vast international media empires, particularly through the innovative use of technology and the cultivation of global distribution and production networks. As media conglomerates spread their tentacles, anxiety is rife that they will encourage a global convergence in popular tastes and trends, to the detriment of national and local cultures. This book chapter aims to explore the claim that the continuous globalisation of the media and entertainment industries is leading unrelentingly towards a hegemony of global cultural homogeneity. Through a discussion of the phenomenon that is globalisation, and the theoretical background against which the cultural effects of the global media might be studied, the chapter critically examines the role of pan-global commercial broadcasting in the creation of a so-called global culture and in the engendering of global cultural convergence.

INTRODUCTION: GLOBALISATION, CULTURE, AND THE MEDIA

“..The communication media are monopolised by the few that can reach everyone. Never have so many been held incommunicado by so few. More and more have the right to see and hear, but fewer and fewer have the privilege of informing, giving their opinion and creating. The dictatorship of a single word and the single image, much more devastating than that of the single party, is imposing a life whose exemplary citizen is a docile consumer and a passive spectator built on the assembly line following the North American model of television..” - Eduardo Galeano

“The world seems like a smaller place; no longer a vast expanse of uncharted territories but a globe thoroughly explored, carefully mapped out and vulnerable to the meddlings of human beings.” -John Thompson

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The term ‘globalisation’ has become the catchphrase of our times. It echoes down the streets of metropolises and tiny villages, in centres of learning and houses of business, in political discourse and in street corner ravings. First coined during the 1980s as an all-encompassing expression to describe the processes leading to the greater integration of the global economy, it has over the years acquired a list of positive and negative connotations without anyone having actually arrived at a comprehensive definition (Reich, 1988). Different theoretical positions and different political stances each have their own notion of what globalisation stands for. On one level, globalisation is an economic phenomenon, and refers to economic activity on a global scale. On another, globalisation is concerned with issues of cultural meaning and identity. For the purposes of this chapter, we may define globalisation as a “rapidly developing process of complex interconnectedness between societies, cultures, institutions and individuals worldwide. It is a social process which involves a compression of time and space, shrinking distances through a dramatic reduction in time taken – either physically or representationally – to cross them, so making the world seem smaller and in a certain sense bringing human beings ‘closer’ to one another (Tomlinson, 1996).

It is widely agreed that communication has an important part to play in the globalisation process and in particular with the process of cultural globalisation. The world in the past few years has witnessed the spectacular rise of a series of technological innovations, particularly digital and satellite communications technologies, which have resulted in a decoupling of space and time and which has accelerated the process of globalisation (McChesney, 1998). The subsequent rise of the media is attributed to the effective commercial exploitation of these technologies and the simultaneous development of a range of institutions and institutional frameworks, both of which continue to shape the way in which the media operates today. Parallel to the liberalisation and deregulation of the media empires, has been the rapid globalisation of the commercial media, advertising and telecommunications markets, all of which have contributed to the process. The development of communication is thus inseparable from the development of media industries (Thompson, 1999). It is these industries that are today responsible for the transmission of ‘valorised symbolic forms’, ‘symbolic goods’ or ‘cultural products’ (i.e. those objects produced by the media subject to economic valorisation). In today’s world, culture is tied up with economic production, and increasing importance is given to the study of cultural products within (capitalist) forms of production and exchange.

The media industry consequently holds a unique place in policy discourse. In addition to being a large important sector contributing (directly and indirectly) to national export earnings, it has highly visible political and social roles. It is an important factor in both the furthering of democracy and the sustenance of autocracies, whilst at the same time furnishing the entertainment that is at once a useful escape from the stress of daily life and a reflection of local, national, and global cultures. Few manifestations of globalisation are as visible, widespread, and hotly contested as the increasing complexity of world wide cultural exchanges and interactions, and the increased proliferation of global cultural products. Cultural globalisation raises important (and often controversial) questions concerning the effect of global culture on local and national cultures, such as those concerning the threat posed to cultural diversity by global culture and the way in which national governments should respond to its perceived effects (Crane, 2002). These issues have gained in importance following the ease with which information and symbolic content can be transmitted over vast distances in a relatively short amount of time. Today, it is a well-documented fact that the largest use of the international communication infrastructure is for the delivery of media products – commercial and public – in the form of information, news, and entertainment (Thussu, 2000). This has, in turn, been spurred on by recent developments and trends in the global media industry.
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