

Media, Globalization of Culture, and Identity Crisis in Developing Countries

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This article focuses on the globalization of culture and the role of media in the ensuing identity crisis (both individual and social) resulting from this process. The article tries to display the basic concept of the process of globalization with all of its effects, threats, challenges, and opportunities and will illustrate its interaction with the media in developing countries. The essay will show that the main components of power structure in today's world can be linked to these two complimentary processes –globalization and the information era. The interaction between these two phenomena has changed the quality of communications which, in turn, is creating new personal and social identities (personification and personifying). According to survey results, it is clear that in societies which are not efficient in reinforcing and strengthening their communication infrastructures and which are unable to compete with the new methods of communication and information exchange, identity formation gains political, economic and culturally adverse and asserts an unrepairable damage. In conclusion, the article tries to present some proposals for developing countries' media –as the active player of this era – and offers ways to deal with the unavoidable process of globalization and identity crisis.

Globalization, the New Phenomenon

Globalization, which also has been called global construction, global orientation and global expansion by various schools of thought, is the latest phase process in an old process rooted in the expansion of modern capitalism and encompassing the political, economic and cultural realms worldwide. Modern capitalism that first emerged in the sixteenth century is a far more complex phenomenon embracing a broader economic spectrum and a more detailed definition than the concept of common market. Thus, some experts view it as “contraction and condensation at the global scale coupled with ever-increasing expansion of awareness” (Robertson, 1992, p. 8).

Many have expressed different and even contradictory definitions of globalization in their discussions over the past few years. According to British sociologist Anthony Giddens, some social sectors are utterly pessimistic about globalization and reject it in its entirety. On the other hand, there are those who perceive globalization as an undeniable reality with profound and inevitable consequences.

Yet there are others, who are generally referred to as Global Expansionists. They view globalization as an inescapable development developing ever-increasing momentum due to the intensification of global interactions and the waning importance of national boundaries. They believe that national economies, cultures and policies will integrate into a global network and that local and national authority and hence dominance will diminish in favor of a homogenous global economy and culture (Held, 2000).

On the other side of the spectrum, there are opposing arguments against the virtues of

globalization. Giddens (1999b) refers to them as the pessimists, and they include a gamut of those from the traditionalists to those challenging the dominance of capitalism. They perceive globalization as synonymous to westernization and Americanization. They even include the environmentalists.

This school of thought argues that globalization will create a world of winners and losers along with the global conquest and economic domination of specific political groups, especially in the wealthy nations like the U.S. These groups are strong enough to resist any pressures to alter the new world-order and could impose their desires and goals as global agendas and work plans. The promoters of this school of thought point out to the waning of national sovereignty and local identity and the eventual prevalence of inequality and injustice in the world (Rupert, 2000).

Meanwhile, some dispute the idea of the “global village” introduced by Marshall McLuhan and envision more of a “global pillaging” for the underdeveloped countries (Held, 2000, p. 25).

There are other theoreticians who dispute this widely held view. For example, Giddens challenges this prospect and believes that the wealthy should not be blamed for all the negative aspects of this phenomenon, which actually is to some extent very similar to the westernization process. However, globalization is becoming ever-increasingly decentralized and thus it is not dominated by a certain group of countries or multinational companies. Even the western countries are being affected by this new trend. There is increasing evidence of Inverted Colonialism. Inverted Colonialism could be defined as the impact of non-western countries on the development of western culture and economy (Giddens, 1999a).

According to Giddens not only is globalization a novel experience, it is a revolutionary phenomenon. In addition to its economic consequences, its political, technological and cultural impact can not be underestimated. More than anything, globalization is influenced by the advancement of communication systems.

In the middle of these two extreme positions, there is a third opinion, which is called “transformationalism.” This perspective gives limited importance to globalization and emphasizes the significance of national and local institutions (Mirabedini, 2001, p. 147).

This third view does not condemn the whole of globalization and praises its positive aspects. These scholars note that although globalization imposes a great deal of pressure on local economies and cultures, it is possible to transform this threat into an opportunity, thereby resisting being conquered by it.

Based on this viewpoint, the leaders of the world would support the notion of democratization of global institutions; and nations could play a decisive role in the policy-making process under the framework of the new world order and solidify their territorial rights and legitimacy (Held, 2000). The acceptance of this notion is reflected in the response of former French Premier Leonel Jospin on the issue of France’s national identity in the globalization process. He said, “We will do our best to make globalization an internal and endemic process in compliance and harmony with our way of life.” He argued that “The course this globalization process takes will depend on the action we take in relation to it, because although globalization is a fact, it is not an end in itself. We must bring it under control if we are to enjoy its benefits and prevent its negative aspects” (Jospin, 2001).

It can thus be concluded that the present range of opinions on globalization, differs from the definition of capital expansion of the 16th century. In this sense it is a new concept based

on the ever-increasing time-space compression and the enhancement of public knowledge and awareness due to the profound alteration in communication systems and its immense impact on economic, political and cultural trends.

It can be stated fairly that “Globalization is a complex phenomenon, marked by two opposing forces. On the one hand, it is characterized by massive economic expansion and technological innovation. On the other hand, there is increased inequality, cultural and social tumult, and individual alienation” (Mowlana, 1998, p. 22).

Globalization of Culture and Identity in the Information Era

On the subject of globalization, the most controversial debate is raised on the issue of cultural globalization and its main topic, the “identity crisis” and the role of mass media as a facilitating tool for its expansion or limitation.

The notion of cultural globalization has prompted various reactions, reflecting contradictory implications. Some perceive this phenomenon as an instrument for establishment of universal unity and democracy based on a global culture signified as the “global village.” According to the principles of McLuhan (1968, 1964), this is due to the expansion of new communication systems. However, others disagree and contend that globalization has not resulted in a unified political and economic identity (Rajaei, 2001). In contrast, cultural globalization has destroyed national identities.

Fukuyama challenges the idea of cultural globalization. He argues that despite external economic pressures, societies tend to preserve their individual identities and cultural values eventually determine the economic direction of the countries. This doesn't mean that societies will not be impacted by the globalization trend. However, there are more profound elements in national cultures, which resist the uniformity derived from economic and political ideologies.

Critics argue that cultural globalization will result in cultural dominance and supremacy. The deterioration of endemic cultures will be replaced with a universal culture promoting excessive consumption and dominance of the economic and information technology powers of the world.

These scholars believe that the western world is unfit to provide a suitable response to cultural globalization. This is because it is being challenged by numerous social and cultural predicaments, itself.

Tomlinson, one of the world-class theorists says: “The cultural globalization that we are witnessing today is not the net result of human endeavors and experiences and even it has not equitably benefited from cultural diversities. Rather it is the manifestation of dominance of a certain overpowering culture” (Skelton & Allen, 1999, p. 23).

These researchers emphasize that the efforts made to conform to the aggressive culture or interpret western culture in various parts of the world have had disastrous results and have revealed insurmountable cultural gaps. Thus, it is impossible to create a global culture with this procedure, and it only widens the existing gap between cultures.

Doubtless, globalization has affected certain values rooted in major religions and cultures of the world. Concepts of good and evil, right and wrong, individualism and pluralism, individual interaction with the society and the very meaning of life are all warped and corrupted by global capitalism, international markets, mass media and the promotion of

excessive consumption. Even some local languages and valuable traditions are on the verge of disappearance as the result of globalization. Global consumerism is now forming a homogeneous global culture where indigenous cultures of the South are being replaced by Western cultures (Muzaffar, 2002).

Others like the philosopher like Coleman James express their dissatisfaction with the globalization. He notes the alienation of societies with their history and their fascination with foreign values. These new values and beliefs have no root or connection to their national identity. Therefore, globalization weakens the traditions and values of local cultures for the sake of universal uniformity and dominance of a commanding culture through the formidable power of international media.

Identity in the Age of Information

A quick glance at the criticisms and resistance challenging cultural globalization indicates most of it is aimed to challenge the virtue of globalization and its contradiction with integrity of identities.

For example, Manuel Castells, the Spanish sociologist and professor at the University of Berkeley, concludes that our world and our lives are being shaped through two opposite trends namely, globalization and integrity of identities. The information revolution and reconstruction of capitalism have established a new society that could be called the “network society” (Castells, 2005). The most important characteristic of this society is its prevalent culture established by a diverse and comprehensive media system.

This novel society threatens traditional social institutions and alters both culture and collective identity. Simultaneously, it creates wealth and poverty and thus introduces fresh threats and opportunities.

For Castells, *identity* is “the process of construction of meaning on the basis of a cultural attribute, or a related set of cultural attributes, that is given priority over other sources of meaning” (Castells, 1997, p. 6). For a given individual, or for a collective actor, there may be a plurality of identities, but these are a source of stress and contradiction in both self-representation and social action

Lacking a concise and accurate definition of identity in the age of information and globalization, it is impossible to define the role of mass media as the most important contemporary instrument for strengthening or weakening of the identity crisis.

In the definition of identity, two conflicting components namely its old elements and historical roots along with the elements of current events and future changes must be considered. Thus, identity has two components of correlation and individuality. A relevant example is the interaction of an individual with his/her society (either the national society or the international society). The individual constantly receives input from the environment and at the same time possesses his/her unique characteristics, which differentiates his/her independence from social pluralism. If the aforesaid definition of identity is accepted, then it is evident that correlation and interaction causes alterations in the individual as well as the surrounding environment (Khaniki, 2001).

Cultural identity is not a mere collection of thoughts, beliefs, traditions, languages and behaviors accumulated through time. Rather it is a cultural selection on how to respond to an outside stimulant in various time frames. As a result, cultural identity is a work plan created

by people for their future activities based on past experiences.

Some sociologists believe “the combination of economic participation and cultural identity is made possible not by a choice between equality and difference, but by the desire to construct or reconstruct a personal or collective experience which combines both universes and a desire to be a social actor” (Touraine, 2003, p. 547).

The social manifestation of identity has always been affected by power struggles and basically has three contributing sources for its inception:

1. Legitimizing Identity: introduced by the dominant institutions of society to extend and rationalize their domination over social actors. Legitimizing identities generate civil societies and their institutions, which reproduce what Max Weber called “*rationale Herrschaft*” (rational power).

2. Resistance Identity: produced by those actors who are in a position/condition of being excluded by the logic of domination. Identity for resistance leads to the formation of communes or communities as a way of coping with otherwise unbearable conditions of oppression.

3. Project Identity: proactive movements which aim at transforming society as a whole, rather than merely establishing the conditions for their own survival in opposition to the dominant actors. Feminism and environmentalism fall under this category (Castells, 1997, p. 10-12).

During the era of modernization, planned identity stemmed from the heart of civil society. However in network society, the emergence of planned identity comes from the core of resistive social groups.

Some scholars especially Castles argue that the crisis of legitimacy has engulfed all institutions, since the development of globalization has dried up the fountain of legitimate identities. Institutions and organizations of civil society established on the foundation of democratic governments and the social contract between labor and capital are becoming increasingly superficial and are unable to address the living values of most people and have lost contact with ordinary citizens. The deterioration of common identity is synonymous with a decline of meaningful social orders, which vividly depicts our status (Castells, 2005).

The social challenges pressing the patterns of dominance in network society, usually manifests itself in the form of establishing independent identities, which are alien with the organizational principles of the network society. They confront the ascendancy of technology, legitimacy of power and the logic of the market economy with their traditions and beliefs. One of the main distinctions of the social movements and cultural upheavals surrounding the issue of identity in the age of information (regardless of their type, either religious fundamentalism, nationalism, ethnic separatism) is that these identities do not stem from institutions of civil society. They introduce an adversarial social logic, completely distinct from the functioning principles of the dominant social institutions.

In the age of information, the prevalent logic of global networks is so powerful that the only way to defy their authority and dominance is to rebel against the whole system and depart from it by establishing another order with distinctive values and beliefs (Castells, 2005).

Moreover, there is a diversity of opinions in relation to the issue of identity and

globalization. For example, Giddens believes that it is erroneous to envision globalization only on a large scale and solely for giant systems. This process is not exclusively an external phenomenon; rather it is also an internal matter and is directly intertwined with individualistic aspects of our livelihood including our individual identity. Therefore, it has a great influence.

From this perspective, the globalization theory of Giddens is similar to that of Robertson. Robertson defines globalization as “a form of institutionalization of the two-fold process involving the universalization of particularism and the particularization of universalism” (Robertson, 1992, p. 102).

In other words, globalization tends to integrate and dominate on the one hand and particularize on the other hand and the output of this particularization is the development of localization. Thus, globalization is inclined towards uniformity and integration and simultaneously strengthens cultural uniqueness (Khaniki, 2001).

Therefore, the inception of uniformity and generalization along side the intensification of cultural distinctiveness are concurrently evident, which has its own impact on the formation of identities.

According to Robertson’s theory, globalization can not be interpreted as creation of a global culture, rather there is an opportunity for various cultures to interact on a global scale.

The identity crisis is not a mere hypothetical and scholastic concern. There is a strong apprehension in regard to the conflict between global and local cultures and its implications. The clash of local and global cultures is the paradox of globalization on the international scene. In fact, there is no independent global culture, more accurately, certain aspects of national or regional culture enters the arena and becomes universal.

Localization is the manifestation of an individual’s or a group’s attempt to regain its identity. Thus, the most comforting and suitable reaction is to search deep inside the historical memory of a group or nation and try to regain past glory and supremacy. These self-assuring memories are intertwined with a specific place and time, which is the core of localization in eastern societies. These societies under the constant barrage of western cultures have no choice but to return to their traditional cultures (Mohammadi, 1992).

Media and Identity Challenges of Globalization

The assessment of mass media and its role in the age of information on the issue of identity and cultural crisis in the network society, which itself is the inevitable by-product of globalization, has become vitally important. The subject of globalization and the function of mass media are so intertwined that it is impossible to imagine globalization without the presence of media.

Some scholars go even further in emphasizing the significance of media and consider the mass media as the main player in the globalization process. They regard the media not just as a mere instrument, rather as an identity in its own right, which could compete with national governments in respect to its power and influence to alter the nature and essence of human societies (Rapping, 1997).

The information and communication revolution and the emergence of new technologies have redefined the meaning and realm of politics and power structure within societies. Thus, power is entrusted to those who produce, control and disseminate information more effectively (Mowlana, 1998).

Many theoreticians hold that power magnates and moguls prepare the news, information, science and political decisions at the national and international levels and then inject them to the societies through the media. Therefore, mass media is an instrument in the hand of the ruling class that not only justifies its authority it gains the support of its audiences.

On the other hand, it is impossible to ignore the great transformation and evolution taking place in international telecommunication during the era of globalization including centralization and integration of mass media and the advent of giant media tycoons. This new ownership of mass media has greatly influenced the content and dissemination of news as well as the commercial nature of cultural products. Although, some scholars promoting globalization praise the positive impact of mass media, there are many experts who criticize the negative role of media in weakening the identity of various societies.

The followers of the Frankfurt School like Adorno and his colleagues argue that the media has deprived humanity from its intellectual capacities and flexibility and has reduced mankind to a single dimensioned and isolated entity. Meanwhile, Markuze explains this subject as the creation of one-dimensional man. Men and women involved in this powerful media network, contribute to a society in which its members do not have strong links with each other and do not play a part in the stability of the social order in any meaningful form (Khaniki, 2001).

Moreover, many other scholars argue that one of the prominent tasks of the media in the globalization process has been its pursuit in developing a single cultural world. The culture sponsored by the western media is a culture, which dictates to the society what to eat, what to wear, how to live, what to think and what to know. This enormous chain of global communication institutions and its allies in the camp of capitalism have transformed the majority of ordinary people into obedient consumers, without identity or ability to command their destiny.

Thus, it is possible to divide the mass media in the globalization process into two categories, namely the aggressive media and the resistive media. The aggressive media are the colossal information institutions with countless audiences. Although they provide a diverse range of news and information, they pursue a limited set of objectives. These objectives include entertainment for leisure and pleasure as well as education for greater uniformity and harmony of audiences.

These institutions tend to remove spatial and temporal boundaries in order to eliminate identity barriers. The successful implementation of this task would pave the way for the strategic goal of the capitalist tycoons and giant industrialists to conquer the world market through exploitation of minds, the draining of brains in the developing countries and injecting a superficial sense of happiness and satisfaction.

On the other hand, the resistive media tends to utilize the open atmosphere in the global information system in order to disseminate its own culture and ideology. However, these information institutions generally do not comprehend the depth and dimensions of the prevailing tragedy and insist on promoting their local and national aspirations instead of finding a broader message for the vast global audiences. Thus, they always fail to compete with the aggressive media in absorbing potential audiences. It is important to point out that technical and practical methods used in presenting the contending culture, is its Achilles heel, not the culture itself.

Conclusion

It is fair to assume that with the rapid development and expansion of globalization, the dominance of a prevalent culture and the ensuing consequences are inevitable. At the same time it is irrefutable that such dominance will result in cultural disorders and upheavals in value systems, especially in the South countries, which ultimately will manifest in an identity crisis in these states. Scholars in developing societies must come up with reasonable and practical solutions to this problem and not only preserve and protect their identity, but also provide means to integrate into the globalization process.

It seems that the Third Way, namely accurate identification and knowledgeable selection of options along with active and innovative participation is the most suitable remedy. In the face of these challenges, societies must be realistic and refrain from blind submission to the prevailing culture. This approach holds the potential to alter the current threats into new opportunities.

The most effective method of combating the aggressive cultures and preserving the cultural identity of nations is to rationally utilize the new telecommunication technologies and have a clear plan of action for peaceful coexistence with other cultures, races and nations. Each country shall evolve its own suitable structure in the cultural arena; otherwise it will be terminated. As Eric Fromm puts it, "history is the graveyard of gigantic cultures with tragic conclusions, because they failed to respond to the new challenges and were unable to adapt and react with a rational plan of action" (Fromm, 1968, p. 62).

Thus, the most effective measure by all the nations especially the countries of the South is to prepare a transparent policy and a comprehensive course of action in regard to dissemination of information and give emphasis to organization, investment and planning for their media.

Establishment of media coupled with innovative communication policies is the scheme used by countries of the North like Canada and France as well as the countries of the South like Indonesia and Singapore to protect their territorial integrity and national identity. This issue is even of higher priority for countries with diverse languages and ethnic groups.

Even in 1997, the European Union prepared its new communication and media policy on the three pillars namely, enhancement of national and regional media coverage, strengthening European communication capabilities and protection of European media against the American media.

Against the new backdrop of globalization and development of mass media, the South faces both opportunities and challenges. These may best be examined by tracing the four trends of (a) ethnicization of mass media, (b) development of alternative media, (c) design of comprehensive policies, and (d) internationalization of the mass media within the South. Many countries in the South are concerned with bolstering their national identity and strengthening their role in the globalization of media and technology. They recognize that information and communications are increasingly the source of power in our world today, and those who cannot compete effectively in the communications and information sectors will suffer both economically and culturally (Mowlana, 1998, pp. 22-38).

It has to be emphasized that the local and national media can not accomplish their objective of preserving national identities unless they can manage to hold on to their traditional audiences and be able to attract new viewers and listeners as well. This objective is

only possible through accentuation of the advantages of their national cultures and enhancement of media coverage of micro-cultures.

Many scholars believe that one of the most influential means for preservation of territorial integrity and protection of national identity is to establish a special media for specific groups and audiences. The advent and strengthening of media alternatives, represents the capability of various societies in introducing their own needs and point of views through utilization of advanced and up dated technology.

In short, the rise of alternative media signals the empowerment of the communities of the South in expressing their opinions and needs by using modern technologies to obtain their participation in the public sphere.

Therefore, a powerful measure to combat the aggression of the global media is the establishment of national and regional news agencies and media. Meanwhile, cultural commodities shall be selectively accepted and localized to satisfy local needs. However, investment on production and dissemination of local cultural commodities in global markets should not be underestimated.

Many intellectuals also argue that various societies shall continuously up date their cultures and identities in order to adapt to the ever-changing world events and to preserve their identities and capabilities in the modern world. They must synergize the development of technology with the enhancement of their cultures.

The best instrument for filling this cultural gap, especially in the countries of the South is the appropriate utilization of the immense influence of the media on education in strategic planning.

According to Giddens, nations are bound to redefine and review their identities in the modern age. It is essential to renovate the old institutions or establish new ones worthy of the globalization era. We could and we should strive to gain more control over world events. This objective is only attainable through an effective and timely response to the incoming challenges. We can not ignore the changes and can not continue doing business as usual. Globalization is a lasting trend, not a mere accident (Giddens, 1999b).

Finally, the countries of the South should realize that attainment of western technology is a must. It is possible to masterfully select the right technology in order to provide our audiences with intellectual alternatives and correct choices.

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