Reflections on Critique of 'Media' In the Globalisation Debate

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Abstract

Media is intrinsic to the debates about the outset and perfusion of globalisation with its different channels acting as primary drivers in transforming the socio-economic cum cultural geography. Its role strengthened with technological advancements altering its character of engagements with different actors in a social setup through its cultural products. This paper attempts to analyse the critique on media in the debates on the globalisation process. Since technological advancements decentralised media by its interactive nature, its role transformed from being a vehicle of globalisation process to being a medium of resistance. This democratising nature of new media channels empowers local cultural communities in their resistance to the negatively perceived characteristics of the globalisation and its forces through what this author calls as 'cultural reassertion'. Literature on media, globalisation and culture is examined extensively to inform the discussion.

Keywords: *Globalisation, Diversity, New Media, Cultural Marginality, Media*

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Introduction

Globalisation and Media

Before tracing the debate over globalisation and its interrelation with media, it is imperative to define the term globalisation. Various scholars from diverse disciplinary domains have defined it variedly and as such a consensual definition is lacking. However, what remains basic to globalisation process are its social, economic, political and cultural contexts as these remain interconnected, that is, the linkages across time and space. The contemporary use and definition of this term is usually referred to a 1983 *Harvard Business Review* article which flagged that there existed an emergent reality propounded by Globalisation has become one of the most significant yet controversial topics of discussion as scholars turned their attention to it starting early 1990s. Within globalisation media is intrinsic to the debates about its onset as well as perfusion. The received 'views' about the media are that its different channels are not only paramount but primary forces that drive transformation in the socio-cultural geography in terms of diffusion and globalisation. As the technological revolution made disruptions in the media landscape transforming the very character of its engagements and outlook with different actors in a social setup, the new media were credited to play a formidable role in furthering the globalisation process. The media were ascribed as having facilitated the very exchange of information, culture, and knowledge through multiple means including news broadcasts, audio-visual programming, new technologies, film, music, sports and various other ways. While on one hand this phenomenon allowed global diffusion of information influencing cultures and societies at tandem to result in what has been referred as 'globalised culture', there equally emerged a response to these entrenchments through these very mediums to what the resistors called intrusions in their local or native socio-cultural spheres and spaces. These critiques on globalisation are adjudged as intrusion in the native cultural spheres and a threat to the diversity and pluralism as a homogenised 'globalised culture' with similar characteristics being advocated. Therefore, it becomes imperative to contextualise the criticism on media and its new channels vis-à-vis its role as an intermediary in the debates on globalisation. This analyses the new channels of the media which are not only democratising the access to the communication technologies but also affording space to otherwise dormant media consumers to fight against the cultural intrusions carried out by same communication technologies by the diffusion of different cultural products.

Advancements in communication technologies wherein some transnational actors were aided to transform into global actors thereby leading to intensely complex interconnectedness on global level (Gulmez, 2017). Within multidisciplinary discourse, a number of other terms have become synonymous with globalisation – economic liberalisation (pursuit of free market), diffusion of communication technology, and Westernisation of socio-politico-cultural life (Irani & Noruzi, 2011). While for Wallerstein (1974) globalization signified "triumph of a capitalist world economy tied together by a global division of labour", for Giddens (1990) as the "intensification of worldwide social relations" in which happenings in one place are

either shaped by and affect events elsewhere, and for Dicken (1992) "a more advanced and complex form of internationalization which implies a degree of functional integration between internationally dispersed economic activities."

Robertson (1992) encompasses the entire world in the ambit of globalisation and argues that it refers to (a) the compression of the world by the global interdependence across domains as well as the global consciousness and (b) the intensification of the world. On the other hand, Tomlinson (1997) argues that globalisation refers to the worldwide development of inter-linkages at the level of social, cultural, institutional, and individual which makes the world look increasingly smaller as the process contracts the time-space dimensions. Tomlinson further tries to define the term in iconoclastic sense as it was viewed to be dismantling the local cultural signifiers in its attempts to promote a global unified cultural schema. This, however, also widens the social linkages as local becomes global and obstacles of communication are reduced. What it essentially means is that the globalisation with most advanced technological tools at its disposal not only accelerates the interchange in economic terms but also the ideas, social values, political values and cultural values over distance in shortened time. American Journalist Thomas Friedman in his 1999 book titled *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* defines it as "the establishment and intensification of – in particular, economic – interdependencies among different nations, which, in his opinion, would contribute to the prevention of violent conflicts (Gulmez, 2017)." Albrow (1990) argues that it refers to any and every phenomena that work towards integrating world into a single unified set up leading to the development of global society with conflicts disappeared. Beck (2000) while bringing in the nation, nation-state dimensions also flags the social aspects and contends that not only does the globalisation amend the interconnectedness of states and societies in national context, however, what is also important are its changes in social relations. He further argues:

> *Whatever constitutes 'society' and 'politics' becomes in itself questionable, because the principles of territoriality, collectivity and frontier are being questioned. More precisely: the assumed congruence of state and society is broken down and suspended: economic and social ways of acting, working and living no longer take place within the container of the state (p. 87).*

Beyond the lexical and disciplinary definitions and descriptions, it is imperative for us to explicate what holds for media globalisation because of the fundamental fact that the media with grandeur advancements in its technological domain remain primary driver of globalisation in all its aspects. There is a consensus amongst the scholars over the role of media within the globalisation debate even though its degree of involvement varies with Rantanen (2005) flagging that "most theorists agree that there is practically no globalisation without media and communications (p. 4)." Babran (2008) argues that the interrelationship between media and globalisation is so intertwined that the very imagination of this global phenomena is impossible without considerations of media's role in it. While the transnational corporations were at the base of global diffusion of products, the media became an important vehicle in their pursuit of global markets which transformed the very character of media itself. With

corporations using media for the diffusion of information, it was accompanied by the values in social, cultural and political domains even though their aim remained economical. Media globalisation became natural force multiplier for the transnational corporations given their mandate of information diffusion and widespread reach further expanded by communication technology revolution. Tehranian (1998) goes further to describe transnational media corporations along with other transnational corporations TNCs as the "main engines of globalization." Media globalisation became fundamental to the economic globalisation and so accompanied free market and economic liberalisation regimes. The changes unleashed in communication technologies in all its domains and mediums including television, cable, satellite transmissions, and importantly internet have widened media's reach in enormous ways as also enhancing its information transmission capability. While upholding media's central role in globalisation, Flew (2007) credits that it is due to globalised operations of media corporations which have facilitated global information flows and importantly framing information in ways that work towards creating shared meaning system. Within this context when Castells (1996) talks of network society structured by global communication network in a globalised world, he calls it as the 'capitalist society' in all its institutional expressions which has two features as "it is global and it is structured, to a large extent, around a network of financial flows (p. 502)." The very thesis of 'network society' that Manuel Castells propounded so forcefully remains an implication of the globalisation process that the technological advancements unfolded. This network society, argues Castells (2010), is truly a global society as there are no boundaries in the networks as has transformed the spatial characteristics of the social set up.

Thompson (1995) identifies some basic characterises of the media globalisation as the continued domination of the global mediascape by big transnational media empires (media ownership), the ways information is processed and disseminated by these media conglomerates, deregulated media environment these create and operate from, media content homogenisation of and its standardization diffusion, unequal information flow within global system varied access levels to people, and most importantly its intricate linkage to global capitalism while it serves its mandate by creating a consumerist market. Media's role in the globalisation process was theorised by Marshal McLuhan as he proclaimed that the world was turning into a 'global village' with the rapid global integration being manufactured through media. Herein the events in one place affect happenings in another place like in a small village despite being separated by time and space (Wang, 2008). It was expected that the media globalisation would lead to bottom up control and decentralisation of power. The media advancements essentially in the digital domain have dented previous one-way flow of information and interactive participatory mediums are decentralising information production and dissemination and so lead to democratisation of mediums. The media have enabled interconnectedness beyond the temporal and spatial domains to further the social interactions (Kaul, 2011). Wheeler (1997; in Wang, 2008, p. 204) argues on these lines and contends that the "new technologies allow for the globalization of the media economy, compress time, make spatial relations horizontal, relocate information." Scholars like Rapping (1997) go further and argue that media is an independent actor within the globalization process with its own

identity "which could compete with national governments in respect to its power and influence to alter the nature and essence of human societies (as cited by Babran, 2008, p. 217)."

Media, Culture and the Process of Globalisation

Media and culture are intimately connected to the debate of globalisation. Though the economic means are considered to be the driving forces behind globalisation, however, the means to achieve those interests remain intricately interconnected to degree of transformation in the targeted society through the mediums of communication via diffusion of cultural products. Like globalisation, there are multiple definitions and aspects associated with culture as well and both have been studied from multiple standpoints including anthropology, sociology, political science and communication studies among others (Crane, 2011). Culture is fluid that is gradually embodied into a shape by interactions amongst individuals which in turn allows them to define codes for the larger community and markers of differentiation with others (Hassi and Storti (2012). A change in cultural aspects is imperative for globalisation as Geertz (1973) argues that the culture is:

> *Historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and their attitudes toward life (p. 89).*

Kroeber and Kluckholn (1952) argue on similar lines and contend:

> *Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiment in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other, as conditioning elements of future action (p. 181).*

While the cultural expressions happen through "shared values, attitudes, beliefs, and practices of a social group, organization, or institution (Understanding Media and Culture, 2016, p. 4)." The channels of communication remain very significant for its transmission. Within the social setup the "representations, practices, values and identities have cultural meanings" as Stuart Hall proclaims it "permeates all of society" and thereby very significant to construct an identity with which people identify and become a basis for forging alliances, associations and solidarities (Sommier, 2014). In a socio-cultural set-up these mediums have primarily remained traditional channels like folk as also modern mass mediums like print, radio, and television. The internet-based channels are also making a foray into this domain even as the access to these remains limited. Of the functions in a society, the media has traditionally been considered as a vehicle of transmission of cultural values as also their preservation. It is through the media that social values are disseminated amongst

people through various means be it television programming, advertisements amongst others.

With this interrelation between media and culture in perspective, it has to be flagged that in the debates about globalisation and its intended project of global society or McLuhan's 'global village', culture along with media remains central to the discourse. However, it has been alternatively referred as cultural imperialism wherein particular Western and more so American values are being propagated as global values at the expense of the local national cultures (Wang, 2008). The widespread reach of transnational corporations across continents, countries, and cities and popularity of multinational brands like McDonalds, Apple, CNN, and MTV among others are what Kraidy (2002) calls "unmistakable signs of the fulfilment of Marshall McLuhan's prophecy of the Global Village (p. 360)." The link between the process of globalisation and culture remains international media through its varied channels like satellite television and now internet. Media remains the primary channel of the dissemination of mediated culture of the global corporations in their efforts to further their interests and create environments feasible to their operations (Wang, 2008). The effects of the media on people and so cultures have been viewed strongly since the emergence of communication discipline in mid twentieth century.

The debate and discourse about the role of communication media in the globalisation of culture has been viewed by many scholars in terms of imperialism in both cultural and media sense—something that aims at invading and dominating the other national and local cultures and as such promoting the Western consumerist culture (Crane, 2011). This has been the serious complaint about the media from cultural communities outside the West accusing media of propagating Westernised cultural products that further risk obliterating and muddying the indigenous cultures. The other context through which cultural critique of the globalisation is voiced is the hybridisation of culture which essentially is the aversion of traditional one to new one with outside influences (Pieterse, 1994). Global media with its widespread distribution of cultural products infringes on cultural domains across countries and have faced criticisms wherein it has been accused of promoting alien Western cultural values at the expense of traditional cultural values which it seeks to undermine, control and dominate. (Kaul, 2011). The fears were not misplaced given the history of relation that global North and South have shared and which was manifested in the politico-economic subordination of South to West and so the direction of globalisation towards West at the expense of the rest (Gulmez, 2017). Tomlinson (1997) argues that this history "provides a very strong context in which cultural as well as political-economic globalization can be grasped (p. 6)." Nearly all descriptions of the globalization process admit of its 'uneven' character – of the fact that "its effects and consequences are not uniformly experienced everywhere in the world (Kaul, 2011)." Countries that acquired early access to the advanced communication technologies went on to transmit their cultural products, often laced with their ideological orientations, and therefore attained an advantage over others particularly the developing countries. "The unequal relationship in the flow of news increases the relative global power of large and wealthy news-producing countries and hinders the growth of an appropriate national identity and self-image (McQuail, 2000, p. 222)."

What makes this evident is the widespread familiarity and global trending of Western (more so American) cultural trends in the developing and underdeveloped regions of the world. As Tomlinson (1997) highlights that these cultural goods include any index "from clothes to food to music to film and television to architecture…and there is no ignoring the sheer massive presence of Western (meaning here North American, Western European, possibly Australian) cultural goods, practices and styles in every inhabited area of the world (p. 5)." These were seen as threats in low income countries to the local cultures, cultural industries which were unable to face the competition from the global cultural industries as they lacked resources and expertise. However, this has to be highlighted that the transmission of cultural products did not start in 1980s as globalisation was being talked about but has historical precedent. Hassi and Storti (2012) date this to industrial revolution and contend that from there onwards the "societies began to have access to machines which allowed them to create cultural products and export them across borders (p. 6)." Though there were attempts to transmit these products across the states, what prevented were the rigid state structures that shielded local cultures from external incursions. The cultural imperialism thesis of globalisation could be grounded in the historical precedents and facts about inequality between the West and the rest of world predating the present discourse of globalisation (Keily, 2000). Many scholars interpreted globalisation in terms of dissemination of American values and domination over others' socio-cultural values and thereby influencing their way of life (McQuail, 2000). Though cultural imperialism was firstly seen in political terms, however, the role of media conglomerates became evident afterwards. Consequently, these were seen as gatekeepers and controllers of cultural products of various platforms including television, film, music apart from publishing industries with their control over production and distribution (Kellner, 1999).

The most visible forms of cultural globalisation could be expansion of pop culture primarily of American cultural values through products like movies, music, television shows, fast food and clothing among others (Tomlinson, 1997). The culture of restaurants through the popularisation of chains like McDonalds and KFCs among others is also a vivid intrusion of global players in the local markets thereby influencing the lifestyles of peoples across. These cultural products or phenomena like pop culture are accompanied by values as Peter Berger, Austrian-American sociologist, argues:

> *Take the case of rock music. Its attraction is not just due to a particular preference for loud, rhythmic sound and dangerously athletic dancing. Rock music also symbolizes a whole cluster of cultural values—concerning self-expression, spontaneity, released sexuality, and perhaps most importantly, defiance of the alleged stodginess of tradition (Culture and Globalization, p. 11).*

Many scholars have flagged that more than cultural imperialism it is the cultural hybridisation that has taken place wherein local cultures get influenced by external ones and take up values from there. Iwabuchi (2002) contends that in the hybridisation phenomena, the globalisation is localised and the globalised cultural products are localised to conform to local tastes of the targeted cultural community. This identifies

with general media effects theory of Uses and Gratifications which prioritises the audiences of media texts and contends that the media consumers have the power to decide their specific media needs and do not accept everything and anything thrown at them. On the similar lines Crane (2011) argues that the:

> *People who are exposed to foreign cultures are influenced selectively, depending upon the characteristics of their national or ethnic cultures, and are likely to integrate foreign elements with their own cultures… Alternatively, people synthesize diverse cultural influences in their environment to produce distinctive hybrid cultural practices, institutions and meanings (p. 2).*

While critics decry the effects of cultural globalisation having adverse effects on local cultures and undermine them, however, scholars like Francis Fukuyama argue against this notion. Fukuyama contests the very idea of cultural globalization and argues that though the effects of global cultural products cannot be out-rightly dismissed but the communities and societies have inherent tendency to secure their identities and core cultural values (Economic Globalization and Culture, Online). From the above discussion, it is evident that most of the scholars, albeit cynically, decry the role of global media conglomerates in their diffusion of Western per se American cultural products that threaten to the local cultures of their indigenous identity and character.

The Role of Media in Resisting Cultural Globalisation

In the preceding section, the focus remained on explicating the intricacies and interconnectedness between media and culture in the light of globalisation critique. This section aims to reflect on how the same media with its participatory forms and channels act as sources of resistance against the cultural incursions by outside forces. Like the multiple aspects to globalization, its dislocating consequences have invited resistance from individuals and groups in multiple spheres including culture. With the advancements in communication technologies, as Mowlana (1998) argues, the very social realm was redefined in terms of power politics which also delegated authority to the individuals and groups that "produce, control and disseminate information more effectively (Babran, 2008, p. 217)."

However, it is these same advancements that have made the new media, in particular the internet-based channels with their participatory and interactive characteristics, more relevant to the people towards their reassertion of identities and promotion of cultures (Wei & Kolko, 2005). Prins (2002) while examining the role of advanced mediums by the cultural communities argues that internet has emerged as a powerful tool for the indigenous communities enabling them to "to represent themselves and to do so largely on their own terms and according to their own aesthetic preferences (p. 71)." In the larger picture, the success of television channels for example in Brazil and India reflects the consolidation and reinforcement of local cultural tastes and values. The traditional mediums and per se the folk mediums interact with the new mediums and renew to better serve the intended cultural means. Movius (2010) has argued that the ever expanding network of communication technologies pushes new forms of media flows in both local and global contexts as

"new media technologies allow for media content to flow easily across borders and enable users to become producers, which in turn lead to hybrid media forms…New technology and the global distribution of the internet allow people to create or contribute to the news and provide new sources and forms of news (p. 9)."

If we take a cursory look at the broadcasting television industry as well as internet-based platforms especially in the regional local language sector, there has been exponential growth in the same. The Indian media sector presents a powerful example, which can be taken into consideration for the sake of this discussion. The country has witnessed an exponential growth in the local regional language viewership of the content, which has forced the major television corporations to start new ventures in the regional language. Zee Entertainment Enterprises, first Indian satellite television in private sector started in 1991, was started to produce Indian content against the growing Western content that would be beamed to Indian market previously. If we consider the platforms offered by the corporation, apart from major Hindi entertainment and news channels like Zee 24 Ghanta, Zee News, & Pictures, & TV, Zee Action, the group caters to around a dozen other linguistic demographics through close to 41 domestic channels like Big Ganga (Bhojpuri) Zee 24 Kalak (Gujarati), Zee 24 Taas (Marathi), Zee Bangla (Bengali), Zee Kannada, Zee Salaam (Urdu), Zee Tamil, Zee Telugu apart from many others (ZEE Entertainment Enterprise, 2020). This is in consonance with how people use media actively which pushes the media conglomerates to create cultural content in the local setting, local language and distribute through feasible channels that would make it accessible to the most of the people. It was such a push of localisation that forced an international media conglomerate of Rupert Murdoch's Satellite Television Asian Region (STAR), based out of Hong Kong, to go local in their content production. STAR was conceived as a subsidiary of 21 First Century Fox in 1993 to beam American content to Asian market (predominantly China and India). Though the network was acquired by Walt Disney in 2017, however what is important for this discussion is that the network was forced to localise its content and enter the regional Indian media market and offer the locally produced content (Wang, 2008). To tap the local market, it started offering content through channels like Star Jalsha (Bengali), Star Pravah (Marathi), Star Maa (Telugu), Star Vijay (Tamil), Star and Suvarna (Kannada) apart from many other platforms including online (STAR TV, 2020). It is not only the Indian market that pushed global media conglomerates to localise but other markets like China among many others required the same. These groups not only reformed the general television content but had a profound influence in the transformation of Indian cinema culture. Dissanayake (2006) argues that these channels have introduced newer elements to inflect the expressive culture towards "self-understandings of nationhood" to cater to the audiences' pursuit of the content that reflects 'Indianness' (p. 33-34).

Additionally, with technological interventions and advancements, the interactive nature of new media technologies democratised the media and allows people, who till recently were the sole consumers of media content, to turn into content creators (Cascante, 2011; Eijaz & Ahmed, 2011). This not only helps in reinforcing the local cultural values but also enables the cultural content producers in the formal set up to understand what exactly people, a profit-making market for them, want and so work towards offering content on similar lines. Therefore, this author

argues that the new media advancements, which resulted in the convergence of the media channels with easy user-friendly access, has unleashed a revolution in the cultural domain by allowing local content creators to produce whatever suits to the cultural sensibilities of their communities. A case in point in contemporary sense is the extreme popularity enjoyed by the new mediums of communications like social media like YouTube, Instagram and now TikTok among a host of others. These not only allow a content production by people, who till yesterday were regarded a passive consumers of the media's cultural products, but also acts as a channel of response to the global for the local.

Conclusion

As discussed in the previous sections, globalisation has been variously termed as a process that would obliterate the local cultures in the different parts of the world and media being its active participant or an enabler. However, notwithstanding these concerns it could be argued that the new advancements in the communication technologies and consequent changing nature of the same have offered platforms to not only defend the cultural identities and values but also to redefine and further those by creating local content. The threat of cultural homogenisation due to globalisation and emergence of a global culture, even though some traits like restaurant culture exist, seems far away even though the notions of space and time have been dislocated and redefined by new technologies. In this context, what could be argued and reaffirmed is that there are two processes that are happening parallel, which includes cultural hybridisation and 'cultural reassertion'. In the former, the global and the local intersect with and influence each other in fixed contexts while in the latter the local reasserts its own identity to fight forces and instruments of globalisation that aim at transforming the local towards legitimation of these ideological cultural products. In both these cases, the role of media is paramount and cannot be underemphasised.

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