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## BEYOND MEDIA GLOBALIZATION: A LOOK AT CULTURAL INTEGRITY FROM A POLICY PERSPECTIVE

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**Abstract** — The development of satellite and computer technologies have allowed audiences around the world easier access to large volumes of foreign media content. But unlike what was anticipated, the homogenizing effect of media globalization has remained rather limited, and when it occurs, it often does with a particularizing effect by embracing differences in the audiences. Policy-wise, in contrast to the defensive measures many decision makers adopted when global and regional media made their first appearances, we have witnessed a change to a more pragmatic approach, especially in Asia, as more nations seek to export as well as import cultural products. The emphasis on “Asian values” and the waning desire of formulating a common culture in Europe are indications of the complexities involved in the integration and disintegration of cultures. What theories of cultural imperialism and post modernism failed to take into account, is that media, whether global, regional, national or local, are but one of the many factors involved in this process.

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### INTRODUCTION

When Marshall McLuhan (1968) proposed the concept of “global village”, it stirred a widespread sense of novelty; that was nearly 30 years ago. Today the idea is coming closer to our everyday reality than ever before; satellite television reaches the most remote corners of the world, and information flows across national borders at a speed and volume never seen in human history.

Yet despite all these developments, we have not seen the emergence of a unified, homogeneous global culture as some had anticipated; on the contrary, there seems to be a trend moving toward the opposite direction. In Europe, there are reports of an ethno-nationalist revival (Schlesinger, 1993), and in Asia, “Asian values” are high on both the political and the cultural policy agenda.

Whether the current emphasis on cultural identity and values reflects a reaction to media’s power in undermining information control and national sovereignty is open to discussion. But even if such reaction is short-term and rhetorical in nature, the fact that there are such developments shows that several questions are begging for answers: has

media influence on cultural change been overestimated, and perhaps more precisely, how much do we understand the interactive relationship between media and culture? In addition, what is actually taking place in the process of media globalization, and what is its implications to the way we conceptualize cultural integration which has presumably preoccupied the mind of policy makers (Yeap, 1994)?

Obviously not all the questions can be answered at one time, but by examining audience responses to the advent of transnational broadcasting, business strategies adopted by media corporations and policy measures in response to the changes that are taking place, this paper seeks to analyze the influence of media in their globalization process. The analysis then formulates the basis for discussing the meaning of cultural integrity, and options for policy makers.

### **MEDIA GLOBALIZATION**

The term "globalization" is often used to denote the growing importance of the global community as an economic, political and cultural entity that forms the framework for individual activities and nation-state operations. It brings events and relationships "at distance" into local contextualities, and at the same time subject nation-states to increasing external influences. It is conceived both as a journey and a destination—the arrival at the globalized state (Featherstone, 1990; Giddens, 1991; Ferguson, 1992).

Despite its popularity in the 1990s, the concept is not without problems. As pointed out by Ferguson (1992), first is the ambiguity in meaning. Some have attempted to interpret globalization by focusing on the forces that contribute to the structuration of the world as a whole: growing economic interdependence, expanding transnational business community, eroding national sovereignty, and homogenizing material and cultural consumption. Meanwhile others, notably postmodernists, have placed the centre of attention on the emergence of a common culture of consumption and style.

Ferguson argued that in addition to the problem with meaning, there is also the problem of evaluation, namely confusing what "should be" and what "is", and the problem of evidence when the supposedly "global" linkages remain confined to one-third of the world population.

To avoid the problem of evaluation, in this paper, "globalization" will be discussed in light of what is, instead of what should be. The problem of evidence, however, is closely linked with the problem of meaning; obviously there is no telling what empirical evidence is called for if there is no consensus on what the term means. Like some other concepts in social sciences, there is not yet a set of accepted criteria on which we can determine whether, or to what extent "globalization" has been fulfilled, let alone media globalization.

While scientifically "measuring" media globalization may be difficult, it is possible to discuss it as a trend on the basis of empirical data which indicate a rapid growth of transnational media, most notably satellite broadcast industry because of its ability to reach vast audiences, and international trade of cultural products.

A look at the recent growth of satellite television shows both the scope and scale of globalization. In Asia, Star TV reached a penetration rate of 11.1 million households in 12 nations within 2 years of its inauguration. It is estimated that by the year 2000, there will be 900 satellite transponders serving the region (Lee & Wang, 1995). In Latin America, the number of satellite television viewers is expected to reach one million by the end of 1997 (Boyer, 1996). As a single medium, Cable News Networks (CNN) was reaching audiences in over 150 nations and territories in the early 1990s (Ferguson, 1992), more than doubled the number in the late 1980s (Schiller, 1989).

Faced with such a surge in satellite broadcast popularity, one immediate concern of many governments—especially those with tight rules on the diffusion of information—was their weakening control, a concern reflected in the initial attempts in restricting, or banning satellite dishes. After reviewing policy measures regarding satellite television in Asian nations, Chan (1992) discovered four major types of responses: virtual suppression as found in Singapore and Malaysia, where satellite television was banned; regulated openness as found in Hong Kong and the Philippines, where direct reception of satellite television programs was allowed, but the government maintains control over redistribution of such programs over cable networks; illegal openness such as the case of India and Taiwan, where direct reception was legal, redistribution over cable networks was not—but was flourishing anyway; and suppressive openness as in China, where the execution of orders banning satellite dishes was ineffective.

Of the four types of responses Chan observed, three—including virtual suppression, illegal openness and suppressive openness—featured measures to restrict the expansion of satellite television. However, what took place in many of these countries, for example, Taiwan, Malaysia, China, Indonesia and Turkey (Lee & Wang, 1995; Sahin & Aksoy, 1993) only served to prove Jussawalla's (1993: 128) point that "there is no way that governments can stop the flow of information from entering their countries because of the wide prevalence of satellite technology".

Faced with the challenge of deregulation and increasing popularity of transnational broadcasting, governments were left with little choice but to adopt a more liberalized policy strategy. In Taiwan, first satellite dishes, then cable television were legalized; the Malaysian government has softened its stance against the reception of satellite programs, and Singapore is on its way to a 100-channel cable system which will allow the government to retain some form of control.

What is worthy of our attention in this process, is why some governments looked the other way when restrictions on receiving satellite television programs were violated. As one may suspect, failure to stop the growth of satellite dishes may be the result of a shortage in government resources in carrying out orders; but ironically, in other instances, orders were not effectively executed because government agencies were divided in regard to policy measures on satellite dishes, and it was they themselves who bent the rules—especially when personal or institutional interests are involved. In China, for example, the Ministry of Electronics sees the manufacture and sales of satellite dishes a major source of income<sup>1</sup> (Wang, Chen & Liu, 1995), while in Turkey where satellite television was not allowed according to its constitution, many of the retransmitters that redistributed satellite television programs were installed by municipal governments (Sahin & Aksoy, 1993).

Compromising with the presence of transnational broadcasting may be pragmatic, yet to many policy makers, it is not without worries, especially when the content of such broadcast is taken into consideration.

Along with the rapid growth of transnational media, empirical data also showed a high concentration of media power. For example, by the end of the 1980s, the most films traded internationally were made in the United States; US products accounted for 75% of broadcast and basic cable television revenues and 85% of pay-television revenues worldwide (Sen, 1993).

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<sup>1</sup>Due to a tightened budget, in China, government offices were encouraged to seek ways and means to support their own operations since the late 1970s. As a result, government departments often became the owners of enterprises in both the manufacturing and services sectors.

The dominance of American products is also highly visible when the situation in regions and individual nations is examined. In Asia, programs from transnational broadcasters, including CNN, HBO, ESPN, BBC and Australian Television International have flooded its airwaves (Gross, 1995; Yeap, 1994). In Europe, the situation is not much different; according to President Mitterrand of France, European programmes accounted for only 20,000 hours of the 125,000 hours (16%) shown annually on European television (Alleyne, 1995). By 1992, American films had a 95% share of the British market and a two-thirds share of the French (Alleyne, 1995). In Canada, 98% of the television entertainment programs were imported (Ferguson, 1993). Even when trade is taking place, the deficit may be enormous; the value of Australian cultural products exported to the States was not more than one-fifth of what US exported to Australia (Collins, 1994).

With a different set of figures, the picture depicted by such statistics is utterly similar to what we have witnessed since two decades ago, when communication scholars sounded alarms on an imbalanced flow of information across national borders, mainly that between North and South.

The gap between centre and periphery is still as alarming as ever. As pointed out by Hall (1991), transnational media is first of all West-centered, and secondly, speaks English as an international language. In the eyes of many third world leaders, such development is both threatening and suspicious. Upon learning Murdoch's investment in Star TV, Malaysia's Prime Minister Mahathir was quoted as saying: "If he [Rupert Murdoch] is not going to control news that we are going to receive, then what is it?" (Atkins, 1995).

Meanwhile it is also worthy of notice that today the gap no longer exists between just the North and South. With production in the hands of a few media corporations which are predominantly American, some are concerned that the current trend of globalization may be American in nature, or is simply a symbiosis of Americanization (Hall, 1991; Rowe et al., 1994).

Globalization as indicated by the growth of transnational broadcasting by satellite, therefore, not only implies the weakening power of the sovereign states to control information flow, but also the loss of cultural autonomy and integrity (Howell, 1992; Won, 1993) to a more homogenized metaculture, perhaps with an American touch to it.

Concerns of this nature have stirred extensive debates within the communications research community. In Ferguson's (1993) words, disentangling the globalizing tendencies of technology and economy from the processes of national and local acculturation has produced some interesting "intellectual bedmates", those including the post modernists, media reductionists, neotechnological determinists, and corporate conspiracists.

Although to many the concern is a genuine one, validity of the theories, especially that of the cultural imperialism and postmodernism, has been a nagging problem, especially in the face of emerging empirical data which can be examined from two different perspectives: audience responses to foreign programs and business strategies of transnational media corporations.

### *Audience responses*

Since the days of the "bullet theory", communications research has been haunted by a tendency to overestimate the power of mass media in shaping the individual mind and bringing socio-cultural changes. Although the bullet theory is now part of the

history and the dominant paradigm proclaimed fallen over 10 years ago, the role of the audience and the intricacies involved in media consumption is still consistently overlooked in the discussion of cultural imperialism and the global cultural homogeneity (Ferguson, 1993, Tomlinson, 1991; Yeap, 1994).

As a matter of fact, empirical evidence from audience research does not necessarily lend support to the imperialist, nor the postmodernist points of view. A study by Wang (1993) showed a decline of broadcast television prime time viewing rates as satellite television began to enter Taiwan and Hong Kong. However, audiences are by no means passive receivers of whatever is fed to them. According to American film distributors interviewed in a study (Cantor & Cantor, 1986), quality local programs almost always outperform even good imported programs. Statistics showed that in six of the seven Asian nations surveyed, 90% of the top 20 programs were locally made (Brenchly, 1994; Wang, 1993), a finding supported by Lee's (1979) study of audience preferences in Taiwan, and Karthigesu's (1994a) observations that Chinese audiences in Malaysia were heavy consumers of Chinese television programs produced in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Sen (1993) made a similar observation that third world audiences, especially those living in rural areas, tended to cling to their own music, drama, dance, language and customs.

A better indicator of the influence of media globalization, therefore, is not just the value of cultural product traded or number of hours on air, but what is actually consumed by the audience.

In addition to what is told by statistics, one cannot overlook the way viewers interpret what they watch on television. A growing number of studies, especially ethnographic audience research, have found that audiences tend to rely on their personal experiences and sociocultural resources in interpreting the meaning of what they watch.

In a cross-cultural study of viewing Dallas—considered by many as a symbol of American cultural imperialism (Tomlinson, 1991)—Katz and Liebes (1985) found that the understanding of the story is influenced by the viewers' cultural background, and reinforced by interactions with other members of the same ethnic group. In one instance, a group of Arab viewers insisted that Sue Ellen ran away from JR and moved into the house of her own father, instead of the father of her lover as was told in the televised drama. In another study of American and Hong Kong viewers' response to *Forrest Gump* (Tseng, 1996), American viewers were found to have picked up messages which were incomprehensible or completely missed out by the Hong Kong viewers. For example, few of the Hong Kong participants fully understood the statement: "life is like a box of chocolate, you never know what you will get", simply because in Hong Kong, chocolate candies usually come in bars or blocks without filling.

One may argue that differences as such are trivial; that few could escape from the dazzling scenes of decadent capitalist lifestyle or the messages conveyed by cold and calculating human relationships that make up the story. But the above finding shows that it would also be presumptuous to assume that everyone in the audience will always receive exactly the same message.

### *Business strategies of media corporations*

While many are preoccupied with the ideological messages conveyed by transnational media, to business leaders, it is not the ideology, but profit, that matters.

According to the findings of a survey of European cross-frontier television services, importation of cheap American programs was considered the only economically viable means of survival at the initial stage of operation for local producers

(Shaughnessy & Cobo, 1990). It was for basically the same reason that American programs surged in other parts of the world decades ago, which led to the concern over cultural invasion.

While it was economic incentive that led local, or regional broadcast services to import programs, returns from such sales constituted only an insignificant portion of the revenue to producers of these programs. Despite a rapid growth of trading overseas, to American producers, the domestic market was still their primary concern, hence there was little incentive for them to make programs culturally-sensitive, let alone to tailor their programs according to the tastes and preferences of a particular group of overseas audience. However, to transnational media that depend on the local and regional markets for survival, so doing does have business advantages, therefore the attitude is different; "there's no money to be made in cultural imperialism", a Murdoch executive was once quoted as saying (Gautier, 1995).

To ensure entrance into local markets, Star TV had more than once made compromises with governments despite the fact that technically, transnational media are not subject to the rules and regulations of any particular nation. The BBC World Service Television news channel was dropped under pressure from China, and Murdoch made the personal decision in ending a talk show which allowed an Indian activist to go unchallenged after describing Mahatma Gandhi as a "bastard".<sup>2</sup>

The same attitude is reflected in Murdoch's business strategies. Soon after the Beijing government issued a ban on satellite dishes, Murdoch adopted a strategy of "going local" by tackling the Asian market in two fronts: one in "Greater China" which includes Hong Kong, Taiwan and China, and another covering the Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asia and the Middle East. By working with partners, Star TV began to take part or set up base in local production, for example, its acquisition of Zee Telefilms of India.

Star TV's strategies, primarily based on business incentives, served to blur the distinction between "foreign" and "local", and a similar philosophy has been adopted by other global media. CNN, for example, now emphasizes news reporting by local reporters with an insider—as opposed to an American—point of view. When Indian youths watched local singers performing on the same satellite MTV channel which features international superstars such as Michael Jackson and Madonna, their pride and cultural identity were enhanced, not eroded (Wang, 1993). As those familiar with the modernization theory are well aware, technologies can serve as a double-edged sword, depending on how they are used.

In Asia, Star is no longer the sole satellite television service. As technologies open up business opportunities, everywhere the number of market players is surging, new production centers beginning to emerge, and more audience groups being "discovered". In this process of jockeying for position, especially worthy of attention is whether local producers are being forced out of the competition.

From an economics point of view, for local producers to compete with transnational media is like the war between David and Goliath; only in this one, David may well be the loser. With abundant resources and significant shares in the global market, transnational media are capable of offering video products at a much cheaper price than those locally produced. Under the shadow of the giant, local producers, some feared, are left with little choice but to commercialize and imitate the content and format of

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<sup>2</sup>From the excerpts of a speech by Yb Dato Mohamed Rahmat, Minister of Information, Malaysia, on 24 August 1995 in Kuala Lumpur. *Asian Mass Communication Bulletin*, 25(5), September–October 1995.

foreign programming, which in turn degrades the quality of their products (Karthigesu, 1994a).

Others maintained a more positive attitude. US film distributors interviewed (Cantor & Cantor, 1986), for example, felt that local production might not have a chance to get started without US business and/or government subsidies because with lower cost for purchasing programs, stations were able to accumulate the capital needed to support local production.

There may be little agreement on the influence of imported programs or transnational media, recent developments showed a rallying of forces for “local” programs to “go global”; nations which have formerly played an insignificant role in the international trade of cultural products have taken up the opportunity offered by satellite technologies and made themselves known on the market. Singapore and Turkey are two cases in point.

Turkey, where audiences were quite content with terrestrial broadcasting, had its first encounter with Magic Box in 1990, a satellite television service with the then Turkish president’s son as a shareholder (Sahin & Aksoy, 1993). In a few months’ time, satellite television was spreading “like wildfire”, reaching large part of the country, bringing down the monopoly the state held over television broadcasting.

Broadcasting into Turkey from Germany to avoid legal entanglement, satellite television brought to the Turkish audience American series, sport matches, and also programs which were designed for the Turkish audiences, but may not be allowed to go on air on Turkey’s broadcast television, for example, talk shows in which sensitive political and social issues were freely discussed.

Because of its wide coverage, satellite broadcasts targeted at the Turkish audiences were not only picked up by the nation’s overseas community, it was reaching into the newly independent Muslim states of the former Soviet Union. In April 1992, Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT) began broadcasting to these republics. By sharing airwaves with a Moscow television channel, it reached about 57 million viewers with signals covering Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia, becoming a *de facto* global medium itself.

What we have witnessed in Turkey is an example of how satellite broadcast may change the nature and structure of television industry in a nation. Originally set up as a way to privatize television without invoking constitutional debates, Magic box suddenly became the pioneer of a new style of television programming in which uncensored foreign films were not the only attraction. News and talk show programs free of ideological controls also proved to be vastly popular for their provoking style. The popularity of these programs in turn stimulated the growth of the “local” industry which may in fact be located outside of Turkey to stay “untamed”, until it was clear that the existing regulatory framework was no longer manageable.

Through a perhaps less dramatic process, Singapore launched its first satellite television service, Singapore International Television (SITV) via Indonesia’s Palapa in 1993, with signals covering northern Australia to South China, and from Papua New Guinea to the Maldives (Yeap, 1994). In addition, the Singapore government joined several Asian regional media organizations such as the Asian Business News (ABN)—the region’s first business news satellite—and a Mandarin satellite television service operated by a Hong Kong-based company, China Entertainment Television Broadcast Limited.

Unlike Turkish satellite television which quickly developed into a global medium without prior planning, the Singaporean services were part of an ambitious government campaign designed to promote an “Asia-centered” perspective in information

and communication activities, and SITV was the first channel to spread public relations messages to audiences outside of the country.

The Singapore case is clearly different from that of Turkey in that the government was leading the changes and in control. It is especially interesting to note that while the government was launching aggressive business ventures in satellite television, direct reception of satellite television programs was still banned in Singapore.

It is not yet clear to what extent Singapore government's strategy to "regionalize" media will succeed. But neither Turkey nor Singapore are the only ones that have seen, and taken advantage of the opportunities in this rapidly changing marketplace of transnational communication. Similar changes are taking place in many other parts of the world.

In Taiwan, for example, satellite television is also bringing a versatile, liberalized form of programming while eroding the state control over broadcast television, and Hong Kong companies are losing no time in developing a satellite network for Chinese communities all over the world. In 1994, the Hong Kong-based Shaw Media Corporation launched a satellite channel covering Europe to serve the 800,000 ethnic Chinese viewers who were largely ignored by mainstream media (Yeap, 1994).

In addition, there is the awareness that greater attention should be paid to local production. Henderson (1995), after a careful look at the "transborder future", concluded that a strong local industry as a complement and competitor to transborder broadcasting, is necessary. In some of the Western nations, for example, Australia and Canada, programs that provide incentive or subsidies for local production have long been implemented (Audley & Associates, 1991; Collins, 1994). Now more governments have awakened to the need of promoting their own cultural products through newly available channels. In addition to Singapore, several Asian nations and regional organizations, including Malaysia, India, Thailand and ASEAN have announced plans to develop their own satellite television industry. In Latin America, Mexico has already become the production center for Spanish programs, and Brazil for Portuguese.

The haste of nations to build their own industry serves to illustrate Sen's (1992) point:

Even those repulsed by the new television offerings were convinced that there was no way out of the global media game; the only cure was to secure their own television channel.

The need to compete with global media for audiences also brought about a fundamental change of attitude of policy makers and interest groups regarding diffusion of information, especially those in third world nations; a move away from controlling, protective measures toward more open, aggressive, and above all, pragmatic options so local broadcast can survive in the inevitable competition with the transnationals. This attitude is best illustrated in a remark by B. G. Yeo, Minister for Information and Arts of Singapore, in referring to the future of Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC): "there is no point corporatizing SBC only to regulate it to death" (Straits Times, 16 March 1994).

Along with this change in attitude is a more relaxed perception of the effect of transborder broadcasting; a perception which no longer sees information exchange as a zero-sum game: gains made by one party necessarily means losses of the other (Yeap, 1994).

At least three observations that are relevant to the concerns of media globalization and its cultural implications can be made from the above statistics and development:

- (1) The audience does have an active role to play in the selection of television programs and interpretation of text; an act which heavily draws upon each individual's



sociocultural experiences and resources. Preferences of the audience in turn hold the key to the development of local cultural industries and the impact foreign programs may have on them.

- (2) Media globalization may have a homogenizing effect, yet this homogenizing effect is more limited than previously anticipated, and it often occurs with a particularizing effect—if the Turkish case can be used as an example. According to Sahin and Aksoy, global media have not Americanized the Turkish culture, but have instead homogenized Turkish communities across national borders by connecting these “small worlds” to create what Anderson (1983) described as “imagined communities”. On the other hand, global media also particularized their audiences by embracing differences and giving minority or disadvantaged social groups their voices.

In fact if we look at the overall picture, transnational broadcasting is bringing a greater variety of cultural products to the international market, as indicated by the active participation of nation states, serving better-defined, and more heterogeneous audience populations.

- (3) In contrast to the defensive measures many policy makers adopted at the initial stage of transnational broadcasting, we have witnessed a change of attitude. As it is becoming clear that blocking out transnational broadcasting is nearly impossible and as more nations seek to export as well as import cultural products, there is a more pragmatic view of media effect on culture with less talk of passive “protection”, but rather, active “promotion” of cultural values or exchange of messages.

### **CULTURAL INTEGRITY AND MEDIA GLOBALIZATION**

According to the thesis of cultural imperialism, the dominance of cultural products will have an inevitable assimilation and acculturation effect on their audiences.

While postmodernists treated an interdependent communication system as one level—instead of the cause—of a global culture,<sup>3</sup> this system is expected to form the material base for all other levels and components, including standardized commodities, denationalized ethnic or folk motifs, generalized “human values and interests”, and a uniform “scientific” discourse of meaning (Smith, 1990). In other words, communication was regarded as a condition for the development of a global culture; it was not a sufficient, but might well be a necessary condition.

While it is trite to point out the significance of media globalization, there is little evidence showing either the emergence of a homogeneous, Americanized world culture. As Ferguson (1993) pointed out, the assumptions about a indifferentiated culture as a result of consuming the same cultural and material products are “reductionist and fail even on a continental North American basis”. After a careful review of communication and identity in Canada, a nation which has long been a heavy consumer of American films and television programs, Ferguson came to the conclusion that while cultural identities are open to influences, electronic media are not the ones that drive the dynamics of collective redefinition.

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<sup>3</sup>Here postmodernism is seen as a swing away from the conceptualization of global culture in terms of a homogenizing process; instead it indicates processes of cultural integration and disintegration that transcend the state–society unit.

To prove cultural imperialism, we need evidence showing overall changes in both the abstract (beliefs, values) and material (artifacts, customs and rituals) aspects of a culture resulted from an unlimited exposure to foreign media content. So far, such evidence has yet been found.

Cultural imperialism has been criticized for invoking a video-determinism by overlooking audiences who, as shown by numerous studies, were seldom "assimilated" because of their exposure to media. They not only exhibit preferences in what to watch, even when surrounded by symbolic representation of a foreign culture, they are capable of reconstructing meaning, and are not necessarily socially and culturally influenced (Ang, 1985; Yeap, 1994). As indicated by Cantor and Cantor (1986), single source hegemony is inaccurate and outdated.

Postmodernists, on the other hand, have stayed away from the idea of an upcoming single, integrated global culture and tended to look at it more in terms of processes (Featherstone, 1990; Smith, 1990). However, with transnational media flourishing and cross-border communication expanding, have we truly witnessed the arrival of a global culture—in the postmodern sense?

Perhaps yes, but only to a certain extent. The state's power in controlling information flow in and out of its territory has been eroded, the emerging format of satellite television programming features a liberalized style which is embedded in the idea of freedom of expression, and by linking ethnic groups with transnational broadcasting, one may claim the birth of denationalized ethnic communities. However, we cannot afford to overlook developments which were missing, or moving away, from the postmodernist prescription.

In Asia, regionalism is on the rise as a safety net for taboo-bashing and free flow of (Western) information across national borders. As Yeap (1994) put it, it is both urgent and necessary for Asians to have a choice of identity in the upcoming age of global culture-based politics and secular state. The emphasis on Asian values, a concept which suggests a common core of values as compared to the West, not only serves as a basis for cultural resistance, but also reflects the priorities of national governments (Karthigesu, 1994b).

While Asian values are enjoying an unprecedented popularity, in Europe the desire of formulating a common culture is waning, and the talk of "European values" strained due to a rise of xenophobia derived from fears of massive migration from North Africa and Eastern Europe. To Schlesinger (1993: 9), what was suggested by postmodernists has not been taking place:

...the nation-state form persists as the frame of reference for all types of nationalist currents. Thus, the postmodernists, with their dreams of flexi-identities, have it wrong. The nation-states have not been superseded. To be a contemporary European nationalist is either to support the old state or to advocate the creation of a new one.

What cultural imperialists and postmodernists fail to see, is the fact that as open systems, social and cultural changes are seldom determined by the workings of just a handful of—let alone one—factors, no matter how powerful they may seem to be. While change and continuity are both implicit in the nature of culture, like all other living systems, such change usually takes place through a complex process of selecting, integrating and organizing input from both interactions among elements within the system and with the environment. It is through this process that a culture is able to bring into being its own output, and to act back on its environment (Lathrope, 1971).

Continuous exchanges among elements within the system and with the environment, therefore, is the very way that cultures operate, function, and survive. As indicated by

Ellen (1982: 186), "Although human systems may sometimes be seen to maintain a degree of system integrity, they are almost invariably engaged,...in transaction with an ambiguously demarcated wider environment". In addition, as such transaction and exchange are taking place on a continuing basis, cultures seldom stay unchanged; only the scope and the scale of change may differ.

While the role of media may be prominent for all the glamour and public attention that are involved in the trade, it is, none-the-less, only one of the many factors in the system that influence change, and perhaps not even a highly significant one. As Ferguson (1993: 43) put it quite cogently,

In late capitalist societies the media's role is integrated to cultural formation and its symbolic representation; but this fact does not diminish the significance of historical and contextual factors as other sources of acculturation.

It is perhaps not a pure coincidence that cultural imperialists and postmodernists, coming from a Marxist tradition, and modernization theorists, coming from a positive-empirical tradition, should both place more weight in media influence than they seem to deserve. This is, of course, not to say that there is little danger in undermining media power, but now is perhaps the time for communication researchers to say: will the real media power please stand up?

### **POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND OPTIONS**

Culture, therefore, is not to be regarded as a static, integrated whole that will be chipped, damaged or destroyed when coming in contact with the outside world. From this perspective, media policies that are aimed at protecting the integrity of a culture are in actuality doing very little—either to slow down, or to enhance its development.

An examination of media policy in Asia shows the beginning of the end for protective measures has arrived, not because the concept of cultural integrity is untenable given the nature of culture itself, but largely because information technologies have rendered the task extremely difficult to carry out. In Asia, only a few governments, for example, Singapore, are still trying to keep its people from information that is deemed potentially harmful.<sup>4</sup>

The question then becomes, what happens after the floodgate is open and media become global? From empirical data that we have examined, audiences that are overwhelmed by information will still be opting for something familiar which they can relate to their own experiences and background. As a response to such needs, the transnational media corporations will likely continue on with their strategies of "going local", but the strategies would be driven by market incentives, not by their social or cultural responsibilities to the receiving nations.

As mentioned earlier in this paper, exposure to imported programs does not necessarily do harm to a culture, however, this does not mean one can overlook the need for an independent, vibrant local programming industry. As one of the most important forms of cultural activities, the production of video materials is far from just being a business venture; it signifies the vitality of a culture's artistic expression and reflects the meaning of its very existence. Without the ability to put its own products in the global market, a culture runs the risk in losing its footing in the surging flood of information

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<sup>4</sup>Recently the Singapore government has made it a rule for internet linkup services to route through a government program that will screen pornographic materials and hate writings that may stir up religious or ethnic tension.

sweeping the world. In this information age of ours, it is only appropriate for us to conceptualize and define "cultural integrity" not in terms of a static whole, but a continuously evolving entity that closely interacts with its environment.

It is the recognition of the importance in generating cultural products that governments in countries such as Singapore, Australia and Canada have undertaken measures to create a favorable environment for local production to grow, either through subsidies, quotas of local production in broadcast and cable television, or direct investment in the industry.

What we see in the mid-1990s, is a change in the role of communications policy, especially in third world nations, from that of a protective guardian against "harmful, alien information" to one of a supportive sponsor for cultural production. Globalization, therefore, does not need to be threatening; it would be so only when we lose sight of the nature of culture and power of media.

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