

# Globalization, Africa and the Question of Imperialism

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**Abstract:** The influence of globalization has been a growing concern for social scientists and cultural theorists. For many, global media institutions abet cultural globalization, which is synonymous with cultural homogenization, which refers the processes of global uniformity and standardization of human cultural experience. Drawing from the perspective of globalization, critical discourse analysis and cultural studies, this paper presents an argumentative discussion on globalization and its cultural influence in Africa. It examined how globalization has been associated with a range of cultural consequences. These can be analyzed in terms of three major theses; namely homogenization, polarization and hybridization. In addition, this paper reviews the cultural imperialism argument in terms of how global media institutions negatively affect the culture of Africans.

**Keywords:** Globalization; Cultural Globalization; Cultural Imperialism; Africa.

## Introduction

The current restructuring and reshaping of globalization has become a powerful transformation process, that has acquired hegemonic status as a result of its operative logic and ideological connotation in the contemporary global economy. A wide and diverse range of social theorists are arguing that today's world is organized by accelerating globalization, which is strengthening the dominance of a world capitalist economic system, supplanting corporations and eroding local cultures and traditions (Boyd-Barrett, 1977; Hamelink, 1983; Bagdikian, 2000; Mc Chesney, 2001). In other words, globalization and the expansion of the communication industries are likely to increase the rate at which culture change to incorporate outside cultural influences. Cohen (1987), argues that the intensification of mass communication and cross-cultural interaction has greatly accelerated the incorporation of external cultural elements in local culture. This perspective is based on the expectation that as the potential sources of influence proliferate with the expansion of communication, the rate at which cultural change will increase.

The overwhelming majority of today's global media is commercially operated in the Western World. For example, in the - U.S, it has tremendous impact on other countries, all of the biggest TV stations (NBC, CBS, ABC, FOX, CNN) are owned by private companies whose sole purpose of existence is to maximize shareholder's profit. Importantly, the expansion of these communication industries across the globe poses challenges to Africa's' indigenous culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Ekeanyanwu (2005), pointed out that the communication industry is part of the culture industry,

and mass communication is a very strong vehicle for cultural dissemination. Nevertheless, with the nature of international communication system, there have been massive flows of Western, largely American, media culture into non-western societies. As a result, native cultures have been distorted and displaced leading to the increase in the adaptation of foreign values, life style and behavioral pattern.

This paper is divided into a number of rubrics; the debate about globalization, globalization and global communication, cultural globalization and global media, and cultural dominance. It examines the influence of globalization and its threat to indigenous culture in Africa.

## The Debate about Globalization

Globalization is an all encompassing concept used to describe the process that intends to harness and conglomerate all the systems of the world's economic and political activities and transacting it as a village (Bayors and Smith, 2001; Oluabunwa, 1999). Since the advent of globalization in the 1990s, the world has witnessed phenomenal changes in all ramification or facets of life (Spybey, 1996). Communication has become more rapid and complex; working patterns have changed and transformed; financial transactions also move freely among countries and political boundaries within the international community.

Several scholars have written about the diffident perspectives of globalization. For Tomlinson (1999), globalization involves a rapid process of complex interactions between societies, culture, as well as individuals across the globe. It is a process that involves the compression of time and space (Harvey, 1989).

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Shrinking distances through a dramatic reduction in the time taken- either physical or representational- to cross them, so making the world seem smaller and in a certain sense bringing human beings 'closer' to one another. Spybey (1997), argues that globalization in its structural dimensions can be regarded primarily as nation states systems, cultural spreading, world military order and other internationally dispersed activities. Oluabunwa (1999:26), also describes globalization as "an evolution which is systematically restructuring interactive phases among nations by breaking down barriers in the areas of culture, commerce, communication and several other fields of endeavor". He stressed that globalization is evident from its push of free market economies, liberal democracy, good governance, gender equality, and environmental sustainability among other holistic values for the people of the member state. In other words, globalization is a process of change in which countries and their economies are increasingly integrated as a function cutting across borders. This connotes the expansion of human activities in the area of transportation, communication, trade and financial exchange targeting around the globe. Furthermore, the transmutation of technology and capital, work together to create a new globalized and interconnected world. A technological revolution involving the creation of a computerized network of communications, transportation, and exchange is the presupposition of a globalized economy, along with the extension of a world capitalist market system that is absorbing ever more areas of the world and spheres of production, exchange, and consumption into its orbit (Kellner, 2002).

Diverse attitudes toward globalization can be summarized by the following terms: worldliness, internalization, transnational, international integration, inter-dependency, westernization and convergence. Scholte (1997), pointed out that there are three general descriptions of globalization. The first description envisions globalization as an increased border relation. This conception effectively equate globalization with internationalization where there is an increase in the amount of goods, people, finance, messages and ideas moving frequently among countries. Secondly, globalization can be described as a removal of barriers to large scale movements of trade, travel, communication and finance. In this respect, the first concept of globalization views it as a causal force, whereas the second concept of globalization views it as the by-product of the removal of barriers between people. In this description about

globalization, social relations are viewed as increasingly tied to territorial frameworks. Instead, global phenomena extends across widely scattered locations simultaneously, diminishing the significance of territorial distance and border.

Despite the diversity of conceptions of globalization, most discussions of globalization points to the expansion of communications as a key source of social change in the international system (Greig, 2002). The proliferation of fax machines, telephones, air travel, television, and internet have provided the opportunity for broader range of interaction beyond an individual's immediate locale and across cultural groups (Greig, 2002; Holton, 2000). Burger (1997), argues that the cultural dimensions of globalization are a consequence of an immense increase in worldwide communication.

## Globalization and Global Communication

The advent of globalization has led to the revolution in communication technologies and has affected individuals across the globe. Basically, global communication refers to the process of transmitting and receiving information on a world-wide scale. People have been communicating on a global scale for centuries (Lubbers & Koorevaar, 2000). Ekeanyanwu (2005), noted that global communication is concerned with the gathering, dissemination, interpretation and analysis of global news and information. Musa (2003), observes that in line with the game of globalization, the global media plays the role of disseminating the international communication ideology as well as diffusing western values and culture, which appears dominant in the world.

With the evolution of technology, global communication has become increasingly easy, faster, clearer and more effective (Lubbers & Koorevaar, 2000). The evolution of global communication can be linked closely to the evolution of technology, as new creations, such as internet are continually being invented, improved and converged with other products, they are enabling new modes of interaction.

Historically, people have communicated globally through geographic proximity, military conquest, political alliances and economic change, however, for thousands of years communities had little need for long distance communication because they lived close to one another (Greig, 2000). Also, Boyd-Barnet and Rantenen (1998), recall that the rise of global news agencies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was made possible through technological

(telegraph and radio telephone) expansion across the globe. These global news agencies include the North American Associated Press, British Reuter, French AFP, Russian Itar-Tass, German DPA, Japanese Kyodo and Spanish EFE. Today, communication is no longer restricted to a geographical place, with communication technologies connecting parts of the world together into an electronic web (Frederick, 1993). Ekeanyanwu (2003), noted that global communication aids the promotion of understanding between the different cultures involved in the global communication arena. He further explained that major news agencies in the world today recruit and maintain international correspondents in major cities which have aided unity and understanding of diverse cultures across the globe. Importantly, global communication is a multi-faceted phenomenon that takes a variety of forms. According to Mc Quail (2000), these forms include:

1. Direct transmission or distribution of media channels or complete publications from one country to audience in another country.
2. Content items of many kinds (films, music, television programmes, journalistic items) are imported to make up part of the domestic media output.
3. Formats and genres of foreign origin that is adapted to suit domestic audiences.
4. Miscellaneous contents such as sporting events, advertising and pictures that have a foreign reference or origin.
5. International news items, whether about a foreign origin appears in a domestic media.
6. Certain international media, such as MTV, CNN International, BBC world...etc.

However, according to Frederick, the continual expansion and influence of the global society faces two essential problems: Firstly; the control of global information and communication by transnational corporations. Wiseman (1998), noted that a handful of immense corporations were in control of information and communication across the globe. This was because corporate control of media production and distribution were fully integrated, which was aimed to reap vast profits and creates huge corporate empires. Secondly; the increasing disparities between the world info-rich and info-poor populations: Bhagavan (1990), has reasoned that there was an immense disparity between the rich and the poor. The Third World is penetrated by western media however they have little access to the forms of

communication on a global scale. In essence, controversial issues surrounding global communication are directly or indirectly linked to the thesis of 'cultural imperialism' or 'media imperialism'. Cultural imperialism refers to a deliberate attempt to dominate, invade or subvert the 'cultural space' of others and suggest a degree of coercion in the relationship (Mc Quail, 2000; Salawu, 2005). Importantly, the invading nation's cultural and other values are imposed on the audience of the invaded nation. The cultural media imperialist thesis postulates four propositions to consider:

1. Global media promotes relations of dependency rather than economic growth
2. The imbalance in the flow of mass media content undermines cultural autonomy or holds back development.
3. 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.
4. Global media information flow gives rise to a state of cultural homogenization or synchronization leading to a dominant form of culture that has no specific connection with real experiences for most people (Mc Quail, 2000; Salawu, 2005).

## Cultural Globalization

It is generally believed that varieties of national and ethnic cultures are made of a world culture; this conveys the meaning that being national is simultaneously belonging to the world. More importantly, globalization is influencing and transforming the cultures people used to experience in local sense, which has established the concept of cultural globalization. Traditionally, though culture is universal and varies from place to place; it is what makes up the entirety of human existence. Culture as it is, has been defined by different scholars in their various fields. To Baran (2004: 45), "culture is the learned behavior of members of a given social group". Also citing Hall (1976), culture is the medium evolved by humans to survive. Nothing is free from cultural influences. It is the keystone in civilization's arch and the medium through, which all of life's event flow. Virtually all definitions of culture recognize that it is something people learn while the creation and maintenance of a more or less common culture occurs through communication. To buttress this, Baran goes on further to lay a longer definition of culture maintaining that is "the world is made meaningful; it is

socially constructed and maintained through communication. It limits as well as liberates us; it differentiates as well as unites us. It defines our realities and thereby shapes the ways we think, feel, and act” (pp. 35). Since culture can be constructed and maintained through communication, it shows that mass communication plays potent role, because it is the only means by which elements of culture can reach wider number of people in the society. Wallerstein (1990) provides a useful way to think about culture. He argues that individuals may be described along three dimensions i.e characteristics of humanity as a whole, group of characteristics that assign that person as a member of a particular group, and peculiar attributes, culture comprises the second dimension in that it describes traits that are neither universal nor idiosyncratic. Instead, culture provides a means of describing groups, culture provides a means for individuals to understand and interpret the world.

Today, the world is unified as a result of technological advancement in communications. ICTs have facilitated interaction of people, and hence of languages and cultures across the globe. Cultures are in constant interaction, they overlap and borrow from one another, people do not remain within the frontiers of their native culture; they venture beyond. This may be reflected in the clothes they wear, the food they eat, the music they listen to, and even in their way of thinking and behaving (Holton, 2000; Greig, 2001). Basically, cultural globalization refers to a phenomenon by which the experience of everyday life, as influenced by the diffusion of commodities and ideas, reflects a standardization of cultural expressions around the world. Propelled by the efficiency or appeal of wireless communications, electronic commerce, popular culture, and international travel, globalization has been seen as a trend toward homogeneity that will eventually make human experience everywhere essentially the same (Holton, 2000). For a culture to be susceptible to external influences, the capacity for cross-cultural communication must exist. The advancement in communication technologies coupled with an expanding global economic systematically increase the opportunities for interaction between geographic boundaries and interact with those of other cultures (Grieg, 2002; Kellner, 2002).

Globalization has also been associated with range of cultural consequences. These can be analyzed in terms of three major theses, namely, homogenization, polarization, and hybridization (Wallerstein, 1990;

Spybey, 1996; Holton, 2000). The homogenization thesis proclaims that global culture is becoming standardized around a westernized life style. This perspective emphasizes that there is a diffusion effect that communication have on cultural attributes. The homogenizing school (Hamelink, 1983; Mattelart, 1983; Schiller, 1989) typically argues that cultures have historically been territorially confined because of the difficulties and cost involved in the cultural flow, but the expansion of global communication links functions to sharply reduce or eliminate these barriers to cultural flow. Typically, those who see globalization and its accompanying expansion of communication as a homogenizing force envision an increasingly Westernized global culture (Greig, 2002). In addition, the presence of cultural alternatives and resistance to western norms suggests that polarization provides a more convincing picture of global cultural development. The limits of cultural homogenization in the contemporary world have often been recast as evidence of polarization. Said (1978), looked at the way in which cultural dichotomies have been constructed between western and non-western way of life. He argues that western cultural imperialist operate through the discourse of power, whereby the non-western world is constructed as the other i.e. as fundamentally different from the west. The polarization perspective to global culture envisions two powerful and interconnected stories about the contemporary world.

The hybridization thesis argues that cultures borrow and incorporate elements from each other, creating a hybrid or synergetic form. Evidence supporting this view, comes mainly from popular music and religious life. This perspective centers on intercultural exchange and the incorporation of cultural elements from a variety of sources within a particular cultural practices. Just like biological hybrids combines genetic materials from different sources, so hybrid social practices combine cultural elements from a range of sources (Holton, 2000).

## **Global Media and Cultural Dominance**

The recent trends in the socio-cultural and economic development of the world, is primarily necessary to underline that nowadays the world has changed dramatically, basically because of the development of new economic system, which is the result of the economic globalization. One of the main implications of economic globalization of media industries is cultural imperialism. According to Varan (1992), there is a school of thought that sees global media systems as vehicles for cultural

imperialism. It articulates the fear of developing countries that perceive themselves under threat. From discourse in cultural studies, cultural imperialism refers to the concept which proposes that “a society is brought into the modern world system, when its dominating stratum is attracted, pressured, forced, and sometimes bribed into shaping its social institutions to correspond to, or even promote, the values and structures of the dominating center of the system” (Schiller 1976:103). Similarly, Ekeanyanwu (2005), noted that cultural imperialism is the subtle manipulation of the mass media of developing countries by the developed western capitalist nations, using their advanced and well developed media to control the behavior, lifestyle and values of developing nations through the imposition of an alien culture on a local culture via programmes and media content.

To put it more precisely, in cultural terms it means that nowadays cultural imperialism is expressed through the development and spread of the influence of certain cultures worldwide. It is noteworthy that nowadays, there is actually one hegemonic state, the US, which has spread its cultural impact all over the world, and the problem of Americanization of the world culture is very important and in some countries it leads to internal conflict between local historical traditions and modern impact of the American culture on the local communities.

Various attempts have been made by scholars to analyze the trans-cultural influence exerted by the global media on cultures all over the world. To a larger extent, the fear of cultural domination by developing countries results from a wider condition of imbalance through which western content permeate the world (Varis, 1984). Belstran (1978), and Gramsci (1971), have argued that audiences are largely unaware of the ideologies woven into the fabrics of such programmes that are designed to encourage the adoption of cultural values that reflect the interests of power elite. Many assume such cultural domination to be an intentional part of a larger campaign by such elites to exert their hegemonic influence (Hamelinks, 1983; Schiller, 1991; Mattelart, 1994).

The relationship of the global media system to the question of imperialism is complex. In the 1970s, much of the Third World was mobilized through the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization to battle the cultural imperialism of the Western powers. The Third World nations developed plans for a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) to address their concerns that Western domination over journalism and culture made it virtually impossible for

newly independent nations to escape colonial status (Ekeanyanwu, 2005: 58).

Similar concerns about U.S. media domination were heard across Europe. The NWICO campaign was part of a broader struggle at that time by Third World nations to address formally the global economic inequality that was seen as a legacy of imperialism. Both of these movements were impaled on the sword of neo-liberalism wielded by the United States and Britain (Mc Chesney, 2001).

In the past fifty years, mass media production has fallen into the hands of some generally western, international media corporation – Bertlesman, Viacom, Time-Warner, Disney, Tele-communication Inc, News Corporation, Sony, Seagram, General Electric and Dutch Philips (Sreberny-Mohammedi, 1998; Markay, 2000). Many scholars believe the nature of global media ownership and the growing significance of communication technologies inequalities has worsened global disparities rather than leveled inequalities (Schiller & Tracey, 1997; Ansu-Kyeremeh, 1998; Sreberny-Mohammedi, 1998). These global disparities and media inequalities are of great disadvantage to Africa.

Varis’ (1994), study shows at least 30-40 percent of programmes from the United States has evidence of cultural domination within it, or identified in the programmes, which are exported to developed countries. Presently, the development of cultural imperialism seems to be so rapid and overwhelming that often specialists speak that this process is inevitable and the weak local cultures are simply unable to resist the influence of the hegemonic culture of the US, which is spreading as fast as the globalization involves more and more countries into the new economic formation and new relations. It is possible to observe a significant impact of American culture or Western culture on national cultures in many developing countries of the world, as well as developed ones. According to Mc Chesney (2001), the global commercial-media system is radical in that it will respect no tradition or custom, on balance, if it stands in the way of profits. But ultimately it is politically conservative, because the media giants are significant beneficiaries of the current social structure around the world, and any upheaval in property or social relations—particularly to the extent that it reduces the power of business. In other words, the expansion of global media in the contemporary society should not be underestimated because the modern technologies, especially information technologies and computing, development of Internet, made the media a

very influential, ideological and cultural tool. This view was corroborated by Ekeanyanwu (2005), when he pointed out that the influence of the global media system would lead to great imbalance in quantity and quality, in the flow of global news and information. He further pointed out that this would lead to cultural domination as mostly western oriented values and lifestyles are being portrayed in the media of the developing countries. In other words, the main reason of such increased influence of global media is the high level of information it gives to human society, when people are getting information twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, and in the future this trend would be even stronger. As a result, people are dramatically influenced by the information they receive from the media, and very often they get acquainted with an absolutely new lifestyle that is brought to them via media. Eventually, it leads to the situation when new generations, especially in developing countries, are influenced by global media, which are often internalized, to the extent that the lifestyle they learn from media comes into clashes with their traditional culture.

Ekeanyanwu (2005), also noted that there are very little opportunities that exist for developing countries' media to counter these overwhelming influences of the global media giants, this is because of the inadequacies and inequalities in socio-political cum economic development. Ekeanyanwu further explained that the worrisome aspect of the issue is that these developing countries have no reply to the phenomenal increase in the importation of media contents and program by these countries' media.

## Conclusion

Cultural imperialism theorists and scholars see global media operating within a single world market organized by the global imperatives of the American and the West European-controlled multinational corporations. Central to the process of economic domination is the role played by the communications-cultural corporations. The media products are largely determined by the same market imperatives that govern the overall system's production of goods and services. Their role is not only informational, but also ideological in that they promote and develop popular support for the values and artifacts of the capitalist system. Thus, it is possible to speak about cultural imperialism as a consequence of the impact of several factors, among which the most significant are the modernity, spread of global capitalist system,

development of media and increasing role of information, and enforcement of cultural nationalism.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is possible to observe a significant impact of Western culture on various non-western national cultures. This impact is particularly obvious in the sphere of television, cinema and music through the use of the economic strategy of concentration of the media by American and the West European-controlled multinational corporations. In this respect, it is possible to refer to the experience of African countries, which are also susceptible to the impact of Western culture and where this impact is probably more obvious than anywhere else in the world because many African countries are gradually losing their uniqueness as the role of Western culture grows in the local communities. In essence, developing nations face the danger of losing their uniqueness and value in their indigenous cultures due to the impact of western culture with the proliferation of global media content in their traditional societies

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