

AFRICA IN THE 21ST CENTURY

WITH THE ADVENT OF THE NEXT CENTURY, THE IMPACT OF NEW MEDIA TECHNOLOGY AND GLOBALISATION ON THE CONTINENT WILL BE INCREASINGLY DEBATED. THE INTERNET ALREADY HAS A STRONG PRESENCE HERE. DOES IT OFFER A POTENTIAL COUNTER-OFFENSIVE AGAINST GOVERNMENT SECRECY, OR IS ITS COMING JUST ANOTHER INVASION FROM THE WEST? THE TRUTH IS THAT THE INTERNET – AND OTHER ELEMENTS OF GLOBALISATION – CUT BOTH WAYS.

Creating a new mix of media messages

Globalisation Good and Bad



Globalisation is the phenomenon on everyone's lips. What is it, how does it connect to the media and what is it doing to us? Media studies lecturer **Larry Strelitz** sheds some light on the issue...

According to media critic Douglas Kellner, those of us in the industrialised world are increasingly living in a media culture, "in which images, sounds and spectacles help produce the fabric of everyday life ... providing the materials out of which people forge their very identities".

If globalisation can be described as having the following features:

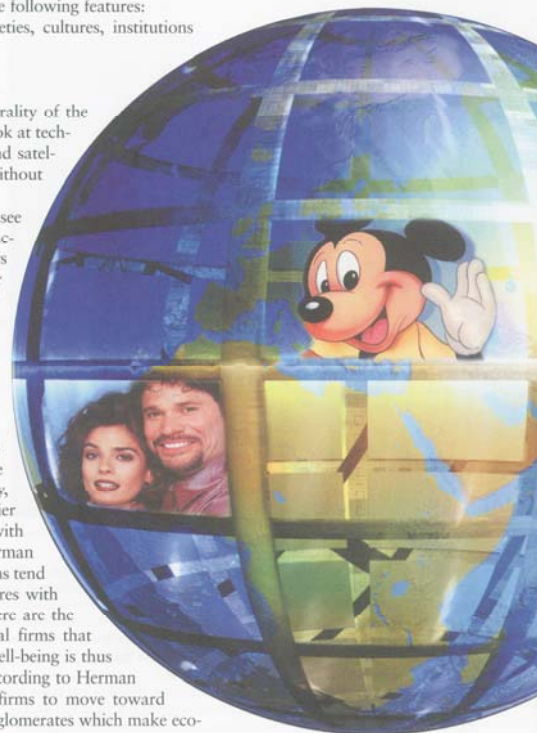
- the worldwide interconnection between societies, cultures, institutions and individuals
- the compression of time and space
- the loss of national sovereignty

then it is not difficult to appreciate the centrality of the media to these processes, especially when you look at technological developments such as digitalisation and satellite transmission. Globalisation is not possible without a particular kind of media environment.

What kind of environment? The one we see emerging increasingly across the world is characterised by the consolidation of media providers into the hands of an increasingly smaller number of transnational conglomerates. Media economists Herman and McChesney write about the "unprecedented wave of mergers and acquisitions among global media giants" in the 1990s and point out that there is a three-tiered global market.

In the first tier they identify ten huge vertically integrated media conglomerates with annual sales in the R100-250 billion range. These include News Corporation, Time Warner, Disney, Bertelsmann, Viacom and TCL. The second tier comprises approximately 36 large media firms with annual sales in the R20-100 billion range. Herman and McChesney point out that most of these firms tend to have working agreements and/or joint ventures with one or more of the first-tier giants. Finally, there are the thousands of relatively small national and local firms that provide services to the large firms and whose well-being is thus dependent on the choices of the large firms. According to Herman and McChesney, the market forces all media firms to move toward becoming large, global, vertically integrated conglomerates which make economic sense.

For these large, capitalist enterprises, economic considerations are the primary determi-



Globalisation 'bad': the homogenisation of culture and creation of a worldwide 'MacDonald's society'.
Globalisation 'good': a creative hybrid of indigenous and global cultures, reflected in the work of Nigeria's Nobel Prize writer, Wole Soyinka.

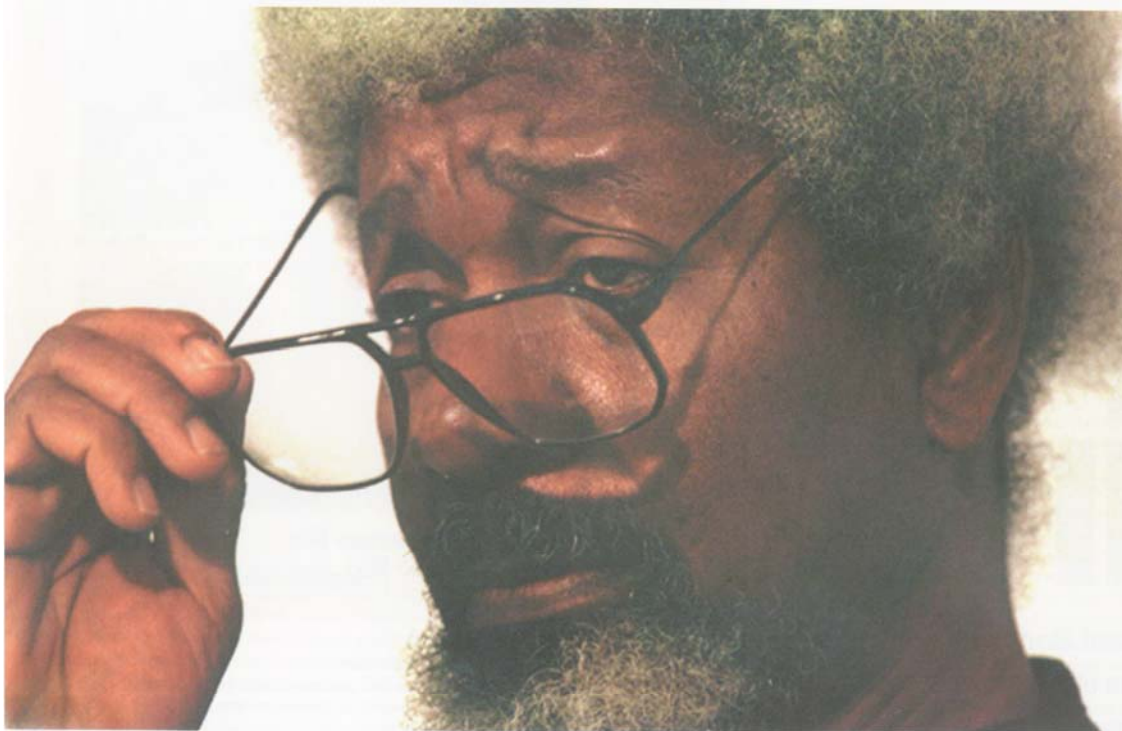


PHOTO: KEVIN LAMARQUE/REUTERS

nants in what meanings get produced and circulated on a global scale. The increasing monopolisation and commodification of culture by an increasingly smaller number of primarily Western media providers raises concern as to the nature of the images and meanings being globally circulated.

Cultural commentators debate endlessly whether the emergence of a 'global culture' – with the hallmarks of homogenisation and convergence – is obliterating local cultures, creating in its wake mirrors of American consumer society. Media theorist Cees Hamelink comments on this debate by saying: "... the impressive variety of the world's cultural systems is waning due to a process of 'cultural synchronisation' that is without historic precedent."

Although it is tempting to take a pessimistic view of the obliteration of African cultures in the inexorable wake of globalisation, it is too simple a take on what is actually going on. Hamelink belongs to a particular media theory tradition – that which believes in the 'cultural imperialism' thesis.

In criticising global domination these theorists see media operating within a single world market organised by the global imperatives of the American- and 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 artefacts of the capitalist system. Says Herbert Schiller, one of the strongest proponents of this view, "Media-cultural imperialism is a subset of the general system of imperialism. It is not free-standing."

So if we return to the role media plays in helping people all over the world cope with globalisation and modernisation, Schiller argues that "it is the imagery and cultural perspectives of the ruling sector in the center that shape and structure consciousness throughout the system at large." The model this view puts forward is of weak receivers of the global message who are unable to withstand the cultural-ideological onslaught of the centre (primarily America).

Is this really what is happening? Are the images produced by the globalised media so powerful and pervasive that all cultural forms and expressions will become a mere mirror of the MacDonald's society?

Arguments which see indigenous cultures in the non-West as terribly vulnerable don't acknowledge that for centuries – before the project of globalisation swung into high gear – cultures have been encountering each other. A number of commentators point out that the current panic over American cultural imperialism tends to overlook the fact that the globalisation of communication is only the most recent of a series of cultural encounters, in many cases stretching back centuries, through which the values, beliefs and symbolic forms of different groups have been superimposed on one another. Thus, most forms of culture in the world today are,

to varying extents, hybrid cultures.

The concept of 'creolisation' is one that is currently used to refer to this process of cultural inter-penetration. Anthropologist Ulf Hannerz says: "Globalisation need not be a matter only of far-reaching or complete homogenisation; the increasing interconnectedness of the world also results in some cultural gain." The people on the receiving end of globalisation and its media do have a choice of what to accept – and very often they choose bits and pieces which they mix with their own forms and expressions.

Hannerz points out that there would not have been a Nigerian Nobel Prize winner in literature in 1986 if Wole Soyinka had not creatively drawn on both a cosmopolitan literary expertise and an imagination rooted in Nigerian mythology, and turned it into something unique. Another example is world music – influence and counter-influence make an eclectic new form of expression which is not Western and not indigenous.

There is also a political dimension to this choice by those on the receiving end of what to take and what to leave. Hannerz uses the example of Sophiatown in the 1950s and 1960s: "To the people of the township, a cosmopolitan esthetic thus became a form of local resistance. Accepting New York could be a way of rejecting Pretoria."

To simply stick to a thesis that says globalisation will obliterate local cultures is to ignore the complex, varied and contextually specific ways in which media messages are interpreted by socially located viewers and readers. In recent years media theorists, drawing on qualitative research techniques such as in-depth interviewing, ethnographic observation and so on, have started to probe how receivers make sense of global media.

The studies have often produced totally unexpected results.

In a well-known study of Dutch viewers of Dallas, Ien Ang discovered that contrary to expectations, it was not the capitalist values of conspicuous consumption and rugged individualism – so obviously woven into these programmes – that provided the points of identification and pleasure for the viewers. Rather, the attraction for Dutch viewers was the proof that even the super-rich have their problems. Furthermore, far from helping to buttress the status quo (a la America), some research has indicated that in patriarchal cultures, masculinist values can often be undermined by soap operas which portray strong women and emotionally open men as key characters. Recently one of my students admitted that he had been "dumped" by his lover because he was not "sensitive like the men in *The Bold and the Beautiful*"!

So does this mean that we should uncritically welcome into our local spaces global media images, sounds and stories? To give a categorical answer is not possible. Despite the fact that receivers of global media often decode messages in ways not intended by the makers, there are still messages sent out and received which espouse the values of consumerism, competition, individualism and so on.

Thus arguing for the power audiences have to use media messages as they will should not blind us to the fact that meanings generated and circulated by particular media can, and do, in specific contexts, help sustain relationships of domination and subordination. In Britain the homophobia of some of the tabloids has played a part in periodic bouts of gay bashing. In South Africa we need to ask to what extent the misogynous sentiments evident in much of gangsta rap and our own home-grown kwaito help naturalise those social values underpinning our high incidence of domestic violence and rape.

Furthermore, it is one thing to 're-make' the meanings on offer, while quite another to be offered radically different ways of understanding and making sense of the world. Where pressure to attract audiences to advertisers is increasingly the imperative for the commercial media, there is usually little desire to work outside of the ambit of whatever everyone already feels comfortable with and to present us with radically different ways of understanding and making sense of our world. As George Gerbner, the well-known American media theorist argues, "Competition for the largest possible audience at the least cost means striving for the broadest and most conventional appeals, blurring sharp conflicts...and presenting divergent or deviant images as mostly to be shunned, feared or suppressed."

The globalisation of media messages is a complex issue requiring much more debate and study. Meanwhile, we should resist making simplistic assumptions about either how good or bad its effects are.

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