

Globalisation, Convergence and the Media

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The Media and Society

In the information age of today, we are heavily dependent on the media as a source of information. In fulfilling its role as our source of information, the media has a duty of responsibility and accountability to the public it serves; that is, to provide important information for the public interest. However, current technology, mainstream ideology and public policies have transformed the media into a gigantic industry with enormous power that not only influences, but also constructs and shapes the perception and understanding of society. These elements of media power highlight the complex interpretation on the freedom of speech and expression.

With reference to democratic ideals, (Konvitz, 2006) points out that the existence of a free media is fundamental to building a free and democratic society. The media has to stand as the “fourth estate”, or, as the “watchdog” to monitor those in power. Hence, the media itself has an obligation to serve and represent the people in its existence as an agent of social change. However, as Watson (2008, p. 121-122) points out the ideal “watchdog” role is not easy to fulfil. He argues that, in some cases, the media in an authoritarian system merely occupies the role of the “guard dog.” Perhaps more interestingly, he suggests that with the rapid shift of ownership to the private sector, much of the media in many democratic societies have become the “lap dog” that only barks during those times at which it is required to do so.

The media has a central position in contemporary society. Depending on how we utilise the media, it influences not only our perception and knowledge, but at times, our attitude and behaviour as well. Gamble and Gamble (2005, p. A10-12) posit that the media provides models, creates and propagates stereotypes that affect our real-life experiences. The representation of reality by the media helps shape our perception. Mediated reality, as Gamble and Gamble suggest, can lead to disappointment because of the over-emphasis of certain facts and events at the expense of others. Nevertheless, the media can also help us share knowledge and experience, encourage unity and diversity and enable our connection with the rest of the world.

According to McQuail (2005, p. 97-99) there are at least five main functions of the media. The first is to provide information on the power relations in a society which help to accelerate innovation, adaptation and progress. The second function of the media is to explain and interpret the meaning of events and information. Third, the media must bring a sense of continuity to a particular society by recognising the established and dominant culture as well as the subcultures and the development of new cultures. Fourth, entertainment is provided by the media in an effort to reduce social tension by delivering amusements as the means of recreation. To reflect the extensive use of the media in political and commercial propaganda, mobilisation is then recognised as the fifth function.

The objective of propaganda is to help shape and mould public opinion. The term propaganda has a negative connotation to it. However, as Watson (2008, p. 108) argues, the verb (to propagate) is something that is important for the society as a whole. In a similar vein, Vincent (2007, p. 233) states that such a misconception is more likely drawn from the references to figures such as Stalin, Mussolini, and Hitler who manipulated the public with media campaigns characterised by their expression of falsehoods and intimidation. It is undeniable however, with the diffusion of information through the media, that governments in power recognise the significance of information. When information is controlled and distributed selectively, it can enhance power. The extent to which information (or truth for that matter) is shared or not shared, as Vincent explains, is the reason why propaganda is perceived negatively.

Debate on the nature of propaganda affected its definition. Propaganda, according to Vincent (2007, p. 233) 'has to do with the use of communication channels, through known persuasive or manipulative techniques, in an attempt to shape or alter public opinion.' Other theorists, Harold Laswell *et.al* (1979, p. 4-5) define propaganda as an intentionally manipulated form of communication which seeks 'to influence outcomes of controversy in favour of preference.' Propaganda, according to these two definitions, is not identified as harmful. At the same time, some argue that there is a potential for danger in any propagandistic message. Thus, as Hartley (1992, p. 52) suggests, "reading" is just as political as the production process.

With advances in technology, propaganda has become increasingly prominent. It has become much more complicated and sophisticated. Public relations campaigns and advertising are also a form of propaganda. Hartley (1992, p. 55) argues that the truth is the outcome of a struggle in search for profit, fame, and voters. The media, in this case, has become the battlefield. Similarly, Chomsky (as cited in Vincent, 2007, p. 265) posits that the media is practising propaganda in support of certain influential groups' interests which direct and finance them.

As discussed above, information becomes powerful when it is carefully selected and controlled. Nation states with autocratic systems optimise this power in order to preserve national order and sustain the status quo. The media in authoritarian states is usually guided, and government officials exercise repressive regulation on materials covered by the media (Watson, 2008, p. 117). Any media groups that publish news unsuitable with the strict guidelines imposed or which take an opposing view to that of the government is seen as subversive. Authoritarian governments possess the power to enact censorship, to prosecute, and/or close recalcitrant areas of the media down.

Conversely, in a democratic society, the law makes it difficult for the government to impose censorship (Cirino, 1974, p. 59). However, there are several ways in which the government could exercise limited censorship. Some these are based on a concern for national security or the prohibition of intolerant views related to religious beliefs, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation (Nieto and Schmitt, 2005, p. 28).

Another form of censorship that is popular around the world regardless of the political system at work is self-censorship. In contemporary society where government interference is minimal, the media is able to perform self-censorship for various reasons. The act of self-censorship is defined as 'the conscious response to anticipated pressure from non-journalists' (Gans as cited in Price, 2006, p. 203-4). Many journalists employ self-censorship and 'adjust to the realities of source and organizational media requirements' as exercised by gatekeepers 'to implement and internalise the constraint imposed by proprietary and other centres of power' (Ambrosio de Nelson, 2008, p. 328).

According to Cirino (1974) and Lesley (1996) the act of self-censorship should be seen as another form of censorship because certain information is kept from the audience. It is a deliberate act by the media to suppress information in the way they deliver their materials on certain issues that may be deemed as sensitive, offensive, or damaging in order to avoid insulting various interest groups. This logic therefore challenges the capacity of the media to perform their role. Their responsibility as the watchdog for society is therefore weakened or threatened.

Globalisation

In recent years, globalisation has become an exceptionally popular term and loosely used by scholars around the world to address various interrelated issues and processes, some of which include economics, politics, technology, and human rights. While the concept is not entirely new (Flew, 2008; Palmer, 2007; Boyd-Barret, 2006), in the last thirty years, globalisation has radically changed the relationship between nations. It does not necessarily mean that globalisation undermines the role of the nation state and its sovereignty. Globalisation, nonetheless, has drastically altered the way in which the world operates.

Ritzer (2007, p. 1) suggests that the discourse of globalisation is interesting because there is no unanimity in its definition. A simple definition, argues Kamalipour (2007), will fail to explain the multi-dimensional, and complex, nature of it. Surprisingly, as Ritzer points out, most scholars have attempted to define globalisation using similar ideas which shows more consensus than previously assumed. Friedman (as cited in Antonio, 2007, p. 70), for example, defines globalisation as

[the] inexorable, integration of markets, nation-states and technologies which enables individuals, corporations and nation-states to reach around the world farther, faster, deeper and cheaper than ever before, and in a way that is enabling the world to reach into individuals, corporations and nation-states farther, faster, deeper and cheaper than ever before.

Ritzer, similarly contends that 'globalisation is an accelerating set of processes involving flows that encompasses ever-greater numbers of the world's spaces and that lead to increasing integration and interconnectivity among those spaces'. Bisley

(2007, p. 31) also explains globalisation as ‘a set of consequences deriving from the reduced costs and increased speed of transporting goods, knowledge, people, and capital around the world.’ Robertson and White (2007, p.64) emphasise two major tendencies within the study of globalisation: the growing understanding of the world as a whole and the ever-expanding global connectivity. These two major tendencies, as Robertson and White stipulate, work within four dimensions including the cultural, social, political, and economic spheres.

The complexity of globalisation reflected in its definition thus resulted in the polarisation of views. For its proponents, globalisation creates opportunities and has the potential to help create a more equal and prosperous world for all. On the contrary, the opponents question the inordinately large value placed on the market and global capitalism. According to Callinicos (2001, p. 111), ‘the enemy is not globalisation, but global capitalism.’ The issue of power distribution and domination predominantly related with the supremacy of the United States and Western countries in general are another important issue brought forward by the adversaries of globalisation.

The world started to operate in a different way once neo-liberalism gained momentum during the Reagan administration in the United States and Margaret Thatcher’s Prime Ministership in the United Kingdom in the 1980s. The market-driven world endorsed the integration of economies by means of emphasising their interdependence as well as decreasing the trade barriers between them (Kamalipour, 2007, p. xii). With the United Kingdom and the United States as the pioneers of neo-liberalism, many other free market economies followed suit.

With the ascendancy of neo-liberalism, government intervention has gradually receded*, while deregulation and privatisation is now common practice in the telecommunication and broadcasting industries (Jin, 2007b, p. 180). Leading finance institutions such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank also play a significant role in fostering neo-

* The current global economic meltdown that we are experiencing since October 2008 has clearly challenged such argument. Government intervention to the financial system has proven to be necessary to avoid further economic recession. This paper however, was researched and written prior to the global financial crisis.

liberalism by promoting free trade agreements around the world (McGuigan, 2005, p. 230). On the other hand, although the market-led economy advocates freedom and efficiency, issues such as inequality and community breakdown continue to surface. There are challenges when the 'global' meets the 'local.' For example, in many countries such as China, Singapore, and Malaysia, wealth generation that is promoted by globalisation has been confronted by cultural autonomy issues (Weber, 2003, p. 275-276).

The existence of global communication media in an increasingly globalised world is central in the discourse of power distribution and domination. As McGraw III (2005, p. 556) notes, globalisation is the force behind economic growth which in turn becomes the driving force for the increasing number of people who need to keep informed on what is happening around the globe. These people have a growing thirst for information and this is where the global media's role is so important. Furthermore, Flew (2008, p. 193) argues that the importance of the media in the global realm is not only related with its role as the international distributor of messages and meanings, but also from 'the perceived role in weakening cultural bonds that tie people to nation states and national communities'. To demonstrate the centrality of the media in the process of globalisation, Rantanen (2005, p. 8) explicitly refers to the media within his definition of globalisation. He defines it as 'a process in which worldwide economic, political, cultural and social relations have become increasingly mediated across time and space'.

Globalisation along with the advancement of technology, mainstream ideology, and public policies has transformed the media into a massive industry. With the vast development and acceptance of democracy that favours a competitive environment, including the competition of various ideologies, the media has become a competitive industry itself. The market, the media, and the power of information has become intertwined within the globalised world and issues such as the struggle for control of global communication has become essential. As cited in Winseck and Pike (2008, p. 8), Daniel Headrick points out that the communication media in this context has served as 'weapons of politics'. Furthermore, the crucial role of the media within global cultural processes has resulted in a growing concern on cultural domination as feared by many nationalists (Banerjee, 2002).

The issue of media domination mainly centres on the influence of Western interests and values on the less developed countries. This is not surprising given that transnational media corporations are highly concentrated in North America and Europe. Accordingly, Hamelink (as cited in Chan and Ma, 1996, p.46-47) argues that the so-called 'global communication' is actually the propagation of transnational mass-market advertising and media products created by a handful of media giants. Hence the global situation, according to Sreberny (2005, p. 13), is nothing more than a form of Western hegemony.

Herbert Schiller (as cited in Jin, 2007a, p. 754) identifies the supremacy of the U.S. and several European countries in media content production as 'an integral component of Western imperialism' and has labelled it as 'cultural imperialism.' The advocates of the cultural imperialism thesis believe that the imbalance in cultural product dissemination is the augmentation of the already apparent domination of the West in the political and economic realms (Banerjee, 2002, p. 519). Consequently, instead of providing an environment in which democracy can flourish, characterised by a diversity of media content equally distributed around the globe, the opposite is occurring. We are witnessing the homogenising tendency that leads into the displacement or even disappearance of indigenous cultures in the less developed countries (Ya'u, 2004; McChesney, 2005; Banerjee, 2002).

The arguments behind the cultural imperialism thesis are supported by several observations and case-studies. As Tomlinson (in Banerjee, 2002, p. 519-520) indicates, the abundance of Western (particularly American) cultural goods in the global market is one of the irrefutable pieces of evidence indicating that Western cultural practices and preferences are increasingly influential and global. Tomlinson also points out that the long history of Western imperialism provides a strong background in the asymmetrical relationship between the West and the rest. It supports the 'hegemonic foundations' of the cultural imperialism thesis. The economic domination and exploitation from the past then evolved into its sophisticated form through capitalism; for capitalism, or as Tomlinson puts it, 'lie at the very heart of the globalization processes'.

On the other hand, the cultural imperialism thesis is not without its detractors who counter the cultural imperialism thesis. According to Jin (2007a, p. 755-756) the adversaries suggest that local resistance over Western cultural products should not be undermined. Furthermore, Jin argues that based on several examples of research, audiences tends to prefer media content that contains culture and sets of values that are most similar to their own. It is noteworthy however, that it has a prerequisite condition – that is, if it is supported by the local economy.

Another reason to reinforce the counter-cultural imperialism thesis is the argument that national cultures can in fact defend their way of life by optimising what globalisation has to offer: sharing their culture with the rest of the world. In supporting this stance, Banarjee (2002, p. 518) argues that cultural exposure should be seen as a transactional process between local and trans-cultural forces because cultures are far more resilient than detractors suggest and will therefore find a way to ‘diffuse and rejuvenate’ themselves. He further suggests that the recent growth of local and regional media content production and programming is evident enough to challenge the cultural imperialism thesis. The preconception that audiences are passive and always absorb any cultural content that the media offers is no longer suitable.

ICT: Convergence and the Internet

The development of technology has undoubtedly made our lives easier. The utilisation of “newer” and “better” technology has penetrated almost every facet of our lives. According to Barr (2000, p. 20) our society has reached the final part of the societal evolution and transformed into the information society. It is a society that revolves around knowledge and information networks, products, and services. The informationisation of society according to Flew (2005, p. 9) is characterised by the rapid growth of the information and communication sectors particularly in the area of production and distribution. Another important characteristic, as Flew further suggests, is the extensive use of ICT in almost every economic activity.

The advances in technology are a prominent feature in the manifestation of information society. Media are traditionally distinct in form and information flows

through specific conduit. However, in recent times, the boundaries between the media, telecommunications, and computing have become blurred (Barr, 2000, p. 22). The three key elements in the communications industry: computing and information technology, communications networks, and content production have converged. Convergence then led into institutional consolidation in which big companies merged to deliver new services and greater service diversification. However, as Barr explains, convergence *per se* does not introduce new technology. It merely deals with the way in which existing communication technology has merged in order to facilitate wider and more integrated methods of information distribution.

With the convergence of the telecommunication, media, and computer industries, we are now entering a new phase of media development. Prior to institutional consolidation, we are witnessing the emergence of private global communication networks. Today, privatisation and deregulation is a common practice. Media mergers and cross-ownership are topics that are continually endorsed by the media giants to expand their market share. With the shift from public to private ownership and new technology developments, Watson (2008, p. 107) questions whether the purpose of the media requires any evaluation at all. As Herman and McChesney (1997 p. 110) succinctly put it, '[i]n every corner of the world, public systems are being sold off to private interests.'

In this information age, the internet has become a part of the fabric of our lives (Castells, 2002, p.1). It is the 'information superhighway' that enables us to exchange vast quantities of information within an interlinked set of networks with other individuals and institutions around the globe (Barr, 2000, p. 28). The internet has become the fastest-growing medium ever recorded with an increase of 2000% users over a period of seven years (NUA 2004 as cited in Flew, 2005, p. 7).

Following 9/11 people around the world access news from various sources via the internet in an unprecedented scale (Glass as cited in Best *et al.*, 2005, p. 53). According to Best *et.al.* Google's Internet Web log data which states that following Bush administration's declaration on 'War on Terrorism' the consumption of foreign news has increased. A study by Tehranian (2002) confirms that after 9/11 the Aljazeera website record a leap of traffic with a significant increase from 700,000 to

1.2 million hits a day. The numbers then jumped to about 2 million hits a day during the first week of the US invasion to Afghanistan and went up to 3 millions in the second week. More than 40 percents of the hits came from the US. Such finding is evident that the advent and rapid growth of ICT have altered the way the world operates. As Spender (as cited in Alia, 2004, p. 147) succinctly puts it, 'it produces an information revolution. It changed what human beings know, and how we think.' Clearly the internet has become ubiquitous in our contemporary society.

Marshall McLuhan (2003, p. 19-35) believes that the 'medium is the message.' It implies that different models of communications have different consequences and affect each society differently (Deibert as cited in Rantanen, 2005). The existence of the internet therefore has a unique and significant impact to our society.

From the early stage of its development, the internet has shown great potential. It demonstrates our capacity to promote institutional goals, overcome bureaucratic barriers, challenge the established order, and promote the creation of new values (Castells, 2002, p. 9). It also emphasises the importance of cooperation and freedom of information in order to promote innovation. The emergence of the internet as a mass medium, as Chun (2006, p. 2) argues, represents a new power structure and promises 'freedom that could not be tamed.' Hence most people see it as empowering, inspiring, and creating active users instead of sedentary individuals that merely surf through channels.

The internet has become the essential medium of our time. Today, the internet also plays a significant role in politics. Social movements and political campaigns utilise the internet as a means through which they can communicate and act. It is an increasingly important tool in recruiting, organising and persuading elements within society. The promise of empowerment manifested itself in *Zapatista* movement in Chiapas Mexico in the mid 1990s. The internet and other electronic networks are used effectively to organise support and capture the imagination of people around the world (Castells, 2002, p. 138). Another example is the *Falun Gong* movement in which Li Hongzhi, the leader of the movement, gathered support and organised protests via the internet. The *Zapatista* and *Falun Gong* movements demonstrate the indispensability of the internet as a component of social movements emerging in the

network society. The internet, as Bill Gates (as cited in Chun, 2006, p. 129) proposes, has created an equal sphere for all and such equality should be used 'to help address some of the sociological problems that society has yet to solve in the physical world.'

The internet allows people to expand their social network and choices by overcoming geographical barriers (Torenli, 2006, p. 447). Similarly, UNESCO's Director-General Koichiro Matsuura (as cited in Leye, 2007, p. 975) states that if the internet is to be used effectively, it can play a major role 'in building human capacities for sustainable livelihoods'. In short, the internet (and ICT in general) could play a significant role in reinforcing democratic systems across the globe. However, the reality does not always reflect that optimism (Bentivegna, 2006, p. 331).

The rhetoric of freedom made possible by the internet is paradoxically accompanied by the threat of surveillance and the loss of privacy. As Chun (2006, p. 2) articulates, the internet poses a risk of becoming a 'dark machine of control'. The extensive use of the internet resulted in the collection, storage, and re-usage of as many data as possible for various reasons. Parties from the area of marketing, bureaucracy, entertainment, and security serve as its prophets. The sense of being closely and continuously monitored has been evoked through the application of the latest technology such as the launching of sophisticated intelligent agents and unique identification numbers for computer hardware in the internet by marketers, bureaucrats, entertainers, and security apparatuses.

Digitisation, together with the extensive use of the internet, has opened a pathway to endless capability and further development. The cutting-edge technical development has presented us with the latest monitoring gear, enormous data storage, complex networking, and statistical analysis (Simon, 2005, p. 14). Software enhancement and operating systems that forced us to have the unique identifying system, along with the improvement of cookies and intelligent agents, have enabled a situation in which the invasion of individual privacy has become far easier. Unsolicited e-mail, the creation of databases consisting of personal information, and secondary use of it by third parties without consent are examples of the ease with which traditional values of privacy can be circumvented. Cookies are able to act as a spy that records preferences and interests (Arvidsson, 2004). Furthermore, as MacKay (2006, pp. 24-5) posits,

information today has become a commodity marketed by commercial entities and commonly used by political forces in propaganda campaigns.

The utilisation of the internet as a means to create a surveillance system is evident enough in China. The Chinese government indeed made arrangements with companies such as Google and Yahoo. Google agreed to censor and control certain websites from users in China while Yahoo provided information about people that are using its Chinese internet services. It is seen as a mutually beneficial agreement. For the Chinese government it is a necessary measure to support the status quo, whilst Yahoo and Google view this agreement as a strategic move to attract business and to create a substantially bigger profit. The information provided by Yahoo then led to the arrest of people asserting “different” views from those supported by the Chinese government itself. The troubling fact is that the assistance of the private sector in infiltrating citizens’ private lives is a serious threat to our right of privacy. However, such threats are not exclusive to authoritarian countries. According to MacKay (2006, p. 37) the U.S. government has also randomly intercepted Americans’ e-mail, justifying such action with an aim to ensure security.

The widespread use of the internet and other ICT in our society further emphasise its prominence. Jonathan Crary (as cited in Webb and Schirato, 2006, p. 256) states that ICT can be considered as ‘points of intersection where philosophical, scientific, and aesthetic discourses overlap with the mechanical techniques, institutional requirements, and socioeconomic forces.’ In regard to globalisation, Boyd-Barrett (2006, p. 27-28) characterises globalisation as ‘dependent on, and a promoter of, ICT’. Along with two other characteristics, the global economic order and the Western transnational corporations, ICT plays a role as the driver of globalisation that outmanoeuvres local and global regulatory entities. ICT sustain globalisation through hardware, software, and service industries with the support of the patent system as well as intellectual property rights. Leye (2007, p. 972) insists that ‘information and knowledge, instead of manufacturing goods, have become the (intangible) drivers of economy.’

As already mentioned, although the importance of ICT is widely accepted, its current use along with its socio-cultural, economic, and political effects are still debatable.

For the proponents of neo-liberalism, ICT is viewed as ‘the liberator’ for its role in opening the window of opportunity in which people can have access to information (Ishemo, 2004, p. 65). It also enables less developed countries to bypass several stages of development and catch up with the developed nations in the democratic world.

On the other hand, technology is not neutral. It is how the technology is used and for what purpose it is used that are two major questions regarding the influence of technology. It also requires various kinds of resources to access it. Therefore, parties with vast capital and political resources represent the dominating force. Therefore ICT, as Boyd-Barret previously suggest, can be seen as the essential variable in sustaining capitalism inherent in globalisation.

To create an equal and prosperous world, all global citizens must have equal access to ICT. However, there are obstacles preventing this such as the policy conditionality imposed by developed countries through various means (e.g. WTO, World Bank or IMF) that in turn create complex political, economic, and cultural implications. For example, it is obligatory to acknowledge intellectual property rights by local administrations to gain accession to WTO membership or IMF and World Bank funding (Boyd-Barrett, 2006, p. 28). Ya’u (2004, p. 17) then argues that the WTO ‘has claimed the powers relinquished by the states without assuming any of the responsibility to the citizens that these powers entail’. In Ya’u’s opinion the WTO has reorganised the world in such an intricate and complex way so as to guarantee the domination of the rich over the poor. He points out that WTO has increasingly become the counter force of the UN system with international trade as an end in itself that disregards the UN declaration on human rights.

The disparity of access to the internet and ICT in general has created a concern known as the ‘digital divide.’ It is seen as major factor in the asymmetric world that we live in today. It suggests that only after all countries have sufficiently and adequately connected to the global world and its economy will equality be achieved (Leye, 2007, p. 978). This assertion shows that the digital divide has neglected the fact that all nations are actually equal and fully integrated to the global economy through their membership in WTO. Therefore the digital divide is more than just digital (Bagchi, 2005, p. 50). It is a sociological phenomenon that mirrors broader problems such as

social, economic, cultural, and learning inequalities. However, through the recent success of peripheral media such as Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya, ICT has proven its potential and capability to bridge the digital divide. Nonetheless, in order to narrow the digital divide, some prerequisite conditions have to be met and appropriate policies should be implied at various levels.

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TABLE OF CONTENT

THE MEDIA AND SOCIETY	2
GLOBALISATION	5
ICT: CONVERGENCE AND THE INTERNET	9
LIST OF REFERENCES.....	16