Cultural Analysis of the Media: The West Media Culture Hegemony Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Media: culture hegemony is a phenomenon which punctuates our daily living in the world today. Media are powerful vehicles of culture, ideology, information and education. To some extent they define people and their cultures. The media play a great role in cultural transmission and influence in and across nations. The developed world media are powerful and their influences transcend space and time. The impact of the developed world (mainly in the global North) media on some cultural aspects in the developing world (countries seeking to become more advanced economically and socially) is of significance. The impetus of the impact of influence has been precipitated by the sharing of information in bulks through the internet. Anchored on critical theory; the aim of this paper is to bring to focus some aspects which manifest cultural hegemony. It acknowledges that the cases of cultural influence are many and thus highlights a few. The main focus is on three areas which include: imperialism and dependency, creation of global culture and influence through international media events. The paper foregrounds and advocates for paradigm shift in this kind of existence.

Key words: Media, Culture, Imperialism, Hegemony, the West, Third world

I. INTRODUCTION

We live in a world of culture. Every race, every organization, every community and every nation has a culture that defines it. Culture continues to evolve through inventions and forces of influence which cause attrition and thus change of some aspects; dropping some and adding others to each cultural landscape. Media being some of the most powerful agents of change in society have been great catalysts of cultural influence over the decades since the invention of radio and television. According to Sullivan (2013) culture can be defined as the signs, symbols, values, beliefs, and behaviors that comprise a way of life for a given community. In all cultures there can be competing ways of interpreting cultural indicators and a diversity of meanings attached to them. As a shared set of ideas, values, perceptions, and standards of behavior, culture is the common denominator that makes the actions of individuals intelligible to other members of their society. It enables them to predict how others are most likely to behave in a given circumstance, and it tells them how to react accordingly.

The media ecosystem has its culture. Thomas (2012) noted that media culture refers to the current western capitalist society that emerged and developed from the 20th century, under the influence of mass media. The term alludes to the overall impact and intellectual guidance exerted by the media (primarily TV, but also the press, radio, cinema and the internet), not only on public opinion but also on tastes and values. Jansson (2002) opined that the alternative term mass culture conveys the idea that such culture emerges spontaneously from the masses themselves, like popular art did before the 20th century. The expression media culture, conveys the idea that such culture is the product of the mass media. Media being one of the most powerful agents of society have been a great catalyst of cultural influence over the decades since invention of radio and television. The influence impetus was rejuvenated by the invention of the internet and its array of communication domains ranging from formal communication platforms to social networks. Hegemony is the social, cultural, ideological, or economic influence exerted by a dominant group (Merriam Webster Online Dictionary). Since colonization; developing countries have been unable to disentangle themselves fully and this kind of existence which seems to spiral to infinity is vividly portrayed by the existence in mass media whereby, developing countries dance to the tunes of the West, sometimes passively, sometimes actively. This paper adopts an interpretive critical inquiry methodology.

II. THEORETICAL BEARING: THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL PERSPECTIVE

Critical theory is a school of thought that stresses the reflective assessments and critique of society and culture by applying knowledge from the social sciences and the humanities. According to Craig and Muller (2007, p.426) some of the key proponents of this theory are Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno who were members of the Frankfurt school, a group of radical social theorists who formed the institute for social research in Frankfurt Germany and migrated to America during Nazi period. Adorno and Horkheimer developed a Marxist sociological approach to media studies. They saw the media as a cultural industry that maintained power relations and served to lessen the 'resistance standards' of cultural aesthetics by popularizing certain types of culture. According to Kellner (1995) the Frankfurt school theorists produced some of the first accounts within critical social theory of the importance of mass culture and communication in social reproduction and domination. They generated one of the first, modes of critical cultural studies that analyze the processes of cultural production and political economy, the politics of cultural texts, and audience reception and use of cultural artifacts. Frankfurt school developed a critical and trans-disciplinary approach to cultural and communications studies, combining political economy, textual analysis, and analysis of social and ideological effects. This school of thought has found bearing in many studies, especially those that interrogate hegemonic existences in society.

Critical theory puts into perspective power relations depicted by the disharmony of contrasts brought forth by different economic relegations in the world. Craig and Muller, (2007, p.425) argued that the critical tradition conceptualizes communication in a discursive reflection; that is discourse that freely reflects on the assumptions that may be distorted by unexamined habits, ideological beliefs and relations of power. Communication without critical reflection is inherently defective for example when it blindly reproduces social conditions that privilege some groups (for example with regard to social class, race or gender) over others. Critical theory exposes hidden social mechanisms that distort communication and supports political efforts to resist the power of those mechanisms. Ideology, truth, deception, power, resistance, liberation, democracy, identity, and participation are few of the terms commonly used for thinking and talking about communication in the critical tradition (Craig & Muller, 2007, p.425). This paper therefore critically looks at the status quo; the prevailing existence whereby powerful media in developed countries trend set many cultural aspects in the cultural universe and thus impose Western ideologies on third world masses.

In the twenty first century mass media have permeated deeper into society and made their audiences alienated and isolated from their cultural roots. Theodore Adorno argued that "mass-produced cultural products of low quality replaced high culture and traditional folk culture" (Adorno & Horkheimer,1972, p.48). This is especially evident in Africa where the masses have adopted many cultural aspects from the West for example dressing styles, eating habits, choice of music among other factors. Postman (1986, p.5) observed that as mass audiences consume mass culture, they tend to act and behave alike and finally become mass men and women in a mass society. Thus, overexposure to mass culture has its ramifications. The Frankfurt School pointed out that in the capitalist societies the capitalized and commercialized mass media have little difference from the other commodities in nature. According critical theory, mass media are in nature, hegemony. Although non-violent, the mass media hegemony works more effectively than the violent ones in maintaining the stability of capitalist culture and society. Horkheimer once said that it could not be exaggerated those radios and movie as a hegemonic power were not inferior to fighter planes and guns (Zhen, 2016, p.26). When the Frankfurt scholars were making their assertions, the internet was far from being invented. The internet supersedes any other media and its impact which has permeated the entire globe cannot be mitigated.

Powerful television channels owned by developed nations for example CNN and BBC and an array of media platforms which ride on the internet seem to puppeteer the entire globe by inoculating cultural traits whose epicenter is in the West. Mass media influence is one of the great forces that shape trends in society. Zhen (2016) noted that according to Adorno and Max the media are very influential because: first, in the process of communication, the hegemonic mass media is held tightly by the message makers, the privileged few, while the masses are powerless message receivers who have no choice but to be exposed to the implantation, secondly, mass media confuse reality and art, which cause among the masses a decline of their sensibility to reality and an increase of their illusions. What makes the situation worse is that the masses that get trapped in mass media are likely to behave under the control, at least under the influence, of mass media. For instance, the movie viewers are prone to take what they see in movies as real life, and therefore to follow it in life. This is quite evident especially regarding constructs which get integrated at individual level and in different systems in society, a scenario which foregrounds the tenets of Gerbner's cultivation theory. Zhen, (2016) cited Adorno and Max arguments that under the control of mass media the masses lose their ability of free thinking. Mass media extend political and economic governance into the cultural domain and control individual consciousness. Under the control of mass media, the masses unconsciously act on the will of the ruling class that that dominates the mass media universe.

III.   TOWARDS A GLOBAL CULTURE

Mass media and culture are interwoven. Dakroury (2014) noted that media and culture are interconnected; levels of understanding of various cultures influence media contents, meanwhile media platforms and contents impact cultural and day-to-day practices. Culture encompasses norms, beliefs, behaviors, values, traditions, languages, myths, ways of life, and so forth. Through the media, groups can create and represent cultural identities. Media narratives and discourses are created within different forms of texts and images that are complexly related to the cultural perceptions and practices of both those who produce and consume them. Encoding and decoding is involved in this process where encoding is done by producers of the messages, while decoding is conducted by the audience. The packaging of information by different editorial teams is a great determinant of the impact likely to be realized. Social and cultural phenomena as projected by the media mean a lot especially in a world that is getting homogenized at a very fast rate. Kraidy (2002) opined that the received view about the globalization of culture is one where the entire world has been molded in the image of Western, mainly American, culture. In international communication theory and research, cultural imperialism theory argues that audiences across the globe are heavily affected by media messages emanating from the Western industrialized countries. Without global media, according to conventional wisdom, the cliché global village would be nonexistent. Mass media have a strong influence on globalization of culture.

According to Kraidy (2002) in the early stage of cultural imperialism, researchers focused their efforts mostly on nation-states as primary actors in international relations. They imputed rich, industrialized, and Western nation-states with intentions and actions by which they export their cultural products and impose their socio-cultural values on poorer and weaker nations in the developing world. This argument was supported by a number of studies demonstrating that the flow of news and entertainment was biased in favor of industrialized countries. This bias was clear in terms of quantity, because most media contents are exported by Western countries and imported by developing nations. Despite the strides which have been made since colonial times, the superiority-inferiority existence between developed nations and the third world nations continues with little mitigation. This existence has often led to protests developing nations who uphold the view that Western media focus mainly on negative news, giving a blind eye to the many positive happenings especially in Africa. take for instance the reference of Kenya as a hotbed of terrorism by CNN prior President Obamas visit in the year 2015. This according to BBC (2015) resulted to the creation of the hashtag SomeoneTellCNN through which the back lash was vented.

Discourses on Western media hegemony have been on the global scene for quite some time. Kraidy (2002) pointed out that the global media debate was launched during the 1973 General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in Nairobi, Kenya. As a specialized agency of the United Nations, the mission of UNESCO includes issues of communication and culture. During the conference, strong differences arose between Western industrialized nations and developing countries. Led by the United States, the first group insisted on the free flow of information doctrine, advocating free trade in information and media programs without any restrictions. The second group, concerned by the lack of balance in international media flows, accused Western countries of invoking the free flow of information ideology to justify their economic and cultural domination (Kraidy ,2002). Decades later an equilibrium has not been achieved and much of the information consumed by the developing world on the international arena flows from the global North. Information is power and power influences the culture and social fabric of any nation.

 The media is undeniably one of the engines of cultural globalization. Kraidy (2002) however, opined that the size and intensity of the media effect on the globalization of culture is a contested issue revolving around the following question: Did the mass media trigger and create the globalization of culture? Or is the globalization of culture an old phenomenon that has only been intensified and made more obvious with the advent of transnational media technologies? Nevertheless, the world today reels with the turbulences of cultural influence and at the center of the driving forces are international media (Kraidy, 2002). Media has played a key role in transforming societies and consequently the realization of mass culture. The advancement of technology has also created a continuum of churning information through more diverse platforms and consequently more accessibility and influence. Media produces a generation whose members are connected regardless of space or location. Electronic media have become the spatial and temporal setting for showcasing and perpetuation of popular culture. The trends which had already been set by television have been intensified by the internet to a great extent. Schültze et al (1991) noted that the mass media is where people construct meaning into their lives. Television and music, for example, can make magic, mystery and drama out of everyday lifestyle patterns, by placing them within a construct that is outside ourselves, which viewers choose to enter by watching and listening, and create meaning from it. The array of print media especially newspapers, lifestyle magazines and books have also played a great role in the homogenization of culture. This so especially due to availability of hard copies and their virtual forms in cyberspace.

IV.   IMPERIALISM AND DEPENDENCY

Since colonization; developing countries have been unable to fully disentangle themselves from dependence of the West; economically and to some extent culturally. This kind of existence is vividly portrayed by the constructs generated and unleashed through mass media, whereby, the West media channels are trendsetters of many issues in society. Globalization universalizes some cultural aspects. This results to cultural homogenization, a state whereby Western culture subdues culture from third world nations by exporting of programs, bias in reporting, focusing on negative news, influence through celebrity culture among other aspects**.** The dominant circulation of global media contents in the developing countries is not only a challenge to their democracies but to their cultures, economies and ideologies. There has been a tendency of the international media to cover the developing world in a distorted way and thus bringing negativity to the limelight and to some extent overlooking aspects which project these nations in positive light. Looking at the world through critical lenses, the conclusion is that communication imperialism among other factors have divided it into two fractions, one possessing the resources and the power, and the other dependent on the powerful and the resourceful, struggling to attain its own identity, image and independence, not only in terms of economic growth but also in terms of media strength. The impact of the media and their powerful effects of the masses is a reality that cannot be ignored. The masses form their opinions and impressions of the world around them on the basis of what they hear or see on the media. Sabir (2013) argued that with the kind of media the South has, people living in these regions not only depend on foreign media for international news but also refer to foreign media even for national news events.

The media serve as channels for inter-cultural 'invasion' of the poorer countries by the more affluent and powerful nations. It is not only specific program contents that are exported. Directly or indirectly, there is also the 'export' from the stronger economies of particular conceptual models that affect, for instance, prevailing views on how program contents should be arranged or presented, or the components which are deemed to constitute an appropriate schedule or format (Woollacott, 2005). This is quite evident in the developing world media were programming and news presentation styles are a reflection of the extent of the West mass media influence. Hollywood movies, hip hop music and politics styles are an indicator of the dependency syndrome existing between the third world and the developed world. Woollacott (2005) pointed out that a great impact is also triggered by multinational companies which buy advertising space or any advertisers who channel their custom through multi-national advertising agencies, or both. Some giant companies for example Coca-Cola and Nike have their presence being felt at all corners of the globe courtesy of the mass media. These are some of the multinationals from the West who dominate the media jurisdiction during major world events through sponsorship.

Since the end of colonialism dominance and imperialism never disappeared to oblivion but have taken different dimensions in different societal spheres, one of which is the media. The postmodern world scenario is characterized by a struggle for dominance. According to Olson (2002) the concentration of ownership of global media and the concomitant increase in the flow of media across international borders have complex implications for national identities. Although this is not really new to postmodernism it certainly is intensified, and so the scenario certainly puts national cultures on the defensive, since in some cases these media are used strategically to subvert indigenous culture. The reason is simple: identity is power. Powerful international media content has tended to be skewed with much of it focusing on aspects which project less developed nations in negative light at the expense of many developmental realizations. The impact of Western culture is felt everywhere. Many indigenous culture aspects in developing nations have been eclipsed by those from from the West. The impact of movies, soap operas and reality television programs is immense. Woollacott (2005) argued that the totality of relevant exogenous media influences may sometimes be evaluated in isolation from an evaluation of countervailing indigenous influences. It tends to be assumed that the adoption of any given western media practice represents a stage in the process of social change that would not have occurred solely in response to indigenous pressures. The role of the demand for cultural imports is underemphasized or glibly explained away as 'created'. The media spectrum has perpetuated constructs which subdue the cultural inclinations of the less developed world and efforts to bridge the divide have encountered challenges (Woollacott ,2005).

Some of the maladies which ailed developing nations during colonial times for example poverty, ethnic conflicts and diseases have stubbornly refused to crumble and to a great extent they have taken center stage as determinant factors for cultural domination. Any general discussion of media impact should include an assessment of the extent to which populations are actually exposed to the media. The most important factor helping to account for exposure is the availability of media. This is still something that cannot be taken for granted in many of the developing countries. Woollacott (2005) argued that media development in developing countries faces the challenges of market conditions, political insecurity, linguistic diversity, illiteracy, and technology. A lot of efforts are required especially in advancing technology in less privileged nations in order to expose populations

to significant discourses on the global stage. The dialogue on significant issues for example climate change should not be relegated to certain segments of the globe while others remain in the dark.

Due to the emergence of a global village, a global culture has also been realized. Horn (2002) noted that many cultural critics have maintained that on the global plane there is an attempt to create a uniform thinking, which in its word and concept formation relies heavily on English as global lingua franca, and that produces, what Ramonet calls "la pensé unique", an expression, which is imprecisely translated as "politically correct thinking". While manipulation is no doubt a key feature of 'mass culture' one should not overlook that consumers often find very creative ways of using discourses offered on media platforms. This can be attributed to the manner in which through the 'copycat' ideologies portrayed in the media ranging from politicians borrowing slogans to copying of news presentation mannerisms and reality shows discourses traverse the international media landscape.

V.   THE EVENTS CONCEPT

Major events which attract large audiences are media convergence points. The significance of such events is amplified by the media coverage which contributes to the direct and indirect participation by the masses from different parts of the globe. Hepp and Couldry (2010, p.22) noted that in definition of media events in a global age we can formulate the following: media events are certain situated, thickened, centering performances of mediated communication that are focused on a specific thematic core, cross different media products and reach a wide and diverse multiplicity of audiences and participants. Media events have continued to become common phenomena as the world reels with technological advancement. There are many categories of events that bring international mass media together for instance sports events, political campaign gatherings, inauguration of presidents and entertainment events for example music extravaganzas are just a few of media events which capture national and international attention.

Media events present a good platform for cultural integration and influence. According to Dayan and Katz (1992, p.15) during the moments (of media events), totality and simultaneity are unbound, organizers and broadcasters resonate together; competing channels merge into one; viewers present themselves at the same time and in every place. All eyes are fixed on the ceremonial center, through which each nuclear cell is connected to all the rest. Social integration of the highest order is thus achieved via mass communication. It is in this integration that dominant cultures "try to box out" weaker cultures and the aftermath ramifications are always evident. Regardless of the corner of the globe where international events which attract intercontinental media attention the subject of cultural dominance will always make its presence felt, sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly. Media events provide an avenue for showcasing the essence of different cultures. The coverage of events creates images in the minds of audiences which have far reaching implications. Dayan and Katz (1992, P.15) defined media events, metaphorically, as high holidays of mass communication, or more concretely as a genre of media communication that can be defined on syntactic, semantic and pragmatic levels. On the syntactic level, media events are interruptions of routine; they monopolize media communication across different channels and programs, are broadcast live, pre-planned and organized outside the media. On the semantic level, media events are staged as historic occasions with ceremonial reverence and the message of reconciliation. On the pragmatic level, media events enthrall very large audiences who view them in a festive style.

In Dayan and Katz's (1992) account, the relevance of media events depends on their character as one of the most important institutions integrating the highly dispersed members of national and international societies. One of the world events which attract millions of viewers and listeners is the world cup. When Africa hosted the world cup for the first time in history in South Africa in 2010 during preparations, the debate on cultural dominance and imperialism was already being propagated. This was triggered by the narrative that the task of leading the event anthem was given to a foreigner (Shakira) whereas Africa has great musicians who could have done it well, the likes of Yvonne Chakachaka and Angelique Kidjo. During the Rio Olympics in 2016, some of the happenings which made negative news had African players at the center stage. When Feyisa Lilesa, an Ethiopian citizen was crossing the finish line after completing the marathon; he crossed his hands, a gesture of the oppression his community back in Ethiopia that was going on in his country. During the same event Kenya made headlines when one of the officials was sent back home after being linked to a doping scandal. In these cases, despite Kenya and Ethiopia displaying superb performance in athletics the notion of the many problems that thrust Africa into negative light still surfaced and to some extent eclipsed the good performance by athletes. Another event which attracts an audience of millions of people in the world, and hence wide media coverage is the miss world competition. Surprisingly it took decades before an indigenous African was crowned in 2001.

Cultural imperialism is a common phenomenon in mediatized events. Dominant media have always sought to advance their ideologies in a world that is deeply capitalistic. According to Best and Kellner (1997, p.4) media spectacles are organized around 'the consumption of images commodities' as part of the vast institutional and technical apparatus of contemporary capitalism, and all the means and methods power employs, outside of direct force, to relegate subjects to manipulation and to obscure the nature and effects of capitalism's power and deprivations. Cultural imperialism is a common phenomenon in mediatized events. Dominant media have always sought to advance their ideologies in a world that is deeply capitalistic through media events. Cottle (2008) tried to extend the concept of media events into a more general approach to "mediatized rituals". In his definition, mediatized rituals "are those exceptional and performative media phenomena that serve to sustain and/or mobilize collective sentiments and solidarities on the basis of symbolization and a subjunctive orientation to what should or ought to be". Western media are the trend setters in almost every aspect that gravitates towards global culture and developing countries find themselves treading the already charted path.

VI.   CONCLUSION

Media culture hegemony is a phenomenon which is prevalent in the world today. Media are powerful vehicles of culture, ideology, information and education. Media define people and their cultures, traditions and customs. Globalization universalizes some cultural aspects while annihilating others. This results to cultural homogenization, a state whereby Western culture subdues culture from third world nations. International media are international gate keepers and great influencers of cultural trends. More advocacy on more projection of ideologies which encompass even the developing world perspectives to a greater extent is needed. Developing nations should also showcase and aggressively defend cultural aspects which define their very existence.

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