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Globalization and cultural hybridity in the context of new digital media

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INTRODUCTION:

The increasing popularity of new digital media in contemporary social lives is now well established, but there remains a dearth of research on what consequences of these new digital media have on cultures. Are the cultures becoming homogenous or heterogeneous? Is it that large, dominant and economically powerful cultures tend to colonize smaller, economically weaker and more vulnerable cultures in the form of new imperialism? Or, cultures are equally benefitting through interaction with each other? These are the heated debate among scholars of different disciplines ranging from sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies. The growing interdependence in economic, political, social, cultural and ecological arenas in the form of globalization and advent of new media has expanded the debate. Contemporary social and cultural theorists come up with polarized ideas - some argue for homogenous cultural form while others see heterogeneity. Hybridity is a crucial and appealing theory, among the approaches supporting cultural heterogeneity. Hybridity results from the mixing of phenomena that are held to be different and separate. It is used in defining today’s globalization, particularly cultural and media globalization. But, cultural hybridity is not an easy concept to grasp. Kraidy (2002) indicates that the failure to analyze inequality, structure and political economic contexts makes the theory of hybridity a tool for rationalizing modernity, global capitalism and global consumerism.

The paper aims to question the fundamental assumptions of the concept of cultural hybridity and its relations with new digital media in the age of globalization: that cultural hybridity displays diversity, democracy, localism and interdependence. This is beyond
the scope of this paper to provide empirical proof of rapid changes of culture globally as an impact of increased uses of new digital media, but the paper argues that new media, like its predecessors, have profound influence in creating a hybrid form of culture through the processes of transculturation and cultural appropriateness. The extent of cultural mixture is now more rapid in the globalizing world when new digital media have been playing as the role of catalyst. The paper moves forward with the central thesis that digital media stimulate profound cultural transformations and realignments in an ever-increasingly interconnected world of communicative interactions and exchanges.

GLOBALIZATION AND CULTURE

Culture can be understood as the order of life on which human beings construct meaning through practices of symbolic representation what John Tomlinson (1999, 2004) says ‘by communicating with each other’. More concretely, culture consists of many types of symbols, including knowledge, tastes and values, which human beings can learn from each other by interactions. Globalization therefore necessarily involves culture. When people move across borders, trade, or communicate with distant others, information and idea move along with them.

James Lull rightly says: “In today’s complex world, communication is the social nexus where interpersonal relations and technological innovations, political-economic incentives and socio-cultural ambitions, light entertainment and serious information, local environments and global influences, form and content, substance and style all intersect, interact and influence each other” (Lull 2000: 10). In such a condition, what critics identify as the era of globalization, forms and formats of human communication are radically different that were even a decade ago. Media are increasingly substituting traditional institutions like families and religions in carrying cultural norms and values from one place to another, from one generation to another. Pointing to the trends, British
sociologist David Chaney says: “traditionally, social institutions such as family and religion have been seen as the primary media of [cultural] continuity. More recently… the role of ensuring continuity has increasingly been taken over by …forms of communication and entertainment” (Chaney 1994: 58). People increasingly deal with media to be entertained and to interact with other people. Therefore, any scholarly debate of culture in the globalized, mass-mediated, Internet-influenced world must consider the most basic dimension of communication – interaction.

Incredible opportunities of human interaction have been arisen with the Internet and other new digital media overcoming obstacles of time and space. Both intra and inter-cultural interactions among people are now more than any period of the past. People meet and interact with each other both in real and virtual means. Clearly, the trend refers to the process of globalization.

In the least trivial sense, globalization is quintessentially an economic process, whose causes and consequences may be also political, social and cultural. In the broadest sense, globalization means the expansion and intensification of economic, political, social and cultural relations across borders (Sørensen 2004: 23). Friedman argues that 'globalization involves the inexorable integration of markets, nation-states, and technologies to a degree never witnessed before' (Friedman 1999: 7). British sociologist Anthony Giddens (1990: 64) described globalization as the ‘intensification of world-wide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa, and U.S. sociologist Ronald Robertson (1992:8) defined globalization as ‘the compression of the world as a whole’. Swedish anthropologist Ulf Hannerz’s definition of a global ‘ecumene’ as a ‘region of persistent culture interaction and exchanges’ (Hannerz, 1994: 137) reflects its anthropologic underpinnings, conceived of by Arjun Appadurai (1994) in terms of disjunction flows of people, capital, technology, images and ideologies. As a consequence of globalization, Anthony Smith acknowledged a developing global culture that is ‘tied to no place or period. It is context-
less, a true mélange, borne upon the modern chariots of global telecommunication systems’ (Smith 1994: 177).

As it is clear now, the process of globalization is pushed by several factors, including economic, technological, political and social ones. It’s a process that increasingly shapes the context for interstate relations as well as for the everyday lives of ordinary citizens. Ideas, customs, and cultural movements all follow closely after the exchange of goods across national boundaries. For example, international trade has been the vehicle by which most religions have spread in different parts of the world while spices from the East and the potatoes and sugar from the Americas changed European diets since the colonial period. Therefore, like globalization itself cultural mix is not new. We can see it as a process which proceeds in line with the transformation of human civilization and in the process of transformation technological innovations play a crucial role. The subsequent 19th-century wave of globalization, made possible by steamships, railroads, and the telegraph, further intensified cultural globalization as well (Robertson and Scholte 2007). Both merchants and migrants bring parts of their cultures along to the places where they do business and settle, and subsequently adjust with the cultures of their home and host countries that ultimately create a new form of culture. But the question here is that what role the new media has been playing in the process of cultural hybridization of contemporary world. Before examining the effect that new digital media has on society and indeed culture, we need to clarify what the term new digital media actually means and what is it that distinguishes new media from their previous forms?

**SOCIOMETRY OF NEW MEDIA**

The concept of culture and new media is relatively new in the scholarly debate, however the rate at which technology has moved into the contemporary social lives is historically unprecedented. Now computers, the Internet, mobile phones, television and other
portable digital media are competing with one and other in the ever growing electronic arena (Seel 1997). More recently as a result of considerable technological advances there has been the convergence of technologies and an example of this is the convergence of mobile phone technologies with that of the Internet, media player and GPS (Global Positioning System) navigation. Nowadays people spend a lot of their media time on screens of mobile phones and laptops than that they used to spend earlier on television screen or cinema. Trends toward online activities and interactive media uses have also resulted in a dramatic decline in traditional media consumption such as newspaper readership. The Washington Post reported on May 3, 2005 that circulation of 814 US daily newspapers declined by 1.9 percent over the six months ended March 31 compared with the same period of previous year. The decline continued as a trend in the newspaper industry as people increasingly turned to other media such as the Internet for information. While another study shows that more than half of all Australians aged 18-29 read the newspaper 30 years ago, now the figure barely tops 20 per cent (AYFS 2005).

The tendencies illustrate that new media technologies are at the very cultural heart of the contemporary society. Firstly, technology, such as the Internet, mobile phones, MP3 players, PDA’s and iPods provide people with unlimited opportunity to access news, entertainment and interaction. The way people communicate each other and at the same time their media consumption has been revolutionized. “Technology generates opportunities: new things to explain; new ways of expression; new media of communications; and creates new forms of destruction (Kelly 1998).

Secondly, new media have also influence the social relations by radically breaking the connection between physical place and social place, making physical location much less significant for our social relationships” (Croteau and Hoynes 2003: 311) that apparently creates the virtual communities transcending geographical boundaries and eliminating social restrictions. Howard Rheingold (2000) describes these globalised societies as self-defined networks, which resemble what we do in real life. "People in virtual communities
use words on screens to exchange pleasantries and argue, engage in intellectual discourse, conduct commerce, make plans, brainstorm, gossip, feud, fall in love, create a little high art and a lot of idle talk” (ibid).

The latest phenomenon in the virtual world is the growing popularity of social networking culture based on Internet provided social networking groups such as Facebook and MySpace. Started with e-mails and chat room, online social networking is redefining social relations and comes up with a new and extremely fast means of communication. Search engines, newsgroups, fan clubs, forums and discussion rooms are other web applications that link all kinds of people, no matter their age, sex, citizenship, and cultural background. Advancement of new digital technologies forces critics, like Andrew L. Shapiro (1999), to argue that the emergence of new digital technologies signals a potentially radical shift of who is in control of information, experience and resources (Shapiro cited in Croteau and Hoynes 2003: 322). People share texts, videos, photos, voices, and everything - from food recipes to developing computer operating system (e.g. Linux) and planning terrorist attacks. The era now we are encountering can be described as the evolution of a universal interconnected network of audio, video, and electronic text communications that blurs the distinction between interpersonal and mass communication.

The new digital media have challenged the traditional model of mass communication and come up with new interactive model. Considering the power of online media, Ward (2002) uses three different models of mass communication to illustrate the varying levels of interactivity. The traditional model (newspapers and broadcasters) is predominantly passive and don’t involve any input from the audience. It is all one way, while the two-way model gives the user a choice in the information they want to consume and an opportunity to contribute to some extent such as phone-in during television or radio programmes. The (triangular) three-way model might involve users sharing information and possibly news with other users, with the journalist acting as a user as well as a
provider (Ward, 2002: 144-8). This dimension of mass communication begins to challenge media’s traditional roles as the sole gatekeeper of news, entertainment and other cultural traits (Ward: 25). Consequently it has been the contention of theorists that that new media, and particularly the Internet, provides the potential for a democratic postmodern public sphere, in which citizens can participate in well informed, non-hierarchical debate pertaining to their social structures.

For diasporic community, the Internet can play a unifying role and it can looses the class, gender and intellectual barriers which used to divide them (Alzouma: 2005). Today, this is true for many scattered peoples who find in the Internet a way to regain a sense of lost community, according to Maybury-Lewis (1998). The flexibility of the Internet makes possible a greater number of positive expressions of individual or collective identities. Internet has become a powerful tool to break isolation of diasporic community who usually either misrepresented or unrepresented in the traditional media of host country (Mahmud 2007).

Scholars like Manovich (2001) and Castells (1996, 2000) have argued that whereas traditional mass media 'corresponded to the logic of industrial mass society, which values conformity over individuality,' new media follows the logic of the postindustrial or globalised society whereby 'every citizen can construct her own custom lifestyle and select her ideology from a large number of choices. Localization of popular search engines, like Google and yahoo, is part of individualization when users even can customize the homepage on his/her choice.

With contrast to these positive appraisals of new digital media there are scholars such as Herman (2007) who has suggested that the transition to new media has seen a handful of powerful transnational telecommunications corporations who own the majority to achieve a level of global influence which was hitherto unimaginable. Details of the corporate control of new digital media and making of cultural hybridity through the processes of transculturation and cultural appropriateness will be discussed in the latter section of the
paper. In general, as the Internet communication is so unregulated and unmanageable some profoundly negative consequences occur as well affecting the cultural lives. For instance, e-mail and chat rooms permit anonymous participation that can range from erotic to the abusive and hateful messages. Information technology has also been used to distribute anonymous racist and sexist messages, to organize hate crimes and to exploit children sexually. Such morally bankrupt actions and crimes on the Internet are hard to police. Lull (2000: 217) rightly points out that: “Indeed, we are just beginning to comprehend the full gamut of consequences of life where virtual representations, conversations, and discoveries compete with more traditional forms of mediated and unmediated communicative interaction and dialogue in a fundamentally unregulated, global environment”.

**CULTURAL AND MEDIA HYBRIDITY**

The facets of hybridity we are concerned with here are cultural hybridity that became a central trope of critical studies in the 1990s when globalization was also the central debate of multiple disciplines. In its simplistic notion, cultural hybridity means mixing of two or more cultures, and they can be local and global. It’s a process of interaction between centre and periphery, or between peripheries. A key exponent of hybridity in globalization theory is Jan Pieterse (Pieterse, 2004), who defined hybridity as the mixture of phenomenon that are held to be different, separate; and hybridization refers to a cross-category processes. According to Kraidy (2005), hybridity involves the fusion of two hitherto relatively distinct forms, styles, or identities, cross cultural contact, which often occurs across national borders as well as across cultural boundaries. The theory of cultural hybridity assumes that the hybrid culture has the power to challenge and break the dominant culture of national states and also hybrid culture is more rich, resistant, democratic, diverse, and heterogeneous than cultures of national states (Appadurai 1990; Featherstone 1990; Kraidy 2005; Tomlinson 1999).
Some researchers also claim that as a result of hybridization, domination within a culture may become more dispersed, less orchestrated and less purposeful because culture can then be negotiated by local and global power (Bhabha 1994).

Moreover, scholars also contend that for the local culture and local traditions, hybridization offers an opportunity for local culture to be highlighted, and globalization is built on the base of local culture and local interpretation (García-Canclini, 1995; Pieterse, 2004). Lull (2000) goes on asserting that hybrid culture is more indigenized and its meanings are always unstable and in changes.

As to media hybridity, Straubhaar (2005) points out that it takes place in two dimensions – one in the production of cultural and media products and another in the audience’s interaction with media texts, including their interpretation of the text and to what extent they identify with it. When theories of cultural imperialism put focus on production and distribution of media text, and cultural pluralism on reception of text by audience considering the audience as active participants, the cultural hybridity emphasize both on production and reception of media text, and reproduction of messages (Kradiy 2005: 150).

NEW MEDIA, NEW CULTURE:

As it is clear now from above discussion that new digital media provided interconnections accelerates interactions of cultural forms and settings, and consequently produce new forms of culture. The following section will make some concrete points in line with the central argument of the paper to characterize relations between cultural hybridity and new digital media.

First, cultural hybridity theory suggests that the formation of contemporary culture is more democratic because different cultural units can negotiate with each. Some
researchers also contend that western hegemony has declined in the process of hybridity (Pieterse, 2004). Kadende’s (2000) study on Buruindinet, an online communication network that is comprised of Burundians in the diaspora and interested non-Burundians, revealed that even conflicting groups can exchange ideas virtually. Discussions on the Burundinet were mainly focus on the civil war that began in 1993 and demonstrate that in spite of the ethnic violence that has hindered direct and peaceful interaction between the Hutu and Tutsi in Burundi, the internet has facilitated productive interaction across vast distances among members of the two groups who reside in the diaspora.

Secondly, hybridization is an opportunity for local and traditional culture to be highlighted and to survive (Featherstone 1990; Pieterse 2004). According to this opinion, globalization often reinforces or goes hand in hand with localism (Roberson, 1995). The new media creates new platforms and make rooms for cultural units which have little or misrepresentation in the traditional mainstream media. People now download preferable music, films and photos from different websites, store those in portable media player, mobile phones or iPods, often create their own stuffs and put those online for global sharing.

Thirdly, there is no single model that has a necessary overall priority or monopoly in cultural production in the digital age, albeit capitalist control of new media is a concern. As it has already been discussed the Internet-based new media is fundamentally unregulated, power is dispersed and cultural production does not have a uniform or standard model (Kraidy 2005). In contrast to the discourse of media imperialism, the theory of hybridity contends that interconnection and interdependence of all global areas occur in a less purposeful way and that globalization is also less coherent or dominant than imperialism (Pieterse, 2004).

Fourthly, due to the mixing of local cultures, the contemporary culture seems to be more heterogeneous than traditional cultures. Some research refutes the idea of cultural or media imperialism, claiming instead that global culture is more diverse and
heterogeneous (Featherstone 1990; Kraidy 2005). New digital media pave the way to access to different cultures and thus influence people towards diverse cultural forms.

Fifthly, the creation of complex and multiple identities is another crucial point of the theory of cultural hybridity in the digital era. A multiple identity may come from the deterioration of national state, cultural boundaries, or from people’s efforts to maintain traditional culture while pursuing a modern lifestyle at the same time (Featherstone, 1990 Kraidy 2005; Pieterse 2004). Moreover, a new form of identity has been emerging when people interact in virtual community through online either openly or anonymously.

People in diaspora are always a point of reference in discussion of multiple identities and cultural blend who adjust with host country’s culture and at the same time try to build ties with home country cultures using new digital technologies. Bangladeshi-British youths who now represent third generation have inherited various sub-cultural elements from their ancestors which have been crucial to the making of their race relations and ‘identities’. Although entrepreneurs among the early settlers set up ethnic media, such as Bengali newspapers and magazines, new modes of social interactions among the diasporas and to their ‘homeland’ began and developed with the availability of the Internet (Reza and Mahmud 2008). Another study of Bangladeshi online newspapers (Mahmud 2007) shows that more than half of total users of those newspapers were expatriate Bangladeshis who logged in outside the country to be connected with the happenings of home country.

**CRITIQUE OF HYBRIDITY**

The theory of hybridity and cultural globalization is not beyond the scope of criticism. Researchers, such as Schiller (1991) and Mosco (Mosco 1996), assert that hybridity theory ignores the commercial and capitalist nature of the global expansion process. They contend that the main motivation and purpose for pushing media hybridization and
globalization is capitalism, it is not a neutral and objective globalism (Boyd-Barrett, 1998; P. Lee, 1991; Mosco, 1996; Schiller, 1991). Therefore, we cannot be pointlessly optimistic about the idea that hybrid culture is democratic, diverse and less purposeful.

Media and cultural hybridization is still operated by commercial and capitalist logic and motivation. Transnational and local businesses are the main actors in producing hybrid products and promoting media hybridization in the process of transculturation and cultural appropriateness. In the process of transculturation, global media always change cultural elements of the local to conform to the cultural values and tastes of a broader market. Localization of video games, mobile phones functionalities, Internet chat rooms and adult websites are few examples in the digital era. Besides, Disney is a primary example of a media company that often uses transculturation. Disney is famous for extracting other countries’ cultural elements or folk fables to enrich the diversity and attraction of their own animated movies. When using transculturation, Disney’s concern is not to be honest to the original culture, but rather how to balance between exotic flavor and the cultural tastes of a U.S. audience (Chan 2002).

The other way to produce media hybridity is cultural appropriateness, a method by which local companies copy the values or styles of the predominant global products in order to promote their own commodities (Iwabuchi, 2002; P. Lee, 1991; Straubhaar, 2005). There are increasing tendency to copy reality shows on TV like American Idol to Indian Idol and when it goes to Bangladesh takes the local shape of talent hunt.

**CONCLUSION:**

The paper argued for a changing and significant role new digital technologies in transformation of cultures, but it did not ignore the roles of traditional media and social institutions like family in the process. It is true that people are increasingly interacting and deal with new media, but reality exhibits a bleak picture of digital divide. Majority of
world population are not members of the virtual community or users of new digital media. They still listen to radio, watch what’s happening on television set or hear from other people. The main contention of the paper was to argue that the rapid development and spread of industrial and consumer communication technologies, and the reach, frequency and diversity of communications interactivity transform certain key aspects of culture. Cultural fusion is now more common as the interactions between cultures have increased with new communication media. New media, at least to some extent, have created a platform which people use to expand their world and construct their social and cultural identities. To conclude, it can be said that today’s diverse technological environment generates a rich stock of resources for creative cultural engagements where cultures will continue to transform towards hybridity.

REFERENCES:


