

# Acculturation and Cultural Imperialism: The Narrative of Media Control in a Changing World

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## Abstract

The Mass Media's trans-cultural impact has often been seen from negative perspective of cultural imperialism. Scholars have dwelt heavily on the probable cultural domination and cultural erosion metaphor relegating or downplaying the positive impact of the mass media in the acculturation process. This work is not an attempt to disprove the notion of cultural imperialism which the mass media have been accused of, but a bold step to highlight the positive aspect of the mass media's acculturation attributes and potential which include promotion of global cultural unity, promotion of social harmony, social and national integration as well as bringing about cultural innovation etc. In achieving this objective, the work critically analyzed in a systematic manner the contributions of scholars and authors on key words and concepts like the mass media, acculturation, cultural imperialism and finally looking beyond cultural imperialism. Recommendations were also made to allay the fears of the exponents of cultural imperialism.

*Keywords: .Mass media .Acculturation .Cultural imperialism*

## Introduction

The mass media are widely acknowledged key agent of social change. In the process of exercising this inherent responsibility, the mass media interact with culture, romance with culture and even fecundate with culture. This implies that the mass media and culture are two sides of one coin or better, likened to chicken and egg in terms of relationship. Certainly, the mass media creates culture, preserve culture, and transmit culture while culture in turn constitutes the content of the mass media and nurtures the mass media. In the words of Harlon (1999) "Mass media is the technology and mass culture is the content".

The mass media is responsible for transfer of culture, exchange of culture and cultural transfusion which are all trappings of acculturation. In the process of acculturation, however, the mass media has brought about cultural domination of the third world countries by industrialized countries in what is globally known as cultural imperialism. Most of these invaded cultures are at the brink of extinction as a result of overbearing influence of the penetrating foreign cultures

Over the years, the issue of cultural imperialism has dominated international discourse and the mass media has been christened the "Trojan horse". "The concept of media and cultural imperialism is real since every media content carries the culture of its originator", Alozie (2013). While communication scholars have heavily dwelt on the potential of the mass media to perpetrate cultural imperialism, little attention has been paid to the positive impact of the mass media's acculturation potentialities. Acculturation has even been portrayed as undesirable social phenomenon by many writers. From which ever direction it may be looked at, acculturation is an inevitable social phenomenon arising from the media-cultural romance. Thus, this work is not conceptualized to disprove the notion of scholars on mass media role in cultural imperialism but to look at the other side of the mass media's acculturation impacts. The aim is to examine the

relegated or down-played positive role the mass media play in the society through the acculturation process. It is therefore, the argument of this work that while the mass media is guilty of cultural imperialism through acculturation, the mass media through preservation and transmission of cultural heritages and through cultural innovations and cultural modifications, promote social integration, social harmony, national and global cultural unity.

To achieve the set objectives of this work and facilitate its understanding, an attempt will be made to explain or define certain concepts and terms used such as: *the mass media, acculturation, the mass media as potent tool for acculturation, cultural imperialism, the mass media and cultural imperialism, looking beyond cultural imperialism.*

### **Theoretical Framework**

This work is anchored on the social responsibility theory of the press. This theory germinated from the libertarian press theory which offers a high degree of freedom to the media. This freedom attracted so much criticism on what was seen as excesses of the media. Hence the theory advocated for a responsible press. It further goes to emphasize that while the society harbours and nurtures the media, they in turn offer concomitant social responsibility roles to the society. This social responsibility role involves self censorship and professional ethics by the media while the society also regulates the media through some laws regardless of the degree of press freedom. This therefore, implies that the media and society operate on the principle of reciprocity. In capturing the concept of social responsibility role of the press, Alozie (2009:57) noted thus:

*The social responsibility theory stands for a free press with responsibility to the society. It wants the journalists to exercise self-control or be controlled by the society. Journalists or members of the press should therefore put in place certain measures of professional decorum that will make them responsible in the discharge of their professional functions. The theory wants the press to regulate itself, be accountable and responsible to the society which it serves and subject itself to the ethics of the profession"*

Going by the assumption of this theory therefore, the media is expected to be guided by certain norms and ethics in the discharge of its responsibilities no matter the degree of freedom they enjoy from the society. They should also exercise some measure of restraint in the propagation and dissemination of values and the government has a role to play on the operation and content of the media by way of regulation. For instance nudity may not be seriously frowned at in some societies while in others, it is a taboo just as what is seen as indecent dressing in the developing countries may be seen as fashion in the western world. It behooves on government and media of every nation to guide and protect the values of its host society. Hence only healthy cultures capable of entrenching sound values should be propagated by every country's mass media.

### **Acculturation**

Talking about the mass media is talking about culture. Culture has received different definitions from different scholars but all agreed that it is the totality of the people's way of life such as language, belief, norms, value, ideas, way of clothing, eating habit, etc. Otterbein (1977) in Idiong (2004) defined culture as; the way of life of a particular group of people- everything that a group of people thinks and says and does and makes'. Baran (2006) sees culture as " the learned behavior of members of a given social group" similar to that definition, Haris (1983) in Baran (2006) says that culture is the learned socially acquired tradition and lifestyles of the members of a society including their patterned, repetitive ways of thinking, feeling and acting'.

Every society is distinct with its own culture. In other words, culture bestows identity on every society. Culture is at the center of all human activities and Baran concluded that "nothing is free from cultural influences". Then the mass media and culture are inextricable interwoven. Both are inseparable Siamese twins. Culture is preserved, transmitted and perpetuated by the mass media. Through transmission of culture, the mass media bring about cultural exchange and cultural diffusion and this process leads to acculturation. Thus acculturation in its simplest definition is "transfer of culture from one group to another". It means the process of exposing the individual or group to different cultures, outside their own culture. The New World Encyclopedia defined acculturation as, "the processes that occur when different individuals or group of people meet and exchange cultures".

By implication, acculturation can occur at both national and international levels. It occurs at national level when people of a particular cultural group are exposed to the culture of another ethnic group as it is the case with Nigerian state known for cultural pluralism and diversity. It is estimated that the country harbours over two hundred and fifty linguistic and cultural groups. Acculturation occurs at international level when foreign culture interface with local culture. In all, the mass media remains a vehicle for cultural exchange as we can further examine in our next sub topic below:

#### **The mass media as instrument of acculturation:**

Having established the strong link between the mass media and culture, it needs no further proof to situate the potency of the mass media in the acculturation process. Acculturation occurs in the process of cultural diffusion and cultural exchange of which the mass media is the channel. "Through exchange of communication at the global level, cultural information, norms and values are transmitted from one country to another", (Alozie 2013:24). The mass media in the transmission process engage in transfer of value, norms, custom and beliefs. Both the radio and television are veritable instruments of teaching and learning especially of languages while the print media also transmit and disseminate ideas and information in textual form to different peoples of the world. However in the process of bringing about acculturation, it has been strongly argued that the mass media perpetuate cultural domination of foreign cultures over the local cultures as fully examined below:

#### **The Mass Media and Cultural Imperialism**

The word, imperialism is a political cum economic coinage associated with colonialism. It implies political subjugation and economic exploitation of the third world nations by the western countries. Imperialism was entrenched in the colonial conquest and economic exploitation of the African continent by European nations. That is why the industrialized European countries are often and derogatorily regarded as imperialist countries especially by the third world nations that were colonized by them. The Cambridge international dictionary of English defined imperialism as "a system in which a country rules other countries sometimes having used force to obtain power over them" Hans Morgenthau, a renowned political scientist quoted by Godsgift and Obukoadata (2008) described imperialism as "the extension of states' power beyond its borders, a policy that aims at overthrow of the status quo, and the reversal of the power relations between two or more states".

In his own definition, Alozie (2013) described imperialism as: "the expression of overbearing tendencies of one country through which social, cultural and economic harsh influences are spread over another country which suffers the harrowing effects of such influences"

Going by the above definitions therefore, cultural imperialism is simply the subjugation of local cultures by powerful foreign cultures in other to foist cultural hegemony. Also drawing from the earlier definitions of imperialism, Alozie (2013:71) says

cultural imperialism is: “the colonization of the culture of less developed nations by the developed and more powerful nations through the importation of foreign films that dominate and corrupt the former’s culture through television”.

Citing Hebert Schiller one of the early precursors of cultural imperialism, Agbanu in Agbanu & Nwabueze (2011) explained cultural imperialism as “the process of social influence by which a nation imposes on other countries, its set of beliefs, values, knowledge and behavioural norms as well as its overall ways of life”.

Cultural imperialism is associated with media imperialism which is defined by Boyd-Barret et al (1971) in Nwosu (1990:71) as “a process in which ownership, structure, distribution or content of the media in any one country singly or together are subject to the external pressure from the media interests of any other country or countries without a proportional reciprocation in influence by the country so affected”. Schiller is also quoted to have seen cultural imperialism as “the way in which large multinational corporations including the media of developed countries dominated developing nations, predicating his views on the fact that the media create culture. Through the instrumentality of satellite technology and internet, the modern media system has popularized the western culture and entrenched western values across the globe especially in the present era of globalization where events of the world are seen and received instantly by the simple touch of button.

It was this twin brother of media imperialism and cultural imperialism that led to the global advocacy for equity in the information flow pattern including the dissemination of culture through the mass media. The clamour was encapsulated in the acronym: “New World Information and Communication Order NWICO” conceptualized by the culturally traumatized third world nations of the world in 1976 in which they vocally called for balance in global information flow system and the dissemination of ‘mass media’ cultural contents.

With reference to the unbalanced global information flow debates, Uche (2000:2) cited by Agbanu in Agbanu & Nwabueze (2011 eds) argued that one culture can have effect on another culture in three ways: “cultural imperialism” which according to the authors means an imposition of one culture on another; “cultural synchronization”, which occurs “when an external culture eventually supersedes the internal one in an evolutionary fashion” and “cultural Juxtaposition” which they explained as “the placing together of different cultural elements”. Certainly the mass media has been identified as the vehicle for perpetration of these three phenomena. The television and internet in particular exert pervasive influence on the younger generation in the area of cultural imperialism particularly in music and fashion. ‘thus, instead of being a creative element in the diffusion of their culture, television appears as a privileged vehicle for the importation of foreign culture from the developed to the developing nations”, (Katz 1977) cited by Agbanu in (Agbanu & Nwabueze eds) this is true in all ramification. Take for instance, sagging; a dirty practice hitherto associated with mentally deranged people in Nigeria has permeated the dressing code of the youths. Our younger musicians today strive to copy and imitate music styles of their foreign counterparts which lack the ingredients of indigenous values. The youths exposed to the videos of these foreign artists have also imitated their shameless immoral dancing styles. As Lomax (1977) cited by Agbanu in (Agbanu & Nwabueze eds) argued, “what is happening to the varied music of mankind is symptomatic of the swift destruction of culture patterns all over the planet”. Then, nudity and pornography have crept into the lifestyles of teenagers just as obscenity now dominates the language and tone of indigenous music. Thus, “the lifestyles of teenagers and university students has shown a drastic shift from the African culture, no thanks to their exposure to foreign media”, writes Agbanu in (Agbanu and Nwabueze 2011).

Unfortunately, the people of the third world countries whose cultures are debased and assaulted appear to be hopeless, helpless and hapless as if their destiny is tied to the hands of their foreign counterparts and rather resort to theoretical blame game.

Globalization, a product of the revolution in information and communication technology is a stark reality mankind has come to contend with in modern era. Interdependency is inevitable fallout of it. And since no one or group can exist in isolation culturally and otherwise, it is left with mankind to devise possible ways of coping with the reality and inevitability of acculturation as well as other trans-cultural impacts of the mass media.

### **Looking Beyond Cultural Imperialism: Harnessing the Positive Side of Mass Media Trans-Cultural Impact**

While the people of African continent nay third world nations continue to grapple with the inevitability of acculturation and its attendant cultural domination by the technologically advantaged nations, their greatest challenge is to maximize the gains of the reality of the prevailing global cultural order for their socio-cultural attainment.

The mass media in the exercise of its transmission of cultural heritage function, engage in transfer of values, norms and custom from one group of people to another thereby creating a forum for cross-cultural interaction and again breaking cultural boundaries. Sharing this point of view, Muzvidziwa (2011) in (Agbanu & Nwabueze eds) stated that,

*"With the advent of media communication, people experience shared cultural symbols at the same time. The mass media are able to entertain and keep people informed of societal development as well as present common values, norms and attitude and symbols".*

Through acculturation by the media, immigrants or migrants get acquainted with the cultures of their host communities and even adapt to them (Ogu E 2017). Through cultural exchange embedded in the mass media's surveillance function, the living conditions or lifestyles of different societies are showcased and this can be copied by other people to modify their lifestyles for improved living. Decent and healthy values abound in different societies that can be assimilated by other societies for the well being of mankind. Noteworthy is the fact that exposure to such healthy foreign values led to the abolition of the African primitive belief that twins are evil and the practice of killing them or dumping them in the evil forests. Today, twins are no longer seen as evil but elusive blessing every family prays for.

Again, transfer and exchange of culture for which the mass media are the vehicle creates opportunity for various people to enrich their culture as culture is dynamic and no one culture is perfect. Certainly, "no culture is inherently complete. All cultures need the complementarities of other cultures", (Kogah 2007).

Acculturation cannot be restricted to foreign culture over domestic culture. It can take place in a pluralistic setting like Nigeria that harbours about two hundred and fifty cultural groups. The media here remain a potent and effective instrument of social integration of different languages and cultural groups. Even at the global level of analysis, the mass media through acculturation has championed cultural unification of the world. Thus, cultural information, norms and values are transmitted from one country to another. "This enables people to share a common culture and a common experience", Alozie (2013:24). People from Anglophone extraction can speak French fluently and better than their francophone counterparts just as the latter can speak English language fluently and even better than the British. While Diversity in culture gives nations sense of cultural identity cultural unification bestows countries a feeling of cultural pride.

The mass media through acculturation breaks language barrier and this reduces ethnocentric zeal which gives way to mutual hostility. Ethnocentrism according to Konkwo (2011:287) is a situation whereby the users of one language see themselves as superior to as or more important than those who do not'.

The author further observed that apart from religion, "it is generally agreed that the greatest cause of wars is perhaps, language differences". Acculturation has helped to mitigate the degree of differences among groups across the globe and within a nation. In a multi-lingual and multi-cultural setting like Nigeria, the divergent groups have come to appreciate the culture of one another and be tolerant of one another as a result of cultural exchange and cultural diffusion through the mass media. It is not therefore, uncommon to see an Igbo dressed in Babaringa which the Hausa man is known for while the Yoruba man clad in red cap and Igbo regalia. There is also global exchange of fashions and wears among countries of the world.

Through cultural diffusion also, the mass media bring about cultural innovation in the society. Cultural diffusion entails a process by which a cultural item spreads from group to group (Smith 2000) in Nwammuo 2011:205) while cultural innovation is a process of introducing a new idea or object to a culture (Nwammuo 2011: 205). People of different cultural background borrow from other cultures to modify their own culture. Acculturation by bringing about cultural innovations and modification enhances dynamism in culture.

The mass media through acculturation integrate a nation's languages and cultures. This apart from fostering unity in diversity is capable of bringing about consolidation and homogenization of a nation's culture to pose resistant to the penetrating unwholesome foreign values. It is even argued that absorbing the traits of another culture help one to appreciate his own culture for according to Kogah, "it is difficult to understand one's own culture unless one has a basis for comparison".

With the world gravitating towards cultural homogeneity, the trans-cultural impact of the media in the conduct of international relations especially with regards to trade, commerce and industry cannot be overemphasized. With the actualization of McLuhan's global village hypothesis, the world is at the stage where nation states have cultural affinity through exchange and transfer of culture enhanced by the new media technology. Through the globalizing order of socio-cultural and economic interdependence, nations of the world formulate their foreign policies based on their acquaintance and familiarity with each country's values and aspirations. Such cultural values are transmitted through the world media.

Added to the above is the fact that no country or group can go it alone. Thus people live and work in different countries outside their own while others travel outside their land to conduct business, receive medication or embark on social interaction adventure. At the time of doing this work, President Muhammad Buhari is in London receiving medical treatment. Then imagine the number of other Nigerians that travel to Europe, America and United Arab Emirate on daily basis to work, study, holiday and trade. Also, imagine other nationals coming to and residing in Nigeria for similar ventures. In all these ventures, prior knowledge of, exposure and adaptation to the culture of host countries are germane to the success of the adventurers. Thus, the mass media fills the gap created by cultural diversity through acculturation, cultural exchange and cultural transfer.

### **Conclusion**

The world is actually benefitting from acculturation vis-à-vis trans-cultural impact of the mass media in a manner that transcends the fear or feeling of cultural imperialism. As Uwakwe (2010:258) rightly observed:

"global media proponents see the world as benefitting from the ability of the mass media to negotiate a united world culture. The adherents argue that there is no grounds for the loss of cultural identity as the mass media are capable of delivering varied contents and reaching different societies".

While the mass media is consciously or unconsciously responsible for cultural imperialism through acculturation, the veritable channel of mass communication serves as a storage house for cultures. It preserves culture, regenerates culture and transmits cultural heritage from generation to generation and society to society. By so doing, the mass media prevents the cultures of various people from going into extinction. And by purveying and projecting the cultures of different groups, the mass media create a forum for cross cultural interaction thereby breaking cultural boundaries.

Indeed, while it can be logically argued that through acculturation, the mass media perpetuate cultural imperialism, it is empirically established that acculturation (which after all is not an undesirable social phenomenon) is not only a sine qua non but a desideratum to the survival of humanity in the emergent globalised order of interdependency. By implication therefore, the mass media's acculturation potentialities, attributes and power remain a blessing to humanity.

Thus, the fears of cultural domination is allayed by the fact that the mass media has a social responsibility role to protect, preserve, and project the treasured norms and values of their host society, just as the government of every country has the responsibility to regulate the content of the its media against the preponderance of infiltrating foreign values through legislations and policies.

### **Recommendations**

The broadcast media of the technologically disadvantaged third world countries should strive to enrich their programmes with local contents that have relevance to the values and aspirations of the people rather than relying on and helping to entrench foreign media programmes that tend to debase the indigenous cultures.

Also, the culturally embattled developing nations of the world should take their destiny into their own hands by going into digital international broadcasting with global network as well as queuing into the cable technology to counter the cultural aggression, offensive and overbearing influence of the foreign broadcast stations. The embattled third world nations should take the bull by the horn and match action with action, force with force in the area of digital broadcasting. The Arabic Al-Jazeera television is today countering the cultural aggression of America CNN and British Broadcasting Corporation the BBC at the international fora. Nigeria has also taken a bold step to project its cultural heritage to the outside world with the establishment of NTA International broadcast which is accessible in the cable network. South Africa is also presently penetrating the globe with its powerful Voice of African Renaissance Radio Station. So, other African nations rise to the challenge of international digital broadcasting.

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