

MEDIA AND CULTURAL IMPERIALISM AS PROGENIES OF COLONIALISM

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Abstract

Culture is the general way of life that helps define and gives identity to a people. The Media plays a crucial role in the production and exportation of cultural content to recipient cultures thus establishing cultural dominance and elongation of colonization generally referred to as neo-colonialism. This in turn has had a devastating consequence on developing countries which must see themselves as viewed by the dormant western world. There is an imbalance in the flow of news from western countries to developing countries. Again, the consumption of cultural content through film, television, music, books, magazines etc by the developing world is detrimental to the sustenance of their indigenous culture and values. This paper stresses the need for an urgent review. Reducing this imbalance and the need for a two-way information flow is imperative in this regard.

Keywords: Media, Cultural Imperialism, Colonisation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Cultural and media imperialism are extensions of colonialism. The historical ties between Britain and the colonists are all-embracing and include culture, such as language, religion, dress, officialdom etc. the fact that colonialism was a ploy to coerce or persuade the colonists to accept the British way of doing things or subject them to the whims and caprices of colonial overlords is a pointer to the fact that colonial subjects or captured territories are a product of cultural and media imperialism. The organization and structure of the administrative apparatus of most colonial countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, etc are a reflection of the British colonial structure. These cultural artefacts are inclusive of the mass media structure, which ultimately bequeath to the captured territories' media products from Britain and France. Thus, different forms of imperialism may be identified; they include economic imperialism which includes the plundering of raw materials, seizure of territories, enslavement of indigenous populations, nationalism, racism and militarism. From the foregoing, it can be safely said

that there is a general agreement in associating imperialism with economic, political and territorial expansion. This paper shall only concern itself with cultural and media imperialism.

Culture

Culture is the entirety of human behaviour or life experience. Culture is concerned with artistic expression and creative, aesthetic and representational activity, the organization and nature of social activity...a concern with the transmission and reception of values and meanings Seannell, et, al (1992). The media are key components in any nation's culture. The civility of a community is measured in terms of the quality and depth of its cultural achievement. Culture defines our personal and national identity.

Ogans (2007, p. 295) defines an organization's culture as:

The glue that keeps people attached to it and allows members to identify with it. It is the set of meanings the members of the group share. We all belong to

multiple groups, each with its characteristics and culture...

For us to be properly integrated into a culture, we must understand, articulate, and accept the culture of any group to which we belong. We must learn the culture into which we are born so that we can become an integral part of the people or race. Citing Geertz (1973).

Ogans (2007, p. 296) defines culture as:

A historically transmitted pattern of meaning embedded in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about the attitudes towards life. The primary symbolic system used to transmit culture is that of language... the importance of language as an aspect of culture can scarcely be overestimated. Language is the fundamental human mass medium. It is the mass medium through which all other media speak.

The colonial territories have language as a common heritage. This is a legacy bequeathed to all the countries under British rule, including the Francophone countries. Culture inherited by the Third World nations reflects in all facets of their economic, political and social lives. The media structures of most Third World countries that were subjected to colonial rule took the shape, form and contents of the European imperialists. This explains why culture is crucial to the understanding of cultural imperialism.

Thus, there exists a relationship between culture and communication. Hence, a broad understanding of culture implies that culture is learnt, acquired, experienced or transferred from one place to another through various ways. Ekeanyanwu (2015)

Colonialism and Imperialism

The quest and scramble for colonies in the Third World by Europe and North America were driven by economic and political considerations. The desire for industrialization by western European and North American powers was also motivated by the struggle for security and power in international relationships. First, there was a burning need for industrialized societies to secure cheap raw materials to feed their industries and secure markets for the finished products. Although imperialism and colonialism had territorial acquisition at the forefront, other considerations such as the morbid desire to impose or bequeath their language, laws, education, science and

technology were factors behind the imperialistic ambitions of the colonialists. Thus, vestiges of colonialism in Africa and Asia can be seen today in the areas of language, codified laws, higher education, science and technology. The colonial toga of language is typified by the French and English languages dominant in at least African countries.

MacBride (1980, p. 8) referred to this view when he stated:

Colonial rule exerted a strong influence over structures of communication, patterned on those European nations. Such influences continued even when political independence was secured, or when another metropolitan power wielding an increasing economic and cultural influence obtained, to a greater or lesser extent, control of the avenues of communication. These patterns where they exist, are at the root of many of today's problems.

The impact or influence of colonialism extends to the structure and pattern of news disseminated in Third World nations today. This is because a great deal of news in the nineteenth century and even twentieth century were provided by international news agencies domiciled in London, Paris and the United States of America. Unfortunately, since this was the heyday of colonialism, they promoted the interest of the colonial powers, helped to sustain the existing political and economic order and to expand the commercial and political interests of the metropolitan powers. (MacBride,1980). From the foregoing is obvious that colonialism is the root of cultural and media imperialism. Imperialism in the words of Offiong (1980) derives its concept from Marxist sources and notes that the wealth and poverty of nations result from the global process of exploitation. Imperialism is the offshoot of colonialism.

Cultural Imperialism

The term globalization is sometimes applied to and equated with cultural imperialism and globalization is seen as the earliest form of cultural imperialism and used to connote the economic, military and political expansion of European colonization.

Downing (2007, p. 33) lends credence to this view:

Sometimes, however, globalization is applied as well to, or even instead of cultural and media processes. The earliest concept of this kind was

“cultural imperialism” itself, sometimes reformulated more specifically as “media imperialism”. The basic idea here was that hand in hand with the economic, military and political expansion of European colonization from 1492 onwards into America, Africa and Asia went the attempted imposition of European culture via religious conversions, efforts to ban traditional religious beliefs, missionary schooling, intensive commercialization, and various forms of media dominated by the colonial powers.

Cultural imperialism also encompasses the production of Hollywood movies in Western Europe and North America and Asia rather than nationally produced films (films produced in Third World countries). This view was reechoed by Schiller (1991) that the military-industrial complex in the United States was using its television programmes and films to obtain world dominance in cultural products. Available literature from the early 1970s to the mid-1980s tended to view the United States as the destroyer of world cultures and world media economics. Although this view may not be correct, it lends credence to the powerful influence of Western Media and the cultural imports of Western Europe and North America on the Third World nations.

It should be noted that the economic factor is very strong and crucial in the discourse of cultural imperialism. Thus, capitalism which accounts for the dominance of the mass media, the United States, or cultural imperialism promotes cultural imperialism. Cultural imperialism is sustained by the fact that it is quite easier and cheaper to import foreign films, television programmes and other media products to Third World countries.

Hollywood films have been popular in countries outside the United States for as long as they have been made. In the silent film era, it was even easier to export films because language was not a factor. Countries with large domestic markets for their cultural products always had an advantage as they could pay for the production costs at home and look to the export markets as mostly profits. This enabled the big countries to charge less for those programmes when selling them abroad and be very competitive with other countries' exports. Small countries were at a disadvantage because they would not afford to produce many films or television programmes and

often had trouble covering costs because of the size of their domestic markets. They become vulnerable to imported products, finding them cheaper than producing their films and television programmes (Ogan, 2007).

The foregoing underscores the views that cultural imperialism is perpetuated because it is more advantageous and economically expedient to both the exporters (U.S.A., France, Britain, Asia) and the importers (Third World Countries) to have media products dumped in Africa notwithstanding the negative consequences on Third World nations.

Communication and the mass media are major carriers of culture. Okunna (1993, p. 96) explains the relationship between communication and culture and the implication for cultural imperialism thus:

The communication industry is part of the culture industry, and mass communication is a very strong vehicle for cultural dissemination. Given the nature of the international communication system, there have been fears that the massive flow of western, predominantly American, media culture into non-western societies of the developing world could lead to cultural domination which would distort and displace native cultures, and lead to the adoption of foreign, values, lifestyles and behavioural patterns.

Ekeanyanwu (2015, p.27) defines cultural imperialism as:

The subtle manipulation of the mass media of underdeveloped or Third World countries by the developed western capitalist nations of Europe and North America, who use their economic and technological advantages as well as their advanced and well-developed mass media systems to control the behaviours, lifestyles, morals, mores, arts and values of the underdeveloped or developing nations. They do this through the massive production and exportation of media software to developing countries and nations. Cultural imperialism is the subjugation of local culture and the imposition of an alien culture on the local culture.

Explaining the concept of cultural imperialism, Uche (1996) cited by Ekeanyanwu (2015) distinguished between cultural imperialism and cultural synchronization and defines cultural imperialism as an external culture that is imposed upon another culture against its will while cultural synchronization is an external; culture that is welcomed and initiated by another culture, although the external eventually supersedes evolutionarily. The corollary is that both concepts are relevant to the understanding of media imperialism.

Media Imperialism and Its Implications on Developing Nations

Cultural imperialism and media imperialism are twin sister concepts which cannot be discussed in isolation from each other and have a symbiotic relationship. The common denominator is that of domination and control by a more powerful and technologically advanced country over a less powerful and technologically disadvantaged country. To isolate and situate each of the concepts, it can be said that while cultural imperialism refers to the influence in terms of cultural behaviour, media imperialism refers to the media channels by which cultural imperialism is achieved. The media channels include television, motion pictures or films, books, radio etc.

Ekeanyanwu (2015, p.15) explains that:

Media imperialism stands for the belief in the philosophy of colonizing and the policy of extending imperial or new colonial influence over the mass media of another country. The concepts could also be defined as the subtle manipulation of the global mass media by the advanced industrialized countries of the West, which use their economic and technological superiority to unduly influence the media systems of weaker nations...

He stresses the implication of the dominance and control in terms of the Western nations to exercise monopoly and control of global information flow which tend to exercise perpetual socio-cultural and ideological dominance over the rest of the world. Supporting this view about media imperialism, Boyd-Barrett (1979, p.177) opines that:

Media imperialism refers to the process whereby the ownership, structure, distribution or content of the media in

any one country are singly or together subject to substantial external pressure from the media interest of any other country or countries without proportionate reciprocation of influence by the country so affected.

The corollary of media and cultural imperialism is that the two concepts are tied to the apron strings of colonialism. The erosion of African traditional values, including religion, politics, culture and formal education dealt a devastating blow to the developing nations of the world. Most Third World Countries are still highly dependent on the media software of the advanced western countries and this has perpetuated ideological influence- values of practices media content and market penetration. Thus, most Third World Countries cannot truly divorce themselves from the media influence, media systems and media practices of the Western World.

Unfortunately, the solution is not in sight because any attempt at redressing the imbalance may not yield any tangible result as there is no concerted effort by all and sundry to achieve a fair and equitable balance in communication facilities globally. Therefore, to redress the burden of media imperialism, there must be a balance in global world news and information flows; flows in communication flow, two-way news and information flow.

The debate about information and communication imbalance and disparity is not different from economic and technological advancement which gives developed countries an advantage over developing countries. Thus, the higher the level of technology, the greater the disparity and conversely the more advantage exercised by the developed over the developing countries. MacBride (1980, p. 129-130) captures the situation this way:

...Available data indicate that developed nations possess over 95 per cent of the World's computer capacity, measured by the value of equipment. Disparity in this sphere is increasing rather than diminishing because each step forward in sophisticated technology accentuates the advantages of a small number of countries.

He further laments the deplorable situation thus:

The principal industrially advanced countries account for 87.1 per cent of the total obviously; the development of communication depends largely on investments which various countries put

into telecommunication infrastructures and equipment. From this point of view, developing countries labour under great difficulties.

Concerns have been raised as to how a just, fair and equitable distribution of communication faculties would redress or at least narrow the gap between the economically and technologically backwards developing countries. The truth is that it remains an uphill task for this to be achieved as the developing countries remain at the mercy of the developed countries.

The role of transnational media corporations is very crucial in the perpetuation of media structure, control and dominance which is the high point of free market capitalism that entrench ideological tendencies in both media structure and practice and cultural orientation. Gershon (2007, p.72) cited numerous writers to support the view when he states that a small set of dominant media corporations exercises a disproportionate effect over the marketplace of ideas. He further strengthened ideological influence when he cited Bagdikian (1990) that:

Market dominate corporations in the mass media have dominant influence over the public's news, information, public ideas, popular culture, and political attitudes. The same corporations exert considerable influence within government precisely because they influence their audiences' perceptions of public life, including perceptions of politics and politicians as they appear or do not appear in the media.

The influence of transnational media corporations on public opinion cannot be overestimated. The global commercial media system dominated by a small number of super-powerful, mostly U.S.-based transnational media corporations have always worked to advance the cause of the global market and promote commercial values, while denigrating journalism and culture not conducive to the immediate or long-run corporate interest, Machesney (1977, p.11).

Media and cultural imperialism have dealt a serious blow to developing countries. This colonial dependency has perpetuated ideological and cultural

dominance bequeathed on the Third World nations by the developed western countries. The first concern developing countries have has been the control of global news flow by international news agencies. Developing countries are compelled to see themselves from the perspective of western news agencies because they supply the bulk of international or global news to developing countries. The second factor is that news and information rooted in the western media confines judgment and decisions on the subjective view of the western world. Thirdly, the flow of news is heavily imbalanced, with one-day information flowing from predominantly advanced western countries to developing countries. The fourth factor emanates from the fact that western countries impose their cultural fare-films, television music, books, and magazines in the developing world to the detriment of local cultural traditions.

CONCLUSION

The developing countries are seen from the point of view of developed countries' media. News and information presented by the western media is often an inadequate, negative, and stereotypical portrayal of developing countries.

Global news reportage of the Third World countries is skewed in favour of crises and negativity and developmental issues are overlooked and undermined. This could partly be attributed to ignorance on the part of the Western media or deliberate distortions of reality to suit their whims and caprices.

Developing nations have tried various ways to redress the skewed imbalance but to no avail. Some efforts in this direction have been frustrated by western countries. For instance, developing countries' proposal to address problems associated with international news flow by regulating the collection, processing, and transmission of news and data across national frontiers was rejected by the United States and Britain which pulled out of UNESCO when the NWIO debate was seen to be taking political overtones, (Kamalipour, 2007). However, the urgent need to redress the news flow imbalance is imperative.

The need for a two-way information flow is necessary. In this connection, liberalization and democratization of news agencies, telecommunication facilities, mass media, data resources, and communication equipment are essential ingredients that would redress the abnormality.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper, therefore, suggests, in line with MacBride's (1980 pp 142-143) initiative and makes the following recommendations:

- a) Arrangements between news agencies and broadcasting, organizations in developing or non-aligned countries for wider dissemination of news from and about them;
- b) Increased interest by some major newspapers and news agencies in industrialized countries to collect and publish news and reports on socio-economical issues from developing countries;
- c) Suggestions for the creation of resource centres (for the exchange of news, television programmes, films etc) in Africa and Asia;
- d) The growing regional cooperation among news agencies and broadcasters and programmes for establishing regional news agencies.
- e) Increasing efforts by international and professional organizations and media of industrialized nations to augment technical and educational cooperation for communications development.

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