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Media Ethics Essay

## **“The global village has destroyed national identity and has promoted a monolithic mass culture”**

Initially there is a need to look at what exactly a ‘global village’ is. Starting at the Oxford English dictionary the ‘global village’ is ‘the world considered as a single community linked by communications.’ Indeed the term itself is basically a convenient representation for globalisation through communication. Yet communication is in itself a very loose term, embracing the established mass media but also relatively new technologies like the Internet and mass consumer products like mobile phones and games consoles. Mobile phones for example can already send e-mail and soon will be able to ‘surf’ the Internet and games consoles already can.

The result of these new communication technologies is not yet clear but such innovations have certainly helped create a “global village” as McLuhan (1964) predicted in a chapter entitled ‘The Medium is the Message’. ‘Technological media are staples or natural resources, exactly as are coal and cotton and oil.... Cotton and oil, like radio and TV, become “fixed charges” on the entire psychic life of the community.’ Indeed McLuhan’s use of the word ‘community’ here is allied to his concept of the “global village” as it is used in the same localised context as the word ‘village’. In turn this links to the concept of a ‘monolithic mass culture’ through the “global village”.

Indeed communications themselves promote ideals through diffused messages. A culture is formed from the repetition of such messages. McQuail (1994) seems to suggest that culture fits a model; the ‘Characteristics of Culture’ (p.96) whereas many culturalists it is an ongoing process based on personal experience. McQuail suggests three key ideas for his model. Firstly that culture is pluralistic- common ideals can take hold because they apply to a group of people rather than scattered individuals. Secondly the culture has some kind of system or order and thirdly affirms that it is communication which spreads and maintains it. Mass culture simply adds an extra dimension to the first of these points – that it the culture is both recognised and well established. McQuail also states that it is non-traditional and non-elitist.

Therefore technology causative of a mass culture must be affordable and not dependent on class or situation. It could be argued that the Internet is elitist, commonplace in affluent societies but not elsewhere. Can a monolithic mass culture exist when some do not have access to relevant technology? But at that rate other factors could be important. For example, the Internet has hardly any regulation, but is restricted to those who can afford computers. Television on the other hand is often regulated but has a large body of viewers. Yet television remains the key technology as it is available in most territories even if only through communal

viewing. However whilst global television consumption is increasing, local audiences are fragmenting, as is 'global' television itself. Channels like CNN have different versions for different areas of the globe. This certainly has interesting consequences for the idea of the "global village".

Certainly this is now part of a definite 'media culture' or what I would rather call 'communication culture'. Stevenson (1999) says the twentieth century has witnessed the development of a mass communication media upon 'standardisation, mass consumption and predictability'. There is now far more information available to us. This information is no tangible either- it is a parallel world that exists only in the terminology of cyberspace. We may be able have as much information as we want but the downside is how to find it on a server somewhere. The 'global village' traditionally seen as 'more' may in fact be 'less'. Stevenson that these 'cultural flows' are 'spatially disorientated' and take place in a monolithic cultural space with unlimited space and no discernible place. Even global news reporting moves us into this sphere of the "global village".

As far as national boundaries go it can certainly be said that such a volume of readily available international information has resulted in them becoming more subordinate in our level of thinking. It is not at question if communication promotes culture, nor whether it has promoted an international culture; but instead whether this universal cross-national set of cultural ideals has destroyed jingoistic identities and homogenised them in one 'community'. Schelsinger (1987) a similar all-purpose notion of 'collective identity'. However while such a vague concept may be a good way to explain the dissolution of national identity, it may be more useful to see if national identity (the key to national cultures) still exists in the globalised world.

National identity is collective and as part of culture has to be reinforced by continuous dissemination of the ideals which contribute to it. Certainly this can also be a factor in it's downfall; if new media messages infiltrate a nation, then the ideals may not be so strong. Yet for an international monolithic culture to take hold, not only would it have to reiterate new shared principles, it would also have to supersede relatively local factors of ethnicity.

Perhaps this situation could occur where there are already supranational collective identifiers such as religion. These identifiers could act like jigsaw pieces; one collective religious culture might have some members overlapped by a different collective culture such as language. Thus interlocking smaller cultures could build a large-scale culture. However for our purposes these identifiers or indeed national identity itself are too deep-rooted to map out communication culture, which works at a far more superficial level. Such deep-roots depend on ancient influences such as shared histories, religion and language (McQuail).

However transnational media players are seeking to overcome such seep-rooted influences. The mass media is an integral part of "commodity culture in a...phase of late capitalism" (Seiter et al [eds.] 1989) and reflects the concept of postmodernism. Most postmodern media concepts such as the satellite and cable explosion are rooted in the modern era, for example the television explosion of the 1940s-60s. However as Barker (1997) points out, these concepts are separated by ideas like McLuhan's postmodern "global village" concept of time and space compression.

Barker points out that globalisation in the postmodern era should not be seen in the context of the 'nation state' as that is a modernist principle. After all globalisation is happening in the age of 'one world' supranational bodies like the UN and EU and swings between the paradoxical dichotomy of postmodern optimism and post-communist Marxist pessimism.

Globalised media organisations are fundamental to these supranational concepts. Schiller (1995) argues that such organisations are working to undermine democracy and cultural diversity by circumventing the state. Just eight giant conglomerates are expected to dominate a few years into the next century (Menon [1999]). One such world player is Viacom, the owners of MTV.

With distribution in more than 82 countries, MTV is a huge operation. Yet like CNN although MTV is an international brand it is not an international service. MTV's maxim 'think globally, act locally', reflects the company's regional standpoint. Different areas, cultures and even countries have individual tailored channels often presented in the local tongue. Whilst MTV is often used as a stereotypical "global village" player, the view of MTV as spreading a monolithic (American) culture is not very truthful.

Like Viacom, McQuail argues that media organisations should meet audience needs primarily and the needs of the state or clients only secondarily. Whilst market forces and the drive for profit might make this seem a utopian idea, he may have a point. Companies must be seen to act in the public interest in order to secure revenue as both satisfying advertisers and advertising income depend on audience satisfaction. As McQuail states (p.135), the media is still expected to perform with the public interest at heart, unlike other businesses, 'contribut[ing] to the wider and longer term benefit of society as a whole, especially in cultural...matters....' This is especially relevant to entertainment such as MTV. Indeed the channel is now one of the most clichéd globalised brands along with McDonalds and Coca Cola and has a 'product' to deliver to viewers. Yet the similarities with McDonalds continue. You can visit any McDonalds across the globe, order a Big Mac and you get basically the same product. The same applies to all the fragmented parts of MTV. Even through it is a localised product there must still be some globalised aspects such as programming formats.

So a merging globalised market is good for MTV. A major part of MTV's localised approach is financial of course; more targeting of audience means more targeted advertising; meaning more opportunities for advertisers. Yet regardless of financial aspects MTV has responded to local cultural sensitivities well in recent years. However it is noted for its trademark merging of styles and music, juxtaposing different places and times in the same way that a monolithic mass culture implies a similar postmodern mixture.

This postmodernism has implications in more underdeveloped nations. Such markets are ripe for infiltration by the major mass media players. In Latin America for example, Hanke (1999) describes a new transnational media order in which MTV Latino has a key role, mediating Latin and American/European rock influences. In this way music works in the same globalised way that multi-national news networks juxtapose footage from many different locations. Yet, appreciation and interpretation

of the same music changes from nation to nation, suggesting individuality of cultural identity rather than homogeneity. Musical scenes with their amalgamated genres can create cultural meaning, including nationalistic ideas. This occurred in mid-1990s Britain when 'Britpop' represented a 'national feeling'. Indeed music is interpreted depending on inherent cultural values. This means it can seem to have a cultural meaning not meant originally.

This reflects the work of the Frankfurt school. Herman et al (1999) use Adorno as an example. His analysis of popular music as it '...moved through the circuits of production, textualization and audience reception was central to understanding the politics of mass culture in modern capitalism.' Indeed mass media capitalism has had immense implications for the culture and identity of the lesser-developed countries they are expanding into.

Menon says that this cultural dynamic can also be seen in India. In 1991 the government opened up the previously closed economy to foreign investment. At the time, Rupert Murdoch's Star television was arriving in Asia and had a potential audience of two-thirds of the world's population. The American version of MTV was broadcast alongside general interest channel 'Star Plus' and various sport and movie networks.

The programming was low quality; 'Star Plus' showing mainly repeats of old BBC shows. It was in English and so audience was restricted to the expanding urban middle-classes and the affluent; televisions were expensive. At first the Western images excited, with consumer ethics gradually seeping into India's traditional values and identity. Yet India is extremely multicultural and multilingual with over 800 dialects of 16 languages amongst 900 million people (Sinclair et al). Therefore, the country is quite good at resisting the onset of the "global village" through sheer variety.

MTV had to come to terms with this. Through localisation, MTV Asia was born, eventually giving India its own channel. The network uses 'Hinglish'- a hybrid language of Hindi and English. Star has also localised its networks as competition has increased to extend its market beyond the English speaking elite. As a result there are now nearly 25 million satellite television homes in India, and a better broadcasting system has resulted. Indeed as Menon says 'if global entertainment is to work, it has to incorporate a respect for human diversity, and find new means of inclusive participation'. It is imperative that local input is used; transplanting Western culture has limited workability. Culture is delicate; a balance must be preserved which new ideas cannot disturb.

Such worries can surface in the developed world too. Canada has long held a fear of cultural imperialism from the USA as American programmes are often more popular than home-produced fare. Even though cultural identity may have been impinged upon, the impact on national identity has been negligible. The UK has a similar strength of national identity. When the programme 'Friends' shot a few London-based episodes, it portrayed British identity from a stereotypical (and false) American standpoint. This 'interpretation' did not go down well with the British public. But this is exactly the point; regardless of external media influences people still know 'who' they are.

Indeed whilst looking at the possibility of the 'global village' destroying national identity it is also pertinent to look see if it could promote it. Different cultural perspectives may make us more protective of our own as with the British 'Friends' episodes. When considering the quality of foreign programming (especially from the USA) maybe it makes us pleased to be able to disassociate from it and be British, or French, or whatever. This could also apply to our view of news images from countries in a war zone or famine.

As in India a homogenous culture cannot really overbear the 'enormous cultural diversity and varying vulnerability of what we call the "Third World".' (McQuail p.115) It is all too easy to forget such diversity and just refer to an anonymous 'third world'. Yet each country has deep rooted cultural identities- the culturally imperialistic idea of powerful Western nations 'dissolving' peripheral identities is not all it seems.

However the "global village" is definitely a case of periphery and core, since the media players are run from core nations. Information flows are a new inequality as 'information rich' territories like North America and Europe contrast with poorer information-starved ghettos; the 'global village' is not truly global matching the old adage that a third of the world's population has two thirds of its food. Those who can afford the technology are furnished with information and even though cheaper technologies such as television have promoted globalisation there are some countries such as Mozambique where television ownership is basically nil.

There is no argument that globalisation has been promoted by the expansion of mass media corporations, even though they have been unexpectedly culturally sensitive. Stevenson argues that such issues must be looked at in a national context as it is from this perspective that humans see their existence, their identity. Ask a Welshman on holiday in Spain where they are from and they will usually reply 'Wales' rather than Europe or indeed the UK.

This is a simple enough concept. It is when national borders do not reflect culture or factors like wealth that problems occur such as in Italy where the rich North could almost be a separate country from the poorer South. Perhaps this shows the fragility of the idea of 'nation', a semi-imaginary political sphere much like the idea of 'Europe'. Indeed Europe is an interesting comparison. Barker mentions that 'cultural transnationalisation' supports the theory of a more homogenous culture and identity within Europe, but regardless of supranational financial and political interaction, the nation state will remain the main focus.

So national identity has not been destroyed and in fact negative ideas and stereotypical images from mass culture may well gone toward strengthening it. Still it has become subordinate in some way; we are in a postmodern monolithic culture promoted by the "global village". Nationally centred ideas such as history and heritage have been muddied by generalised 'spatial information flows' like the sea (the 'global village') ebbing and flowing between individual nationalities with little regard for space and place. But so what if people can no longer be identified by just nationality- that is the case even with political organisations like the EU. Above all, your own nation is what people identify with most.

A monolithic mass culture, and the concept of national identity can, and do, act simultaneously. National identity is so deep rooted that even constant bombardment from new media ideals can only slightly dilute it. The global media affects more transient ideals than this. Perhaps the key idea is that the mass media players of the "global village" have learnt not to bulldoze over national boundaries but instead to complement and use them to their advantage.

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