

## MEDIA TECHNOLOGY AND CULTURAL IMPERIALISM IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

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**Abstract:** *The New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) was set up to address the problem of communication imbalance between the West and the developing nations. This communication imbalance indicates a wide margin between the developed nations and developing nations in terms of media technology, accessibility to information, information gathering and dissemination. The result is absolute or partial domination of the media system of the developing nations leading to gradual or outright erosion of the cultural values of developing nations. This paper, therefore, examines the relationship between media technology and cultural imperialism in order to establish whether media technology is an instrument of cultural imperialism. The study employed survey method of inquiry. The population comprised of 256 students of the Department of Mass Communication, Madonna University Okija. Using Taro Yamane technique, the study used a sample size of 156 respondents. The finding reveals that indeed, cultural imperialism is about an attempt to bring about domination of a culture by a perceived 'superior' culture. The study equally shows that the domination varies according to countries of media export and the countries of media import. The study recommends that the use of traditional media of communication should be encouraged. This will make the developing nations to start exporting indigenous culture and media messages to the developed nations.*

**Keywords:** Communication imbalance, Cultural imperialism, Media technology, Media system

## INTRODUCTION

Cultural imperialism refers to the creation and maintenance of unequal relationships that favour Western civilization and serves as a veritable instrument of influencing the cultures of developing nations (Johnston, 2000). McQuail (2005) sees cultural imperialism as a general expression for the tendency of global media industry exporters (especially from the United States) to dominate the media consumption in other smaller and poorer countries and in so doing impose their own culture and other values on audiences elsewhere. Not only content is exported, but also technology, production values, professional ideologies and ownership. The aim of the cultural imperialist, according to Ekeanyanwu (2015) is the subjugation of a local culture and the imposition of an alien culture on the local culture.

## STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Studies on Western media and cultural imperialism have always shown apparent media domination and subtle manipulation of the mass media of developing nations by Western capitalist nations through media technology, production values, ideologies and ownership. The result is total or partial erosion of cultural values of developing nations. The urge to be 'Westernized' has led to adulterations in the cultural values of developing nations. This is possible due to the wide gap between the two Worlds in terms of media technology and media programming. The developed nations are media-producers while the developing nations are media-consumers. This means that the developing nations depend wholly or partially on the media-producers for media contents. In doing so, the developed nations have subtly influenced the cultural values of developing nations. This study, therefore, attempts to critically study the modes in which media technology can lead to cultural imperialism in developing nations.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The following are the objectives of the study:

- a. To ascertain if media technology leads to cultural imperialism in developing nations.
- b. To establish the nature of media influence on cultural values of developing nations.
- c. To determine the extent media technology is instrumental to cultural imperialism.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study was guided by the following research questions:

- a. What are the causes of cultural imperialism in developing countries?
- b. What is the nature of media influence on the cultural values of developing countries?
- c. To what extent is media technology an instrument of cultural imperialism?

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study was anchored on the cultural imperialism theory which holds that all media products originate from only centre nations that have devious ulterior motives of deliberately wanting to dominate the media of periphery nations. This assumption states that no periphery country will ever be able to produce media products of its own (White, 2001). Corroborating this explanation, Udoakah (2015) maintains that there is domination of the centre against the periphery. The centre always provides the means and definitions of what is to be taught and the periphery always is always at the receiving end of the communication channel. This gradually makes the periphery to imbibe in totality the ideologies and cultural values of the centre.

This theory was a product of advocacy led by Herbert Schiller in the 1960s and late 70s in response to the agitations against United States economic dominance in the global system. The study became relevant because media domination exerts tremendous negative effects on the cultural values of developing nations. The theory submits that there should be integration and symbiotic relationship between the media systems of the two Worlds thus accepting the spread and acceptance of the global culture and deeper and more committed integration into the global village (Ekeanyanwu, 2015).

## MEDIA TECHNOLOGY

Technology is simply the systematic application of knowledge to practical tasks in industry. Technology may also be viewed as a systematic process for analyzing problems, devising, implementing, managing, controlling, assessing and evaluating solutions to problems. Technology can be understood from two perspectives: the hardware approach and the software approach. The hardware approach focuses on means of mechanizing or automating the collection, processing and dissemination of information in the case of media technology. This includes tangible devices that are susceptible to the senses such as radio set, television set etc. On the other hand, the software approach or process approach refers to the programmes and instructions that form part of media messages. By whatever standard, media technology plays significant role as agent of cultural imperialism. What then is media technology?

Media technology involves global communication infrastructure which provides limitless access to information and/or programming that uses the devices to work. Ekeanyanwu (2015) states that there is no doubt that new communications technology have given vent to the concept of the global village as a result of the advent of computer and their networking capabilities. McQuail (2005) agrees that technology has certainly given a powerful push to globalization. The arrival of television and satellites in the late 1970s broke the principle of national sovereignty of broadcasting space and made it difficult and ultimately impossible to offer effective resistance to television transmission and reception from outside the national territory. The result is that such technology can be used as instrument of domination as the Big Media can always package whatever they want the Small Media to watch, read and assimilate. Page | 4

In the study of the role of media technology as instrument of cultural imperialism, two theoretical perspectives have emerged. One is the technological determinism theory and the information diffusion theory. Technological determinism is a *technology-led* theory of social change. Here, technology is seen as 'the prime mover' in history. In economics, this is known as a 'technology-push' theory rather than a 'demand-pull' theory. Technological determinists interpret technology as the basis of society in the past, present and even the future. They argue that technologies such as writing, printing, television or the computer 'changed society'. In its most extreme form, the entire form of society is seen as being determined by technology: new technologies transform society at every level, including institutions, social interaction and individuals. At the least a wide range of social and cultural phenomena are seen as shaped by technology. 'Human factors' and social arrangements are seen as secondary.

However, Ekeanyanwu (2008) argues in the contrary that the accusation leveled against new communication technologies that it is leading to cultural imperialism is both misleading and unintelligent. He further maintains that 'the power of technology is in the use to which it is put, not in its very nature.

On the other side of the continuum, the information diffusion theory explains how innovations are introduced and adopted by various societies. Credited to Rogers (1962), the theory recognizes the process of spreading any kind of new technical device, idea or useful information (McQuail). The information diffusion theory therefore, explains how innovations are introduced and adopted by various communities. This theory often provides easy gateway to media imperialism because the innovations being transferred are done through the mass media including media technology. However, Baran and Davis (2006) argue that information diffusion theory assigns a very limited role to mass media. Media mainly create awareness of new innovations. Only the early adopters are directly influenced by media content. Others adopt innovations only after being influenced by other people.

## CULTURAL IMPERIALISM

The dynamic nature of culture makes it an easy tool of manipulation. When two different cultures meet, an interface occurs resulting in forms of culture contact, culture shock, culture relativism and culture transfer. At this stage, the rate of influence is relatively rational as cultural values are evenly distributed. When culture contact continues over time, there is usually a tendency for one culture to dominate the other. This stage of cultural domination is the major concern of sociologists and media experts. Page | 5

Kenechukwu (2014) sees cultural imperialism as a systematic penetration and domination of the culture of a given race by another culture that claims superiority. Ethnocentrism is an art of using one's ethnicity or culture as standard parameter for measuring other cultures. This means in essence that cultural imperialism occurs when one culture dominates another culture to the extent that the culture being dominated gets into extinction over time. The mass media exert tremendous influence on culture, sometimes leading to cultural imperialism.

McQuail (2005) defines cultural imperialism as a general expression for the tendency of global media industry exporters to dominate the media consumption in other smaller and poor countries and in so doing, impose their own culture and other values on audiences elsewhere. The main instrument of cultural imperialism is the mass media. By reshaping the media system in the developing nations, the developed nations not only supply media equipment but also dictate the production values of the developing nations. Ike (2005) holds the view that cultural imperialism occurs in form of invasion of indigenous peoples' culture through the mass media by external powerful nations. The developing nations are predominantly media-consumer nations because they depend on the developed nations for media equipment and programming. The result is a domination of the cultural values of the developing nations which they often tag 'outdated'. The intent of cultural imperialism is a deliberate attempt to dominate, invade or subvert the cultural space of others.

Cultural imperialism is an issue under debate in international communication discourses. While some scholars such as McQuail (2005); Boyd-Barrett (1977) and White (2001) hold similar views of cultural imperialism as agent of cultural domination, other critics such as Tomlinson (1991); Lechner & Boli (2009) and Rothkopf (1997) argue that cultural imperialism is growing in some respects but local transformation and interpretations of imported media products propose that cultural diversification is not at an end in global society (Lechner & Boli, 2009). According to Rothkopf (1997), cultural imperialism stresses the value of tolerance and openness to cultural change in order to avoid war and conflict between cultures as well as expanding accepted technological and legal standards to provide free traders with enough security to do business with more countries. Rothkopf's definition almost exclusively involves allowing individuals in other nations to accept or reject foreign cultural influences.

## **MEDIA TECHNOLOGY VIS-À-VIS IMPERIALISM DEBATE**

There is an on-going debate on whether media technology is an instrument of cultural imperialism. The result of this debate was the emergence of two dominant perspectives: the mainstream perspective and critical perspective. The mainstream perspective is optimistic of the impact of new communication technologies in developing countries and sees technology as a means of removing organizational and infrastructural constraints in developing nations for the realization of these technological potentials. On the other hand, the critical perspective argues that technology serves as an instrument of political and economic subjugation and posits that new communication technologies are developed to benefit the industrial-military complex of the developed world without consideration of its effect on the cultural values of the developing nations (Tsui, 1991).

Proponents of the mainstream paradigm are Rogers (1986), Pool (1979) Parker (1982) and Hudson (1984). The mainstream perspective looks at the positive impact of media technology and argues that improved information and technology permit more resource exploitation. Parker (1984) advocates that every country should develop a human development information intensive strategy. Rogers (1986) avers that the uniqueness of media technologies would promote development in the developing nations as they are more efficient in transmitting information and collecting feedback. He envisages that the new technologies would facilitate self-development by individuals and communities.

For the critical perspective, Schiller (1981) posits that media technology can lead to loss of economic sovereignty and national security caused by trans-border data flow. In the cultural arena, therefore, media technologies supply the means of allowing increased access to Western media products thereby resulting in decreasing cultural diversity and creativity and facilitating the extension of cultural imperialism (Tsui, 1991). On the other hand, Hamelink (1986) questions the claim that sees technology as a social construction and sees technology neutrality not only from a sociological viewpoint but also from the epistemological dimension. Hamelink (1986) posits that the importation of media technology together with the emulation of the Western worldview is a great obstacle to development of indigenous technological capacity and thus can be an instrument of cultural imperialism.

## **MODES OF CULTURAL IMPERIALISM**

There are different modes of cultural imperialism which include market economy, transfer of ideologies and media imperialism. These modes have facilitated changes in culture associated with cultural imperialism. Corroborating the market economy factor, McQuail (2015) avers that the expansion of efficient and low-cost transmission technologies has been driven by commercial motives and has fuelled demand for

imports. It has also stimulated new audiovisual production industries in many countries that look, in their turn, for new markets.

The main beneficiary and the main exporter has been the United States, which has a large and surplus production of popular entertainment and an entrée into many markets secured by the cultural familiarity of its products, mainly as a result of decades of American films. The English language is an added advantage but is not decisive, since most TV experts have always been dubbed or subtitled when transmitted. The argument here is that when these broadcast materials are sold, they are sold along with their cultural colourations embedded in them through language, cinematic experience and textualization. To check the influx of such broadcast materials from the United States and Europe, the developing nations have resorted to the use of indigenous language and cinematic renditions in packaging movies as in the case of Nigeria Nollywood industry or the Korean film industry.

The second mode is transfer of ideologies. Every race has its own unique way of life. However, the advancement in communication technologies has created a platform for the exchange of information between societies. As the exchange continues, ideologies equally change from one society to another. Pathetically, the presence of uneven rate of exchange of ideologies leads to the domination of one ideology over another ideology. In this regards, Sarmela (1977) identifies the ideologies as follows:

- (a) The ideology of the technological imperialists,
- (b) The maximization of culture; the ideology of total efficiency,
- (c) The cult of modernism; the ideology of novelty,
- (d) The ideology of productivity.
- (e) International standards; the ideology of the supranational,
- (f) The mechanistic system of knowledge and causal relations; the ideology of technical solutions,
- (g) Group centricity; the ideology of organization and,
- (h) The opinion industry; the ideology of the control of knowledge.

The third mode is achieved through media portrayals. This is the fulcrum of media imperialism. The debate on media imperialism dates back to 1970s as a result of cries of developing nations on absolute control of media by the developed nations. This gave birth to the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO). In 1980, UNESCO recognized this problem of imbalance. Boyd-Barret (1977) defines media imperialism as the process whereby the ownership, structure, distribution or content of the media in any one country are singly or together subject to substantial external pressures from the media interests of any other country or countries without proportionate reciprocation of influence by the country so affected. He identifies the following four modes of media imperialism which we may refer to as media-formation model: (a) the shape of the communication vehicle involving a specific technology at the consumer end, and a typical range and balance of communication contexts, (b) a set of industrial arrangements for the continuation of media production, involving given structural relationships and financial facilities, (c) a body of values about social

practice and, (d) specific media contents. The actual export of media content is probably the most visible form of media imperialism.

## **ABSOLUTE OR PARTIAL DOMINATION: THE AFRICAN PERSPECTIVES**

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The quest to determine the nature and extent of cultural domination has remained a scholarly discourse among sociologists and media scholars. Prior to the report of MacBride et al (1980), the dominant view was based on absolute domination. This was as a result of developing nations' initial decline in challenging the status quo of media programming which was dominated by the West. They were left at the mercy of existing media technology and programming. Today, the story has changed as developing nations are gradually becoming media-producers and take greater involvement in the design of local media contents.

Another argument anchors on the paradigm shift in media effects from all-powerful media effects to limited effects. Integrating the media effect paradigm in determining the degree of domination, it is interesting to note that audience selectivity of media messages is a viable way of either allowing or discarding tendencies of cultural invasion through the mass media. Contrary to the all-powerful model such as magic bullet theory that holds that information from the mass media are direct and immediate thereby making receivers cognitively passive and helpless in the face of a strong communication stimulus.

Kenechukwu (2015) maintains that cultural imperialism is easily attained under the all-powerful model than the limited effect model. This is because the limited effect model holds that media audiences differ in the way and manner they react to the same media message. From these two paradigms emerged: the dominant paradigm and the alternative paradigm. The dominant paradigm combines a view of powerful mass media (all-powerful media effect) while the alternative paradigm (limited media effect) considers individual differences and social categories. Based on this, the developing nations have the ability to sieve the type of information to be retransmitted. This gave rise to the formation of national as well as international press agencies.

Ekeanyanwu (2015), remarks that with globalization the world became a single market with no regular traditional boundaries. This sounds all right except for the fact that Africa remains a consumer and supplier of raw materials for the industries in Europe and America while the rest of the West and Europe remained producers. On the other hand, scholars such as Giddens (1990) and Moran (1998) shared optimistic views about globalization in bridging the communication gap between the West and the developing countries. These scholars argue that globalization is, in a positive sense, a sign of the declining grip of the West over the rest of the world, as exemplified by phenomena such as the spread of the ubiquitous curry meal to the stream of immigration into the West (Graeme, 2005).

## METHODOLOGY

The study employed survey method of inquiry. In this study, the population size comprises students of the Department of Mass Communication, Madonna University Okija Campus (N= 256). A sample of 156 was drawn from this population using the Taro Yamane's Formula. The questionnaire was the research instrument used in this study. The questionnaire was constructed to reflect key items in the research questions.

## DATA PRESENTATIONS

The results of the question items posed to respondents are presented in tabular format as follows:

Table 1: *What are the causes of cultural imperialism in developing countries?*

RESPONSE	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE (%)
Media technology	131	84
Market economy	14	9
Ideologies	11	7
Total	156	100

Source: Field Survey 2015.

Among the options provided, media technology (84%) was found to be the most pronounced cause of cultural imperialism in developing nations. This may stem from the fact that the respondents are easily exposed to information media either for news or entertainment.

Table 2: *What is the nature of media influence on the cultural values of developing countries?*

RESPONSE	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE (%)
Absolute domination	83	53
Partial domination	41	26
Symbiotic influence	32	21
Total	156	100

Source: Field Survey 2015.

The nature of media influence on cultural values of developing nations indicates tripartite degrees of influence: absolute domination, partial domination and symbiotic influences. The respondents (53%) who were in favour of absolute domination anchor on the premise that media messages have direct effects on behavior thus media technologies may serve as vehicles of cultural domination. The respondents (26%) that held the partial domination perspective are of the view that media technologies can

only perform limited functions. The respondents (21%) who were in favour of the symbiotic influence believe in the complementarities that exist between media technology and culture.

Table 3: *To what extent is media technology instrumental to cultural imperialism?*

RESPONSE	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE (%)
Large extent	110	71
Low extent	46	29
TOTAL	156	100

Source: *Field Survey 2015.*

In measuring the extent of the influences of media technology as instrument of cultural imperialism, the study observed that 71% of the respondents (71%) were of the view that the domination was to a large extent thus raising questions on the post-NWICO stance on communication imbalance.

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

From the analysis, it was observed that all respondents agreed that cultural imperialism is all about the attempt to bring about domination of a culture by a perceived 'superior' culture. The study equally showed that the domination varies according to countries of media export and the countries of media import. Depending on intervening variables, the domination may take the forms of absolute domination, partial domination or symbiotic influences.

Secondly, the study identified media technology as the most veritable medium of cultural imperialism. This accounts for the way people are influenced based on their exposure to certain media messages. In determining the extent of influence, the study found that the influence is high in developing nations.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results of this study, the following recommendations are proffered:

- Modernization of communication structure and improvement of broadcast programming and newspaper features.
- Sharing cultural values with the rest of the world through media programming.
- Government should encourage constant researches in communication. This will help to formulate sustainable national communication policies.
- The use of traditional media of communication should be encouraged. This will make the developing nations to start exporting indigenous culture and media messages to the developed nations.

- There could be media mix in which case both media systems can complement each other.

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