THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Another Look at Cultural and Media Imperialism: A Critical Analysis of the Concepts

Ekwutosi Sanita Nwakpu
Assistant Lecturer, Department of Mass Communication,
Alex Ekwueme Federal University Ndufu-Alike Ikwo, Nigeria

Abstract:
The Concepts, cultural and media Imperialism have been used to describe the influence of the western (developed) nations on the developing nations around the world. The two concepts have generated prominent debates from media scholars of different backgrounds with some scholars arguing that the globalisation of the media is way of making different cultures compatible and others arguing it are detrimental to the developing nations who are at the receiving end. Heightened by the need to make the theories less problematic and more coherent. the paper through analytical and descriptive approach critically analyses the concepts from a different perspective bygiving them more clarification and balancing the existing argument. The paper first examines the stand of different scholars on the theoretical conjunctures before taking a stand. It concludes that even though that the two theories have received a lot of attention, it will continue receiving attentions especially from the scholars from developing nation until they realise that Western culture is not imposed on them, rather they are less contented with their own culture and continue copying others' culture.

Keywords: *Culture, media imperialism, westernisation, developing nation*

1. Introduction

Cultural and media imperialism are two concepts that have arguably suffered from scattered conceptualisation as well as generated heated debate and attention among media scholars. This paper critically x-rays these concepts to make them more academically coherent and less problematic. It takes a panoramic view of the concepts, offering an unusual perspective that tends not only to clarify, but also balance the arguments on the already over-stretched concepts. Rather than dwell on vociferation or arguments as many authors chose, this paper takes alternative approach that is both analytical and prescriptive to bring about balance in the concepts. To this end, this essay proceeds through introductory overview, navigating through positions of different scholars and towards the latter part, explores the theoretical conjectures of the concepts before taking position and subsequently concluded. For better understanding of the concepts, they shall be explored separately as related concepts with similar effects.

Scholars in the communications field have no reason to ignore the global dimensions of their ever-evolving subject. It is said that the myopia and insularity to which they allude to this is that of intellectual provincialism and not parochialism (Golding and Harris, 1997). A critical look at the avalanche of related literature reveals that research interest in international communication dynamics has gone through three overlapping phases: The first borders on a happy optimism, which sees the media as 'magic multipliers' that bring instant development advice to the mass audience. Pioneer scholar like Wilbur Schramm, whose conceptual framework helped in political communications, is a good example of this (Golding, 1977). The second phase of these dynamics centred on the spread of Western imagery and culture as a form of imperialism, cultural imperialism, which was more insidious and more effective in cementing the dependency of the post-colonial periphery than the physical crudities of earlier decades' (Golding and Harris, 1997, p.4). The latest phase is that of globalisation which Waters (1995, p.1) calls 'the concept of the 1990s'. Although this essay tangentially touches on the first and third phases, the centre of discourse is on the second phase. Tomilson (1991) skillfully unpacked various discourses regarding the media, nationality and modernity, which are all embedded within the notion of cultural imperialism.

2. Conceptualisation of culture and Media Imperialism

Admittedly, cultural imperialism is a concept that can be hardly discussed in isolation with media imperialism. The two concepts are broadly used, and in certain cases very interchangeably. This is however very confusing sometimes as juxtaposing them lumps their interpretations that tend to contradict at some points. Notwithstanding, Boyd-Barrett (1977, p.117) notes that cultural imperialism can sometimes contradict the much narrower claim of media imperialism. In this instance, media imperialism is seen as the process whereby the ownership, structure, and distribution of media content singly or collaboratively subject the "substantial external pressures from the media interests of any other country or countries without proportionate reciprocation of influence by the country so affected" (Boyd-Barrett, 1977, p.117). Lately, Boyd-Barrett (2015) further asserts that the concept of cultural imperialism has elided too much into 'media

imperialism'. Hamelink (1983) uses 'cultural synchronisation' to refer to cultural imperialism while Biggins (2004) referred to it as cultural dependency.

As if the above scattered conceptualisations are not enough, Sparks (2012, p.282) accused the concept of cultural imperialism of having 'imprecise category', and as one of its foremost critics notes, rather than seeing the concept as a coherent body of thought, "a better way of thinking about cultural imperialism is to think of it as a variety of different articulations which may have certain features in common, but which may also be in tension with each other, or even mutually contradictory" (Tomlinson, 1991, p.9). Sparks however admits that "it is possible to advance a viable and coherent concept of cultural imperialism" in order to unearth how "the ways in which state power and cultural power are intertwined in the production and circulation of cultural artefacts" (Sparks 2012, p.294). As one of the highly contested issues of the contemporary discourses in media especially among the developing nations, imperialism is accused of causing cultural extinction due to the influx of Western cultures and ideologies. As one of the 'staple catch-phases' in international communication, Sreberny-Mohammadi (1997, p.45) notes that the notion of cultural imperialism has been ill-defined and it operates an evocative metaphor instead of precise construct that challenges its historic validity.

Cultural imperialism concept became popular from scholars such as Herbert Schiller and Oliver Boyd-Barrett.Thus, "the concept of cultural imperialism today best describes the sum of the processes by which a society is brought into the modern world system and how its dominating stratum is attracted, pressured, forced and sometimes bribed into shaping social institutions to correspond to, or even promote, the values and structures of the dominating centre of the system" (Schiller, 1976, p.9). Schiller was also particularly concerned about how corporate American powers exploited the post-colonial regime to resell their ideologies using the most powerful of all media channels.

Similarly, Biggins (2004, p.2) notes that "cultural imperialism or cultural dependency occurs with the Western countries' influence on the language, values and attitudes (including religion), ways of organising public life, styles of politics, forms of education, and professional training, clothing styles, and many other cultural habits". Through its widespread aided by the multinational media platforms, Biggins (2004, p.2) submits that globalisation has led to a "landslide transformation of existing local culture and identity into a new form of frontier". Other areas of cultural imperialism include eating habits such as fast food and in the practice of drinking coffee as takeaway beverages in schools or workplaces which was exclusively seen in the U.S. society years ago, but which has transcended boundaries today.

Schiller (1969) was critical of this when he discussed imperialism as the ability of developed countries to prevail over weaker states in the world, through the impact of the media corporations, such as the CNN as well as multinational corporations like McDonalds and Starbucks. From the foregoing, cultural imperialism becomes the practice of exporting a culture to the outside world as the best to follow not just through the media, but also through multinational corporations. Media moguls such as Rupert Murdoch and Ted Turner represent people largely accused of transmitting Western images and commercial values into the world's population (Rampal, 2005).

3. Analysis of the Concepts

From a retrospective perspective, the causes of cultural and media imperialism are not narrowed down to the US as some studies suggest. The end of cold war and the collapse of Berlin wall in the 20th century were often credited as factors that necessitated the aggressive global integration (Emeagwali, 2004) which the purveyors might argue as a means of knitting the broken world, but which turned out to be tending towards cultural cleansing or imperialism as the argument suggests. On the other hand, the exportation and spread of democracy often held as the best system of government has arguably 'unleashed unparalleled Western cultural influences around the world' (Rampal, 2005, p.3). In other words, "the globalisation of media imagery is surely the most effective means ever for cloning cultures to make them compatible with the Western corporate vision" (Mander, 1996 cited in (Rampal, 2005, p.3). While not totally disagreeing with this claim, one may be tempted to argue that the claim is too bogus and lacks empirical evidence, given that there are a lot of people in the receiving end of the so-called Western culture that have no access to digital media outfits that supposedly transmit these cultures. This becomes one of the criticisms of these concepts hugely blamed for all the woes of the 'other' countries. This seemingly unending blaming was perhaps what gave birth to the concept of NWICO – New World Information and Communication Order which was brought as an affront to the effects of imperialism. As Nordenstreng (2013, p.351) puts it, "NWICO was part and parcel of the developing countries' drive to emancipate themselves from "structures of imperialist power". Contemporary debates about globalisation also address the problems of cultural and media imperialism, New World Information order as well as the concept of free flow of information (Morley 2006). Morley highlighted the summation of what he calls 'cultural imperialism thesis and its limits' as shown below:

- The way the original model oversimplifies the complex nature of flows in international communications.
- Its failure to address the more recent strategies of 'globalisation' adopted by many of the key media producers.
- The problems that follow from the policies of cultural protectionism' to which this model of media imperialism seems to lead.
- The inadequacies of the simple 'hypodermic' model of the media's supposed effects on their audiences, which underlies the original theory of media imperialism' (Morley, 2006, p.34).

The above limitations are still obvious today, and the situation is even worsened by the expansion of the ICTs and the social media. However, contrary to speculations from different sources, it should be emphasised that although there is an increasing global connectivity (often attributed to imperialism and globalisation), Tommilson (2012, p.355) warns that this is by "no means necessarily implying that the world is becoming, in the widest sense, either economically or politically 'unified'. Perhaps, this informed why when imperialism is mentioned in discussions of contemporary realities, it is usually in the context of a discussion of its limitations (Nordenstreng, 2013, p.354).

Discussions on imperialism derive from many sources that is why they have never been exclusively Marxist in inspiration. For instance, scholars like Hobson and Schumpeter (representing the old generation), and Ferguson and Mann (representing the new generation) of scholars, have all addressed issues on imperialism from divergent intellectual and political perspectives (see Mann, 2003; Ferguson, 2003, 2004; Schumpeter, 1951; Hobson, 1902). In all ramifications ''imperialism in general and media imperialism in particular occupy a vital intellectual place in international media studies'' (Nordenstreng, 2013).Morley cited Major Ralph Peter (rtd), in the article he published in US Army War College quarterly journal *Parameter* That US popular culture is a weapon for softening up 'regressive' populations. That of the US is branded the 'culture with killing power'. He further boasts that

''Contemporary American culture is the most powerful in history and the most destructive of competitor cultures. ...The *'genius', the secret weapon of American culture, is the essence that the (liberal) elites despise: ours is the first 'genuine people's culture'. ...we are Karl Marx's dream and his nightmare. ...The de facto role of the US armed forces will be to keep the world safe for our economy and open to our cultural assault''* (Peter, 2003 cited in Morley, 2006, p.34)

From the foregoing, the claim still remains that the big media in the United States is the channel that exports these cultures to the receiving end. This puts the media readily in-between any form of imperialism. Media imperialism is therefore seen as 'certain forms of imperialism' that 'are directly related with the media in some ways' (Boyd-Barret, 2015, p.1). It means that 'the media themselves, the meanings they produce and distribute and the political-economic processes that sustain them are sculpted by and through ongoing processes of empire building and maintenance, and they carry the residues of the empires that once were' (Boyd-Barret, 2015, p.1).

Still lamenting the effect of cultural imperialism, Schiller whose work heralded these concepts had earlier warned that 'everywhere local culture is facing submersion from the mass-produced outpourings of commercial broadcasting in the United States' (Schiller, 1969, p.111). The cultural impact of this modernity brought with it what Clignet (1971) described as 'double alienation' in much areas of the South, an alienation from people's tradition and cultural heritage and alienation from the metropolitan culture which allows only for selective exposure.

The same blame game also resonates with the increasing hollywoodisation of movie industries of Africa, Asia and the rest of the world. In Nigeria for instance, the Nollywood (Nigerian equivalent of the Hollywood) is fast degenerating into an 'Americanised' industry save for the few epic and comic episodes that appeal to the rural populace. The production pattern of these contemporary movies follows in the Hollywood format. Another notable feature is that actors are meant to use Western accent otherwise the production is underrated. Due to a cataclysmic reduction in the preference of music and movies without romantic undertones and episodes, the production of movies in Nigeria, India etc has been infiltrated with open sex and romantic episodes with bikini ladies and sexy figures in order to draw more audiences and increase marketing as observed by (Rampal, 2005). This is usually blamed squarely on Western media imperialism. It is now very obvious that streaming and watching of steamy scenes no longer makes people ashamed because it has been internalised and somewhat accepted as the best practice. This has not been ignored by critics who warn of the long-term implications of such movies that lack realism. In whatever ways this issue became a product of Western influence is yet to be fully expatiated or at the very least well substantiated empirically.

It can be deduced that many of the authors cited above see cultural imperialism as a deliberate imposition or exportation of culture considered superior to other places with 'substandard' culture. This essay argues otherwise that although it seems like an imposition it does not necessarily mean that people are compulsorily bound by the new culture. As matter of fact, people have inalienable rights not to follow the tenets of the new culture if they chose to.

Misleadingly, as can be further deduced from the above overview, some critics of media imperialism have rather conflated with the historically specific, enduring and inevitably finite phenomenon of American hegemony, which obviously has been reduced to so much exaggeration as seen subsequently. Boyd-Barrett (1977) had earlier argued that in trying to distil the conflicting interpretations of media imperialism from different authors, it is pertinent to argue from the perspective that media imperialism is carried out by the powerful media, corporate and political powers of different countries not just the West on the Rest perspective as many scholars (see Hall, 1992) have argued. China, Japan, and other emerging countries also share in the blame assuming that all these claims are true. It is therefore necessary to shift the entire blame from the 'centre'.

This may have been the view earlier expressed by Frank (1967) about the "centre" and the "periphery", although some authors prefer terms such as "metropolis" and "satellite". Schiller spoke about the "peripheral" country while discussing how a society is "brought into the modern world system". In this instance, ''imperialism is seen as a relationship between the rich, developed world and the poorer, underdeveloped, world'' (Sparks, 2013, p.283). In the same line of argument is Galtung whoseidea of imperialism stretches as far as a relationship between the centre and the periphery. This implies so that:

*''(1) there is harmony of interest between the centre in the Centre nation and the centre in the Periphery nation, (2) there is more disharmony of interest within the Periphery nation than within the centre nations, (3) there is disharmony of interest between the periphery in the Centre nation and the periphery in the Periphery nation. (*Galtung, 1971, *p. 83)*

As demonstrated above, one of the main features of the way in which imperialism was perceived by Schiller and others was in relations to the concept of "centre and periphery". This centre arguably represents America. This perspective is still dominant in contemporary discourses about imperialism as manifested in Sparks (2012), Panitch and Gindin (2004) etc. They argue that the United States is typically imperialist because of its domineering influence in the 'glocalised' world. The basis for this argument lies in the fact that ''the USA is by far the largest economy in the world, and it has a military apparatus that is vastly more powerful, and expensive, than any other in the world'' (Sparks, 2012, p.288). Although this

holds element of truth, the influence of other super power countries such as China, Russia, United Kingdom, France etc. as I have earlier argued should not be undermined.

The lopsided ownership of the big global media outfits serves only to worsen the scenario for the developing countries. As the divide widens, the countries at the receiving ends continue to moan. Contributing to this debate is Tunstall (1977) who came up with a four-decade long classic writing on *The Media are American*. More recently in 2007, Jeremy Tunstall came up with a new project which arguably modified his position on the importance of regional centres of media production *The Media Were American*, which obviously appears to show that both national and regional centres of production the world over had presumably eclipsed the old traces of the old empire. It also suggests that America may not be the *Centre* again.

An evidence that aligns to my claim is available *How Europe underdeveloped Africa,* where Walter Rodney (1972) emphasised the dangers of cultural and media imperialism which he blamed squarely on the Europe. Admittedly, the effects of this imperialism have been assimilated into the workings of many developing worlds where these cultures are exported to. This is evident in the perception and regular reference to the phrase 'international best practices' which connotes that the western culture is superior to that from other places. In other words, it suggests that the so called 'international best practices' are out there not within. This is the direction of cultural diplomacy that tends to render people's culture as inferior. Against this backdrop, the position of this essay is that the claim of any superiority in culture is only overstretched because in the end it borders on the recipients' acceptability. If they mount strong resistance, the reverse would be the case. The fact that no culture is generic should also serve as a reminder to those who think of dominance of their culture.

Through the time, the concepts of cultural and media imperialism have also been applied to studies as theoretical underpinnings (Morley, 2006, p.34). In fact, as the available literature shows, it is obvious that scholars do not only talk about cultural and media imperialism as concepts, they also refer to the concepts as theories that address the dominance of Western Culture on the rest. Schiller (1969) is often heavily cited in this regard**.** Thus, from the theoretical point of view, human beings, especially from the African perspective, have transited from the agrarian to industrial and ICTs. When Marshall McLuhan projected a global village in 1967, some critics considered it as mere wishful thinking. Today, communication revolutions aided by satellite and cable television, social media and the internet, have taken the world by storm as ideas, happenings, and cultures are relayed to the global village in fractions of seconds. Thus, through media channels such as the internet, Hollywood, etc which relay entertainment to its target audiences across the globe, these cultures in form of music and movies are exported to the world. In line with the hypodermic needle theory developed by Harold Lasswell in the 1920s, people try to internalise the 'American' way of speaking, eating, acting etc. The fashion industry is also largely affected by this unbridled influence. Sagging of trousers and bra among young people is very common and this is blamed on the effects of imperialism. With these domineering influences, neo-colonialism as its offshoot also possesses the potential to eradicate the cultural legacies of the Third World countries or so the fears suggest.

It should be emphasised that cultural or media imperialism is not entirely bad because it also leaves room for hybridisation of culture and enhances dispersed and decentred cultural flow in a certain way. It should also be emphasised that culture has no generic application which means that no matter how big such culture must have been accepted or how 'superior' it looks; it does not apply to everyone else everywhere in the world (Lonner, 2007). Rather than nonstop lamentation and blame game, the developing world should embrace their culture and resist any temptation to be enslaved by western culture. By the way as Morley (2006) argues, any culture that cannot withstand a test of time is lacking appealing ingredients needed in the survivability of such culture.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion therefore, imperialism both in media and cultural perspectives has seen massive scholastic attention in the past and will continue to receive attention even in the future until people realise that the Western cultures are not imposed on anybody, rather some people are less contented with their original culture. Admittedly, it is extremely difficult to offer a comprehensive explanation of these widely debated concepts; and it is even more demanding to find solutions to the problems they created. Clearly though, as I have argued in this essay, there seems to be no end to the blame game associated with imperialism. The South who is at the receiving ends of the imperialism should not blame everything that goes wrong with its system on Western powers even when there are also positive things coming from cultural alignment with the West. Argument made in this essay tends to justify that rather than heaping the entire blame on the US, other emerging world powers whose influence is also overwhelming should be blamed as well.

5. References

i. Boyd-Barrett, O. (1977) 'Media Imperialism: Towards an International Framework for the analysis of media systems', in Curran, J., Gurevitch, M. and Woolacott, J (eds) Mass Communication and Society. London: Edward Arnold, pp.116-35.
ii. Boyd-Barrett, O. (2015) Media Imperialism. London: Sage
iii. Biggins, O. (2004). "Cultural Imperialism and Thai Women's Portrayals on Mass Media," a paper presented at the International Conference on Revisiting Globalization & Communication in the 2000s. August 5-6, 2004. Bangkok, Thailand.
iv. Clignet, R. (1971) 'Damned if you do, damned if you don't. The dilemmas of colonizer-colonised relations', Comparative Education Review. pp.296-312.

v.   Emeagwali, P. (2004). 'The truth about Globalization, keynote speech delivered on September 18, at the Pan – African conference on Globalization Washington DC, USA. emeagwali.com

vi.   Frank, A.G. (1967). Capitalism and underdevelopment in Latin America: Historical studies of Chile and Brazil. New York, NY: Monthly Review Press.

vii.   Galtung, J. (1971). A structural theory of imperialism. Journal of peace research, pp. 81-117.

viii.   Golding, P. (1977) 'Media Professionalism in the Third World: The transfer of an ideology', in Curran, J., Gurevitch, M. and Woolacott, J (eds) Mass Communication and Society. London: Edward Arnold

ix.   Golding, P. and P. Harris (1997) Beyond Cultural Imperialism: Globalisation, communication and the New international order. London: Sage

x.   Hall, S. (1992) 'The West and the Rest': Discourse and power', in Hall, S. and Gieben, B. (eds) Formations of Modernity. Cambridge: Polity Press

xi.   Hamelink, C.J. (1983) Cultural Autonomy in Global Communications. New York: Longman

xii.   Lonner, W. J. (2007). Handbook of multicultural perspectives on stress and coping. P. T. Wong, & L. C. Wong (Eds.). Springer Science & Business Media.

xiii.   Mander, J (1996). "The Dark Side of Globalization: What the Media are Missing," in The Nation. [WWW Document]. URL http://www.escape.ca/~viking/global.html

xiv.   McLuhan, M. (1967). The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects. New York: Random House.

xv.   Morley, D. (2006). 'Globalisation and cultural imperialism reconsidered: Old questions in new guises'. In J. Curran & D. Morley (Eds.), Media and cultural theory (pp. 30–43). London: Routledge.

xvi.   Nordenstreng, K. (2013) How the new world order and imperialism challenge media studies. tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society, 11(2), 348-358.

xvii.   Panitch, L., &Gindin, S. (2004). Global capitalism and American empire. London: Merlin Press.

xviii. Rampal, K. R. (2005). Cultural imperialism or economic necessity? The Hollywood factor in the reshaping of the Asian film industry. Global Media Journal, 4 (6) pp.1-15

xix.   Rodney, W. (1972) How Europe Underdeveloped Africa. London and Dar es Salaam: Bogle-L'Ouverture and Tanzania Publishing House.

xx.   Schiller, H. (1969) Mass Communication and American Empire. New York: M. Kelly

xxi.   Schiller, H. (1976) Communication and Cultural domination. New York: International Arts and Science Press

xxii.   Sparks, C. (2012) Media and Cultural Imperialism Reconsidered. Chinese Journal of Communication 5 (3): 281-299.

xxiii. Sreberny-Mohammadi, A. (1997) 'The Many Cultural faces of imperialism', in Golding, P. and P. Harris (eds) 'Beyond Cultural Imperialism: Globalisation, communication and the New international order. London: Sage

xxiv.   Tomlinson, J. (1991). Cultural imperialism. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press

xxv.   Tunstall, J. (1977). The media are American: Anglo-American media in the world. London: Constable

xxvi.   Waters, M. (1995) Globalisation. London: Routledge.