

[Others]

Globalization in context: Big Macs in Beijing and other top news stories

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Key Words: globalization, homogenization, hybridization, cultural hegemony

Interdisciplinary Fields: Intercultural Communication, Globalization, Global Media

Introduction

A comparison of Yunxiang Yan's study, *McDonald's in Beijing: The Localization of Americana*, and Philippa Atkinson's critique, *Representations of conflict in the Western media: The manufacture of a barbaric periphery* provides opposing perspectives on globalization and its culturally imperialistic persuasions. Yan's commentary observes the effects of global expansion on a non-Western country which imports Western culture through a transnational corporation, while Atkinson's criticism focuses on the way in which the Western media imports news and information from non-Western countries and repackages it for consumption by a broader Western audience. In addressing each perspective, the authors portray differing theoretical and philosophical views of globalization.

Atkinson endorses the theory that globalization promotes homogenization via the editorial policies of global media. She contends that global media enterprises create generalist opinions of the Third World which perpetuate negative stereotypes to its audiences. The end result is a manufactured understanding of Third World issues that is simplistic and ill-informed. Little effort, in particular, is given to recognizing local customs and traditions or an ethnic *mélange*, which may be the pre-determiners of a conflict. Instead, sensationalistic images and storybook reporting are used to shock, titillate or entertain an ignorant audience. The knock-on effect of this bias is that when the West answers the call for help with aid or military intervention, it can inflame rather than resolve the situation.

In contrast, Yan debunks suggestions of homogeneity or a

'McDonaldization' of Chinese culture as a result of China opening its doors to a dominant global brand. He sees the strong influence of local traditions shaping the McDonald's presence in China and forcing the restaurant chain to adapt to the special needs of the Chinese consumer. His observations have encouraged him to believe global societies are marked by diversity rather than uniformity (1997, p. 75) and that transnational corporations (TNCs) like McDonald's provide a bridge to other cultures rather than plant a time bomb in the local culture.

Hybridization

Perhaps Yan's background has framed his view on what critics consider the cultural hegemony of globalization. He was born and raised in Beijing, lived for over a decade in a peasant village in northern China during the Cultural Revolution and ended up as a Harvard educated professor living and working in the U.S. (Gunde 2003). He is in some respects similar to the new generation of cultural critics Machin and Leeuwijn refer to who do not recognize themselves in the image of passive and infantilized victims of mass media manipulation (2007, p. 27). As an ethnic Chinese who has lived the American experience of McDonald's and who understands the roots of its popularity in China, Yan advances the notion that the Chinese consumer is hardly passive and that the McDonald's venture in Beijing is a manifestation of hybridization. Jan Nederveen Pieterse defines hybridization in Terry Flew's *Understanding Global Media* as:

... an antidote to the cultural differentialism of racial and nationalist doctrines because it takes as its point of departure precisely those experiences that have been banished, marginalized or taboo in cultural differentialism. (2007, p. 53)

McDonald's has been embraced as a symbol of progress in modern day China, one which casts aside remnants of the repressive Maoist political system. The 'work hard and live a simple life' dogma of the Maoists has been subsumed by a growth of consumerism and replaced with the more liberal doctrine of: 'make money and know how to spend it' (Yan 1997, p. 67). Yan illustrates this point with his anecdote about a couple in their seventies who dined at the Tiananmen Square McDonald's for their first time on the National Day of China on October 1 and to commemorate the momentous occasion they had their photo taken in front of the Golden Arches. The picture was then published in their local newspaper alongside a photo of the couple taken on October 1, 1949, the very first National Day of China and the founding of the People's Republic of China. The photos were hailed as a juxtaposition of the old China with the new. In 1949, the couple was poor,

serious and thin, saddled with the *Tu* or bitterness of the time, but now they were healthy, happy and fashionable having been delivered to a period of *Yang* or sweetness.

The Chinese have co-opted the Golden Arches of McDonald's to symbolize a very different meaning to what the people in downtown Los Angeles or downtown Tokyo for that matter hold of the fast food chain. McDonald's in Beijing creates an elegant and relaxing dining experience while serving haute cuisine (Yan 1997, p. 53). It is a place to hold a business meeting or to impress a girl on a date or to celebrate a family milestone. Dining regularly at McDonald's announces to the world you are upwardly mobile, a middle-class professional; a somebody. As Yan suggests, the locals have taken the Western notion of 'fast' out of the fast food restaurant (1997, p. 72).

In many respects, localization presents McDonald's in Beijing as more Chinese than American. Ninety-five percent of the food used in its restaurants is grown in China; at the time of the study all of its 1,400 employees were ethnic Chinese; the Chinese flag flies above each restaurant and goofy Ronald McDonald has been replaced by a maternal Aunt McDonald. But that's not to say the locals see McDonald's as a Chinese business or even wish to see it as Chinese. They are buying western style, something exotic, but a version Isaacson describes as:

Even as McDonald's gives foreign consumers the American cultural package, providing them with the transnational feeling, the McDonald's experience abroad is not Americana, but a localized version of Americana. The cultural experience takes on a new meaning, recontextualized in a form that is different from one culture to another. (1999)

Yan sums up the McDonald's experience in China succinctly when he says the Chinese are getting a mere 'taste' of Americana (1997, p. 75), portions from a platter of Western culture the locals find appetizing. He disputes the notion that the cultural tentacles of TNCs strangle a foreign culture and make no worthwhile contributions. McDonald's in Beijing has become a model for hygiene, service, quality control and management systems for local food chains as well as the government; in effect, transferring skills and technology.

By collecting anecdotal evidence from local people and conducting his own ethnographic inquiries, Yan has demonstrated it is difficult to view Chinese consumers as victims of the global expansion of McDonald's. In fact, globalization has promoted diversity as an antidote to the homogeneity of China's isolationist policies of previous regimes. The physical appearance of McDonald's in Beijing may be similar to Mickey Ds in New York or

Mac in Tokyo or Maccas in Sydney, but once you step inside that's where the similarities end. Rather than devour the local culture, localization of McDonald's has initiated an extension of local customs and traditions. In Yan's eyes, Chinese consumers have adapted and appropriated these cultural products in a positive manner, which has urged him to advise analysts to pay more attention to the responses of local people before drawing grand conclusions about the impact of transnational corporations and globalization (1997, p. 75).

Global Media

Complete neglect of local concerns in the Third World is at the center of Atkinson's criticism of the practices of the global media, which she identifies as primarily the Western media. Their focus is not on getting the story right, but on getting more viewers to increase ratings shares and attract greater advertising revenue. And, to win a Western audience raised on Hollywood reality and tabloid newspaper treatment of world events, sensationalism wins out over in-depth political analysis of events in the Third World (Atkinson 1999, p. 104). Furthermore, the onset of ubiquitous mobile communications capabilities and the growth of global communications networks have made the dispatch of reporters cost effective and have led to an erosion of dedicated reporters in local bureaus around the world. These days, when a news story breaks in a far-away destination, a reporter can fly in, quickly assess the situation, find an angle to the story, and dispatch the report in time for the evening news bulletin. Consequently, only a superficial understanding of the situation is gleaned by the reporter and passed on to audiences across the world. Oftentimes, the story is driven by storytelling parameters. There is a protagonist and an antagonist, good versus evil, with the emphasis on the good being a reflection of truth, justice and the American way (Atkinson 1999, p. 104).

Homogenization

Atkinson sees this simplification of news stories coming out of the Third World as a byproduct of Western globalization, which strips away cultural differences to create a homogenized image—Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese are Asian; an Arab is an Arab; and an African is an African. Flew explains this practice of cultural profiling as:

Globalization generates a global cultural experience where subjective identities are refined less by the relationship of individuals to geographically defined spaces and the 'imagined community' of the

nation state, and more by their relationship to complex and interconnected global media and communication flows. (2007, p. 59)

Atkinson illustrates this point first by citing the global media's tendency to portray images of people dressed in authentic costumes and participating in ceremonial dances that haven't changed for generations as daily attire and customs in Third World countries (1999, p. 105). These quaint images of primitive cultures and noble savages are designed to complement the advertising copy in paraphernalia for tourist promotions— 'a place where time stands still'. Secondly, it is the global media which determines what is news and newsworthy for international consumption. For instance, unless a Japanese person was aboard a plane that crashed in a less travelled part of the world, the story is given only cursory treatment or maybe ignored by the Japanese media even though many people were killed. How often have you heard a newsreader announce: 'One hundred and twenty people were killed in a plane crash in Colombia. There were no Japanese passengers aboard.' End of the story.

Western Perceptions of Africa

Atkinson contends that Africa is especially beset with a blanket cultural stereotype irrespective of the fact that the continent comprises 47 countries. It is painted as a dark place ravaged by war and famine, and exploited by tin pot regimes. In the eyes of the West, it is a barbaric wasteland menaced by machete wielding tribes who mutilate each other for no particular reason. Therein lies the problem of global media representations of complex ethnic and cultural realities. They are unwilling to understand the causes and reasons behind the atrocities to properly represent the images presented on news bulletins. Preference is given to a simple description of what took place to shock an audience instead of exploring the motives. This constant stream of negative images of Africans fighting each other with rudimentary weapons perpetuates perceptions of an uncivilized people.

In Bradford Hall's simple brainteaser, he exemplifies how a lack of information affects our perception (2004). Among his simple arithmetical problems, $1 + 1 = 2$ seems correct at a glance however $8 + 9 = 5$ appears to be incorrect, even though we are assured it is correct. When he provides the missing information that it is $8(\text{am}) + 9(\text{hours})$ we can immediately see that it is correct. This supports Atkinson's argument that by ignoring critical background information to the conflicts in Africa, Western audiences will never understand their origins and how, or if, they should intervene.

Complications for Aid

Atkinson suggests that the consequence of skewed images of far-away conflicts is rendering improper aid response from the West, as decision makers in aid agencies are subject to public opinion for donations and where the aid is to be directed (1999, p. 107). She cites the example of relinquishing food aid distribution to local authorities as taking sides and actually helping warring groups in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Rwanda to starve out their opposition (1999, p. 107). Global media influences groups of people in the West whose impression of foreign cultures has a marked effect on aid policy strategies for the Third World. In most cases, the perception remains along the lines of having to bail out a helpless part of the world, which never seems to get better.

Third World Media

As a counter measure, Atkinson supports people 'in the know', aid agencies such as Save the Children and Medicins Sans Frontières who are imbedded in areas affected by conflict and are taking steps to educate journalists or to impose guidelines on how a disaster is reported in order not to flame the negative imagery of the Third World (1999, p. 108). Realistically, she concedes that apolitical aid agencies do not have the power to control media reportage as was exercised by the US military during the first Gulf War in 1991, or to even push for improvements in the methods and standards of reporting (1999, p. 108). Instead, she advocates the West funnel aid into development of the media in Third World countries so that more balanced information is disseminated locally and internationally (1999, p. 108). Already, local radio has been used as a tool for peace-building under the auspices of the United Nations to encourage groups in conflict to communicate with one another. On a broader scale, however, it is difficult to imagine a tiny broadcaster in Sierra Leone tilting at a large Western media conglomerates in order to re-educate an international audience on the real issues facing the Third World. But, if an empowered local media can promote change locally and contribute to an easing of conflict, global media may take notice and present more positive images of the Third World. After all, Hollywood audiences love a happy ending.

Conclusion

It would seem that while Atkinson and Yan are commenting on differing engagements of globalization in different parts of the world, both are cham-

pioning the needs of local cultures. Atkinson presents a convincing critique on how the global media mines the Third World for news stories, controls the content then sells it to the West as something different in complete disregard for local sensibilities regarding the information and images that are pulled out from within their borders. Conversely, Yan's study on McDonald's in Beijing shows that when a product crosses transnational borders, the locals do have the power as gatekeepers of their culture to contain global expansion to their benefit. If exercised properly, global expansion by TNCs can actually bring diversity to a local culture. In comparing both articles, we are exposed to the local experience on opposing sides of the globalization divide: one which is repressed by the sameness of homogenization and the other a progressive quilt of diversity born from a process of hybridization. The debate on globalization and its impact on local cultures, especially in the Third World, will remain somewhere in between.

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