MEDIA AND SOCIETAL ACCULTURATION: CONTINUING THE DISCOURSE

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Abstract

The question as to whether or not media acculturate society has since been answered in the affirmative by a number of earlier works. Consequently, the matter has been placed beyond reasonable doubt. Nonetheless, since media acculturation is a never-ending process which presents changes in intensity and manifestation from period to period, as well as place to place, contemporary discourse in this subject matter cannot but be continuing.

This paper takes the discussion further, and tries to situate it in time and space. It places culture, society and media in context by seeking a clearer understanding of the concepts for the purpose of this particular paper. Their distinct features and interrelationships have also been dealt with. Whereas society is the macro factor, both culture and media are micros situate within the megastructure.

Using a descriptive methodology which embraces the focus group and observation techniques, it also avails a couple of community-based local and localized instances of undelayed media acculturation. The paper observes and affirms that media acculturation continues to remain a reality, whilst noting that the questions of how exactly this takes place, and to what specific measurable degree, are yet to be sufficiently and satisfactorily answered. It has succeeded in keeping the on-going discourse alive. In addition, it offers local and localized insights for further debate and scholarly activity.

Keywords: Culture; Effect, Media, Society, Acculturation.

1.0   Introduction

Let us, for a brief while, imagine the possibility of isolating three groups of persons who share similar demographic, psychographic and socio-economic profiles. The first group can only watch or listen to drama programmes on television and radio, while the second group is limited to watching and listening to news programmes. A third group is made to watch and listen to nothing but musicals and musical programmes.

If the above scenario is accomplished under strict and well controlled research conditions, then in a few months, one may not be surprised to find that the programmes watched by each of the groups would have succeeded in both affecting and influencing their media culture; and ultimately their total culture.

For example, if all the groups were returned to normal unrestricted media programming as was the case before the experiment, each group may end up sticking to drama programmes, news programmes and music programmes, or at least opt for a similar set of programmes, as the case may be. This will, in turn, change their behaviour.

To this extent, therefore, it becomes possible to see that media would have to a certain degree, acculturated the sample used in this hypothetical study. This would be so because the programmes watched and listened to during the experimentation might be seen as more ideal and, subsequently, favoured above other programme types. In due course, the programmes preferred would impact on attitude and behaviour. This acculturation may be temporary or permanent depending on other social and psychological realities. The fact that media acculturates people is not new in scholarship, though it continues to be an on-going discussion in contemporary debates. Answers such as "how exactly", and "to what specific degree", remain the major challenges.

What follows is an attempt to carry the existing discussion a little further. In doing this, the paper takes a fresh look at the whole question of the media/society/culture inter-relationships, and how media continues to change, influence and replace societal cultures.

2.0   Understanding Culture

Culture both means and represents different sets of things and concepts to different people. Some scholars have, nonetheless, dared, to articulate their understanding of the world 'culture' and to present same confidently.

Let us proceed, if we may, to see some of these and to find out if the perspectives have changed over time. Kluckhohn, C and Kelly, W.H (1945), saw culture as a compendium of all historically created designs for living, whether they be explicit or implicit, rational, irrational and non-rational. According to them, these designs exist at a given time and they serve as guides for human behaviour.

In 1952, working with Kroeber, A.L, this time, Kluckhohn attempts a broader definition of culture. They say:

> Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinct achievement of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional ... ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may on the one hand, be considered as products of action, and on the other, as conditioning elements of further action.
> Linton, l. (1945: 78 – 105)

In this latter attempt, Kluckhohn and Kroebeer (1945) have expatiated on the earlier work by the former. The earlier expression "historically created designs for living", has been elaborated upon to

include artifacts. Additionally, in this instance, culture is said to be either an end in itself or a means to an end.

Later on, Unseem, J and Unseem, R (1963) would revisit the question of culture and are content with seeing it as the attributes and values encapsulated in the learned and shared behaviour of a community of interacting human beings. They appear to have left out the issue of time and place, deliberately or inadvertently

Hofstede, E. (1984) also adopts a simple and uncomplicated approached to the culture question. He is convinced that culture is merely the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one category of people from another. The attempt here may appear oversimplified as culture is not just domiciled in the mind, but evident in everyday life and living. Here also, the factors of time and place are not considered crucial.

Damen, L (1987), would aver thus:

> *Culture: learned and shared human patterns for models of living; day-to-day living patterns. These patterns and models pervade all aspects of human social interaction. Culture is mankind's primary adaptive mechanism.*

Damen, L (1987:53)

Undoubtedly, Damen has sought to provide answers to certain questions raised by Hofstede (1984), especially as it concerns culture and daily living. He also goes ahead to introduce fresh angles such as modeling and adaptation. Ben Elugbe (1991) succinctly presents culture as 'the universe of values and artifacts in which a given people lives'. Though brief, this attempt appears to capture the essentials; such as values, artifacts, a given people, and living. Since a 'given people' will live in a "given time". This perspective seems to address the question of time as well.

All the above attempts appear linked together by certain critical variables. These are firstly that culture is for the civilized human kind and, therefore, not for animals secondly, culture consists in an integrated pattern of human knowledge, beliefs and behaviour. Thirdly, there is an emphasis in the sharing of attitudes, values and practices.

Stuart Hall (1983), tried to raise the discussion on culture by insisting that language remains the most crucial and significant aspect of culture. He states that language embodies and sustains culture in a dynamic and developmental way. He uses the Meaning Theory and the Signification Theory of language to drive home his views. In the former, says he, language has a limited and less dynamic function as well as character. Within every cultural and linguistic system, individuals grow up believing that certain words and sounds have specific meanings which are immutable. This is the Meanings Theory at play. However, the Signification Theory, he goes on, leads us to "think of language as enabling things to mean' rather than being the meaning in itself.

Although Stuart Hall has lifted the discussion on culture to a higher pedestal, there is cause to worry. Being a Marxist, Hall approaches the subject biased as *initio*. Additionally, his tracing of culture to Karl Marx instead of Cicero leaves much to be desired, and needs to be re-examined. Furthermore, he falls hook, line and sinker to the temptation to over-politicise the subject matter.

His treatment of the Theory of Dominance borrows essentially from the earlier works of Raymond Williams (1973). The theory rests on the pillar that in any social system, there will arise one culture which clearly dominates all the others. Being so powerful, this particular culture will command attention and obedience from the people, as it continues to entrench and establish itself over time. Hall is of the opinion that the educational system stands out as one of the most dominant cultures of the modern era.

This theory is more recently referred to as the theory of Dominant Social Paradigm; and today, the economic system is believed to be the most dominant element of social praxis.

3.0   Culture, Society and Media

In a situation (as it usually is) where culture, media and society are interwoven and often interdependent, it becomes necessary to distinguish between the three concepts. This will, without doubt, enhance an understanding of their inter-relationships and mutual influences which shall be discussed subsequently.

As has already been demonstrated, culture remains the cumulative construct of patterns of human behaviour, knowledge and creativity. This is clearly identifiable with a people, a place and a time. In tangible terms, culture consists of, and embraces works of art, customs, beliefs, institutions, ceremonies, language, literature, ideas , religion, taboos, techniques, rituals, rites, festivals, traditions … the list is almost endless.

Williams (1983), sums up the scope and features of culture as follows:

1. A general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development.
2. A particular way of life, whether of a people, period or group
3. The works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity.

These classifications are realistic and cover very vast areas of human thought and activity. Culture, however, is dynamic; and may prove challenging to capture in one grasp.

Society on the other hand presents a wider framework of human existence, subsistence and development. It is the summation of relations and relationships between one individual and another, as well as between the individual and the state or community. According to Flemming Funch (1995):

> *Society consists of what people do because of necessity, because they HAVE to. Society is a finite game with certain rules that have to be adhered to. Society will perpetuate rules from the past and will resist any changing of the rules. Society has a lot to do with achieving and maintaining power… Flemming Funch (1995: 1-5)*

We shall return to the above quoted text soon, we shall reflect on same, when attempting to distinguish between culture and society.

In a holistic sense, media comprises and represent all channels of information and communication. These serve to share ideas, knowledge, expressions, experiences, values as well as culture.

Media channels span the ancient (including drums, kites, smoke and semaphores), to the old media types as we find in books, newspapers, magazines, television, radio, film and outdoor. In recent times, the so-called new or emerging media have registered prominence and sometimes, preference. The new or emerging media channels are made up digital and computer-driven modes such as e-mails, websites, blogs, feeds, podcasts, on-line software publishing, and the mobile phones, (particularly its short message services). While Suein Whang (1999) as well as Flew, Carely and Cain Cross (2010) have posited that new media play the single most significant role in globalization, Howard Reigngold (2009) warns that the virtual communities created by new and emerging media may alienate people from reality. This situation could bring about adverse developments and consequences.

As observed earlier, culture, society and media are intertwined and inter-mingled. However, there are subtle, but critical demarcations. Society is the umbrella, within which culture and the media find responsibility. Going back to the text quoted in Flemming Funch (1995), society is finite. The law defines the limits, responsibilities and privileges of citizens, indigenes and residents. Culture on the other hand, is infinite, allowing room for all types of expressions and representations. Society defines its territory and defends it jealously, while culture seeks freedom beyond boundaries and borders. Just like society, media is also controlled by people and by law. The owners of a media outfit determine its vision, mission and techniques, while the government regulatory agencies have the say when it comes

to reach, conduct and content. This is, of course inspite of the fact that many media concerns exaggerate their freedom to function without bias or restraint.

Let us consider a couple of arguments from Flemming Funch (1995) again. On society, he debates along these lines:

> *In society, deviation is considered anti-social and carries various sanctions and punishments. This is because it is in the vested interest of society that rules don't change. If somebody comes along and changes the rules, or causes some rules to be dropped, then past winners might no longer command the same power based on their former winning status. For example, Communist Party officials in Russia.*
> Flemming Funch (1995:3)

His postulation here is both passionate and convincing. The fact that every society tries to maintain the status quo is well-known. However, by using Russia as his example, he has foreclosed on realities in the democratic world like U.S.A and U.K where the rules can be changed or dropped if the people's representatives are strongly convinced.

On culture, Flemming Funch believes it is a force of change in itself. Culture, says he, is not encumbered by resistance, but expresses itself freely. In the process, he continues, cultures bring about change in many other facets of human activity. Deviancy, he maintains, is the very essence of culture because new, different and fresh ideas are always welcome. Unlike society, there are no laws, no bounds and no limits when it comes to culture.

The role of creating for awareness of societal policies principles and governance is left to the media. So also are the media responsible for the understanding and appreciation of culture. One can see, therefore, that culture, society and media are truly interdependent. This is not to say that they do not differ is certain fundamental aspects, as already pointed out.

4.0 Media and Acculturation

Whether ancient, old or new and emerging, media as a force, continues to acculturate the members of the society in simple and complex dimensions. For instance, the very fact that the individual chooses to use or pay attention to a particular channel of media means that that individual is opting for something other than what used to be. This is acculturation in its most basic format.

4.1 Political Acculturation

One of the roles of the media, especially the mass media is to keep the people informed of the true political picture of the society. This is to say that it is expected of media to mirror political reality by presenting the collective activity and struggle of the people to govern themselves through elected representatives. If media succeeds in doing this well, and this information filters across boarders (as is the case in today's media experience), the citizens of other countries receive the signals. They then set about comparing what they receive in foreign media to local political realities. If they find the foreign political, format more appropriate, they then begin to question and , later, resist the political realities of their on nations. This could ultimately lead to resentment, protests, strife and change in government. It is due to this fact of media's power of political acculturation that countries with "iron-fisted' regimes such as China, North Korea and Russia have always blocked media signals from the free world. Thus, they nip political acculturation in the bud.

4.2 Economic Acculturation

The economic activity in any nation is the primary and most significant attempt at sustenance, development and growth. Economic information is, therefore, crucial, thus media covers and relays

economic information relentlessly and vigorously. Such economic activities as manufacturing/distribution, commerce, exchange rates, banking and financing, commodities, and stock market operations are captured, analysed and relayed to the citizens of a country through the mass media as well as other social media. Invariably, this information also goes international, making it possible for people in other countries to receive the signals or printed matter so released.

Government officials, professionals, private businessmen and ordinary citizens discern such economic information. Some then see it as a stimulant for revisiting the economic status quo in those countries. Ultimately, changes revisions, amendments or total disbandment of existing economic concepts, principles, policies and operations come about as result of the availability of preferred options made possible by media. When the economic culture of the individual or a people is so influenced, media has succeeded as far as economic acculturation goes.

4.3   Social Acculturation

Using film as an aspect of media, Theodore Ardono and Max Horkheneimer (1983) pontificate as follows:

> *Real life is becoming indistinguishable from the movies. The sound film,*
> *far surpassing the theatre of illusion, leaves no room for imagination or*
> *reflection on the part of the audience ... hence the film forces its victims*
> *to equate it with reality.*
>
> Curran, Gurevitch and Wollacott (1983:353-354).

Here, Ardono and Horkheimer cannot hide their frustration over the alarming rate at which film influences and changes audience attitudes and dispositions, thereby successfully and easily acculturating movie-goers. They are brazenly judgemental in their work, and the thin line between objectivity and subjectivity is completely blurred in this instance.

Lanrele Bamidele (1999) provides a fairly-detailed illustration of media acculturation. This time though unlike Ardono and Horkheimer, he chooses another media element – television. He posits that:

> *Television is believed to be capable of accumulating people with*
> *manners other than their native ones, thus exposing other ways of*
> *shaking hands, of settling down, of wearing clothes, of reacting to*
> *strangers – hospitality, of casting votes and of conversations ....*
>
> Lanrele Bamidele, in Egbe Ifie (ed) (1999:338).

The above views clearly indicate the extent to which media (using television as the example) can and does change or replace existing social behaviour and mannerisms. Thus, once again the media present a formidable force in the acculturation of people at the social level.

5.0   Theoretical Insight

In the Cultivation Analysis Theory, George Gerbner (1980:92) attempts to examine the link between the programmes watched by viewers in juxtaposition with their perception of reality. According to O'Guinn et al (1997:42), the more people watch television, the more they are exposed to its distortions of reality, and the more they view the real world as the same with that portrayed on television.

The cultivation analysis theory finds support in a number of other alternative explanations. For example the daily experiences of people help to form their personal outlook on life. If television-viewing forms a significant fraction of these experiences, then it is bound to influence the individual's personal interpretation of life.

George Gerbner's cultivation analysis theory insists that television possesses the power to shape people's perception of life. This it does by affecting attitudes and influencing ways of thinking. By

monitoring viewership during day time and prime-time dramatic television programmes, Gerbner was able to confirm that cultivation takes place. Over time, viewers showed correlation with respect to themes, fashion, life-styles and character.

On "mainstreaming" Gerbner found that people exposed to regular and extended television viewing, displayed more mainstream and homogenous views and attitudes that led to a convergence with what was represented in television shows. On "resonance" Gerbner found out that the more people watch television and become cultivated, the stronger that "new culture" gets. In other words, a viewer whose has been "mainstreamed" by continuous television – viewing, has those perceptions, attitudes and ideas strengthened through continuing subsequent exposures. All these come together to explain and reinforce Gerbner's Cultivation Analysis Theory to explain, thus pointing out the numerous ways that television (the strongest media arm), shapes, influences and strengthens the viewer's perception of societal life and reality. Placed on the weighing scale, the Cultivation Analysis Theory presents two sides. It is a brilliant combination of macro and micro-level theories. Additionally, it offers an acceptable and detailed explanation of the unique role played by the television medium. Through this theory, Gerbner has succeeded in applying empirical study to hitherto widely held assumptions of the humanistic type. This theory also redefines effect beyond merely observable behavioural change; whilst providing a strong basis for positive social change.

On the other hand, George Gerbner's Cultivation Analysis Theory tends to focus on heavy users of television, to the exclusion of the light users of the medium. The theory also assumes homogeneity of the content of television programmes. As a result, the theory is difficult to apply beyond television, and on audiences that are less deeply-involved.

6.0   Two Local Scenarios

A couple of focus group experiments were conducted by this author. These are local and localized, and do not represent any profound activity or claim. However, they offer very modest, but quite interesting insights.

Focus group A

With the permission of their parents and guardians, 15 adolescent girls aged 14 – 19 from a "downtown" vicinity were assembled. These were all 'local girls' who dropped out of school, or could not go beyond the primary school. They had never watched foreign films, but were familiar with a good number of local, vernacular movies from Nollywood.

The group was made to watch a particularly 'revealing' episode of *Hellcats* on the DSTV Series Channel. After the experience, the girls were suddenly 'transformed' into city girls. They began to use some of the terms and expressions from the film they had just watched. They were emboldened, and said that skimpy skirts and singlet-type tops made girls look confident and attractive. They also said that they saw nothing wrong in trying these garments themselves. If this is not social acculturation, what is?

Focus Group B

Twenty-two boys and girls from a 'slum vicinity' aged 9 – 16 were made to watch the popular thriller film – *Commando* for the very first time. The film starred Arnold Swazeneggar as a super-human hero who shoots, bombs and slashes his way through impossible fortresses to rescue his daughter who was held hostage by criminals.

After the viewing experience, the boys were observed to have subsequently picked up sticks and improvised 'guns' and gone to 'war' from time to time, as they mimicked Arnold Swezeneggar in shadow fights against are another. Also, the boys were observed to sneak up behind the girls and mimicked the sounds of gunshots and exploding grenades. The girls instinctively dived for cover

whenever the boys startled them in this manner. The boys appeared to be quick and happy to adopt the new culture of aggressiveness, much unlike the girls.

7.0   Final Remarks

It is obvious and evident that media in all its presentations – film, radio, television, books, newspapers, magazines, outdoor, or social media, represent formidable channels for acculturation. Whether they are described as ancient, old or new and emerging does not prevent this reality; as the political economic and social life of society remains prone to media acculturation.

There is, therefore, the dire need to insist that media remain relevant and responsible in content and presentation. This way, media acculturation when it does occur will not leave any adverse effects in its wake. Media owners, practitioners as well as governments owe it a duty to humanity to ensure that media acculturation brings about positive rather than negative effects, affectation, and aftermath.

Just before rounding off this paper, it is needful to remark that political, economic and social acculturation is not limited to cross – border cases. Within a country, worthy and exemplary media information will cause some degree if acculturation, as leader and indigenes of one country or state try to emulate the leaders and indigenes of another state. This change in the way of doing things, occasioned, by the activities and behaviour of those from neighbouring states or countries as relayed by the media is a change in culture. When this becomes the case, then acculturation has been effected via the tremendous power of the media.

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