

Alexandros Baltzis*

School of Journalism and Mass Media Studies

Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (Greece)

Social Networks and Production of Culture in a Global Environment

Globalization and cultural production

In a recent review of the literature on globalization and culture, Lizardo (2008) describes two main and competing perspectives: the culture or media imperialism thesis – suggesting macro-level approaches and the empirically oriented perspective suggesting micro-level approaches and analysis of everyday processes, i.e. of the realities of the production, dissemination and consumption of cultural goods and services. The former emphasizes on macro-structural inequalities, on patterns of ownership, and on infrastructural and technological divides across dominant and dominated regions of the world. The latter focuses on detailed empirics and considers the importance of context and of subjective discourses making a significant contribution in understanding the localized appropriation of globally distributed symbolic goods.

This review suggests that while the media/culture imperialism thesis focuses on systemic and global interconnections, it has been confuted both theoretically and empirically. Indeed, as can be seen by analysis concerning the globalization of communication (e.g. Thompson, 1995), the media/cultural imperialism thesis overemphasizes the position of the USA in the network of global cultural flows, failing to consider:

- a) That there is not a unified, unique, and homogeneous American culture.
- b) The complex and often hybrid nature of all local cultures and the long process of their formation.
- c) The localized appropriation of globally distributed symbolic goods.

Reception studies (e.g. Gillespie, 1995; Liebes & Katz, 1993) have shown that the cultural imperialism thesis could hardly be supported by empirical evidence, especially when it comes to the consumption and appropriation of cultural goods. Besides, empirical evidence

* *Contact information:* Dr Alexandros Baltzis, School of Journalism and Mass Media Studies, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, 46 Egnatia St., Thessaloniki, GR-54625, Greece. Email: baltzis@jour.auth.gr. Homepage: <http://users.auth.gr/baltzis/en/>.

shows that as the global economy became increasingly multipolar, the USA lost its postwar dominant position (e.g. Thompson, 1995: 167-169; Lizardo, 2008).

The second perspective, according to Lizardo (2008), although important for providing empirical data on the local contexts of reception and appropriation of cultural goods and being closer to the local reality, it lacks a general theoretical framework and fails to identify the complex interactions between the local and the global. As a result, it leaves no other macro-structural perspective, but “a plethora of disconnected observations of localized practices and consumption styles across the global arena” (Lizardo, 2008).

Nevertheless, the juxtaposition between the macro- and micro-perspective – that has a long tradition in sociology – might be considered somewhat artificial and irrelevant in view of other approaches that analyze the reality of local cultural production and consumption on the micro-level, accounting at the same time for the international and global environment, and within a macro-structural theoretical framework (cf. Wallis & Malm, 1984; Wittel, 2001; Baumol, 2006). For example, Wallis and Malm (1984: 297-302) suggest that imperialism is one pattern of cultural interaction among several others. Some twenty four years ago they identified several patterns of interaction among different cultures in the global environment, in their research on the recording industry in the periphery of the industrialized world. They also provided examples of the suggested patterns, taken from very different local circumstances around the world. Their approach is based on empirical evidence from the local reality of the production, dissemination and consumption of music considering the international and global influences and cultural interactions of the cases they analyzed.

The patterns they identified may well be applied for any cultural good as they are not valid exclusively for the recordings. It is in this broader sense that they will be briefly described here. It may even be suggested that further study is needed to understand under what conditions globalization favors or inhibits one or another pattern of cultural interaction. It is also interesting to note that the patterns they describe are not typical to modernity. Thus, according to this view, by *cultural exchange*, “two or more cultures or sub-cultures interact and exchange features under fairly loose forms and more or less on equal terms” (Wallis & Malm, 1984). In the case of *cultural dominance*, a powerful society or group in the society is imposed on another in more or less formally organized and institutionalized ways (e.g. teaching certain cultural expressions in schools and neglecting or suppressing either traditional or popular forms). A third pattern – according to this approach – is *cultural imperialism*, whereby money and/or cultural resources (like gifted artists, music, unique traditional artifacts or even pieces of the cultural heritage, etc.) are removed in a dominating culture area. In

contemporary world, it is not uncommon for these resources to be returned to the dominated area or society, packaged and ready to be sold to the local public. Finally, Wallis & Malm (1984) identify *transculturation* as a process whereby the culture created by the global multi-media conglomerates (i.e. not only music, but any type of cultural expression) can interact with virtually all other cultures and sub-cultures in the world, due to the worldwide penetration of the mass media, the communication convergence and the internet. Cultural and artistic goods in the countries of the periphery include, elaborate and assimilate elements from transcultural forms, but an increasing number of local and national cultures also contribute with their own features to transcultural forms.

Cultural imperialism, then, is identified as one of the forms or patterns of interaction between different societies (or groups in a society). This is an approach quite different compared to the one that is usually taken into account in various discourses about globalization. The specific features and the peculiarities of the cultural production and consumption on a local level (e.g. in the local recording or publishing industry) suggest that these patterns of interaction perhaps should be considered as ideal types rather than pure and standard types found in reality. In other words, on the one hand it is not easy to argue that the whole fabric of cultural relations among the different parts of the world is dominated exclusively by one or another pattern while on the other this does not mean that there are no asymmetries, inequality, and cruel exploitation among different societies. These complexities seem to be further enhanced due to several features of globalization and processes related with it.

For obvious reasons, the details of the different discourses in which globalization appears, as well as the various approaches documented in the literature, will not be presented here. A *most general definition*, for example by Giddens (1991: 63-65), will be mentioned, however. According to this, globalization is conceived of as the situation in which changes and developments in some part of the world may have – through a complex network of relations and influences – a strong impact on other, very remote parts, countries, societies, neighborhoods, and of course individuals. This is valid also for the culture and the arts. DiMaggio (1987), as well as others, quite right argue that as interconnectedness, mobility and the division of labor *increases*, the attachment to spatially fixed communities (also to their norms and values) declines and transcultural interconnections emerge, while “*symbols (goods or tastes) become increasingly important to the organization of social life*” and the functions of the mass media and the field of the cultural production in the everyday lifeworld of the consumers, their importance, meaning and uses, are reconfigured (Lizardo, 2008).

Because it is unlikely changes in the consumption of symbols to leave unaffected their

production, it should be added that cultural production is reconfigured as well. Parenthetically, the separation of production from consumption has been a problem for a considerable time, as it led to the development of two research directions that could hardly be accommodated in a common theoretical framework, at least in sociology (DiMaggio, 1987; Lizardo, 2008).

Since globalization, as a process of increasing interconnections leads to de-localization (DiMaggio, 1987; Giddens, 1991; Lizardo, 2008) and gives rise to networks that displace communities, i.e. to *network sociality* (cf. Wittel, 2001), perspectives considering the complex social networks as the environment whereby both cultural production and consumption take place, seem to become more relevant. For example, the social network markets approach (Potts et al., 2008), developed during the last years, might explain some new trends from both the production and the consumption perspective. From the *consumption* point of view, such a trend is the decreasing relation of the embedded cultural capital, the tastes and preferences with the typical socioeconomic features that define status and positions in systems of social hierarchy. Another trend, from the *production* point of view, is the detachment of high concentration in cultural markets (global or local) from homogenization and low levels of diversity (e.g. Burnett, 1992; Lopes, 1992; Christianen, 1995).

Anyway, this approach places the production (and the consumption) of culture in the context of the *new economy*, i.e. in a system where exchange is prioritized over production, and services over products. In a globalized world, institutionalized or informal networks become more important than bureaucracies as it is within them that information, knowledge, capital, labour, clients, and products are circulated (Wittel, 2001). And it is in this new, service-based economy (of information, of knowledge, of symbols) where connections are also monetized (Wittel, 2001), producing value out of thin air. It remains to be seen in these circumstances how the patterns of cultural interactions are changed.

In the literature on globalization several features are outlined and analyzed and despite the different approaches and views about the nature of this process, there seems to be a consensus on some of them (Kotzias, 2000): globalization intensifies and/or creates new, complex networks of relations and interactions between societies (close and distant alike); new modes of production are introduced; new technologies acquire specific importance; the communications and transport are changed; the space-time relation has changed; new global ecological problems appeared; the functions of the national state are modified. These changes, which are also features of the globalization process, have several consequences for the culture and the arts, as well as for the everyday lifeworld of millions of people, including the artists.

Some of the consequences for the culture and the arts include the appearance of alternative modes for the production of symbolic forms and their dissemination, the development of digital technologies, the convergence of different forms of communication, the collapse of the barriers in cultural exchange, the opening of cultural markets, the increasing importance of the global multimedia conglomerates, as they strive for domination in the global markets and control over the new channels for the dissemination of cultural goods (like the internet), and the proliferation of social networks in the cultural field. Purpose of this very brief sketch, of course, is not to explain in details each and every feature and development, but to support the argument that globalization is a complex social phenomenon that brought about several ambivalent and contradictory changes in the fields of the arts and the production of culture. For example, while the development of the digital technologies and the convergence between different forms of communication enhanced the reach of the global multimedia conglomerates, these same developments – on the other hand – created the opportunities for non-mainstream artistic forms and minority voices to reach broader audiences.

One important development which makes up the process of globalization is the growth of the global multimedia conglomerates which moved on a higher level in parallel with the interpenetration of consumer electronics and entertainment corporations (cf. Townley, Beech & McKinlay, 2009). As markets are expanding, so is uncertainty increasing – a permanent structural problem of the cultural industries. To cope with increasing uncertainties, strategic alliances, mergers and acquisitions leave on the global field of cultural production less and less players (cf. Townley, Beech & McKinlay, 2009). In these circumstances, as the barriers for cultural exchanges are collapsing and the distribution channels become less controllable, the libraries and catalogues of content (music, film, etc.) become of vital importance for the global multimedia conglomerates – a development that created at least the organizational infrastructure for convergence between different fields in the production of culture.

In other words, in the field of the cultural production also – as in other fields in the developed countries – there is an evolution from the industrial a manufacturing-based production of goods into an asset-based production of services and ever expanding revenue streams. As the circulation of symbolic goods becomes more important than their production, the most important stage of the whole process is not the publishing of a new book, or a new music CD, but the publication of a story in a form of a book and a film with proper music (not necessarily in that order) which then may be used in advertisements and sold as a soundtrack, while a series of tie-in lifestyle products will be produced on the basis of the film. In the field of culture, this is also part of what is called “new economy”, along with the rise of the network markets. Be-

cause circulation becomes more important than production for the global multimedia conglomerates, small firms “with short life cycles due to intense competition, carry out the so called ‘Research & Development’ activities” (Townley, Beech & McKinlay, 2009).

All these developments indicate that globalization affects in both directions – positive and negative – all six facets or more precisely *constrains*, of the production of culture, identified by Richard Peterson (Peterson & Anand, 2004): the technology, the regulations and the law, the industry structure, the organization structure, the professional careers, and the markets, i.e. the audiences as seen by the industries. However, globalization does not mean only expansion of the global multimedia conglomerates. It means also development of formal or informal networks of niche interests, of minority voices, and of networks for the production and dissemination of non-mainstream cultural and artistic forms. From this point of view, globalization is also the introduction of forms of art and new modes of authorship, production, distribution and reception, which – under certain circumstances – may lead to a radical reconfiguration of the production and consumption of culture.

Cultural production and social networks

Social networks have always been important for the production, dissemination and reception of artistic goods. For example, Howard Becker in the '70s and later in his “*Art Worlds*” (1984) pointed out that “all the arts we know about involve elaborate networks” and “that art is social in the sense that it is created by networks of people acting together” (Becker, 1974). Pierre Bourdieu, in his *Distinction* (1984: 151-152) argues that “in the newest sectors of cultural and artistic production... ..recruitment is generally done by co-option, that is, on the basis of ‘connections’ and affinities of habitus, rather than formal qualifications”. According to this point of view, specific qualifications (like a diploma in photography or filmmaking) in these occupations are a genuine ticket of entry only for those who are able to supplement the official qualifications with “real – social – qualifications”. Social capital, then, has been very important in the field of the cultural and artistic production.

More recently, Frank and Carlisle-Frank (2009) show in their review, that there is extensive research in this direction, as they point out that Coser, Kadushin and Powell describe the dependence of how book distribution and book promotion on informal networks, that Ruth Towse found a wide-ranging informal network in the market for classical singers, where “jobs are obtained through word of mouth rather than by advertisement”. They also indicate that Freakley and Neelands found networks and relationships to be important in the field of dance

and that Dolfsma describes the importance of relationships between disc jockeys and music producers (Frank & Carlisle-Frank, 2009). Frank and Carlisle-Frank (2009), however, in their study on social networks in popular arts, argue that “in addition to reducing diversity and creating inherent inequalities, excessive reliance on networks can lead to higher agency costs and lower product quality”.

A point that can be made here is that the functions of the social networks in the field of cultural production, have been studied well before the advent of the internet and the rise of globalization as a complex social phenomenon. These functions include the selection of talent, the control and the management of innovation and creativity, and the reproduction of social hierarchies within the field of the cultural production. However, the developments in this field, brought about by globalization, call for new research and from different points of view.

In any case, the explosion of user-created content on the web and of the online social networks during the last years does not mean that every user has become a producer or that every user consumes mostly amateur material (Manovich, 2009). There is no doubt, that the 300,000,000 users of MySpace, the 25% of the Korean population that uses Cyworld, the 14,000,0000 photos uploaded on the Facebook every day, and the 65,000 videos uploaded daily on YouTube, are significant numbers. These show the growth of the networked population. However, Lev Manovich (2009) is right in his point that there is no reason to equate these trends with *alternative* and *progressive* in the production of culture. Only 0.5% to 1.5% of users of the most popular sites contribute their own content and most of the user-generated content “either follows the templates and conventions set up by the professional entertainment industry or directly reuses professionally produced content” (Manovich, 2009). Besides, most of the innovative projects that appear on the web are done by professionals.

Considering all this, Manovich (2009) raises the question whether the identities of people and their imagination are now “more firmly colonized by commercial media”, although these developments provided artists as well with new creative tools. The ambivalent consequences of globalization appear also here, because on the other hand, “in most cultural fields every professional or company, regardless of its size and physical location, has a web presence and posts new work online” (Manovich, 2009).

Identifying the social networks in the production of culture with the online social networks does not seem to describe the whole picture. Because innovation and artistic production that appears online originates from the offline art worlds, the offline social networks in the production of culture remain important. From this point of view, the analysis of the cultural production and consumption perhaps needs to be modified taking into account these recent

developments in a more realistic way.

Townley, Beech and McKinlay (2009) point out that in the theory of the organizations:

“...networks are contrasted with hierarchies and markets... ...networks are assumed to have virtues that are systemically eliminated, or at least impossible to sustain, by hierarchy. Networks are open, dynamic, adaptive, and their associative nature treats expertise as an individual and shared asset. Where hierarchy relies on command and control, the organizing imperatives of networks are trust, mutuality and reciprocity. The disciplinary costs of networks are minimal or highly diffused; rewards and sanctions more subtle, continuously imposed by network members. Individual competence, behavior and motivations are constantly displayed, monitored and evaluated by peers rather than scrutinized through market mechanisms or the rule-based hierarchies. The essentially voluntary, associational nature of networks generate higher levels of commitment, are open and inclusive, providing psychological rewards beyond hierarchical organization.”

In this perspective, a possible direction for studying the social networks in these conditions is “to develop a more elaborate understanding” considering the different forms of capital (intellectual, social, symbolic, and economic), as Townley, Beech and McKinlay (2009) also point out, but in all facets of the cultural production. The social network markets approach mentioned above, might also contribute, because it gives primacy to *communicative* actions rather than to connectivity alone. This is because it takes into account that consumers of cultural and artistic goods rely mostly on the decisions of others in making their choices and act to a lesser degree like the autonomous rational agents of neoclassical theory (Potts et al., 2008). According to this approach, also, the creative industries are the set of economic activities that involve the creation and maintenance of social networks and the generation of value through production and consumption of network-valorized choices in these networks (Potts et al., 2008). The point made here, is that perhaps it is necessary to “blend” sociological analysis with a socio-economic approach.

Conclusion

Further research on the social networks in the field of the cultural production and consumption is needed, that will not focus exclusively on the internet, no matter how good its potential may be. This is because offline social networks are – and probably will remain – important, and the context in which the online social networks are embedded should be taken into account. This way, one may avoid the illusions and great expectations of the Internet Nir-

vana Theory, according which the cultural intermediaries that dominate the market will be eliminated by the development of social networks, user-created content and a virtual public sphere where artists and audiences will interact without mediation. This is important to produce realistic suggestions for the support and development of a further democratization of the cultural production.

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