

Children, Media and Globalisation: A Research Agenda for Africa

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If globalisation is a process of accelerated flow of media content, to most African cultures and children it is also a process of accelerated exclusion. While African cultures are marginalized by the streamlined information and entertainment menu served by global media conglomerates, the bulk of African children are only spared by the fact that global availability is not synonymous with global affordability. Given Africa's marginality in global economics, given the limited resources of most African states, and given the enormous costs of cultural production and dissemination, even elite African children who can afford access to national and global media content, are often reduced to consuming media burgers conceived and produced without their particular interests in mind, as even their national media are forced to rely on cheap imports as alternatives to local production. The children are often victims of second-hand consumption even as first-hand consumers, since the media content at their disposal seldom reflects their immediate cultural contexts. They may have qualified as global consumer citizens thanks to the purchasing power of their parents and guardians, but culturally, they remain consumer subjects, and must attune their palates to the dictates of undomesticated foreign media dishes. This is generally the case, despite national and regional broadcasting charters that stress the need for African children to 'hear, see and express themselves, their culture, their language and their life experiences, through the electronic media which affirm their sense of self, community and place' (cf. SADC 1996).

Given their tender ages and given the dearth of counter powerful local messages at their disposal in national media, African children are more vulnerable to uncritical internalisation of the explicit or implicit ideological content of the media they consume. The fact of the media not being about or for African children as primary consumers is in a way an implicit statement on the dispensability of their local cultures. An invitation for them to join the consumer bandwagon on its own terms can only entail an invitation to self-denial, self-evacuation, or self-devaluation, and the glorification of the creativities and mediocrities

of others. But whether or not these invitations are actually taken up by African children, and in what ways, is often more assumed than proven, even when research has been done. The tendency in research has been to mistake labels for contents and exposure for effects, as if the African children involved have lost all agency to the dominant structures of capital. While such assumptions may be commonsensical and understandable, only meaningful research can draw attention away from grand-narratives that either tend to celebrate the illusion of unregulated flows or the victimhood of those at the margins of global abundance. If our modest research in a related area among Cameroonian youths is anything to go by, the reality may be more nuanced than usually depicted. Not only do young Cameroonians appropriate media representations never intended for them; they use these representations to construct fantasies about whiteness, which in turn serve as a standard of measure in encounters with actual whites. The media reinforce ideas of western superiority and allure, thus buttressing fantasies that deny the reality of actual experiences with the modest circumstance of the white tourists, volunteers, researchers or clergy often encountered by the Cameroonian youth. Sometimes the latter would rather believe that the white he or she knows was pretending to be poor, than deny media representations of white opulence. Daily contact with whites can leave young Cameroonians baffled and disappointed. Real experience is dismissed in favour of mass-mediated fantasies. And any white who is reluctant or unable to live up to this representation has no business to be white (cf. Nyamnjoh and Page 2002).

Media globalisation

This article seeks to draw attention to the sort of research questions that could meaningfully challenge simplistic assumptions about children, media and globalisation in Africa. But first an understanding of changing mediascapes under globalisation is in order. Propelled by 'the incessant pursuit of profit', global media entrepreneurs appear to settle for little short of the total 'relaxation or elimination of barriers to commercial exploitation of media and to concentrated media ownership' (McChesney 2001:1-4).

This craving for profit has negatively affected the traditional emphasis on public service media that guarantee cultural pluralism and diversity regardless of the market. In Europe since the 1990s, market-driven ideas of public service broadcasting serving the interests and preferences of individuals as individuals have become more popular (Syvertsen 1999; Søndergaard 1999). Seen as individual consumers, even children are treated as autonomous agents glued together by a selfless market slaving away for their cultural freedom, development and enrichment as global citizens with power to arm-twist parents and guardians to service their consumer instincts. This development blurs the traditional distinction between public service and commercial broadcasting, and passes for public service even the greedy and aggressive pursuit of profit.

The shift makes a virtue of consumption, presenting it as the ultimate symbol of civilisation. If consumption is the supreme indicator of cultural sophistication, then the media could dispense of traditional ideas of quality educational programmes, and still be of tremendous service to children as budding consumers. Hence the sacrifice of conventional educational content in favour of a plethora of mass and often cheaply produced alternatives, aimed more at forging consumer zombies than developing rounded and critical citizens of the children they target. The profit motive dictates that various media content are conceived, produced, and disseminated with the primary objective of maintaining economic, political and cultural privileges and advantage, while thwarting any attempt at the social shaping or domestication of media technologies and content that could abolish or overturn such privileges. It is precisely in this way, Schiller (1977) perceptively argued way back in the 1970s, that America used the rhetoric of 'unregulated flows', as a 'highly effective ideological club' to promote its political, economic and cultural values by whipping 'alternative forms of social organization' into a ridiculous defensiveness.

However, far from leading to a presupposed convergence, globalisation appears to accelerate the production of differences, heterogeneities or boundaries through the structures of inequalities inherent in global capitalism (cf. Chomsky 1999; Comaroff and Comaroff 2000). As Bill Clinton has very aptly pointed out, the 'abject poverty' which is part of our globalised world, 'accelerates conflict', 'creates recruits for terrorists and those who incite ethnic and religious hatred', and 'fuels a violent rejection of the economic and social order on which our future depends' (Clinton 2001). Globalisation has only intensified age-old boundaries and divisions. 'It looks as if, in a world characterised by flows, a great deal of energy is devoted to controlling and freezing them: grasping the flux often actually entails a politics of 'fixing' – a politics which is, above all, operative in struggles about the construction of identities' (Geschiere and Meyer 1998:605).

Not only is the traditional idea of public service media fast becoming outmoded; calls for some ground rules to protect cultural diversity have simply been greeted with the rhetoric of free flows at worst or with token concessions to 'cultural minorities' at best. What is more, the corporate media are in a particularly powerful position, given their dual role as players and umpires (McChesney 2001:3-9). They 'enjoy an enormous leeway to negotiate and protect interests from the vantage of prior monopoly positions', and 'do not have to bend over backwards to strike deals' (Thomas and Lee 1998:2). Given their freehand and reluctance to invest in diversity, the global corporate media have tended to downplay creativity and variety in children's media in the interest of standardisation, routinisation and profitability.

With such premium on profit, the global media corporations that target children are hardly about the 'unregulated flows' of the world's cultural diversity. Relegated to the margins even in African countries, are what Fayemi (1999) has termed 'voices from within'. That is, 'the lives of ordinary children and their everyday life: how they are nurtured and reared, the games they play, their

adolescence and growing up years, their education and their role within their families and immediate environment’.

As Soyinka puts it, African children are thus lured and/or coerced ‘to develop an incurable dependency syndrome and consume themselves to death’, as feeding the global consumerist machine becomes a way of life for them. Caught in the global web of consumerism, ‘the self-respecting youth dare not be seen without a Walkman’, with often devastating consequences (Soyinka 1994:209-210). By focusing on more of the same, the global media tend to mistake plurality for diversity (Murdock 1994:5). The result is globalisation as a ‘deeply and starkly inequalitarian’ process (Golding and Harris 1997:7), a one-way flow in cultural products that favours a privileged minority as it compounds the impoverishment of the rest. As ‘empires of image and of the imagination’, the corporate media control global markets and global consciousness (Murdock 1994:3), mostly by denying access to creativity perceived to stand in the way of profit, power and privilege.

This literally leaves children and marginal cultures in Africa at the mercy of the McDonaldised, standardised or routinised information, education, games and other entertainment burgers served in the interest of profit by the global corporate media. Because the latter ‘advances corporate and commercial interests and values and denigrates or ignores that which cannot be incorporated into its mission’, content becomes uniform, regardless of the nationalities or cultural identities of shareholders. This is hardly surprising since wanted are passive, depoliticised, unthinking consumers more prone ‘to take orders than to make waves’ by questioning the ‘light escapist entertainment’ menu presented them (McChesney 1998:7). In this regard, it could be argued, as McChesney (1998:6; 2001:13) has done, that the basic differences are not between nation-states as such, but between the rich and the poor (whom I term ‘consumer citizens’ and ‘consumer subjects’ respectively), across national borders. However, the fact remains that the investors, advertisers and affluent consumers whose interests the global media represent, are more concentrated in and comprise a significant proportion of the children of the developed world, than is the case in Africa where only an elite minority are involved and hardly any local cultural products are competitive globally.

Research questions

This scenario invites some interesting research questions into assumptions about globalisation of media content as a process of cultural homogenisation. How true are such assumptions of children in Africa, where only an elite few qualify to consume global media first hand? To what extent, for example, is there cultural imperialism, in the sense of a systematic penetration and domination of cultural life on the continent by the globalised western children’s media content? How are the elite few among African children affected by global media content? Is it scientifically adequate to assume cultural homogenisation from such expo-

sure alone? If not, what other indicators are to be used? When is measurement to start and end for a final conclusion on homogenisation to be reached?

Is it possible that African children might desire and consume the same media content as Western children for example, yet read entirely different meanings into that content? If yes, how are we to explain such differences? How do the structurally excluded bulk of ordinary children in Africa react to their predicament? Do they simply celebrate victimhood? Or do they seek to manoeuvre and manipulate themselves into inclusion, even if only at the margins? How does this enrich understanding of the hierarchies of consumption made possible by globalisation? What creative strategies are employed by African children, both elite and marginalized, to appropriate, gatecrash, cushion, subvert or resist the effects of their cultural exclusion by the global structures of inequality evident in global media? How do African children reconcile otherwise conflicting cultural influences in their daily interactions with one another and with others? What accounts for refusal or reluctance to internalise and surrender to marginalisation? How, when, and why do Africans and their children draw from the sociality and conviviality of their cultural communities? In short, to what extent could it be claimed that African children 'may welcome, accept or collude in some cases, but in others they may ignore, select, reshape, redirect, adapt and, on occasions, even completely reject [media content]? Even when the same material is available to all and widely consumed, the eventual outcome, may vary considerably both within and between countries' (Halloran 1993:3).

Within the context of globalisation and postcoloniality, it is possible for children to assume multiple identifications that draw from different cultural repertoires, depending on the context (Warnier 1999). If cultures prescribe behaviour and beliefs, and if children are exposed to competing cultural codes or styles in this way, should we talk of identity in the singular in relation to those children – especially as every culture takes much time to be transmitted, assimilated or undone? What do we have to say about children's actions and identities inspired by drawing from multiple cultural repertoires? How do children come to terms with the fact that identity in the age of intensified globalisation is not determined solely by birth, or entirely by choices made by them? How well these questions are answered would depend on how sensitive one is to local predicaments methodologically, and also on what meaning one gives 'Africanness' in relation to children in Africa.

Methodology

First on methodology, if we recognise cultural diversity, we must be ready to question theories and methods built under the assumption of a universal culture; and we must be ready to question research on or about African children undertaken from the insensitive position of assumptions about an objective social science. For, every culture generates for itself its own 'thinkability' and 'unthinkability' (Surin 1995:1183). If arguments to the effect that only someone 'raised and nurtured in the cultural environment of a linguistic group' can 'capture all of a

culture's subtleties and complexities' (Grinker and Steiner 1997:684) are to be taken seriously, then the best way to go about researching any culture is to seek as much as possible to be an insider even as an outsider, to be predicament-oriented. Attitudes of arrogance and condescension towards the cultures in question can only result in knowledge pregnant with prejudice, stereotypes and dogma.

A 'predicament-oriented' approach should seek first 'a local understanding of the nature of given predicaments among those actually facing these predicaments in their everyday lives', and then an understanding of 'the broader historical, structural and/or ecological causes generating such predicaments', with the aim of feeding such understanding 'back to the local level to illuminate the understanding from below of the predicaments confronted there, and to provide guidelines for local actions and struggle' (Himmelstrand et al. 1994:4-8). This means that social research should not be divorced from its ethical and political implications. Although the debate on 'objective' social research is dated, not enough social researchers are assuming their ethical responsibilities for one to stop flogging a dead horse. Some still believe that social phenomena can be understood, controlled, manipulated and exploited, independent of human intention and expectation. This largely accounts for the tendency to celebrate impersonal and insensitive methodologies that only exacerbate the misrepresentation of the powerless. Such strict adherence to dominant research models has usually precluded the asking of the really important questions of why and how.

Halloran echoes this point with the example of comparative international research, which is quite common in the study of children and media. Such research is by nature very difficult to conduct, but certain assumptions in conventional research traditions have made it even more so. 'At the heart of the problem is the failure to recognize that social research is embedded in cultural values and that the fundamental differences... which obtain in different societies preclude the use of carbon copy survey or interview methods which assume that genuine comparability can be achieved only by administering the same questions in the same way in all participating countries. One has only to take note of the relationship between language and culture to realise that this approach is patently absurd' (Halloran 1981:9). Like media content, methods of data collection no matter how appropriate in the West are not always adapted to the realities of children in Africa, and a deliberate effort must be made to domesticate them. In certain cases, nothing short of a cocktail of theories, methods and approaches would suffice to take care of the many-sided-ness and particularities of real life in Africa.

Being African

This leads to the second point: the 'Africanness' of children in Africa. What does it mean to be an African child? Different people have different answers, but no research can yield adequate results, that have fails to problematise this issue. To some, being African is an attribute of birth, transmitted through the life essence of a black African father, and to be protected from contamination by the prod-

ucts of other life essences. Being African for them is a birthmark and a geography taken together. But others see the Africanity of children as a process. To these, although there is reason to lament the marginalisation of cultural identities from the African continent in today's McDonaldised content, it would be quite misleading to assume from this a counter notion of a geographically confined, patriarchal, essentialist and frozen understanding of being African. This idea of Africanity is rich, flexible and relevant to researching children and the media in Africa under the current context of accelerated flows of people and cultural products.

Identities, whether African or otherwise, 'are complex and multiple and grow out of a history of changing responses to economic, political, and cultural forces' (Appiah 1992:177-178). In other words, identity is not 'innate in consciousness at birth', but rather 'something formed through unconscious processes over time' (Hall 1994:122). Identity 'always remains incomplete, is always "in process", always "being formed"', and therefore, 'rather than speaking of identity as a finished thing, we should speak of *identification*, and see it as an on-going process' (Hall 1994:122). In cultural identity two phenomena complement each other: 'an inward sense of association or identification with a specific culture or subculture' on the one hand, and 'an outward tendency within a specific culture to share a sense of what it has in common with other cultures and of what distinguishes it from other cultures' on the other (Servaes 1997:81). There is therefore the need to treat children's identities in Africa as 'a dynamic reality... that moves forward daily but knows no end' (Mveng 1985:68).

For, although African identities have had a raw deal in relation to other identities, and there is certainly a need to create greater room in children's media for African philosophies of personhood and agency (cf. Nyamnjoh 2002), Africa has been subjected to certain influences through slavery, colonialism, and by interaction with other cultures, that have affected African identities in no small way, and that cannot simply be brushed away like one brushes dust off one's coat (cf. Appiah 1992). Abhorrence for Western colonialism and consumerism notwithstanding, marginalized Africans cannot afford to dismiss as non-Africans those children of the elite few who have found attraction in and can afford the current globalised Western media culture for purposes of prestige and power; not only because these are the children of those who preside over their destinies, but also because even the elite few often domesticate in most creative and original ways their consumption of foreign media. Nor should black Africans dismiss as non-Africans children of European and Asian descent, born and brought up in Africa, with some of who have never lived outside of the continent, nor are they interested in migrating from Africa. How can such children be denied their Africanity, simply because their ancestors can be traced back to Europe or Asia? As researchers, we must therefore be creative, negotiating, dynamic and realistic in attributing Africanity to the children we study.

As researchers, we must come to terms with Africa's negotiated identities in recognition of ongoing processes of 'sorting out, selection, choice, and finally *voluntary* adoption of some ideas, values, outlooks and institutions' that have resulted from encounters with other forms of identity (Gyekye 1997:25-26) ei-

ther directly or through media representations. Studies have evidenced that even in precolonial Africa the idea of a fixed *cultural identity* is more romantic than real (cf. Appiah 1992); rather, ethnic groups have tended to have 'a constant flux of identities' depending on political expediency and other factors (cf. MacGaffey 1995). The children, whose relationship with media is of interest to us, may well straddle multiple identity margins in most fascinating and creative ways, and seeking to pigeonhole them into single identity margins could subtract from rather than enrich understanding of the complexity of their life experiences.

We need therefore, as social scientists, to take seriously arguments against the temptation 'to celebrate and endorse those identities that seem at the moment to offer the best hope of advancing our other goals, and to keep silence about the lies and the myths' in such identities. Our duty as social scientists is to stay committed to the truth about children's identities in Africa. For, although 'We cannot change the world simply by evidence and reasoning, ...we surely cannot change it without them either' (Appiah 1992:173-180).

Homogenisation, conflicts or heterogeneity?

But to recognise the cosmopolitan nature of African children and their identities, does not necessarily imply to argue in favour of cultural homogenisation implicit in the rhetoric of globalisation. Although globalisation is homogenising consumer tastes, the same globalisation, through the unequal relations it generates, provides consumers (big and small) with the means to create individual and social identities, which are variant and diverse in a way that speaks less of a synthesis of cultures (Appadurai 1996; Warnier 1999). Not even in U.S.A., where much has been achieved in the area of the 'McDonaldization of Society' (Ritzer 2000), is that synthesis possible. It is more a type of unity in diversity, where the fact of children belonging to the same consumer club (wanting the same toys, computer games, television programmes, books, animated cartoons, films, music, fast foods and soft drinks) does not guarantee cultural synchronisation (Lapham 1992).

As Halloran puts it, quoting a cynic, in reference to warring Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Bosnians and Macedonians of the former Yugoslavia, all watching the same television for years did for them was that they could 'march to fight each other wearing the same T-shirts, whistling the same pop tune and with a can of coke and a mars bar in their packs'. They had little else in common 'other than a tribally based hate and a need to "cleanse"' (Halloran 1993:2). This is analogous to the situation between African and Western children, where there is generally very little else in common linking them, than the pool of media products and consumer items into which they read different meanings as first or second-hand consumers, depending on their cultural and social backgrounds. Thus, despite the increasing synchronisation of their tastes and habits, the cultural heterogeneity of children as consumers of similar media contents seems to get deeper instead.

Children everywhere may appear to be chasing after the same media products, but they bring along with them specific cultural traits that lead to diversity in their consumption of those products. It thus appears unrealistic to assume from mere exposure cultural synchronisation as if children had effectively become the consumer zombies intended in the standardised and routinised media content served them. Creative responses by African children may well mean that the final outcome is neither a victory for 'African cultures' nor for 'western consumer values' as such, but rather, a creatively negotiated blend of both to enrich their personal and collective cosmopolitanism. In this way, African children are active agents in ongoing processes of simultaneously modernising African traditions and Africanising their modernities. The outcome is neither triumph for 'culture' nor for 'globalisation' as distinct entities, but rather for the new creation to which a marriage of both has given rise: African children as repertoires, melting pots and negotiators of conviviality between multiple encounters or competing influences.

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