

Program 3: Global Culture

What impact are global media and communications having on culture? Some argue that globalisation is a threat to local cultures by creating a homogenised world culture.

Others believe we are witnessing an increasing hybridisation of cultures. Is globalisation simply another term for what used to be called 'cultural imperialism' or even 'Americanisation'? Or are local cultures more robust and adaptive than the rhetoric of globalisation would have us believe?

Rena Sarumpaet

Hello, I'm Rena Sarumpaet and welcome to the third program in our series 'Globally Speaking - The Politics of Globalisation'. Today, 'Global Culture'.

The word Globalisation can mean many things. But as we've heard it usually refers to the growing inter-dependence between the nations of the world as they're drawn into a global economy. The main agents of this are transnational corporations. But as well as those with well known brand names like Coca-Cola and McDonalds, many of these corporations are in media, communications and information technologies. For this reason globalisation has also come to mean, for some, the threat of cultural homogenisation.

R. Ramakrishna

The information revolution and particularly the electronic media - these are now slowly and steadily creating a lot of discontent.

Rena Sarumpaet

R. Ramakrishna heads the economic study group of India's ruling party - the Bharatiya Janata Party or BJP. He's concerned that consumer values are creating unrealistic expectations particularly among young people.

R. Ramakrishna

People are looking to the TV and there's a composite pop culture, pop music culture, there are discotheques all over the towns, now this sort of apeing, this sort of trying to come out of your cultural mould and getting into some other mould it is certainly there. It does not have much of a deliterious effect on the urban households, but the rural households in which even necessities of life are being denied, where you see a very artificial life in the media, that breeds discontent. Discontent brings about break down of law and order, mafia groups and gun toting - all these things are the products of these things. And we see a lot more of unrest particularly in the youth. I don't know what type of society we will be developing over time.

Rena Sarumpaet

The question then is whether regional, national and local cultures are strong enough to resist the forces that appear to be moving us towards a global culture. Professor Tony Milner, Dean of the Faculty of Asian Studies at the Australian National University, believes it's necessary to take an historical perspective in order to understand these fears about cultural homogenisation.

Professor Tony Milner

One must see globalisation there in a longer historical phase and globalisation is in many ways a continuation of an earlier colonial process and therefore the response to globalisation today links up a bit with the response to colonialism in the past, and that's one reason why we have to take seriously these Asian values attitudes because they do have a link to the anti-colonial movements.

I mean there is a perception in many parts of the region that globalisation is fairly close to westernisation and therefore it does bring back memories, community memories of the colonial period, a nervousness about being brought into a global situation and sacrificing values which are local.

Rena Sarumpaet

However, Director of the East Asian Institute of the National University of Singapore, Professor Wang Gungwu, goes so far as to say the nation state which Asia inherited from the colonial era now becomes a kind of defence against the further influence of western values.

Professor Wang Gungwu

Asia having been weak and humiliated and defeated for several centuries is regaining some confidence in themselves by having acquired many of the institutions from military to legal to commercial to political institutions that have made the nation states of the West so strong. And now that different Asian nations are acquiring them they are beginning to recover the confidence in their own values, and particularly want to see their values preserved, not to see them all eroded away by the very aggressive modern values of the West which are infecting the young people in Asia. And therefore there is this tendency among the political elites in Asia to say we now have the confidence to restate our own cultural positions if we still believe them, we should affirm them, and not bow our heads in shame because all these have failed in the contest with the West, and to accept just simply defeat and simply bow down to all the new values that are coming from the modern West.

Rena Sarumpaet

According to Tony Milner, the degree of resistance to western cultural influences should not be underestimated. Professor Tony Milner

There are indications that young people in Asian societies right across the Asian region have been concerned about globalisation and concerned to assert or to discover to some extent and then assert their own identity in that. And from what I understand of developments in China we'd be making a great mistake if we assumed that young Chinese were galloping toward a liberal democratic view of the world. I watched in a seminar quite recently, very successful middle-class young Chinese people being lectured about China's human rights and labour relations problems and they were very angry, they were very nationalistic, seemingly speaking in a way one might have thought their grandparents would speak. But they were not going to put up with that sort of western criticism of China and spelt out that China had very great achievements historically and continued to do so.

So you sense there very much even among this very commercially minded group a negative response to a globalisation if it wasn't a globalisation that had great respect for Chinese uniqueness or the Chinese local in the process.

Rena Sarumpaet

For all the evidence of cultural resistance there are many contradictions.

In the 1960's and seventies the spread of US-based media, advertising and consumer goods around the world, provoked protests against cultural imperialism and Americanisation. However, Professor John Sinclair from Victoria University believes cultural flows are never just a one way process - they involve interpenetration at different levels between nations.

Professor John Sinclair

It occurs to me that Americanisation is something that happens to Americans too. So in other words what we're witnessing is not the imposition of one national culture, the American upon all the other national cultures of the world. That was how it was seen in the seventies and that was what cultural imperialism meant. But I think that one of the really useful things about the idea of globalisation in fact is that it enables us to get away from that, but what it facilitates is thinking of cultural influence as being a manifold sort of phenomenon which operates at lots of different sorts of levels and operates sort of across nations and across a different strata within nations, from one nation to the next, even from the point of view of the United States that they much to their displeasure in the 1980's discovered that they were caught up in this too when Sony came in and started buying into their media industries.

Rena Sarumpaet

Likewise, Chandra Muzaffar from Malaysia believes that cultural influences are running in many directions. Far from producing victims of cultural imperialism, these criss-crosses of cultural flows can actually empower individuals.

Chandra Muzaffar

It would be wrong to equate globalisation today with say neo-colonialism. It is not. For two reasons - one, if you look at the way in which ideas and values are flowing across borders, it's not just from the dominant to the dominated, sometimes it's from the dominated to the dominant. How else do you explain the popularity of Indian cuisine in London? How do you explain the popularity of certain martial art forms from sino civilisation, because it's a dominated civilisation and yet you find that people in the West are lapping it up you know things of this sort.

So there is another flow that is taking place and one must also appreciate the fact that it is not just western dominance, after all Japan is a very important actor in the present globalisation process, especially when it comes to economics. So it is a very complex process - that's one aspect of globalisation. There's another aspect of globalisation which makes it very very challenging. I think globalisation has the potential in spite of everything of empowering the individual, and that empowerment of the individual in this particular form through a certain technological device is something which hasn't happened on such a vast scale at any time in the past.

Rena Sarumpaet

On Radio Australia and Radio National, you're listening to 'GLOBALLY SPEAKING - The Politics of Globalisation'..... Global culture is not just about flows of media and brand names but also about the movement of people. When people move around the world they take their cultures with them. Of course they are influenced by the cultures of the host nations which they move through, but in turn, they exert their own influences on those cultures.

Oxford historian, Felipe Fernandez-Armesto is currently teaching in the Netherlands.

Felipe Fernandez-Armesto

Does the culture of the indigenous peoples change the metropolis? And of course it does tend to, it's difficult to generalise about the ways in which it tends to because they're so diverse and the actual manifestations of this influence tend to be very different according to the environment, according to the political relationships, and according to the period of history one's talking about. But very obviously subject peoples have an effect on the metropolis in challenging the in-comers ideas about politics and about human nature because they're always going to be surprising things that they encounter in the cultures in which they're guests, visitors or rulers.

Where I'm talking to you from the Netherlands there is in a country of 19-million people a million immigrants today, there are four million Muslims in France and most of them from former areas of French colonisation. And there are two million Muslims in the United Kingdom, and even the United States has experienced something of the same phenomenon in which Spanish speaking peoples of Indian ancestry have re-colonised the areas which the United States conquered from them in the 19th century.

Rena Sarumpaet

Dipesh Chakrabarty is an Indian born academic who lived and worked in Australia for 20 years and now teaches at the University of Chicago.

Dipesh Chakrabarty

You know once both in Australia and in the US when we as academics studied an area we used to think that in order to find Indian culture you had to go to India, in order to find Filipino culture you had to go to the Philippines. And now increasingly you know that Indian culture or Filipino culture is both inside and outside as people have become diasporic as cultures cease to be rooted in particular places.

That actually gives rise to the very interesting possibility, we now use the word cosmopolitanism, that the problem of multiculturalism, the problem of globalisation may create also this other exciting possibility of people enriching themselves by inhabiting consciously more than one culture, and by not having to think that, or not having to imagine that they belong necessarily and primarily to one culture alone. And that I think is a very exciting possibility.

Rena Sarumpaet

As we've heard, globalisation involves the accelerated movement of capital, people, products and images aided by new technologies. Media and advertising are opening up a new world of possibilities which encourage people to experience different cultures.

Dipesh Chakrabarty

Two interesting experiences I had in the United States back in Chicago, one was with an undergraduate student and one was with a graduate student of mine, both from India who are now studying in the States and I asked them what had initially made them think of going to the States. One of them, the older person, the older man who is now a graduate student said to me it was his exposure to Nike shoes and sporting gear on sporting grounds, so he was exposed to objects that were being imported into India which still had a protected home market. So it's the extra finesse of objects produced in properly capitalist countries that appealed to his imagination.

Whereas the younger person actually talked about American soap operas and he had visions of being in a convertible car with you know I imagine with a blonde woman, hair sort of flying in the air, driving along some beautiful highway, and he described that, he said you know I was really struck by these images and I wanted to be in that place called America. And I said to him so how do you find it now? He said well it wasn't unreal, it's possible.

Rena Sarumpaet

Although historically, global media flows have been dominated by American movies and TV programs, and indeed for the most part still are today, certain regions of the world have their own vibrant cultural industries. India for example, has become famous for 'Bollywood' - its film industry based in what used to be called 'Bombay'. Bollywood actually produces more films each year than Hollywood. And the case of Indian TV is remarkable in the way that globalisation has actually stimulated local cultural production.

John Sinclair again.

Professor John Sinclair

India was in a situation where it had a single national broadcaster, Doordashan that enjoyed a monopoly, and it was very much an instrument of nation building, you know very consciously trying to develop a sense of Indianness on a national sort of basis bringing together all of the really quite diverse ethno-linguistic cultural groups that make up that extraordinary sub-continent. What has happened with the advent of the internationalisation of the Indian television industry has been a kind of a fragmentation into those groupings, so that the kind of hegemony which Doordashan, the national broadcaster held over the nation, that hegemony's been lost.

As soon as an opening occurred for the linguistic and cultural minorities, as soon as the opening occurred for them to get into their own cultural production, have their own television stations and so on then yes, it happened. That's a very very interesting case of how globalisation instead of producing more homogenisation, in actual fact undermines the kind of homogenisation which had been achieved through the nation, and facilitates a kind of a breaking down into sub national cultural groupings.

Rena Sarumpaet

Mahdav Prasad is a cultural studies scholar who's compiling encyclopaedias on Indian film and television. Indian TV manages to maintain its own character in what is a mix of original programming and adaptations of familiar western formats.

India has been opening its economy to foreign goods and services, including global satellite television, since the early nineties. Mahdav Prasad explains how local television and film industries have been able to retain a unique Indian style.

Mahdav Prasad

Certainly in the beginning you saw a spate of Dynasty or Dallas clones, and some of that goes on even now. And there is a lot of imitation of programs, and it's also partly because certain people have rights to foreign programs and then they try to reproduce that model. So you have things like

the 'Price is Right', that sort of program and its indigenous versions. Then you have some people who simply imitate 'Mind Your Language', Hindi version and that kind of thing, there's a lot of that.

There are also on Tamil channels interesting programs which try to reproduce the atmosphere of a panchayat, a panchayat being a village council where issues are debated, judgements are given by a council of people. So there's an attempt to reproduce that kind of atmosphere and get people to debate the stuff. So it's a mix.

Rena Sarumpaet

At the moment on Indian television the highest rating program is the Indian version of 'Who Wants to be a Millionaire'. Yet, even where India borrows television formats from the West, it manages to retain its own local character through its indigenous languages. R. Ramakrishna again.

R. Ramakrishna

I don't think globalisation is going to break the language barrier quickly, and if language cannot be broken, along with the cultural epithets which go with the language, even that is a little difficult. For instance Mr Murdoch came in a big way with his Star TV in India, but he has Indianised the Star TV. There are channels which have 24 hours Hindi programs or the regional Tamil programs, and sitcoms ok, sitcom as a concept may be alien but we are now producing sitcoms in vernacular languages. So I don't think globalisation is going to make much of an impact in these areas.

Professor John Sinclair

Again and again the conglomerates are finding that what they need to do is to adapt their products to different, not even national markets but different kinds of cultural markets even within the one nation.

Rena Sarumpaet

John Sinclair.

Professor John Sinclair

Real as the barriers of culture and language may be, the global media corporations are finding technological solutions. They're developing not only different products for different cultures, and in different languages, but also products for different levels of the market.

Professor John Sinclair

Now there are also ways in which those obstacles can be overcome with international satellite services for example to Latin America, with the new generation of digital satellites it's quite an easy

thing to send out a first release movie over the satellite and the subscriber just chooses whether he or she wants to watch it in English or Portuguese or Spanish, right there's this multiple sort of tracking. So there are new technologies to overcome these sorts of obstacles. You know MTV might stand up there with you know CNN as being you might think at first blush prime example of cultural globalisation, but when you look a little more closely you'll see that in actual fact MTV has found that it needs to adapt itself for different markets. And even within for example Latin America there is of course a Spanish speaking and Portuguese Brazilian speaking version of MTV, but even within the Spanish speaking one there's a version for Mexico and a version for Argentina.

So this is because of the nature of musical tastes and music is something which is extremely local, extremely local but yet can very easily be globalised in the way in which for example reggae was brought to the world back in the 1970's. So what we might find happening is that at the level of what Stuart Hall has called, 'the global popular' which is like music performers like Michael Jackson and Madonna and so on that have this kind of universal currency, at that sort of level there is going to be evermore sort of cultural homogenisation if you like. But that you know more sort of on the ground the differences of culture and language which exist within a nation and other nations like it are going to be more decisive in a kind of a middle band of cultural production of cultural identification.

Rena Sarumpaet

In discussions of globalisation we sometimes forget that it has an ideological dimension, a rhetoric that it wants us to believe. But the word globalisation should not be taken too literally as John Sinclair reminds us.

Professor John Sinclair

When we talk about for example the global village we have to remember that you know literally not everybody is a member of the global village and whilst mundane cosmopolitanism might be part and parcel of more or less everyday experience within Australia, it's not the case in to go back to India for example where 75 per cent of the population, and we're talking about nearly a billion people are living in villages, and not a lot of those villages have television. There are something like 55 million television homes in India, it's a lot, it's a big number, but in terms of a billion people it's not really that great. Those people are also a very long way from a telephone, they don't see cinema all that often and so on. So their participation in the global village is really pretty marginal.

So I think it's important when we talk about the global village, when we talk about globalisation that in actual fact it's not really a global movement, it is predominantly something which is happening within the western societies and it's happening within the globalised sectors we can say of societies like India, that there are those sectors like people who work in the software industry who are incorporated into globalisation but the vast majority of people in the country are not.

Dipesh Chakrabarty

One obvious question that cuts across the tendency towards globalisation is the question of privilege. Who has access, who doesn't, and interestingly most of the studies of imagining the globe or moving between cultures, of hybridisation, of global flows relate to more successful middle-class professional people. I mean the only the one interesting piece that I've seen on working class people relates to the immigration of Mexican workers into the United States. But often you know in New York or in Chicago being inside a taxi which is being driven by a Pakistani taxi driver and getting into some kind of conversation with them I often wonder what it means for them, which is not to say that they don't desire it, but it must mean something very different to them than it does to me, which is not to say that there is no possible exchange between my experience and his. But that experience is much less studied.

Rena Sarumpaet

Dipesh Chakrabarty.

Dipesh Chakrabarty

So, when we talk about cultural homogenisation, we can easily forget that not everybody experiences globalisation in the same way: not everybody participates in the same global culture, and not everybody is willing to be drawn into global culture anyhow. Above all, we need to realise that real people make regional, national and local cultures much more robust and adaptive than the rhetoric of globalisation would have us believe.

John Wiseman

One of the most striking trends I think in Australia has been an increasing recognition that the price of globalisation cannot include the destruction of the values of a fair go, of an inclusive tolerant decent kind of society. And I think that's going to be crucial in terms of the debate in Australia and around the world in the years to come.

Rena Sarumpaet

John Wiseman, author of 'Global Nation: Australia and the Politics of Globalisation'. And you can hear him in our next program Advance Australia Where?

Globally Speaking - The Politics of Globalisation' is a joint project of Radio Australia and Victoria University in Melbourne. This program was produced by Sue Slamen and Barry Clarke - Technical production, Darren McKenzie. Academic advisor, John Sinclair of Victoria University.

I'm Rena Sarumpaet, bye for now.