

From Where Everybody Knows Your Name to Space: the Final Frontier:
Examining the Implications of Globalization on Notions of Place and Definitions of Community

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How we situate ourselves in an integrated world is a question that people have been forced to deal with due to the continued globalizing trend in the developed world. With leaps in the advancement of communications technology, people now deal with an overlapping web of communication networks that stretch around the globe. This has a profound affect on our identity as human beings, influencing our perception of the world by inundating us with an endless supply of information about different countries and cultures. Conversely, with increased concentration of media ownership, culture has become homogenized as corporate interests determine what people absorb. In either case, no longer are we restricted by geographic distance or cultural difference. We are made aware of it all whether we like it, want it, understand it—or not. Thus, citizens of the developed world must deal with the societal implications of globalization, as it pushes us to re-evaluate and expand our notions of place and definitions of community.

While academic study on globalization has focused primarily on economic and political considerations, it is clear that it has a strong societal dimension. As the world becomes increasingly integrated in terms of trade and political organization, its effects are trickling down to the grassroots level

as market fluidity translates into social and cultural migration. Philip Resnick notes, “we, in the western world especially, where centres no longer seem to hold, are experiencing the dissolution of traditional notions of culture” (128). As we shop for goods made in China, watch blockbuster movies produced in the United States, or intake breaking news from the Middle East, our sense of identity has muted under the weight of international interactions in virtually all areas of our lives.

It is not difficult to see that this ‘culture shock’ experienced by any individual in the developed world has, to varying degrees, been caused by the globalization of mass communications. As Lorimer and Gasher state, “the globalization trend would not have been possible without the binding role of communications media” (296). This is because “communication networks have the ability to ‘bind space’—to bring people and places closer together” (Ibid., 295). While this can be seen as a positive development, it is nonetheless filled with inherent dangers.

Communications, being a commodity in the world market, has seen increasing concentration of ownership that has resulted in a kind of cultural homogenization. In his book Democracy and the Global Order, David Held states that the “developments in trans-national media networks are directly linked, of course, to the globalization of economic activity which has challenged local, national, and regional ways of life in many parts of the world” (127). This can be seen in looking at the six largest communications companies in the world. They are, in descending order: AOL Time Warner, The Walt Disney Company, Bertelsmann AG, Viacom, News Corporation, and Vivendi Universal (mediachannel.org). All of these companies own a diverse range of media products, including telecommunication providers, major film studios, national and international television networks, print publishing companies, international magazine brands, music studios and major theme parks. It is virtually impossible for any human being in the developed world to avoid media products coming from at least one of these conglomerates through their subsidiaries and/or affiliates. These six companies are the primary sources for virtually any piece of information ordinary people receive, and this naturally limits the choice available to the buying public. Given the world’s population of six billion people, in effect, these companies have a market share of a

billion each, give or take 166 million per company. This is an astounding position for these companies to be in as they can, in effect, determine what can be read, heard, watched and played by anyone on the face of the earth. This is especially notable with the proliferation of countless satellites orbiting the earth, beaming all forms of media down on the planet. Media conglomerates can choose which aspect of a particular culture to emphasize and market, and alternatively, choose which aspect of culture to ignore and neglect.

This real potential for cultural homogenization caused by globalization has serious implications for how individuals perceive their place in the world and define their sense of community. At the most overwhelmed level, with such integration and concentration of media content, one can easily feel a profound sense of confusion in understanding's one's place in the world. As Carla Brooks Johnston notes in her book Global News Access, "technology is responsible for the changes that leave us somewhat confused, suffering from information overload but substance underload...Industry changes are leaping ahead at such a pace that evaluating the situation to plan for maximum benefits is next to impossible." (3). It can be said that with so much choice in accessing information via the media, we are overwhelmed by it and are forced to rely primarily on our immediate wants rather than on our needs. That is to say, given the concentration of media ownership in the world, we may simply choose to get the bare essentials in terms of information and news while wholly neglecting comprehensive, in-depth, objective analysis of the issues we deem important. Therefore, in terms of understanding our place in the world, rather than feel empowered as a citizen in a democratic and free society, we are blinded into cultural slavery—trapped by the onslaught of information overload and doing nothing about it. While we may feel as if we are boundless in terms of access to images of the world, it is nothing more than a mass-produced illusion akin to George Orwell's world in his book Nineteen-Eighty-Four, where the people blindly followed and believed the images and information they saw in the news. A case in point is the fact that with the vast amount of 'breaking news' in a single day, most of which is instantaneously broadcast on all-news

channels and media webpages, people spend more time getting ‘the news’ and less time reading news analysis.

At a more moderate level, globalization can be a positive force in terms of identifying where we belong. While we can become trapped under the intricate web of globalized communication, given an inner-motivated power to ‘find ourselves,’ we can come to situate ourselves in a far less vulnerable position. Despite cultural homogenization, “where culture, in particular is concerned, we need to take all the complexities of the human condition into account” to truly understand our place in the world (Resnick 129). Contrary to popularized wisdom, we are not merely what we eat, what we watch, what we read, or what we do. In short, we are more than the sum of our parts and self-interested desires. We are beings imbued with consciousness and the power to choose. As such, we have the power and freedom to choose what elements of identity are the most significant and relevant in our present age. We can either choose to emphasize our geographic location and all its related social and cultural attributes, or select a more conceptual understanding of place, incorporating universal values that exist in the world. In either case, making a concerted and critical effort to wade through the information from global media is necessary. As Aristotle notes, “the fact remains that the good citizen must possess the knowledge and the capacity requisite for ruling as well as for being ruled, and the excellence of a citizen may be defined as consisting in a ‘knowledge of rule over free men from both points of view’” (105). Given the great imbalance of power and influence between an ordinary citizen and global, corporate media, it is a necessity for the citizen to be truly informed in order to maintain any level of freedom and control.

However we define our place in the world, it will have a significant effect on how we define community. Community is important because it constitutes “the necessary foundation for any kind of social order” (Resnick 132). While some may say that globalization has done nothing but break traditional forms of social order, where geographically based nations were the emphasis, one can easily state with confidence that it has allowed for a more democratic and empowering form of community where people choose who they belong to and why. If one decides to emphasize the local, geographic

emphasis of place, then community will simply be the group of people living in that particular area of the world. If one decides to emphasize more universal values, then community can be defined as any group of individuals who share some significant common interest. In an age where communications technology has allowed increased diversity in community development, rather than being indoctrinated by propagandistic understandings of community, citizens now have the choice to deepen the meaning of community and create more meaningful associations with other people. Globalization has played a key role in giving individuals the opportunity to create their own communities and sense of identity. No longer are we restricted to vague national ideas of place and community, but we are able to forge new associations online via newsgroups, mailing lists, chatrooms, message boards and the like. And through these digital connections via cyberspace, we can bypass the homogenous worldview broadcast through the globalized media and converse with real individuals and expand one's understanding of the world in which we live.

Clearly globalization has many implications with respect to our perception of place and definitions of community. On the one hand, it is a homogenizing force as it blends the world's diversity into easily packaged, marketable products for consumption around the globe by trans-national media conglomerates. It can create confusion in terms of weakening a strong sense of identity, and make us feel like animals who live only to consume the information that media distribute for profit. On the other hand, globalization can be an empowering force that can facilitate a profound understanding of the universal values that define humanity. With determination and effort, we can learn to appreciate the diversity of our world and associate with the qualities that we identify with the most. Despite the concern with homogenizing media content, globalization can facilitate a more dynamic implementation of communications technology, allowing individuals the ability to discover for themselves what qualities of human society are most valuable and constructive in their daily life.

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