

Global media and the end of the nation-state: myth or reality?

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Date: June 2014

From: African Nebula(Issue 7)

Publisher: Samar Habib

Document Type: Article

Length: 5,025 words

Lexile Measure: 1500L

Abstract:

Debates about the influence of international media moguls on feeble African nation-states in particular often focus on whether the end of state sovereignty is a hyperbolic myth or a literal truth. This paper argues that, far from being an either/or question, contemplations of the phenomenon can be effectively enhanced if we adopt a middle-ground. Such a posture requires that we examine the dialectic between so-called global media and the nation-state within the orbit of critical theories such as Marxist political economy, in understanding their implications for sub-Saharan African states.

Keywords: global media, Marxism, nation-state, political economy, sovereignty

Full Text:

Introduction

When Plato in *The Republic* spoke of the captives in his allegorical cave, little did he say about the ideologies at work in that cave. He did not, for instance, tell us with much clarity why those bondsmen continually apperceived the shadows on the wall rather than the forms. Plato's theory of perception, *strictu sensu*, established a kind of base/superstructure mode of existence in which 'shadows' would always have to subsist on 'forms'. Put summarily, his work valorises a mechanistic mode of cognition between binaries--as in his analogy of the divided line--such as the oft-perceived dualism between the state and the global world. To be sure, those who unflinchingly support the sovereignty thesis of the state often argue that nation-states are primordial, self-contained, and naturally existing geographically bounded spaces. This container-model of logic has been adequately described by Ingrid Volkmer (2012) in *The Handbook of Global Media Research* as territorial essentialism. While it is practically impossible for us to give a full account of the emergence of the nation-state *hic et nunc*, suffice it to say that the concept is a modernist, political construct birthed in the early morning of the Enlightenment (Thompson, 1992; Smith & Riley, 2009). Admittedly, nation-states are not a *fait accompli*. We view the idea of the nation-state as a technology, the essence of which was to politically organize, regulate, and control the then fragmented, less united tribes of Europe for the sake of economically maximizing their material and non-material modes of production. Negri and Hardt (2000) remind us that nations that achieved sterling success in this respect blossomed into empires.

Today, we know too well that such a feat was both economically and politically rewarding. Ironically, the growth of an empire implies the demise of others, or the suppression of other states, a claim well-rehearsed in postcolonial scholarship and subaltern studies (Said, 1978; Ngugi, 1993; Loomba, 1998; Gikandi, 2003). The merging of giant transnational media corporations (TNCs) into supra-mega news agencies, for example, is leading some scholars to posit that the nation-state has reached its worst decline (Chomsky & Herman, 1988; Boyd-Barrett & Rantanen, 1998; Price, 2002; Herman & McChesney, 2004). They insist that what is left of the state are its paraphernalia, the hoisted flag and coat of arms for example, and that the most productive sectors of the economy

of many nation-states have been hijacked by global powers. The Nigerian scholar, Arthur-Martins Aginam (2005), paints a very dark picture of this turn of events in Nigeria and South Africa in relation to the work of global media in these nations. Aginam contends that giant conglomerates such as AFP, AP, UPI, and Reuters whose operations are backed by the siamese twin principle of neoliberal democracy and a free market economy, have literally pillaged the broadcasting industries of Nigeria and South Africa. What he decries the most is that the modus operandi of these international media bodies is displacing the thriving neo-Habermasian public spheres of African nations with a high sense of effeminate consumer culture, commercialization, and entertainment (See also Chibuwe, 2013; Omenugha et al, 2013).

Without doubt, there are issues of base/superstructure, commodity fetishism, and the Althusserian-Gramscian inspired notions of ideology and hegemony that need to be examined in this essay in the orbit of a Marxist political economy. For instance, what factors explain the continual dominance of international media giants in global news marketing, and what resistance strategies have weak nation-states been mapping out to curb this ebb and flow? What reasons are there to explain why many consumers in the Third World prefer media deliverables from, say, CNN, BBC, or AFP? Thus, any account of the impact of so-called global media (henceforth global media) on the destiny of nation-states (most of whom are putatively subaltern) must be critically acute and theoretically Marxist. Beyond any other conspicuous reasons, the main objective of TNCs' expansion beyond the shores of their countries of origin is for economic gains. Marx (1867/2009) himself repeatedly observed in *Kapital*, contrary to liberal economists such as Adam Smith (1776/2012) and David Ricardo (1817) who taught that profit is the function of shrewd market deals, that profit is mainly derived from the surplus production of a commodity. The labourer is made to produce more than they are paid for. This surplus value in Marx's writings is the basic unit of the capitalist economic structure. Commodities such as those delivered by global media moguls are produced en masse for the purpose of exchange and therefore mass consumption. This means that the capitalist who produces a commodity, like international news, is interested in selling it rather than using it. Within the context of global media, we would note that the massive production and distribution of news work, film, and other media deliverables, ought to find their way from the Metropole into the consumption markets of nations at the Periphery. Capitalist ventures such as these bring the subaltern state on its knees, says the political economist. Is the decline of the nation-state thus a myth or reality?

The End of the Nation-state Thesis

Political economists strongly posit that the nation-state is under serious threat as a result of the unparalleled influence of global media giants on their states. They vociferously hold that TNCs are in fact shadow states working in the interests of their mother-nations. Political economy of the media *mutatis mutandis* is the tradition that focuses on how media texts relate not only to their conditions of production, but more importantly to the broader political and economic structures of society (Boyd-Barrett & Rantanen, 1998; Herman & McChesney, 2004). In a word, it is a critique of media institutions. Its underlying thesis is that the globalization of the media is a threat to state sovereignty, largely defined as the power of the state or its accumulation of power to make and enforce laws and to seek to have a monopoly over the use of force (cf. Coker, 2014).

This thesis is lucidly developed in Monroe Price's *Media and Sovereignty* in which he explores the forces that undercut the autonomy of nation-states in their control and regulation of their broadcasting houses by international media influence and domination. For Price (2002), new technologies, the convergence of media conglomerates, political upheavals, and newly emerging concepts of human rights make it difficult for subaltern nation-states to offer resistance and restrictions of mediascapes (Appadurai, 1996). New communication technologies, for example, in his words, have led to "a widespread discounting of the capacity of the state to maintain control over the flow of images within its borders (p. 17). These technologies, he contends, have a negative effect on the sustenance of local languages in individual states, the enrichment of their history, and the strengthening of their internal political and creative processes. We are not willing to accept this view. Developed nations like Canada, China, and Hong Kong, for example, may be exceptional cases as they have mapped out active strategies of state responses to challenges to their authority by the CNNization of their home broadcasting houses. These include the use of

ownership rules to reliably affect content. Canada's regulatory regime and its Income Tax Act, for instance, were enacted to favour Canadian advertisers using Canadian stations and other Canadian options before giving space to those from the United States (Price, 2002). Another coping strategy against the global tide is Malaysia's technology of boundary which regulates activities on the direct-to-home broadcasting by one of its own private service provider Malaysia EastAsia Satellite (MEASAT).

Some scholars go as far as positing that the nation-state itself is dead, and that it was from the word go destined to fail because it is an artificial political construct. Proponents of this extremist view consequently maintain that economically feeble states are no match to the capitalist drive of giant media conglomerates. According to Herman and McChesney (2004), the global media indeed are the new missionaries of corporate capitalism, and that their business is to consolidate economic and political power. As they put it, "We regard the primary effect of the globalization process--the crucial feature of globalization, and the manifestation of the strength of the great powers and TNCs, such as News Corporation, Time Warner, Disney, and Sony, whose interests they serve--to be the implantation of the commercial model of communication, its extension to broadcasting and the 'new media', and its gradual intensification under the force of competition and bottom-line pressures" (Herman & McChesney, 2004: 9). They are convinced that media outputs are commodified, and are designed to serve market ends, not citizenship needs. They say that the work of the media, viz. the film, radio, and television industries, is to promote the aspiration of empire for the countries they work. These industries while promoting Westphalian ideologies and values also engage in propaganda and suppress any resistance of subaltern nations to the hegemony. One such is the Reagan-Thatcher New World Information and Communication Order (NWIOC) that led to the passing of the free flow of information law by UNESCO. Many critics are agreed that it is the NWIOC that paved the way for the penetration of the global media apparatus into national territories and crashed their national media on their heads. Such critics have also noted that international media policies and regulations are seriously antidemocratic, and thus weaken the sovereignty of feeble nation-states. This lack of resistance, contrary to Price's (2002) empirical accounts, is made possible through the work of global corporate ideology championed by the global media.

There is therefore a growing discontent among purists that international media policies are skewed in such a way to promote Western interests only. These include a free market economy, political freedom and deregulation, a strong private sector, and the belief that the proper objective of the economy and economic policies should be sustainable economic growth. The editors of *Democratizing Media*, Zhao and Hackett (2005), have observed that these policies are very harmful to the growth of nation-states at the periphery. As they note, "Transnational media conglomerates are probably more concerned with protection of intellectual property rights and their bottom-line issues than with diversity and freedom of public expression" (Zhao & Hackett, 2005: 16). In fact, Zhao and Hackett strongly insist that TNCs are shadow states. Examining the nexus among globalization, media, and democracy, they argue that the globalization of media flows implies the globalization of media effects, and therefore identify four waves of media democratization: (a) the huge gap in the worldwide distribution of the means of communication between technologically advanced nations and non-technologically poor nations; (b) the commodification of information and its negative implications for universal access, (c) major imbalances in the flow of information and media content between North and South, (d) the threat posed to the information/communications sovereignty of nations, and (e) the development of grassroot or alternative communication forms.

Meanwhile the commercialization of global media also has dire consequences on the values of peripheral states as it promotes consumption, individual freedom to choose, and weakens collective social action. As laments Aginam (2005) in the case of Nigeria and South Africa, Herman and McChesney (2004) similarly bemoan that the commercial ethos of the global media is vigorously displacing the public sphere with entertainment, and is committed to meeting consumers' needs than informing and educating the citizenry (see also Price, 2002), and therefore gradually eroding local cultures. On the basis of these arguments Herman and McChesney reached four basic conclusions: (1) the presence of a commercial global media shapes and directs the content of national media, leaving them incapacitated; (2) the global mediascape is increasingly dominated by Anglo-American transnational corporations with a market-model ethos; (3) the global

media system is an indispensable component of the globalizing market economy as a whole, and that (4) the oligopolistic tendencies of global media have fundamental flaws that weaken and militate against the thriving of democracies and are a barrier to meaningful self-government and public participation.

Media Globalization as a Myth

Interestingly, another school of thought maintains that the end of the nation-state is a hyperbole. This school insists that nation-states have what it takes to remain the locus for decision making on domestic policies, in spite of the Sisyphean forces of global media. Distancing themselves from the cultural imperialism thesis, defendistas argue, on the contrary, that many states do still maintain their sovereignty unperturbed by the claws of international media operations. Many states, some authors believe, till this day have the final word in matters of lawmaking and media policies such as privatization, liberalization, and deregulation (See Price, 2002; Hackett & Zhao, 2005). But this is where the argument gets messy for while Herman and McChesney (2004) on the one hand insist that it is through the passing of information and media laws such as the free information flow that megacorporate megamergers penetrate other states' media, Morris and Waisbord (2001), on the other hand, turn the argument on its head. We think it is only by empirical studies such as ethnographies that the verities of these claims could be best appreciated. Besides I am also convinced that it is not an either/or question. As Morris and Waisbord (2001) rightly point, state and global interests interact in very complex ways. For example, there is no question concerning the ability of sovereign states to control the processes and mechanisms of formal citizenship and the movement of people across borders. It is at this juncture that Morris and Waisbord should have paused for a while to catch their breath. It appears to me that the authors see the clash between state and global not as an ideological battle, as Herman and McChesney (2004) brilliantly demonstrate. If they (Morris and Waisbord, 2001) are ready to admit that "globalization has made it more difficult for all states to monopolize the information that citizens consume" (p. xvi), why then do they engage in a rather *prima facie* analysis? Other resistance strategies against global media hegemony include the promotion and maintenance of national and cultural identities, and imposing domestic content quotas on foreign material, as evident in Brazil (Straubhaar, 2001), South Africa (Horwitz, 2001), and Australia (White, 2001).

The Chinese Communist Party, for example, employs negotiated liberalization in curbing the operations of private and foreign capital in the state. Three processes are involved: (a) negotiating terms for the entry and operation of non-media state capital, private capital, and foreign capital in the media market, (b) limiting their areas of operation, and (c) making efforts to contain them through the carrot-and-stick strategy (Zhao, 2004). Already known for its tight Sisyphean strategies such as propaganda, censorship, detention of active journalists and shutting down dissident media houses, the Party intensified its control regime in the early 2000s by its move towards conglomeration, and merging of local industries. Zhao (2004) puts on record that the Party strategically announced at the turn of the millennium that the 800-or so local newspapers could only be allowed to operate if their circulation capacity reached 350, 0000. Other mechanisms of control in China against the influence of global media include firewalls, chat-room monitoring, jailing of website operators, shutting down internet cafes, and the establishment of strict content regulations and cyber police squads.

If nations such as China, Canada, and Hong Kong have been vigorously dealing with the influence of international media networks in their states, then to what extent can we say that giant media conglomerates are truly global? Are there really global media? It has been argued that Cable News Network, for instance, cannot be described as a global media because it is hugely American-centered, and does little to promote the values of the states it broadcasts to. It is questions of the sort that drive Hafez's (2007) brilliant work *The Myth of Globalization*. According to Hafez, there is too little empirical evidence to support the globalization thesis. He cautions us not to believe in media globalization preached on the power of new media and new communication technologies as Thompson (1995) holds. In his view we cannot say we are globally interconnected on the footing of hi-tech systems because access to these systems is structured and filtered on the basis of geographical location, gender, class, and technological literacy (See also Zeleza, 2003). He notes that neither the existence of satellite radio nor television should delude us into thinking that we live

in a McLuhanian 'global village' or a Castellsian 'network society'. These technologies are not a sufficient condition for global communication in the sense that they tell us little about their actual reach and potential to change cultures and societies. Often the debate about media globalization essentializes technological reach at the expense of user reach. Thus one important way to understand user reach of global media is to analyze occluded ideologies imbricated in international reporting and their effects on nation-states.

Ideologies of International Reporting

On ideological grounds the international mode of reporting by many global media actually tends to betray what they claim to stand for. It demonstrates that the globalization of international news reporting is a myth: International reporting domesticates rather than globalize the world. It is increasingly becoming difficult if not impossible for journalists to keep to their mandate of objective, fair, and balanced reportage because international reporting takes place within the prism of unipolar, national interests, cultural stereotypes, and a biased othering of nation-states, and therefore is more about reporting about countries rather than with countries. International reporting, Hafez (2007) notes, defies the definitional logic of news and news values of topicality, novelty, and universality. Quite on the contrary, it overemphasizes irrelevant news, engages in misapplication by implication, produces negative concepts of the other as legitimation for action, and fails to examine significant developments and problems. For all these mistakes, international news, Hafez (2007) observes, is guilty of regionalism, conflict perspective, political focus, elitism, and decontextualization. He writes, "One might formulate the thesis that the conflict perspective of international reporting stands in diametrical opposition to the 'harmony perspective' in local reporting and thus the construction of a negative-chaotic distant world correlates with the construction of a positive-harmonious familiar world" (Hafez, 2007: 31). It is on this basis that I have been arguing for the de-Westernization of the media and its theoretical apparatus in the context of Ghana. Taking a cue from Hafez, Western media have more often than not been accused of seeking Western interests only. For example using the 9/11 attacks on the US, Hafez (2007) shows how international media reporting can be used for propaganda ends. He is convinced that reports of the events were sharply divided between opponents and supporters of US counter-attacks on Iraq and the demonization of Islam, and that discourses on the subject were impassioned by acts of patriotism far more than they were led by rational debates, the former being favored on the airwaves (See Said, 1978). He also speaks of the complicity of CNN in promoting the agenda of the United States by making use of its tabloid-like albeit satellite advantages of production speed, information gathering and viewer reach. On the basis of his observation, Hafez (2007) concludes that "it would be illusory to believe that in the age of mass democracy media no longer produce propaganda or that media discourses are always pluralist" (p. 55).

In Africanist discourses, media globalization has similarly been looked at with suspicious eyes. Often transnational media corporations are considered tools of essentialism, othering, and above all imperialism. Scholars here express angst about the expansion of global capitalism and patterns of capitalist accumulation with all their social and spatial inequalities and divisions of labor. The emergence of global media in African nations, they intimate, marks the return to conquest, domination, exploitation, and the production of inequality, disorder, and crises. In *Rethinking Africa's Globalization*, the Malawian historian Paul Tiyambe Zeleza (2003) bemoans the almost rapturous usurpation of the cultural, economic, and political space of the South by the agglomerated force of the North masqueraded under the banner of a neo-liberalist market economy and the new work order (See Aginam, 2005). He also rejects the claim that the presence of TNCs is a sure way for African nations in particular to emerge from darkness as international news could reach the North by the operations of TNCs. As far as Africa is concerned, what is being globalized, critics point out, is not the globalization of African values and world-views for Africans but those of the Occident. A challenge such as the need "to bring globalization discourses, the experiences, and expectations of our societies, and refrain from becoming mindless parrots for Northern perspectives, preoccupations, and paradigms, not in pursuit of narrow nationalisms or the dangerous myths and essentialisms ... but as part of the struggle to create a global civilization in which we Africans, for so long victims of oppressive forces emanating from elsewhere can feel at home" (Zeleza, 2003: 61), in the minds of such scholars, requires urgent attention. This call may be

justifiable on grounds that global media are vigorously promoting the sub-culture of commodity fetishism in many parts of the world.

Global Media and the Rise of Commodity Fetishism

It is one thing for scholars to demarcate the contours of powerful international media on economically weak states, and another thing to examine their influence on social and cultural patterns in those states. At the very least, we posit that the influence of TNCs is much more pronounced on nations (collective individuals) than on their states (the people who represent them). Here I am singling out the idea of commodity fetishism, a term Marx originally used to explain not simply the product of hyper-consumerism but more important the fact that money is a fetishized commodity par excellence (Kamenka, 1983). We have already noted that one major deleterious impact of TNCs is the displacement of the public sphere with mass consumption, mass culture, and entertainment. Are the activities of global media in nation-states similar to the concerns raised by two of Frankfurt School's eminent thinkers, Adorno and Horkheimer? In "The Dialectic of Enlightenment", the duo critiqued how humans are descending in the abyss of self-destruction because of our modes of reasoning. For Adorno and Horkheimer (1949), the belief that what distinguishes (post)modern societies from those that precede them is enlightenment needs reconsideration insofar as the claim is illusory. Our capacity for sound reason is called to question in an age obsessed with commodity fetishism. The point is made that mass culture and the commercialization of almost every single atom of production in society have brought with them a kind of brainwashing and dependence on the media, Hollywood and the capitalist ideas of entrepreneurs. In this light, humans have become so consumed in the things they amass that they are shaped, defined and identified by them, said Adorno and Horkheimer (1949). Reason in a consumerist culture, is interpretive of what the individual possesses. In a sense the Cartesian maxim *cogito ergo sum* is making way for *consumo ergo sum*.

It thus is important to note that the workings of capitalism through the agents of mass culture and the global media may lead to domination. When individuals are dominated and consequently subjugated under the claws of a capitalist project, they are but reduced to what Adorno (1991) describes as psychological deindividuated social atoms. In this type of state the individual becomes obsessed by consumerism, and regrettably develops a fetish for commodities, in the context of the media, such as international news, American action thrillers, and romantic comedies. At the realm of politics, individuals are in a like manner conditioned through the presentation of the stimuli of mass media to elicit responses of compliance, patriotism, and social order in favor of the states of those media houses. Although some critics have sharply described the work of Adorno and Horkheimer as too nihilistic, only few are ready to deny its relevance for richly engaging popular culture and the media.

Conclusion

We would like to conclude by returning to our analogy of Plato's allegorical cave vis-a-vis the influence of global media and state sovereignty. Far from being a myth/reality binary, media globalization poses interesting philosophical problems such as the one Plato anticipated. To be sure the cave of globalization is a problem of how to naturally perceive globalization. We reckon that in order to behold the true forms of the influence of global media, there is the need to back scholarly speculations with evidence, and theory with empirical research (qualitative, quantitative, mixed). Thus it's high time that pro- and anti-globalization theorists stopped apperceiving the 'shadows' in their own caves, in order to step unto a middle-ground that they may understand that the forms of influence of global media on nation-states do exist in varied degrees, and can never be even. We recommend that they draw on the tools critical theorists like Marx lovingly bequeathed us.

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Source Citation (MLA 9th Edition)

Coker, Wincharles, and Eric Opoku Mensah. "Global media and the end of the nation-state: myth or reality?" *African Nebula*, no. 7, June 2014, pp. 101+. *Gale Academic OneFile*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A467048562/AONE?u=googlescholar&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=e65fb927. Accessed 17 Nov. 2023.

Gale Document Number: GALE|A467048562