



Global Implications

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These Twitter updates—a revolution in real time—show the role social media can play on the political stage. (Photo courtesy of Cambodia4kidsorg/flickr)

Technology, and increasingly media, has always driven globalization. Thomas Friedman (2005) in a landmark publication, identified several ways in which technology “flattened” the globe and contributed to our global economy. The first edition of *The World Is Flat*, written in 2005, posits that core economic concepts were changed by personal computing and high-speed internet. Access to these two technological shifts has allowed core-nation corporations to recruit workers in call centers located in China or India. Using examples like a Midwestern American woman who runs a business from her home via the call centers of Bangalore, India, Friedman warns that this new world order will exist whether core-nation businesses are ready or not, and that in order to keep its key economic role in the world, the United States will need to pay attention to how it prepares workers of the 21st century for this dynamic.

Of course not everyone agrees with Friedman’s theory. Many economists pointed out that, in reality, innovation, economic activity, and population still gather in geographically attractive areas, continuing to create economic peaks and valleys, which are by no means flattened out to mean equality for all. China’s hugely innovative and powerful cities of Shanghai and Beijing are worlds away from the rural squalor of the country’s poorest denizens.

It is worth noting that Friedman is an economist, not a sociologist. His work focuses on the economic gains and risks this new world order entails. In this section, we will look

more closely at how media globalization and technological globalization play out in a sociological perspective. As the names suggest, media globalization is the worldwide integration of media through the cross-cultural exchange of ideas, while technological globalization refers to the cross-cultural development and exchange of technology.

Media Globalization

Lyons (2005) suggests that multinational corporations are the primary vehicle of media globalization, and these corporations control global mass-media content and distribution (Compaine 2005). It is true, when looking at who controls which media outlets, that there are fewer independent news sources as larger and larger conglomerates develop. The United States offers about 1,500 newspapers, 2,600 book publishers, and an equal number of television stations, plus 6,000 magazines and a whopping 10,000 radio outlets (Bagdikian 2004).

On the surface, there is endless opportunity to find diverse media outlets. But the numbers are misleading. In 1983, a mere 50 corporations owned the bulk of mass-media outlets. Today, those 50 corporations have morphed into only six conglomerates (large companies consisting of many seemingly unrelated businesses). These conglomerates control most of the United States' mass-media vehicles. These six corporations are Time Warner, Disney, Viacom, General Electric, and the foreign-headquartered News Corporation (Australia) and Bertelsmann (Germany). Because the readers of the *Daily News* in one town might not care that their newspaper is owned by the same folks who own the *Tribune* across the country, why does it matter? Monopolies matter because less competition typically means consumers are less well served since dissenting opinions or diverse viewpoints are less likely to be found.

While some social scientists predicted that the increase in media forms would create a global village (McLuhan 1964), current research suggests that the public sphere accessing the global village will tend to be rich, Caucasoid, and English-speaking (Jan 2009). As shown by the spring 2011 uprisings throughout the Arab world, technology really does offer a window into the news of the world. For example, here in the United States we saw internet updates of Egyptian events in real time, with people tweeting, posting, and blogging on the ground in Tahirir Square.

Still, there is no question that the exchange of technology from core nations to peripheral and semi-peripheral ones leads to a number of complex issues. For instance, someone using a conflict theorist approach might focus on how much political ideology and cultural colonialism occurs with technological growth. In theory at least, technological innovations are ideology-free; a fiber optic cable is the same in a Muslim country as a secular one, a communist country or a capitalist one. But those who bring technology to less developed nations—whether they are nongovernment organizations, businesses, or governments—usually have an agenda. A functionalist, in contrast, might focus on

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the ways that technology creates new ways to share information about successful crop-growing programs, or on the economic benefits of opening a new market for cell phone use. Either way, there are cultural and societal assumptions and norms being delivered along with those high-speed wires.

Cultural and ideological bias are not the only risks of media globalization. In addition to the risk of cultural imperialism and the loss of local culture, other problems come with the benefits of a more interconnected globe. One risk is the potential censoring by national governments that let in only the information and media they feel serves their message, as can be seen in China. In addition, core nations such as the United States risk the use of international media such as the internet to circumvent local laws against socially deviant and dangerous behaviors such as gambling, child pornography, and the sex trade. Offshore or international web sites allow U.S. citizens (as well as others) to seek out whatever illegal (in the United States) or illicit information they want, from 24-hour online gambling sites that do not require proof of age, to sites that sell child pornography. These examples illustrate the societal risks of unfettered information flow.

China and the Internet: An Uncomfortable Friendship



What information is accessible to these patrons of an internet café in China? What is censored from their view? (Photo Courtesy of Kai Hendry/flickr)

In the United States, the internet is used to access illegal gambling and pornography sites, as well as to research stocks, crowd-source what car to buy, or keep in touch with childhood friends. Can we allow one or more of those activities, while restricting the rest? And who decides what needs restricting? In a country with democratic principles and an underlying belief in free-market capitalism, the answer is decided in the court system. But globally, the questions—and the government’s responses—are very different.

China is in many ways the global poster child for the uncomfortable relationship between internet freedom and government control. A country with a tight rein on the dissemination of information, China has long worked to suppress what it calls “harmful

information,” including dissent concerning government politics, dialogue about China’s role in Tibet, or criticism of the government’s handling of events.

With sites like Twitter, Facebook and YouTube blocked in China, the nation’s internet users—some 500 million strong in 2011—turn to local media companies for their needs. Renren.com is China’s answer to Facebook. Perhaps more importantly from a social-change perspective, Sina Weibo is China’s version of Twitter. Microblogging, or *weibo*, acts like Twitter in that users can post short messages that can be read by their subscribers. And because these services move so quickly and with such wide scope, it is difficult for government overseers to keep up. This tool was used to criticize government response to a deadly rail crash and to protest a chemical plant. It was also credited with the government’s decision to report more accurately on the air pollution in Beijing, which occurred after a high-profile campaign by a well-known property developer (Pierson 2012).

There is no question of China’s authoritarian government ruling over this new form of internet communication. The nation blocks the use of certain terms, such as human rights, and passes new laws that require people to register with their real names, making it more dangerous to criticize government actions. Indeed, 56-year-old microblogger Wang Lihong was recently sentenced to nine months in prison for “stirring up trouble,” as her government described her work helping people with government grievances (Bristow 2011). But the government cannot shut down this flow of information completely. Foreign companies, seeking to engage with the increasingly important Chinese consumer market, have their own accounts: the NBA has more than 5 million followers, and Tom Cruise’s Weibo account boasts almost 3 million followers (Zhang 2011). The government, too, uses Weibo to get its own message across. As 2012 progresses, China’s approach to social media and the freedoms it offers will be watched anxiously—on Sina Weibo and beyond—by the rest of the world.

Technological Globalization

Technological globalization is impacted in large part by technological diffusion, the spread of technology across borders. In the last two decades, there has been rapid improvement in the spread of technology to peripheral and semi-peripheral nations, and a 2008 World Bank report discusses both the benefits and ongoing challenges of this diffusion. In general, the report found that technological progress and economic growth rates were linked, and that the rise in technological progress has helped improve the situations of many living in absolute poverty (World Bank 2008). The report recognizes that rural and low-tech products such as corn can benefit from new technological innovations, and that, conversely, technologies like mobile banking can aid those whose rural existence consists of low-tech market vending. In addition, technological advances in areas like mobile phones can lead to competition, lowered prices, and concurrent improvements in related areas such as mobile banking and information sharing.

However, the same patterns of social inequality that create a digital divide in the United States also create digital divides in peripheral and semi-peripheral nations. While the growth of technology use among countries has increased dramatically over the past several decades, the spread of technology within countries is significantly slower among peripheral and semi-peripheral nations. In these countries, far fewer people have the training and skills to take advantage of new technology, let alone access it. Technological access tends to be clustered around urban areas, leaving out vast swaths of peripheral-nation citizens. While the diffusion of information technologies has the potential to resolve many global social problems, it is often the population most in need that is most affected by the digital divide. For example, technology to purify water could save many lives, but the villages in peripheral nations most in need of water purification don't have access to the technology, the funds to purchase it, or the technological comfort level to introduce it as a solution.

The Mighty Cell Phone: How Mobile Phones Are Impacting Sub-Saharan Africa

In much of Africa's poorest countries there is a marked lack of infrastructure. Bad roads, limited electricity, minimal schools—the list goes on. Access to telephones has long been on that list. But while landline access has not changed appreciably during the past 10 years, there's been a marked fivefold increase in mobile phone access; more than a third of people in Sub-Saharan Africa have the ability to access a mobile phone (Katine 2010). Even more can access a “village phone”—a shared phone program created by the Grameen Foundation. With access to mobile phone technology, a host of benefits are available that have the potential to change the dynamics in these poorest nations. Sometimes that change is as simple as being able to make a phone call to neighboring market towns. By finding out which markets have vendors interested in their goods, fishers and farmers can ensure they travel to the market that will serve them best, avoiding a wasted trip. Others can use mobile phones and some of the emerging money-sending systems to securely send money from one place to a family member or business partner elsewhere (Katine 2010).

These programs are often funded by businesses like Germany's Vodafone or Britain's Masbabi, which hope to gain market share in the region. Phone giant Nokia points out that worldwide there are 4 billion mobile phone users—that's more than twice as many bank accounts that exist—meaning there is ripe opportunity to connect banking companies with people who need their services (ITU Telecom 2009). Not all access is corporate-based, however. Other programs are funded by business organizations that seek to help peripheral nations with tools for innovation and entrepreneurship.

But this wave of innovation and potential business comes with costs. There is, certainly, the risk of cultural imperialism, and the assumption that core nations (and core-nation multinationals) know what is best for those struggling in the world's poorest communities. Whether well intentioned or not, the vision of a continent of Africans

successfully chatting on their iPhone may not be ideal. As with all aspects of global inequity, technology in Africa requires more than just foreign investment. There must be a concerted effort to ensure the benefits of technology get to where they are needed most.

Summary

Technology drives globalization, but what that means can be hard to decipher. While some economists see technological advances leading to a more level playing field where anyone anywhere can be a global contender, the reality is that opportunity still clusters in geographically advantaged areas. Still, technological diffusion has led to the spread of more and more technology across borders into peripheral and semi-peripheral nations. However, true technological global equality is a long way off.

Section Quiz

When Japanese scientists develop a new vaccine for swine flu and offer that technology to American pharmaceutical companies, _____ has taken place.

1. media globalization
2. technological diffusion
3. monetizing
4. planned obsolescence

Answer

B

In the mid-90s, the U.S. government grew concerned that Microsoft was a _____, exercising disproportionate control over the available choices and prices of computers.

1. monopoly
2. conglomerate
3. functionalism
4. technological globalization

Answer

A

The movie *Babel* featured an international cast and was filmed on location in various nations. When it screened in theaters worldwide, it introduced a number of ideas and philosophies about cross-cultural connections. This might be an example of:

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1. technology
2. conglomerating
3. symbolic interaction
4. media globalization

Answer

D

Which of the following is *not* a risk of media globalization?

1. The creation of cultural and ideological biases
2. The creation of local monopolies
3. The risk of cultural imperialism
4. The loss of local culture

Answer

B

The government of _____ blocks citizens' access to popular new media sites like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter.

1. China
2. India
3. Afghanistan
4. Australia

Answer

A

Short Answer

Do you believe that technology has indeed flattened the world in terms of providing opportunity? Why or why not? Give examples to support your reason.

Where do you get your news? Is it owned by a large conglomerate (you can do a web search and find out!)? Does it matter to you who owns your local news outlets? Why or why not?

Who do you think is most likely to bring innovation and technology (like cell phone businesses) to Sub-Saharan Africa: nonprofit organizations, governments, or businesses? Why?

Further Research

Check out more on the global digital divide here: <http://ucatlans.ucsc.edu/communication/digitaldivide.php>

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