Abstract:

Communication technology has shrunk the world facilitating increase of media access and reach but has become counterproductive as it has led to concentration of media ownership. Serious apprehensions have been expressed at this concentration of ownership of print and electronic media in the hands of a few transnationals. The hypothesis that greater the media expansion higher the degree of concentration of ownership is proving significant. Marshall McLuhan’s concept of global village facilitated interaction between lifestyles of diversified cultures by transcending the geographical boundaries. Unfortunately this perception has assumed a dubious distinction perpetuating one world and one culture phenomenon. Even Ted Turner propounds the theory of global citizenship. Heterogeneity is the essential characteristic of culture. With one media and one culture philosophy, is the world moving towards homogeneity threatening the survival of local cultures?

Introduction:

“In a film of Rainer Fassbinder’s there is a nightmare vision in which a single company runs all of Germany’s media from an antiseptic office tower”, exclaims Leo Bogart while drawing attention to the danger of media monopoly. In an era of global communication network where the marriage of computers and telecommunications has shrunk the world to the size of a football this nightmare of Leo Bogart is soon turning into a reality.

Invasion from sky has resulted in two contradictory developments. Firstly, it has enormously increased media access and reach. Secondly it has facilitated concentration of media ownership. In both totalitarian and democratic countries, the once bonded viewers of government-controlled media today have a mind boggling variety of mass media to choose from. It was inevitable for any country to have succumbed to the invasion from the sky. However, this unconditional surrender to media aggression has far reaching consequences.

Hong Kong based STAR (Satellite Television Asian Region) TV reaches 42 million homes including 30.5 million in China and 7.3 million in India.
Rupert Murdoch, the media monarch now has access to more than 33 European countries and his satellite signals reach a broad horizon extending from Japan to Turkey including Asian giants India and China. The pioneer of transnational broadcasting, CNN international has captured a sizable market in Europe, Asia and America.

Serious apprehensions have been expressed at this concentration of ownership of print and electronic media in the hands of a few transnationals. Pradip N. Thomas questions the motive behind this media expansion and he says, ‘In spite of notable achievements, we need to recognise the often hidden truth that the purveyors of the global communications revolution are selective in their interests, interpretations, innovations and intercessions”.

Mintz and Cohen’s (1970) perspective of the issue is also worth quoting. They have felt that “Those who own the mass media, unfortunately, have extension non-communication financial investments. The grave danger here is that consumer of their information and comment are unaware of the special interests for which the mass media plead. Can we trust those who profit from war to discuss over their networks the relative merits of war and peace? To what extent are those people using the mass media to enrich themselves and to the detriment of their communities and their nation”.

Marshall McLunhan’s concept of global village facilitated interaction between lifestyles of diversified cultures by transcending the geographical boundaries. Unfortunately this perception has assumed a dubious distinction perpetuating ‘one world and one culture’ phenomenon. Even Ted Turner propounds the theory of global citizenship. However, media giant of Turner’s stature who perceives world as a conglomeration of different neighbourhoods feigns ignorance of freedom of speech and expression in order to pitch his cable tent in China. Obviously, in the mad race to establish media access and plurality, the socio-cultural factor has been relegated to the background.

It is appropriate to quote Herbert I. Schiller who sees cultural domination as an offshoot of globalization. According to him, “Cultural domination means also adopting broadcasting systems that depend on advertising and accepting deregulatory practices that transform the public mails, telephone systems and cable television into private profit centres...The domination that exists today, though still bearing a marked American imprint, is better understood as transnational corporate cultural domination”.

The rationale behind this criticism is the fact that a handful of giant advertising agency groups are calling shots regarding media buying
decisions. Advertising, being the primary source of income, has compelled media owners to succumb to their financial muscle power.

Mass media are rescheduling and reformulating their programme content in order to appease top notchers. This unfortunately has culminated in a situation where a strategy to sell a detergent or toothpaste is no different from marketing a newspaper or a television programme.

Today media are emphasizing more on consumption of consumer perishables than on achieving distinct human experiences and sensibilities which varies from one culture to another. Choices of a breakfast cereal cannot square with the experiences one derives from exposure to media.

Robert Borofsky defines culture as “One which constitutes the very matrix within which people formulate their ideas....carry out their actions.” Since every society has its own cultural boundaries, media play a crucial role in disseminating information which enable people to form values, attitudes and beliefs. Apparently, media are still harping on Western values and culture.

The analysis of programmes one get to see on today’s television for instance denotes that multiplicity of channels is a farce as the programmes are repetitive and manipulated by one owner. American TV networks, for instance, compete with one another by running more and more soap operas, game shows, talking heads and sit coms. These are the kind of programmes that viewers are supposed to be content with.

The so called Asian channel is a misnomer as it merely produces Asian editions of American programmes. At the heart of these American programmes is the gross perpetuation of consumer culture which indulges in the celebration of consumer products.

According to Marjoirie Ferguson, “some of the principle elements of globalization are global cultural hegemony and democracy for export via American TV.” Media like television have become agents of cultural imperialism. Even Asian media run by Westerners tend to follow American values and culture. The complexities of the cultural fabric of American society are never questioned. Instead they are meekly accepted and branded as progressive. Oprah Winfrey’s show which has frank sexual discussions is relevant in some cultural contexts. These endeavours to photocopy anything Western is posing a serious threat to cultural identities.

In India there is a conflict between two cultures and value systems. National media which conformed to Indian culture and values have become vulnerable in the face of satellite competition. As a consequence aesthetics,
values, ethics, critical thinking and creativity have suffered in the intense competition of media to fulfil popular demand.

Even though most of the countries in the Asian region have succumbed to cultural colonialism, Japan has successfully preserved its culture and values from Western onslaught. Japanese society derives its strength and confidence from its traditional elements and is, therefore, strong enough to confront the challenges of transnational media. Japan’s success is attributed to its economic and political stability. Further, in the development of communication technology Japan is far ahead of its Western allies. Thus political and economic stability strengthens a nation’s cultural identity.

People in several Asian countries including India are facing a dilemma. On one hand, there is government monopoly over electronic media and on the other; satellite television has perpetuated a system of monopoly media ownership. One is conspicuous and the other veiled.

The ultimate concern is whether local cultures face any threat from the influx of foreign programmes. Sixty to seventy percent of content in satellite channels are foreign programmes and the popular Zee TV known for indigenously produced programmes imitates American soaps, talk and game shows. This heavy consumption of foreign and those programmes modelled on Western concepts by local audience are bound to lead to negative consequences in the form of culture wars.

In India a new ordinance on cable network has come into force which requires cable operators to adhere to programming and advertising for pay channels. However Star and Zee TVs which have free to-air channels are kept out of the purview of the ordinance. Further, the codes will also apply to the video channels of the cable operators. Foreign and Indian pay channels will have to conform to Indian programme and advertising codes. Whether countries like India with a fragile media policy but rich cultural heritage endure corporate dictatorship through media is an issue that has assumed gigantic proportions.