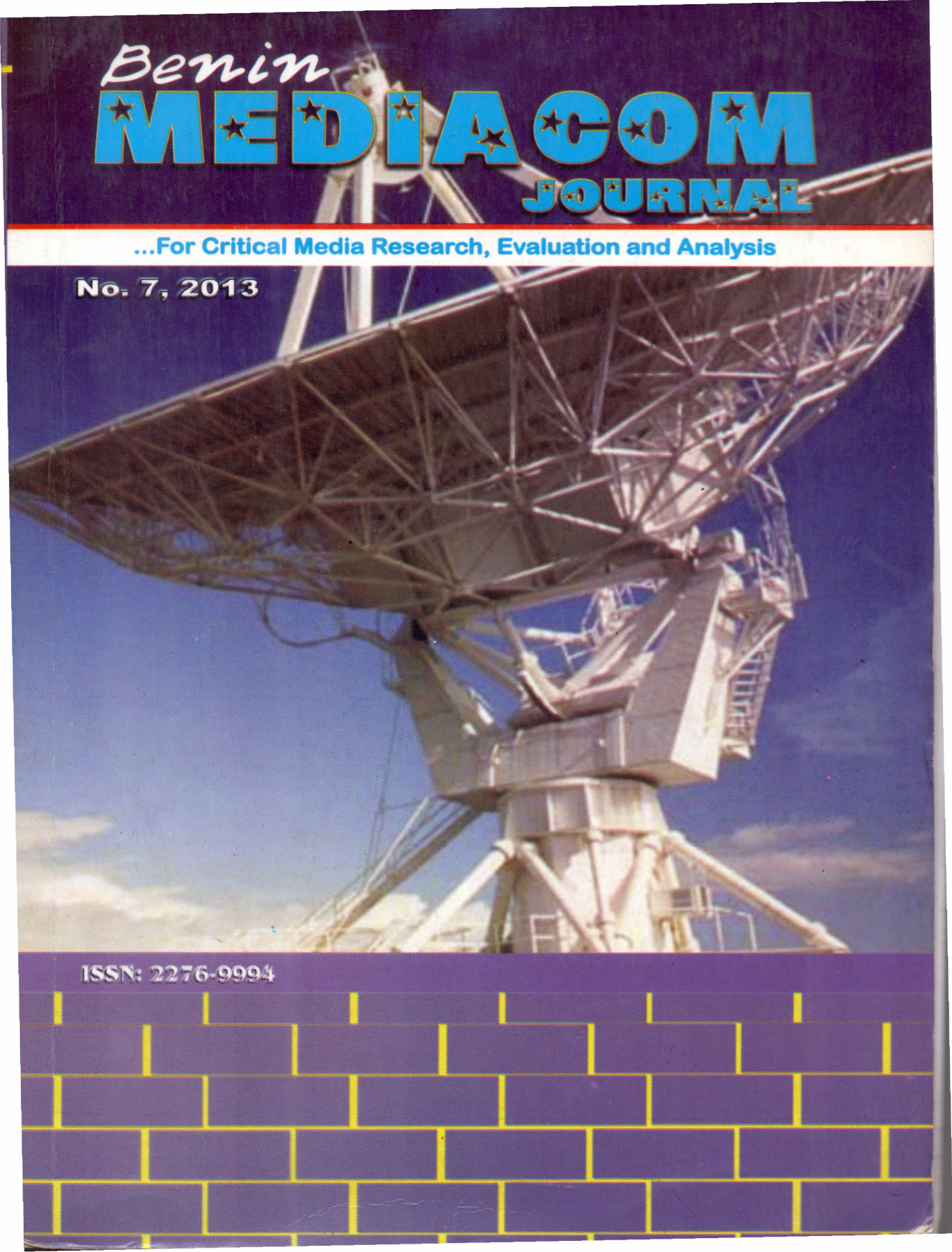


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Cultural Imperialism Theory and Mass Communication Research: A Critical Review

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Abstract

This paper explored the origin, basic postulations, and selected scholars' comments on the cultural imperialism theory. Based on the five-item scale consisting of scope, testability, parsimony, utility, and heuristic proposed by Julia Wood (1997), this paper attempted a critical evaluation of the cultivation theory and concluded that it is a huge success in heuristic, considering the intense and immense global debates it had generated and sustained for almost a century. The paper therefore recommended it as such to mass communication scholars and policy makers who are interested in the preservation of local cultures, with emphasis on the point that the subtle cultural modification potentials of foreign media contents is a living reality.

Keywords: Cultural imperialism theory, mass communication, research.

Introduction

Although many scholars credit Herb Schiller as the originator of the cultural imperialism theory in 1973, Martin and Nakayama (2013) however traced it even further back to the 1920s when, according to them, discussions about the phenomenon began and thrived under various names such as *media imperialism*, *electronic colonialism*, and *cultural imperialism*. In another contribution to literature, Branston and Stafford (2006:) observed that the theory emerged as a reaction to the hegemonic and loudly canvassed positions of Hollywood tycoons that cultural products are popular and pervasive outside America because of their inherent "universal appeal". They noted that Herbert Schiller (sic) (1919-2000) was one of the best known antagonists of cross-border media hegemony and the brain behind the concept, *cultural imperialism*, that he later called *transnational corporate cultural domination* following large scale purchase of controlling interests of huge segments of American media and cultural industries by entities outside the country.

Assumptions and Principles of the Cultural Imperialism Theory

Cultural imperialism is basically "the invasion of an indigenous people's culture by powerful foreign countries through mass media" according to Baran (2006,p. 515). This view finds support in the words of Okpoko (2009,p. 105) who conceives media imperialism as "...the utilization of the media by powerful economies (in) ensuring, shaping of culture and media content of other

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countries.” The foregoing positions boil down to the observation by Boyd-Barret (1979) cited by Tijani (2009) that cultural imperialism has two dominant issues of cultural invasion and one-sidedness of power and allied resources. Moreover, Baran and Okpoko reflected the words of Schiller (1976) cited by Ekeanyanwu (2012,p.39) that cultural imperialism is the proposition expressed in the following words.

A society is brought into the modern world system when its dominating stratum is attracted, pressured, forced, and sometimes bribed into shaping its social institutions to correspond to, or even promote, the values and structures of the dominating centre of the system.

Similarly, in a quest for a lucid picture of cultural imperialism, Alexander (1983) cited in Onakpa (2010,p. 226) as stated as that.

The position of Western media in moving forward and distribution of cultural traits all over the world is so great that it is better left unmeasured. They determine how people talk, dress and even view the world, especially among the audience in the third world countries. All these are made possible through pictorial communication...

From other elements in the literature (such as Martin and Nakayama 2013; Ekeanyanwu, 2012; Anaeto, Onabajo, and Osifeso, 2008; Branston and Stafford, 2006) the following major postulations of the cultural imperialism theory emerge.

- Media is a powerful vehicle for creation and transmission of culture across borders.
- Media systems and products in Western nations, particularly America, dominate media systems and products in other countries due to differences in economic and technological advancement.
- Media products from Western nations, because of their sheer plurality, pervasiveness, and dominance, influence indigenous culture in other nations to the detriment of such nation’s cultural heritage.

As a concept/theory, which is almost a century old on the agenda of academic discourse, analyses and comments on the cultural imperialism theory are expectedly many and divergent. For instance, against the background of widespread outcry against cultural imperialism, Baran (2006: 517) observed that “...it is folly, then, to argue that non-native media content will have no effect on local culture –as do many U.S. media content producers”. A group of

international assembly of scholars (MacBride, Abel, Beuve-Méry, Ekonzo, Márquez, Losev, Lubis, Masmoudi, Nagai, Omu, Osolnik, Oteifi, Pronk, Somavía, Verghese, and Zimmerman, 1980,p. 162) underscored the seriousness of cultural imperialism when they observed that “The media in developing countries take a high percentage of their cultural and entertainment content from a few developed countries, and chiefly from a few large producers in those countries. The flow in the other direction is a mere trickle by comparison.”

On the other hand, Martin and Nakayama (2013,p. 380) contend that cultural imperialism is as complex as its definition because of the interplay of economic, nationalist, and cultural forces which “...make it difficult to determine with much certainty how significant cultural imperialism might be.” Citing John Tomlinson (1991), Martin and Nakayama however concede that five ways of thinking about cultural imperialism include the followings.

- Cultural domination
- Media imperialism
- Nationalist discourse
- Critique of global capitalism and
- Critique of global modernity

Based on the premise of the debate on whether there is a clear-cut distinction between one culture and another, Oladepo (2012,p.133) challenged the validity of cultural imperialism theory in evolving contemporary society. He buttressed his position with the research findings by Akpabio and Mustapha-Lambe (2008) that “...preference for foreign films is simply based on its high quality in comparison to local competition.” However, Oladepo contradicted himself in the same article two pages later when he asserted that, “Cultural imperialism has remained a relevant theory due to the domination of the global media sphere by ‘big’ media organizations mostly from the West.”

Nevertheless, a major distinction between the cultural imperialism theory and other media effects theories is that cultural imperialism theory focuses on the cultural implications and effects of trans-border communication, while other theories deal with mass media messages in general on their recipients.

Interpretation and Critique of the Cultural Imperialism Theory

To interpret and criticize this theory meaningfully, the logical first task is to specify and adopt a suitable scale. For this purpose, this writer finds the five-element parameter as postulated by Julia Wood (1997: 55) suitable and applicable to critiquing the cultural imperialism theory. The elements include *scope, testability, parsimony, utility, and heurism*.

Criterion 1: Scope of the Cultural Imperialism Theory

The cultural imperialism theory basically seeks to establish the phenomenon of cultural domination by more endowed and more developed nations of less endowed and less developed nations through mass media products such as movies and news. To that extent, the theory is a huge success. However, identifying a problem is one thing, suggesting practical solutions is another thing

altogether. The cultural imperialism fails to suggest how less endowed and less developed nations can overcome cultural imperialism without closing themselves to beneficial aspects of exposure to other cultures, whether dominant or recessive.

Criterion 2: Testability of the Cultural Imperialism Theory

The testability of a theory is a measure of its amenability or otherwise to empirical analysis and application. The key concepts and assumptions of the theory are testable and have been observed in many societies. It is easy to observe that more endowed and more developed nations dominate less endowed and less developed nations through mass media products such as movies and news.

Criterion 3: Parsimony and the Cultural Imperialism Theory

The concept of parsimony as a criterion for evaluating a theory can be distilled to the question: are the postulates of the theory comprehensive, yet simple? The cultural imperialism ranks low on the parsimony scale. Its basic concept or postulation is shrouded in multitude of words, even in reviews by most scholars in the literature.

Criterion 4: Utility of the Cultural Imperialism Theory

The utility evaluation criterion seeks to answer the question: how useful is a theory vis-à-vis the goal it seeks to accomplish? The cultural imperialism theory is more of scholarly noise and less of a practical guide to solving communication problems in society. The theory fails to present a valid and convincing argument against capitalism. Neither did it show how powerful nations are culpable for the economic and political situations in less powerful countries.

Criterion 5: Heurism and the Cultivation Theory

A theory is said to be heuristic if it stimulates follow up thinking, research, modification and application. The cultural imperialism theory is a huge success in heurism, especially considering that it had generated intense global scholarly contentions for almost a century. Arguably, the scholarly debates following in the wake of the cultural imperialism theory contributed to notable national and international efforts aimed at solving communication challenges in society. Such efforts include the UNESCO sponsored global debate that culminated in the famous MacBride *et al* report titled, *Many Voices, One World: Communication and Society Today and Tomorrow. Report by the International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems*.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Given the basic principles of the cultural imperialism theory, it is easy to conjecture that media products from economically and technologically more advanced nations will continue to dominantly influence indigenous culture in nations with comparative economic and technological disadvantages. The theory

is an insight into the process of enculturation arising from media invasion of one country by another. Therefore, cultural imperialism theory should continue to be a reminder to various stakeholders, especially mass communication scholars and policy makers who are interested in the preservation of local cultures, that the subtle cultural modification potentials of foreign media contents is a living reality.

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