Technology Discourses in Globalization Debates

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INTRODUCTION

Globalization, a key concept in our modern and postmodern discourse, is a highly contentious term that continues to generate endless debates about its form and consequences on our societies. Anthony Giddens (1999) professes that while the term is "not particularly attractive or an elegant one, absolutely no one who wants to understand our prospects and possibilities can ignore it." While many agree that it denotes the occurrence of social change, there is, however, less agreement what these changes may be and whether they, in effect, represent the transition of one form of society to another (i.e., the industrial to the postindustrial or information society). Nevertheless, the increase in the volume of discourses surrounding the term is significant in illuminating that the increased interdependence of the world can lead to new forms of challenges, concerns, empowerment, and resistance with the symbolic and material exchanges of ideas, products, and services, as well as the formation of social networks (Castells, 1998). Castells (1996, 2000, 2001), in his numerous reflections on the network society, asserts that since the 1980s, a new economy has emerged that is global, information-based, and interconnected. This new form of economy remains capitalist in form but is situated on an informational rather than an industrial form of development; at the core of the informational mode of development are networks contributing to a network society.

The term globalization then captures a complex set of processes that involve political, social, economic, cultural, and technological factors, and these intersect with each other in crucial but unpredictable and uneven ways (Stammers & Eschle, 2005, p. 57). Crucial to the debates on globalization is the role of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in making the world a connected entity. ICTs are often seen as providing a new platform to enable the flows, exchanges, and networks in analysing globalization as a multidimensional process. According to Hamid Mowlana (1997), a useful way of viewing the "postindustrial age" or the "information age" is to look at it as a tangible or material infrastructure being built into contemporary societies (p. 176). In this sense, modern communication and information technologies, in the form of satellites, computers, and radar, comprise the new infrastructure. Characteristics of new media technologies, like the Internet and mobile phones, include digitization, convergence, and networking, which enables new ways to distribute, store, consume, and interact with information that facilitates a networked distribution on a global scale (Flew, 2007, p. 22).

BACKGROUND

While globalization is a relatively a new concept that has gained much currency and controversy in the last two to three decades, the idea of high-speed transport and communications in some ways altering our social reality in terms of the construction of the temporal or social space is not in itself a new idea. There is an abundance of references in literary texts and historical annals to human interaction and concepts of geography being negotiated through technological innovations. In literary fiction, specifically, the future is often imaged through the advances in technology that prophesy degrees of technological determinism on human society. There have been references to a global economy through industrialization and technological innovations dating back from 1870 to 1914 (See Kobrin). Marshall McLuhan's (1964) concept of the "global village" constructed the notion of a world community brought about by communication technologies and, consequently, technical biases, he argues, were intrinsic to our cognitive constructions of reality.

Similar ideas were propounded by Martin Heidegger (1971), who prophesied the "abolition of distance" as a distinctive feature of our modern condition where all "distances in time and space are shrinking" (p. 165). Addressing the ability of modern technology to premise on simultaneity and instantaneousness, Heidegger perceived technology as a levelling experience for individuals and in the process it produces a loss of meaning in defining what is far or near. Equally, Robertson (1992) alludes to the compression of time and space and an intensification of a consciousness of the world. Benedict Anderson (1991), in *Imagined Communities,* locates cultural artefacts and technological innovations, including books and press, as crucial in shaping our social imagination, political engagements, and our notions of community. Much of the rhetoric on globalization, as such, has revolved around the notion of "deterritorialization," where the material space is replaced with social activities that emphasise the connectedness of the world. However,

globalization, in our contemporary context, is deemed to be more expansive in terms of the nations involved and deeper in terms of the intensity of interactions and interdependence (Haleja, 2005, p. 7). In later debates, globalization has entailed the reconfiguration of material spaces where social space is no longer tightly defined by territoriality and, as such, the world becomes borderless. In a nutshell, globalization as advanced by ICTs is seen as both empowering as well as causing conflict and divisiveness within and between countries (Wilson, 1998, p.2).

The Implication of ICTs

Globalization has been discussed as a philosophy of ideas and as empirically (i.e., quantitatively and qualitatively) discernible processes that are occurring throughout the world. The process of change associated with globalization has been defined and viewed from various perspectives spanning the economic, social, political, legal, technological, and cultural, and has involved a range of viewpoints from the cynics to the ardent supporters of an open, borderless world of trade, commerce, and symbolic exchanges. Kaldor et al. (cf. Zanfei, 2005, p. 7) refer to the different perspectives of economic globalization ranging from the "supporters" who have championed the value of free international integration of economies since the early 1990s, to the "regressives" who have endorsed globalization when only deemed beneficial to an indigenous nation, and "rejectionists" who have clamoured for the greater protection of national economies.

These debates often implicate information and communication technologies (ICTs) as driving the change. ICTs encompass the full range of the "production, distribution and consumption of messages, across all media from radio and television, to satellite to Internet, and tangentially the 'information revolution' denotes the rapid advances in the power and speed of computers, the digitalization of information, and the convergence of once-separate industries to a new amalgam of production, distribution and consumption activities" (Wilson, 1998, pp. 6-7). According to Wilson (1998), this conveys both the "cross-border flow of information content as well as hardware used nationally and locally to produce, distribute and consume information" (pp. 6-7). Globalization has also been viewed as being primarily driven by the Internet and ICTs, which enable peoples, ideas, investments, goods, and services to come together through interconnected economies (Lang, 2001). Manuel Castells (2000) situates ICTs as fundamental in enabling the expansion of social and organizational networks in the information age, where information generation and processing are intrinsically entwined in the transformation of societies.

From this perspective, "globalization and technological advances in ICTs signify a fundamental transformation of the economy" (Alecke & Untiedt, 2000). Inevitably, the ICT revolution has been viewed as the primary catalyst for the process of globalization. It provides the tools for the postindustrial age and the foundations for a knowledge economy facilitating the rapid transfer and acquisition of knowledge (Ajayi, 2000; Morales-Gomez & Melesse, 1998). The wiring of the planet through ICTs has been seen as the "death of distance" (Caincross, 1997), where there is a shrinking of physical spaces and temporal distances. Anthony Giddens (1990, p. 64) similarly stresses the reframing of social geography due to globalization where there is "an intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa." While the death of distance through the speed of communication presents opportunities for economies and polities, the increasing modernization and industrialization, as well as the attendant interconnectedness of the world, is also seen as giving rise to new forms of risk (Beck, 1992). Ulrich Beck (1992) argues that "a universalization of hazards accompanies industrial production, independent of the place where they are produced; food chains connect practically everyone on earth to everyone else" (p. 39). For example, terrorism in the age of globalization is seen as a global threat that can have consequences for both the global economy as well as individual governments, posing new forms of security threat which require both local and global governance.

In fact, reductionist models of globalization have limited their analyses to primarily economic and/or technological perspectives. These perspectives stress the "growing integration and liberalisation of worldwide markets, the development of communications and transport technologies and the rapid growth of global governance institutions above and beyond the state" (Stammers & Eschle, 2005, p. 55). Marxist and neo-Marxists view technological and institutional developments as indicative of a shift in the more fundamental structures of capitalism while being uncertain of whether these have constrained or empowered local spaces (Stammers & Eschle, 2005, p. 55).

Giddens (1990, 1999) defines globalization as not a singular process, but a complex set of processes that operate in a contradictory and dialectical manner. While nations lose a degree of economic power through these processes, Giddens reiterates that globalization has also been the reason for cultural revival of local identities in different parts of the world. In tandem with the resonant theme of deterritorialization, the discourses of globalization in its initial phases also mooted the withering of nation states and the inability of politicians to influence events. Hardt and Negri (2000) propound that in the age of globalization, a system of imperialism is created through a network of global and supranational entities that have forced nation states in some ways to compromise their jurisdiction and sovereignty. While postmodernity has not witnessed the demise of the nation state, it has nevertheless witnessed the emergence of global governance through intermediary and international institu-

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