

The impact of the homogeneous global advertising on multicultural reality

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Abstract

This paper provides an overview of the main effects of the global homogeneous advertising, which emerged in our country after 1989. This new merger-mania trend, globalization, has been the main worldwide dramatic and significant transformation of the past century. Diverse cultures are becoming visible: new global technology allows this diversity to be declared, acknowledged and shared, allowing for a link of civilizations and societies. However, globalization has also had many negative effects upon humanity. It also submits a perspective on the new tendencies and trends characterizing advertising as a new means of mass education and formation. We shall focus on the relationship between the global corporatism, the global target market and the global market values, on the one hand, and the impact of consumerism and advertising, on the other hand. We shall address the nature of the contemporary capitalism and the impact the market has upon culture and society in general. We shall also approach the intricate relations between globalization, consumption and identity. Above all, the goal of the study is to provide the context and the perspective of the ever-increasing social and cultural impact of the new global advertising system, upon the diverse reality of the world today.

Keywords: globalization, hegemony, corporations, market, consumption, diversity, culture, identity, advertising system.

1 Introduction

1.1 Intention

This essay-study is not the place for a detailed discussion on concrete cultural, economic and political events. Nor is it a thorough and comprehensive analysis of the contemporary advertising system. It tries to provide an overview of some



of the opinions revolving around the matters of globalization, hegemony, corporations, market, consumption, diversity, culture and identity. It is not exhaustive but it tries to present some of the relationships between the above issues in the context of the contemporary Romanian advertising system.

1.2 Motivation

It is commonly agreed that human beings are social beings. We live in social settings, surrounded by other social beings; we cannot even exist as human beings outside society. The system that makes socialization and society work, the system that provides the means of socialization and human interaction is communication. Communication is the main informant of our ideology, of our “cultural sphere of meaning”, as Cortese ([1], p. 1) states it.

Everything we know regarding culture, identity and normalcy comes from or is reflected by the mass media and the advertising system, the main “protagonists” in the communication process in the contemporary world. At the same time, part, if not most of what we are, has the same origin.

We define ourselves as human beings based on the information and on its result: the representations we are exposed to. Modern technology has made information and communication global. It reaches nearly every location and informs us about almost everything.

The global media is profoundly and significantly influenced by the advertising system, which is its main sponsor. Furthermore, the global advertising system is indubitably and completely controlled by its generator: the transnational corporations (TNCs). We can easily see that this practice is mostly related to another aspect of communication: the source. This is the one that proposes and produces the message.

There is only one more feature of communication: the receiver. The receiver is the very target of the whole communication process. As receivers, we are informed and formed by it. And we tend to think that we have some control over it, that, we are, too, an active part in the communicational process, not just a passive recipient of the capitalist discourse of the global multinationals.

2 The global world

Globalization is the major trend at the outset of the twenty-first century. We are all experiencing the famous “merger-mania”, the joining together on all levels of our lives. We are all integrated and part of the major “Global” world, of the “Global” screen, we are all interconnected.

The continuously advancing technology enables instant personal links between individuals from all part of the world, even the most remote ones. The social and cultural lives of individuals are consequently changing irreversibly. The ideas of space and time are also changing irrevocably. It also enables unbelievable-before economic exchanges and political connections, which lead to major quests for power-attainment.

Globalization is not, as Bart Van Steebnbergen noted, the dreamt and desired “universalism” of philosophers, which was “based on global initiatives and undertakings and on the will to make the world a better place”. On the contrary,



it is “what is happening to us all, to global effects that are unintended and unanticipated” ([2], p. 26).

Being global means what “is” and “must be”, rather than what “might” or “should be”. Globalization expresses the unintended and unpredictable effects of the economic rationalism, of capitalism, of consumerism, manifested on the large, global scale. It “is a story about inexorability, economic logic, natural interest and market forces” (Harris [3], p.1).

2.1 Diversity in the global world

While multinational businesses are springing out and taking over, national and human relationships are gradually forgotten. Respect for the individual uniqueness, for social and cultural diversity becomes incongruous.

Human individuality is at stake because diversity is threatened by the very essence of this process. In the perspective of the cold, economic rationalism, notions such as “community”, “cultural identity” and “diversity” seem to be soft and romantic. There is no interest in and respect for human uniqueness, for self-expression when “major”, “global” economic reasons are also under consideration. “The ever-increasing transnational flow of commodities, be they material or immaterial, seems to create a set of common cultural denominators which threaten to eradicate local distinctions” (Eriksen [4], p. 2).

Globalization is not only “happening to us all”! It implies new powers, new truths on cultural, social and economic scales, to name just a few. Consequently, it means new issues to be taken into consideration because these new realities are affecting all of us, our lives and our societies.

Therefore, more attention should be paid to its consequences rather than to its overestimated development. Experts on this domain are too focused on the market issues; they are overconsidering the efficiency and profit-increase. It should not be about what we can do for the market (especially to extend the market), but about what the market is doing to us! We should therefore acknowledge and take greater responsibility for the “globalization” ethics, for the morals of the process, which is affecting and changing our “global” world!

2.2 Globalization re-defined

There have been several debates on the grounds, characteristics and effects of globalization. “For some, globalize is what we must do if we wish to be happy; for others ‘globalization’ is the cause of our unhappiness” (Bauman [5], p. 1). Terms such as “western-ization”, “Americanization”, homogenization, hegemonization, hybridization, glocalization, expansionism, imperialism, capitalism, continentalisation, marginalization, corporatism, MacWorld, McDonaldization have long and thoroughly been scrutinized by numerous analysts beginning with Ritzer [6] and Barber [7]. Persistence on clarifying these issues would be futile.

To put it shortly, the term globalization is often used to “explain, justify and understand new social, economic and cultural situations and realities in our modern world and, on the other hand, it is never defined, explained or justified as it should be” ([8], p.1).



Economic circumstances, the capitalism and the liberal democracy have the leading word on the world “global” matters. But nothing is restricted to economic circumstances. Its impact is on diverse identities and cultures and it is affecting us all! Although globalization was expectedly beneficial, mutually enriching cultures and diversity through the extended possibility of communication and exchange, its impact has been opposite: it often tried to impose one of these cultures, to impose a homogenic and hegemonic cultural model and discourse ([8], p.1).

2.3 Culture re-defined

Let us define the concept of “culture”, because this is yet another overused notion. Many definitions have been suggested; much debate has also been done. We shall consider and make operational the definition stated in a United Nations Document, 2000, called Cultural Diversity and Globalization: “Culture is the sum total of beliefs, myths, knowledge, institutions and practices whereby a society or group affirms its presence in the world and assures its reproduction and persistence through time. In other words, a style of life that takes in the whole existential reality of the persons and communities in a society, and not only arts, folklore and beliefs” ([8], p. 4).

Culture is obviously connected with and based upon diversity! Through the possibility of global communication, the diverse cultures of the world are affected. Specific human beliefs, knowledge and practices are, hence shaped. Internationalism occurs mainly through mass culture and it means importation of foreign media programs.

This theory may be contradicted by fashionable politically correct policies trying to accommodate “multiculturalism”. But these attempts are always integrated in and proposed by the hegemonic culture: “recognizing cultural pluralism by accommodating ‘multiculturalism’ in one way or another – always and inevitably that regime will suppress difference by requiring all cultural groups to negotiate within a public space which is shaped by a particular culture” ([9], p. 3).

Culture is not fixed or predetermined; it does not exist independently, autonomously. But it is a construction and it is also constructing. It coexists, relates and it is part of the global cultural system. Therefore, respect and attention should be paid to its uniqueness.

2.4 Identity and exclusion

Globalization would also imply social exclusion. In fact, Bauman’s “warm circle” based upon spontaneous social cohesion, the communal society and the social community is losing grounds [10]. All in favor of rational, economic calculations, of an abstract individual-centered system, of a cold world governed by “efficiency, calculability, an emphasis on quantity (to the detriment of quality), predictability, control and the replacement of human techniques by non-human technology” ([2], p. 31).

This process involves practices of exclusion and rejection; it involves excluded and rejected persons. Bauman’s metaphors are very suggestive: Janus’ two-faced societies, the door locked on the inside; they are also undeniably



expressing the firm, unchangeable “walls” and the impossibility of demolishing them from the outside [5].

Globalization divides and unites, all according to the economic logic. Consumerism, capitalism and market values are the decision-makers. “In a consumer society, people wallow in things, fascinating, enjoyable things. If you define your value by the things you acquire and surround yourself with, being excluded is humiliating. And we live in a world of communication; everyone gets information about everyone else. It’s the crime of humiliation!” [5].

2.5 The rule of economic rationalism

Global markets and market values seem to be the only decision-makers on most fields of world matters. Nowadays, global corporations seem to be governing the world. They are not doing it openly or directly; in fact, they are just directing, pressing national governments (which lose autonomy, decision-making and policy-regulation) to rule for them, in their interest. Nation states cease to be effective and lose autonomy in favor of liberal capitalism and global economic management [5].

Consumerism is the reality that binds all the above together. Consumerism is the main interest of the transnational corporations that lead the global world; it is the main message of the mass media and, consequently, of the hegemonic culture. “Economic rationalism defines democracy as something which is meaningful only to those who can participate as consumers – no money means no participation and no choices” ([11] p. 2).

Consumption is not restricted to material products; cultural products are also marketable. They are the issues of mass media and they are responsible for our values, identities and life-styles. The cultural products reflect the cultural values of their producers. Because the media is global and responsible for mass communication, the cultural standards of the global market are globally accepted and worshipped values. Consumerism is the main emphasis of the media discourse. Consequently, it is becoming one of the main values of the global identity.

Owing to globalization, mainly the same cultural and material products are consumed. This is the theory of monoculturalism; it emphasizes the homogenization effect of media imperialism. To be specific, it accounts for the impact of western hegemonic media discourse on the audience; the message of this discourse is consumerism.

It is important to take into consideration the debated idea about the main danger of the globalization process: Globalization is an issue; the power of the capital is the issue. “Economic globalization means [...] the spread of capitalism as a dominant economic model, a capitalism grounded on a consumption culture. Contemporary capitalism has as its defining feature the concept of benefit maximization which means a ceaseless increase in consumption” ([12] p. 6).

Globalization is a product of the urge of the capitalists to expand markets and maximize profits. The world of communications has become a perfect stage for the workings of capitalism with the same main target: that of perpetuating market values [13].



2.6 The advertising system in the mass media

Mass media proposes, promotes and regulates the mass culture. It is the main informant of our ideology, of our culture [1]. Media is considered to be responsible for the production of culture. However, mass media is controlled and regulated by media corporations. No open, direct control of the major TNCs is implemented in the mass media. But, advertising is the discourse of multinationals! It is their switch for culture and media control, it is the very essence of the “global culture”.

Of course, officials at the Independent Broadcasting Authority are vehemently denying it: “Even the suggestion that the policy of commercial broadcasting companies is influenced, in some way, by advertisers’ requirements, provokes sharp denials” ([14], p.710). Of course, media regulation system does not allow for direct, explicit control.

Because advertising is the “concealed subsidy” of the mass media, it has major decision power. It is effortlessly shaping the mass media, as diverse media compete for their subsidies and, therefore, adapt their programs accordingly to the “marketing needs” of advertisers.

Because TV companies compete for advertising sponsorship, they are selling not their programs, but their audiences. “TV companies therefore seek to make and transmit programmes that produce the audiences advertisers want to reach” ([14], p.717). The desired fragments of the audience are limited groups. In order to reach them, the advertising and the media is representing the reality of those groups, their ideologies and values. This leads to the hegemony and to the homogeneity of the media. But it also leads to its discriminatory nature. The “capitalistically unwanted” segments of the society are excluded from the media programs. Their invisibility proves that the media is a threat for the world diversity and multiculturalism. It also demonstrates Bauman’s “crime of humiliation”.

Advertising is also influencing the representations of the mass media. It has no interests in portraying the diverse human reality, the problems of unemployment, of homelessness and of underclass. It is presenting the conservative and limited ideology of the middle-to-upper class; it is reinforcing only the ideologies of the capitalism and consumerism [15]. Everything else, every other representation is superficial and stereotypical, yet another proof of the truthfulness of Bauman’s “crime of humiliation”!

2.7 Advertising and consumerism

Hence, contemporary world has given advertising a crucial role. As Marx said, in capitalism, everything turns into a commodity. Advertising encourages consumerism by bringing with it both the Discontent and the Salvation. It makes us uncomfortable with ourselves, especially with our bodies; it makes us frustrated, depressed, lonely and unfulfilled. But it also brings the salvation: the product! Consequently, order is reestablished, happiness regained, but all these gained through the products, all for more money gained by producers [16].

Advertising and consuming have become the magic of our contemporary existence, our rituals: “For any society to operate without some form of ritual is



for a society to live without a shared collective memory. While ritual can take a verbal form, it is more effective when tied to material things" [17].

Postmodern consumption is creating a postmodern culture, that of the imperative of the capital and of consumerism. Because of economic inequality, advertising and media are targeting particular audiences and, consequently, generating exclusion. Media is intensifying the effects of globalization, the social division and exclusion based upon the economic logic: "we live in a world of communication; everyone gets information about everyone else. It's the crime of humiliation!" [5].

Because advertising represents only the exclusive reality of some groups, it is a threat to the world diversity and multiculturalism. The images of cultural diversity are only a shallow distraction and a superficial show to mask its homogeneity [18].

2.8 Advertising as decision-making

Advertising, as a tool of capitalism and consumerism, also becomes part of the consumption and production decision-making. "Decisions about production are therefore in the hands of a group occupying a minority position in the society and in no direct way responsible to it" ([19], p. 705). It also implies decision-making about consumption, which should be in the hands of the society as a whole, of the individuals. Moreover, it should be about the needs of the society.

But, it is not the society that controls advertising or production. On the contrary, advertising and production operate to preserve consumption, regardless of the actual specific needs of the society.

As a consequence, consumption of capitalist goods cannot satisfy the human needs. Because these needs remain unsatisfied, "attempt is made, by magic, to associate this consumption with human desires to which it has no real reference. You do not buy an object: you buy social respect, discrimination, health, beauty, success, power to control the environment" ([19], p. 708). No needs are satisfied, or promised to be satisfied. Only social problems are promised to be solved.

This obvious truth does not constitute a drawback for advertising. Quite the opposite, it makes consumption eternal. By not satisfying a need, the quest for its fulfillment is kept alive; desire is also kept alive. "Consumer society proclaims the impossibility of gratification and measures its progress by ever-rising demand. To avoid confusion, it would be better to follow that fateful change in the nature of consumption and get rid of the notion of 'need' altogether, accepting that consumer society and consumerism are not about satisfying needs – not even the more sublime needs of identification, or self-assurance as to the degree of 'adequacy'. The moving spirit of consumer activity is not a set of articulated, let alone fixed, needs, but desire [...] the consuming desire of consuming" ([20], p.184).

2.9 Advertising re-defined

Now, let's see what advertising means. "An advertising is a message that has been called to the attention of a public audience, especially by paid announcement" ([1], p3). It is a cultural system and it also defines the predominant shared meaning system. In fact, advertising is only, or should only



be about constructing commodity signs, but they make the commodity signs possess social status, symbolic meaning and cultural values: “Goods are used in the negotiation of social life, and acts are meaningful ‘markers’ of social categories. The precise form that this takes is framed by both cultural and economical relations – that is, by social power” ([17], p7). Advertising becomes, consequently a regular part of the culture of the society.

Advertising “is also, in a sense, the official art of modern capitalist society” ([19], p. 704). The advertising images are very powerful and they are immediately internalized. If we tend to analyze language and sounds, we totally take for granted the images [16].

2.10 Discourse of advertising: discourse of TNCs

All these being said, what is the message that the advertising conveys? Advertising ultimately sells our dreams, our normalcies and values, which are associated with certain products. These products are not perfect, but they are said to be better than ever, than anything else, finally, better than yourself. The advertising is transmitting us that these products are beneficial; it is also conveying a complex of inferiority if we do not use the products.

By entering into our dreams, the advertising has gained enormous power. Through this power, they can easily now produce consumers. Because this is what advertising is producing: consumers [16].

In fact, at present, the advertising agents and producers can do almost anything. They are stigmatizing us, stereotyping us, discriminating and, last but not least, reducing us: “Clothes reflect many things (time and place of activity, social status, age, sex, ethnicity, subcultures) but what is produced through the clothing system is not simply the boundaries but the ‘meaningful differences’ between categories.” ([17], p10).

3 Considerations on the Romanian advertising system

This essay study presents some of the main effects of the global homogeneous advertising that emerged in our country after 1989. The major shift recorded in this field was triggered by the privatization of the mass media that followed the Romanian revolution.

During the socialist regime, mass media was public, directed to the Romanian public, to the individuals of the specific society. As advertising was concerned, it was directed to individuals, considered as users with specific necessities that required satisfaction through products. The products were sensible to the specific needs of the individuals, to the specific economic, social and cultural context. The particular ads were unsophisticated and based upon reason and upon words too.

Removal of the socialist system, theoretically considered as the dawn of democracy, was accompanied only by capitalism, consumerism and private interests.

In capitalism, mass media is no longer public, directed to an individualistic, human public; but it is private, controlled by private interests. It is no longer designed for a public, but for a specific audience. As advertising is concerned, it



serves to meet the interests of the producers: to transform the public into consumers and to produce them. The products are there (everywhere). The goal of the advertising system is to create the specific needs of the individuals and the specific economic, social and cultural context for them!

Media and advertising do not address the “capitalistically unwanted” segments of the society. It is not directed to the specific realities of the society: to the minorities or to the underclass. It does not deal with unemployment and homelessness. It is not sensitive to ethnicity, to diversity in social class, status, age, sex, etc. It is only directed to the target audience.

The contemporary “Western” advertising system has become obvious in Romania as a consequence of privatization and, later, of globalization.

Most commercials in Romania are upholding the global advertising discourse because they are assumed, copied and translated global ads (generally for soft drinks, beer, detergents, cosmetics, cars, and so on). These are authentic imported products, but also, TNCs’ goods produced in the Romanian subsidiaries: all the commodities that emerged into our market and need consumers!

Recently, Romanian private advertising companies have launched their products on the market. They are designing local commercials for the above products. These ads are very similar to their foreign models, “professional” advertisements, maintaining the “western” discourse, similar in approach, style and expression. But these Romanian advertising agencies also produce commercials for authentic, specific products, which compete with the foreign products (these are also soft drinks, alcoholic drinks, beer, detergents). They are not de-nationalised, global ads, but commercials promoting the Romanian authentic values, myths and life-styles, the authentic Romanian culture.

The above-mentioned argument does not contradict the essence of the “Western” advertising system in Romania. These commercials are not representative for our advertising market because there are only a few, accepted ads in the major global discourse of advertising and they are mainly designed for advertising festivals and only screened for a limited period of time. They cannot be a threat to the main hegemonic discourse of advertising, which is imposing homogeneity, consumerism and the power of capital.

4 Conclusion

We live in the so-called “global informational era”. There is information everywhere (better said, misinformation) from most locations in the world, on various topics. We are bombarded with advertising messages all the time. Of course, we do not pay attention to all of them. But we cannot ignore them all, either! Representation in the complex system of advertising discursive formation is everywhere and that is why it should be analyzed properly. The message being of paramount importance, we have to carefully examine it, using reliable semiotic tools.

In addition, we should not take for granted the inflexible and unchanging nature of all the realities discussed above. No reality is predetermined: neither is consumerism, nor is it capitalism and nor is it globalization. Our conclusion is



that they are so powerful because they are seen as fixed and predetermined, part of a preset and inflexible plutocratic reality, because they are not consciously perceived and critically analyzed.

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