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The flattening of culture

The globalisation of culture – I have written this in a style that is NOT overtly ‘economic’ in its language – I hope that will stimulate debate.

- Culture has increasingly become a commodity. Popular books and films have international markets. Harry Potter has readers almost all over the world.
- English movies are seen almost in all countries. Western pop music has become popular in developing countries. The reverse flow of culture is insignificant.
- The flow of culture is mainly from the North to the South. In the last few years the media owners of the West have shown interest in entering developing countries.

# Some developments

- For example, Murdoch has opened TV channels (STAR News, STAR Movies and STAR Plus) in India.
- Cultural globalisation has been facilitated by the information revolution, the spread of satellite communication, telecommunication networks, information technology and the Internet etc.
- This global flow of ideas, knowledge and values is likely to flatten out cultural differences between nations, regions and individuals.

# Possible Outcome

- As this flow of culture is mainly from the centre to the periphery, from the North to the South, and from the towns and cities to villages, it is the cultures of villages of poor countries which will be the first to suffer erosion.
- Can tradition really mix with modernity?
- How long can something last and what are the interests on the emerging generations?

# The blurred lines between traditional audience and author, creator and consumer, expert and amateur

- The experts and companies are not the only ones creating “products” for the consumers.
- Now consumers are providing products for other consumers. Home-grown videos, songs, plays, and writing makes its way to the internet apart from an expert gatekeeper and thus the lines are no longer strictly defined between the roles of the author and the audience, the creator and consumer
- Blurred lines, as the term suggests, are unclear and confused. The internet user may not always know the source of the content they see on the internet. Authors and creators can be unknown
- So how does a user discern which information is true and which is false

# Things are changing fast!

- Before anyone had the technology that we see today, most culture was local.
- The lack of transportation and communication between towns and states made it difficult if not impossible to have one completely unified culture
- It is thought to have began with the rail and road systems, followed by commercial print technology, photography, the phonograph, and illustrated media: newspapers, magazines, novels, and postcards. Moving pictures came soon after as well as film and the dawn of the celebrity age, electromagnetic waves, broadcasting, long-distance phone calls, television, and finally the Internet

# The change continues

- With each step in technological development, our culture became more unified because it could.
- Information on events happening many miles away, half the globe away, could suddenly be viewed or read about in our own homes. These technologies linked people and synchronized society.
- Suddenly a multi-layer culture full of local cultures could become one culture. Technological developments were the very beginnings of a flattening culture and as more developments occur, it seems the flatter our culture becomes

# A market of multitudes – popular culture?

- The multitudes want not just the “hits” that we hear on the radio, but also bands and brands that are underground, more local, and perhaps unheard of by the general public. The the mass market is scattering into a market of niches, no longer being unified by “hits” - consumers are favouring the market with the most choice
- Everyone can participate in retrieving a desired “product” off the internet as well as selling “products”. The necessity of the market of multitudes helps create the blurred lines between creator and consumer
- The market of the multitudes is an aspect of flattening culture. Technology provided the foundation and the market of multitudes contributed the desires of consumers.



# How was culture once passed on?

- In the opinion of some this “endless forest of mediocrity” is fostered by the loss of our **professional gatekeepers—the** loss of the experts that filter and edit information before it reaches the public. Journalists, editors, news anchors, music companies and Hollywood movie studios are being replaced by others who have the same capabilities to publish as the experts do
- Our culture is being flattened by the influence of others – sometimes unknown and the loss of gatekeepers. Remember my Yoruba friend and the one generation situation in Ibadan.

- As traditional mainstream media and other forms of spreading beliefs, values etc. central to a particular culture are replaced by a **personalised one**, the Internet has become a mirror to ourselves. Rather than using it to seek news, information, or culture, we use it to actually **BE** the news, the information, the culture. This infinite desire for personal attention is driving the hottest part of the new Internet economy—social-networking sites – I have removed myself from certain Face Book pages as I felt the pictures were not those I wanted to view – sex and violence featured in ‘conversations’ between people who started by conversing on politics and social behaviour.

# The pace of events

- The digital culture is affecting the physical culture by blurring the lines—did that really happen or is that just how someone thought it happened?—and distorting the truth—what’s right?
- This subjectivity creates the blurred lines and distorted truth and ultimately contributes to the flattening of our culture.
- Does this look familiar to you - “One chilling reality in this brave new digital epoch is the blurring, obfuscation, and even disappearance of truth,” - Truth, like our culture, is being flattened as users create personalized versions that reflect our own myopias – plastic surgery, clothing, language ‘ the F word’ etc. These are now changing in meaning and use.

# Truth

- Truth has increasingly become subjective and the internet is thought, in part, to be responsible for this. Is it "undermining of truth is threatening the quality of civil public discourse, encouraging plagiarism and intellectual property theft, and stifling creativity" – who now trusts a politician and we sue even the most respected professionals. What of age, experience, status etc. – where is it going?
- The line between fact and fiction becomes blurred. Our culture, and especially digital culture, is being flattened by the loss of clear truth. After all, if truth is subjective or personal, who can claim to be right and who can point a finger at the wrong?

# Some counter arguments

- Are we now questioning more and not simply accepting things. Just because it was good for others is it right for me?
- Nothing is static – traditions will adapt and amalgamate new ideas etc.
- Functional diversity has always taken place, what we fear is arbitrary diversity – comparative advantage, which can become a competitive advantage – Smith and Ricardo believed that trade would widen horizons in more than just geographic terms.
- Through prices, markets aggregate, distill and communicate all this local and tacit knowledge in providing incentives for the efficient production, use and distribution of goods and services. Market competition thus directs the behavior of individuals more expertly through the invisible hand than any visible hand could

# More thought...

- Luddites were wrong...
- “Market forces” are an expression of a culture. They are not independent of or opposed to culture - “Market forces” are an expression of a culture. They are not independent of or opposed to culture - when critics of globalisation scoff at this, imploring that this does not constitute *real* diversity, they utterly miss the point. While a McDonald’s salmon burger is not traditional Norwegian fare, it is *certainly* not traditional American fare. Whatever international customers are buying into is not “total Americanization.” Globalization encourages entirely new cultural products.

# Let's conclude for today...

- The significance of this new diversity is often lost on critics of globalization for at least three intertwined reasons: they confuse a large market with a mass market, they underestimate the market value of novelty, and they fail to appreciate that differences in cultural context impact the meaning of market transactions
- Globalisation provides precisely the large market in which real specialization and novelty thrive. Global markets will not be merely mass markets, and this alone debunks much of the worry that global market forces push towards cultural homogenisation.
- The Chinese drink alcohol because it's good for the body. Westerners drink because it's fun and enjoyable," Swedish journalist Tomas Larsson concludes