GLOBALIZATION, CULTURE AND THE ROLES OF MEDIA

1. Introduction:
   Globalization is one of the main buzzwords of the 21st century. We feel its presence in almost every field of our lives; in economy, politics, culture and also media. This leads to a constant transformation in this era of change. Nothing stays the same no matter how much we try to resist. With the advancements in technology and telecommunications, borders are removed and we (the humanity) are like Alice in Wonderland, who has found a little door in her living room, which leads to a world of wonders. The question is: What happens to us? How do the new things we face change us? How much of our genuine selves can we protect when we pass that door? Can we give this process a name? Does it change all the people we travel together the same way? Are there any dangers waiting for us on the way? In the first part of the paper, I will try to give the definitions of key terms, which will help us through our journey. In the second part, how the global arena (the wonderland) is formed will be explained. In the third part, the main theories used in order to analyze the cultural changes people face will be discussed together with some specific examples. Finally, I will evaluate the evidence given and establish a framework through which we can analyze the cultural changes that globalization, together with global media brings to our worlds.

2. Definition of Key Terms
   **Globalization:** This is a highly debatable concept among scholars. There are varying definitions. Gillespie argues that it is neither a universal assimilation in one homogenous culture nor a universal search for roots and revival of singular identities. She sees it as a more complex and uneven process with many sided translations (18-19). It is a system in which you may not choose to take part but it is growing at such a high speed that there is almost no way to hide from the effects of it.
   **Global media:** It is regarded as one of the main reasons behind the hybrid, creolized and impure cultures in the world (Gillespie 4). With the liberalization of the trade of cultural products, from books to TV, from radio to movies, and most important of all, with internet, people in the world gained access to all kinds of foreign media. As the West, mainly the U.S.A dominates the international flow of information and entertainment, this globalization process is sometimes interpreted as “Americanization” by some scholars as well (Thussu 145).
   **Culture:** Sometimes it is referred to as a mosaic not necessarily composed of territories with clear, sharp edges. There is always an interaction, and a diffusion of ideas and habits (Hannerz 17). There are also learning and sharing processes in the formation of culture. In this case it is neither instinctual nor individual (Pieterse 46). About globalization’s cultural consequences, there are hybridization, homogenization and polarization theories –which will be discussed later in detail - through which we can analyze how cultures are influenced as a result of an exposure to new, foreign values brought by global media products.

3. Creation of the wonderland
   As Thussu argues, after the 1980s, the advancements in digital information and communication technologies and increasing deregulation and privatization in different sectors including media, led to great changes in the world. As a result of privatization, states began to lose their former power. Free market regulations enabled multilateral
organizations to gain more dominance in the global arena. Thus, states became one of the players in the game, rather than being the only ones setting the rules (66). Countries, one by one began to privatize their telecoms and with the aim of private competition, public service role of telecommunications receded. The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) talks created a push towards opening up protected markets and with the move towards World Trade Organization (WTO) in the end, a more legal mechanism was constituted to enforce international trade agreements in favor of privatization and liberalization (Thussu 68). This organization, supporting the free flow of information and encouraging investment in infrastructure in the South, paved the way for the penetration of Western markets to Asia and Latin America (Thussu 69).

With the advancements in technology and telecommunications, it became possible for immense amounts of data to be transferred to the other end of the world in seconds, which made a huge effect on trade and economy in general. States’ power over economy diminished as it became harder and harder to control these flows. In addition to this, digitization, computer and mobile technologies and satellites gained importance (Thussu 75). Thussu further argues that satellites provided fast and cheap communication services all around the world which made it easier for international businesses to operate in global electronic marketplace in areas like “telephony, global banks and airlines, international newspapers and magazine distribution” (76).

The increasing number of satellites and the privatization going on in this area increased competition and today the satellite market is dominated by few nations. Even Intelsat, which is an intergovernmental treaty organization, formed to operate a global satellite system offering satellite capacity on a non discriminatory basis is controlled mainly by the USA and Britain. This shows once more that the technologically advanced countries have the power to “set and implement the policy agenda” (Thussu 79). As the global carriers increased in number, state run operators had to privatize their own satellite systems so the market for satellite services became more and more commercial day by day. Transnational companies (TNC) became the highest beneficiaries of these changes and this shaped the new world economy dramatically. The income per head increased in the North, whereas the South faced a counter effect as a result of globalization (Thussu 97). Large media conglomerates began to make global plans to gain the highest profit, which brought with it the debates about the deterioration of media plurality and democracy (Thussu 98).

To sum up, when we look at the last 20 years, we see that the world began to move towards an increasing liberalization and privatization, which increased competition. This has shaken the sovereignty of states as the free flow of goods and ideas at an extremely high speed became possible and the influence, number and power of TNCs increased radically. As the western countries were the pioneers and promoters of these changes, they had (and still have) the most profit, whereas nothing much has changed economically in the Third World Countries, with a couple of exceptions like India and China. As a result of these changes a global media sector was formed and people became more aware of the rest of the world at a great speed. They have found the key that leads to the wonderland through the magazines, televisions, radios and internet which are placed in their living rooms. Just like Alice, all they had to do was to turn the key of that door and enter this magic land, waiting for them full of surprises.

4. Changes awaiting us beyond the door

When Alice passes the door, she faces a world made up of different colors and creatures she has never seen before. She tries to make new friends, joins tea parties. She sometimes likes the atmosphere but sometimes leaves, finding the people quite rude. During her trip, she eats and drinks several things which make her shrink and grow larger.
In some cases she finds it difficult to pass through doors and fit into different atmospheres.

When we think about our own journeys, it is not hard to point out the similarities. Once we pass that door, we face the same colorful world. This makes a big impact on who we think we are by broadening our vision. However, this process is not new. There were people who faced similar changes during colonialism times or as a result of their migration to different countries in history (Sorensen 252). There was an exchange of cultures going on between these people but with globalization, the whole planet became interconnected facing a flood of information, which is mostly coming from the west and flowing with a great speed, blurring the territories. Then, what happened as a result of this? Scholars are hotly debating about the outcomes. One of the theories is hybridization. A hybrid person is generally the blend of several races, nationalities, sexes and class contexts (Sorensen 252). When we talk about hybrid identities, we can say that it encompasses several types of being and belonging together with different “religious bonds, gender solidarities and national royaltiess” (Sorensen 252).

4.1 Homogenization, Polarization and Hybridization in Between

Hybridization does not refer to losing one’s own identity totally. It reflects the possibility of benefiting from other cultures and putting the new knowledge with the old one side by side. But have not we always done this? Are all the cultures pure, with sharp edges? Obviously not... As we have discussed above, culture is made up of discussions, diffusion of ideas and habits. The only change we face today is the rising amount of discussions and interactions as a result of global media which blurs the lines between different cultures more and more. This brings with it various interpretations about the fate of traditions and cultures. Giddens describes tradition as “a framework of action that can go largely unquestioned” (41). Then he argues further that societies across the world are becoming more detraditionalized. This increases the reflection potential of people on the new information they receive from the world. People feel the need of justifying and questioning their beliefs and traditions continuously and they recreate their self identities constantly (Giddens 47).

Nederveen Pieterse sees hybridization as the “solvent between the polar perspectives”. On one side there is homogenization, on the other, polarization. According to him, this concept gains its meaning through its relationship with these two terms (57). We have the cosmopolitans, who are willing and able to adapt their self identities to the new cultures they face by either putting the new knowledge side by side with the old or more assimilating to the new culture, losing much of their identities, -a status which is called as homogenization- and on the other side, there are fundamentalists who support the importance of a more territorialized world, where traditions, cultures and rituals remain unchanged (Thussu 49). What they believe can be called as polarization as well. Ironically they do not resist using the new global technologies in order to unite with other fundamentalists in the world (Giddens 50). As we see, hybrid people neither resist the changes completely, nor assimilate in the new culture presented to them. They are finding a way in between. Hjarvard argues that globalization leads to the mental and emotional involvement of people in global networks, either in the form of active resistance or a gradual adaptation (25). If we turn back to the story of Alice, we can say that fundamentalist view represents the moments when she wishes to shrink to her original size. Sometimes she does. However, in our case there is a constant growing as we face these novelties no matter which side we choose to take part in.
4.2 Is there a well-structured plan waiting for us behind the door?

The cultural changes people face through global media brought with it different theories. Some scholars argue that the West is practicing cultural imperialism especially on the Third World countries (Thussu 50) and some support the critical theory arguing that people become less and less critical as a result of the profit based media products lacking educational and political contents (Thussu 54). In this case what is presented and how it is interpreted by people are two things that have to be analyzed.

The supporters of the modernization theory like Daniel Lerner argue that mass media would bring modernism to the more traditional cultures (Thussu 43). According to him, increasing urbanization raises literacy and this way the media exposure of people increases, which leads them to wider economic and political participation (Thussu 43). But is the aim this much innocent? Does the West really want to educate and improve the “traditional cultures” without asking for anything in return? Do the people really become more politically active in the end? This theory brought with it another critical theory that questions these results. According to these scholars, the West, with a capitalist world view was in search of profit and consumers instead of an aim of modernizing traditional societies.

The postmodern world is one in which the concentration of ownership of the global media and the concomitant increase in the flow of media across international borders have complex implications for national identities. Although this is not really new to postmodernism, it certainly is intensified, and that flow certainly puts national cultures on the defensive, since in some cases these media are being used strategically to subvert indigenous culture. The reason is simple: identity is power (Olson 3).

Of course there are people who have the ability to filter the new information and cultural messages without losing their own identities like the Punjabi families living in Southall, celebrating Christmas, but in a different fashion. They meet their family members and friends, eat a nice dinner and exchange presents. However, at this point it is important to point out the fact that Punjabi families do not see and celebrate Christmas as a religious event (Gillespie 103). There are even some families, which blend both cultures like the Sikhs celebrating the anniversary of one of their gurus during Christmas (Gillespie 104). In this case, one of the symbols of the Christian culture is commodified and commercialized (Gillespie 103). The notion of commodification, borrowed from Marx refers to the change of cultural products into commodities to fulfill the psychological needs of the consumers and to entertain them (Thussu 54). This view is clearly the opposite of what the modernists argue, as in this case, the critical engagement of the masses with the socio-political issues is diminished and they become politically passive consumers who are only after the fulfillment of their psychological needs (Thussu 54). This type of community is obviously far from what Habermas describes as the ideal community, which is composed of people who has the potential of taking part in rational political action (398).

If we analyze the process of the masses moving away from intellectual debates that includes the creation and production of new ideas into a more “numb” consumer profile, we can take Macdonalds’ research as an example to this. In the USA, from 1901 until 1940, the number of articles in Coller’s and The Saturday Evening Post about business, professional men and political leaders had declined, whereas articles related to entertainment increased about 50 percent (36). Another example can be given from Turkey, where the number of entertainment programs on TV during daytime exceeds the number of cultural and political programs dramatically. The Supreme Council of Radio and Television has an aim to balance the number of entertainment programs with the
cultural and educational programs. However, we see that private TV channels usually prefer to broadcast these types of educational programs after midnight just to fulfill their responsibilities. As a result of these strategies, individuals lose the concept of community and begin to turn into selfish individuals, who are in fact not different from their peers anymore as the global media is shaping people in one form, transmitting the consumer, capitalist, and individualist world view (Macdonald 39). Since the reception of the individuals differ, we cannot generalize the outcomes but and as the scale is too large, people become more and more disintegrated from each other. They feel themselves as parts of larger masses, but lonely at the same time. As they do not feel their presence and importance in a real group of people with whom they share common values and sentiments (all these terms are blurred as a result of globalization) anymore, they feel more individual (Macdonald 39). Just like Alice, they try to join new communities, sometimes feel like a part of them but sometimes become misfits and in the end feel lonely. There is always a question of “belonging”.

4.3 Who decides whether we should shrink or grow larger?

There are opposing views to the “cultural imperialism” theory. John Tomlinson argues that people have the potential of negotiating the “contradictions between alien cultural values and the pleasure of the text” (304). Not every ideological message is understood the same way by all the different communities in the world. To prove this they have formed focus groups consisting of people from Arabic countries and they were asked to watch a *Dallas* episode. At the end when asked about what they understood from it, it is found out that some of the Arabic people interpreted the storyline according to their own cultural values. They do not see it as a promotion of imperialism but rather watch it just because they enjoy watching it (Tomlinson 306). In this case, as they did not get the message correctly, can we say that this program did not add anything new to those people? At least by opening up a window about an American way of living, it makes these people more aware of what is going on at the other end of the world, without necessarily creating an atmosphere of homogenization. They come to terms with their own cultures by comparing it with others (according to what they understand from it), creating a hybrid atmosphere.

As people have a tendency to filter the information they get according to their own cultural backgrounds, multinational companies developed special strategies to be more appealing to their foreign customers. They either add new products or change their strategies according to different countries. We can give an example from MTV which is mostly broadcasting local Indian videos rather than American ones as Indians have a more conservative approach towards American video clips. With its motto: “Think globally, act locally” they became the biggest video music network in the world (Thussu 149). MTV combines “national, regional and international artists along with locally produced and globally shared programs” (Thussu 151). We can also give another example to it from Turkey, where Burger King and McDonalds prepare special menus including Turkish deserts for Ramadan.

When we look at these cases, we can also say that not even cultures but also companies are hybridizing. Although some scholars argue that companies like McDonald’s and MTV lead to increasing homogenization, others see it as the localization of multinational companies. They believe the new products and strategies they form suitable for each culture is making them “glocal” rather than global (Holton 144). Pieterse believes that glocalization proves the possibility of the local and global living together, not necessarily with conflict (57). This resembles the definition of hybridization, which
gives the chance of bringing together and making use of two different cultures without conflict.

But when we look at other cases, we see that not every person in a country interpret the same information in similar ways. If we turn back to the Christmas celebrations of the Punjabi families, we notice that although the youngsters enjoy celebrating Christmas in their own ways, generally elderly people in families see this as “the manifestation of oppressive, postcolonial, white power” (Gillespie 103). This shows us the importance of personal interpretations. Empirical evidence can be multiplied. There are so many varieties of ideas and feelings individuals form regarding their exposure to global media products no matter where and when they live. Because of this, it is hard to draw a line between nations saying each one will act differently as a whole. As people have different personal experiences, educational levels, social and political views, the way they interpret these new messages will unsurprisingly vary even though they live in the same country. Because of this reason, more attention should be paid to smaller, local groups rather than approaching the issue from a national point of view (Thussu 49). As Hjarvard argues, it would be foolish to expect globalization, and in this case global media as well “to constitute the same subjective experience no matter where one is situated- geographically, culturally, socially” (16).

5. Conclusion:

In the last 20 years, we faced a dramatic change as a result of globalization that removed almost all kinds of boundaries in our worlds. We were re-writing the story of Alice in Wonderland, with no dramatic changes.

As a result of the advancements in technology and telecommunications, free flow of ideas, data and information became possible. The world market, dominated by the Western countries, mainly the USA began to promote liberal and capitalist values. Increasing privatization led to more competition and the formation of strong TNCs, which are threatening the sovereignty of states. By investing in the infrastructure of developing countries, Western countries began to dominate the market in these regions greatly. Fast and cheap communication services together with the advancements in computer and mobile technologies paved the way for global media. Easily accessible internet connection, magazines, newspapers radio and TV channels helped us to pass the door into the wonderland. On the other side of the door there was a colorful world waiting to be explored. Each one of us went to different ways to explore, judging what we knew before every time we faced novel ideas. Hybridization, homogenization and polarization were our choices. According to some scholars, most of the information was put there by the West intentionally to make us more passive and lazy; some thought it was there to make us question our traditions. While we were traveling, we interpreted things as we wished. Sometimes we stripped some traditions like Christmas or Christmas trees from their meaning, using symbols as commodities for different purposes. Did we become politically passive beings who used these symbols just to satisfy our psychological needs? There are examples proving that we become less interested in politics and more in entertainment programs. Just like Alice, we entered different houses, made new friends, had different experiences, at the same time kept on questioning what we knew in the past. There were no boundaries. Different from Alice, who was shrinking from time to time, we constantly grew larger, even if we chose to be fundamentalists. Sometimes we succeeded to negotiate the new information we gained with what we knew before rather than homogenizing. Companies changed as well, being hybrid themselves. What does it all lead us to then?

No matter how biased the information that we face is, it is the individuals who become homogenized, hybridized or polarized as a result of their personal choices. Of course,
there are many elements affecting this choice. The amount of exposure to the debatably “biased” global media has an important effect. As we all know, a lot of Third World countries’ media is filled with foreign programs, advertisements, etc. As a result of their dependency to the West, they are not powerful enough to take part in the global arena with their own productions. That is why; those countries usually import programs, magazines and newspapers from the West. This creates a highly profitable market for Western countries (Thussu 98). Although there is an unfair distribution of media products in the world, we cannot generalize the outcomes by taking the nations as a basis. The only thing we can be certain of is the fact that the vision of people is broadened and they are not the same people anymore as a result of global media. There are many different examples from all around the world proving that each one of these hybridization, homogenization, and polarization theories are correct. There will be many more in the future. But to reach a constant general result is almost impossible as the personal background of people affect the way they interpret the new information they face. In this case more local analyses should be made to reach healthier results rather than thinking on a national level. At the end of the story Alice woke up and realized that it was all a dream but we can never go back from the same door anymore as we grew larger and larger as a result of drinking the liquid called global media one by one.
WORKS CITED


