

When Media Intersects with Society; The Good and Bad

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DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.19349170](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19349170)

Abstract

This article examines the complex and evolving relationship between media, culture, and society, highlighting both its beneficial and detrimental impacts. Drawing on existing literature and contextual examples, particularly from Uganda and global media environments, the study explores how media functions as both a mirror and a molder of cultural values and social norms. On the one hand, media promotes cross-cultural exchange, enhances awareness of global issues, and amplifies marginalized voices, as seen in advocacy against practices such as Female Genital Mutilation and in the visibility of LGBTQ+ communities through digital platforms. On the other hand, the article underscores significant challenges including the spread of misinformation, especially during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the reinforcement of stereotypes, and the growing influence of state control and censorship on media freedom. Guided by the theory of mediatization, the discussion demonstrates how media logic increasingly shapes public discourse, often limiting critical engagement and diversity of perspectives. The article concludes that while media remains a powerful tool for social transformation and cultural exchange, its negative consequences necessitate a more critical and informed approach to media consumption to ensure balanced and inclusive societal development.

Keywords: Media and culture; Mediatization; Social media; Misinformation; Cultural globalization; Media representation; Freedom of expression; Digital communication; Public discourse

The impact of the interaction between media and culture on society is ambiguous and open to debate on if it has been beneficial or detrimental to societies in which these two variables interact. Media encompasses various means through which mass communication is disseminated to a large audience including traditional, new and alternative media (Esen & Kalayci, 2021).

Culture encompasses the shared beliefs, values, practices, traditions, norms and behaviors of a group or society. When media intersects with culture it means that the content and messages presented through media platforms are influenced by and have an effect, on the culture in which they are shared. The ever-evolving relationship between media and culture is intrinsic to societal development, often operating as both a mirror and a molder of societal values, norms, and perspectives.

The accessibility of global information through social media platforms and online news has promoted cross-cultural awareness and understanding. This instant access to news from different parts of the world allows individuals to gain insights into different cultures, traditions, and perspectives, fostering a more inclusive and diverse society. (Obydenkova, 2008). For example, the presence of Halloween, originally a Celtic tradition, in some African countries showcases cultural exchange in a globalized era. Media platforms like TV and the internet have introduced Halloween's imagery and customs to African audiences, leading to its adoption in certain communities. This blending of traditions results in unique celebrations reflecting a mix of cultures.

Media has significantly benefited society by spotlighting critical social issues like human rights abuses, environmental concerns, and inequality through articles, documentaries, and campaigns (Entman, 1993; Hopkins, 2018; Rabia et al., 2020). This heightened awareness has prompted societal improvements. For instance, media revelations about human rights violations have instigated public demands for accountability. In Uganda, the media has performed a pivotal role in the fight against Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) through constant gender sensitive and deliberate reporting on the vice that has since been outlawed as a result. This has been through consistent and expert reporting on the harmful effects of the practice through sharing testimonials from its survivors. As opposed to portraying FGM completely as a cultural practice, the media has emphatically framed it as a gross human rights violation and form of child abuse. By doing so, the media has ensured that governments are held accountable for their obligations. This has prompted legislative changes and stricter enforcement.

The LGBTQ+ community, in Uganda faces challenges due to laws and societal attitudes but the emergence of

social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter has provided representation and hope. These platforms have become tools for expressing concerns, sharing stories and gaining support (Amoedo, 2021). Through the media, they can raise awareness about their experiences humanize their struggles and challenge norms. As a result, it has become a lifeline for the community in Uganda by providing a space to advocate for rights, challenge discrimination and promote inclusivity.

However, the boom of social media is counteracted by the bane of misinformation, taking not only the sexual minorities, but the entire world by storm. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories on platforms like Facebook and Twitter hindered public health efforts and fueled panic among the masses (Keykhaei et al., 2021). This phenomenon serves as a testament to the overwhelming influence of media, especially in an age characterized by rapid information dissemination.

A study 2022 study across 18 countries dared to show the double edged nature of social media in shaping and creating culture. Ng & Tan, (2022) in a study carried out in 18 countries found that the media attention given to COVID-19 was greatly influenced by cultural values and pandemic severity thereby highlighting the importance of culturally nuanced public health communications.

While censorship may shield society from harmful content, like pornography, based on beliefs like the third-person effect (Gunther, 1995; Chia et al., 2004), it's also used by governments to control dissent and ensure societal stability (Wang, 2022).

Uganda provides a compelling illustration of how the intersection of media and culture can impede freedom of expression and shape societal perceptions. The Ugandan government's rigorous approach to information control, particularly regarding internet and media outlets, underscores the significant role that state mechanisms can play in shaping the flow of information within a society. Journalists frequently face a dilemma where they must balance their responsibility to report accurate information with the need to safeguard themselves from potential government repercussions. This situation often results in a prevalent atmosphere of self-censorship (Höglund & Schaffer, 2021). As a consequence, the free exchange of information is hindered, and society is deprived of a range of perspectives, resulting in a more uniform and less critical public conversation.

The theory of mediatization provides further insight into how media intersects with culture and influences society (Goroshko & Goroshko, 2021). Mediatization refers to the social and cultural process in which a field or institution becomes dependent on the logic of the media. The media has the power to shape and direct the audience through the discourse it produces. With this comes a crucial problem that needs to be addressed- the spread of information. With the eased access to information brought about by today's digital era, the media plays a major role in shaping public opinion. Media's interaction with culture can perpetuate stereotypes and harmful ideologies, skewing societal norms. Such portrayals, whether of women as mere objects or racial stereotypes, can marginalize and stigmatize specific groups. Moreover, the overwhelming media presence can stifle critical thinking, making individuals more reliant on media narratives and less likely to form independent opinions.

In conclusion, it is evident that while the media has facilitated the cross cultural globalization, understanding, its detrimental effects on society call for individuals to engage with media with a deliberate, critical and discerning lens in order to, fact-check information, and promote diverse and accurate representations of cultures.

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