



Globalization, culture, and information: Towards global knowledge transparency

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I seek to intertwine the IS research on globalization with IS research on culture. I first discuss various perspectives of globalization – cultural imperialism, inter-connected businesses, and a global village – and the accompanying role of information technologies. I then present a brief overview of three waves of IS culture research: identifying differences, explaining differences, managing differences. Based upon the gaps identified in the overview, I suggest some propositions for future IS culture research. Finally, I seek to identify important future research that lies at the intersection of globalization and culture research, namely research into global knowledge transparency. Global knowledge transparency involves the dual objectives of providing more detailed product and service information to the consumer and gathering more detailed knowledge about the individual. The former helps individuals make more responsible choices in their purchase decisions, enabling them to understand the consequences of their choices on the well-being of others. The latter helps individuals make more informed decisions concerning their own well-being, enabling them to better understand the consequences of their choices for their own life and health. Taken together, the two objectives of global knowledge transparency can help societies promote better use of resources and more individual accountability.

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1. Introduction

The term and concept of globalization has spawned much definition, debate, and interpretation. From an economic point of view, globalization typically refers to the reduction in, or entire removal of, foreign trade barriers in order to facilitate the flow of goods across borders. This view tends to equate globalization with economic development (Beck, 2000). Yet globalization entails far more than the mere exchange of finished goods: it also encompasses the exchange of production materials, the substitution of production processes, the relocation of services, the redistribution of resources, and the diffusion and infusion of cultural norms, artifacts, and values. And while globalization in its nascent forms of finished product exchange between the Orient and the Middle East date well back to the Grecian Empire (Attali, 2006), certainly the rate and scope of globalization has intensified over the past half century. As such, it has important strategic implications for organizations as well as society. And because globalization is greatly influenced by information and communication technologies, it is also of strategic importance to IS research and practice.

Information and communication technologies (ICT) play no small role in the globalization phenomenon: ICT enables managerial control over vast global supply chains, ICT itself is a product and service that can readily be offered to global markets; ICT becomes a trade platform joining suppliers and buyers from around the world, and ICT provides information and social

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networks that know no boundaries. One of the many outcomes of increased globalization is the need for greater information – information about suppliers, about markets, and consumers as well as information about distribution, logistics, and operations. And, as both the globalization phenomenon and the accompanying ICT expansion have become a common aspect of modern civilization, so too has it become apparent the influence that culture, and cultural differences, has on globalization and information dissemination as, at times, an enabler, and at time, a constraint. In this Viewpoint, I will present my interpretation of the IS perspective of these three inter-related topics of globalization, information, and culture. The inter-twining of these phenomena give rise to the need for several important research areas.

2. Globalization

While the broader economic and political community may take a decidedly product trade focus on globalization, the IS literature has adopted multifarious views of both the meaning of, and ramifications of, globalization. IS research on globalization includes such topics as the introduction of a global IS system (Lehmann, 2004; Pan and Leidner, 2003), managing offshoring relationships (Lacity et al., 2009; Rottman and Lactiy, 2004), structuring the global IT function (Weill, 2004), managing globally dispersed team (Kayworth and Leidner, 2000), global ecommerce preparedness (Sarker and El Sawy, 2003), global requirements analysis (Kirsch and Hayney, 2006), and the plight of small firms attempting to operate in global market (Leidner, 1999). Here, I will focus less on topics of Global IS research than on conceptualizations of globalization in IS research. In an AMCIS panel on the topic in 2002 (Barrett et al., 2003), prominent researchers from different regions presented different perspectives of globalization. My interpretation of these perspectives led to the following three conceptualizations of globalization: cultural imperialism, interconnected business, and interconnected societies.

3. Cultural imperialism

In its earliest form, cultural imperialism resulted from one nation-state occupying another and, in the process, infusing aspects its culture into the local way of life. But cultural imperialism hardly ended with the end of colonial and imperial rule. Rather, a new form of product, and increasingly service, cultural imperialism has emerged in which large, powerful organizations are able to infuse their products, all of which are embedded with a certain aspect of “culture” around the globe. Be it the powerful Disney purchasing local television stations around the world, translating, and showing its’ popular children and pre-teen shows, or Coca-Cola and its worldwide distributors ensuring that young people around the world develop a taste for its beverages, or Microsoft dominating the desktop in the developing world, one conceptualization of globalization is this view that globalization, pushed and dominated by large global concerns, results in cultural imperialism and, subsequently, to greater degrees of cultural homogenization. Homogenization of culture is largely thought of in terms of products, but the fear of course is that the use of products will eventually result in value change – so if you drink enough coke, you start to enjoy sweet drinks and this will become part of your daily habit, e.g., part of your culture. Cultural imperialism is at least partially buttressed by trade policies that advantage organizations in the developed world, policies that not only fail to level the playing field, but provide further advantages to the large global concerns (Beck, 2000). ICT plays a role in this cultural imperialism both as a product – ICT products themselves are ethnocentric cultural artifacts (Walsham, 2005) and as an enabler – ICT provides access to global products in markets that might previously have been isolated.

4. Interconnected business

A second perspective of globalization is that of the global inter-connectedness of businesses, or more specifically, the global interconnection of business processes. Fueled by global supply chains, business processes across organizations along the chain become connected, largely by information and technology. As the global supply chains become tighter, business processes become standardized, and, in essence, homogenized, so the first conceptualization of globalization is also evident in this second. And, as with the first conceptualization of globalization, it is the most powerful organizations that are able to push their processes on others. ICT plays a well-documented and central role in global supply chains. Not only is ICT the key enabler of such supply chains, but it also becomes an artifact of the supply chain itself: small firms must cope with multiple ICT standards if they wish to supply materials to more than one large organization. Thus, the ICT skills of the small firms must increase to meet the demands of the global supply chains. Some research is now examining the issue of how small firms assimilate the ICT of larger firms and what influences their decisions to adopt multiple standards (Bala and Venkatesh, 2007). Subsidiaries of multinationals are also affected by ICT demands and expectations stemming from the corporate ICT strategy which may force upon them standardized processes that are antithetical to their culture or way of operating (Mohdzain and Ward, 2007; Lehmann, 2004).

5. Global village

A third conceptualization on globalization is that of the global village, or globally interconnected lives. The conceptualization portrays both an optimistic, as well as a darker side, of globalization. On the optimistic side, as large firms pursue cheaper and cheaper raw materials and supplies, they lean more on firms in the developing world. This may help fuel growth

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