



# The Internet: The Frontier of Cultural Soft Power in Cross-Cultural Transmission

WANG Pingping<sup>[a]</sup>, \* , NIE Aimin<sup>[a]</sup>; CUI Juanjuan<sup>[a]</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup> Foreign language Teaching Section, Naval Aviation University, Yantai, Shandong, China

\*Corresponding author.

Received 21 September 2021; accepted 12 November 2021

Published online 26 December 2021

## Abstract

As a significant carrier of culture and cultural products, the Internet plays a significant role in cross-cultural transmission. Within the framework of Soft Power theory, the phenomenon of cross-cultural transmission on the Internet is analyzed, and further study of its causes are conducted. Culture has become a prominent element of soft power. With globalization and consumerism as the context, cultural industry flourishes. Meanwhile, the Internet develops exponentially, becomes a powerful agent between culture and economy and performs as the frontier of cultural soft power in cross-cultural transmission.

**Key words:** The Internet; Cultural Soft Power; Cross-cultural Transmission

Wang, P. P., Nie, A. M., & Cui, J. J. (2021). The Internet: The Frontier of Cultural Soft Power in Cross-Cultural Transmission. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 17(4), 65-69. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/ccc/article/view/12336>  
 DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/12336>

The ubiquitous reference of terms as globalization in contemporary society indicates an accelerating international, interregional, or intercultural communication. The process of globalization and commercialization of culture due to prevailing consumerism makes cultural issues a hotspot in both public and academic sphere as a significant element of national strength. On the other hand, the rising and booming of the Internet is also a prominent feature of contemporary society. As a powerful medium, the Internet performs as a frontier of cultural soft power.

The innate features of the Internet, such as openness, instantaneity, and interactability, make it an effective carrier of cultural products and cultural values. In an international context characterized by the accelerating pace of economic globalization and the influence of consumerism, cultural products can be transmitted worldwide. In aspect of intercultural communication in a mass media age, the producing and consuming of cultural products follow the rules of market, and a consumerism culture promoted by transnational corporations permeates through the boundaries of countries.

## 1. ON CULTURAL SOFT POWER

### 1.1 Soft Power Theory

The concept “power” is constantly mentioned in international politics since the comparison of national strength among nations is inevitable. In dictionary, “power” is defined as the ability or right to control or influence others. At the most general level, it can be interpreted as the ability to affect others to get the outcomes you want. Traditionally, power is interpreted as the possession of tangible resources, such as territory, population, military, natural resources, etc., and military might is emphasized as the major power resource in international politics. In contemporary period, however, the connotation of “power” is undergoing great changes, as the association between the word “power” and its conventional interpretations as military force is weakening, while factors as technology and culture become more significant (Nye, 2000).

Traditional powers like military power and economic power are both examples of hard command power that can be used to force others to change their position. Hard power can rest on inducements or threats, but there is an indirect way to exert influence on others and get your outcomes. A country may obtain the outcomes it wants in

world politics because other countries want to follow it, admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness. This aspect of power-getting others to want what you want-can be called soft power. It refers to the ability to win other's support or acquiescence through attraction rather than coercion. Soft power co-opts people rather than coerces them. (Nye, 2002).

The term "soft power" is now widely used in describing international relations. Although there are still contentions on the connotation of soft power, it is generally agreed that the source of soft power falls to three categories. One is the appeal of cultural values, including language, education, lifestyle, pop culture etc. The second is the appeal and even assimilatory power of social institution and development pattern. The third is the ability to set political agenda and determine the framework of debate.

## 1.2 Cultural Soft Power

### 1.2.1 Culture

Culture is a complicated word with both broad denotation and deep connotation. There is no precise definition describing what culture really is. E.B. Taylor defined culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and many other capabilities and habits acquired by...[members] of society." (Soulse, 2002) Similarly, according to Robert Murphy, "Culture means the total body of tradition borne by a society and transmitted from generation to generation. It thus refers to the norms, values, standards by which people act, and it includes the ways distinctive in each society of ordering the world and rendering it intelligible." (1986, p.14). Ruth Benedict believes that each culture is like a person, and possesses unique characteristics that distinguish itself from others. (1989)

Generally speaking, the concept "culture" is interpreted either in a broad sense or in a narrow sense. In the broadest sense, "culture" covers the whole process of social practice and its achievements, both materially and mentally. In a narrower sense, "culture" is often limited to the range of intellectual sphere, including knowledge, arts, religion, values, ideology, ethical codes, law, custom, etc. In this paper, the concept "culture" is mainly interpreted as the latter, including the process of intellectual production and the products.

### 1.2.2 Culture and Soft Power

In international arena, soft power rests primarily on three sources: First, cultural appeal, and to be more specific, a universalistic culture that represents an attraction to the mass of the world in the form of cultural exports. By this token, cultural exports, such as films and television programs, art and academic writing on the Internet can be regarded as a valuable source of soft power. (Nye, 2000) Second, values and social institution. Political, economic and social systems which are interpreted as democratic,

free, and open represent a great appeal as universal values. Such shared values can engender acquiescence and cooperation. Third, the ability of setting agenda and framework in order to influence other's preferences and positions, and legitimizes its own behaviors with an appearance of authority. Considering the fact that values are embodied in its various forms of culture, the universalism of one culture and its ability to establish a set of favorable rules and institutions that govern areas of international activity are critical sources of power. (Nye, 1990, p.33)

In the discussion of power and its exertion, the difference between "source" and "behavior" should be made clear. As the name implies, "source" represents the origin, while "behavior" indicates the outcome. In analyzing cultural soft power, culture is what we call "source", and its actualization---the exertion of soft power---is the "behavior". Whether soft power produces behavior depends on the context and skill with which the source is converted to outcomes. The context is characterized by globalization, while the skill refers to the development of information technologies and the adoption of the Internet.

### 1.2.3 Cultural Industry

The Frankfurt School put forward one of the first models of critical cultural studies that analyzed the processes of cultural production and political economy, the politics of cultural texts, and audience reception and use of cultural artifacts (Kellner, 1995). They focused on technology and culture, indicating how technology was becoming both a major force of production and formative mode of social organization and control. In *Some Social Implications of Modern Technology*, Herbert Marcuse argued that technology in the contemporary era constitutes an entire mode of organizing and perpetuating (or changing) social relationships, a manifestation of prevalent thought and behavior patterns, an instrument for control and domination. (Kellner, 2002) Mass culture refers to the culture popular among the public by means of mass media, such as pop music, pop fiction, fashion magazines, movies, etc. In the realm of culture, technology produces mass culture which accustoms individuals to the dominating patterns of thoughts and behaviors, and thus functions as powerful and effective instruments for social control. Mass culture connects arts, politics, religion, philosophy with business, which makes commodities available in these fields, thus enables the manipulation of the ruling class on public minds, and the cultivation of a sense of acquiescence.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the term "culture industry" was for the first time used to indicate the process of industrialization of mass culture and signify the commercial thrust that stimulated the process (Horkheimer, M., Adorno, T., 2002). Cultural industry is characterized by a domination of monopolistic capital in cultural sphere, and the according commoditization

of culture. It applies mass media to convince the public. Within the context of industrial production, commodities of cultural industry possess the same features as other mass products, namely, commodification, standardization, and massification. Yet the cultural industry has the specific function of equipping the capitalist society with an ideological legitimation and therefore integrating the individuals into its well-established value system and way of life.

#### **1.2.4 Cultural Soft Power in the Context of Globalization**

Globalization is a term that encompasses multileveled connotations, which makes it hard to quantify. Among the majority of the definitions of globalization, the factors that play a major role are regarded as expansion, concentration, and acceleration of worldwide relation. (Osterhammel and Petersson, 2005) If any consensus exists about the influence of globalization, it is the assumption that globalization challenges the importance of the nation state and alters the balance of power between states and markets in favor of the latter. (Strange, 1996) Indeed, one prominent aspect that is universally perceived is the economic globalization. Along with the economic globalization is the global rise of consumerism. Market behaviors connect the world like never before as global consumerism and expanding channels of distribution create uniform desires and demands.

The globalization of mass production, mass consumption, and mass media is the explicit aim of the visions of the future, and growth is the common denominator of social development. The global homogenization of consumption desire and cultural reference, oriented on the standards of industrial civilization, advanced by its leaps and bounds, transcends the borders of nations and political blocs. For example, the social, economic, technological and cultural images inspired by Hollywood generally lead to a global awareness of and openness to the ideas and values behind such images, possibly because “American corporate and advertising executives, as well as the heads of Hollywood studios, were selling not only their products but also America’s culture and values, the secrets of its success, to the rest of the world.” (Pells, 1997, p.31-32) Large, established entertainment industries often enjoy considerable economies of scale in content production and distribution. Evidence of a homogenization of consumption patterns and attitudes could be found far beyond political sphere of influence, namely, the capitalist “free world”. It proves to be much less difficult to spread the products of entertainment industry across cultural borders. Cultural industry may function as a formidable tool of soft power in projecting the appeal of one culture, economic model, as well as social or political institutions.

In a world that are increasingly characterized by globalization, many countries witness large scale cross-

cultural transmission by transnational media companies who produce cultural products all over the world. Media become a major tool in disseminating certain lifestyles and cultural values. In an age when information technologies greatly assist the transborder flow of information, it is more and more difficult for nations to isolate from other parts of the world. within such a context, market and transnational companies are playing an increasingly important role in producing as well as marketing cultural products. Culture takes the forms of lucrative commodities and even becomes an engine of economic growth.

---

## **2. THE INTERNET AND CULTURAL SOFT POWER**

---

### **2.1 The Internet as the Mass Medium**

The Internet has transcended the original role of being a mere tool; in a sense it has become a source of culture. With its inherent characters ever since its creation, the Internet changes the world in every possible way, perceivable or intangible. The Internet grows exponentially and develops as an all-time and ubiquitous technology, and is changing the society to an unprecedented extent.

The term “Internet” here is applied for the simple signification as an international network of interconnected computers enabling people in different locations to communicate with one another and to access vast amounts of information from around the world, and is studied from the angle of its function as an agent among different social groups due to its connectivity.

The Internet is often called the fourth medium after newspaper, radio, and television. Compared with the previous traditional media, the Internet has many unique features enabling it to surpass all other media forms in terms of its influence on the society. These unique features compared with traditional media are the reason that makes such level of influence possible.

First, the Internet is an open medium. Openness is its most fundamental character. Each computer is made an equal knot on the Internet without a sense of affiliation. In terms of information transfer, packet switching technology is applied, which can avoid interception of information transfer among computers on the Internet unless the whole Internet is destroyed. In order to make resource sharing possible, the adoption of protocols such as TCP/IP further facilitates information transfer on the Internet.

The openness of the Internet is not just on technology level. Openness also means that due to an anonymous system, technically anyone can have access to any information on the Internet, and anyone or any organization, including a nation or a government, cannot control information dissemination completely. In a sense, any nation is an entity with different levels of closure and

therefore different levels of information monopoly, while an open Internet undermines the controlling of information to a reasonably large extent, and ensures individual's right to know.

Second, the Internet enables bi-directional communications, a most distinctive feature of the Internet compared with traditional media, where on most occasions people only passively receive information. However, on the Internet an individual can be a receiver and at the same time, an information promulgator. The forms are various: one to one, one to many, and many to many etc. Most online activities and programs, no matter it is online chat, BBS, or simply a news website, the easy, direct and rapid communication pattern with a feedback mechanism provides individuals on a possibly largest scale a chance to acquire much more information in much less time. This bi-directional system therefore turns the Internet to an ideal platform for information dissemination.

Third, with the help of information technologies, people have easy and quick access to various kinds of information on the Internet. Such various forms of information sources attract a large scope of people to access the Internet, thus further facilitates information dissemination. The Internet is often compared to an immense information ocean where people can find virtually any kind of information they need. Various kinds of websites---general website, specialized website---provide all-inclusive information ranging from academic knowledge, such as sciences and humanities, to news, life tips, fashion, entertainment, and sports, to name just a few. Besides, information on the Internet is not restricted to mere texts and still images, but is in mixed display of all kinds of media forms, including various dynamic audiovisual files. As a carrier of enormous amount of information, the Internet means a great appeal to diverse social groups.

With its distinct features of being open, interactable, and capacious, the Internet develops in an astonishing speed and permeates every field of social life. To a large extent, the Internet satisfies the need of resource sharing beyond time and space. The geographic boundaries are broken, and along with it comes a new "cross-space", a space for cross-national, cross-regional, cross-cultural activities in cross-cultural transmission.

## 2.2 Cultural Soft Power via the Internet

With its unique features, The Internet develops rapidly into a network that connects large parts of the world and influences human society in a profound way. Information and communication technologies make it possible that information communication and resource sharing become independent of time and space to an unprecedented level. The geographic boundaries are much blurred as the Internet bestows new meaning on the concepts of time and space.

As a result of evident advantages in information

communication, the Internet performs as a natural stage for cross-cultural transmission. In a sense, it opens a new era of cultural dissemination. It is beneficial to cross-cultural transmission as a ready-made stage in terms of cultural soft power where values and ideas along with cultural products can permeate and influence. In an economic globalization age when communication system and market span the whole world, various cultural products, services, and entertainment forms prevail on the Internet, which not only creates a communicative means that is universal, but also results in a globalized thinking pattern. Globalization here is not only a phenomenon indicating the transnational flow of goods and capital, but also a global pervasion of technologies and information with a cultural connotation.

The advances in communication technology are decisive factors enabling financial markets to boom worldwide, and transnational corporations to set up their global organizations. Driven by communication technology and the worldwide marketing of cultural industries, the Internet facilitates the promoting of cultural soft power in cross-cultural transmission as the agent connecting capital and culture. On the Internet, cultural soft power takes forms in much mild and hidden ways. Products of pop culture are consumed and welcomed worldwide. Wherever the Internet surfers are, whatever their nationalities are, they have fast and easy access to cultural products. Whether in tangible or intangible forms, and whether in aspects of informing, delivering, or consuming, the Internet accelerates and facilitates the whole process. Therefore, it makes sense to say that the Internet performs as a frontier for cultural soft power in cross-cultural transmission.

## 3. CONCLUSION

The Internet is a powerful catalyst in contributing to the interconnectedness of the world as a unique medium. It has great impact on culture as the effective carrier. Globalization and the rise of consumerism results in worldwide cultural industry boom, as cultural products are marketed globally by transnational companies and made available to large consumer groups worldwide. Mass production, mass consumption, and mass culture are all catchwords that are frequently associated with such social phenomena. In the context of globalization, the Internet performs as the frontier of cultural soft power in the process of cross-cultural communication.

## REFERENCES

- Benedict, R. (2006) *Patterns of culture*, London: Mariner Books.  
Ferguson, M. (1992) The myth about globalization. *European Journal of Communication*, 7, 69-93.  
Horkheimer, M., Adorno, T. (2002) *Dialectic of enlightenment*.

- (Cumming, J Trans.). New York: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Huntington, S. P. (1993). The clash of civilizations? *Foreign Affairs*, 3(72), 22-49.
- Kellner, D. (1995) *Media culture: Cultural studies, identity, and politics between the modern and the postmodern*. London: Routledge.
- Kellner, D. (2002). The Frankfurt School and British Cultural Studies: The Missed Articulation. In T. Nealon and C. Irr (Eds.), *Rethinking the frankfurt school: Alternative legacies of cultural critique* (pp.31-58). Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Morgenthau, H. (2005) *Politics among nations: The struggle for power and peace*. McGraw-Hill Education (Asia) Co. and Peking University Press.
- Murphy, R. (1986) *Culture and social anthropology: An overture*. (2nd ed., pp.14). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Nye, J. (1990). *Bound to lead: The changing nature of American power*. New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers.
- Nye, J. (2002). *The paradox of American power: Why the world's only superpower can't go it alone*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Nye, J. (2004a). *Soft power: The means to success in world politics*. New York: Public Affairs.
- Nye, J. (2004b). *The benefits of soft power*. *Harvard Business School Working Knowledge*. Retrieved Oct. 10, 2021 from <https://hbswk.hbs.edu/archive/the-benefits-of-soft-power>.
- Nye, J. (Jan. 3, 2000). The power we must not squander. *The New York Times*. Retrieved Sep.18, 2021 from <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/01/03/opinion/the-power-we-must-not-squander.html>
- Osterhammel, J., & Petersson, P. (2005). *Globalization: A short history*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Pells, R. (1997) *Not like us* (pp.31-32). New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers.
- Soules, M. (2002). *Notes toward a definition of culture*. *Media Studies*. Retrieved Oct.10, 2021 from <http://www.media-studies.ca/articles/culture.htm>
- Strange, S. (1996). *The retreat of the state: The diffusion of power in the world economy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Williams, R. (1983). *Culture and society, 1780-1950*. New York: Columbia University Press.