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Determining the Transcultural Value of Free Flow in Digital Communication Platforms

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Abstract: Digital communication platforms dominate the contemporary communication landscape. The majority, though not exclusively, originate in the United States of America, developed and operated by a limited number of dominant corporations representative of the globalized cultural industry. This paper employs intercultural and transcultural theoretical frameworks to analyze the cultural nature of these platforms. Subsequently, we aim to determine the extent to which these dominant platforms facilitate transcultural exchange, and assess the efficacy of regulation in guiding platform-based communication. Our conclusion posits that current platform practices are fostering a discernible “techlash” directed towards cultural containers of communication.

Keywords: intercultural communication; transcultural communication; digital communication platforms; cultural imperialism; cultural values

1 Introduction

Digital communication platforms have become ubiquitous. Whether observing fellow passengers on the metro in Shanghai, a bus in Los Angeles, or awaiting connecting flights in Frankfurt, it is evident that individuals frequently utilize digital communication platforms on their smartphones. The industry providing these applications often labels them “social media,” a potentially misleading and promotional term. Indeed, some argue that these platforms may, in certain respects, inhibit genuine social face-to-face interaction rather than facilitate it. Furthermore, these platforms often resist categorization as “media” in the traditional sense, which would imply stricter editorial oversight. Regardless of definitional debates, communication platforms demonstrably compete successfully with traditional mass media for audience attention, becoming a primary source of information, particularly for younger demographics (the Reuters Digital News

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Report documents the rise of platforms as news sources year after year; for the latest report see Newman et al. 2024).

A salient characteristic of these platforms is their transnational reach and appeal. Brands such as Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, X, Bluesky, YouTube, and Netflix, among others, are marketed globally by US corporations. National exceptions are few, notably TikTok, a platform run by the Chinese company ByteDance, which has offices all over the world. Within China, platforms with similar functionalities, such as Weibo, WeChat, and Douyin, serve primarily the national user base. What significantly limits the transnational reach and appeal of platforms are restrictions to access in some countries due to regulatory, political, or infrastructural reasons.

Notwithstanding these limitations, for the first time in human communication history, media outlets have attained truly global scope, transcending not only geographical and political boundaries, but also cultural borders. In comparison to earlier transnational media corporations, such as the media empires of Rupert Murdoch (with holdings in Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) or Bertelsmann (predominantly in Europe, with some presence in the USA) (see Mazzoleni and Palmer 1992), digital platform applications generally do not adapt to specific cultures, nations, or user preferences. Their operational models are largely standardized globally, generating substantial economies of scale and scope, and contributing to significant economic success. Their profitability, combined with strong user retention and high levels of ownership concentration, renders these market-leading platforms remarkably stable. Even the rebranding of Elon Musk's platform from Twitter to X, despite considerable changes in governance, did not damage the service to the point of disappearing from the market.

Globalization, it appears, has progressed from a moderate level characteristic of mass media to a more pervasive level facilitated by digital platforms. Academic discourse surrounding mass media globalization often centered on the question of whether the "free flow" of information and entertainment might foster cultural imperialism. Cultural imperialism, in this context, refers to the process by which "the cultures of less developed countries have been affected by flows of cultural texts, forms and technologies associated with 'the West'" (Hesmondhalgh 2007, 214). The concept of cultural imperialism remains debated, with some scholars arguing against the notion of a culturally uniform and homogeneous global space, highlighting the "active audience" who "make creative and active use [of] internationally distributed cultural goods" (ibid., 217). David Hesmondhalgh, for instance, favors the term "cultural internationalization" to describe the process driven by the pursuit of new markets for cultural products. Colin Sparks, building on Appadurai (1996, 27), suggests that globalization has superseded the imperialism paradigm. Sparks asserts, "Strong theories of globalization argue that the world in which we exist today has radically different parameters from that of preceding epochs. It displays features,

most notably the degree of interconnectedness, that are ‘strikingly new’” (Sparks 2007, 128). Indeed, this debate from nearly two decades prior remains remarkably relevant to understanding the contemporary landscape of culture and communication, now significantly shaped by digital platforms.

To further develop and expand upon this concept of globalization, we argue for the necessity of applying an additional theoretical lens. Digital communication platforms, analogous to the editorial content of mass media, transmit cultural values alongside user-generated content. The content displayed by platforms is the product of a sophisticated process involving algorithmic filtering, potentially with human content moderation. The manner in which this rigorous and non-negotiable set of rules shapes and constrains cultural expression on individual screens constitutes a form of cultural agency. To better comprehend and explicate this cultural agency across borders, two primary theoretical approaches can be distinguished: Interculturality and Transculturality.

2 Interculturality and Transculturality

Analyzing digital platforms necessitates in-depth consideration of the underlying conceptualizations of culture and its associated values. The concepts of interculturality and transculturality are predicated on differing perspectives regarding the definition, delineation, and communication of culture (Herdin 2012). While interculturality emphasizes exchange between clearly defined cultural units, transculturality highlights the porous and dynamically overlapping nature of cultural systems.

Interculturality derives from the Latin prefix *inter-* (“between”) and pertains to exchange between distinctly defined cultures, often delineated by national borders. Intercultural communication emerged as a scientific discipline in the 1950s, spurred by increasing international mobility following World War II (Mendenhall, Punnett, and Ricks 1995). Particularly in the USA, the expansion of multinational corporations in the 1960s heightened the need to navigate cultural differences. Edward T. Hall established foundational links between communication and culture with *The Silent Language* (1959) and coined the term “intercultural communication.” In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Geert Hofstede (1980) conducted extensive comparative cultural studies across nations. While these studies remain influential, Hofstede’s work has faced criticism for presenting a potentially oversimplified and stereotypical portrayal of culture.

The intercultural approach, which conceptualizes culture as geographically bounded and clearly distinguishable, contrasts with transculturality. Transculturality emphasizes the dynamism of global exchange, international interdependencies, and deterritorialization (Appadurai 1996, 52), challenging the notion of discrete cultural spaces. Comparative cultural studies primarily oriented toward national borders are

increasingly limited in their explanatory power as globalization intensifies. It is now a widely accepted observation that globalization does not inevitably lead to homogenization. The interplay between the local and global, and the “linking of localities” (Robertson 1995, 35), are reflected in concepts such as indigenization (Appadurai 1996), glocalization (Robertson 1995), hybridity and third space (Bhabha 1994), third culture (Featherstone 1995), and others. Within this context, transculturality gains prominence as it offers an alternative to the more static cultural concept of interculturality.

The concept of deterritorialization (Appadurai 1996, 52) challenges the assumption that territories (typically nation-states) are synonymous with uniform, homogeneous cultures. In a globalized world, values are viewed not as fixed entities, but as mutable constructs shaped by cultural flows. The Latin prefix *trans-* denotes lifestyles that extend across cultural boundaries (Welsch 1999). Transculturality, therefore, critiques the concept of culture as a bounded container emphasizing physical, cultural, or political divisions and constructing singular unity and identity (Beck 1997; Urry 2000). Globalization can be understood as a phenomenon of “complex connectivity” (Tomlinson 1999, 2; 71). Tomlinson defines this as “the rapidly developing and ever-densifying network of interconnections and interdependencies that characterize modern social life.”

According to Appadurai (1996), globalization manifests not only in geographically defined regions but also in diverse, non-physical spaces. He employs the suffix “-scapes” in reference to the concept of landscapes, defining five dimensions of globalization, independent of physical location: *financescapes* (global capital flows), *ethnoscapes* (deterritorialized spaces characterized by migration), *ideoscapes* (ideological spaces of ideas like democracy), *mediascapes* (globally networked media), and *technoscapes* (technological configurations). Digital communication platforms operate primarily within mediascapes and technoscapes. Through their inherent design and operational protocols, these leading platforms significantly shape and define mediascapes and technoscapes. Users have limited capacity for modification or substantial input, despite the perceived illusion of user-driven content creation. While users contribute content, platforms ultimately control dissemination.

Platforms are intrinsically embedded within specific economic, political, and ideological frameworks. Platforms operated by Meta, Alphabet, or Microsoft exemplify neoliberal market mechanisms, and platforms originating from China operate within a different political-economic system. From an intercultural perspective, platforms can be seen as culturally encoded, embodying the values of their origin and disseminating these across diverse regions. Conversely, a transcultural perspective highlights how platforms are utilized globally and adapted to local contexts. However, many users may remain unaware of the underlying ideologies embedded within these platforms. Platform usage, therefore, constitutes not merely a technological act, but also a cultural practice governed by algorithms and influenced by content ranking, opinion prioritization, and moderation practices.

The intercultural and transcultural perspectives initially appear conceptually distinct. To delineate their differences more precisely, a comparative analysis along key indicators such as cultural context, cultural differentiation, and values proves useful. This allows for a detailed examination of both approaches. Concurrently, it becomes evident that both perspectives possess validity, and their integration is necessary to fully capture the complexity of cultural dynamics. This is particularly pertinent to digital platforms, which both reflect the cultural imprints of their origin and undergo transcultural adaptation. The theoretical discussion of platforms thus suggests that a synthesis of both cultural perspectives, adopting a “both-and” approach, is warranted.

3 Intercultural and Transcultural Dynamics

In order to better understand the terms interculturality and transculturality, it is beneficial to initially consider the cultural foundations upon which these concepts are built. A central theoretical framework in this regard is Kashima’s (2002, 208) approach to cultural dynamics, which proposes a metatheoretical model: “By cultural dynamics, I mean the stability and change of culture over time. I argue that this requires an attempt to integrate two different conceptualizations of culture.” Drawing on analyses of existing literature concerning “culture and mind,” Kashima identifies two fundamental conceptions of culture. On the one hand, culture is conceived as a “relatively enduring system of meaning, a structured set of symbolic meanings that are shared by a group of people” (ibid.). Kashima terms this perspective the “*culture-as-a-system* view” (Kashima 2000, 22). Culture, in this sense, is a largely stable construct characterized by shared attitudes and a repository of common symbols, thereby serving as a foundational framework for group experiences (ibid., 21).

Conversely, culture is also perceived as processual, permeable, changeable, and mutable. Culture, therefore, is a “process of meaning making, a stream of symbolically mediated activities by concrete individuals in particular contexts” (Kashima 2002, 208) and can be defined as a “process of signification [...] a process of production and reproduction of meanings in particular actors’ concrete practice (or action or activities) in particular context in time and space” (Kashima 2000, 21). He calls this view culture-as-a-process (“*process view*”) or culture-as-a-practice (“*culture-as-a-practice* view”), wherein culture is continuously produced and reproduced (Kashima 2000, 22; 2002, 210).

The conceptual distinction between “*culture-as-a-system*” and “*culture-as-a-process*” finds parallels in the discourse surrounding interculturality and transculturality. While intercultural approaches often presuppose stable cultural identities, the

transcultural perspective prioritizes the fluid and dynamic nature of cultural practices and meanings. Both perspectives are essential for comprehending the multifaceted complexity of culture.

The concept of interculturality aligns with the “*culture-as-system*” perspective. In empirical research, cultures are frequently compared using dichotomous pairings (e.g., neoliberalism vs. state capitalism in platform debates). The objective is to identify differences between cultures, which are generally defined in terms of nation states. The underlying principle is to identify consistent patterns deemed universal characteristics of the unit of analysis, thereby differentiating cultures. This implicitly assumes internal homogeneity within a culture, considered characteristic of a nation and typically contrasted with other cultures. Kashima (2002, 209) describes this as “characteristics that mark cultural similarities and differences.” In this framework, culture is viewed as relatively stable and internally homogeneous within a specific social unit, forming a cohesive whole sustained by the respective group of individuals (Kashima 2002, 210).

In contrast, transculturality challenges the notion of cultural stability and geographically fixed differences. Culture can neither be regarded as a homogeneous island (Welsch 1999) nor as a self-contained container (Beck 1997). Rather, it is in a constant state of flux, is dynamic and resembles a continuously changing matrix. Bauman (1999, xxix) sums this up aptly: “a constant invitation to change, not their ‘systemness.’”

This understanding corresponds to the “*culture-as-process*” view. The emphasis shifts from a collective, nationally defined culture to the actions of individuals who, despite potentially diverse cultural backgrounds, share a common mindset. Culture is understood here as a dynamic process emergent from the concrete interactions of individuals within specific contexts. Kashima (2002, 210) describes this as: “seeks fluctuating and yet recurrent patterns displayed by concrete individuals engaging in specific activities in particular contexts. People engage themselves in this continuous flow in interaction with others.”

While the intercultural approach conceptualizes culture as a stable, distinct entity, the transcultural perspective centers on fluid, situationally emergent contexts of meaning, continuously produced and transformed through human practice.

4 Platforms Between Interculturality and Transculturality

Digital communication platforms are deeply connected to the legal, economic, and ideological systems of their country of origin. This perspective aligns with the

“*culture-as-system*” approach and the intercultural perspective. The cultural coding of platforms is reflected in their underlying values, business models, and mechanisms.

From a transcultural perspective, it becomes clear that these platforms are not only carriers of specific values but are also used, adapted, and imbued with new meanings by people around the world. However, this often occurs without users being aware of the underlying ideologies. Platforms control content through their terms of use, and their algorithms determine the visibility of opinions through rankings, thus setting unspoken framework conditions for public discourse. This leads to an area of conflict. While platforms function as global communication spaces, they also bring with them the norms and mechanisms of their culture of origin, be it in the form of data protection practices, blocking (and over-blocking) measures, and business models based on clicks and screen time sold to advertisers.

Platforms are therefore products of their cultures of origin. At the same time, however, they can also influence the thinking and behavior of their users through structural mechanisms such as algorithmic control, personalized content delivery, and specific interaction logics. This influence is often subtle yet capable of permanently changing cultural norms and social discourse.

From a transcultural perspective, platforms are not merely technological tools, but also carriers of economic, political, and social ideologies. They become embedded in local cultures, shape perceptual patterns, and influence which topics and perspectives become globally visible, often without conscious reflection on the part of the users. In this sense, social platforms are not only communication media but also actors with significant value-based cultural impact.

Values play a fundamental role in shaping individuals’ perspectives and their broader worldview. They serve as essential building blocks for identity formation, providing orientation frameworks and acting as core cultural elements. Moreover, values establish a foundation for legitimating social norms, shaping behavioral expectations, and guiding collective decision-making. Communication, in this sense, must always be understood within its cultural and social environment – it does not occur in isolation. As a result, communicative actions can be seen as a process of social exchange in which values function as interpretive frameworks that influence perception and meaning-making.

Thompson and Hickey (1999, 68) emphasize the inseparability of culture and values, defining culture as “the learned set of beliefs, values, norms, and material goods shared by group members.” Understanding values is therefore crucial to uncovering the deeper, often less visible layers of culture, as they represent core distinctions between human societies (Giddens 1997, 586). Culture itself can be conceptualized as a “framework of meaning,” enabling members of a society to interpret and navigate their surroundings (Clarke et al. 1976, 10). It consists of shared

codes that are continuously constructed, transmitted, and reinterpreted. From a constructivist perspective, human beings are embedded within complex networks of meaning, shaping and being shaped by the cultural frameworks they produce – what Geertz (1973, 5) famously described as “suspended in webs of significance.”

The dual perspectives on culture – one as a structured system and the other as an evolving process – become evident in Inglehart’s (2000) analysis of contemporary social change. He identifies two divergent schools of thought regarding socioeconomic development. The first argues that modernization leads to a convergence of values, as economic and political forces reshape cultural norms. This perspective suggests that traditional values gradually erode, leading to more universally modern orientations. The second school of thought, however, stresses the resilience of cultural traditions, asserting that entrenched values persist despite external pressures and transformations (Inglehart 2000, 20). These perspectives align with the broader debate on whether culture should be seen as a stable system or as an ongoing, dynamic process (Table 1).

Table 1: Conceptualization of culture as a system (interculturality) versus culture as a process (transculturality). Based on Kashima (2000; 2002), Gudykunst and Mody (2002), Welsch (1999), Bauman (1999).

Culture and values	Interculturality	Transculturality
Concept of culture	Culture-as-a-system view	Culture-as-a-process view
Context of culture	Culture as a comprehensive, abstract entity (“system”) that is separate from particular social practices	Culture is associated with particular activities (“process”) and as process of signification
Cultural differentiation	Cultural differences typically conducted from a geographical perspective, often defined by nation-states, with the objective of identifying, distinguishing, and comparing cultures (prefix: inter-)	Exchange between cultures leads to a blurring of the boundaries. Cultures are interconnected and permeable, with a focus on transformative processes (prefix: trans-) that traverse and shape them
Values	The prevailing cultural paradigm is regarded as static; consequently, values are presumed to be autonomous of external influences	Globalization has a considerable influence on the process of cultural transformation, thereby contributing to the dynamic nature of values and fostering their increasing diversification
Applied to communication platforms	Legal settings, legislation and control	Local adaptations of legal and procedural rules Individual operations and consequences Challenging inherent values

Communication platforms are not value-neutral constructs but are embedded in the ideological, social, and political value systems of their country of origin. As these platforms operate globally, they do not simply adapt to new cultural environments; rather, they act as vehicles of value transmission, influencing local discourse, communication norms, and even thought patterns. This process can be understood through the lens of “cultural diffusion,” in which external value systems shape user behavior, perceptions, and interactions – often in ways that diverge from or even contradict local traditions and regulatory frameworks.

For instance, within the European Union, the widespread adoption of platforms developed in the USA introduces an external ideological framework that subtly transforms the public sphere. Digital platforms not only facilitate communication but also implement algorithmic structures that prioritize certain types of content, strengthen particular worldviews, and ultimately shape how information is perceived and circulated. These mechanisms raise questions about cultural sovereignty, as the dominance of external platforms may lead to a form of *ideological homogenization* – a gradual alignment of local discourses with the values of these digital infrastructures.

For example, the standardized visual design and global accessibility of digital platforms create the impression of a progressive homogenization of media and technological environments. This perceived uniformity manifests both in visual standardization – as seen in standardized user interfaces like Windows or platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, which maintain consistent designs worldwide – and in technological uniformity, driven by programming structures and the ubiquity of global connectivity.

As a result, technology that may have initially seemed “foreign” no longer appears foreign; it becomes familiar, smoothly integrated into daily life through localized interfaces, language adaptations, and widespread usability. This sense of familiarity, however, can mask underlying cultural differences. Global platforms are built upon normative and ideological assumptions that do not necessarily align with local value systems. Consequently, what may seem like a universal communication culture is, in fact, simply a superficial synchronization – a standardized external layer that obscures deeper cultural distinctions.

Those who equate this visual and technological uniformity with actual cultural convergence risk overlooking deeply ingrained cultural differences, including ideological influences embedded within digital infrastructures. This absence of critical reflection may result in an unexamined acceptance of value systems shaping communication dynamics largely invisibly to users. Thus, while digital platforms facilitate global interaction, they also contribute to the diffusion of specific ideological frameworks, subtly reshaping the public sphere without explicit recognition.

However, a decade of digital platform dominance shows that they do not remain static; their global use alters and reshapes them. Through their international user base, they absorb diverse practices, reinterpret their functionalities, and undergo cultural adaptations. Yet, despite this adaptability, their fundamental structures – including governance models, economic incentives, and content moderation policies – persist in reflecting their original ideological imprint. In this sense, digital platforms serve as both channels for transcultural exchange and as mechanisms for disseminating dominant ideological norms.

This dynamic highlights a wider conflict: While digital platforms enable intercultural communication and foster new forms of social interaction, they also contribute to the spread of value-laden frameworks that may not align with the local cultural and political contexts where they operate. Understanding this twofold function is essential in assessing the wider implications of digital globalization and the interplay between technology, culture, and power.

5 European Response

So far, Europe and its software industry have limited influence in the design and shaping of digital communication platforms. However, interculturality and transculturality associated with digital platforms affect the way Europeans communicate through these non-European platforms. Facing influences from both Chinese and US platform design models, the European Union decided to address the issue by releasing rules for digital platforms, regardless of their place of establishment, headquarters, or formal registration. Digital Markets Act (DMA) and the Digital Service Act (DSA), both from 2022, apply to all communication platforms of a minimum size – thus to all of the dominant players in the market.

The European Union has explicitly based these two regulations (which implies that they are directly legally binding for all member states) on European values. As set out in the European Democracy Action Plan (European Commission 2020) democracy is coined as the core value, which enshrines free media, pluralistic democratic debate, and the right of everyone to freely express their views. This setting is based on the European Charter of Fundamental Rights from 2000, where the preamble clearly affirms the core European values:

(...) human dignity, freedom, equality and solidarity; it is based on the principles of democracy and the rule of law. It places the individual at the heart of its activities, by establishing the citizenship of the Union and by creating an area of freedom, security and justice. (European Union 2000, preamble)

The Charter's two chapters on freedom and equality enshrine, among other fundamental rights and freedoms, the freedom of expression and information (art. 11), of thought and religion (art. 10), of arts and sciences (art. 13), the protection of personal data (art.8), the respect for cultural, religious and linguistic diversity (art. 22), the principle of non-discrimination based on any ground such as sex, race, color, ethnic or social origin, genetic features, language, religion or belief, political or any other opinion, membership of a national minority, property, birth, disability, age or sexual orientation (art. 21), the equality between men and women (art. 23) and the elderly (art. 25).

The operation and use of digital communication platforms affects all of the values listed in the Charter to varying degrees. Platforms from the USA and the People's Republic of China follow their own sets of platform rules and regulatory frameworks, which may not fully align with the standards set by European digital regulations. Europe itself does not own or operate any dominant platforms. The European Union, therefore, decided to ensure compliance with its values by subjecting all platforms operating in Europe to its jurisdiction, as enshrined in the DMA and DSA.

The success of this strategy to address the intercultural bias of communication platforms through strict regulation remains to be seen. As of February 2025, the second Trump administration and leaders of the US tech industry have strongly objected to this policy. While DMA and DSA hold platforms accountable for what they disseminate to their customers, representatives of the Trump administration misleadingly characterize these rules as suppressing free speech and as censorship (Atkinson 2025).

Cultural clashes appear not only between different ideological systems but also within "Western" democracies. When Elon Musk took over Twitter in 2023 and, later, after joining Trump's second election campaign in 2024, removed fact-checkers from his platform X, he violated a number of European values, such as the principle of non-discrimination, and prompted prominent public figures, such as journalists, to abandon this platform.

6 Conclusions

The Internet in general, and digital communication platforms in particular, once held the promise of equal communication opportunity for everyone, reducing power inequalities by giving voice to those previously unheard in the mass media era. This globalized media world contributed to cultures transcending national geographic, political, and cultural borders, leading to large-scale cultural exchange. While whether this should be characterized as cultural imperialism is debated, further analysis suggests that process-oriented transculturality is gradually but consistently overcoming system-based interculturality. In a "techlash" move, digital

communication platforms have reversed progress. Due to their rigid and centrally controlled structure, platforms do not qualify as transcultural but instead manifest as outdated, though highly successful, intercultural artifacts. Legislative attempts to promote value-based behavior are not welcomed by platform operators.

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