Standardizing Information Society?:
A Comparative Study of Commercial Culture

Todd Joseph Miles Holden

Faculty of Language and Culture, Tohoku University, Kawauchi, Aoba-ku, Sendai-shi 980

Received April 25, 1994; final version received August 19, 1994

This paper has two objectives: to outline a theory of standardization in information society and to conduct an empirical test of it. The theory centers on convergence and divergence of specifiable sociocultural elements. The test is based on a common information medium—television commercials—in two post-industrial societies—Japan and the United States. From a pool of over 20,000 CMs, 3059 ads were theoretically sampled (1927 in Japan and 1132 in America). Content analysis revealed that almost one-fourth of all American ads possessed some standardization content. Japanese CMs contained less, yet, standardization was well represented. Overwhelmingly, convergence outdistanced divergence in both countries. Eight key findings have surfaced, which merit further investigation. They are: (1) at the level of society the two nations appeared headed toward greater convergence; (2) at the level of culture diversity is most prominent; (3) At least four types of information penetration were discerned: uni-directional flow, bi-directional third party flow, third party uni-directional flow, and specialized flow; (4) Convergence can be measured in terms of importation and exportation of six information elements: corporation, product, human resources, ideology, lifestyles, and situations; (5) divergence can be measured in terms of five information elements: values, practices, forms of social organization, social problems and common objects; (6) America was found to be non-economic import-insular (or information import conservative) and Japan was non-economic import-expansive (or information import liberal); (7) America and Japan were both non-economic, export expansive, but only vis-a-vis specific information elements; (8) Time-space distanciation (or feedback) reveals the relative strength of reproduction of or resistance to information in society and, therefore, serves as an important indicator of the direction of standardization.

KEYWORDS: standardization, convergence, diversity, advertising, information society

Introduction

Is society becoming more or less similar in its form, structures, ideas, and activities? In a nutshell, this is the standardization question. It is a query which has existed for over two millennia. The social thinkers who have had something to say on this matter are certainly not trivial. Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Locke, Augustine, de Tocqueville, J. S. Mill, and Marx and Engels, among others, have invoked the concept of uniformity and, less frequently, diversity, to explain societal shape and activity. The substantive areas these authors saw standardization as engaging included: family, law, political form and practices, economic organization, communication, education, and public opinion.

In earlier work (Holden 1988, 1992) I sought to show how, over the last century, this question of standardization has informed, been woven by, or otherwise woven itself through the seminal explanatory constructs at the heart of the social sciences: modernization, nationalization, rationality, mass society, centralization, and liberalism. And yet, despite its pervasiveness, standardization as a theory of societal organization and change has gone without sustained academic attention.

This comes as somewhat of a mystery. After all, the last three decades has brought a constant chorus of claims that modern society is in the clutches of a profound transformation (see Giddens 1989:655). The change on most authors’ minds is “convergence”—an accreting similarity among the nations and peoples of the world. The most common culprits include industrial organization (Kerr 1960, 1983), knowledge base (Bell 1973; Touraine 1974), unity in political-economic form (Fukuyama 1992), consolidation among nation-states (Wallstein 1974; Rosenthal 1980), an increase in multinational economic entities and global market configuration (Drucker 1968), as well as a rise in non-state, transnational political actors (Giddens 1989; 1990).

Despite convergence fever, these claims remain without an overarching construct. It is only consolidation that is argued; and then, consolidation as seen through the prism of only one aspect of society. Above all, though, none of these claims are without challenge. Numerous disuptants argue that local diversity and distinctiveness hold sway over a large array of social phenomena, including voting (Claggett et al. 1984), political economy.

The research reported here was made possible by a Tokutei kenkyu award provided by Monbusho. I wish to thank the Socio-Politico Information Science Division of the Graduate School of Information Sciences at Tohoku University for nominating me for the award, and in particular, Professors Abe Shiro and Hosoya Takashi for their support throughout the research process. Special thanks to the many research assistants involved at various stages of the project—in particular: Azrina Husin, Izumi Hiroshi, Sato Ayako, Hobaru Tomoko and Saito Maeko.
(Bensel 1984) issue position (Agnew 1987) and identity (Pred 1983). In effect, modern society is so variegated in its forms and activities that the standardization question remains what Gallie (1955–6) has called an "essentially contested concept". This paper works toward bringing some closure to this matter.

About the study

To do so, communication has been selected for substantive investigation. The reasons for doing so are simple: back in the mid-nineteenth century, as industrialization was gearing up in Europe, communication was posited by both Mill (1956:89) and Marx and Engels (1967:84) as both cause and evidence of encroaching uniformity. Now, in the midst of post-industrial reorganization (where information, knowledge and communication constitute a central pillar of societal shape and activity), the Mill/Marx/Engels logic would prompt one to surmise that communication should martial the forces of convergence in even greater measure. Yet to contextualists, whose voices have swelled this past decade (e.g. Giddens 1983, Foucault 1979, Collins 1981), communication processes promise quite the opposite effect. Diversity—not uniformity—is believed to be spurred by proliferating information.

Extracting ourselves from the fray, the fact that a large segment of the world is moving pell-mell toward knowledge-based organization means that, regardless of direction, the standardization question is germane and likely being engaged at every turn. In applying the standardization question to information society we seek to determine the degree of convergence or divergence in the form and content of societal information output. To help in making this determination I have selected two very different post-industrial societies. One, America, is considered among the most heterogenous nations on earth. Its cultural and racial diversity is viewed alternately as its greatest weakness, as well as its greatest strength (Fallows 1989). The other society, Japan, has historically been one of the world’s most insular, unified, homogenous nations (Reischauer 1977). Both countries are liberal market societies, although according to many the view of capitalist organization (Johnson 1982) and practice (Prestowitz 1988) differs greatly between the two. In effect, the societies possess nominally similar political and economic organization, yet have very dissimilar socio-cultural histories. Scanning information content, one wonders whether patterns in continuities and dissonances will emerge both within or across the two information societies. To answer this question I selected a common communication form—television advertising—for socio-cultural comparison.

About advertising

In previous work on Japanese television advertising (1993a), I conducted a systematic analysis of hidden content. Finding over 50 recurrent codes in over 1000 commercials, I concluded that ads are less tools of persuasion or explicit socialization than they are directive and selective. They direct viewers toward particular attitudes, lifestyles and images (such as consumption) and away from others (non-acquisitive, humanistic values). Consistent with past studies (e.g. the MacBride Commission 1980, Schudson 1984) my data revealed a world that was capitalistic and liberal, ordered, stable, trend-conscious, consumption-oriented, product-centered, disposable, non-essential, convenient, and desire-centered.

As for selectivity, ads presented a highly circumscribed image of contemporary Japanese life: small and manageable; bounded, yet within specified parameters, full of possibility; gendered; limited in available freedoms; absent out-groups; devoid of alternative political-economic organization.

Notably, no exceptions to these general orientations were found. In this way, Japanese ads work as American ads. They “pick . . . up some of the things that people hold dear and re-present . . . them to people as all of what they value . . . (Schudson 1984:233; emphasis his; see also Fiske 1987:20). For this reason, I suggest, whether intentional or not, ads serve some social interests better than others.

More importantly, ads function in a way similar to other information media, such as journalism. To paraphrase Cohen’s (1963:120) famous dictum, although unsuccessful in telling people what to think, they are stunningly successful in telling viewers what to think about. In effect, I argue, advertising serves an agenda setting function. Like any other institutional medium of communication, advertising tells us what people, ideas and activities are important (and, by implication, which are not), in what way, and to what degree.

The standardization angle

Assuming this to be true, just what is it that advertising tells us is important? For Schudson (1984) advertising tells its recipients that they are bounded up in a society of production and sale. This makes advertising “the ‘official art’ of the advanced industrial nations of the west,” (Dyer 1982:1). Having studied this phenomenon in Asia, I would argue that advertising is something more: by the latter stages of the 20th century, it has become the globe’s common culture.

I say this for a very simple reason: in a world in which liberal capitalism is becoming the predominant form of socio-politico-economic organization, advertising is positioned to become the predominant form of communication. Predominant because despite (or perhaps because of) widely divergent cultural, historical and ideational pasts, advertising is the singular system of information transmission which virtually all nations hold in com-
mon. Advertising is the common currency. Whether its specific content is the same, its shared presence means that the people of the world are confronted by an identical message: the social world is organized in terms of production and sale, acquisition and use, commodification and exchange. This is the convergence side of the standardization question. Society, on this account, is becoming more similar in its shape, structures, ideas, and activities.

On the other side stands content. Each information vehicle sits within a particular information system; it is situated in a specific locale, defined by what Giddens (1984) calls “regionalized” time-space activity. While broad parameters may be shared between nations, the specific dimensions are shaped by or reflective of the particular societal context. We would imagine commercial content would differ from country to country because the cultural traditions and socio-political histories of each nation are so different. This emerged in my Japanese study, where content reflected patterns of culture (Carey 1979), appeared directly related to the rules and ideas (see Tuchman 1988) and institutions (Murdoch 1982) of the society, and bore close resemblance to the particular structure of the context within which they were broadcast (Fiske 1987). From this perspective, then, the content of advertising should provide a different answer to the standardization question. Cross-culturally (at the very least), ads should lead to a finding that the social world is less, not more, similar; more, not less, diverse.

Framing a mission

This poses a dilemma: when the standardization question is measured in terms of advertising form, the social world appears similar. When measured in terms of content, it appears diverse. One would imagine that differences would only become more pronounced when societies with radically different socio-cultural histories were compared. But if it were not—if the opposite were found—what would that tell us about the shape of modern society? What might that say about the power of information? That is the purpose of the present research. To observe and separate the allegedly intransigent power of culture from the asserted overwhelming, unifying force that is communication.

Method

Theoretical presuppositions

This study hinges on the notion of standardization, which I conceptualize in the following way. Standardization is a theory of social organization and change. It centers on sameness and difference in places, practices and ideas. The concept is bi-furcated to encompass what I refer to as convergence and divergence in social form and content. A well-developed theory of standardization does not only see an increasingly uniform social world. It recognizes a struggle between homogeneity and heterogeneity—a battle that is far from concluded. As such, it is equally committed to searching out diversity as it is finding uniformity.

I argue that standardization is an essential theory because sameness and difference is both quantitatively and qualitatively different from times past. It is quantitatively different because sameness, in particular, can be found with increasing regularity in a larger-number of activities and sites throughout the world. It is qualitatively different because, while convergence and divergence have existed previously, they have not operated in their current embodiments or with such effects.

The standardization question has been neglected by social scientists over the years for a variety of reasons. First, it is generally subsumed within other social scientific questions; second, it has been interpreted only in terms of uniformity; third, it has been confined to the question of effects; and fourth, it has been evaluated exclusively in negative terms.

Despite the neglect, all the central explanatory concepts of the past century invoke it. For instance, modernization posits pervasive modernity; nationalism asserts geographical unity; mass society sees sameness in the reduction to the mob; centralization finds commonality in consolidation; rationality advances universality in its highly circumscribed forms of method and organization. What is common to all of these theories is their tendency to see and/or craft a standard world built around a particular vision. In all cases, the social world is perceived in a unitary way. I call this predilection for uniformity, the “standardizing temptation”. I have argued that, at the very least, a concept is necessary to understand how and why uniform visions become recognized and/or refied. One part of such a concept must include the failure by such generalizing constructs to recognize the importance of localism and diversity in explaining the social world. It is this failure that ultimately separates the other concepts from standardization, and most recommends development of a new theoretical construct.

Methodology

In order to determine whether standardization exists in information society (and, if so, which of the twin forces is most powerful), sense data was utilized as a means of comparing places, practices and ideas. The data was distinguished in terms of similarity and difference, used, respectively, as inditia of convergence and divergence in societal form and content.
The data was treated in a systematic way: via content analysis. Our version owed more to structuralism than behaviorism, meaning that we focused on qualitative observation of latent content rather than quantitative description of manifest content. In the words of our earlier study "hidden worlds" exist inside advertising. Multiple symbols, meanings, ideas and messages embedded in ads educate, inform, select and direct. Not all of this content exists on the surface. Not all of it is intended. Possibly still, not all of it may actually be present. Rather, it may be the interpretation of participants (i.e. message producers, senders, receivers) bound up in a process of on-going symbolic interaction.¹

The samples

In selecting a sample the major objective was to simulate the commercial environment for the television viewer in both countries. To do so, four weeks of advertising were compacted into one "ideal" week. The week reflected the greatest possible equality between the seven commercial stations (4 in Japan and 3 in the United States)—by which we meant the greatest balance among stations in morning/evening and weekend/weekday representation.² The resulting distribution and sample figures are reproduced in Appendix 1.³

In order to create such a week we recorded commercials for an entire month in two sites: Baltimore, Maryland, in the United States, and Sendai, Miyagi, in Japan. These cities were selected because of their roughly identical features: northeastern locales of relatively similar size; locally prominent cities located in fair proximity to the seats of national government.

The recording followed a prearranged rotation, which is described elsewhere.⁴ In all, over 670 hours of programming was recorded (336 hours per country). From this, over 20,000 CMs were culled. Once the data was collected, we dubbed all the commercials onto a so-called "second generation tape", eliminating all programming and repeat advertisements. This left us with over 7,000 commercials. By a process of "theoretical sampling" (Glaser and Strauss 1967) the second generation tapes were then arranged into a hypothetical broadcast week (simulating a television viewer tuning into any station, Monday through Sunday, morning, afternoon or night). The total number of commercials in our sample was 3059 (1927 in Japan; 1132 in America). We then set about coding the ads for evidence of convergence or divergence.

The coding process

Coding was conducted in the following manner. No more than 3 members watched CMs at any one sitting.⁵ During each session all members performed one or more roles, aside from coding: secretary, timekeeper, TV/VTR operation, card file, master coding sheet. The lead researcher kept his own coding sheet. This standardized sheet assisted in regularizing treatment of the CMs in the sample. The original protocol consisted of over 50 categories.⁶ An average of ten codes was found per CM. The average coding time per commercial was eight minutes. Each ad was viewed, on average, five times. In all, 3059 commercials (1927 in Japan, 1132 in America) were coded. Of this number 528, or 17.3%, pertained to standardization.

In establishing whether convergence or diversity exists in advertising form and content we utilized a set of pre-established measures or guides. Thus when space, time, frequency, people, things, events, practices or values appeared in a heterogeneous (diverse) or homogenous (similar) way, a finding of standardization could be asserted. We strived for non-trivial findings. Thus, if no clear intention could be discerned beyond the depiction, but rather seemed coincidental or peripheral, we did not code the CM as heterogeneity or homogeneity.⁷

The guides used to code the two types of standardization were limited, consistent and recurrent; our interpretation of them invariant. Specifically, for heterogeneity, people entailed an array of personal and social types;

¹On this point see Cicourel (1964) regarding presuppositions in the study of symbolic interpretation and Fiske (1982) concerning the processes of human construction and interpretation of signs.
³Unlike the Japanese sample, the American effort was hindered by the Olympics and insufficient recording by our confederates overseas. This led to an unnatural distribution of stations in our "ideal" sample.
⁵During the Japanese portion the coding team consisted of 7 rotating members; the American portion, by contrast, numbered 3 constant members. Because of the size of our working pool during the Japanese segment, our rule was that the same three members could not code together on consecutive days; In this way, researcher effects were more likely dispersed throughout the sample. This randomization of bias was less likely in the American portion, which was hindered by flagging interest among student researchers, end of the year examinations, and a lack of language competence necessary for coding American CMs.
⁶These categories are detailed in the studies listed above, but included such measures as: Interaction, Corporations, Individualism, Salary Men, Sexism, Sexual Content, Discrimination, Gender roles, Image of women, Foreigners, Class, Nationalism, Hard/Soft Sell, Image of Japan, Traditional Japan, Japan in the world, Image of the United States, Alcohol, Homes, and Cars.
⁷Obviously, decisions being involved, this process can be criticized as subjective. To varying degrees this is an inescapable aspect of qualitative method. Nonetheless, I do believe that biases can be limited utilizing strict, uniform procedures and teams of rotating coders who adhere to identical standards. On this methodological strategy see Denzin (1970).
values concerned the display of differing tastes; space dealt with a product specific to a particular locale, things pertained to a variety of kinds located under one roof; values centered on the pursuit of various lifestyles, and practices involved the utilization of a single product in idiosyncratic ways. In addition, heterogeneity was found in two other common depictions: (a) the product possessed a number of different functions and (b) foreign and domestic elements appeared concurrently, yet remained separate.

As for homogeneity, people entailed differing types blended together in the common use of the product; values concerned the consolidation of different views within a common place, time or action; space centered on a product which is shared across locales; things dealt with the introduction of identifiable consumption objects external to the focal product; practices involved the wedding of foreign or extra-cultural elements (ideas, lifestyles) with dominant cultural practices. Additionally, homogeneity was found in cases where: (a) the product or ad was the same as that in the companion study country; (b) the product was distributed by a chain; or (c) social structure (such as shared political or economic practices) were discerned.

The analysis process

Following coding, an index of all commercials pertaining to standardization was created. From this effort 270 CMs (or 14%) of the Japanese sample and 258 CMs (22.8%) of the American sample dealt with some aspect of standardization. Further, indexing revealed that of these raw totals, 31 CMs (or 1.7% of the entire Japanese sample) and 80 CMs (or 7% of the whole American sample), respectively, dealt with heterogeneity. Homogeneity fared better as a percentage of the entire sample. 215 (or 11%) appeared on the Japanese side, while 258 (or 22.7%) surfaced in America.

As a share of standardization generically, homogeneity clearly was the winner. In both America and Japan, messages of convergence dominated. 79.6% of standardization content in Japanese ads and 69% in American CMs concerned homogenization. In the following section we discuss the possible meaning of these results.

Results and Discussion

Our study suggests that, despite vast historical, cultural, philosophical and structural differences, the focal societies evince a large degree of convergence. This is likely due to five factors: (1) both societies share (in very gross terms) the same political and economic organization; (2) both societies share and have commercialized the same social activities; (3) both societies hold a large number of corporations and/or use-objects in common; (4) both societies have been open to importation of the same or similar external values and practices; (5) a certain degree of mutual interpenetration (of products, practices and values) has occurred between the two societies.

This is not to say that evidence of diversity does not exist. Despite wide zones of similarity, a large discrepancy in values and practices can be found. Wide realms of resistance to standardization (particularly in the area of culture and ideology) can be found. For instance, in the Japanese data, there was great attention to the image and status of the 'salaryman', the historically and culturally-rooted sport of sumo, the phenomenally popular soccer craze, the traditional presence of nature. In the American data, by contrast, there was greater attention to health and fitness, political values such as liberty and community, lifestyle diversity and a shift (no matter how superficial) in gender roles and racial equality. Such ideo-cultural elements did not appear in ads from the companion society.

In short, evidence of both similarity and diversity were uncovered in the data. Space limitations mitigate against a detailed examination of this data here. We leave that task for a later paper. To set up that subsequent analysis I will introduce the five ways advertising appears to have standardized information society.

1. **Convergence in terms of increasing corporate/ad penetration.**

Perhaps the most obvious way post-industrial convergence can be measured is in terms of information flow between national and corporate cultures. In our sample, external indicators of convergence—the degree of penetration by a company, product or ad form emanating from outside the focal country—were well represented. We distinguished between two kinds of convergence: ad form and information content.

The former concerns the presentation of company, product, images or ideas. The latter focuses on corporate and product presence, and substantive presentation of the product. Our working hypothesis had been that presentation styles would not be shared between the two countries. However, it was the similarities in form—rather than the differences—which emerged as most salient. Consider, for example, that both societies tended to gender their form. In this homogeneity convergence could be discerned.

Formatic diversity was not absent from the sample, however. Above all, the countries differed in the directness and clarity of their commercial communications. While content of U.S. ads tended to be unequivocal, unambiguous and straightforward and their Japanese counterparts played up nonsense, feelings and implication, ²

---

²For those interested in the raw numbers (broken down into country, tape and standardization dimension), see Appendix 2.

³On mood, atmosphere and meaning in Japanese commercials, see Fields (1983), pp. 115–117. As to possible reasons why Japanese CMs are so, see Taylor (1983), pp. 128–133.
formatically, just the reverse was found. Camera and editing techniques as well as color emphasized ambiguity in America and clarity in Japan.

The most important results concerning external indicators of convergence dealt with ad content. Two distinct types of penetration were uncovered. When content originated from one of the sample countries and appeared in the other, I call this type of convergence uni-directional flow.

When corporate/product content flows from a country outside of both sample countries and is present in both, I call it bi-directional, third party flow. Although less common, such a case provides an excellent test for standardization. Convergence can be argued in the sense that the corporation has gained access to each of the focal markets. In many cases the identical product is being sold.

The second type of content convergence is related to the last. However, rather than information flowing from a third party into both sample countries, it moves into only one. Such cases, when they exist, are indicative of a globalizing world market of capital, organizations, products and ideas. An intellectual and social milieu larger than the two countries in our study. In our research, Reebok, Oil of Olay, and Hyundai transmitted information into the United States; BMW and L’Oreal transmitted information into Japan. This type of movement can be called Third Party, Unidirectional Flow.

Both types of penetration that we have cited are characterized by what I would call specialized flow. It is information content adapted to the particular values and practices of each country. This practice is pervasive in our comparative sampling. A strong example of this is McDonalds which hawked teriyaki burgers and chinese food in Japan, but not in America. This underscores the standardization of information society.

For the most part, just as with the case of uni-directional flow, deeper analysis uncovers divergence beneath the uniform exterior. The manner of presentation in each country revealed clear differences in the populations, values and practices of those depicted. The paradigmatic example in our sample was DeBeers which advertised its 10th anniversary diamond in both America and Japan. In each case a different audience (distinguished by age and class) was addressed.

2. Convergence in terms of foreign import/export.

It is not only corporations or products that can serve as means for measuring convergence. Ideas, lifestyles, popular culture, or public figures can also be signs of greater similarity. These signs possess directionality in the sense that each has a site of origin or termination. In this way we can speak of the import or export of information. Convergence, then, is the result of an in-flow or out-flow of certain information elements.

Our sample suggests that whichever direction information flows, it takes one of six forms: human resources, ideology, lifestyles or ways of being, situations—as well as the two considered above, corporations and products.

Importation. Convergence can be seen in the degree of openness one society displays toward the six information elements disseminated by another society. Our data indicates national differences in this regard. Specifically, America imports little—certainly far less than Japan. In fact the data suggests that America is non-economic import-insular (or information import conservative) and Japan is non-economic import-expansive (or information import liberal). Japan’s receptivity to convergence is greater than America’s in terms of the movement of information from outside. Stated alternatively, America’s commitment to information distinctiveness is greater than Japan’s.

Exportation. Cultural hegemony or national extension can be measured in terms of the degree to which domestic information elements are depicted in other societies. When products are the major measures of exports, both America and Japan evince signs of profligacy. When, on the other hand, elements such as people or lifestyles are considered, export expansiveness becomes provisional. For instance, in Japanese ads, situations are most widely represented; in American ads, ideas have the fullest distribution.

3. Convergence in terms of generic object.

Because the societies in this study share roughly the same commercial cultural base, we hypothesized that a large degree of convergence would be found in what I call “generic object”. By this I mean a common product—irrespective of corporate maker—which exists in both societies and is presented similarly. This proved the case for a large number of items; a sampling includes: sports drinks, toilet paper, tile cleaner, kitchen wrap, cars, electronics, deodorant, make-up, soap and shaving supplies. Despite great socio-cultural differences Japan and America exhibited a base of similarity relative to a large number of material and lifestyle objects. Many products inhere from a logic and world view shared by both societies; constructions apparently more powerful than cultural difference.

4. Diversity in terms of autonomous values and practices.

Clearly aspects exist in commercials which belong to only one country; elements that are neither imported, exported nor influenced by external elements. Working with the data, five categories involving distinction were discerned: values, practices, forms of social organization, social problems and common objects.

Differences in these five areas—in particular American attention to political values such as liberty and community and Japanese focus on social organization—demonstrate that sociocultural convergence has not fully transpired. Matters such as social problems—pervasive in American CMs but wholly ignored in Japanese ads—
suggest that in spite of a shared commercial form, the two societies remain quite distinct in key respects. This is even true when identical themes (common objects such as work and nationalism) are addressed.

5. *Time-space distanciation as measured by resistance to or reproduction of exo-societal values.*

Giddens (1990) has argued that at least 3 factors—disembedding, insertion and reflexive ordering of social relations—can account for modern social change. The media messages that we have studied possess these properties. They are human creations that transcend time and space. They also, in their own way, reflect responses to time-space distanciation. They lead either to resistance to or reproduction of cultural ideas and practices. This is similar to what earlier (and theoretically distinct) social sciences referred to as “feedback”. In terms of standardization, this aspect is crucial.

Our working hypothesis had been that those ad messages (whether foreign or domestic) which aligned with deep-seated cultural beliefs, societal organization and social practices would be adopted in and reproduced by other CMs; those which challenged such beliefs and practices would be resisted or modified. This we found to be true. To take the case of cars, for example, many Japanese companies accept the idea that their vehicles can be sold in the same way as American cars. I suggest this demonstrates a convergence not only in generic object, but in values, as well, insofar as both societies can be seen as subscribing to the notion that a particular product symbolizes a particular idea. This is clearly an issue of feedback, for a message transcends time and space, is modified in part, then reproduced in a new socio-cultural context. In such a way, ads utilize feedback and serve the forces of convergence.

This can also work in reverse. Rather than serve as an agent of convergence, rather than disembed, insert or decontextualize, information in ads can serve to inoculate recipients or bolster existing social order. The feedback process ads trigger can also maintain the uniqueness of the socio-cultural milieu. Diversity, in short, can be reproduced. By cycling back into the cultural context, ad content can negate or certainly check socio-cultural convergence.

**Conclusion**

Judged only from a numerical standpoint, standardization is not a trivial concern. Almost one-fourth of all American commercials in our sample possessed some standardization content. While Japanese advertising contained less, standardization was well represented. As for which side of the equation was more powerful, the figures are overwhelming: homogenization roundly outdistanced heterogeneity. Using these numbers, alone, as a guide, one would be tempted to argue that convergence, rather than divergence is the direction in which information society is headed.

Some words of caution

Of course, not without strong caveats being raised. Beyond the standard disclaimers (e.g. this study only surveyed one month of advertising, slight flaws in data collection and coding occurred), other more serious concerns must be voiced. First, we are speaking primarily about one aspect (the socio-economic structure) of information society. Secondly, it is likely that clear indicators may not exist for measuring divergence. The invisible is pervasive but especially hard to identify and, more, quantify. Thirdly, and perhaps most obviously, a finding of converging images and messages in media does not mean that convergence is transpiring at the level of human interpretation and, more, social action.

Advertising as standardization

What, then, are we to conclude about standardization in information society? Because ads pull all viewers within the orbit of consumer society they are a homogenizing force. At the same time, the prospect of actual homogenization is virtually illusory. Even the broadest of ads speak to societal members in different ways. Taken on such terms, advertising is standardization incarnate: it is both an embodiment as well as a reproducer of convergence and divergence. This research has demonstrated as much. It has also shown that when it comes to advertising, the world looks a whole lot more heterogenous than homogenous. This is true even in a society as relatively uniform as Japan.

One power of modern advertising is its ability to create what Boorstin (1974) calls “consumption communities”—hermetic, exclusive publics. Ironically, this is not just a force of segmentation. Certainly ads do fragment recipients—separating them by type (i.e. single/married, with/without children, young/old, alcohol/non-alcohol drinkers, health/non-health conscious, etc.); however, such segmentation serves to widen viewer experience. In this way, paradoxically, a basis for collective experience is laid. Not only are human possibilities expanded, a greater prospect for socio-cultural convergence is engendered.

The emergence of convergence?

Beneath and throughout this work two observations have lain at ready reach. First, convergence and divergence are often very closely intertwined. Second, societal and cultural convergence are situational, concurrent
and, often, mutually exclusive. Ironically, these two points are not necessarily unrelated. Whether we speak of society and culture or convergence and divergence, the best way to determine whether information society is standardizing may lie in information form and content.

The societies studied here share a large number of formatic (socio-structural, systemic) elements. The same cannot be said for their content (cultural ideas and practices). Convergence at the level of culture is much more intractable; much less discernible than at the level of society. Judging from this data, such convergence is much less feasible or imaginable. It may simply be the case, as so many have alleged, that “context counts” (Agnew, et al. 1983). So-called “action contexts” (Giddens 1984) contain the power to mediate forces, frame activities and interpret values (see, for instance, Massey 1984), and if this is true for the institution (Foucault 1979), the locale (Pred 1983) and region (Agnew 1987), it certainly should be true for the nation (see Tocqueville 1955).

This is not to say that some contextual convergence hasn’t transpired. The Japan and America of today are much closer now in terms of shape, values and activities than they were even thirty years ago. Much of that has to do with liberal democracy; still more to capitalism; more, still, to modernity; a final amount, likely, to the ascending dominance of information in societal discourse, intercourse, and concourse. Just as pressure on the social, political and economic infrastructure has been brought to bear by an increasingly interconnected world, so, too, will pressure be increasingly wrought on the cultural infrastructure of all societies. Pressure to assimilate, to incorporate, to unite, to converge with other cultural bases. The results of this research do not guarantee this result; they do portend it.

Appendix 1: Station and Advertisement Distribution

Below is the distribution of the seven stations (4 in Japan, 3 in America) which comprised the ideal week of broadcasting.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sun</th>
<th>Mon</th>
<th>Tues</th>
<th>Wed</th>
<th>Thurs</th>
<th>Fri</th>
<th>Sat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A.M.</td>
<td>Miyagi</td>
<td>Tohoku</td>
<td>Miyagi</td>
<td>Sendai</td>
<td>Tohoku</td>
<td>Sendai</td>
<td>Higashi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P.M.</td>
<td>Tohoku</td>
<td>Higashi</td>
<td>Sendai</td>
<td>Miyagi</td>
<td>Sendai</td>
<td>Tohoku</td>
<td>Miyagi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This yeilded the following ad distribution:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Morning</th>
<th>Evening</th>
<th>Total (#/%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Higashi Nihon</td>
<td>213 (21.4%)</td>
<td>250 (26.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miyagi Telebi</td>
<td>321 (32.2%)</td>
<td>280 (30.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tohoku Hos</td>
<td>241 (24.2%)</td>
<td>201 (21.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sendai Hos</td>
<td>221 (22.2%)</td>
<td>200 (21.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals&lt;sup&gt;10&lt;/sup&gt;:</td>
<td>996</td>
<td>931</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mon</th>
<th>Tues</th>
<th>Wed</th>
<th>Thurs</th>
<th>Fri</th>
<th>Sat</th>
<th>Sun</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A.M.</td>
<td>NBC</td>
<td>ABC</td>
<td>NBC</td>
<td>CBS</td>
<td>NBC</td>
<td>ABC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P.M.</td>
<td>CBS</td>
<td>NBC</td>
<td>CBS</td>
<td>ABC</td>
<td>CBS</td>
<td>NBC</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This yeilded the following ad distribution:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Morning</th>
<th>Evening</th>
<th>Total (#/%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CBS</td>
<td>57 (9.1%)</td>
<td>282 (55.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NBC</td>
<td>321 (51.3%)</td>
<td>159 (31.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABC</td>
<td>248 (39.6%)</td>
<td>65 (12.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals:</td>
<td>626</td>
<td>506</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>10</sup>Unlike the full (4 week) sample, this sub-sample was better balanced: between morning and evening (51.7 to 48.3%)—and amongst—.
Appendix 2: Statistics Concerning Homogeneity and Heterogeneity in Japanese and American Advertisements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>JAPAN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tape Number: Type: C:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Heterogeneity</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Homogeneity</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong>:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: C1 through 16 refers to the ordering system for the tapes in the ideal week (1 corresponding to Sunday morning and 14 referring to Saturday night. 15 and 16 are supplementary tapes due to limitations in the original recording process. For the first three tapes in the sample, homogenization and heterogeneity were not distinguished on the coding sheet. Instead, a generic “standardization” appeared. The numbers presented for heterogeneity and homogeneity for the first three tapes, therefore, are based on reconstructions made from the coders’ margin notes.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AMERICA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tape Number: Type: C:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Heterogeneity</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Homogeneity</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong>:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: C17 through 30 refers to the system used to order the tapes in the ideal week (17 denoting Monday morning and 30 Sunday night).*

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


