

THE PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES OF FILM PUBLICITY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper has tried to explore the prospects and challenges of movie publicity in Nollywood, the Nigerian Film and home video industry. Using an observational approach drawn from a somewhat insider's knowledge, the types of movie publicity which obtain in the industry were x-rayed. Some of the constraints in the industry which include non-existence of Theatre/Cinema houses, insecurity, and a lack of Corporate Body by way of Association/Guild to handle its affairs, were identified. The paper concludes on the note that publicity which is a vital arm in the movie production process that has a prominent role to play in box office returns should be taken more seriously. It was then, recommended, among others, that there was need to build theatre/cinema houses, make the various arts and culture Departments of the states more viable and active, create a body or association of movie/film publicists that would take control and regulate the manner and methods of movie publicity in the industry and put measures in place to address the insecurity problem in the country.

Keywords: Publicity, Movie, Nollywood, Theatre, Culture

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Introduction

Movies and talk about movies constitute a certain portion of our daily conversation. It is difficult to imagine a day pass without the average person coming in contact with movies by watching them, as they are or seeing clips from the news; seeing billboards, handbills, flyers, posters, advertisements, hearing or talking about them with friends and family members. These are all forms of publicity and creating awareness about the film. Much has been written on the Nigerian video film but pretty little is written on how they are publicized and get the much needed attention that leads to patronage. This paper is designed to assess the modes of movie publicity employed by the Nigerian filmmakers and the challenges which confront them in the process. It is therefore, an appraisal of this aspect of the Nigerian movie industry/Nollywood, in order to determine how it has fared so far and how it can be bettered if need be, for greater and more satisfactory viewing experience.

Movie Publicity

Whether consciously undertaken or not, every movie gets some measure of publicity, at some point in the production process, be it at preproduction, production or postproduction process, or at all the stages. There is no hard and fast rule as to when publicity should start for a film. “Publicity may well start with the acquisition of property. The purchase of the motion picture rights in a famous novel or play is frequently a good point of first release,” (Mayer, 1973p.III). This publicity may be intense for some movies and for others it may occur as a happenstance or a mere interpersonal communication between knowledgeable friends with members of cast or crew. For some, it may just flit in as gossip that a given actor/actress is featuring in an upcoming film production. What matters, however, is that publicity is like air to the movie: a necessity but not a yardstick for success. All the same, in the bid to attain a measure of responsibility and put on the garb of a respectable corporate entity, all sorts of guilds and associations have sprung up in Nollywood. But till date, one is not aware of any guild or association that sees to the promotion and publicity of movie productions; not even the Film Marketers Association appears to have this responsibility. This sort of justifies the reason for this paper. But why is this so? The answer to this question would be the subject of another discourse.

Definition

Many professionals in the field of publicity and media practice in general, tend to use the terms “publicity” and “public relations” interchangeably. However, while trying to distinguish the two, Bly (1992p.472), cites Crains’ Dictionary of Advertising terms, as providing the following definitions:

- Publicity (NOUN) - Information regarding a person, corporation, product, and the like released on his or its behalf for non- paid use by media.
- Public Relations (PR) – activities of persons or organizations intended to provide understanding of and goodwill towards themselves or their products or services.

On his part, O'Brien (1977p.1) draws his own distinction between publicity and advertising. He says that there is one major difference between advertising and publicity which is that in advertising the client pays both the advertising agency and the medium in which the advertisement is to be placed. In publicity, the client pays only the publicist.

Having briefly explained the difference between advertising and publicity by observing that the advertiser pays for all the relevant partners in the advertising process, he clarifies further by saying that publicity is the art of furnishing or even creating news. People don't charge you when you give them news. They are eager for it, and quite willing, at their own expense, to disseminate it. He maintains also that people reached by advertising are usually skeptical because they are expected to pay for it whereas "publicity reaches them in the form in which they receive all other news. There is no indication that anyone is advertising anything. It also bears the imprimatur of the medium it appears in, and thus appears to be, and usually is, solid straight information that can be regarded as unvarnished truth," (O'Brien, 1977 p. 2).

Inasmuch as publicity is free, it nevertheless expects an action if not a positive reaction from its audience. Thus, as Clifford (1976 p.136) says, "Publicity is that activity whose aim is the promulgation of information to the public with the intention of

influencing opinion and conduct.” With specific reference to educational theatre and the play production process, which is his focus, Clifford says that publicity seeks to inform and persuade the general public to purchase tickets and attend production.

In this later definition, which we are going to adopt, publicity appears to have striking similarity with both public relation and advertising. This is because the element of persuasion occurs-demanding attention and awareness from the audience. Indeed, film publicity is designed to win not just attention and awareness of the viewer to the film, but expects the viewer to go to the cinema to see the movie, and in our environment where the cinema/ theatre is no longer accessible, it expects the viewer to either make a purchase or go to the nearest video film rental shop and borrow it. Of course, the persuasion here is subtle and not overt in the manner of advertisements.

For Langley (1980) the job of the publicist in the theatre is, if not the most difficult staff position, it is certainly the most thankless one. He says that it is difficult, even fruitless to speak of “Good” publicity as opposed to “Bad” publicity. Either promotion succeeds by attracting audience to the theatre or it does not. Thus, just as journalists would echo McLuhan by saying that “No news is good news” even so, publicists are wont to say that “the only bad publicity is no publicity (Langley, 1980 p.331). Mayer (1973) also notes that retention of a reputable scriptwriter, hiring of a known director and getting certain stars as cast, help publicity.

From the foregoing, we see and understand that the essence of publicity in the theatre goes beyond creating awareness and bringing the attention of the viewer to the film or movie being publicized. It expects the potential viewer to act, by persuading him/her to go to the theatre/cinema to see the play or watch the

movie. In our situation, it expects the audience to get a copy of the movie; however he wishes in order to watch it. Thus, we are looking at two issues here: for the theatre publicity director, his duty is to bring audiences to the theatre to watch the performance because as Langley would say the essence is to achieve a “standing Room Only; -(SRO), audience capacity if possible. However, for our situation, the absence of cinemas the country over makes it necessary to distinguish between live theatre/stage and the cinema or movie as a product.

This distinction becomes necessary because the present day cinema patronage in Nigeria is restricted to the metropolitan cities of Lagos, Abuja, Port Harcourt, Kano, etc and the cinema houses are located where only the middle class citizens can access them. Also, the cinema in Nigeria has lost its status as a popular or mass art form to take on its original position on arrival as a class, middle and upper class art. Indeed, the cinema as presently constituted belongs to the middle and upper classes since few people from the lower classes can afford the One Thousand Naira (N1000.00) and above gate fee charged in these cinemas.

In fact, cinema going culture in Nigeria has as yet received another shell-shock, almost death penalty in the menace that is Boko Haram. Being a communal medium, it gathers people of all works of life together. Presently in Nigeria, except for churches, and mosques, (where people are more or less compelled for spiritual reasons to congregate), gathering in large numbers for any event void of security, is tantamount to committing suicide. This has affected the patronage of the few extant cinema houses in the country, especially in the cities which are prone to the insurgents’ attack.

Types of publicity in Nigeria

Publicity is an essential part of promotion and promotion in Nigeria cannot be significantly different from what obtains elsewhere. However, there may be slight differences of technique and or methodology. These may arise from speed of delivery, especially as it relates to radio jingles, language, poster size, style of writing, among other such niceties. Whatever the approach, the objective is the same: To get attention and swell tickets sells. This being the case, the producer is faced with the challenge of reaching as many people as possible so that his patronage is assured. Having at the back of his mind that censorship classification does not affect patronage, he employs all kinds of techniques including lobbying for the “18” (adult viewership) classification category, which seems to attract viewers the way sugar draws ants, including the under eighteen which it was intended to restrict! Thus, the types of movie/film publicity in Nollywood include but are not restricted to the following:

- A. Interpersonal-Face to Face/telephone
 - B. Radio-
 - C. TV
 - D. Film/movie-trailers
 - E. Print media: newspaper, posters, handbills, previews, reviews, flyers etc.
 - F. Social media/social feeds- twitter, face book (f b), you tube, whatsApp.
 - G. Others- personality interview, road shows etc.
- a) Interpersonal – face to face/telephone publicity.

According to experts, movies and talk about movies constitute a large chunk of our daily conversation. Interpersonal

communication is therefore a great purveyor of movie publicity. This can emanate from one of several sources, from members of the cast or crew. When a producer lets out in a conversation or telephone, that he is about to embark on a production; when a potential member of cast mentions that he/she would be featuring in an up-coming movie, it is publicity, alerting the recipient of such information to be on the look-out. This mode of publicity can occur at any point in the production process.

Closely related to the interpersonal publicity is a call or notice for audition. Audition can be either open or closed. In either form, there is publicity. It becomes more so, when the audition is open. Here, the media- electronic, print and social; all get involved, depending on the preference of the producer. Each participant in the audition exercise whether open or closed is necessarily a conscious or inadvertent publicist! This creates an expectant mood in the receiver as he patiently looks forward to the making and subsequent release of the movie. While in the waiting mood, he still talks about it, thereby creating more publicity.

b) Radio: using radio and or television to publicize movies is a little dicey without dabbling into straight advertising. This can occur when a producer, director, lead actor or actress, or just about anybody in the know grants an interview to the media and invariably talks about himself. Or, perhaps, he appears in a discussion, talk show or somebody crafts a special request message on a request programme or phone-in, which can escape the presenter. Even the presenter can be made to publicize the movie. This can be achieved by cultivating a personal relationship with the presenter and he

can drop the information in the course of doing his job without it appearing like an advertisement.

- c) Television: unlike radio publicity, television publicity can be achieved by deliberately planting the information in a special and deliberate repackaging of a previous one which is then given to them to be aired in one of their drama programmes.

Barring this technique, one would need to cultivate a special relationship with the television station's presenters in order to get round them. Also, the same methods as in the radio can obtain, by featuring in their programme or granting an interview which the movie production's media or public relations unit would have organized.

- d) Film trailers: trailers are movie teasers or snippets meant to raise curiosity. This can be a very good publicity technique in cinema going culture where, before the movie to be shown for the main event begins, trailers are used to fill the space and time. Trailers are usually not designed to last more than a few seconds or minutes because they are meant to be teasers- to raise both the viewer's curiosity and appetite for the forthcoming movie. Trailers are quite effective publicity means because they highlight a particular scene, reveal the stars involved and give direction for the story line. They build up expectation and longing for the movie.
- e) Print media: These are the strongest outlets of movie publicity. The print media cover all printed materials. However, newspapers and magazines appear to be more favoured because of their coverage both in terms of

demographic and psychographic variables. It can come in form of previews or reviews. Movie publicity in form of previews can appear at any point in the production process, be it at preproduction, during production and post-production, when the editing is in progress. At any of these phases of the production, the preview can be accompanied with visual images of actor, scene, location, and any number of whatever the reviewer feels would attract the audience. A preview is a publicity technique that makes the audience hang on suspense and wait, looking forward to the birth of the movie.

On the other hand, “the performance is not complete without a written review, a permanent record, description, or evaluation to fix the memory and evoke for the future some image of a transitory art.” (Kernodle 1967 P. 631). The above submission of Kernodle is with specific reference to the live stage where each performance is a completed work. However, the quotation is relevant to the movie because such review would always refresh the audience’s memory of the film in question. Besides, reading about a movie one has watched gives added pleasure.

The review, unlike the preview is usually done when the movie has been released to the public. It is therefore an evaluation of the work done. A successful review boosts sale and adds to the popularity of the movie. Sometimes, too, a bad review could achieve more success for the movie because people may want to know if the review was faithful or may want to see for themselves what makes the movie so bad or good. A review is the very opposite of preview but the aim is similar, to create awareness for the movie and increase sale. It

is equally a permanent record of the work which helps documentation.

Other forms of print media publicity include hand bills, flyers, posters etc. Of these, posters are more common in the Nigerian movie publicity environment than the other categories. The posters are placed at strategic locations on walls of residence, public buildings but more particularly on the sides of bridges especially under pedestrian bridges as those that dot Lagos city, and other states capitals, and also Niger bridge, third mainland bridge etc. in fact, bridges are good publicity avenues in Nigeria. They are usually entertaining for children travelling with their parents as they compete in reading the titles of the movies.

The unfortunate thing with posters, however, is that some of them are often used to deface walls of residential buildings; some are placed on extant ones while some are simply torn off and thrown away. All the same, posters like all other media used for publicity hardly return like empty hooks without a catch. They get their messages across.

- f) Press release: This is also another method of getting publicity. The media arm of the production company must have cultivated good working relationship with some media organizations. This way it can prepare a press release at any point in the production process of the movie in order to lay the foundation for its release, thereby making people aware and expectant.
- g) Social media/internet: The internet and social media have provided more outlets for film publicity than any other medium of communication before them. Indeed, they out rival interpersonal communication in providing publicity

outlets because they also have elements of interpersonal touch in them.

Through e-mail, face book, yahoo, chat etc, information is provided to individuals and groups on the latest movie in town or about to be released or in production and those involved in such movies. Through face book, you tube, WhatsApp, Skype, etc, clips of such movies are equally shown. These help to create awareness and a curiosity to see such movies on release. The internet and social media are perhaps the greatest communication revolution to happen to mankind yet and are of immense publicity benefit to movie publicists.

With the general system of mobile communication (GSM) handset in hand, a person can upload and download whatever information he/she deems relevant and worthy to be shared with others. In this way, publicity for such work/information spreads across cultures and traverses boundaries, depending on one's contacts. Incidentally, a person's contacts seem to be growing larger on a daily basis. Through the internet and social media, man has actually arrived at his extensions via the media even as McLuhan predicted some decades ago.

Publicity outlets for whatever product, idea or service that a publicist wants to publicize depends on the product, service, idea, and type. Also, on the ability and creative ingenuity of the publicist and the financial power available to him.

Challenges of Movie Publicity In Nigeria

In as much as publicity is free, and that is on the part of the receiver, for the owner of the product, service or idea to be

publicized, it is not. For him, publicity is an investment and that is in terms of finance and creativity.

Since advertising, another investment in a similar direction is expensive and publicity is free, the publicist has a big challenge because getting things done without payment is a bit difficult. The major challenge, then, which faces a publicist, is the ability to have media outlets that he/she can exploit whenever the need arises. To meet this task, he/she has to have contacts and this means making friends with media practitioners. To this end, the publicist must possess some qualities/attributes of a public relations practitioner. He needs to seek out those media people he might need long before they are needed and always service them by keeping in touch, bearing in mind that they would be needed some day. Once this relationship is established, it would be easy to reach them in time of need. It can be achieved by occasionally placing a how-are-you call, for example.

The next issue that has to be tackled once the contacts are there is the problem of finance. Of course, one needs money to prepare posters, hand bills, flyers, buy gum or starch for poster pasting, money to buy mega bytes in order to subscribe to access the net, use social media and social feeds, send bulk mails, upload information. There is always need for money and its utilization is important for optimum returns. One may also find a way to motivate and transport those who would help in sharing and pasting the hand bills, flyers, posters, etc.

The crafting of the message is not as challenging as the other elements. However, it is important to be careful with the diction, the selection of visuals that would be uploaded via you tube, whatsApp, face book or used for posters and flyers. The

language has to be short and sharp, one that can easily come to mind and would therefore make for easy recall. Again, the placing of the posters matters a great deal. It is important to place the posters at strategic places along the road where they can be easily seen and read without being obstacles to road users or targets for children and people of unstable minds to tear or remove.

It has already been pointed out that pedestrian bridges, walls of bridges, residential houses, etc are useful for these purposes. However, for residential house walls, there is need to obtain permission from the owners of such houses. This is necessary because people generally do not like the idea of their walls being defaced. Failure to obtain permission before placing such posters may lead to their being torn off or even lead to court action and prosecution.

Publicity is an interesting and entertaining enterprise. It requires creativity, persuasion no matter how subtle or little and above all, a listening ear and a seeing eye. The end of it however, is to create awareness at the highest level. That awareness in turn is expected to engender patronage by boosting the turn out in the cinema house or theatre audience and a high increase in unit sales of movies. Now, because many movie producing outfits combine publicity with advertising, it is a bit hard to determine which of the two media outlets achieve more returns.

Conclusion

The publicity arm of the movie industry is perhaps one of the most interesting of the other aspects of movie making. It is through publicity in whatever form that people get to know about movies and patronize them. However, whether consciously embarked upon or not every movie gets some form of publicity at

one stage or the other of its existence, either, in the making or after. And publicity even if it is negative, somehow enhances and creates awareness of such movie to the public. Publicity then is like a breath of life to the movie, a necessary part of its overall acceptance or rejection.

In this paper, we have tried to look at the publicity of movies as it affects Nollywood, the Nigerian film and video industry. The industry enjoys a robust and unique publicity in all its forms. It particularly thrives on the use of posters which dot major bridges and walls of buildings, both residential and corporate which are strategically situated in the country. These posters usually make interesting and competitive read among children on their way to and from school and during journeys.

Sometimes, too, they make use of outdoor media, in the manner of the old and defunct mobile cinema van tradition to discriminate publicity information of a new film/movie. The creativity that goes into movie publicity is quite interesting and engaging. The film publicity is a necessity and worthwhile venture in the industry, there can be no doubt. What limits or hinders the growth of film publicity and indeed threatens its future is the poor state of or rather decline of cinema houses in the country. Indeed, some efforts are being made to revive the cinema going culture in the country but these efforts are merely flashes in the pan in comparison, with what used to obtain. Cinema going is perhaps one of the greatest and fastest revenue earners for film makers. In its absence, the producers are forced practically to hawk their movies from place to place and this can be quite trying on both product and producer.

Recommendations

Cinema going is a necessary, even inevitable part of the film making experience. (Ekwuazi 2007), tells the story of Danlami who for three consecutive years never missed going to the cinema. He even failed to consummate his marriage on the night of his wedding because he needed to be at the cinema. Cinema going helps to prolong life because it creates an enabling atmosphere for the release of tension; after a hard day's job.

Based on the importance of movies in the life of individuals and society and the vital place they occupy in the economy, the following recommendations are hereby made.

There is need to build new theatres and cinema houses in the country in order to help the industry grow. This recommendation is based on the fact that a film producing country like Nigeria, which occupies the second position in the universal movie production market, needs such cinemas. India as at 2004; has twelve thousand nine hundred (12,900) theatres, with provision for an additional ten thousand (10,000) screens, (Kotian, 2011 p. 17).

However, the above recommendation has a proviso: that there is urgent need to address the security situation in the country. Film/cinema going is an evening/night outdoor event and those who attend shows need to be protected as they go about their business.

Also, the various arts and culture departments of all the states should have mini theatres for live performances and as screening centres. This can have a cushioning effect as they can be used to premier movies in the day time if night life is likely to be endangered.

The practitioners in the industry should also have a body of publicists to control the manner and method of film publicity in

the industry. This would help it have a desired and acceptable format as well as have a voice to address issues of concern to it.

Finally, publicity is everybody's business, whether in or out of the industry but it needs to be controlled so that somebody would take the responsibility for running the department.

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