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**Utilising the Mass Media for the Promotion of Religious
Activities in Nigeria**

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Abstract

Mass media play a very crucial role in every society. The media can be generally viewed from two angles; first, as technological devices employed to disseminate information to a large and heterogeneous audience. Second, as a social institution, which, refer to those highly organised or defined relationship for the gathering, processing, packaging and dissemination of information, for public consumption. Thus, we can also classify the mass media as social institutions or systems, which function among other social

institutions, including religious institutions. The media as the watchdogs of the society cannot be divorced from religious institutions. Both the broadcast and the print media can be used to propagate morals, ethics and godliness, which are the basic principles of nation building in a country that forbids the establishment of broadcast stations for outright religious broadcasting. The power of the media can be used to redress and reconstruct a country's national value system by carrying out religious activities. The media have the ability to communicate religious messages that will enable the people to achieve lofty ambitions and greatness, through hard work, godliness and civic principles, which will eventually bring about development in the society. Thus, the focus of the paper is on how the mass media can be used to promote moral attitudes in our people, which will in turn, lead to development in every other aspect.

Key Words: Mass Media, Information Dissemination, Religion and Development

Introduction

Mass media play the role of the watchdog of the society. The mass media can be viewed from two different angles. First, as technological devices employed to disseminate information to a large and heterogeneous audience. These devices are radio, television, newspapers, magazines, books, films, cinema, GSM, etc. Second, as a social institution; they refer to those highly organised or defined authority relationships and are responsible for the gathering, processing, packaging and dissemination of information for public consumption. Thus, the media can be classified as a social institution or social system, which functions among other social institutions like government, family, political institutions, religious institutions, etc.

An institution is an organisation, which moves to achieve some goals or activities that people feel are important. An institution may be a group or a social practice. An institution according to Ineji (2003) is described as the regular and firm way of getting things done in an area of life. The human race is made up of several social institutions and man finds himself in any of these social systems. A social institution is seen as any identifiable combination of individuals, groups, social organisations and corporate bodies. Social institutions include the family, schools, churches, political parties, hospitals, military institutions, government units, just to mention a few.

Mass communication functions within each of the above units to foster social interaction, exchange and sustenance of society. Each of these units is regarded as a social institution and mass media can be used to foster social action within the system. It is therefore, meaningless to discuss any social institution like mass communication as though it operates in isolation and unconnected to other social processes. The media are very important in the provision of ideas and images, which people use to interpret and understand a great deal of their everyday experience. They therefore relate both structurally, through organisational ties and interaction and culturally, by conveying information and impressions about society. This paper therefore focuses on the relationship that exists between the mass media and religion.

Theoretical Framework

A theory according to Asemah (2009, p.297) is a set of interrelated constructs, definitions and prepositions that present a systematic view of a phenomenon or explanation and prediction of a phenomenon. Therefore, the agenda and development media theories have been chosen to provide the theoretical framework for this paper.

The major assumption of the theory agenda setting theory, according to Asemah, (2011) is that the media set agenda for the public to follow. The theory holds that most of the pictures we store in our heads, most of the things we think or worry about, most of the issues we discuss, are based on what we have read, listened to or watched in different mass media. The media make us to think about certain issues, they make us to think or feel that certain issues are more important than others in our society. The agenda setting theory argues that the media may not tell us what to think, media may tell us what to think about. Based on their study of the media's roles in the 1968 presidential election, Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, cited in Asemah (2011) wrote in (1972) that in choosing and displaying news, editors, newsroom staff and broadcasters play an important part in shaping political reality. Readers learn not only about a given issue but, how much importance to attach to the issues from the amount of information in a news story and its positions. Wimmer and Dominick (2006) observe that the theory on agenda setting by the media proposes that the public agenda or what kinds of things people discuss, think and worry about is powerfully shaped and directed by what the media choose to publicise. This means that if the news media chose to give the most time and space to covering HIV/AIDS, this issue will become the most important item on the audiences' minds. Folarin

(1998) notes that the agenda setting theory implies that the mass media pre-determines what issues are regarded as important, at any given time, in a given society. Agenda setting theory does not ascribe to the media the power to determine what we actually think, but does ascribe to them the power to determine what we are thinking about.

The relevance of the agenda setting theory to the study cannot be over-emphasised. The media generally set agenda for the people to follow. What people think about in the society is based on the information conveyed to them through the media. Thus, the media can be used to set the agenda of morality in the society through religious programmes.

The development media theory, according to Yaroson and Asemah (2008), derives its strength from the need for the media to be active participants in the quest for the development of a society. The theory sees the media as ready and prepared to champion social, economic, political and religious development. According to Sambe, cited in Asemah (2011):

The journalistic responsibility is that, information in journalism is understood as a social good and not as a commodity, which means that the journalist shares responsibility for the information transmitted and is thus, accountable not only to those controlling the media, but ultimately to the public at large, including various social interests. The journalist's social responsibility requires that he or she will act under all circumstances in conformity with a personal ethical consciousness. Be it as it may, the Nigerian journalist has maintained a standard of repute to the society, as well as, a standard of dispute.

The assertion above shows that the media are to be used to serve the general good of the society. The media are seen as agents of development and social change in any community thus, the theory says that the media should be used to complement government's effort by carrying out programmes that will lead to positive behavioural change among the people. The development media theory is relevant to the study in that it places emphasis on using the media for development purposes. The media, through their religious activities can be used to change people's attitude.

The Concept of Religion/ Religious Institutions

Religion is found in all human race or societies, but what precisely do we mean by religion? Well, there is no uniformity in the way the concept has been defined. Mangai (1999) describes religion as a joint style of beliefs and practices through which a combination of people gives explanation to real life predicaments and to things that are sacred. To Ember and Ember (1966), religion refers to any set of attitudes, beliefs and practices pertaining to supernatural powers, whether the powers are forces, gods, spirits, ghosts or demons. Wallace (1996) sees religion as a kind of human behaviour, which can be classified as beliefs and rituals concerned with supernatural beings, powers and forces.

Going by the above definitions, we will discover that religion, as a kind of human behaviour can be verbal or non-verbal; the non-verbal aspect including rites and specific religious acts and activities. The verbal aspects include beliefs, mythology, ethical standards and conception of the supernatural and religious ideology. Religion is broad enough to apply to all human population, that is, it is encountered in all human societies. Religion is concerned with the supernatural, which is the non-natural, the more than natural, and a realm outside of the everyday world, strange and mysterious in ordinary terms. One of the most widely acceptable definitions of religion is the one offered by Emile Durkheim. According to him, religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden- beliefs and practices which unite into one moral community... all those who adhere to them.

From the above, we can safely say that religion developed as a result of man's attempt to establish a link with the un-known or the supernatural. This becomes necessary in order for his existence to be meaningful and relevant. Today in Nigeria, there exist several religions, with various beliefs and rituals. Notable ones include Christianity, Islam, and African traditional religion such as Olokan, Ogun, Sango, and Oronmila, to mention a few. These religions exist to serve some functions. The means through which these religions carry out their practices are simply referred to as religious institutions. Religious institutions perform the following functions in our society:

- a) interpreting and explaining human problems;
- b) legalises the existence of other institutions;

- c) explaining and defending doctrines;
- d) tolerance to people by taking whatever happens to be an act of God; and
- e) providing means of overcoming life's problems.

Mass Media and Religious Institutions

The media as the watchdog of the society cannot be divorced from religious institutions. The media need the religious institutions to survive while the religious institutions also need the media to survive. Broadcast media can be used to propagate morals, ethics and godliness which are the basic principles for nation building in a country that forbids the establishment of broadcast stations for outright religious broadcasting. The power of the media can be used to redress and reconstruct a country's national value system by carrying out religious activities. The media can communicate religious messages that will assist the people to achieve lofty ambitions and greatness through hard work, godliness and civic principles. The media as social institutions have the potentials to affect our religiousness.

Religious institutions use the media to carry out their activities so that the members of the public will know about their programmes. There are several religious programmes on the electronic media, which are aimed at inculcating certain morals and attitudes into the people. Today, churches use radio, television, newspapers, magazines, handbills, books, posters and many other mass media channels to carry out evangelism. For example, on NTA Jos there is the Christian Half Hour where different denominations preach the gospel. More so, many churches today use the mass media to reach out to millions of people across Nigeria and outside Nigeria. Thus, the media provide or serve as means through which churches carry out their religious programmes.

There are also Islamic programmes that are carried out in the media. This means that the Muslims also use the media to propagate their religious activities; they use the media of mass communication to reach out to thousands of people. We also have different programmes on Nigerian television- AIT, NTA. These programmes are mostly carried out on Fridays. Through the newspapers, magazines, radio, billboards, posters, handbills, etc, Islamic programmes are disseminated to the members. Thus, we say that the media also need Islamic institutions.

We can say that the media and religious institutions are inter-dependent. The media as earlier noted are in the business of newsgathering and reporting. The media need religious institutions because these religious institutions like church, mosque serve as sources of news. Through this, they get news. Religious institutions also need the media because the only means through which they can reach out to a large audience is through the mass media and not through interpersonal communication. Media technology has a complex relationship with religion or at least, with organised religion. Many faith communities have noticed that media messages can affect the attitudes and behaviours of their followers, often in ways contrary to religious teachings. The relationship between religion and the media has recently been subject to more thorough reflection in academics as well as in public debate. Today, we witness not only a spared of televangelical format in Pentecostal religious bodies, but, also, there is the deliberate and skillful adoption of various electronic and digital media- cassettes, radio, video, television, internet and the format associated with these media. New forms of religion not only transform religious discourses and practices, but religion also features in films, videos and television programmes in framework of entertainment or infortainment. To address the link between religion and cultural identity, it is important to analyse the commodification and proliferation of media and religion as part and parcel of mass culture while avoiding three major pitfalls. Religion and media interact in contemporary culture in complex ways.

Religious bodies have different ways of using the media. Through various programmes, religious bodies air out their programmes. For example, Christian programmes could come in form of Christian films, Christian radio programmes like drama, musicals, etc, Christian network and radio stations. Religious bodies also use television to air out their religious programmes. There are Christian television stations and Christian television networks. Religious bodies, whether Islam or Christianity, in most cases, show drama and other programmes that are aimed at inculcating positive attitudes on the people and also, with a view to influencing them. Religious bodies that do not have their private broadcast media often buy air-time so as to air their religious messages. This is because, in some countries, religious institutions are not allowed to operate their private broadcast stations. For example, in Nigeria, the National Broadcasting Commission Decree forbids religious and political institutions from having their private media for the purpose of disseminating religious programmes. Thus, the religious institutions in Nigeria do not have options than to seek for air-time to carry out their

religious activities. They carry out their programmes through drama, preaching, musicals, films, etc. This could be through local or network broadcast.

There are some religious bodies that receive licence from the international media and they operate their own international religious broadcast media. For example, the Synagogue of All Nations has its own television station called "Emmanuel Television" which it uses to carry out religious activities to millions of people across the globe. Christ Embassy and other religious bodies also have their own television stations which they use to disseminate their religious programmes to millions of people across the world. (Note that the broadcast stations operated by these religious bodies are not regulated by the NBC, hence, they have their private broadcast media). Their air-waves and signals cannot be stopped by the NBC. This implies that religious bodies in Nigeria are not given licence to operate either a radio or television station in Nigeria for the purpose of disseminating religious programmes. They are only allowed to buy air-time in the broadcast media to air their programmes.

Religious bodies also use the print media to disseminate their religious messages. There are some religious bodies that have their print media for disseminating their messages. For example, The Apostolic Church has The Apostolic News, there is also the Women Mirror owned by Deeper Life Bible Church. Religious bodies through the print media, write articles, features and news about their activities and the essence is to publicise their activities.

Religious Publications

Religious publications may be defined as publications that primarily cover religious topics. Consequently, they need to be carefully distinguished from ethnic publications that cater to specific ethnic communities some of which are ultimately based on religious beliefs and practices. According to the existing definition used by the Publications Assistance Programme Applicant's Registration Guide, religious periodical are periodicals primarily religious in purpose and content. Accordingly, religious periodicals are magazines and newspapers that identify with a religious tradition to express and/or evoke a sense of the sacred through the recognition of a divine or trans-divine focus. Stories and testimonials about primal experiences, religious feelings and experiences, accounts of institutional and communal rituals, communal and individual acts inspired by faith, myths and doctrines and the interaction of the believer with the surrounding society, including advice about daily living as a believer, provide the primary content of

religious publications. Ethical and moral teachings are an important aspect of all religious traditions.

Religious publications play a major role in creating and maintaining a sense of community for many people across the world. Clearly, religious magazines are more important as a means of maintaining a sense of a country's identity. Churches and similar religious institutions publish most religious magazines and newspapers. Through these publications, they seek to maintain a sense of community among their members by sharing news and ideas. Three methods are used to finance religious publications. These are:

- i. **Direct Subscription:** Where individuals pay an annual fee to receive the publication. Such publications are largely interdenominational. Individual subscriptions plus small advertising revenues support magazines of this type.
- ii. **Indirect Subscription:** Where formal membership of a church or other institution involves an automatic subscription to a particular publication. This is the case with many large church publications. A congregation member is asked to collect a nominal subscription and deliver individual issues after receiving batch consignments. The advantage of the automatic membership-subscription method is that it radically cuts management and promotion costs.
- iii. **Advertising Revenues:** Where the publication is usually a “free” interdenominational community type newspaper. These papers cater to a specific locality where they are given away to whoever wants a copy through “Christian bookstores. This type of publication, which relies entirely on advertising to pay salaries and production costs, is a relatively new development that has really developed over the last fifteen years. “Free” community papers of this type appear increasingly popular because they meet real needs and provide an important service to local communities.

Religious publications are read by most church members and attendees. The number of people who pick up religious publications from display tables at the back of churches is remarkable. Working for a religious publication or even publishing one, is a labour of love not, something undertaken to grow rich. The average worker in the religious publications industry appears to be relatively low-paid. Consequently they are constantly looking for ways to cut costs and are often in danger of bankruptcy. Although the exact content

varies from publication to publication, various themes emerge. First, there are devotional articles dealing with the relationship of the individual and even community to God. Second, there are practical articles about how one ought to live. Here, one often finds advice about coping with life's problems, marriages, children, etc. Then there are historical articles about the achievements of great religious figures. Finally, news items relating a particular faith to the rest of the world play an important role in religious publications and are often linked with appeals to support less fortunate people and nations.

The prime target of each publication varies, but in general, religious publications are aimed at specific markets identified by or with a religious tradition. Having said this, five patterns of a publication may be observed:

- First, there are official denominational publications, which target everyone in a particular denomination.
- Second, there are various unofficial denominational publications which represent the views of particular groups within denominations.
- Third, numerous interdenominational protestant publications, which attempt to appeal to a wide readership.
- Fourth, there are publications issued by different religious orders, shrines and mission groups that have highly specific readerships drawn from people who support a particular cause.
- Finally, the newer “free” community papers appeal to anyone interested in reading them within a geographic area.

The Position of the Law on Broadcasting and Religion in Nigeria

The body that is saddled with the responsibility of regulating the broadcast media in Nigeria is the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC). This commission came into being in 1992 with the promulgation of Decree No. 38 of NBC under the leadership of General Ibrahim Babangida. The Nigerian broadcasting codes forbids granting of licence to religious bodies. Religious broadcasts are usually classified as commercial programmes and individual programmes on radio and television stations in Nigeria. Religious bodies can broadcast certain programmes but, it is subject to certain conditions. According to NBC codes, the book containing the rules and regulations of

broadcasting, appropriate opportunity for religious presentation shall be made available to the various religions in the community. All religious programmes must maintain a proper balance and wide range in their subject matter. The religious materials should not be the subject of any advertisement. A station shall ensure a fair and equitable representation of the various religions in its coverage (NBC CODE, 1993).

The law that established NBC (Decree No. 38 of 1992, as amended by an act of parliament) gave it the power to establish a code which can be used to regulate the broadcast media. Based on this, NBC has the power to take any action against any broadcast media in Nigeria that goes against its rules and regulations. The NBC code has become law in itself. By this law, the NBC is able to regulate all broadcast media contents, including religious programmes.

Religious beliefs and practices are central to people's lives and are capable of evoking strong passions and emotions. Nigeria is a community with different faith and varying sensibilities and sensitivities. To avoid offending any religious belief or practice, the law, that is the NBC code mandates broadcast stations in Nigeria to do the following:

- a. give equal opportunities and equitable airtime, not less than 90 minutes of a station's weekly airtime to all religious groups in the society as a civil responsibility without charge;
- b. present religious programmes respectfully and accurately;
- c. religious broadcast over which members of a specific religion exercise control shall be presented by responsible representatives of the given religion;
- d. religious broadcast shall not contain an attack on or a ridicule of another religion or sect;
- e. broadcasters shall avoid the casual use of names, words or symbols regarded as sacred by believers;
- f. a religious broadcast shall restrict itself to the content of its creed and shall not be presented in a manner as to mislead the public;
- g. a programme promoting religion in any form shall present its claims especially those relating to miracles in such a manner that is provable and believable;

- h. rites or rituals involving cruelty and obscenity shall be avoided except in programmes designed specifically to teach the beliefs of a religion; and
- i. Religious broadcast shall not exceed 10% .

According to the NBC code of 1993, an advertising promoting religion in any form shall:

- a. present its claims, especially those relating to miracles in such a manner that is verifiable, provable and believable;
- b. not use the peculiarities of broadcast technology to mislead the viewer/listener; and
- c. not cast aspersions on any other religion or sect and shall be seen to exploit the weakness , handicap, shortcoming or state of desperation of members of the public.

Summary and Conclusion

The media, whether print or electronic, have a very crucial role in the promotion of sound morals in our society. This paper, therefore attempts to critically examine the relationship between mass media and social institutions, especially religious institutions. The paper concludes that mass media cannot be divorced from social institutions because they are inter-dependent thereby, needing each other. The media cannot be separated from religious institutions. Mass communication has become a source of comfort and motivation for most people; they are on daily basis bombarded with religious evangelism on radio and television. By this, the media, which are the channels through which mass communication is achieved, are helping in serving both religious bodies and families. Mass media give life and energy to social institutions, which help us to understand our social system; help us to keep in touch with others within the social system, helps us to predict their responses to situations and this help us to adjust appropriately. Mass communication can be useful when there is social disorder and anarchy in a social system. It can point out disaffection and point the way forward to show direction when there is derailment in the system. Thus, we can say that mass communication cannot operate in isolation; it functions among other social institutions in the society.

Recommendations

The recommendation this paper gives is based on the fact that the media and religious institutions are interdependent. Therefore, based on the fact that the media cannot be divorced from religious institutions, the paper recommends that:

- a. The media generally should be used to carry out religious programmes, because they can go a long way in influencing peoples' behaviour positively.
- b. Religious bodies that carry out their religious activities should avoid attacking other religious faiths. The media should strictly be used to preach religious activities and should not be seen as an avenue to despise other religious groups.
- c. There is also the need for the media organisations to fair and just in the allocation of air time various religious bodies. This implies that all religious groups should be given equal opportunity and equitable air time.

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