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Dysfunctional Trends in Nigeria's Broadcast Content and Slide towards Educational Paucity of the Nigerian Child

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Abstract

The broadcast media exist to cater for all segments of the audience including the youths. They strive to achieve this by offering fresh information and trendy entertainment. Their offering, however, could and sometimes do have negative, unintended consequences. This discourse examines how programming by the broadcast media, driven largely by the desire for returns on investment, has had dysfunction of effects on the youths. The discourse encourages the National Broadcasting Commission, NBC, to live up to its duty of pushing broadcast stations to comply with the provisions of the Nigeria Broadcasting Code. The paper also encourages the broadcast media to reinvent their programming to address the needs of the youths and to ensure that their programming has a human face, driven less by economics but more by service to their audience.

Key words: Programming, curriculum, young ones, responsibilities, influence, obligations

1. Introduction

Since its advent on the mass communication scene, the broadcast medium has become a powerful tool of social control. The medium – radio and TV – can affect the audience in a variety of ways and can also be used to accomplish a variety of purposes. In no other way does broadcasting achieve this than in its contents and overall programming. Eastman and Ferguson (2009) capture the essence of programming: “In the media world, programming is the software that gives the hardware a reason for existence. Both are necessary for the system to work, but without programming no broadcast or wired services would exist. Programmers sincerely believe that ‘content is king’.”

The above implies that without good contents which find expressions in programmes produced and aired, even the best of equipment (hardware) would amount to nothingness. The hardware is meant to serve the software (content) and not vice versa, and where the latter is poor, the state-of-the-art hardware counts for nothing.

Programming can be a group of programmes on a station (in that case, programming is an outcome) or it can be the act of choosing and scheduling programmes on a broadcast station (in this case it is the process) (Eastman and Ferguson 2009). Programming represents, at the basic level, individual shows that people choose. The broadcast stations are saddled with the duty of selecting programmes that, in their estimation, would satisfy the yearnings of the audience, and then organise those programmes into a schedule that is coherent and flows meaningfully from one programme to the next. It also involves promoting those programmes and evaluating them periodically to ascertain if they have achieved the purpose for which they were broadcast in the first place.

Programming for the child today has increasingly become more challenging than ever before. The multiplicity of channels (both on radio and TV), the proliferation of cable TV, the globalization of entertainment, the increasing cost of programming and the ever changing tastes of audiences provide some of the challenges in the path of programming for the child. The weight of these challenges does not in any way lighten the burden of responsibility on the professional shoulders of programmers of children's programmes. Failure to rise to the challenges, however, oftentimes results in contents and general programming that may not only fail to cater for the needs of the child, but may out rightly be dysfunctional to the child. By ‘dysfunctional’ is meant the unintended, negative consequences of programme content on the child (Cassata and Asante 1979).

Nigeria's Child's Rights Act 2003 defines ‘a child’ as a person who has not attained the age of 18. This definition serves as the contextual definition of a child in this discourse. The word ‘child’ is used synonymously with ‘adolescent’ and ‘youth’, except where an expressly different meaning is intended.

In Nigeria, programmes with educational contents targeted at the children were in the early days of radio and television never in short supply. Indeed, they were part of a well articulated policy of broadcast stations to do their utmost to contribute to the education of the citizenry, and by so doing raise the bars of literacy in the contrary (Salama 1978). This still remains the official policy of most radio and television stations in Nigeria, albeit it does not go beyond the policy level. In reality, many of the educational programmes meant for the child are disappearing while the contents of the surviving ones are less rich than they were a few years ago. This has, inevitably, given space to programmes which contents could be described as “child unfriendly”, with the attendant unintended consequences upon the child and the society. This is indeed a dysfunctional trend.

This paper intends to discuss these dysfunctional trends using the broadcast stations based in Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria as a case study.

2. The Media and Children

Postman (1987) has characterised the media generally and television in particular as the primary curriculum for young people. This characterisation rests on the relationship between what children listen to or watch and what they do. Akpan (2006) notes that: "The functions as well as the dysfunctions of the media are predicated on the intrinsic ability of the media to affect the behaviour of their audience(s). In other words, the mass media would not be able to accomplish those identified as well as the unidentified functions and dysfunctions if their products or contents were without effects". It is on this basis that the definition of influence as given by Moorhead and Griffin (1999) is apt: "The ability to affect perceptions, attitudes or behaviour of others". Being tutors in their own right, the media invariably encourage the child to look up to them as his model in different aspects of life. To the child, the media professionals are "leaders" to be believed, trusted and protected; they are regarded as people whose professional calling has imbued them with leadership acumen and responsibility. Elliot (1977) has rightly related the concepts of professional and leadership to each other: "Professionalism does suggest a claim to leadership, a claim to know better than the client what his needs are. The effectiveness of professionalism as a mechanism of social control over aspects of social life involving contact and changes rests primarily on such a claim".

The mass media do indirectly claim leadership. No one can be a leader without the ability to influence others. And it is the media's effectiveness in affecting the behaviour of children that is the ultimate determinant of whether they are really leaders of social influence in the society. Mass media influence on children through communication is a form of exercise of power which depends on certain assets or properties of the agent of influence (communicator).

For the broadcast personnel, the task of exercising influence on the youth audience lies in programming that is driven by novelty and entertainment value. Viewers want fresh stories that promise something new (Eastman and Ferguson 2009).

Yet, the compelling need to provide novelty and entertainment (infotainment) must be balanced with commercial viability, and this inevitably drives broadcast content producers into programmes that may be commercially viable, yet dysfunctional to the child. In this context, the driving motivation is content profitability rather than the educational well being of the child. In such circumstances, children's programmes, in the event that they are not viable, either because of the cost of production or lack of sponsorship, are gradually de-listed from the programme schedule – they disappear from the airwaves.

Broadcast contents are expected to contribute to the build-up of the child in all spheres of life, including his educational uplift. The broadcast medium, particularly the television, is sometimes described as a teacher, often complementing and at times attempting to supplant the classroom. Fully aware of such broadcast potentials, programmers intentionally take advantage of the medium to contribute to and make an impact on the educational development of the child.

A former South African President, the late Nelson Mandela, is often quoted as saying that a nation that cares for its children invests in the future. Implicitly, the TV and radio stations, being a critical part of the nation's culture industry, are intrinsically obligated to cater for the young ones through their programming, partly on behalf of the nation that grants them the liberty to operate, and profitably too. As a corollary to Mandela's statement above, Owen (2008) adds that: "Any nation that fails to invest in its very young is building on an insecure foundation and can't expect to produce a strong nation that will take its place amongst the nations of the world".

No doubt, the main aim of a broadcast outfit is to make profit – in cash or kind. For the private stations, the main indicator of success is the return on investment in monetary terms; but for government-financed stations, the profit may be expressed in successfully doing the bidding of the financier. Whichever way the profit is expressed, the bottom line is that TV and radio stations have a duty to invest in the all round development of the young ones through content that caters for the needs of the youths. They have to create content that the children should identify with, and in the process provide general education for the kids. Different social issues plus core educational issues have to be integrated into programming in a way that arouses and sustains children's interest.

The aim of programming for the children should be targeting behaviour and changing attitudes with contents that are also educational in nature. Therefore, stations have to find creative ways to package contents that children can identify with and which provide general education for the kids. Different social issues plus core educational issues have to be integrated into programming with a heavy dose of educational content and that keeps children entertained.

The Nigeria Broadcasting Code has noted that broadcasting is susceptible to imitation. No wonder Postman (1987) describes the media and TV in particular as the primary curriculum for young people. Taking

further the metaphor of TV as curriculum, Boshoff and Prinsloo (2008) stress that the society should exercise influence over the form and content of such curriculum the same way society exercises civic vigilance in relation to the design and content of formal, school-based curricula.

The relationship between the media and children is such that demands some deeper concern or interest by the society. The nature of TV in particular makes children vulnerable to what is broadcast. Thus in the short- and long-run, TV plays a critical role in modelling the behaviour of children. Boshoff and Prinsloo (2008) further drive home the point:

The worlds constructed on television are very frequently in the form of narrative. Narratives have always played a central role in children's lives, and story is described as both a universal means of making sense of the world and as a vehicle for others to make sense of the world for us...Narratives enable children to suspend their disbelief and enter the domains of the televised characters. Through processes of identification, children can take on the roles of the protagonists or other characters, and along the way learn lessons about what is constituted as heroic, as appropriate, as socially effective.

The authors further argue that if the characters provide points of identification, and the narrative action proposes ways of being in the world, there is need therefore to consider the kinds of characters and scenarios the children are, in a sense, invited to inhabit temporarily.

It is generally agreed that the mass media play a crucial role in presenting and validating certain ways of being. The media create 'reality' which the children readily accept as reality. Lemish (2007) canvasses this point:

Television introduces children to worlds outside their immediate reality. It expands, interprets, highlights, judges, legitimizes or excludes social phenomena that the viewer encounters in reality and in the other media. It constantly reinforces certain ideological, mythical, and factual patterns of thought and so functions to define the world and to legitimize the exiting social order.

Therefore, as Asemah (2011) has noted: "Children programmes should encourage active rather than passive reactions. Broadcasters have special responsibilities to children. Programmes designed primarily for children should take into account the range of interest and needs of children from instructional and cultural materials to a wide variety of entertainment materials. In totality, programmes should contribute to the sound and balanced development of children to help them achieve a sense of work at large and informed adjustment in their society".

In programming for the youths, the programmer assumes a paternalistic role. Paternalism involves leadership, and it is even more demanding here: the content producer should sift functional programmes from potentially dysfunctional ones, "exercising some control over what may give offence" (Head, 1985, p. 59). This safeguards the airwaves from frivolities that may otherwise be harmful to the youth who are generally impressionistic.

3. Theoretical Framework

This discourse is based on the dysfunctional model of the mass media. By dysfunctions of the media is meant the negative uses or consequences that result from the applications of the media. These dysfunctions are, most times, unintended, latent and, therefore, unacknowledged. The dysfunctions are embedded in the process of media use.

"The outcome of surveillance – warning society and individuals of natural dangers, wars, attack, and so forth –", write Cassata and Asante (1979), "may foster panic, create instability, and promote anxiety or apathy". McQuail (1987) writes that information purpose can lead to an intended or unintended dysfunctional effect through bias in selection or misrepresentation". The author further observes that the function of correlation which aids in mobilisation, definition of important issues as well as the promotion of efficiency through the assimilation of news, also "carries dysfunctional threats of increased social conformity, increased passivity and weakened critical faculties" (McQuail 1987).

He further points out that interpretative activity may in practice be an excessive or partisan form of social control. DeVito (1986) calls this situation "narcotisation", which he defines as "the media's function of providing the receiver with information that is in turn confused by the receiver, with doing something. The individual is drugged into inactivity as if under the influence of a narcotic".

Cultural continuity may increase social cohesion by widening the base for shared norms and experiences, but the mass media, according to Cassata and Asante (1979), "must take the responsibility for

fostering the lowest common denominator concept of our society as well as depersonalising the acts of socialisation”. Through their entertainment functions, the mass media lower tastes, foster passivity and permit escapism. Entertainment may imply systematic trivialisation and consciousness control. In despotic regimes, mobilisation could be interpreted to mean brainwashing, coercion, regimentation and conformity.

On the one hand, the mass media engender social interaction among audience members but, on the other, they establish what DeVito (1986) calls “privatisation”, which he explains as “a tendency for an individual to retreat from social groups into a world of his or her own”. Because of the tremendous amount of information reaching him, the audience member sometimes feels helpless and confused, and consequently retreats into himself.

From the above discourse, it is evident that mass media content can have dysfunctional effects on the consumer. It may even be more so among the youths whose naivety sometimes makes them voracious and indiscreet consumers of media content, much unaware that some content consumed over time can have dysfunctional effects on them, including making them educationally poor.

4. National Broadcasting Commission’s Provisions for Programming for Children

The National Broadcasting Commission (2010) makes specific prescriptions for programming for the child. This is an acknowledgement by the regulatory authorities of the need to reach the child with such programmes that will constitute a positive influence on his development as he climbs the ladder of life. These prescriptions are contained in section 4.2 of the Nigeria Broadcasting Code entitled CHILDREN and YOUTH (NBC 2010).

First, the Code defines who is young person or child: “Children are young persons, in this context, are viewers and listeners aged 18 and below” (section 4. 2.1). The NBC acknowledges that “this age group is particularly vulnerable to influence. It therefore needs protection from broadcast materials likely to lead it into anti-social behaviours”. For this reason, the Code states as follows:

“Broadcasters shall:

- (a) not broadcast a programme which violates social values, shows disrespect for law and order or departs from an honourable life-style;
- (b) not broadcast a programme containing sexually explicit or obscene material; (c) avoid the use of foul or blasphemous language;
- (d) protect children from programmes that are likely to lower their self-esteem;
- (g) devote at least 10% of total airtime to children’s programming and this shall be within the children’s belt;
- (f) promote indigenous values and present foreign folktales and values with care to avoid negative influence in children.”

Among other things, the Code forbids the broadcast of content containing exorcism and occultism, and that due care should be applied in dealing with themes which children could imitate. Broadcast operators are not to air programmes such as cartoons that glamorise violence and crime or leave criminality unpunished.

In acknowledging the importance of the presenter in influencing the young ones, the Nigeria Broadcasting Code in section 1.10 states as follows: “A presenter or anchor shall be decently and appropriately attired in a manner that is consistent with the Nigerian culture... A presenter continuity/announcer shall have a good command of the language or presentation, in diction, grammar and elocution”. The above is imperative because as NBC notes in section 3:10.1: “Broadcasting is highly susceptible to imitation especially by children”.

The above provisions by the NBC provide the benchmark with which children’s programming should be measured. By extension, these provisions constitute the benchmark with which the dysfunctions of programming for children could be assessed.

5. Dysfunctional Trends in Nigeria’s Broadcast Content

The broadcast stations owe the young ones the duty to provide them with quality programmes. Boateng (2008) has stated this much:

It is recognised internationally that special provision needs to be made to ensure that children are provided with programming that entertains, informs and educates them; programming which is made specifically for them which enhances their understanding and experience of the world and which reflects their culture, language and life experiences and which affirms their sense of self, community and place. Children’s programmes should address the particular needs of specific age groups.

However, where these provisions are not made, dysfunctional trends set in. Some of them are discussed below:

i) Children’s Day Part

It is a universal professional acknowledgement that the early evening day part in broadcast programming is reserved for children's programmes. The day part spans from 3 – 7pm. During this belt, programmes that meet the needs and wants of the children are aired to give them entertainment and also assist in their all round development. However, in most broadcast stations in Nigeria today, religious and other programmes have taken over the belt, thus pushing out children's programmes. The obvious implication is that to the broadcast stations, the drive for money is higher on their scale of preference, even during children's day part, than catering for the needs and wants of the children. The consequence is unmistakable: broadcast stations have not only sold their conscience but have sacrificed the well being of children on the platter of money. And the children suffer.

For example, there is only one children's programme – *Kids Get-together* - on *Atlantic FM, Uyo*, owned by the Federal Government, while on *Radio Akwa Ibom, the Voice of Promise, Uyo*, owned by the State Government, there are only two children's programmes. On *AKBC-TV Channel 45, Uyo*, also owned by the same State Government, there are four children's programmes, namely *Tinkinik, Concept, Young Minds* and *Bible Quiz*. With four programmes, AKBC-TV obviously has the highest number of programmes among stations in Uyo, the Akwa Ibom State capital. The NTA Uyo, owned by the federal government, has only one which is not regular on the air because of lack of sponsorship. Against the backdrop of NBC demand for 10% of a station's programmes to be targeted at the kids, could it be said that the stations have fulfilled their mandate? The answer is glaringly in the negative, and this is thought-provoking.

In situations where the children's day part has not been given out to religions and other sponsored programmes, stations are reluctant to spend money on the production of local programmes that cater for the educational needs of the youths. Rather, they have recourse to foreign programmes, particularly cartoons, to fill the airtime. While it can easily be argued that cartoons are for the entertainment of the kids, it is also safe to state that the cartoons, produced from a different culture, do not serve the needs, including educational, of the kids in this part of the world. This raises the question: why do stations refuse to invest in children's educational programmes, to complete the oft-stated mission of education by such stations?

It is great disservice to the society for broadcast stations to insist on sponsors for children's programme before they are produced. What then can such stations mention as their contributions to the educational enhancement of the youths and society?

ii) Use of Pidgin English

Quite a number of broadcast stations in Nigeria are being swept away by the seemingly novel tide of pidgin English as their language of broadcast. For example, most of the programmes on Atlantic FM, Uyo and planet FM, also in Uyo, are done in pidgin English. The ostensible reason is that pidgin English is now in vogue and the lingua franca of Nigeria; that it is the language of the youths – the so-called leaders of tomorrow. Pidgin is a corrupted version of a language used for informal communication by persons who may be unable to use the formal version of the language.

However, what the programmes and producers in such stations have failed to consider is that these youths are not instructed in pidgin English in schools, neither do they write their examination in pidgin English. To be sure, all public examinations in Nigeria are in Queen's English. No university in Nigeria considers or accepts pidgin English as a requirement for admission. It is therefore glaring that rather than assist the youths in the quest for good education, many broadcast stations have contributed to the slide of the youths towards educational paucity. The radio and TV are indeed teachers, sometimes more trusted than the teachers in school. Are the stations not now teaching the youths to speak pidgin, rather than Queen's English? The instruction on the airwaves seems to be having the desired effect: many youths now speak pidgin English more fluently than Queen's English.

As a result of this, many youths find it difficult to pass English Language at the Senior Secondary School level. To overcome this failing, they resort to cheating at public examinations. Massive failure is the natural outcome. In the recent Senior Secondary School examination released by the West African Examinations Council, WAEC, for May/June 2014, only 31% of the candidates had a credit pass in English Language. It is a calamitous situation that the broadcasters are not the models – the teachers that they used to be. And the youths, nay the nation, are the worse for it.

iii) Ignorant Teachers

It is an observable trend that many “half-baked” presenters now rule or dominate the airwaves of many a station. Quite a number of the on-air talents lack the depth of all round knowledge required of such personalities. Some appear not to know their left from right in English grammar, and this reflects in the quality of grammar on the airwaves. Sometimes their handling of the issues on the air betrays their paucity of knowledge of the subject. They mislead the audience in the process. At times, the audience members tend to lead while the presenters follow. Such presenters are dysfunctional to the system and to the audience members.

Overindulgence in pidgin English has not helped matters as many on-air talents use pidgin English to hide their deficiency in English Language. Sadly, too, some of those who write the script for the on air talents are very deficient in the use of English Language. Examples are some news reporters and editors who do not understand rules of grammar, hence do not respect such rules. This deficiency manifests itself in news bulletins that are full of grammatical loopholes.

iv) Poor Pronunciation

Until recently, the pride of a broadcaster lay in correct pronunciation of English words or at least as close as possible to the way the owners of the language pronounced. Then, children and students alike were all too eager to listen to broadcasters to learn from them. Indeed the broadcasters were a model and reference point. While some audience members still regard the way broadcasters speak on the air as a reference point, the fact is they are, frankly, no more the point of reference. Much bad or poor pronunciation has crept into the airwaves through the broadcasters. Either out of complete ignorance or as a form of pride, some broadcasters have bastardised the airwaves with poor pronunciations. And the youths are learning the wrong pronunciations. This is evidenced in the supposed stylish manner that the youths tend to be pronouncing words. While they think their pronunciation is great, the youths are unaware that they are learning substandard pronunciation that does not lift or enhance their overall grammar status. Similarly the broadcasters, in their euphoria of stylish pronunciation, fail to realise that, unwittingly, they are on a disservice mission to the youths and society. It is an indictment that some output of radio and TV stations – the content - can no longer stand out like a beacon to lead the young ones.

v) Music

The primary offering on the airwaves is information and entertainment, without which the airwaves would be drab. Entertainment in particular has to follow trends. The broadcast stations have, no doubt, responded to current trends in their entertainment packages, particularly music. Yet the question is, “To what extent does the prevailing music on the airwaves make meaning to the growing child?” “Naija” music has taken over the airwaves, and much of it has amorous lyrics that add no value to the Nigerian child. At other times, the lyrics do not simply make sense. Beyond this, there is the issue of imbalance in terms of music genres on the airwaves. This is a challenge to programmers and broadcasters.

6. Consequences of the Dysfunctional Trends

The dysfunctional trends observed and outlined above are not without effects on the nation as a whole. Some of these effects have been discussed implicitly in the preceding section. Yet the following need to be pointed out:

- i) The continued absence of adequate children’s programmes on the air leaves an avoidable hole both in general programming and the catering for the needs of the young ones. It highlights the child unfriendly policies of our broadcast stations, their proclivity to sacrifice the child’s needs on the altar of the commoditization of programmes.
- ii) The trend suggests that the broadcast media may have failed in duties or responsibilities towards the child and society. They would have failed in providing programmes with contents that would supplement the education of the child. As radio and TV are often regarded as teachers in their own right, this role would have been discarded or diminished.
- iii) The above situation leaves the child intellectually impoverished. The child appears to depend solely on the classroom for his educational input, the broadcast media having failed to complement classroom effort.
- iv) As the broadcast media continue to shun children’s programmes, the child and the entire public gradually lose faith in the media talents as active partners in the educational development of children and nation.
- v) The decreasing depth of knowledge of some broadcasters on global issues, the growing trend of bastardisation of words on the air, the increasing use of pidgin English as the language of programming and the inability of some on-air talents to speak good English on the air have gradually made the public to lose faith in the broadcast media as teachers and models.
- vi) The child is expected to learn from many mutually reinforcing sources, including the broadcast media. However, when some of the media sources are not functional or are outrightly dysfunctional, two things are likely to occur: the child may not learn in the first place; and what he learns may be the wrong thing. The consequences of learning the wrong thing may be felt as far as public examinations when what they learn from the media are not acceptable to examiners. As a bad teacher cannot produce good students, the outcome is failure in public examinations.
- vii) The entire situation bespeaks a degenerative microcosm of the larger system.

7. The Way Forward

The dysfunctional trends in the broadcast media portend danger for both the broadcast industry and the intellectual development of the child. The burden of addressing observed lapses in programming relative to the child lies on both the broadcast media and their regulatory agency – the National Broadcasting Commission, NBC. The NBC has the duty of ensuring that broadcast stations comply with section 4.2 of the Nigeria Broadcasting Code which deals with programming for children and youth. In particular, the NBC should give teeth to section 4.2.2 of the Code which lists the dos and don'ts of broadcast programming as well as the category of sanctions which is Class B. According to section 3.6.10 of the Code, class B breaches are “written warning to remedy/rectify a breach within a reasonable time frame, failing which a fine shall be imposed. Failure to comply attracts a reduction of the daily broadcast hours for a given period, and re-commencement of full broadcast hours shall be subject to a heavy fine for public and commercial broadcasts and a light fine for community broadcasters. Further failure to comply leads to suspension of licence for a given period with a re-commencement fee of a severe fine for public and commercial broadcasters and a light fine for community broadcasters”. The NBC should step up its monitoring of what stations are doing or are not doing, and actually take steps to ensure that there is tremendous level of compliance with the Code.

On their part, authorities of the broadcast houses should allocate more funds to the production of programmes targeted at the child, knowing that an investment in the child is an investment in the future of the nation. Similarly, producers should be given more exposure by way of training on the increasing complexity of producing for the child in a globalised world. The technical quality and contents of such programmes must improve to compete favourably with imported contents designed for the children.

The broadcast stations should re-invent their programming, not only to satisfy the needs of the youths but to ensure that all segments of the population are catered for. Commercialism, though necessary to sustain operations, should be made to have a human face and should be applied with discretion. The need to make money does not and will not take away obligations from the broadcast media. Obligations have to be met, services must be provided and youths should be assisted to attain their potentials.

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