



# Can Nollywood Save Nigerian Children from an Impending Mass Society?

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**Abstract:** The mass society theory presents the media as a predator that would eventually eat up the culture and ethos of a society where it operates (McQuail, 2005). Today's children are being fostered by the new media, more or less, rather than the family or society. They are a product of the media and they know only little of 'their culture' as more and more families are gaining access to digital pay TV, Internet and its array of social media networks. These media give children and young adults an almost limitless exposure to all sorts of program beamed through the satellite from around the world. Children are finding the 'new media' as sweet escape from the 'boring', 'old school' state-owned TV which propagate relatively better, the Nigerian culture. This paper argues that the huge popularity of the home video media in Nigeria can be used to stem the negative effects of mass culture and mass society. But there is still a huge challenge regarding contents to which the paper recommends ten proactive measures.

**Keywords:** Mass society, mass culture, mediated media influence, mean world syndrome.

## Introduction

The concept of mass society states that modern society has been (is being) transformed by powerful new media such as communications satellite, GSM, TV and the home video, fostering new norms, beliefs,

attitudes and even new behaviors on a large scale in place of old ones. Instead of a homogenous society exemplified by diversity of culture and complex idiosyncrasies, we are living in a world of ‘mass culture’ – same ‘language’, dance, taste, religion, etc.

In its absolute sense, the mass society theory predicts that the media is a predator that would eventually eat up the culture and ethos of a society where it operates, (McQuail, 2005). Children, the custodians of a nation’s future heritage, have been worst hit by the effects of new technologies of media among all demographic groups. Today’s children are being fostered by the new media, more or less, rather than the society. They know not so much about their native dialects or vernaculars (Chioma, 2011, p.715) culture and ‘their culture’ is a product of the media – depending on whatever is transmitted via mass communication systems (Onabajo, 2011, p. 248).

In a study of average minutes a day spent on all media in leisure time in ten European countries among children and adolescents 9-16 years old, Johnson-Smaragdi found that the home videos consumed the highest time after TV games, (Johnson-Umaragdi, 2001, p.25). The study found that on the average, 9-16 year-olds in ten European countries devote about four-and-half hours a

day to all mass media –music media excluded. Patterns of children media use however vary within countries due to different media policies, socio-cultural background, level of economic development and other factors.

In Nigeria, children constitute a large percentage of the home video audience. The home video industry has benefitted from epileptic power supply which makes regular TV viewing difficult in most homes. In other words, the home video seems to be as devastating as TV in terms of potentials to propagate a mass culture. Most home video films in Nigeria are shot locally and their contents largely project the Nigerian culture. However, TV (free-to-air and pay TV) appears to be effective instruments of westernization. It is a predator on the Nigerian culture (Onabajo and M’bayo, 2008:7). Besides the few details supplied by Morah and Omojola (2014, pp.385-402) on interactivity and community relevance, it may be too early to assess contributions of the digital large screens as outlets for home video especially for children.

The problems emanating from the thematic characteristics of Nollywood (i.e. Nigerian home videos/films) have been articulated elsewhere by various experts and researchers [for example, studies by Ademola (1997), Ekwuazi (1991), Ekwuazi & Nasidi (1992), and Oyebanjo (2003), Ntiense (2011),

Ndubuisi et al. (2011), Owolabi, et al. (2014). These include the positive portrayals of vices and negative cultural practices such as rituals, violence, robbery and other crimes and immoralities. Through rigorous policy measures and control, the National Films and Video Censors Board (NFVCB) has reduced the incidence of warped themes. The NFVCB's main protection of children against negative or corrupt communication in home videos is through 'classification' and 'censorship'. Unfortunately, the vast majority of Nigerian children are still heavily exposed to films and videos meant for adults.

The NFVCB assumes that children would demonstrate enough self-restraint to take their prying eyes off films and videos classified "above 18", or that when parents see the "parental guidance required" tag on a film, it would spur them to deny children access to such films. This has not been the case in practice. This expectation from children is made more difficult since there is proportional allocation of time (Popoola, 2014, p.79; Onabajo, 2011) that could enable them prepare for that viewing responsibility. Owolabi, et al. (2014) found that exposure to foreign films is a major factor in indecent dressing among youths and that Cable TV and Home video constitute roughly 50 per cent of media through which youths view foreign films. The effects of

deliberate and non-deliberate exposure of children even to wholesome films meant for adults (for example a very romantic scene) are already telling on the children – corrupted morals, declining love for virtues, criminal tendencies, unusual dress sense, foul language, etc.

### **Theoretical Background**

In proposing the Activation Theory of Media Exposure, Donohew argues that an individual will seek to satisfy the need for stimulation and information when attending to a message before they seek to fulfill information need alone. For instance, teenagers could be persuaded to be alcoholics or sexual perverts through TV/home video program that are very entertaining but which have alcoholic and sexually pervert scenes. (Donohew, Palmgreen and Duncan, 1980).

Similarly, the Cultivation Theory propounded by Gerbner states that television can have direct effect on viewers through consistent exposure to particular programs. The theory predicts that those who watch four or more hours a day of TV (heavy viewers) would suffer from the 'mean world syndrome' (that is, they will see the world as worse than it actually is) than those who view less than four hours per day (light viewers). Gerbner submits that too much viewing of violence on TV would produce a more fearful

populace. (Gerbner and Gross, 1994).

The divergent views of scholars on the relationship between the media and society may be broadly divided into two. On one side are scholars who postulate that the mass media are directly shaped by society – the social, political and economic structures and institutions in the society impact on the media. Whoever controls the society controls the media. On the other pole are theorists who suggest that it is the media's normative influence that shapes the society. A violence-dominated media, for example, engenders a violence-dominated society (Akinfeleye, 1990, Folayan, 2014, M'bayo&Onabajo, 2008, Morah&Omojola, 2014).

Those who belong to the 'interdependence school' argue that both the media and society exert mutual influence at the same time. For instance, while McLuhan suggests that the media is changing the way people think, act and feel (McLuhan, 1964), McQuail posits that such changes are usually 'mediated'; that is, the consequences of communication technologies come about due to symbolic changes. He summarizes mediated media power into seven frames:

- Media attract and direct public attention
- Media persuade in matters of opinion and belief

- Media influence behavior, intentionally or not
- Media define reality
- Media confer status and legitimacy
- Media inform quickly and exclusively but selectively. (McQuail, 2005, pp. 81-5;129-30).

### **Children and Television: Between Rights and Protection**

The United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child's resolutions (valid for children below the age of 18) is formally endorsed by all countries except Somalia and the United States as at 2005. Article 13 of the Charter states:

"1. The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.

2. The exercise of this right may be subject to certain restrictions, but these shall only be such as provided by law and are necessary:

- For respect of the rights or reputations of others, or
- For the protection of the national security or of public order (ordre public) or of public health or morals."

Article 17(e) encourages “the development of appropriate guidelines for the protection of the child from information and materials injurious to his or her well-being bearing in mind the provisions of articles 13 and 18”. (Feilitzen and Bucht, 2005:7)

Quite often, children are relegated to the background in the society. They constitute about one-third of the Nigerian population, for instance, yet they have no say in the things that affect them, usually because it is assumed that children are so young they cannot take appropriate decisions. Programs meant for children constitute less than 10 per cent of programs on TV, on the average, yet children constitute over 50 per cent of the TV audience.(Folayan, 2008).

### **Tapping the advantages of the Home Video**

Although more and more homes in Nigeria are having ‘TV reach’ (they have TV sets and TV signals), more homes do not have ‘TV access’ (even though they have TV sets and TV signals, they are not able to watch TV often.) Note Feilitzen and Bucht:

*In many African countries, most children do not have access to television and broadcasting is often restricted to a few of the country’s languages. The African delegates at the Second World Summit on Television for Children*

*in London, in 1998, stressed the importance of radio, local and international programming in the child’s own language. (2005, p.15)*

A major reason for inaccessibility is lack of affordable electricity. Herein is a great potential for home video, in that, with home video, the viewer can choose what to watch when to watch and where to watch TV/video. Access to home video is more available than TV since many homes can watch home videos whenever there is public electricity or they can put on alternative energy supply. Unfortunately producers of home videos in Nigeria very rarely feature children in lead roles or as role models in their productions. When they feature in films, children are more often “extras”. Aki and Pawpaw, perhaps the most popular ‘children’ home video stars, are well over 18 years of age, not minding their dwarf frames; hence they cannot be regarded as children. Often, attempts to play children roles by Aki and Pawpaw fail dismally because they could not really interpret children. At the moment, there is no popular Nigerian home video conceptualized and written by children or written for children with children constituting the bulk of the cast.

### **Mass Culture: Effects of the Motion Picture on Children**

Opubor and Nwuneli (1999) observe as follows:

*The masses are bound to become more educated. New social problems will emerge with increases in boredom and loneliness amidst millions of city dwellers and industrial workers. This will, in varying degrees, lead to anti-social activities as well as self-destruction...film and cinema should therefore 'engage' people positively. There are many Nigerians, who like Olu Akaraogun say: 'I admit that as a kid I was a fanatic of films about America's Wild West. Later on, I gathered that the younger generation raved about Indian films. Currently, thanks to Bruce Lee and the incredible martial arts of Kung Fu, the young generation thinks of the so-called Chinese films made in Hong Kong. (p.45)*

Opubor's and Nwuneli's predictions are a reality in today's Nigeria. Many children and young adults are crazy about foreign movies and soap series, most of which find their ways into the country through film pirates. A single DVD could contain as much as 24 hours of motion pictures, 'engaging' these children and young adults negatively in many cases. If the current TV and home video viewing habits of children are sustained, in the next few years we may see more of the following:

- 'The Mean and Scary World Syndrome' – Nigerian children, due to too much viewing of victims of violence in films may

become afraid of the world around them; having watched TV series of broken relationships and failed marriages, youths grow up scared of going into relationships and marriage.

- 'Desensitization to real-life' – Children would trivialize certain things that are of crucial importance. Some special children motion pictures such as foreign cartoons hide under humor to portray negative actions such as violence and children who grow in that nurture may see violence as normal parts of life.
- 'Aggressive behavior' – Children are 'believers' and 'actors': they accept virtually anything they see and act them out. When they view too much of aggression, foul language, etc, they demonstrate what they have learned in their own behaviors, overtly or covertly.
- 'Mass culture' – Children will exhibit a new 'Nigerian culture' – that which is fostered by the foreign media, not the real Nigerian culture. A more general term for describing the dominant influence of the media is known as Mass Society. This is a form of society theoretically identified as dominated by a small number of interconnected elites who control the conditions of life of the many, often by means of persuasion and manipulation.

The term was originally applied by C. Wright Mills to refer to large-scale and centralized forms of social organization in which media are necessary instruments of achieving and maintaining dominance of elite interests. The paradigm grew from critical theories that arose from the concept of mass culture. The mass culture concept refers to the culture of the masses (the majority, who often are poorer, more undeveloped, etc.) but scholars found that what obtains is more of mass society than mass culture. The media have become a key instrument to foster the culture of the minority on the majority. Today, in Nigeria more and more families are gaining access to pay TV, generally gratified as status-symbols - DsTV, MyTV, Internet and its array of social media networks, etc. These media give children and young adults an almost limitless exposure to all sorts of programs beamed through the satellite from around the world. Children are finding the 'new media' as sweet escape from the 'boring', 'old school' state-owned TV which propagate relatively better, the Nigerian culture.

The Home Video offers a huge opportunity in re-orientating the children before they grow older and becomes more difficult to bend. As

Onabajo has noted, "Nigerian home video has become increasingly popular... We should learn to accept and appreciate Nigerian films, no matter the technical or aesthetic shortcomings; although there is the dire need for thematic relevance." (Onabajo, 2006, p.40).

### **Learning from Australia**

Many countries across the continents have been taking steps to find a satisfactory balance between ensuring the rights of children to information and protecting them from the negative consequences of such exposures. One of the few countries that have recorded good successes in terms of steps to democratize children TV/film viewing is Australia. While many countries have not gone beyond mere classification of films and subtle warnings that 'the following programs are not suitable for people aged below 18 years', Australia has made remarkable efforts to develop children's television and films (whereas it used to be a country where television programing had been largely of cheaper imports from other English-speaking countries, mainly United States and the United Kingdom).

These efforts which began since the late 1970s (and were sustained through regulations by the Australian Children's TV Foundation, ACTF, established in 1982) include:

- Compulsory broadcast of domestically-produced children and adult programs
- Increased quantity, quality, diversity and ‘Australianess’ of children’s programs on commercial TV
- Quota requirements for the broadcast of children programs

### **Can Nollywood Help Nigerian Children?**

The home video media in Nigeria, in spite of the challenges (Daramola, Hamilton and Omojola, 2014, p. 46), has remained hugely popular. Though it has not been fully explored for developmental purposes, rapid changes in information technology have further democratized access to it. The home video stands out in Nigeria in terms of its potential for development communication. It is cheap – the viewer who cannot buy the films can rent or buy extremely cheap (pirated) copies; without electricity many homes in the urban and sub-urban areas watch home videos with their mini-power generators or at formal and informal ‘viewing centers’ and many more home videos are in indigenous Nigerian languages. But as Owolabi, et al. (2014) and Folayan (2016) has established, there is still a huge challenge regarding contents.

Defleur and Ball-Rokeach, through their Media System Dependency Theory argue that the more a person depends on having his or her needs

gratified by media use, the more important will be the role that the media play in the person’s life and therefore, the more influence those media will have on that person.

In other words, if more and more people become dependent on media, then the overall influence of media will rise and media’s role in society will become more central. Defleur and Ball-Rokeach have listed four components of media system dependency theory:

- 1) The structure and nature of media systems in the larger societal context affect the amount of influence it can wield on the audience. It is not the ‘power’ of the media but media content that wields the influence how the media is organized in the society;
- 2) The degree of audience dependence on media information helps to understand when and why media messages alter audience beliefs, feelings and behavior. The ultimate occurrence and shape of media effects rests with the audience members and is related to how necessary a given medium or media message is to them. In other words, the uses people make of media determine media influence.
- 3) The modern society relies on the media to understand the social world, to ‘escape’ from life’s hassles, and for



entertainment. Today's world is very complex and without the media, we hardly can make meanings of what happens around us everyday.

- 4) Not everyone will be equally influenced by the media – those who have greater dependency on the media (such as children and young adults) will be more influenced. (Baran and Davis, 2003).

The foregoing thesis states that: If society X has a highly-developed media system, media will play very important role in the society unlike society Y, which has very low media systems development. They argue further: no matter how well developed or undeveloped the media system is in both societies, media can only affect people's beliefs, feelings and behavior in proportion to how people use the media. Even if the media system is very highly-developed in society Y, if the people in society Y do not use the media, the media cannot exert influence on them. The media has power to exert influence but it is the uses to which people put the media (the proportion of their dependence on the media in their daily activities) that determine this influence.

A looming mass society may sooner or later wipe away the Nigerian cultural identity if appropriate steps are not taken to regulate children's TV/home video viewing (Folayan, 2008; Savage, 2011). Children and

youth appear to be a good focal point in motion-picture-centered behavior change programs because they are the elders of tomorrow, are more bendable than youths and adults, are generally heavy TV/film viewers and because behavior change always take a long time to attain (Chioma, 2011). Few TV programs devoted to kids (such as Tales by Moonlight and Kids Say the Dardnest Things have revealed that children-focused programs are potent in positively molding children. (Saturday Punch, 2016).The following reforms are highly recommended in this regard:

- Establishment of a Nigerian Children Films/Home Video Foundation by the NFVCB or the Federal Ministry of Culture to provide funding and technical support for children home video production
- Production of films principally aimed at total positive development of children (edutainment, rather than purely entertainment films)
- Involvement of children as writers, actors, consultants in films targeted at children. Producers of children films should not think for the children, but think through the children. Children, though generally 'learners', are not as gullible and naïve as often assumed. Advances in pre-school and primary education curricula and in information technology have

vastly improved the ability of the Nigerian children to reason. We have to 'enter into the children's world' to understand them. But regarding the 'hook' and 'hidden' effects of motion pictures, children may not readily distinguish what is good from what is bad.

- Films okayed for adults by the NFVCB should not feature scenes in which children are negatively presented
- Children should be featured in lead and supporting roles in films meant for adults, since adults too need to 'learn' so much about the world of children (how children think and interpret their environment)
- Most children watch (films on) TV – including home videos relayed on TV - at prime periods of broadcasting (6pm -10 pm); hence regulations should be made to revise the current Children Belt in Nigeria. Children Belt should be moved to the time children are likely able to watch the films, not 2-5pm week days as it is currently

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(when they are still in school) or Saturday or Sunday mornings (when they are on bed or doing house chores or in church).

- To reduce the commercial pressure on children, advertising should be drastically reduced on children TV programs and home videos/soaps.
- Children films should be rooted in indigenous culture and indigenous media such as drama, theatre, folk, plays, poems, songs and proverbs should be employed in producing such films. Violence is not the only problem concerning children and the motion picture; hence national culture and values must be projected.
- As suggested by Ndubuisi et.al. (2011), more children films should be produced in indigenous Nigerian languages.
- The National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) should encourage the establishment of Nigerian Children TV Channels (channels targeted exclusively at children) on pay-TV networks.

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*BOLU J. F.*

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