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Television Drama and Development

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Abstract

The television has come to stay as an attractive medium of communication. It combines sound, vision and motion to present humanity with a medium of great appeal. And drama in this medium has proved a most popular programme type, drawing even fanatical viewership from among persons of diverse backgrounds. Its capability to present moving images, in addition to the visuals and the sound, makes it a medium of choice, and drama through it, a most realistic avenue for education and societal mobilization. This paper explores the possibility of employing drama through the television in development programming and goes further to suggest play creation strategies that would facilitate such.

Introduction

The television is a powerful medium. Warren Agee et al(1979:275) describe it as “the most pervasive medium known to modern man”. They report how television has ‘permeated everyday life in America, changing social habits and creating new ones’. And Gene Youngblood(1990:250) compares the television with the computer, and describes it as “a powerful extension of man’s nervous system... it extends our vision to the farthest star and the bottom of the sea”. Emmanuel Akpan(1983:260) sees the television as “the greatest communication mechanism ever designed and operated by man. It pumps into our brains an unending stream of information, opinion, moral and aesthetic values”. And in his *Toward A Television Aesthetic*, Horace Newcomb(1976:615) mentions television’s capability to bring “its massive audience into a direct relationship with particular sets of values and attitudes”.

As a virile conveyor of information, Barnice and Ehrenberg(1988:20) hold that the medium

(...)in both a loose and a precise sense, (...) can be an educator (...) people may say(...) they ‘learn’ from television(...) without speaking solely or primarily about any overtly educational strands in the schedule.

And the Television Research Committee of Leicester University Press, in its *Working Paper 1(1970:17)* attests to the didactic propensity of the television as a medium that could be “used to improve taste and broaden horizons”.

Barnice and Ehrenberg(1982:22) stress that the main role of television is to entertain, therefore, its function as an instructor, “conveyor of information, and intellectual stimulus are secondary to the audience”. The nature of television viewership, they explain:

we watch a lot but it is mostly at a fairly low level of involvement, often at a lower level of attention than in a cinema or theatre, at a live concert or sporting contest, or for most books or magazines.

Furthering the discourse, they warn that although television is a very effective medium for making us aware and for giving us the feel things, but for detailed information we have to turn to other media.

The basis for this warning emanates from the fact that moving pictures, although their impact can be greater, are slow and inflexible at conveying specific information compared to speech or print.

The programming responsibility on television is very important as one of the ingredients of development communication is that the programmes must be properly conceived, and artistically produced to attract and sustain viewership. In the words of Barnice and Ehrenberg,(1982:23) information programs have to be “good viewing if they are to keep our attention”.

In **Television Drama (Agency, audience and Myth)**, John Tulloch (1990:1) asserts that television plays have been popular events

capable of engaging minds and desire and sensibilities across the social classes, as well as of exploring social issues, in ways ... both complex and arresting, without necessarily ‘losing’ the audience at its lowest end.

Tulloch surmises on television and development programming, stating that

(...) television was already developing great importance in all lives, and ...it might, with work and will and purpose, prove a major popular educative force for the future.

This essay aims at the examination of the suitability of the television medium in development programming, and how plays could be crafted to suit this purpose.

Television is still not well understood in most developing countries, even among persons involved in so-called processes of programme production in television stations. No wonder the number of immovable, uninteresting programmes that litter our airwaves, It therefore becomes imperative to conduct an in-depth analysis of the medium and its employment in development programme production. And since play writing is the step in drama production process, strategies for an effective play creation process to suit the developmental aim of such production, is also given serious attention. The methodology shall be explorative and analytical. What has established by notable scholars about the medium, shall provide guide for our thoughts, while an analysis of these thoughts, shall be undertaken. And that shall generally dependent on library research.

Organisational strategies

Television is a more complex medium than the radio. The medium employs the perceptions of vision, sound and motion. Its production and transmission are based on high and expensive technological operations. The medium's appeal to both the vision and motion has made it a highly attractive communication medium. Indeed, this attractiveness has made it the most sought-after and most powerful medium.

There is a growing wave of apprehension in the developing countries about the gradual but steady erosion of indigenous cultural values through western – produced television programmes. This apprehension is an indication of the perceptive power of the television message. In effect, it attests to the possibility of utilizing television theatre/drama in development communication and education, if well-planned and fitted into an integrative model.

A television theatre for development communication and education project can be organized by a non-governmental organization, a mass media-based institution of learning, a television station, a development agency, and indeed, any organization that is sincerely focused on development. There could also be collaboration between any two or more of these bodies or with government agencies, at the national or local levels. But it would be most advisable for such projects to be led by non-governmental organizations or institutions of learning, so as to ensure credibility and successful completion. Experiences in the field have shown that governmentally - initiated and propelled programmes of this nature fail due to poor handling, mismanagement and even abandonment. And it were better a project like this never took off than that it was abandoned half-way through, as it is capable of giving a wrong impression that the envisaged change is impossible and untenable. However, governmental agencies could even facilitate television theatre for development communication projects, but with the lead collaboration of educational or non-governmental organizations.

Research: As in all cases of development education through the theatre medium, a research into the general and peculiar development problems of the area to be covered in the

television theatre programme, has to be undertaken. This research has to take into consideration the area of coverage of the television station chosen as channel. Even if the programme is focused on the problem of some communities within the station's catchment area, the research and its outcome should encompass the general development problems of a cross section of that area of coverage.

Production: The organizer of the television theatre project could decide to record the programmes on its own and air them through a television station. It could do the production through a collaborative arrangement with a television station. It would be imperative for a production committee to be set up (within the context of a collaborative agreement) whose responsibility would be to plan for, and ensure the entire production process. The planning committee members should participate in the research process in order to be well - armed with the facts that constitute the overall message of the production. With the facts firmly at the disposal of the team, the stage is now set for the script writing process.

Scripting: The scripting process for the television, just like many other aspects of the medium, is more complex than that of the radio. It demands the efforts of a playwright and that of a screenplay writer. The former crafts the facts into a play text, while the latter produces a television drama script out of the play text. Where the playwright is versed in the language of television scripting, he could craft his play directly in a television play script format. And where the screenwriter is well - versed in play creation processes, he could also create his work directly in the language of the television. If the organizer does not have a professional within the project team who is knowledgeable in any or both of these scripting methods, the option would be to commission one to handle them. It is necessary for the playwright, either in-house or consulting, to be part of the research process, to enable him get the facts first-hand.

Casting: In the casting for a television theatre for development communication project, the nature of television as a vision, sound and motion medium must be taken into consideration. Since there are perceptions of sight and movement in the medium, in addition to the sound of radio, the cast members should be persons who can personify the roles in these three perspectives. An old village elder, must not only be heard speaking like one, but must be selected based on such suitability or some intensive make-up would be needed to portray the age.

Generally, it is believed that sound is a complimentary aspect of television production, with vision as the lead aspect. But it must be noted that the development communication/education process is an intensive communication exercise. Dialogue, the spoken words, by the characters, constitutes the embodiment and the vehicle of the dramatic action. It is the channel through which all of the facts of a play are revealed. And although, the mise un scene elements like scenery, costume, make-up and lighting, are there in television, the best outlet of information for the audience, remains the dialogic interactions in the play. The sound, in this project, plays a more important role than would be expected in television. Consequently, the casting must be done with a view to selecting not only those pictorially suited for the roles, but also those who are able to effectively lift the lines from off the script.

Rehearsals: The rehearsals must also be guided by this reality. The actors should be made to rehearse effectively, to satisfy not only the visual aspects of the production, but to also verbally present the message of the play effectively, in the dialogic engagements. The play could be rehearsed for two to three weeks before recording, in order to allow the actors take-in their lines. The last round of the rehearsals should take place in the location proper to the play, in order to familiarize the actor with the locality before the actual recording.

Recording: The recording of a television theatre for development programme can use any of the tested drama recording methods. Since a development – based television theatre programme is bound to have many outside scenes, an outside broadcast recording system would be ideal. However, there could be some in-door scenes which demand shooting in the studio or in-door locations. In both the outside and in-door location recordings, the camera disposition and usage is very important. The organizer might decide to embark on a one-camera recording or employ the use of an outside broadcast van with multiple cameras connected to a central console controlled by a technical director. Where a one-camera recording system is used, the director must ensure that the camera takes different shots of the same lines to enable him introduce shot variations during the editing process. A situation where one camera is made to run through a scene, panning to and fro, without visual punctuations, should not be allowed in this project. Such recordings result in poor productions that can neither attract nor sustain the attention of the viewer.

The television theatre for development communication programme is meant to showcase the relationship between humanity and development within which he lives. This relationship has to be portrayed in the shots in the production, which should be a mixture of those from indoor and outdoor locations.

Editing: During the editing process, the producer has to ensure that anything that is capable of distorting the message of the programme is edited out. If the recording had been through the use of repeated recordings with one camera, the editing process is expected to be long and tedious. Care must be taken to ensure that there is sound synchronization with the pictures in the production.

Limitations:

The sceptical views expressed about media effects by communication experts, affects the television. Indeed, some media commentators are even more uncertain about the effects of the television than the radio. One of the basis for the scepticism is on the cost of the medium. Television set ownership, programme production and transmission are very costly. Voogd(1992:224) bemoans the high cost of the medium's operations, in spite of its general attractiveness and suitability for education.

As a means of education, television was initially considered as the solution for educational problems in third world countries... it surpassed the obstacles of illiteracy and could fill in the lack of schools in the rural

areas... But experts are starting to doubt the cost-effectiveness of such efforts.... Even if reliable reception-facilities can be ensured the success of such projects is tempered by the often poor programme production.

Another serious problem of the medium that causes sceptics to wave it off in development communication is strong governmental control. The broadcast media stations, in countries like Nigeria, are still predominantly government-owned and under strict control. And such control, in the view of D. Kalb(1982:88), turns

broadcasting organizations into ponderous bureaucratic institutions, where the creativity that television demands, does not get the opportunity to flourish.

Kalb also reports of a project carried out in the Sudan which showed less favourable results of the effect of television. The Sudanese government had launched the Sudan Rural Television project in 1976. Eighty-eight villages received television sets, antennas, generators, and light for communal viewing in village television clubs. Research showed that the initial attractiveness of television waned considerably within a short period of one month. He concludes that the findings show that television reaches mainly the younger villagers who are better educated than the average adults, who are reached by other media.

But available information and observations indicate that the television, especially in Africa, have not been effective participant in development programming, especially in rural development. The predominant assessment is that “the vast majority of stations, regardless of their location, do not perform well in satisfying the needs of these rural communities” (Amienyi:2000:11).

A typical example of this rural neglect in broadcasting can be seen in Nigeria, Africa’s most populous nation, where

in the last ten years, Nigeria has invested about 2 billion naira in the communication system. Yet only a meager 20 percent or less of the population, who are urban residents, benefit meaningfully from the communication facilities that the country offers. The remaining 80 percent who are rural dwellers are completely cut off. (Nwuneli?:1984:11)

In spite of these failings, it is believed that if there is an entrenchment of proper broadcasting policies, sincere re-structuring of the broadcasting system, the television would be made a

veritable tool in the development drive, Moreover, television broadcasting would best serve the development process if properly integrated into a multi-approach communication and education system.

The rising wave of television drama is a further attestation to the medium's popularity and an indication that it could be purposely focused to fit into the popular development process. Voogd(1992:224) asserts that

locally-produced television
in the Third World has enormous
potential, if we consider for instance,
the popularity of drama-series in Brazil,
India and Egypt, which are not only
entertaining, but can be used very
effectively for educational purposes,

The structural advantages of the television are strong. It would therefore be wasteful for a medium as powerful as this to be written off from the development information process. This study agrees with Festus Adesonaye(1990:72) who believes that, in spite of these obvious shortcomings, logistical changes could be put in place to make the medium really relevant to development education and communication. The medium finds some absolution in the words of Wilbur Schram (1964:97)who says that “television has never been used to its capacity in support of economic development(...) but still the possibility is tantalizing”

Television has become a very popular medium in Africa. According to Amienyi(2000:11) between 1980 to 1986, the number of television receivers in Africa grew from 8.2 million to 37 million, a growth of 45.1%. The number of television receivers per 1,000 inhabitants was 17 in 1986. In 1996 there were 50 sets per 1,000 inhabitants. With this increase Africa's share of the world's totals for television moved approximately from 1.5% in 1986 to 2.7 in 1996.

Although this is not really a significant progress for a continent that holds almost 20% of the world's population, it is a remarkable shift as it indicates the growing popularity of the medium and its readiness for utilization in a properly-planned development process.

In his *Television in the Third World*, D. Berwanger(1999:90) reports of a research project in Indonesia before and after the introduction of television in a number of rural villages, It showed that a significant number of villagers had changed certain behavioural patterns after having been exposed to development campaigns carried out through television. Nevertheless, he warns that the power of television to induce change by itself should not be overrated. Voogd(1992:225) also reports that television started being used for developmental purposes in the mid-sixties.

For many Third World countries, television
presented the prospect to educate the
masses and to provoke social changes

that would bring the country to modern standards of living.

Although some communication commentators have expressed scepticism about its ability to induce change, and its unsuitability for development communication because of feedback deficiency, it has been generally agreed that television is a very potent medium in influencing behaviour.

The television, like the radio is an intimate medium belongs to the home. Therefore it does not enjoy the privilege of the exclusive viewership, enjoyed by the live theatre. The competition for the attention of the viewership is as intensive as that of the radio. It starts as an intra-medium competition where various channels are jostling for the viewer's attention, to the struggle with the high technology outlets of satellite viewing, the emerging sensation of home video, to other interests like radio, family discussions, bed rest, etc. etc. For a development theatre programme to attract and sustain viewership, it has to be artistically produced to intensify the experience of the viewer.

Ideally, the television theatre for development education project ,should be part of an integrated communication programme. Part of this programme should be the sitting of community viewing centres especially in the rural areas of the television station's catchment zone. This should be so, for as observed by Katz and Wedell,(1997:56)

television ownership is mainly limited to the urban professional and commercial classes and government officials, because to be able to afford a television set a large income is necessary and for a farmer television means more than a year's income. Nevertheless, even though the great majority cannot really afford it, there exist strong motivations to acquire a television set.

This motivation which is yet to be realized, especially in the rural areas of developing countries, could be mitigated by the establishment of community viewing centres.

As part of the integrative communication process, development agents could be made to watch the programmes in the community viewing centres and afterwards, engage the viewers in discussions on the development issues that have been raised. This re-enforces the effectiveness of the project's message, for according to Katz and Weddel (1997:59)

deeply rooted attitudes cannot easily be changed by exposure to the media alone. Attitudes and actions are most influenced by mass communications when the latter are linked with, and re-enforced by agents in the field.

The discussion session also takes care of the feedback deficiency of the television medium.

Play righting strategies

The television theatre is a special delight of viewers. Coming from a medium that combines vision, sound and motion, the television theatre has, through the years, been able to create for itself tremendous appeal, even in the rural areas of developing countries (where viewership could be ensured). A development television play could therefore be a success, if the script is painstakingly crafted.

The major ingredients of a good play script remain constant in any medium, but there are special peculiarities of each medium that necessitates modifications and accentuation. Such is the case in the television, described by E. M. Iji(1996:42) as a

broadcast medium, perceptibly
tactile, pictorial and photographic in
its visual delineations, further enriched
with all the magic of sounds and visions
(...)which (...) can create its own appeals
and impressions

Plot

As an intimate medium competing with so many interests in the home, the plot of an development television play must be well contrived to attract and sustain the attention of the viewer. And one of the foremost ways of ensuring this is through the creation of sound conflict. It is the strength of the conflict in an development television play that would make it a compelling attraction. The playwright/screen writer must not only create a great conflict but has to concretely establish it early in the play to invite the attention of the viewer.

The effective management of the ripples of a good clash makes for a sustaining dramatic action. As a highly dramatic medium, the action of television drama must be well-crafted to compel the viewer to stay on. The plot of a television play could afford the fluidity of short scenes. There could also be cuts from two or more simultaneous happenings. The television playwright, unlike his stage colleague is privileged with the flexibility of cutting from one scene to another intermittently. For instance, the scene of people felling trees in a woodlot could be cut at different points in to that of a village meeting where the increasing heat in the village is discussed. There could be a scene where a father is negotiating the high price of new school lockers for his children while the carpenter blames the high prize on lack of wood in the community. This scene could be cut intermittently into one where some women are discussing the poor state of cassava plants in the farm as a result of the unusual heat experienced by the community. The caution however, is that in the employment of this device, care must be taken to ensure that the sequence is well-understood by the viewers. The location of the two scenes must be different to make for easy linkage and clarity.

Some television development play projects could adopt the serial approach. The facilitators of such projects should ensure that each episode of the serial has a particular message it presents.

In his plot creation process, the television development playwright should visualize the events in the play as possible shots. The television play is essentially a series of shots that tell a story. Therefore in the conceptualization of his play, the playwright should reduce the story into shots in his minds' eye. This enables him conjecture how the eventual camera shots, through which the play would be presented to the viewer, would appear. This consideration should therefore guide the development playwright in the type of locations and the actions he assigns to various parts of his play.

Conflict is of great importance in the television development plot. Edwin Wilson(1997:153) calls conflict “the crucible of a play” .Like the crucible, a vessel through which metals are exposed to intense heat, conflict provides an avenue to test the psychological disposition and worth of the characters. In the words of Wilson,

every play provides a crucible; a test
devised by the playwright to show
how the characters behave under
conditions of stress. Though this
test the meaning of the play is
brought out.

It is upon this condition of stress that the dramatic action is built. As an intimate medium, the television demands realistic presentation from its programme creators. An development production makes even a more realistic demand on the playwright. To make for believability, the features in the play should be probable and such that could be identified by the viewers as part of the happenings in their society. L. O. Bamidele(2000:16) holds that “the television play is (...) faced with a great cultural expectation, to live up as a new form of art, to tell the story of its society”.

Character

The ingredients of effective characterization, are very pertinent to the television development theatre project. However, as a medium with greater allowance for short- fluid scenes and intermittent cuts from one scene to another, characterization should be effectively – handled, to give depth to, at least the major characters in the play. It should be possible for the audience to clearly identify the characters in each of the scenes and to establish their roles in each scene and in the play generally. There has to be consistency in the traits assigned to each of the major characters.

One of the principal considerations of a development play project should be that simplicity and clarity are necessary for understanding and realization of meaning. The assignment of attributes to characters in such plays should be appropriate and with utmost consistency. Any complexity in characterization should be kept off the script as it is capable of confusing the audience and causing an impairment in the communication process.

Generally, the focus of the dramatic story has always been human beings and human concerns. The television is a most realistic medium. And the development discourse is concerned with human acts of commission and omission. Therefore, the creation of characters in a television development play must be done realistically. The characters should

be such that the viewers could identify as probable persons from their society. Yerima(2003:91) submits that

the character of a play(...) must be as close to life as possible. The figures (...) must possess human aspects in order to help the audience to define a play for themselves, after viewing a performance.

The crucible of a play is caused by the clash in the polar attitudes of the major characters. The tension and various crises that result from the heat in the crucible should occasion the gradual exposition of the traits of the major characters in the play. The characters unfold themselves as the dramatic action evolves. Static characters and ones whose traits are fully exposed too early in the play is a drab characterization which could affect the general reception of the play script. The development playwright should therefore strive to create 'moving' characters that are revealed as they react to the events and other characters in the course of the play.

Diction

The creation of diction is another very important responsibility of the playwright. As part of the process of dramatizing the story, he not only transforms into an action, but more so, into dialogue between the characters, since, according to Wilson(1997:153), "ultimately everything on stage must be acted or spoken by a performer".

The ingredients of diction creation as discussed in the other theatre approaches also pertains to the television medium, with some modifications to suit its nature. For instance, at variance with the mono-perceptive sound mode of the radio, the television communicates through additional perceptions of vision and motion.

Visual and motion perceptions are considered to play more important roles than sound in television medium. A pictorial black out on screen with only the sound on stream, is worse than a moving picture with an audio problem. The development playwright should note the primacy of vision in the medium and represent this in his script. In spite of this, sound and vision play complimentary roles in television communication and their optimum workability must always be ensured. The television development play, especially, needs the functioning of this symbiosis. This is because no matter the strength of the shots in an development advocacy play, the dialogue must be equally properly scripted, delivered and produced to present the message.

In order for the message to be grasped and well-understood, the diction in a television development play should be made up of simple words. Here again, technical jargons from the development lexicon should be followed immediately with simple explanations that lay bare their meaning. And as a realistic medium, the dialogue must be the conversational everyday language. This enables the viewer to identify himself with the play-the story, the character, the language, the problems presented and the suggestive remedies provided.

The playwright must be careful in his choice of words. He should limit himself to the words that are really needed to reveal the meanings in play-directly and sub-textually. An development sensitization play is an advocacy activity. It is a popular activity. The action must not include words that are bound to injure the cultural sensitivities of the people that constitute the television station's catchment area, as this could cause controversies and societal alienation from the programme.

Generally, the playwright should note the vision, sound and motion perceptions of the television and reflect this in his script. Where the original playwright is different from the screenwriter, the latter has to ensure that effective shots are creatively-conceived to match with the diction in the original playwright's script. The shooting script should give adequate direction on the needed shots. Every shot has a feeling it conjures in the viewer. For instance a wide shot of a depleted woodlot establishes the case of a wasteland, an outcome of the reckless felling of trees.

Thought

Aristotle (cited in Dukore:1994:49) defines thought as including

every effect which has to be produced by speech,
the sub-divisions being proof and refutation; the
excitement of feelings such as pity, fear, anger, and
the like.

The summary of this is that thought is essentially the feelings evoked through the dialogic engagements in the play. And Horace(cited in Dukore:1994:58) admonishes the poet (the playwright) to charm his audience and at the same time instruct him, "to blend in one the delightful and the useful and useful". Julius Caesar Scaliger(cited in Dukore: 1994:139) stresses that the purpose of drama "is the giving of instruction in pleasurable form, for poetry teaches and does not simply amuse, as same used to think."

Education through entertainment is the purpose of the television theatre for development communication project. The playwright should however resist the temptation of turning his play into a dramatic sermon on the environment. Rather, he should ensure a good blend of the extrinsic and the intrinsic in his play. The extrinsic value of the play is derived from the physical aesthetical elements of the plot, character, diction, spectacle and rhythm in the play, while the intrinsic derivation is the lesson imbibed through the consummation of these elements. His responsibility is to employ "pleasure to draw men to wisdom" (Thomas Lodge cited in Dukore:1994:167)), and to "impress adroitly upon citizens the need of being better men" (Euripedes cited in Scaliger:1994:139). This demands a through research on development issues, good knowledge of the nuances of the television medium, and the crafting of an effective play script that is capable of attracting viewers, as well as artfully embedding the development lessons in the action of the play.

Conclusion

This paper has established that the television has some power to affect public behaviour and in spite of the structural defects in terms of cost of operation, which tends to make it an elitist medium. Its attractiveness, emanating from its ability to provide sight, sound and

motion, make it a medium of choice. It is this popularity of the medium that this essay has exploited to proffer strategies here the medium and its popularity, even in the rural areas of developing countries, could be employed in the process of development of communication.

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