



INFOTAINMENT AS A COMMERCIAL STRATEGY IN MEDIA PROGRAMMING AND MANAGEMENT IN NIGERIA

ENDONG, Floribert Patrick Calvin

Department of Theatre and Media Studies
University of Calabar
Calabar-Nigeria, PMB 1115, Calabar, C.R.S. Nigeria

Abstract:- The advent of commercial broadcasting in Nigeria – coupled with the ever existing competition among national media outfits – has motivated most media houses (especially news organizations), to remodel their orientation. Many of these news houses have resorted to infotainment as a strategy to win the patronage of audiences, and in turn, attract advertisers. This paper discusses infotainment as a contemporary trend in media programming and management in Nigeria. It explores the strengths and weaknesses of the practice as well as its implications for media programming and management in the country. Being anchored on Williams Stephenson’s Play theory and the Uses and Gratification theory, it argues that, infotainment merely offers operational advantages to media managers and owners as it involves lesser fund for production and programming than the regular/classical programming formats. The paper also argues that infotainment is, to an extent, suitable for commercial broadcasting as it may attract the youths who theoretically constitute the greatest portion of audiences being targeted by advertisers. Nevertheless, infotainment has some disadvantages: it causes a segregation of audiences into narrower niches; encourages passivity and above all, gives a blow to the credibility of news and educational programs. This credibility is particularly endangered in the case where programs that are supposed to be purely factual are rather spiced up with “paranormal” (entertainment) elements.

Keywords: Media Management, Infotainment, soft journalism, media programming, commercial broadcasting, entertainment.

1. Introduction

Besides the transmission of values, the

setting of the agenda and the education and persuasion of masses, the electronic media are known to have diverse other uses and functions. These uses and functions include information and entertainment. In effect, without wanting to relay the old cliché that stipulates that information, education and entertainment represent the cardinal functions of the media, it must be emphasized that audiences depend

For Correspondence:

floribertendongATyahoo.com

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enormously on the media for news and entertainment. This is evidenced by the fact that that radio and television programming is mostly shaped to satisfy these two social needs (Dominick, 2011:210; Brandston and Stafford 2006; Endong 2014: 124; Koblowe and Madu, 2012: 89)

The inestimable potentials of the electronic media have often profoundly informed the modeling by both media houses and media regulatory bodies of media programming. The adoption by a media house of a particular programming format depends partially on its managerial and editorial philosophies. Generally, each media house has to conceive a programming format which is either all news; news/talk or pure entertainment-oriented. With respect to ownership and orientation, we may find diverse types of electronic media outfits: commercial radio and television stations, government radio and television stations, global radio and television stations and the like. These media compete at the national, regional and international sphere to widen their reach. This, they sometimes do for commercial purposes; and in the course, they develop various strategies to hit their goal. Entertainment is one of the multiple strategies these media houses often employed. In effect, entertainment is more and more viewed as a “bade” and a strategic instrument used to attract audiences. (Endong 2014; Koblowe, and Madu., 2012: 89; Dominick 2011; Pierpaolo 1999). This growing inclination to amusement (entertainment) has given rise to a relatively new and popular phenomenon called “infotainment”, the subject of discourse of this paper. As noted by Piepaolo (1999:19), infotainment is more and more unavoidable in contemporary media broadcast.

In an age where the ‘war’ for audiences and ratings has become the main feature of the broadcasting sphere, and where the importance of such ratings has arguably weakened public service obligations and responsibilities, the need for a restructuring and re-location of PSB through

the employment of infotainment principles does seem to be called for.

This paper attempts a comprehensive explication of the concept of infotainment. It presents the different forms and manifestation of the phenomenon in Nigeria, its advantages (pros) and disadvantages (cons). Before focusing on these objectives, the paper defines its theoretical framework.

2. Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored on Williams Stephenson’s Play Theory. This theory was introduced in 1967 in Stephenson’s book titled “The Play Theory of Mass Communication”. It represents a serious alternative to - and a visible refutation of – the conventional theories bordering on the consumption of mass media production (Glasser 2012: 23; Stockwell 2004:4). It opposes the various illumination and information-based models, as well as the “relatively subjective” communication theories which stipulate that the mass media have harmful effects on audiences. According to the Play theory, the mass media cannot have exclusively negative impacts on audiences because they are primarily used for entertainment (Akinjogbin and Kayode 2011; 111; Glasser 2012). Williams Stephenson’s Play theory emphasizes on how audiences use the media for their own satisfaction and how media content affects audiences positively or negatively. This, it does, by drawing a two-edge continuum where pain and pleasure feature at the two extremes. These two elements (pain and pleasures) are central to human experience and Stephenson observes that, while work favors pain, play favors pleasures. Play is self contained and people resort to it to get satisfaction, contrarily to work which is an essential action for productivity.

Williams Stephenson’s assumptions are anchored on his Ludenic Theory of Newreading which argues that in its consumption of newspapers’ content, the readership often derives pleasure and relaxation more than it gets information and illumination. The theory extends this observation to other forms of mass communication. Communication pleasure is

therefore viewed by Stephenson as the ultimate end of mass media production in general. Such a production is often focused on turning certain conditions – which will otherwise create concern – into positive. The mass media equally provide audiences – especially those of national culture – with popular and required issues for discussion. All these media activities greatly contribute to satisfying audiences' need for entertainment, play and enjoyment. In this wise, the mass media serve two principal purposes namely (i) maximizing the communication pleasure in the world and (ii) showing the extent of autonomy achievable from an individual respect to the social control performed by his socio-cultural system (Brandston and Stafford 2006; Akinjogbin and Kayode 2011: 112).

Some authors have associated Williams Stephenson's Play and Pleasure theory with the uses and gratifications theories, which border on how and why people use the media (Glasser 2012; O'Sullivan 1996; Bransdston and Stafford 2006; Watson 2003). The media greatly influences both the needs of the audiences and the gratification they (the media) provide them. However, according to the play theory, the media principally represent serious sources of pleasure (entertainment) to audiences, more than they are sources of information and education.

3. Infotainment: What is it?

Infotainment is a neologism derived from two uses of the media namely "information" and "entertainment". A literal definition of the concept may stipulate that it is a type of media programming or program aimed at informing and entertaining audiences. However, Tanjong (2006:117), stresses that it is an original type of programming which is more inclined towards entertainment. Tanjong therefore defines the phenomenon as "information and entertainment journalism practiced by some media organs as a strategy to attract audience. Here entertainment is prioritized to keep audiences tuned on".

This definition clearly indicates that infotainment is a "strategy" by some media house to widen their reach by attracting

audiences. Priority is given to entertainment which is believed to have the potentials of capturing audiences. In effect, as Koblowe and Madu (2012:89) insightfully opine, "nothing captures an audience as much as entertainment". Entertainment "constantly shifts people's focus away from the realities and worries of life". It may be argued that the realities of life as portrayed by news content are most often a desolation; with stories that depict a world ridden by wars, and multiple social problems. An incorporation of entertainment elements to news is mostly believed to "soften" programs or programming. Some of the entertainment programs include sports, drama, musicals, comedy shows; meanwhile informational programs include news, current affair, documentaries, and business related programs among others (Effiom 2006:72-76; Dominick 2011:16; Stockwell 2004:3).

The conception of infotainment has gone beyond mere programming to mean a special and original type of journalism and way of presenting information in a news program. News is here presented in a soft and entertaining way. This presentation style emphasizes the inclusion – in the news (factual) program – of paranormal and entertaining elements. The news or educative program thus ceases to be exclusively informative or educative. It is in line with this that Nisbet (2012:16) succinctly describes the phenomenon (infotainment), and provides a plethora of appellations for it. He notes that infotainment is viewed in

Trends in mass media, that have made the paranormal - along with crime, celebrity, entertainment, and melodrama - into standard journalistic fare at leading news organizations. This new news dubbed "soft journalism" or infotainment is the media industry's reaction to nearly two decade decline in its readership and viewership base. Paranormal subjects are ready made for level of human interest, drama and sensationalism with unending story lines.

In this perspective, infotainment is the spicing up of news or educational contents of a program with entertaining (paranormal) elements; in view of shaping program content in a way as to appeal to media audiences. It is therefore safe to argue that the inclusion of this paranormal elements affects the credibility of the news or educational program as it will be demonstrated later in this paper. Entertainment has always been an important part of the media. Almost all media houses incorporate it - to an extent - in their production, irrespective of editorial policies. With focus on electronic media, Dominick notes that: "Television is primarily devoted to entertainment, with about three-quarters of a typical broadcast day falling into this category. The entertainment content of radio varies widely according to station format. Some stations may program 100 percent news while others may schedule less than 5 percent" (Dominick 2011: 48). Prominent agents of entertainment (especially in Africa) include F.M stations and their counterparts in television whose appellations vary depending on countries. In Nigeria, these types of television stations – that have adopted programming format inclined to entertainment – are called "television Xtra, Television Plus, Television 2," among others (Effiom 2005: 48; Akinjogbin and Kayode 2011: 117; Endong 2014: 124).

4. Infotainment in Nigeria: The Phenomenon of FM Radio and TV.

F.M. radio stations do not constitute a new phenomenon, since they have been integral part of broadcasting worldwide and have long achieved this recognition (Effiom 2005: 49; Tanjong 2008: 81). But a relatively worth noting novelty is their orientation which has persistently been dynamic over the years, especially in African countries. This dynamism is remarkably favorable to infotainment. Mentioning and examining the way in which FM radio and TV operate in a discourse pertaining to infotainment is therefore inevitable. In his definition of F.M. radio and TV stations, Effiom (2005:49) observes that:

these categories of media houses perform basically similar functions as the regular

stations, but lean more towards entertainment than other programs [...] such stations therefore, are established primarily to provide entertainment with occasional interjection of other program types to break the monotony. They do not therefore subject themselves to the rather elaborate structure of regular station.

It should be noted that, as stated in citation above, the interjection of other program types is merely aimed at breaking monopoly. Monopoly may cause programming to be dull and boring. Entertainment, on the other hand, is aimed at attracting audiences. Entertainment stations are presently flourishing in the Nigerian media ecology. They are principally characterized by notable tendencies of deviating from the canons of journalism. That is why critics view them as "new generation of media operatives who hold little allegiance to prior code of journalistic ethics, and who fashion themselves as celebrity personalities shape shifting across the genres of news and entertainment" (Carpini 2001:160-191). However, the remarkable inclination of media houses towards entertainment is not exclusively observed in the media programming upheld by entertainment stations. In effect, infotainment is more and more becoming a generalized phenomenon in the Nigerian audio-visual ecology. In line with this, Akinjogbin and Kayode (2011: 114) lament that "one constant criticism of television in Nigeria is that it is used more as an entertainment medium than for development ends". Akinjogbin and Kayode, particularly note the recrudescence of obituaries and wake-keeping based programs, which somehow represent a remarkable feature of this pro infotainment philosophy by Nigerian media houses.

On our TV stations, (private stations inclusive), it would appear that obituaries and reports of funeral wake ceremonies are now competing with entertainment as television fare. Of course there are ways in which obituaries and wake-keeping ceremonies may be seen as extensions of entertainment, on Nigerian television

stations. [...] The obituary becomes a general, collective invitation to well-wishers and sympathizers as well as to "socialites" who will make the social wake-keeping ceremony a memorable occasion. As such it is spiced with snippets of real or constructed earlier ceremonies, and of the greatness of the deceased and his/her family, with an implied forecast of how much is likely to be invested in the ceremony.

Infotainment – and particularly entertainment – on media is increasingly dominant as it is generally believed to have potentials of attracting audiences (Kolbowe and Madu 2012: 89; Folarin 2002). According to William Stephenson's Play Theory and the Pleasure theory, the mass media should be used principally for play, to incite pleasure in the audience than for work. (O'Sullivan et al, 1996: 172; Kolbowe and Madu 2012: 88). This simply means that the media should focus more on entertainment than on information and economic improvement. The analysis of this theory is based on the assumption that work is anything that deals with reality, earning a living and production while play is a period for recreational activities, hobbies and self-cultivation. Unless such a period provides satisfaction (pleasure) it is unproductive. This theory is however subject to controversy as entertainment is often viewed as something derailing audience from the realities of life.

5. Advantages of Infotainment

Infotainment, as a type of media programming, has some benefits. These benefits can be viewed as operational advantages for media owners and managers. In this paper, two – but not the least – of such advantages are discussed, namely reduced cost of media management and suitability to commercial broadcasting.

5.1 Reduced Cost of Media Management

Good programming evidently involves considerable fund, personnel and equipment, meanwhile some new entrants in the media landscape (in black Africa especially notably Nigeria) are not sufficiently viable stations in

terms of finance. These media outfits most often resort to infotainment and some times, progressively remodel their programming formats, enriching them with other program types. Effiom (2005:49) observes that the very nature of entertainment stations "places some limit on them in terms of programming and save their proprietors, funds for equipment and personnel cost, making it possible for them to function, with relatively less capital and running cost than the regular station".

Opting for an entertainment-oriented programming format is less costly. No doubt, most of the private radio and television stations (which are believed to be less financially viable than government-owned media outfit), have quickly adopted this format of programming. This position is confirmed by Kolbowe and Madu (2012:81) who observe that there is "disparity in programming between the government and private station. Private stations are more entertainment oriented than their public counterpart. The nature of programs affects the type of consumers".

5.2 Favorable to Commercial Broadcasting

From the first days of broadcasting, the media of mass communication were merely functioning as social service, assuming active contribution in societal development. But since the advent of commercial broadcasting in the eighties, The media in most African countries in general and Nigeria in particular have resorted to revenue generation as one of their objectives, transforming broadcasting into a business. (Effiom 2005: 94; Tanjong 2008: 86; Dominick 2011: 210). One of the ways in which the media generate revenue is advertisement. Meanwhile, advertisers are likely to patronize radio and television stations that can deliver the audience to them; and this is where infotainment is often viewed as a crucial and strategic tool. Kolbowe and Madu (2012:81) do agree that "the nature of programs affects the type of consumers". Similarly, Dominick (2011:208) corroborates this view, observing that:

Perhaps, the most meaningful way we can organize radio station is according to their format, a type of consistent programming

designed to appeal to a certain segment of audience. Formats are important because they give a station a distinctive personality and attract a certain kind of audience that advertisers find desirable. Most modern stations can offer an amazingly precise description of the kind of listeners they want their format to attract.

By opting for A format inclined towards entertainment (infotainment), most media managers have the opportunity to attract the youths who most often constitute the greater portion of the audiences targeted by the advertisers. Recognizing this fact, Kolbowe and Madu opine that: “nothing captures an audience as much as entertainment.” Therefore, with entertainment, efforts are made to attract audiences and make the media outfit a potential part of advertisers’ media mixes in the latter’s advertising campaigns.

Infotainment is founded on two principal benefits: the low cost of production and programming, the prospect of aggrandizing the reach of media outfits and increasing chances of been first-hand choices of advertisers. Nevertheless, Nisbet (2013:16) expresses skepticism as to these advantages. He observes that:

Like many other mistakes in the history of business, the resort to infotainment is the combined result of a short-term and outlook on profit returns and a blind regard to longer term market and social costs. The continued segmenting of audiences, but the social need shall always remain for public affairs coverage, and consumer demand should remain, if completely snuffed out by the current practices of news organizations.

6. Disadvantages of Infotainment

Nisbet’s observation already emphasizes a number of the weaknesses of infotainment. This section discusses three other disadvantages namely, progressive and alarming audience segmentation, the inculcation of passivity and the reduced credibility of news programs.

6.1 Segmentation of audiences.

It has been observed that entertainment – which is the primary objective of infotainment – is appealing more to the youth. (Koblowe and Madu 2012: 80; Effiom 2005: 48; Dominick 2011: 210, Branston and Stafford 2006: 136-139; Watson 2003:67). By giving priority to a particular segment of the audience, infotainment is visibly exclusivist. No doubt, it is not generally endorsed. As strongly put by Nisbet in citation above, infotainment causes segregation of audiences into “narrow niches”. Koblowe and Madu (2012:89) share this view as they posit that: “stations with entertainment appeal limit their reach and alienate important members of the society who are relevant in societal structuring. With limited balance in programming, some organizations pay more attention to specific types, eliminating media consumption of certain groups”.

Koblowe and Madu’s (2012:80) observation stems from their view that informational programs are attractive to adult audiences meanwhile entertainment is rather appealing exclusively to the youths. They add that “the lack of educational and informative content may limit adult consumption of television programs because they are more information inclined to receive current and global reports”. On his part, Nisbet (2013: 18) goes further to underline the negative consequences a relatively low informational and educational content is likely to have in any programming. He opines that: “Although reinigorated sales and ratings are the goals of soft journalism, release research from the field of political communication indicates that infotainment has actually accelerated the decline in news audiences, while serving to impair the public’s in and knowledge of public affairs”.

It should however be noted that the observation stipulating that entertainment is likely to attract youth audience is relatively challengeable as there exist music formats that are aimed exclusively at adult and the old audiences. One of such is what Dominick calls soft “Adult Contemporary format” which

emphasizes mostly subdued vocals from the past. Dominick equally identifies a sub type of the same category – the “oldies-based AC and describes them in the following terms: “these stations play few, if any at all current hits. Instead, their playlist is dominated by softer hits from the sixties, seventies and eighties” (208). Also, programming can be fine-tuned in such a way as to provide entertainment programs for de different age groups or for all the social groups. In line with this, Dominick (2011: 48) posits that:

Entertainment that is carried by the mass media must, almost by definition, appeal to mass audience. The ultimate result of this state of affairs is that media content is designed to appeal to the common denominator of taste. More programs that resemble *Murphy Brown* and the *Cosby Show* will find their way to TV than will opera performance.

A good media programming will therefore have the objective of entertaining audiences from all social groups. If this is achieved, the critique of infotainment appealing exclusively to youth will not be tenable.

6.2 Inculcating Passivity

Beside over segmenting audiences into narrower audiences, critiques against infotainment are directly linked to the disadvantages of entertainment. Kolbowe and Madu (2012: 89) for instance posit that: “If the world is caged into entertainment, the media would cease to realize their goal of informing, educating and persuading publics. They would be unable to meet audiences’ gratification and this would have varied consequences on all, including media outfits”.

Many critics have argued that entertainment motivates passivity as it encourages audience more to watch or listen to programs on leisure than to take part in the leisure. A sport program tends for instance to inculcate the culture of simply watching sportive and recreational encounters; not really motivating watchers to actually go for the mediated sportive or recreational activity. Dominick (2011:48) observes that critics have

expressed the fear that by resorting to infotainment, media may increasingly turn audiences to be watchers rather than doers. He argues that: “One other consequence of the widespread use of media for entertainment is that [...] flicking on the TV set [...] requires little effort on our part and some fear that media do such a good job of entertaining society that they encourage passivity. Instead of playing baseball, people might simply watch it on T.V. Instead of learning to play the guitar, an adolescent might decide to listen to a record of someone else playing guitar”.

6.3 Reduced Credibility of News or Educational programs

This critique is often advanced when it comes to the use of entertainment or what is called the “paranormal” to spice up traditional news or educational programs. Critics opine that infotainment otherwise called “soft journalism” erode news programs and consequently affects the credibility of such informational and educational programs. According to Nisbet (2013:29), not only is infotainment simultaneously eroding the core news consumer base, while undermining news organization credibility, but a steady stream of sensationalistic news has adverse effect on public perception. Nisbet opines that “the continued embrace of soft journalism (infotainment) will ultimately lead to the end of journalism”.

7. Conclusion

This paper discussed infotainment as a new trend in media programming and in the practice of journalism. It argued that this trend is engendered by commercial broadcasting. In effect commercial broadcasting has caused media houses to constantly view themselves as businesses engaged in a fierce competition. In line with this, most Nigerian media houses view immense prospect in the adoption of a programming format that is fashioned in such a way as to appeal to the largest youth audience possible. By attracting audiences they hope to attract advertisers. However, as clearly illustrated in the paper, infotainment has

disadvantages which are more related to negative effects of entertainment on audiences.

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