

## **The Nigerian Mass Media and Childhood Socialization**

Okafor, Godson Okwuchukwu (Ph.D)<sup>1</sup>, Malizu, Chinonye Faith <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>(Department of Mass Communication, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Nigeria)

<sup>2</sup>(Department of Mass Communication, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Nigeria)

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**Abstract:** *The influence of the mass media is a contentious issue when it comes to childhood socialization. The nature and degree of media influence on children's behaviour has been extensively addressed at some time or other, with the bulk of decades of research focusing on the relationship between the exposure to media programmes and social behaviour of children. While the issue of media has been extensively investigated, the "third parent's role as a socializing agent has been overlooked. When one considers that the media is a significant source of values and that it has the ability to impact on the thoughts, feelings, and behaviour of individuals, the media's role in the inculcation of deviant values is of relevance if one is to fully understand how this social system has increasingly become a source of values. Therefore, this study attempts to examine the role of the mass media in childhood socialization in order to determine how much influence the media has on the individual during childhood stage.*

**Keywords:** *Mass Media, Childhood, Socialisation, social behaviour.*

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### **I. Introduction**

The mass media especially the visual media (television, films, and now the new media) are widely believed to be uniquely effective because of their visual advantage which enables the retention of attention among audiences, as well as 'pre-occupying' especially for children and adolescents, even among some adults. One cannot talk of socialization without mentioning children because primary socialization occurs in children. Socialization is responsible for the transformation of a helpless infant, described as 'a biological being' into a thinking, acting and talking normal human being, described as "a social being".<sup>[1]</sup>

Childhood on the other hand is a period of information seeking when the child's central concern lies in defining a coherent picture of the world. "For the 20<sup>th</sup> century child, the picture is apt to be broad and complex. The mass media especially the pictorial media to which they have access very easily expose them to the world far and beyond the limits of his immediate environment"(p.15).<sup>[2]</sup> But unlike our own society where presently, the trend has been to screen primary and secondary school children in traditional dancing costumes.

However, children are actually portrayed as entertainers to television viewers. "It is worrisome that if new strategies are not adopted whereby children would be exposed to a more expanded use of the media, they might grow into tradition directed, dance-oriented and violent adults".<sup>[3]</sup> Living in a media-saturated world, the media has become an integral part of everyday life and children are spending between 35-55 hours per week on the different forms of media.<sup>[4]</sup> However, with this constant exposure to media contents, it is not surprising that the question most often asked when a child behaves in a particular manner is: "what role did the media play in childhood socialization?" thus the thrust of this study.

### **II. An Overview Of Nigerian Mass Media**

The media constitutes a wide variety of industries and merchandise.<sup>[5]</sup> Consequently, the mass media includes; Television, newspapers, music, movies, magazines, books, billboards, direct mail, broadcast satellites, the internet, as well as internet enabled 'new media' and its now popular social networking sites etc.

The mass media which are more available to the child today than in the past, presents them with attitude and values which seem counter to those of the family, school and at times peers. It also presents the child with very quick information and in great quantities thereby making the media a ubiquitous part of the child's life. Additionally, the advent of the new media particularly the World Wide Web (WWW) or the internet and the plethora of social media that presently characterise social interaction across the globe have created yet another dimension on the issue of media and socialization.

Prior to the emergence of the new media, scholars agreed that the mass media undeniably plays a major role in the socialisation process. For instance, "Television has been called everything from an educational panacea to a bomb tube".<sup>[6]</sup> However, the arrival of the new media into the global media landscape has brought with it changes in media dynamics, particularly in the socialisation process and media social interaction in general. On one hand, different people at different times labelled the television unbiased, accurate, liberal and/or conservative. While others in addition accused the media of practically everything ranging from wrecking the

family to robbing us of our individuality. These were the different positions long before the new media became part of the daily global source of news and social interaction.

### **III. Defining Socialisation**

Socialization is the learning processes by which individuals acquire the culture (norms, habits, values, skills and practices) of their society, thereby becoming acceptable members of their society or group. He explained that norms or normative patterns of any society relate to the values which define the things that are accepted as proper, legitimate and/or expected modes of behaviour or action within social interactions or relationships (p.7).<sup>[7]</sup> Ezewu (1985) defines socialization more broadly as the process by which persons acquire the knowledge, skill and dispositions that make them more or less able members of their society. However, Nnonyelu explains that there is now a new recognition that socialization is no longer regarded or seen as a one-way process, in which individuals learn how to fit into society, since people may also in their day to day existence, redefine their social roles and obligations.<sup>[1]</sup>

DeFleur and Dennis defines socialization as a complex, long-term, and multidimensional set of communicative exchanges between individuals and various agents of society that result in the individual's preparation for life in a socio-cultural environment (p. 209).<sup>[9]</sup> This preparation or induction to social life takes place in the infancy of the individual and derives from different agencies that converge in the child's reasoning, perception and interaction with the surrounding world. These agencies alternate between the parents, family and social groups sphere on one side, to the child's exposure to media on the other. Yet, the views and the validity of this definition vary, as Buckingham argues that the socialization theory is 'a functional approach that regards children as passive recipients of external social forces rather than active participants in the construction of their own social lives and identities' (p.14).<sup>[10]</sup> However, the approaches to socialization vary from the anthropological point of view to the more Freudian one. The first refers to the process as *enculturation* which consists in the individual's internalisation of "all aspects of their culture"<sup>[11]</sup> such as traditions, language and common discourses. The media has its importance in this view, for it can teach the child about the nature of his or her social order (*ibid*). On the other hand, psychologists see socialization as an inner process that one must acquire in order to control inborn drives that 'would lead to socially unacceptable behaviour' (*ibid*). The role of the media in this case can be considered as highly important, for the negative aspects that explicit exposition of adult issues can cause in the child's future development. Finally, the sociological belief is that 'socialization prepares individuals for participation in group life' (*ibid*: 210). Issues of media and representation take an active role in this approach, which can be addressed to the argument of television as a socialization agency.

Obasi (2005), Marshal (1998) and Nnonyelu (2009) generally agreed that the content of culture in society is transmitted to members for internalisation through an identifiable process called socialization via its agents like schools, family, peer group and the media. These agents assist individuals acquire the culture of their societies which enable them transform from a raw, hapless and defenceless infant to a mature, independent and culture-bearing member of society. It is this transformational process that is generally referred to as socialization which also continues throughout life in varying degrees.<sup>[1]</sup>

However, debates in sociology and related social sciences over the relative importance and impact of these agents on individual behaviour have raged for decades with little resolution. Taking socialization as a communicative process rather than an isolated effect on the individual, a distinct approach has to be taken to analyse the effect of the mass media in children's social behaviours.

### **IV. Mass Media As A Socialising Agent**

A research into how the mass media shapes the social behaviour of children whether positively or negatively appears novel, especially in television media studies. The advent of mass media has thus made possible the reproduction of information on a massive scale via the medium of both the print and electronic media to inform, educate, entertain, as well as transmit values thus establishing the mass media the most powerful communication force ever created by man. Considering the degree of information flow available through the mass media, and its possible consequences on the child's learning capability, it has become pertinent to take a critical look at the diversified role of the mass media in the process of socialisation especially at the childhood stage.

Today, it has become a common sight to see children spending a large proportion of their time after school, during holidays and their leisure times watching television or movies. This shows the extent to which the mass media has become a major socialisation agent in our contemporary society. Also most parents cannot afford to spend a good portion of their time with their children. This also makes the monitoring of what the children are learning very difficult.

Overtime, this intense and frequent interaction between the child and the media has served to reinforce the efforts of the family and the school, but in most cases, it weakens and dilutes family and school influences in the socialisation of the child. It is often difficult to determine which of these socialisation agencies wields the

greatest influence in child socialisation. However, “children can learn directly from the media which also communicate to parents and peers standard of behaviours which they transmit” to their children (p.23).<sup>[14]</sup> This shows that even what is taught to the child by parents is often determined by the mass media. The above fact greatly underscores the significance of the mass media in childhood, as well as adult socialisation.

The media may be directly utilised for education and indoctrination, as in educational television programmes. Or the exploitation of all forms of communication in authoritarian societies where the regime systematically try to spread and sustain the values they approved.<sup>[15]</sup>

As message multipliers, the mass media should transcend all the other agents in the socialization process because of its ability to increase the number and speed of message delivered, as well as the size of the audience reached in very little time. It is reasoned that given the tremendous powers especially in situations where the mass media have been adopted as integral part of the learning process, its socialization capacity must be enormous. The electronic media is of great importance both for the literate and the non-literate audience. The make-believe world of electronic media serves as a model of reality for countless people reaching children at the very time when they are eagerly reaching out to learn about the world. Those too young to read, those who never learned the habit of reading and those who have little access to printed sources of information and entertainment, all depend heavily on electronic media to tell them of the world outside their own immediate surroundings.<sup>[16]</sup>

However, socialization by television particularly has positive effects. For example a television programme such as *do it yourself* in NTA can help children develop skills and knowledge that will help them in school. Writing about the TV programme Sesame Streets for Children, Domnick noted that those children who watched this programme scored higher in tests measuring knowledge of numbers, letter, relationship and vocabulary concepts that the series was designed to teach.<sup>[17]</sup> Socialization, though a lifelong process occurs intensively along the first years of life. In other words, at the time when children begin to learn the language, detailed rules of behaviour and the value system of their culture. Of course, all electronic media function as part of national culture too, but they come from beyond the immediate family circle and its community linked support.<sup>[18]</sup>

In more developed societies, a greater part of the complex process of socialization has been taken over by the mass media. The individual at various times in life learn some aspects of social norms from the media. But contrary to popular assumptions, some social sciences scholars especially sociologists in their analysis of the roles of the various agents of socialization like the family and peer group in this learning process, perceive them as more important than the mass media in the socialization process.<sup>[19]</sup> For instance Chinoy noted that, the chief agency of socialization is usually the family or kinship group. By ministering the needs of the helpless infant, the parent initially in most cases the mother establishes a relationship with the child, which is of central importance to its future development. The child discover that his earliest ties are usually with his parents, family experience and expectations carry on special emotional weight and are therefore of particular importance in shaping personality and transmitting cultural demands and expectations. However, contemporary studies reveal that children spend most of their time with the media like television, video, radio, mobile phones, tablets, internet etc. than with their parents and thus making questionable, the saying that – the family is the most primary social institution in society.<sup>[7]</sup>

What children see on the screen, whether on the television screen or in a theatre, depends on what is available at the time they come to watch. If, however, there is choice, young children prefer comics and animated films, especially those with animals as the main characters. They can understand these and they usually lack terror elements. For older children, by contrast, the thrill element of a film is its major appeal regardless of how the thrill is produced, they want to see something that excites them and has an element of terror, violent, or suspense. Anything that offers excitement, adventure, or mystery appeals to them because it is in sharp contrast to their daily lives. It is for this reason that older children often prefer movies to books, game and sports. This coupled with the fact that more time is spent today with media than parents make mass media influential in socialization today than family.

In spite of the stance taken by most sociologists on this issue, it is still strongly felt that in societies where the potentialities of the mass media have been fully exploited, by the reason of their unique advantage over the traditional agents of socialization, the mass media must have some influence. Thus, how much the media contribute to this fascinating process of socialization is the primary concern of the paper.

## **V. The Mass Media, Violence And Pornography**

The effect of television violence has been an issue of public concern almost from the inception of television in the early 1950s. The question now is no longer whether TV directly causes aggressive behaviour in teenagers, but how? In 1972, a major United States Federal research programme now known as the Surgeon general programme was initiated to assess the effect of television violence on children. Its conclusion held that the convergence of evidence was sufficient to permit conclusion indication of a casual relationship between

extensive viewing of violence and later aggressive behaviour. TV violence also makes teenage children more willing to harm others, more aggressive in their play and also more likely to select aggressive as the preferred responses to conflict situations. Most teenagers emulate undesirable attitude as well as behaviours from watching violent programmes. <sup>[20]</sup> The conclusion has been endorsed by a number of researchers. In their theoretical formulation, three possibilities exist:

1. Television reduces aggressive behaviour
2. Television has no significant relationship to aggressive behaviour
3. Television causes aggressive behaviour

Children who spend more time in watching violent television programmes are rated more by her peers, rated poorly by teachers, have fewer problems solving skills and are more likely to get in trouble with the law as teenagers. She also noted that exposure to media violence causes children to behave more aggressively both immediately and when they are older. <sup>[21]</sup> The children most at risk are those ones who prefer television violence. More aggressive watch more violent television and actually prefer more violent television than their less aggressive peers. The effect of television and film on children is a complicated one. Quite a number of researches have been carried out in various countries of the world. Although some scientists say that the television (and films) has no effects on people's attitudes, most psychologists and neurologists agree that what human beings perceive is stored in their brain permanently. They go further to say that one's early experiences as a child actually influence the very structure of the brain. What people perceive and experience, contribute to the development of a person's behaviour

Another view on the relationship between television violence and aggressive behaviour is explained primarily by the social learning theory and is credited to Bandura. In 1965, Albert Bandura and his student used children in his study to point out the importance of observational learning or modelling. They clearly demonstrated that children imitate aggressive acts they witness from the television presentation. The study was called "Bobo-dolls" studies. Our social behaviour is picked up from observational learning through modelling. It can be learned not only through observation of a live model but also by exposure to symbolic models which may be represented by oral or written matter in picture or in combinations of verbal and pictorial materials. Today, television and movies are highly influential sources of symbolic modelling. Especially in view of the amount of time young people spend before television sets. It was repeatedly shown that both children and adults acquire attitudes, emotional responses and new ways of behaving through models in film and on television (p.14). <sup>[22]</sup>

While there is indeed no scientific evidence that excessive viewing of violence either on television or in films can or does provoke violent crime in any individual, it is clear that the bulk of studies show that a large number of children watch a great deal of violence in both films and television and these make vivid impression on the young. The exposure creates what psychologist call 'a mean world syndrome' - a perception that contemporary life is more dangerous than it is and gives birth to less creative minds, violence and sex

This follows a basic premise that children learn from all aspects of their environment. If one or another environmental agent occupies a significant proportion of a child's daily activities, that agent becomes a component of influence on child's behaviour.

In recent years, children and in particular teenagers, have formed the habit of watching television as a daily routine. Television has long become essential household equipment. The television in most homes is on for a long time and the teenage children are the ones who watch it most of the time. By mid adolescence, teenager must have watched 15,000 hours of television. <sup>[23]</sup> This means that more time is spent watching television than with teachers, friends or parents. As a result of the viewing time available to children and particularly because of their adventurous and level of mental development, the impact of TV on children is quite enormous.

Recent researches have indicated that young children especially teenagers are vulnerable. They tend to believe what they see on television without distinguishing between fact, fiction and the adverts. Disadvantaged Children tend to believe fictions more readily than those whose lives contain more opportunities for learning. The direction represented in television ultimately creates problems because most children assume that TV depicts life as it is or as it should be.

## **VI. Negative Implications**

Critics of radio listening emphasize the harmful effects. These are most pronounced when children concentrate on programs of violence, crime and mystery. Terrifying programmes may affect the general physical condition of children by producing nightmares, nervous tensions, loss of sleep and poor appetite. Children who spend much of their time listening to the radio get too little exercise for normal development and healthy physical condition. Their schoolwork may suffer because they do not give enough time to their studies and do not concentrates when they are studying. As with any other form of amusement, too much time spent in listening to the radio may be regarded as a danger of poor personal and social adjustment.

Hurlock listed five effects of television on children, firstly, television watching cuts into the time available for other play activities, especially outdoor play with other children. It also leaves little time for creative play or different forms of amusement.

Secondly, television present material in such an exciting and vivid way that schoolbooks can hardly compete with it for children's interest and attention. As a result, they often find schoolbooks and schoolbooks boring.

Thirdly, characters in television are usually presented as stereotypes and children come to think of all people in a given group as having the same qualities as the people on the screen. This influences children's attitudes toward them.

Fourthly, since children are imitators, they feel that what has the stamp of approval of a television program must be an accepted way for them to behave. Because law-abiding heroes or heroines are less glamorous than those who win attention by violence and other unsocial acts, children tend to use the latter to identify with and imitate.

Fifthly, many children believe that anything said on television is true and that the television announcers know more about everything than parents, teachers and doctors.<sup>[24]</sup> This is likely to lead to a general gullibility. Hurlock believes that all types of amusements of childhood like television watching is commonly hazardous to personal and social adjustments because, first, more time is spent on it than other forms of play and, it is less often supervised by parents and other adults than other forms of play.

## VII. Conclusion

The mass media are therefore used because they serve certain functions for the individual and society. The media offer an opportunity of being together, something for friends to enjoy each other's company and a common experience about what to talk. Apart from educating people about events and happenings in the world they live, the media also provide casual relations and time out from school, work, family duties or fantasy world, which the troubled and disturbed may escape.

It is known that people absorb most of their social norms from the mass media either consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly from others who have acquired norms from the media. Some other studies on the relative rank of the mass media as normative sources among major agents of socialization, as the family, schools and peer groups, have reported the mass media as relatively more important than the other agents.

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