

THE PLAY THEORY: A CRITIQUE FROM THE COMMUNITARIAN CONTEXT

***Akinjogbin, S.A.**

****Kayode, O.O.**

Adebola Adegunwa School of Communication

Lagos State University, Ojo, Nigeria

**E-mail: kunleakinjogbin@yahoo.co.uk*

***E-mail: jimikayode@gmail.com*

ABSTRACT

Communication plays a vital role in human existence. Because of the importance and effects of communication on the interrelationship of man and its environment, attempts have been made by scholars and philosophers to explain the effects and roles of communication on various man's activities, phenomena and events. And this has resulted in theories and postulations cutting across different eras - mass society era - limited effect - scientific perspective - cultural era theories and now technological/digital age era. This study is a critique of William Stephenson's play theory of mass communication. His view that people use mass media mostly for play i.e. entertainment, pleasure and self-satisfaction rather than work (information and improvement) was true to some extent in the traditional society where the need of the people was small and their level of education low. However, recent developments in communication and technology have madethat postulation in need of some revision, particularly with the development of the new media and globalization of information which emphasizes skills both in the production and consumption of information.

Keywords: *Play theory, critique, communitarian, interrelationship*

INTRODUCTION

The Play theory of Mass Communication has been developed by social scientist William Stephenson based on the precedent work of J. Huizinga, Homo Ludens, and of the Hungarian psychiatric T.S. Szasz. The concept has been explained in his 1967 book "The Play Theory of Mass Communication" University of Chicago Press, US. The author developed the concept to contrast those who argued about the harmful effects of the mass media and the information-based vision of media. Play theory is based on the idea that media cannot have harmful effect because the audience uses them primarily for entertainment, rather than as serious sources of information. Play Theory of Mass Communication is a theory that holds the first function of media is to provide entertainment (Folarin, 2002; mediadictionary.com; and <http://www.peoi.org/Courses/Coursesen/mass/mass2.html>).

Play is an activity pursued for pleasure. The daily withdrawal of people into the mass media in their after-hours is a matter of subjectivity. The effect of mass communication is neither escapism nor seducing the masses. Rather it is seen as anti-anxiety producing, and is regarded as communication-pleasure. Regarding the newspapers, Stephenson developed and defended the Ludenic Theory of Newsreading: he argues they are read to provide pleasure and relax instead of information and illumination, as mistakenly believed

so far by many media authors and readers. Media, in general, are aimed at providing communication pleasure and their activity is often focused on turning certain conditions into positive which would otherwise create concern. People of any national culture require something to talk about to satisfy their need of entertainment, play and enjoyment. Mass communication in this perspective can serve two purposes:

1. Maximize the communication pleasure in the world.
2. Show the extent of autonomy achievable from an individual respect to the social control performed by his socio-cultural system.

What makes Stephenson's research unique is the innovative methodology adopted: to analyze how communication processes are received by individuals he studied mass communication from a subjective and psychological standpoint, rather than an objective and sociological one as his predecessors did. (http://www.12manage.com/description_packhard_hidden_needs.html). Although much of media research and scholarship has been focused on media effect in a socially negative way such as violence, misogyny, racism and sexual objectification, there have been many in the research communities who have studied media consumption from an audience perspective. Often working with different iterations of uses and gratifications theory, several scholars have put forth frameworks to help understand why we consume media.

William Stephenson's Play Theory, which suggests that our interaction with various forms of mass communication helps us create and enhance our individual identities, is one of the older and better-known examples of such work. In 1967, Stephenson published his audience-centric theory in, *The Play Theory of Mass Communication*. Stephenson introduced Play Theory with the words, "the media have been looked at through the ideas of morality, when, instead, what [is] required [is] a fresh glance at people existing in their own right for the first time'. Although the most powerful implications of Play Theory relate to the individual, Stephenson's perspective on the value of play is rooted in the work of Johan Huizinga, whose theories dealt with the broad cultural value of play. Stephenson credits Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*, which was published in 1938, as marking the beginning of modern thinking about play. Stephenson suggests that before Huizinga's work, play was viewed as a frivolous activity, whereas following *Homo Ludens*, play began to be recognized as process that gave "rise to useful conventions that permit culture to evolve and stabilize". (Worsfold, 2007).

The first step in understanding Play Theory is to understand Stephenson's notion of play. Extending Freud's position, Stephenson grounds his theory along a continuum with pain placed on one side and pleasure on the other. In this model, work leans toward pain, while play leans toward pleasure. Stephenson argues that work is anything to do "with reality, with earning a living, [and] with production", while play is a "time for recreation, hobbies, or self-cultivation" that is "largely unproductive except for the self-satisfaction it provides". Stephenson next places the functions of the mass media on his continuum of pain and pleasure. He notes that the media can be associated with both pain, through its capacity to support work, and pleasure, through its capacity to entertain. It is in defining what constitutes work related media consumption and play related media consumption

that one first encounters the ambiguity of Play Theory. Stephenson suggests that mass communication dealing with work consists of matters of reality such as the weather, shipping news, and farming information.

Conversely, play related mass communication deals with "leisure-time pursuits", which would presumably include the arts, sporting events, and travel information. However, in this categorization, one cannot help but point out that what constitutes work and play varies from person to person. Thus, when one is applying play theory, one must first gauge the subject's definition of the two terms. Play Theory is concerned solely with play related media consumption. Stephenson's model suggests that pleasure is derived from two distinct forms of media play. Davis and Baran have built on Stephenson's framework and classified these forms as participatory and elite dominated communication play (Worsfold, 2007). Participatory play occurs when "communicators are free to alter interaction to achieve their goals". Under this form of play, participants are able to express themselves in equal terms. According to him, people use mass communication more as play than as work more for pleasure and entertainment than for information and improvement.

For instance, more newspaper readers give more attention to comics, cartoons, sport pages, fashion columns, human angle stories etc. than they do to hard news and public service materials. Stephenson's philosophies are one, that life is centred on two major activities - work and play; thereby leaving out death. Two; that people use mass media for pleasure and entertainment rather than for information and improvement. This translates to the fact that the more media you have, the more of entertainment and pleasurable life becomes. To explain the theory, Stephenson used a data gathering procedure called Q-sort in his research on how different audiences, expressed as typical individuals, feel about the media.

PLAY THEORY ASSUMPTIONS

Play Theory hinges on one primary assumption, which relates to the audience's active involvement in the media consumption process. Stephenson asserts his belief in audience involvement by commenting, "I do not think of [media consumption] as merely entertainment in a non-ego-involving sense, but at its best as a highly developed form of subjective play". While today's popular view, which is influenced by modes of mass communication such as the 24 hour a day news channel, holds that audiences sit passively in the media's unrelenting stream, Play Theory assumes that audiences are extremely active and engaged in the media consumption process. This absorption and the decreasing self-consciousness that it inspires are in fact vital to achieving the individual development that characterizes communications play.

Although Stephenson positions Play Theory as a model applicable to mass communication in general, the bulk of his discussion is centered on newspaper reading and he makes little mention of either television or radio based media consumption. Perhaps Stephenson intended this failure to assess a greater spectrum of media as a tacit indication that Play Theory was still a work in progress (Worsfold, 2007). Stephenson offers several criteria on what constitutes play. For instance, he argues that play is secluded, taking place in a particular place set off for the purpose in time or space: it has a beginning and an end.

In short, the postulates of Play theory can be seen as:

1. Play is distinguishable from work - play is self-sufficient, an interlude from work and work is not an interlude; it produces goods and services
2. Communication-pain is a command for work and action, production, education, development of skills whereas communication-pleasure is enjoyment, contentment, and delight as found in entertainment.
3. Much work and play is subject to social control and some is a matter of convergent selectivity. Social control is the way in which cultures function from involuntary categorical imperatives, whereas convergent selectivity is relative freedom from social control, tending toward individuality of choice in behavior.
4. People are differently involved in conditions of social control and convergent selectivity. In situations of social control people develop self-attitude and stature but in convergent selectivity people exist for themselves; the mass media offer opportunity for convergent selectivity.

Reacting to Stephenson's methodology, Professor Deanna Campbell-Robinson as cited in Anaeto et al (2008), suggests that Stephenson's technique could be used for a direct examination of people's attitudes towards the media and be able to demonstrate (i) that within any single, democratically defined audience group, several attitude or "taste" groups exist; and (ii) that similar taste groups exist within other cases. However, Chaney in Bittner (2003) as cited in Anaeto et al (2008) contends that Stephenson

...fails to move beyond an individualistic description. While the importance of audience commitment is understood, his concern with finding a methodological demonstration of his argument leads his audience to be conceived as only a conglomeration of individuals.

Like environmental theory, the play theory has also been quite controversial. Critics have said that we cannot afford to use those expensive media for luxury alone, but we should use it for self-development. Some other critics acknowledge it can lay claim to experiential support at the least. For instance, Wilbur Schramm as quoted by Folarin (2002) believes that the play theory, for whatever it is worth, presents a better justification for prevailing media than does Marshall McLuhan's "global village concept".

APPLICABILITY OF STEPHENSON'S THEORY TO NIGERIAN SOCIETY

One does not have to go far to find experiential support for the Play Theory. For example, one constant criticism of television in Nigeria is that it is used more as an entertainment medium than for development ends, apart from the fact that the general functions of information, education and entertainment usually ascribed to it (and to the mass media generally) are too vague to provide effective working guidelines to its handlers in developing countries. Scholars like Katz and Weddell (1978) and Awe (1978) as quoted by Folarin (2002) espouse the development functions of national integration, socio-economic, modernization and cultural creativity as more meaningful for development broadcasting. In short, there is a general feeling that developing countries cannot afford to use the expensive medium of television as a "baby-sitter" as is done in the more developed and more stable societies of the West.

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. To Folarin (2002), 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.

The longer the list of children, grandchildren, great grandchildren and great great grandchildren announced in the obituary, the greater the number of lawyers, doctors and "business tycoons" among them; and the greater the number of them who are resident in the U.K, the U.S and other hard currency controlling nations - (especially in the unedifying exchange situation currently obtaining in Nigeria); the more earth-shaking and more inviting the occasion is likely to be, the more the number of famous and costly orchestras that will entertain the guests and keep them awake till dawn the more money will be sprayed at the occasion, the greater the number of cows that will be slaughtered, the more drinks will be guzzled and of course the more confused the scene will appear to an uninitiated beholder.

Finally, the video covering of the occasion (from which the television report of the ceremony proper is excerpted) takes care to emphasise all the scenes that emphasise the greatness of the occasion. Thus it is the entertainment value, not the funeral aspects (rites), of obituaries and wake-keeping ceremonies that arrest viewers' attention. Yet these are called "news of social importance" (NSI), and they occupy the greater portions of the "commercial" slots as well as slots contiguous to prime-time news. It is also true of course, that they fetch these television stations substantial proportions of their annual revenues. It must also be emphasized that just as we celebrate death of very important personalities through the media, Nigerians also celebrate "life" through the mass media.

This is reflected in different programmes on Nigerian television stations that are exclusively devoted to the coverage of social events such as marriage, conferment of chieftaincy titles and honorary degrees on deserving citizens, during various tertiary institutions' convocations, various cultural festivals and so on. Sometimes these programmes are transmitted live. Of particular examples are BisiOlatilo show on African Independent Television (AIT), Channels Metro Life, Lagos Television City Scene and Nigerian Television Authority's Saturday Life to mention a few.

Thus the Play Theory has considerable supporting material in Obituaries and reports on wake-keeping, marriage, conferment of chieftaincy titles and honorary degrees ceremonies in Nigeria, especially since these reports never fail to attract audience attention. Moreover, the coming of new media such as cable and satellite TVs as well as the Internet and Global System of Mobile Communication (GSM) in the mid 90s has further led credence to Stephenson's play theory assertion that people use mass media more for entertainment and pleasure than for information and improvement. The interactive nature and globalization of the new media has afforded the people to use the mass media more

for entertainment, as they are now accessible to international programmes, most of which are entertainment in form or content. For example, most Nigerians are becoming increasingly fanatical about and addicted to European leagues as well as Latin American films.

Surprisingly, this has no regard for level of education, income, status or sex of the audience involved. In addition, studies have shown that about 60% to 70% of the programmes on our broadcasting stations are entertainment in nature contrary to the National Broadcasting Commission's recommendation of 30% to 40% entertainment and 60% - 70% development based issues programmes (Adeyemi, 2006). The print media industry is also not left out of this entertainment based content that the media seem to be turning to. As a matter of fact more of human interest or soft sell magazines and newspapers are springing up on daily basis as opposed to serious/hard news/magazines/newspapers. Abdulraham (1988) as quoted by Olatunji and Jimoh (2008) define soft sell or human interest papers thus:

"These are the periodicals focusing on issues that the reader can relate to his/her own life, or those issues he/she recognizes as universal to human experience; love, death, triumph, defeat, self-sacrifice and hardship are universal to human experience".

Speaking in the same vein, McQuail (2000) as quoted by Jimoh and Olatunji (2008) says human interest issues refer to a set of:

News story or format that focuses on personal actions and consequences employs dramatic, humorous or narrative styles and usually deals with matters close to everyday emotions and experience.

In Nigeria, human interest publications otherwise called "soft sell", "people-oriented", general interest or human angle (Adebambi&Ajayi, 1991) as cited by Jimoh and Olatunji (2008) give prominence to issues of life that stimulates readers' amusement or amazement: depression or dislike; empathy or sympathy. Even though Nigerian critics call this genre of publications "junk", "gossip", "sensational", "gutter", or "jaundiced periodicals" (Soyinka, 1991; Johnson, 1991) as quoted by Jimoh and Olatunji (2008), their existence cannot be wished away and it seems they are waxing stronger as even new publications of this kind are springing up more and more today. The trend is so worrisome that a psychoanalyst, Dr. Okonkwo Charles of Lagos State University Teaching Hospital lamented that:

"In advertisements, films and books, pornography washes over us like a great wave of sewage. It corrupts the body and numbs the wound and senses. So overwhelming is this tide that nobody, including myself, a practicing psychoanalyst can remain untouched by it".

This is understandable because, in spite of sex, racial, national, cultural and religious differences, there are certain universal truths about human nature. Issues such as love, death, success, failure, scandals, defeat, triumph et cetera are universal to human experience. Much more significantly, when these issues referred or relate to the other persons, they often provoke the "interest" or attention of most readers. Stansfield (1982) as quoted by Jimoh&Olatunji (2008) says everybody is usually curious about what somebody else is looking at. Corroborating the above, Whetmore (1985:64) as cited by Jimoh&Olatunji (2008) says:

"It is no secret that most of us deserve a certain pleasure from vicarious experience. We like to look in other people's lives, to share in their victories and defeats".

Even talking about the serious/hard publications, they devote a sizeable portion of their editorial contents to sensational stories of murder, fraud, sex and so forth to attract wider readership. Of course, it must be stressed that this development is historical as it took its root from Europe. For example, Britain that was once referred to as the "workshop of Europe" because of its industrial revolution also pioneered "Gossip" publications. According to Johnson (1999) discussing about the proliferation of human interest magazines in Britain, these magazines contained "gossips ... which are pursued with industry and effrontery to satisfy prominent tastes" and "spread the details of sexual revelations". (Jimoh&Olatunji, 2008).

Similarly, in United States before the birth of yellow journalism in the 1890s, sprinkling of yellow reports had invaded the serious newspapers. (Jimoh&Olatunji, 2008:12). Benjamin Harris who had been hounded out of London for publishing pamphlets considered anti-crown arrived in Boston in 1686. Four years later, it started public occurrences, which contained an "item alleging an affair between the king of France and his son's wife" (Dominick, 1996). Moreover, low mortality rate of soft sell newspaper/magazine compared to high mortality rate of the hard news or serious magazines confirms their acceptability and patronage by the generality of the society. For example, despite the high cost of such magazines as Ovation, Reality and other celebrities or fashion magazines, they enjoy a lot of patronage than the hard/serious newspapers or magazines.

It is also true that sports and entertainment rank next to sensational stories of murder, "419" etc. in providing attraction to newspaper readers generally. All the aforementioned confirmed the universal nature of human beings, their preferences in terms of media content and usage and by extension the relevance of Stephenson's play theory. Another factor that may further lend credence to Stephenson's play theory is that using the mass media for pleasure and relaxation does not involve much of media literacy; evaluation and interpretation of mass media contents or messages. Media literacy according to Weaver II and Hybels (2004) is the ability of the reader, viewer, listener or user of mass media to comprehend, evaluate and interpret mass media messages. Because consuming the mass media content purely for entertainment or play as propounded by Stephenson does not involve any intellectual stimulation, most media consumers feel at ease using the mass media to satisfy this particular need.

WEAKNESSES OF STEPHENSON'S PLAY THEORY

Play Theory is most significantly limited in its ability to explain people's use of less interactive media such as radio or television. From a web perspective, once one establishes an acceptable definition of online play, Stephenson's theory is limited by its failure to account for those who have access to the web, but who do not actively use it. Besides, this is also true of other media; there are people who do not derive pleasure from newspapers because they are not literate or because they do not have access to papers either because it is not

affordable or that it is not distributed to their locality. Also, Stephenson's generalization that people use mass media more for entertainment or pleasure than for information or improvement is not only erroneous but also uncommon- sensical. People use mass media for different purposes as attested to by Uses and Gratification theory, which states that media consumers choose any mass media to meet their own needs which, could vary from information, education, entertainment and so forth.

Furthermore, the theory also assumed that all human beings are the same philosophically and psychologically. It fails to recognize the uniqueness of individuals and the peculiarities of cultures and nations as attested to by individual difference theory. The use of mass media is a function of who you are in terms of age, gender, education, cultural background and religion. Studies have shown that younger people (youth and adolescent and people with low level of education and females generally) use mass media for entertainment more than for information and education and men generally use the mass media more for education and information. Also, the theory failed to indicate that different medium serve different purposes. Even though the theory was futuristic in terms of the society becoming more inclined towards entertainment and pleasure rather than intellectually tasking assignment, it failed to see the globalization of information through technology.

The coming of Internet has opened a lot of opportunities across international borders both in terms of wealth creation and data transfer. And since globally, the world's economy and politics is knowledge-based and information driven, to be relevant one has to key in through the information superhighway (Internet) and GSM. This accounts for why most people use the Internet and GSM more for education and information than for pleasure and relaxation. The theory also failed to distinguish between mass media producers and mass media consumers. The purpose to which one is using the mass media for is a function of the role one is performing at any point in time. Another strong weakness of Stephenson's assertion is that it does not take into consideration that the world is dynamic and that the only thing that is permanent in life is change.

Since the era of mass society to which the theory belongs, the world has moved to the era of the scientific perspectives then limited effects theory, cultural theory, global village of Marshal McLuhan and finally to digital age. The movement from the eras to the global bedroom (Akinfeleye, 2008) and currently to the digital age has not only redefined the way we use the mass media but has completely changed it. Moreover, Stephenson failed to define in concrete terms what he meant by work and play. Since there is no universal meaning ascribed to the two keywords ("work and play") taking into consideration the cultural differences, Stephenson's assertion has failed a universal application or generalization. Of course, this is a key weakness of social scientific theories of which play theory is one.

CONCLUSION

William Stephenson's play theory postulation that people use mass media more for pleasure and entertainment than for information and improvement may be true to some extent in the traditional society as reflected in the use of traditional mass media (radio and TV in particular).

This was so due mainly to the low level of education, as well as limited needs of the people then. However, the modern mass media otherwise called the new media coupled with the globalization of information dissemination exchange has made the society to be information driven and knowledge-based as people can only be empowered economically and politically based on the quantity and quality of the information at their disposal. The use of mass media now tends to emphasise education and information whether at the individual, corporate or country level. Since you cannot grow beyond what you know and knowledge is a function of exposure to information, people now use mass media particularly the interactive ones (Internet and GSM) for education and information besides pleasure and entertainment.

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