


# Chapter 4

## Media and Contemporary African Society: Constructing an Environment Sensitive Communication Theory of Media Effect

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### ABSTRACT

*This research proposes a theory that ameliorates the deficiencies of agenda-setting, two-step flow, and third-person effect theories that are linear in explaining the influence of mass media on their audience. Whereas postmodernism abhors universality because, in reality, different groupings of individuals in different societies receive and respond to media messages differently depending on the influence of both internal and exogenous variables in the society in any communication process. These lacunas in the theories birthed the environment dynamo theory which does not intend to replace but to capture the idea that science, psychology, ethnography, and technology have broadened the understanding of the nuances that determine the relationship between the media and audience, and vice versa. The environment dynamo theory cumulatively created a web to explain media effects in society based on three components that are intricately interwoven - the audience, media, and environment.*

### INTRODUCTION

In a postmodern world, truth and reality are shaped by both internal and exogenous variables such as personal history, social class, gender, culture and religion, individuality, and technology all of which combine to define the narratives and meanings of our lives which are locally constructed without universal applications (Cornell, 2006). These variables could not be sufficiently explained with linear theories of the media as postulated in agenda-setting, two-step and third-person effect. In this era, major changes in the characteristics of the media, audience, and environment have occasioned varied responses to mass

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media messages. Unlike in the past when media analyses and effects were monolithic in explaining the effects of the media on audience and environment, advancements in science and technology have pushed the frontiers of knowledge and awakened the consciousness that different variables – demography, psychology, ethno-religious, culture, politics, socio-economy - all combine to influence the outcome of the media content; who is communicating what to whom, and with what effect in a spiral of news source (Musa, 2011; Imoh, 2013; Oludele, 2020).

This development has pushed to the fringes the era when a single story defined an explanation of an all-powerful media effect on society. At present, science and technology have shown that different narratives combine to influence audience reaction to media content. As Cornell (2006) posited, the pre-modern era marked the period religion was the source of truth and reality while science characterized truth and reality in the modern era as against the postmodern era where there is no single defining source for truth and reality beyond the individual. This can be seen in the different reactions that greeted the recent Pope's *Fiducia Supplicans* on the blessing of couples in irregular situations and of couples of the same sex. (Francis, Fernandez & Matteo, 2023) observed that previously, it would have been a *fait accompli* for an *imprimatur* from the hierarchy of the Catholics Church without dissent. Arnold (2024) observed that there is a growing resistance in Africa to the *Fiducia Supplicans* while globally, bishops are divided as to its acceptance or rejection.

Apart from the clerics, the faithful have voiced their opinions which was either contrary or supported the Pontiff's declaration based on their different individualism, laws, and cultural peculiarities. The stance was predicated on how the media in different countries interpreted and communicated the declaration on *Fiducia Supplicans*. This is obvious in the position of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) that assured there would be no possibility of blessing same-sex unions and activities in the church as that would go against God's law, the teachings of the Church, the laws of our nation and the cultural sensibilities of our people (Ugorji & Ogun, 2023). Contrary to that, Argentina, the home country of the Pontiff while in support, states that *Fiducia Supplicans* does not give rise to confusion and that confusing the blessings with approval or permission would be reductionism (Arnold, 2024).

Closely allied to this is Strinati's (1995) view on post-modernism and mass media delineated culture and society where social environment appears different from ordinary life. For instance, Koskei (undated) observed that we now have TV, radio and computers in our sitting rooms, bedrooms and places of work where cultural representations such as music, videos, news etc., are part of our everyday life. In the 1970s and 1980s in Nigeria, many homes did not have television sets so, many people in the neighbourhood would converge at a viewing centre or in the house of the wealthy individual in the community to watch Nigeria Television Authority (NTA), the only TV station in Nigeria that boasted of 30 million viewers then. But this has changed as 740 television stations (Okamgba, 2023) now beam different programmes to varied audiences. There is, however, no guarantee that the signals received in different homes of people with different backgrounds will have the same universal effect as envisaged by the agenda setting, two-step and third person effect theories in a pre-modern and modern era. This dovetails into Jean Baudrillard's 1920 - 2007 narrative on hyperreality and simulation by the media in a postmodern era that sees the stages of communication as being more real than the real communication; hence, the real is abolished. The mass communication is under pressure of information; it pursues enticing disruption of the society and culture (Standard Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2020). For instance, the media unravelled a cross-dresser popularly called Bobrisky after propping up his celebrity status which many in the conservative world had believed would have a negative influence on the youth. Bobrisky was arrested after spraying money at a social event, a cultural practice that is prevalent in the country. At the court,

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