Mass Media Role as Agents of Attitudinal Change in Geriatric Care in Contemporary Igbo Society

Chinelo E. Ude-Akpeh

Abstract

This paper examines the role of the mass media in the face of the changing privileges and the emerging challenges of the elderly in a contemporary African society given that the traditional support systems in place are increasingly being undermined by the spread of modernization and the attendant challenges. The imperative of the study derives from the fact that traditional societies do not have government-funded institutionalized structures in place to cater for the elderly, and this leaves the humongous task of care for the elderly to family members. This paper therefore explores how the mass communication media can be exploited in advocacy and enlightenment campaigns to salvage the degenerating traditional ethos and care for the elderly that once characterized the traditional African society and also awaken the government to its responsibility. The paper is anchored in the Agenda Setting Theory of the media. Data for this study were purposely collected through secondary sources. The findings reveal that government is totally indifferent to the plight of the elderly, and that if the media are vibrant in their agenda setting role, the government will rise to its responsibility towards the elderly in its policies and practices. This paper concludes that comprehensive care for the elderly can only be achieved through the collaboration of government, NGOs, community and family members with the media as the rallying force.

Keywords: *Mass media, Attitudinal change, Geriatric care, Advocacy, Igbo.*

Chinelo E. Ude-akpeh
Nta Television College, Rayfield.
P.m.b. 2738 Jos. Plateau State, Nigeria
Phone No: 08066144316
E-mail: neloudeakpeh@yahoo.com

Introduction

Aging is a global biological reality which cannot be controlled. It is associated with physical and mental changes which if not well managed can lead to depression, serious illnesses, zero-productivity, lack of care, self-withdrawal, abject poverty, deprivation and abuse. Managing these potential age-related issues is oftentimes more expensive than their prevention making it a matter of serious concern for national development. Thus, caring for the elderly (geriatric care) is non-negotiable and has become a matter of global concern. What differs from society to society and from culture to culture is how the care is provided. The physical and mental changes brought about by aging require that the individuals who are growing old should be assisted with the instrumental activities of daily living such as housework, preparing meals, taking medications correctly, going outside the home or moving around the home, using the telephone, paying bills, using the toilet, eating, bathing, dressing, among others (*Caring for the Elderly*, n.d.).

The population of the elderly globally has continued to grow rapidly. According to the United Nations, "There is a continuing trend toward lower birth and death rates around the world. As a result, the proportion of elderly individuals in cultures and societies around the world is on the rise and is projected to continue to rise well into the coming centuries" (cited in *Caring for the Elderly*, n.d., n.p.). Corroborating this stance, the WHO projects that, by 2025, the world's geriatric population in developing countries is estimated at 840 million. This high rate of aging, it is believed, is not just a feature of developed countries but also that of developing countries in higher proportions. The ugly implication is that developing countries will have to grapple with their enormous aging population along with their massive issues of economic development. Ni (2004) associates this rise with higher standards of living and medical advancements which, he believes are extending life expectancies in many countries to well above the age of eighty.

As the aging population increases, the weight on resources, demand on medicare and physical therapy also increase. Manes (2016) posits that with the current trend in family structure, care of aged relatives is becoming more challenging to adult children who are supposed to be responsible for their parents' care. With the rate of industrialization, modernization and urbanization, some aspects of the traditional ways of caring for the aged are fast being eroded without any institutional

governmental architecture in place to support the elderly as obtainable in developed countries. The government seems to be completely oblivious of its responsibility to the elderly who have devoted their productive years to the socio-economic development of the nation thereby leaving the enormous burden to family members. This paper describes the challenges associated with care for the elderly in a contemporary African society and how the media, through its programmes, can set the agenda for the government and the entire society towards promoting elderly-care-friendly policies and practices.

Geriatric Care as a Core Part of Igbo Cultural Values
The Igbo people of south-east Nigeria are endowed with very rich cultural values, as it is typical of African traditional societies. These unique cultural values define the society and control the whole gamut of its religious, social, cultural, political and economic life. Thus, these values are cherished and inculcated in the younger generation for them to be perpetuated. Sofola (1982) presents the basic ingredients that constitute African cultural values: "wholesome human relations among people, respect for elders, community fellow-feeling, live and let live philosophy, altruism and hospitality" (p.52). This view is corroborated in Onwubiko (1995) who outlines eight characteristics of African core cultural values as follows: "Sense of community life, Sense of good human relations, Sense of sacredness of life, Sense of hospitality, Sense of the sacred and of religion, Sense of time, Sense of respect to elders, Sense of language and proverbs as cohesive of the community based on the truth" (pp.13-14).

From the array of these attributes, it is deducible that respect for elders, good human relations and care for one another are treasured ideals in traditional societies. This implies that age goes with some degree of honour, respect and privileges. The communal living system made it possible for every young member of a community to feel that assisting the elderly was a sacred responsibility; the elders in turn dispensed correction and discipline to the young (Okwueze, 2004). Thus, in traditional African culture, the elderly are accorded high social status and respect. Consequently, mistreating the elderly is equivalent to invoking a curse upon oneself and the wrath of God and the ancestors on the entire community (Caring for the elderly, n.d). In Igbo religion, the elders were viewed as next to the ancestors and their opinions, of course,

were never trivialized. "Transition to the age-grade of elder in traditional culture often marked the pinnacle of the status an individual could achieve" (Giddens, 2009, p. 301).

Thus, every member of the society looked forward to becoming an ancestor which can only be achieved through being a credible elder. Ugwu and Ugwueye (2003) corroborate this view with the statement that only those that lived up to good old age and lived good life were qualified to join the ancestral cult at death. It was also believed that the elders were the custodians of history, culture and tradition who would always speak the truth because of what they believe in. This position produced councils of elders who delivered justice, fairness and truth. In the words of Abanyam (2013), "In the traditional African society, older people were highly esteemed because of the important roles they played by helping to integrate the society, preserve its cultural values, transmit knowledge and skills, settle disputes and educate the young. People in the traditional African society held positive views about older people" (p.34).

In Igbo land, generally, the children of the aged take care of their parents, which is also why everybody strives to live the philosophical name – *Nkemakonam* (Let mine not lack). Other relatives may assist depending on the nature of the relationship, but it is important to note that proximity is a reason why parents at times insist that, at least, one female child should be married within their locality. Thus, the children are expected to visit quite often, even when a grandchild has been assigned to live with and take care of the elderly one. The Ada (first daughter) in some cases has it as her responsibility, though all female children share in this duty. When the female children are many and possibly living close by, they may take turns (weekly or as may be convenient for them) in coming to stay with their aged parents. In a few cases, and depending on the prevailing circumstance, the aged parents could be taken to the houses of their female children in rotation. This gesture highlights the premium placed on a female child in Igbo land. The male children are not left out in this care-giving though it is observed that daughters-in-law dread parents-in-law much more at old age, and vice versa, as the elderly parents-in-law may not also want to be a source of inconvenience to them. In most cases, the male children provide money while the female do the labour and give the needed care.

Current Situation of Care for the Elderly in Igbo Land
In a typical African contemporary society such as Igbo land, the premium placed on the elderly has conspicuously waned. According to Jean-Pierre (2015), the perception of the elderly in Africa nowadays has receded with the rapid renewal of technologies and ever greater productivity needs. Thus, Africa is no longer a reference or a good example of what obtains in traditional societies. The old man is now given the status of "old" which has a negative connotation. He becomes more distant from other members of society and his condition is characterized by almost total insolvency. Since he is no longer working, the other active members of society are indifferent to his presence.

Aging globally comes with various health, physical, psychological relationship crisis, but the attitude towards the aged may vary from place to place depending on the architecture of the society. Hosain et al. (2006) note that everywhere, aging has become a social problem with the change in the structure of society owing to urbanization and industrialization which drive the younger generation to the city in search of greener pasture. Abanyam (2013) agrees with Hosain et al. thus: "Changes in the structure of African society resulting in the geographical dispersion of the extended family system and the tendency for family members to be educated and work outside the home affected older people" (p.37). The ever-rising cost of living drives all sexes in contemporary times to be actively engaged in work, preferable in the city, to struggle to make a living. Gone are the days when women stayed at home to tend to children and the elderly leaving the men to solely provide for the family. Given the economic scenario, many parents cannot even afford the upkeep of their nuclear families, let alone eking out something for the care of their elderly parents and relatives.
The aged are mostly associated with low resources occasioned from retirement from active service and work. Bond et al. (1993) observe that society tends to reward present work, but does not reward past work and by extension old age. Consequently, the elderly people are discriminated against by economic and social policies, which are mostly focused on the young employed, and the affluent. Giddens (2009) underscores the effect of retirement on the aged: "No longer with their children and often having retired from paid work, older people may find it difficult to make the final period of their life rewarding" (p. 30). The result is often sole reliance on the children who often control the

distribution and disbursement of any remaining resources accruing to the elderly parents, which they often divert to solving their own family problems. Thus, the dependent status of elderly people does not only stem from low resources but also from restricted access to resources during this period. Unable to grapple squarely with the harsh economic demands of urban life, the aged who live in the city tend to relocate to the village.

Another major factor that induces this 'homecoming', besides economic hardship, is that in most cases all their children have moved out to work and to build their own families leaving the aged parents lonely and helpless. Sometimes, even when some of the children, especially the sons, remain with their parents after marriage, the accommodation space often becomes too tight to manage necessitating that the parents relocate to the village if possible. At that age, they willingly do so as they feel more inclined to participating in traditional and clan activities where their wealth of wisdom and experience is often revered. Besides, living a communal life offers them the much needed opportunities for social interaction and a sense of relevance to society. However, the relationship with people outside the nuclear family does not rule out the loneliness associated with aging. The situation is usually worse when they lose their spouse.

Furthermore, time still comes when the aged become more incapacitated, needing more home nursing and care. During this period, the traditional options for care-giving are to send one or more of the grandchildren or the relatives' children to go and live with them, to make the daughters and the daughters'-in-law to provide care in rotation, or to engage the services of care-givers who may be relatives or not. However, experience has shown that these arrangements have their challenges. It is observed that many young children and hired care-givers may not cope satisfactorily with the humongous task of care for the elderly. Many are irritated by the functional deterioration and vulnerability of the elderly. The situation is worse if the aged live in the rural areas. Some of the children may not be comfortable with sending their own children to the village to live with their grandparents, which deprives the younger children of quality education and other social amenities. Also, the level of involvement of the daughters in the care giving often depends on their occupations and the disposition of their

spouses while engaging external care givers has its attendant issues.

The Old People's Home Alternative
The stark reality is that caring for the elderly is a huge responsibility which weighs families down because many old people prefer to "age in place", that is, to live in their homes as they age. The modern generation of Nigerians have explored the limited options open to them in the care of their elderly, and in the process, the physical, emotional and psychological comfort of both the caregiver and receiver is sometimes compromised. The western practice of families isolating their old people and putting them in elderly homes is not the norm in most African societies. In the few places where it is practised, cases of abuse abound. Abanyam (2011) states that abuse of elderly people in residents' home in Africa is a sad reality, coupled with the fact that most of these elderly homes are under-funded and understaffed. Old people are often left at the mercy of unscrupulous care givers who would never satisfy their needs like their own child. The modern/western system of old people's homes is still alien and many elders in traditional societies cannot just imagine staying in such homes. Even some children of the aged decry it as a foreign culture indicative of poor relationship between the aged parents and their children.

Interactions with a number of elders living in such homes indicate that they prefer to live in their homes. When forced by circumstances to live in formal homes for the elderly which are extremely few and unpopular, they encounter so much psychological problems because these homes are usually far removed from their home towns. If these homes were built in their villages where they can be attended to by kinsmen employed by the government, it may change the narrative of the elderly and their distaste for such homes. Furthermore, the proximity of such homes would not debar those of them who are still strong from attending any social gathering of their interest such as funerals, clan meetings and marriage ceremonies.

To this end, some people in some Igbo communities have attempted to solve this problem in different ways. Under the aegis of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), some well-meaning members of society can adopt a few old people who need help and engage the services of middle-aged women within same community who are paid

to visit them about three times a week to do some chores and spend time talking with them. More specifically, a former Senator that represented Anambra Central Senatorial District, Sen. Ikechukwu Abana, through his NGO, runs a special old people's home peculiar in the sense that these elderly ones do not reside there. The edifice is equipped with a mini clinic with a nurse and a visiting doctor, a canteen, and recreational and entertainment facilities. It has been observed that a good number of the elderly within the environment are excited to visit the home as often (if not daily) to share experiences and spend time with their peers.

Thus, the aversion to old people's home can be reversed if the phenomenon is tailored to suit the needs of the elderly with an African orientation. But the crux of the matter is that government has demonstrated apparent lack of interest in the elderly. The position of this paper is that the media has a social responsibility to draw the attention of government to this social group who have burnt out the candles of their life serving the nation in one way or the other. Whether they were engaged in public-paid employment or were home makers, they still served society and should be provided for as citizens. Only the media can sensitize the government on the need to find an acceptable African solution to this conundrum.

Agenda Setting Role of the Media and Geriatric Care
The theory of agenda-setting (though not specified) was initially chronicled in the first chapter of Walter Lippmann's 1922 book, *Public Opinion,* where he argues that the mass media are the principal connection between events in the world and the images in the minds of the public. Lippmann's work provided the foundation for Bernard Cohen (1963) who observed that the press "may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about". Cohen posits that the world will look at different people differently depending on the map that is drawn for them by writers, editors and publishers of the paper they read. Cohen's idea later led to the formalization of the agenda-setting theory by McCombs and Shaw. "The news media construct our view of the world" (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2009, cited in Asemah et al., 2017). Lang and Lang (1966) reinforced this notion by observing that the mass media pay attention to certain issues; they are constantly presenting, suggesting what individuals should think and have feelings

about (Asemah et al., 2017).

Agenda-setting theory was formally highlighted by Max McCombs and Donald Shaw in a study on the 1968 American presidential election, which demonstrated a strong correlation coefficient between what 100 residents of Chapel Hill, North Carolina, thought was the most important election issue and what the local and national news media reported was the most important issue. By comparing the salience of issues in news content with the public's perceptions of the most important election issue, McCombs and Shaw were able to determine the degree to which the media determine public opinion. Since the 1968 study, published in a 1972 edition of *Public Opinion Quarterly*, more than 400 studies have been published on the agenda-setting function of the mass media and the theory continues to be regarded as relevant (Anonymous, n.d, cited in Asemah et al., 2017). The theory was, therefore, formally proposed by McCombs and Shaw in 1972/1973.

The major assumption of the theory is that the media set agenda for the public to follow. As Hasan puts it, "The mass media by paying attention to some issues and overlooking others will affect public opinion, people will tend to know about those things dealt with by the mass media and adopt the order of priority set by the media …" (p. 126). According to him, "Audiences not only learn about public issues and other matters through the media, they also learn how much importance to attach to an issue or topic from the emphasis the mass media places on it." (ibid). Thus, the theory holds that most of the pictures we store in our heads, most of the things we think or worry about, most of the issues we discuss, are based on what we have read, listened to or watched in different mass media. The media make us to think about certain issues; they make us think that certain issues are more important than others in our society. According to Wimmer and Dominick (2003), agenda setting theory of the media proposes that the public agenda or what kinds of things people talk about, think or worry about is powerfully shaped and directed by what the media choose to publicize.

Griffin (2000, p. 360), cited in Asemah et al. (2017) notes that:

McCombs and Shaw believed that the mass media have the ability to transfer the salience of items on their news agendas to the public agenda.

They are not suggesting that broadcast and print media make a deliberate attempt to influence listener, viewer or reader opinions on issues. Reporters in the free world have a deserved reputation for independence and fairness, but McCombs and Shaw say that we look to news professionals for cues on where to focus our attention, we judge as important what the media judge as important.

The above assertion shows that the mass media, whether print or electronic, set agenda for the public to follow. Some of the striking features of this theory are that it reaffirms the power of the press, while still maintaining that individuals have freedom to choose what to pay attention to. Baran (2004) explains that there is a close relationship between what the media are presenting and public agenda. This implies that what the people think about may end up being the issues that are being raised by the media. The people mostly affected by media agenda are the people who have a willingness to let the media shape their thinking; they have a high need for orientation which is referred to as an index curiosity. This implies that if you have a feeling towards something, you will be curious to know what the media will say about the issue.

It is therefore clear that the mass media play a very significant role in shaping public opinion. The various media of communication: the radio, television, newspaper, magazine, and the social media are used to inform and educate the masses, helping them to form attitudes, beliefs, and values about the world around them (Jonah, p. 90). Given this power wielded by the media, if media contents are crafted and communicated saliently and persuasively, the recipients would tend to give priority to the messages and be moved to take positive action. Thus, the mass media play a vital role in mobilizing people through advocacy and sensitization which would make them aware of the issues in society and how to perceive these issues. The media present issues that generate positive or negative reactions among the members of the society. These may be chronic social issues which are dependent on media coverage to raise public consciousness and conscience. This sensitization role can, for instance, re-orientate the attitude of care givers and the government towards the elderly in contemporary time. From the foregoing, therefore, we infer that if the media begin to host programmes on the imperative of geriatric care needs, the media would have formed issues

for public discourse. The salience given to the discourse will certainly capture the interest of policymakers and provoke them to take action to address it. It is believed that how a person acts at a particular time is determined mainly by what issue the individual believes is important (Uwom & Oloyede, 2014).

Writing on communication approaches that influence public opinion, Owuamalam (2016) avers that media messages can be structured in a logically sequential order to provide the awareness which will provoke the message recipients to move from a supposed ignorance to the elicitation of action consequent upon the media contents consumed. He believes that "the contents, persuasively provided, become the pills designed to influence opinion change in the consumer" (p. 155).

What Needs to Be Done

In view of socio-economic dynamics of the Igbo society, the care of the aged should not be left in the hands of the family alone; the government and non-governmental agencies should play a very important role. To awaken them to this responsibility the media should roll out all the arsenal at their disposal to raise the consciousness of all the stakeholders to the plight of the elderly and the way forward. A number of measures can be adopted:

Framing: One of the media strategies that may be adopted to draw the attention of the government to the plight of the elderly is framing. This implies the process of transferring the salience of attributes. The media can actually draw up frames; they can frame issues as they affect the society and people will be disposed to think along that line. Suffice it to say that the agenda-setting theory draws a direct positive relationship between media coverage and the salience of a topic in the public mind. The media, therefore, through framing can set health/social agenda for the public to follow, thereby, placing before everyone messages that could change the thinking of the people on the traditional ways of caring for the elders and get them to think, understand and adopt the more modern and western way.

Persuasive Communication Strategy: Communication serves several critical roles in the lives of older adults. These roles include maintaining a sense of identity, and relieving loneliness, depression, and anxiety. It also allows adults to exert influence and to help others by listening,

reflecting and offering advice. Effective communication is a critical tool for life adjustment, linking people to their environment. Thus, if communication is compromised, social life is affected. This underscores the key role communication plays in maintaining social affiliation (Yorkston, Bourgeois, & Baylor, 2010). Media contents can be packaged persuasively to enhance opinion and attitudinal change in the elderly, enabling them to accept any new method of care giving presented to them which is in their best interest. This possibility forms the fulcrum of persuasive communication theory (Festinger, 1957).

Creation of Elderly-friendly Programmes: The depression, loneliness, ill health and increased death toll which characterize aging can be ameliorated if the media will consciously create TV and radio programmes that will educate and inform both the elderly and their care givers. Such programmes should raise the self-worth of the elderly, making them feel cherished by society and should also expose them and their care givers to global best practices in the care of the elderly. Improved communication with the elderly can soothe the stress on both caregivers and receivers, cushion the attendant challenges associated with geriatric care and promote person-centred care.

Media Campaigns: Health sensitization and awareness can foster good health and well-being among the aged, making it easier for them to be managed by caregivers. Adequate information on degenerative illnesses in both men and women should be given as early as possible through various organs – media, churches, town unions, cooperative societies.

Social Amenities: The agenda-setting role of the media can be deployed to prevail on the government to provide the basic social amenities in the rural areas to discourage the drift to urban areas, a trend which commonly leaves the elderly stranded and lonely. If life in rural areas is made appealing, the youth will not be desperate to leave their villages in search of greener pastures. Thus, the traditional architecture of society which favours elderly care will be preserved.

Policy: There is much dearth of social benefits for the aged in Nigeria's policy. The media can promote the introduction of such elderly-friendly policies that cater for the basic needs of the elderly. There is also the need to align health systems with the requirements of the elderly. This

calls for provision of long-term care, and development of people-centred and integrated health service system.

Conclusion

This paper concludes that comprehensive/adequate care for the elderly can be achieved through the collaboration of government, NGOs, community and family members, and that the media can raise this consciousness. The media should therefore rise to the challenge of setting the right agenda for the government and other charitable organizations to invest in setting up well-equipped old people's homes in the villages and tailor them to the African cultural landscape. The media should also stimulate the formulation of policies aimed at enhancing the provision of sufficient social amenities that will make village life more appealing to curtail the massive drift to urban areas which strips the aged of the warmth of their beloved family members. Such investments will create jobs, develop rural areas and make the people have confidence in their leaders. Social service arms of government at various levels should put machinery in place to address issues relating to social challenges and elderly care through adequate and sustainable welfare programmes.

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