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**DISSEMINATING SPIRITUAL BROADCAST CONTENT IN FAITH-BASED
RADIO STATIONS: A PATHWAY TO RELIGIOUS IDENTITY ADHERENCE
AMONG LISTENERS**

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Abstract: The broadcasting of spiritual content by faith-based radio stations in Kenya has not only strengthened the religious needs of a Christian audience but has also drawn them into the competitive media market. It is within this context of competition that this study sought to establish key factors influencing the framing and dissemination of faith-based radio content. This exploration was essential because faith-based radio stations must first strengthen their appeal to their relatively homogeneous Christian audience before extending to a more heterogeneous one. The review of generic studies in this paper was more theoretical than praxis-oriented by its exclusive focus, albeit rudimentarily, on the media effects theories that provide essential multi-reference terms for analysing key divaricate empirical findings and expending the methodological rigour for such an analytic portion by exploring the mediatization of Christianity through benign historical lenses. The investigation revealed from a functionalist perspective that the stations' attempts to incorporate secular issues as a diversification strategy were far-fetched and manifestly detrimental to their core mission. It is therefore crucial for these stations to broadcast wholesome spiritual content, as it is a powerful correlate to their mission and vision.

Key words: Faith-based radio, Secular, spiritual content, Christianity, homogeneous, heterogeneous.

1. Introduction

This paper situates its review within historical resources drawn from books, journal articles, websites, and unpublished materials. Engaging these older sources is necessary to trace the inception of technology and its gradual adoption by Christian organizations, particularly churches, in disseminating the gospel to mass audiences. Establishing this historical trajectory provides a foundation for examining the contemporary dynamics of mediatization, a concept that offers a critical backdrop for analyzing the findings presented later in the paper.

The study advances this discussion by interrogating the operations of three purposively selected faith-based radio stations, treated here as multiple case studies. Through this focus, the paper addresses a central question: whether faith-based radio stations, designed primarily for religious broadcasting, should diversify their content beyond faith-oriented programming. Framing the inquiry in this way highlights the tension between mission fidelity and audience expansion, a dilemma that continues to shape the strategic decisions of religious broadcasters.

From a qualitative perspective, this analysis explores how the presence or absence of content diversification influences the stations' ability to fulfill their mission and vision while sustaining or expanding their audience base. The findings underscore the importance of deliberate programming choices, compelling managers, producers, and hosts of faith-based stations to ensure that doctrinal commitments correspond with audience engagement in an increasingly competitive media landscape.

2. Mediatization of Christianity

The essentialist framing between media and religion has been prevalent for some time, and as Soukup posits, the perceptible dependent dialectic between communication, media, and religion can be traced back to the earliest storytelling of myths and the sketching of cave paintings (Soukup 2002, 10). The emphasis on such a close dialectic is highlighted in this scholarship through the remits referring to the decision made by Johannes Gutenberg to print the Bible as the first output of his press, which surfaced religious themes by way of its art, music, and manuscript tradition. Interspersed with this emic understanding is the reference made to the first radio broadcast by a religious service on Christmas Eve in 1906. It is based on this reference's written outputs that Hoover does not obscure the interaction between media and religion, and it is based on this observation that he speaks about how media and religion continue to

undergo significant changes (Hoover 2008, 281).

It is in the context of bringing such changes into a coherent whole that Fore acknowledges in historical terms that church leaders had been concerned for years about the communication revolution and had been asking how they could actually get the churches to take the changes seriously (Fore 1986, 811). At the time, a more prevalent view that emerged in the concatenation of these narratives was regarding what it would take to coax churches to become involved in radio, television, satellites, and computers, and in this way, join the communication revolution.

Indeed, it would appear in its broadest sense that this concern about having religion represented in the media has been answered today, given the many forms of religious programs that are finding coverage in the media. This is even the case for secularized commercial radio stations that are becoming more convivial with faith-based content, thereby entwining them directly in their broadcasts, an indication of the conclusion that the mediatization of Christianity is indeed taking shape in the entire radio industry globally.

Manifest in the normalization of literary approaches to the radio industry, it is fair to say that the mediatization of Christianity is theoretically justified and empirically demonstrated by researchers who have attempted to argue the deterministic causes behind its leap in historical terms. It is here, therefore, that Fore's earlier observation that the gospel's response to media technologies is to safeguard access for all God's children, rather than to reserve most of the goods for a favored few, takes hold in this contemporary moment (Fore 1986, 812). Indeed, just as was the case more than two decades ago, as observed by Soukup, "we are seeing enormous output of spiritual and religious content in almost all of our media today" (Soukup 2002, 67).

This massive content output appears to have engineered the emergence of nuanced perspectives on the complex nature of mediatization as a key concept from a variety of theorists and researchers. Among them include Hepp and Kronert who explain that mediatization is related to religion, spirituality, and its present change (Hepp and Kronert 2008). Couldry entrenches this nexus further by arguing that mediatization, a concept that was reworked and labelled by Hjarvard and Shultz, is stronger at addressing aspects of media textuality, especially when a unitary media-based logic is at work (Couldry 2008, 377; Hjarvard 2007, 106; Shultz 2004, 90). Such strength forms the basis for Couldry's assertion that mediatization has had its profile in the media theory grow considerably well in recent years (Couldry 2008, 379).

Such growth, as intimated by Couldry, signifies an attempt of understanding mediatization through the broader realms of transformative logic and mechanism geared towards mediatizing certain processes,

objects, and fields (Couldry 2008, 379). Altheide and Snow build on this logic by offering that a distinctive and consistent transformation can be understood well if viewed as a part of a structurally necessary and desirable transformation of social and cultural life through media operating from a single source and in a common direction, signifying a transformation of society by the media (Altheide and Snow 1979, 2).

This transformation's positionality is appraised through various scholars' reflexive and ruminative analyses regarding the mediatization concept, particularly by Schulz and Couldry, who identify four components: extension, substitution, amalgamation, and accommodation, which elucidate how Christianity can be adapted for media representation (Schulz 2004, 91; Couldry 2008, 379).

Within the esoteric philosophical debates around such adaptation, some scholars inveigh against using the terms mediatization and mediation interchangeably. Indeed, they note that there is a high chance of one confusing mediatization with mediation, and for this case, Hjarvard, in particular, warns that mediatization should not be confused with the wider concept of mediation, as the latter generally refers to a communication via a medium (Hjarvard 2006). It is based on this understanding's rigidification that Hepp and Kronert argue that different religious institutions ought to understand mediatization as a concept that pressurizes them to communicate their norms and values across various media platforms including television, radio, print, and the new media (Hepp and Kronert 2008). Such pressure abounds, in part, from the recognition that "media is increasingly operating like a market place and in this way bringing about more demand for religion and spirituality content" (Hoover 2008, 282).

It is in the context of such demand that Demerath claims that secular tendencies are slowly being replaced by the resurgence of Christianity (Demerath 2003, 214). This replacement is occasioned by the media's content output that is indicative of its action of taking over many of the social functions that used to be performed by the religious institutions (Hjarvard 2006). Martin-Barbero is in agreement with Hjarvard through his indication that rituals, worship, mourning and celebration are all social activities that earlier relied on institutionalized religion but have now been taken over by the media and transformed into more or less secular activities. (Martin-Barbero 1997, 104; Hjarvard 2006)

3. Review of related theories

This paper applied the terms of reference provided by two media effects theories, which were combined to create a framework for explaining how audiences consume the broadcast content of faith-based stations, which is the crux of this study. The two theories reviewed below,

which addressed the research objective, are the Uses and Gratification Theory and the Agenda-Setting Theory.

3.1. Uses and Gratifications Theory

In this contemporary moment, a number of media scholars and theorists conceive that the uses and gratifications theory, first articulated by McQuail, is a sub-tradition that provides a strong backdrop for conducting research grounded in media effects (McQuail 1994, 10). More specifically, Wimmer and Dominick provide contextual grounding for this claim by explaining that, although the uses and gratifications theory was first articulated in 1994, its historical roots can be traced back to the 1940s, when theorists, through the lens of media effects, attempted to connect audiences' various forms of media behavior such as radio listenership or newspaper readership to broader patterns (Wimmer and Dominick 1994, 342). It is through this cause-effect relationship that the early history of media effects research, as demonstrated by Cantril, was conceptualized around understanding the kinds of broadcast content that audiences found appealing, given their ability to meet consumers' social and psychological needs (Cantril 1942, 36).

An overarching and cyclical premise that can be drawn from the delineation of the highlighted studies is that the uses and gratifications theory of communication emphasizes the audience's ability to identify and select both the media and the content disseminated for consumption. As noted by McQuail et al., such an audience is considered active, given its goal-oriented nature and approach to media use. In other words, this audience is deliberate and intentional in choosing a particular media platform for its own satisfaction (McQuail et al. 1972, 135). Heeter et al. reinforce the notion of an active audience by clarifying, rather than obscuring, the audience's funnelling process in selecting media, programs, and content (Heeter et al. 1983).

It is in the context of content selection that McQuail et al. outline four basic factors conditioned by expressivity and interpretation of how consumers use the media (McQuail et al. 1972, 136). One of these factors is entertainment, which foregrounds the way an audience selects media and its content purely for personal satisfaction. In this regard, media is recognized as a vehicle that audiences can use to release tension and divert their minds from the various challenges they face in their day-to-day lives. Building on this, Rubin explains that an audience's quest for gathering information from the media should be viewed through the lens of their attempts to seek specific entertainment content (Rubin 1984, 69). In this context, therefore, information gathering and the search for entertainment should be considered together, at least in the study of faith-based radio as

a medium of enjoyment that is non-discriminatory.

Another factor that influences people's selection of their preferred media is social solidarity. For clarity, McQuail et al., in their review of a television audience, break down this factor by showing how media use often emerges from its affordance for social interaction. In this sense, social interaction may take the form of people listening to broadcast content on Christian values and beliefs and subsequently generating discussions around these issues (McQuail et al. 1972, 137).

Thirdly, according to Severin and Tankard, audiences can also use the media as a tool for companionship. This is particularly evident among frequent consumers of media content who are lonely or socially isolated. In such circumstances, these consumers turn to mass media to construct and maintain a sense of identity, finding reinforcement for their personal values, models of behavior, and insights into themselves (Severin and Tankard 1997, 165).

The fourth and final factor that fuels an audience's choice of its most preferred media platform, as articulated by McQuail et al., is surveillance. The need for surveillance is closely tied to an audience's need for information. Indeed, scholarship has repeatedly argued that the media is designed to provide audiences with news about events happening around them and, in this way, ensures that it satisfies people's need for information by keeping them abreast of what is taking place around the world (McQuail et al. 1972, 138).

In this study, the theory was useful in establishing the participants' perceptions of how the programs and broadcast content disseminated by the selected faith-based radio stations resonated with their choices of both content and station. In other words, the theory provided a framework for examining how the stations' programming and content met the audiences' needs and interests. In this way, it was possible to confirm Halloran's notion regarding the importance of interrogating what an audience does with a media platform, rather than what the media platform does to an audience (Halloran 1970, 18).

3.2. Agenda-setting Theory

In the context of media effects discourse, agenda setting is understood as the process by which the mass media identify particular issues and events and convey them repeatedly and prominently, thereby ensuring that audiences perceive those issues and events as more significant than others (Coleman et al. 2009, 147). This kind of coverage stems from the understanding that events receiving the most attention in a medium's programs and broadcast content become the issues that audiences regard most important (Iyengar and Kinder 1987, 20; Iyengar et al. 1982, 850; Zhu

and Blood 1997, 100).

Shah et al. build on this coverage by arguing that it emerges from the well-researched notion that a mass media audience is incapable of holding stable and independent opinions on issues of great concern and is therefore dependent on a given media platform to advance these issues on its behalf (Shah et al. 2002, 350). In this way, as Terkildsen and Schnell contend, the process of agenda setting by the media ensures that even obscure aspects of policy interventions have the potential to become prominent national issues (Terkildsen and Schnell 1997, 890).

McCombs and Shaw contribute to the discourse on media coverage of issues of national interest by positing that the media is powerful to the extent that it can highlight and disseminate content it deems suitable for prompting a target audience to reflect upon (McCombs and Shaw 1972, 180). For instance, a faith-based radio may disseminate purely spiritual content, thereby overemphasizing spiritual matters within its broadcasts. Such a trend sets the pace for what an audience discusses in relation to spiritual issues.

Such power is also reiterated by Severin and Tankard, who describe the media's immense capacity to foreground certain issues in the public sphere (Severin and Tankard 1997, 309). McQuail builds on this point by noting a clear relationship between the importance attached to issues by the media and the significance attributed to those issues by audiences, ranging from influential figures to the general public (McQuail 1994, 21). However, McCombs and Estrada introduce a caveat: "the fact that the media can tell audiences what to think about does not mean that all media platforms consistently exercise this power by dictating both the issues to be considered and the ways in which they should be addressed" (McCombs and Estrada 1997, 237). Moreover, even when platforms do capitalize on this affordance, McCombs and Estrada stress that agenda-setting does not necessarily translate into changing audience's opinions about what ought to be done regarding a particular issue (McCombs and Estrada 1997, 238).

Even though this line of thought is important, Coleman et al. do not lose sight of the central concept of agenda-setting theory. They explain that for more than thirty years, scholars have demonstrated how this concept revolves around the transfer of issue salience that is, how media emphasis of certain issues elevates their importance for the public (Coleman et al. 2009, 148). The scholars further argue that this role of the media can be better understood within the context of two levels of agenda setting. The first level emphasizes the extent to which an issue is covered in the media, serving as an indicator of the degree to which the media determines the issues audiences should be aware of. The second level, as they explain, emerged from researchers interested in expanding on the effects identified in the first level. They indicate that the second level of

agenda-setting is primarily concerned with attribute salience -the influence characteristics that describe objects or people in the news - and with the tone in which those attributes are presented (Coleman et al. 2009, 153).

4. Research Methodology

This study employed a case study design pursued from a qualitative approach. This choice was informed by the study's focus on understanding the meanings and lived experiences of human social worlds in relation to the multiple case studies namely Sayare, Fish, and Upendo FM faith-based radio stations situated in Eldoret City, in Kenya. Two techniques of data collection were used: which were the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs).

This wealth of data was obtained from participants selected using two non-probability sampling techniques: purposive and snowball sampling. The purposive approach was used to identify nine radio presenters from the three faith-based radio stations who participated in the in-depth interviews. The inclusion criteria for presenters were based on their roles in programme development and content dissemination. Snowball sampling, on the other hand, was employed to identify eight listeners of the three stations who participated in the FGDs. A total of eight participants was selected, consistent with established scholarly guidelines on the recommended size for FGDs. Data were analysed thematically through manual coding. To enhance reflexivity, the researcher maintained a reflective journal throughout the study.

5. Presentation of Findings

All participants agreed that the audience plays a pivotal role in the sustainability of a faith-based radio station. One radio host from Fish FM explained that their station targets a Christian audience between the ages of eighteen and forty-five, a demographic considered to represent the middle-aged segment in the society. He emphasized that the target audience significantly influences both the nature of the station's programming and the manner in which presenters deliver broadcast content. Although the station offers a variety of programmes, he noted that they are anchored in evangelism, which serves as the foundation for addressing the diverse needs and interests of the audience. In this regard, the radio host stated: "In all instances we encounter as radio hosts, we make sure that our objective of appealing to our target audiences remains constant."

By intentionally enhancing their appeal, the stations were able to attract listeners who tuned in frequently. The in-depth interviews revealed that the stations' programmes were strategically structured in alignment

with the specific times at which different audience segments tuned in. One female host elaborated on this point, noting that the morning show primarily targeted listeners commuting to work or school. For this audience, the hosts deliberately disseminated content focused on instilling hope and encouragement, regardless of denominational or religious affiliation, based on the belief that all human beings require such a message. It also emerged that, during these early hours, the stations deliberately avoided overtly doctrinal preaching, opting instead for content that was broadly inspirational.

A female radio host reinforced this point by noting that their programmes also have a significant impact on individuals who are not practicing Christians. The soft-spoken presenter from Sayare FM observed that the station's spiritual content has, over time, proven beneficial to non-Christian audience segments, as evidenced by the feedback received from them. She explained that such responses are largely shaped by the way the station packages and disseminates its broadcast content.

Another presenter emphasized applying a Christian perspective to secular matters enables faith-based stations to remain responsive to the needs of their audience. She explained that, at their station, radio hosts actively identify the issues that listeners wish to hear addressed, deliberate on them collectively, and only disseminate such issues through broadcast content if they are deemed appropriate. However, she clarified that not all issues are taken up, as some contravene the doctrinal principles on which the station is founded. This caution also extends to advertising, where certain adverts are excluded in line with the station's policy because they conflict Christian norms and values. As she remarked: "Some adverts, if allowed to run, will brew controversy, which might ultimately taint the image of the radio station."

This caution was also evident in efforts to promote unity and cohesion among the audience. A Sayare FM radio host illustrated this point by explaining that, although the station reaches a diverse and heterogeneous audience through its programming, presenters exercise great care to avoid content that might incite hatred or divisiveness, which could damage the station's image. She remarked: "Divisive broadcast content, such as that bordering on political matters, has to be approached carefully; otherwise, one risks being partial and thereby dividing the audience."

Given the competitive nature of the radio industry, presenters emphasized that by avoiding potentially divisive content, such as politics, faith-based stations were able to maintain a competitive edge. Linet, a radio host from Upendo FM, observed that the creativity of presenters in disseminating different forms of content ensured audience gratification, which in turn fostered listener loyalty. In her view, this loyalty reduced the likelihood of audiences switching to secular stations, thereby safeguarding

the faith-based stations' position in the market. This strategy was also linked to tailoring broadcast content to demographic characteristics. Once research was conducted and dissemination styles adapted to segmented audiences, stations were better able to retain their listeners.

In exploring the distinct expectations of broadcasting within faith-based stations, the interviewed radio hosts highlighted music dissemination as a central practice. At Fish FM, for instance, one host explained that the station sought to provide airplay to as many musicians as possible, with the policy that no two songs from the same artist could be played within a single hour. This approach, the presenter noted, ensured variety while maintaining fairness in exposure. Furthermore, as a faith-based station, the audience expected presenters to uphold the highest standards of Christian values in the dissemination of content. Any form of obscenity, hate speech, ethnic prejudice, profanity, or unsavory language was strictly prohibited. The presenter emphasized this commitment by stating: "The code of conduct for journalists is incorporated in our radio station as well, and presenters here are expected to observe it."

The principle of caution, as articulated by a Fish FM presenter, was ultimately anchored on presenting *spiritual truth* as the central reference point in all broadcast content.

This strategy reinforces the assertion that audience engagement is fundamental to the survival of faith-based radio stations. The findings revealed a consistent pattern indicating that the selected stations in this study were primarily established to serve the Christian community, with particularly emphasis on women and youth. The stations sought to nurture these groups spiritually through content that was informative, educative, and entertaining.

The presenters derived a sense of gratification from the active engagement of their listeners, who frequently called into the station during talk shows to contribute to the ongoing discussions. This finding was corroborated by some listeners who participated as focus group discussants. They noted that presenters consistently provided opportunities for audience members to go on air, which in turn, motivated them to listen more frequently and remain loyal to the station. The discussants further emphasized that evangelism should remain the cornerstone of the stations' programming. One participant stated: "I like spiritual content, and the station I listen to ensures that we access this type of content. In fact, this station has established a routine of broadcasting Mass services filled with good teachings and preaching every morning at six."

The listeners observed that the presenters appeared to conduct prior research on the type of content their audience preferred, which explained why many listeners considered such content a blessing. One discussant elaborated on this point, noting that the presenters seemed aware that

music strongly resonated with the audience, hence the stations' decision to dedicate extended, un-interrupted hours to playing it. This view was corroborated by an interviewed radio host, who confirmed that the stations regularly reviewed their programmes based on audience feedback. At Fish FM, for instance, the breakfast show underwent weekly reviews, during which the station carefully considered listeners' views and opinions. These reviews provided a basis for continuously updating the programmes to align with audience expectations.

During the focus group discussions, listeners expressed their views and expectations regarding the programmes broadcast by the stations. At the outset, participants identified the stations as faith-based and, consequently, indicated a preference for gospel programmes, particularly entertaining gospel music broadcast on these platforms. Although they acknowledged that songs from other genres were also important, they emphasized that Christian music should be prioritized. Wallace remarked: "Gospel music should be given prominence as it is related to Christianity. Even though songs from other music genres are important, I am happy with the Christian music that faith-based stations play."

However, the listeners cautioned that faith-based stations should ensure the dissemination of updated gospel music rather than repeatedly playing the same songs daily. They observed that listeners tend to enjoy new and diverse music and that maintaining an updated playlist could enhance listener loyalty. One discussant suggested that the stations diversify their music collection by including gospel songs from different countries. Lizzy, another participant, stated: "The music should be updated in the sense that they come from different countries, provided they are preaching a message."

The listeners further recommended that the programming of faith-based radio stations should ensure that preaching and broadcast content are designed to be interactive in nature, addressing the holistic well-being of Christians, including their spiritual, emotional, and physical needs. While emphasizing the importance of interactivity, the listeners also advised presenters to exercise caution by ensuring that contributors refrain from using vulgar or obscene language on air. This concern stemmed from the high moral and ethical expectations placed upon faith-based stations, which are regarded as custodians of Christian values and principles. One discussant, Joel, remarked: "The other thing being on ethics, I do not expect a Christian station to go on the negative side of ethics but to adhere to the ethics that expect them not to lie or use gross language on air, because children who may be listening to the broadcast content need protection."

The empirical findings on the ethical conduct expected of faith-based stations, alongside other results presented in this section, represent the

culmination of data collected through the study's research instruments. The subsequent section presents the study's conclusions and recommendations within the analytical framework derived from the reviewed literature in the preceding sections.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

The findings reveal that, within the framework of uses and gratifications, listeners of faith-based radio stations seek spiritual nourishment from their programming. Correspondingly, drawing on the agenda-setting theory, faith-based stations acknowledge this audience need and intentionally shape their programming to promote a Christian agenda. This approach, as the findings indicate, is largely informed by audience surveys conducted by the stations.

In summary, the results underscore the importance of faith-based stations maintaining a strong focus on spiritual content while ensuring that, even amid program diversity, their broadcasts remain grounded in Christian values and perspectives. Consequently, their mission and vision statements should align closely with this faith-based identity. Furthermore, maintaining such a focus does not imply exclusivity to a homogeneous audience; rather, it calls for creative strategies that appeal to a broader public by responding to audience tastes and preferences without compromising the stations' core Christian identity.

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