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Article

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VISIBILITY, AIRTIME AND POWER: CHRISTIAN TELEVANGELISM AS SYMBOLIC CAPITAL AND COMMERCIAL EXCLUSION IN IBADAN, NIGERIA

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Abstract

In Nigerian cities, access to religious television broadcasting has been studied primarily as a story of Pentecostal expansion and institutional competition. This paper argued that in Ibadan, Nigeria, the more analytically significant story is economic: television airtime functioned as a priced commodity whose purchase produced symbolic capital, and the broadcast landscape is structured by the capacity to pay rather than by religious merit or communicative need. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between September 2008 and February 2009, including systematic content analysis of programme schedules from three television stations and interviews with 70 respondents, the paper examined the commercial logic governing broadcast access, the exclusion mechanisms produced by a 100 per cent increase in airtime costs over three years, and the conversion loop through which payment for airtime produced visibility, recognition and followership, as well as enhanced income that funded continued broadcast presence. The findings suggest that regular television presence functioned as symbolic capital within the Ibadan Christian religious field, signifying achieved socio-economic standing and reproducing the dominance of financially powerful religious ministries. All 37 regular religious programmes identified across three stations were presented by male hosts, and no Catholic, Anglican, or Methodist denomination held a regular broadcast slot during the period. The paper demonstrated the production of broadcast visibility as symbolic capital rather than financial profit in a measurable sense, and argues that Ibadan's religious broadcasting landscape functioned as a hierarchically structured commercial arena rather than an open public sphere.

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Keywords: Christian Televangelism; Commercial Exclusion; Historical Ethnography; Ibadan; Nigeria; Symbolic Capital.

Introduction

In Ibadan, Nigeria, access to religious television broadcasting between 2003 and 2009 was not determined by theological authority, denominational size, or evangelistic need. It was determined by money. Television stations sold airtime at commercial rates. Religious communities that could pay occupied the broadcast space. Those that could not were absent from it. This paper examines that commercial structure as the primary object of analysis rather than as background context for a study of religious identity or institutional non-participation. The argument is organised around one central claim: television airtime in Ibadan functioned as a priced commodity whose purchase produced symbolic capital in Bourdieu's (1986) sense, and the broadcast landscape is structured by the capacity to pay rather than by religious merit or communicative need. Payment for airtime produced broadcast visibility. Visibility generated prestige and recognition within the Ibadan religious field. Recognition attracted followers and donations. Donations funded continued broadcast presence. This conversion loop reproduced the dominance of financially powerful ministries and raised the barriers to entry for those without equivalent capital. Understanding how this loop operated, who it favoured, who it excluded, and what kinds of religious authority it produced is the analytical purpose of this paper.

The data were collected between September 2008 and February 2009 as part of a master's thesis at the University of Ibadan. The period documented represents a formative moment in Nigerian religious broadcasting: the peak of commercially structured television televangelism before platform-based digital media disrupted the cost structure of broadcast access. While subsequent scholarship has documented how regulatory pressures and new media technologies restructured religious broadcasting access in Nigeria (Ukah, 2015), the commercial logic governing broadcast entry before that shift remains undocumented as a discrete historical phenomenon. This paper is therefore offered as a historical ethnography of a pre-digital broadcasting regime whose structural logic has continued relevance for understanding how visibility, capital, and religious authority intersect in Nigerian urban media environments. Three arguments are advanced. First, television presence functioned as symbolic capital in Bourdieu's (1986) sense: a scarce, purchased resource whose possession conferred recognised distinction within the religious field. Where this paper uses the term status it refers specifically to this Bourdieusian sense of recognised positional distinction rather than to income or social class in themselves. Second, the commercial structure of the airtime market produced class-based exclusion consistent with Fraser's (1990) critique of the bourgeois public sphere. Third, the findings resonate with Weberian insights regarding the cultural logic connecting economic success and religious legitimacy, though the data support resonance rather than confirmation of Weber's thesis in its original formulation.

Study Context

The fieldwork was conducted in Ibadan metropolis, the capital of Oyo State in South Western Nigeria, between September 2008 and February 2009. Census-based estimates for Ibadan's metropolitan area ranged from approximately 2.5 to 3.6 million at the time of fieldwork, depending on whether calculation was restricted to the five core local government areas or extended to include peri-urban extensions (National Population Commission, 2006). Ibadan remains a long-standing centre of religious diversity, tertiary

education, and media activity. Television penetration is concentrated among middle-income and upper-income households, making a regular broadcast slot a resource seen by the social strata whose recognition carried most weight in the production of ministerial prestige. Three television stations served as primary field sites: NTA Ibadan at Agodi, a federal government station; BCOS at Basorun, the Oyo State government station; and Galaxy TV at Oke-Aare, a privately operated station. Each operated a commercial airtime market for religious programming with no public service allocation for religious content. Programme schedules from all three were obtained directly from station records and cross-checked through interviews with station personnel for the year preceding fieldwork. The fieldwork was conducted before the widespread adoption of platform-based digital broadcasting in Nigeria, when commercial airtime was genuinely scarce and its pricing logic operated without the competitive pressure of low-cost digital alternatives.

Literature Review

The Political Economy of Religious Televangelism: Televangelism as a commercial enterprise has been analysed most extensively in the American context. Hadden and Swann (1981) provided an early foundational account of the financial and institutional structures of American religious broadcasting, documenting how Pentecostal ministries built media empires that operated as independent commercial enterprises. Roberts (1990, p. 327) showed that the televangelist builds an independent organization; defined his or her own goals, obtains his or her own financial resources, and manages his or her own enterprise, all independent of denominational controls. Frankl (1987) traced the application of business principles, scientific management, and cost-efficiency calculations to the religious enterprise, documenting how audience reach and income generation became the primary metrics of ministerial success in the televangelism model. In Nigeria, Ihejirika (2005) documented how media became a site of religious competition, with broadcast presence directly affecting denominational membership and institutional legitimacy. Taiwo (2007) showed how Pentecostal media in South Western Nigeria communicated values of prosperity, success, and divine favour that reinforced the connection between financial achievement and spiritual authority. Ukah (2008) documented how Nigerian Pentecostalism institutionalised the entrepreneurial logic of televangelism through media-oriented religious organisations operating in direct commercial competition. Ukah (2015) further examined how regulatory pressures subsequently restructured Nigerian religious broadcasting, providing a later point of comparison against which the pre-digital commercial dynamics documented in the present paper can be measured. These accounts establish televangelism in both its American and Nigerian forms as simultaneously a religious and an economic phenomenon in which financial resources are constitutive rather than merely instrumental.

Bourdieu: Symbolic Capital, Field, and Distinction: Bourdieu's (1984, 1986, 1991) concepts of symbolic capital, field, and distinction provide the primary analytical framework and define what this paper means by status symbol. For Bourdieu (1986), capital exists as economic capital (financial resources), social capital (networks), and cultural capital (skills and credentials). Symbolic capital is what any of these forms becomes when recognised and legitimised within a given field: prestige, reputation, and the authority to command deference. Its value is constituted through recognition, making television presence particularly apt as this form of capital in a context where being seen on television is itself the primary indicator of achieved standing. Bourdieu (1991) argued that the religious field is a structured arena in which agents compete for the recognised right to speak in the name of

the sacred. Dominant agents reproduce their position by converting economic capital into symbolic capital and back in a self-reinforcing loop. In the Ibadan broadcast market this loop operated as follows: payment for airtime produced broadcast visibility; visibility generated prestige and recognition; recognition attracted followers and donations; donations funded continued payment. Bourdieu's (1984) concept of distinction captures the performative dimension: occupying a prime Sunday broadcast slot was a public demonstration of hierarchical position, a signal to audiences and competitors alike that one occupied the upper registers of the religious field.

Supporting Frameworks: Weber, Fraser, and Lawuyi: Weber's (1958) Protestant ethic thesis identified a cultural orientation in which financial achievement functions as a marker of spiritual standing. The Pentecostal prosperity theology undergirding much of Ibadan's broadcast landscape operates analogously: it frames financial success as evidence of divine blessing and interprets the ability to sustain broadcast presence as spiritual testimony. The paper uses this resonance interpretively rather than claiming to demonstrate the spirit of capitalism in Weber's full analytical sense. Habermas (1989) conceptualised the public sphere as a space for rational-critical debate among citizens in which participation is theoretically guaranteed to all. Fraser's (1990) critique of that model demonstrated that such spaces exclude lower social strata through commercial barriers and women through institutional norms. Both mechanisms are visible in the Ibadan data and are documented in the findings. Lawuyi's (2004 and 2005) analysis of Nigerian urban space provides the most empirically direct framework: Lawuyi (2005, p. 132) argues that what decides the use of a space is not the need as such but the will to market a need on the part of whoever possesses the resources to do so. This captures why a nominally public state broadcasting infrastructure functioned in practice as a commercially stratified arena.

Methodology

This paper draws on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Ibadan between September 2008 and February 2009. An ethnographic design was chosen because the research questions concerned the social logic of capital accumulation in a religious field rather than the distribution of measurable attitudes across a population. Seventy respondents were selected through purposive sampling comprising 50 Catholics and 20 non-Catholics including 8 Pentecostal and Evangelical pastors and 7 media workers at the three television stations. The Catholic majority reflects the original focus of the master's thesis; for this paper the non-Catholic broadcaster and media worker interviews were analytically central, while the Catholic respondents supply the perspective of institutional outsiders observing the broadcast market from a position of structural absence.

Thirty-eight in-depth individual interviews were conducted, ranging from 25 to 60 minutes. Four key informant interviews provided primary commercial and institutional data: Toyin Oladele, chief marketing officer of BCOS; Fr. Stephen Nwabuike, former presenter of The Catholic World on NTA Ibadan; Fr. Toyin Pinheiro, Director of Communications of the Archdiocese of Ibadan; and a Pentecostal minister from Triumphant Assembly. Two focus group discussions (FGDs) with Catholic youth groups at the Life Prop Media Centre and at the University of Ibadan, each comprising eight to twelve participants, generated audience-side data on how television presence was perceived. Direct observation was conducted at all three television stations and FRCN Ibadan across multiple visits. Programme schedules were obtained directly from station records and cross-checked through interviews with station personnel. All named regular religious programmes were identified; gender and

denominational affiliation were recorded and verified through station staff. Data analysis followed Geertz's (1973) interpretive approach with iterative thematic analysis across respondent categories. All institutional respondents provided consent for attribution by name. All other participants are anonymised through role-based descriptions.

Findings

The Airtime Market: Price, Access, and Commercial Logic: The fieldwork established that commercial pricing was the sole criterion governing access to Ibadan's religious broadcast space. The chief marketing officer of BCOS stated the governing principle plainly, "We give airtime to whoever that can pay for it" (Chief marketing officer, BCOS, personal communication, 2009). This statement defines the market structure the paper analyses. Airtime was a commodity. No religious, institutional, or public service criterion modified the commercial logic of allocation. The schedule analysis confirmed its structural effect on broadcast composition. Table 1 presents the market outcomes that resulted from this pricing logic across all three stations for the year preceding fieldwork.

Table 1: Commercial Broadcast Access by Denomination and Gender, Ibadan Television Stations, 2007–2008

Station	Denomination / Type	Programmes (n)	Lead Presenter Gender	Frequency
NTA Ibadan	Pentecostal / Evangelical	14	Male (14)	Weekly
NTA Ibadan	Catholic	0	—	—
NTA Ibadan	Anglican / Methodist	0	—	—
BCOS	Pentecostal / Evangelical	11	Male (11)	Weekly
BCOS	Catholic	0	—	—
BCOS	Other Christian	2	Male (2)	Weekly / Fortnightly
Galaxy TV	Pentecostal / Evangelical	9	Male (9)	Weekly
Galaxy TV	Catholic	0	—	—
Galaxy TV	Other Christian	1	Male (1)	Fortnightly
Total	All denominations	37	Male (37; 100%)	—

Note: Data cover approximately September 2007 to August 2008. Only regular slots held throughout the period are counted; occasional broadcasts are excluded.

Source: Author's content analysis of programme schedules collected from NTA Ibadan, BCOS, and Galaxy TV, 2007–2008.

The table documents the market outcome of the commercial access structure. All 37 regular programmes were broadcast by financially capable Pentecostal and Evangelical ministries. No Catholic, Anglican, or Methodist denomination sustained a regular slot during the period. The broadcast space was not shaped by denominational size, theological influence, or historical presence in Ibadan; it was shaped by the capacity to meet commercial pricing. The question of why mainline denominations were absent is addressed by the cost data: a 100 per cent increase in airtime costs over the preceding three years had raised the price of a weekly thirty-minute slot to approximately 800,000 naira per year, a threshold that smaller

and institutionally unsupported broadcasters could not sustain. The market did not select for theological quality or pastoral reach. It selected for financial capacity.

Cost Escalation and the Exclusion of Smaller Broadcasters

The cost escalation is documented most precisely in the account of a Catholic priest who had maintained a weekly programme on NTA Ibadan from 2003 to early 2005 using individually sourced funds. He described the pricing structure and its effect:

When I was on Tele, I paid close to 1.3 million [naira] for close to two years which I had to source by myself. It's capital intensive. I was paying up to one hundred thousand naira for a quarter of thirteen weeks, but after sometimes, it was increased by 100%. That is why we are not there anymore. (Fr. Stephen Nwabuike, personal communication, October 13, 2008).

At 100,000 naira per quarter, a weekly thirty-minute slot cost approximately 400,000 naira per year. After the 100 per cent increase it cost approximately 800,000 naira annually. The cost increase made continued participation financially unsustainable for an individually funded broadcaster operating without institutional support. A Pentecostal minister from Triumphant Assembly independently attributed the general absence of mainline churches from television to the financial requirements of being on air, confirming that the cost barrier operated structurally across broadcaster types rather than as a difficulty specific to one denomination. A Pentecostal pastor who used television only for advertising at the time of fieldwork described the capital logic of market entry, "I believe you grow into something. You don't just jump into it" (Pentecostal pastor, personal communication, 2009).

Growing into television meant accumulating sufficient capital through prior ministerial success to fund broadcast entry. The logic is circular in Bourdieu's (1986) sense: broadcast presence requires capital, capital requires prior success, and prior success is amplified by broadcast presence. The data suggest a mutually reinforcing relationship between television visibility, organisational growth, and financial capacity. The fieldwork establishes that financially dominant ministries occupied the broadcast space at the time of fieldwork and that their market position was self-reinforcing.

Television Presence as Symbolic Capital: The Conversion Loop in Evidence

The conversion of airtime expenditure into symbolic capital was confirmed across broadcaster, media workers, and audience accounts, representing three independent perspectives on the same social dynamic. From broadcaster perspectives, a Pentecostal minister attributed rapid organisational growth to sustained broadcast media presence, citing a nationally prominent ministry's television and radio investment as the primary driver of its membership expansion. This is a respondent's attribution rather than a verified causal claim and is presented as such. From media workers' perspectives; an NTA Ibadan respondent observed that prominent preachers used regular television presence to demonstrate that they were socio-economically powerful, affluent, and high-status. A BCOS respondent stated that regularly being on television meant that a preacher had arrived, was doing well in the ministry, and was of high class and status. These accounts establish that the status signal produced by broadcast presence was visible to and confirmed by the commercial media workers who managed the market from which it was purchased.

From audience perspectives; a focus group participant at the University of Ibadan stated: when you see a pastor on television every week you think, this man is big. Another participant added: people follow success. These audience accounts confirm that broadcast

visibility was converted into deference and followership at the reception end of the conversion loop, not merely at the production end. The loop ran in full: payment produced visibility; visibility produced recognition in media workers' descriptions and audience interpretations; recognition attracted followers and donations; donations funded continued payment. Competition for prime Saturday and Sunday slots, when post-church audiences were largest, drove prices higher still and concentrated broadcast presence further among the most financially powerful ministries.

Gender Distribution in the Broadcast Market

The schedule analysis found that all 37 regular religious programmes across the three stations were presented by male hosts. This distribution was not produced by broadcast regulation: the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation imposed no gender restrictions on religious programming. It was produced by the intersection of the commercial access barrier with denominational norms that restricted the public preaching office to men. Women faced two sequential market conditions rather than one: institutional gatekeeping filtered them from the pool of authorised broadcasters before the commercial threshold was reached. The commercial market therefore amplified rather than created the gendered distribution of broadcast presence. The data show structural absence produced by intersecting institutional and commercial mechanisms rather than documented cases of individual exclusion, and the analysis is presented with that evidential limitation acknowledged.

Discussion

The Religious Field as a Commercially Structured Capital Market: The Ibadan findings are most precisely described as a Bourdieusian field analysis. The broadcast space functioned as a structured arena in which agents competed for dominant positions according to rules governed by economic and symbolic capital rather than theological merit. The conversion loop at the centre of this competition produced an outcome that was simultaneously commercial and social: payment produced visibility; visibility produced prestige and public recognition; recognition attracted followers and donations; donations funded continued payment. This loop reproduced the positional advantage of the already-dominant and widened the structural distance from those who lacked entry capital. Bourdieu's (1984) concept of distinction captures the performative dimension. Prime Sunday broadcast slots were not merely communication time. They were enacted performances of hierarchical position within the religious field, read by audiences with the precision the fieldwork accounts confirm: this man is big, he has arrived. The paper does not claim broadcast presence was the sufficient cause of ministerial success, only that it functioned as a recognised positional resource whose possession contributed to the accumulation of further resources. The direction of causality for any given ministry cannot be resolved from the available data.

Weber, Fraser, and Lawuyi: Supporting the Market Analysis

The findings resonate with Weber's (1958) account of the cultural logic connecting economic success and religious legitimacy. In a theological environment that frames financial success as divine blessing, the capacity to purchase broadcast presence is interpreted as spiritual testimony. Respondents consistently expressed this interpretive logic without separating financial success, divine favour, and ministerial achievement as distinct categories. The paper does not claim this demonstrates the spirit of capitalism in Weber's full analytical sense; it uses the framework to illuminate a cultural condition in which commercial

dominance of the broadcast space was read as spiritual legitimacy. Fraser's (1990) analysis of economic and normative exclusion mechanisms both apply: commercial pricing excluded economically weaker ministries, and denominational norms produced the gendered distribution documented in the schedule data. Lawuyi's (2004, 2005) market space framework explains the Nigerian urban dimension most directly: a nominally public state broadcasting infrastructure functioned in practice as a commercially stratified arena where access was determined by the capacity to market a need rather than by the need itself. Lawuyi's formulation is the most empirically grounded of the three supporting frameworks in the Ibadan data and provides the analytical bridge between Bourdieu's field theory and the specific conditions of Nigerian urban broadcasting.

Limitations

The data are from a single city during a six-month fieldwork period in 2008 to 2009 and should not be extrapolated to contemporary Nigeria or to other cities without independent evidence. The evidence base is entirely Christian. The data are stronger on the supply side than the demand side: broadcaster and media worker accounts are detailed while audience data derive from focus group discussions rather than a systematic audience study. The argument about the conversion of symbolic capital into economic capital through follower donations rests on respondent testimony and interpretive inference rather than documented financial evidence. The gender analysis shows structural absence through schedule data and intersecting institutional and commercial mechanisms rather than documented cases of individual exclusion.

Conclusion

In Ibadan's pre-digital religious broadcasting landscape, airtime was a commercial gate: payment produced visibility, visibility produced recognition, and recognition reproduced the advantage of those who could pay. The conversion loop this paper documents, from capital expenditure through broadcast visibility to symbolic capital accumulation and back to economic capital through follower growth, is the central finding. It operated through the commercial pricing structure of three television stations, was confirmed by broadcaster, media worker, and audience accounts, and was measured in its structural consequences through systematic content analysis of one year of programme schedules. Three contributions are offered. First, the application of Bourdieu's symbolic capital framework to the Nigerian Christian religious broadcast market provides a theoretically precise account of how airtime expenditure was converted into positional advantage within a structured religious field. Second, Lawuyi's market space analysis explains the specifically Nigerian urban dimension of this dynamic with greater empirical precision than the European-derived public sphere tradition alone provides. Third, the paper establishes a pre-digital historical baseline documenting the specific commercial conversion loop, cost thresholds, and exclusion mechanisms that characterised broadcast access in a major Nigerian city before low-cost digital alternatives became available, positioning future research to examine what the digital transition changed and what structural logics it reproduced.

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