

MEDIA-ECOLOGICAL INSIGHTS INTO THE EVOLUTION AND RECEPTION OF THEOLOGICAL COMMUNICATION IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN SOCIETY

By

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Abstract

This article examines the transformation of theological communication in contemporary Nigerian society through a media-ecological lens, tracing the shift from pulpit-centred proclamation to broadcast mediation and, more recently, to digitally networked platforms. Rather than treating media as neutral conduits, the study interrogates how changing communication environments restructure religious authority, audience reception, cognitive engagement, and community formation. Drawing on media ecology, reception theory, and theological communication frameworks, the article offers a comparative analysis of pulpit, broadcast, and digital media, highlighting how each medium configures distinct modes of meaning-making, participation, and ritual practice. The Nigerian context provides a particularly instructive case, given its vibrant religious landscape and

rapid adoption of digital technologies. Through critical engagement with theological, sociological, and communication scholarship, the article argues that digital media have not merely expanded the reach of theological messages but have essentially altered the ecology within which religious knowledge is produced, interpreted, and lived. These transformations generate both opportunities for participatory theology and challenges to traditional ecclesial authority and doctrinal coherence. The study contributes to ongoing debates in theological communication by demonstrating that understanding contemporary religious practice requires sustained attention to the formative power of media environments and their cultural, cognitive, and communal effects.

Keywords: *Audience Reception; Digital Religion, Digital Culture; Media Theology; Media Ecology, Theological Communication*

Introduction

The communication of religious and theological knowledge has historically been central to the functioning and cohesion of societies, serving as a channel for moral instruction, communal identity, and cultural continuity¹. In Nigeria, religious communication has long been anchored on oral and performative traditions², with the pulpit acting as both a locus of authority and a medium of instruction for the faithful.³ Sermons, catechism, homilies, and liturgical readings constituted primary vehicles through which theological ideas were transmitted, shaping social norms and influencing public discourse.⁴

With the advent of mass media technologies in the 20th century, these traditional channels were complemented and gradually transformed by radio, television, and print media.⁵ The incorporation of

broadcast media expanded the reach of theological communication beyond the immediate congregation, allowing religious leaders and believers to influence national discourses and participate in socio-political and cultural debates.⁶ This evolution, however, was not merely technological but ecological, reshaping the social, cognitive, and ritual contexts within which theological messages were produced and received.⁷ As Okhueleigbe holds:

a useful analogy comes from biology: if a new species enters a forest pond, the entire ecosystem shifts, some species thrive, others decline, and some adapt. Similarly, in the media landscape, the introduction of a new medium, such as the smartphone, reshapes communication habits. It changes how individuals engage in conversations, substituting texting for talking, altering the ways they browse the web, consume news, read (or neglect) newspapers, watch videos, and play games⁸.

Media ecology, as a conceptual framework, posits that the medium itself, not merely the content it carries, affects perception, cognition, and societal interaction.⁹ Within the Nigerian context, theological communication has increasingly been mediated by technological forms, producing systemic effects on religious engagement, authority, and interpretation.¹⁰ The movement from oral and print-based paradigms to digital and networked media has, therefore, altered the very ecology of religious knowledge, demanding new analytical perspectives to understand its reception and impact.¹¹

The digital turn in Nigerian religious communication has been accelerated by the widespread adoption of mobile technologies, social media platforms,

and internet streaming services.¹² Pastors, theologians, and religious organizations now maintain digital presences that allow sermons, homilies, devotional content, and religious discourse to circulate across geographies, transcending the traditional spatial and temporal limits of the pulpit.¹³ These shifts have profound implications for audience engagement, interpretive authority, and participatory modes of faith practice, making the media-ecological perspective particularly apt for analysis.¹⁴

Furthermore, the intersection of theology and digital media in Nigeria reflects broader sociocultural transformations. Urbanisation, globalisation, and the proliferation of information technologies have created new contexts of religious consumption, where audiences negotiate meaning, identity, and authority in interactive and networked environments.¹⁵ Theological communication is no longer unidirectional; it is now a dynamic, multi-sited process, shaped by platform affordances, audience expectations, and social interaction patterns.¹⁶ Indeed, paraphrasing Egere, one may there to say “the goal of media ecology is ... connectivity, democratisation, participation and digitality”¹⁷.

From a historical vantage point, this evolution can be traced from the colonial-era church missions, which relied heavily on print and oral dissemination, to contemporary megachurches leveraging digital platforms for mass engagement.¹⁸ The continuity lies in the communicative intent, to shape beliefs and social behaviour, but the medium’s characteristics have introduced novel epistemic, ethical, and participatory dynamics.¹⁹ Media ecology thus allows for a critical understanding of how these new media forms restructure theological meaning, engagement, and authority, offering

insights into both continuity and disruption in religious practice.²⁰

Analytically, understanding the movement “from pulpit to pixel” requires attention to the interplay between technological affordances and theological content.²¹ Nigerian audiences interact with religious content in diverse ways through live streaming, social media engagement, and digital feedback mechanisms which simultaneously democratizes access and challenges traditional hierarchical authority structures within religious institutions.²² These ecological transformations necessitate critical scholarly attention to the cognitive, social, and ritual dimensions of mediated theological communication.²³

Thus, the study situates itself at the intersection of theology, media studies, and media-ecological theory, offering a lens to interrogate how technological environments in contemporary Nigeria shape both the production and reception of religious communication. By analyzing the evolution from traditional pulpits to digital platforms, the study highlights systemic changes in audience engagement, communicative authority, and societal impact, providing a critical framework for understanding how theological communication adapts to, and is transformed by, the modern media ecology.²⁴

Theological Communication: Definitions, Functions, and Historical Practices

Theological communication refers to the systematic process by which religious knowledge, doctrines, and moral teachings are transmitted within and across faith communities. It encompasses both formal and informal channels, including sermons, homilies, catechism, liturgical readings, pastoral counseling, and religious

education. The practice of theological communication is not limited to conveying beliefs; it also functions as a means of shaping moral behavior, constructing communal identity, and mediating relationships between humans and the divine.²⁵ Beautifully Okhueleigbe puts it thus:

From Augustine's introspective meditations in Confessions to Aquinas' synthesis of Aristotelian philosophy in Summa Theologiae, theological communication integrates philosophy to clarify doctrines and respond to existential questions (MacIntyre, 1981). This dialogue between faith and reason continues today in inter-disciplinary theological scholarship. Moreover, engaging with contemporary philosophical debates allows religious traditions to articulate their relevance in modern society.

Historically, in the Nigerian context, theological communication was predominantly oral, with the pulpit serving as the primary site for message dissemination. Clergy exercised authority as the custodians of doctrinal interpretation, while congregants received messages in relatively unidirectional formats. This traditional arrangement emphasized continuity, ritual authority, and moral instruction within the immediate community.²⁶ With colonial influence, print media such as tracts, hymnals, and religious periodicals expanded the reach of theological communication beyond localized congregations, introducing literate populations to new forms of religious knowledge.²⁷ Commenting on this, Okhueleigbe holds:

the interaction of theological communication models with secular communication theories presents a fascinating area of study that highlights both the commonalities and divergences between spiritual and secular

paradigms. While secular communication theories, such as the Shannon-Weaver model, phenomenology, or interpersonal communication theories, primarily focus on the mechanics, processes, and contexts of communication without direct reference to divine elements, they often intersect with theological models in meaningful ways. These interactions can be examined through several lenses: purpose, audience engagement, modes of communication, and the ethical implications of message delivery²⁸.

In the contemporary period, theological communication in Nigeria has diversified further, blending oral, written, and broadcast modalities. Pentecostal and megachurch movements, in particular, have leveraged emerging media technologies to expand the reach of sermons, devotional messages, and pastoral teachings. This expansion reflects both the adaptive nature of religious institutions and the increasing complexity of media environments in shaping theological discourse.²⁹

Core Principles and Applications of Media Ecology in Religious Contexts

Media ecology, as a theoretical framework, examines the ways media environments rather than individual messages affect human perception, cognition, and societal organization. Marshall McLuhan famously asserted that “the medium is the message,” highlighting that each communication technology reshapes social interaction, thought patterns, and cultural norms.³⁰ Neil Postman further elaborated on the concept by emphasizing that technologies carry implicit ideologies, shaping not only communication practices but also societal expectations and behaviors.³¹

In religious contexts, media ecology provides an analytical lens to understand how different media forms: oral, print, broadcast, and digital, reshape the production, transmission, and reception of theological content. For example, radio and television expanded religious reach in Africa, transforming pastors into public figures and creating shared national religious spaces beyond localized congregations.³² Digital media, however, represent a profound ecological shift. Platforms such as social media, live streaming, podcasts, and mobile applications have created interactive, networked religious environments where audiences participate actively in meaning-making rather than solely consuming transmitted messages.³³

Media-ecological analysis thus emphasizes systemic effects: the medium alters not only the audience's access but also interpretive patterns, cognitive frameworks, and social hierarchies within faith communities. The shift from pulpit to pixel, in this sense, is not merely technological; it restructures the ecology of theological communication, influencing authority, ritual participation, and congregational engagement.³⁴

Reception Theory and Audience Engagement in Digital Religious Media

Reception theory, originating in literary and media studies, focuses on the active role of audiences in interpreting and negotiating meaning from media texts. Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model posits that messages are encoded with intended meanings by producers but are decoded by audiences based on social, cultural, and cognitive contexts, often resulting in negotiated or oppositional readings.³⁵ It simply holds that audiences are not perceive receivers of information, rather, when they receive, they impact that information with their own personal believes, opinions, faith and experiences and

from such interaction, the received information assumes meaning. In the domain of theological communication, this theory emphasizes that religious audiences do not passively absorb sermons or devotional content; they interpret, critique, and integrate messages according to personal and communal frameworks.

Digital media amplify these dynamics by facilitating interactive engagement. Nigerian audiences increasingly access theological content through live streams, social media pages, and apps, often providing instant feedback, comments, and communal sharing. This participatory culture reconfigures traditional hierarchies of authority, allowing the faithful to engage with religious messages, question interpretations, and co-create religious meaning.³⁶ Studies suggest that digital audiences negotiate theological authority in ways that challenge conventional pastoral dominance while fostering new forms of communal and virtual religiosity.³⁷

Thus, combining media-ecological perspectives with reception theory provides a comprehensive lens to analyze contemporary Nigerian theological communication. It highlights the interplay between technological affordances, message structures, and audience practices, demonstrating that the evolution from pulpit to pixel entails not only a change in medium but also a transformation in interpretive processes, relational dynamics, and religious cognition.³⁸

Comparative Analysis: Pulpit → Broadcast → Digital

The transition of theological communication in Nigeria must be understood not simply as a shift in technology, but as a tectonic transformation in communicative logics, social praxis, and spiritual epistemologies. Historically, the

pulpit served as the primary locus of theological authority and communal formation. Grounded in liturgical tradition and oral rhetoric, pulpit communication was shaped by embodied presence, sacred space, and ritual enactment, making it a transactional and relational mode of transmitting doctrine and moral norms.³⁹ In this context, authority was construed through ecclesial office, embodied charisma, and shared interpretive community, as explored in classical ecclesiology and homiletics.⁴⁰

Broadcast media, radio and television, introduced a *massified* but still hierarchically mediated form of religious discourse, one that distilled the sermonic encounter into consumable soundbites. Whereas the pulpit emphasized situated meaning within communal worship, broadcast theology operated within one-to-many paradigm that privileged clarity, repetition, and mediated presence over ritual immediacy.⁴¹ Communication scholars like Denis McQuail have shown how broadcast structures privilege standardized, centrally curated messages, a logic that affected the form and content of religious discourse by privileging visibility and simplicity over dialogical depth.⁴²

The digital era marks a qualitative reconfiguration of theological communication. Platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube do not merely transmit messages; they create networked participatory ecologies that reshape authority, interpretive agency, and communal belonging. Sociologist José van Dijck's work on platform society underscores that these digital environments commodify attention while enabling new forms of social legitimacy and peer-generated meaning, forcing religious communicators to negotiate meaning not only with God and congregants but with algorithmic affordances themselves.⁴³

Theologically, this trajectory reflects a move from relationally grounded ecclesial proclamation to ecologically mediated proclamation, a shift that reconfigures not just who speaks, but how audiences participate in meaning-making. James K. A. Smith argues that in digital spaces, liturgical rhythms and embodied practices are displaced, producing forms of religious “digital habitus” that reorganize how believers perceive the sacred and communal identity.⁴⁴

Audience Engagement, Interpretation Patterns, Participatory Practices

Digital religious media in Nigeria have created hybrid interpretive spaces where traditional theological authority and lay agency coexist, conflict, and co-construct meaning. Reception theorist Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding framework underscores that meaning is not passively absorbed but actively negotiated; Nigerian digital audiences reinterpret sermons through cultural, political, and personal lenses.⁴⁵ This phenomenon is evident in online prayer groups where comments, emojis, and threaded discussions produce interpretive negotiations distinct from traditional homiletic consumption.⁴⁶

Furthermore, evangelical and Pentecostal digital content often abstracts theological messages into memetic, shareable fragments, which may reinforce doctrinal points or, conversely, generate divergent meanings depending on audience contexts. Media psychologist Sonia Livingstone emphasizes that participatory cultures reorient audiences from passive spectators to co-producers of content and meaning, a dynamic that profoundly challenges clerical paradigms of authority.⁴⁷

From a theological communications perspective, this emergent agency raises critical questions about

hermeneutic authority and doctrinal fidelity. As N. T. Wright suggests, interpretive communities shape how texts are understood; digital spaces expand interpretive communities beyond localized congregations, producing polyvocal interpretations that can both enrich and destabilize doctrinal coherence.⁴⁸ Pastoral communication in this context must therefore attend not only to theological precision but to audience hermeneutic capacities and contexts, integrating communication pedagogy with ecclesial teaching. Practices such **as** online exegesis sessions, interactive Q&A livestreams, such as that of Radio Maria, Port Harcourt, anchored by Iheoma Abraham, and user-generated devotional content **t** reveal a shift toward participatory theology, where laity actively shape the religious conversation.⁴⁹ This democratization has profound implications for ecclesiology, spiritual formation, and the sociology of religion.

Influence of Medium on Message, Authority, Cognition, and Community Formation

The media-ecological axiom that the medium shapes the message is nowhere more visible than in the evolution from pulpit, to broadcast, to digital platforms. Marshall McLuhan's insight that technologies restructure human perception and social relations speaks directly to this process: each communicative medium carries implicit biases that privilege certain patterns of thought, attention, and social organization.⁵⁰

In the pulpit, theological communication is embodied, rhythmic, and communal; it engages the body, voice, and shared sacred space in ways that integrate cognition with ritual participation. In broadcast media, messages become framed for clarity and repetition, emphasizing propositional truths over dialogical

engagement; the audience is imagined as a passive mass, not an active interpretive community.⁵¹

Digital platforms, however, introduce fragmentation, immediacy, and interactivity into theological discourse. The cognitive experience of digital religion is shaped by attention economies, multitasking, and hypertextual navigation, conditions that scholar Christian Fuchs argues significantly affect how messages are processed, internalized, and lived.⁵² Digital environments also produce networked identities wherein religious community is not defined by spatial congregation but by relational clusters connected through media practices.⁵³

Authority in this ecology is not solely vested in institutional office; it is distributed across digital influencers, peer validators, and algorithmic visibility metrics. Communication theorist Axel Bruns' concept of "produsage" captures this hybrid space where users are simultaneously producers and consumers of religious content, eroding traditional monopolies of interpretive authority.⁵⁴ Theologically, this reconfiguration invites reflection through lenses such as participatory ecclesiology, which recognizes that the Spirit moves through both ordained and lay voices, and incarnational communication models, which emphasize contextually embedded proclamation that speaks to the lived realities of digital cultures.

Evaluation

While human beings are not slaves of media, they undeniably inhabit a media-saturated environment that profoundly conditions how reality is perceived, interpreted, and inhabited. In this sense, the Pauline affirmation "in him we live and move and have our being"

may, without theological distortion, be heuristically recalibrated to acknowledge that it is within media environments that contemporary subjects live, communicate, are recognized, and become socially intelligible. This study critically evaluates theological communication within this mediated condition, arguing that media ecology does not concern itself with simplistic or deterministic notions of hypodermic media effects, but rather with the structural, environmental, and formative consequences of media presence itself. Media ecology insists that the mere existence of dominant media forms— independent of specific content—reshapes cognition, social relations, authority structures, and symbolic systems.

From the era of hunting-and-gathering societies through oral cultures, manuscript traditions, print civilization, broadcast media, and now digital networks, human communities have never existed outside media environments. Each historical epoch has been defined by one or more dominant media forms that amplify certain human capacities while attenuating others, reconfiguring how knowledge is transmitted, how communities are organized, and how meaning is stabilized. This study evaluates Nigerian theological communication against this *longue durée* of mediated human existence, demonstrating that the contemporary digital turn represents not an aberration but an intensification of a perennial human condition: theology has always been mediated, but it is now mediated differently, more pervasively, and with greater epistemic consequences.

Analytically, the study succeeds in showing that digital media do not merely extend the reach of theological messages; they alter the conditions of theological intelligibility itself. Authority is no longer grounded solely

in ecclesial office or sacramental proximity, but increasingly negotiated through visibility, interactivity, and algorithmic circulation. Cognition shifts from sustained attentiveness to fragmented engagement; community from spatially gathered bodies to networked publics; and theological meaning from stable doctrinal transmission to participatory and often contested interpretation. The evaluative strength of this work lies in its insistence that these transformations are not morally neutral nor theologically insignificant, but demand sustained critical discernment. Reflectively, the study avoids both technological determinism and romantic ecclesial nostalgia. It neither demonizes digital media nor idealizes pre-digital religious communication. Instead, it offers a synthetic evaluation that recognizes media as constitutive of human culture and religious practice, while maintaining that theological communication must critically negotiate, rather than uncritically absorb, the logics of its dominant media environment. In doing so, the study affirms media ecology as an indispensable framework for contemporary theology, one that enables the Church not merely to use media, but to understand how media use it in return.

Conclusion

This study has argued that theological communication cannot be adequately understood, evaluated, or practiced apart from the media environments within which it occurs. From pulpit-centered oral–aural cultures grounded in embodied presence through broadcast Christianity shaped by mass mediation to digitally networked religious life structured by platform logics, theology has always been mediated. Yet the conditions of mediation—its scale, speed, saturation, and infrastructural power—have never been as pervasive, rapid, or structurally formative of

ecclesial consciousness as in the contemporary digital era. The shift from localized, incarnational proclamation to networked, algorithmically governed communicative regimes represents not merely a change of instruments, but a transformation in how authority, meaning, participation, and communal belonging are constituted and negotiated.

Drawing on media ecology, reception theory, and theological communication, the study concludes that digital media actively reshape the epistemic ecology of faith—that is, the conditions under which religious knowledge is perceived, authorized, internalized, and enacted. They tend to privilege immediacy over contemplation, visibility over sacramentality, participation over catechetical depth, and affective resonance over doctrinal coherence. These shifts neither invalidate theological tradition nor guarantee its flourishing; rather, they relocate theology within new horizons of intelligibility that demand sustained hermeneutical and pastoral discernment. The Church's communicative task today is therefore not simply to “be present online,” but to interrogate what kinds of theological subjects, ecclesial habitus, and modes of believing are being formed through prolonged immersion in digitally mediated religious environments.

At the same time, the study resists reductionist narratives that portray digital media either as an existential threat to faith or as a neutral extension of ecclesial mission. Media are not external instruments at theology's disposal; they are formative environments that shape perception, cognition, memory, and relationality even as theology seeks to inhabit them. Consequently, theological communication in the digital age must be understood as a negotiated and reflexive practice, situated

between fidelity to the Church's incarnational, sacramental, and doctrinal identity and critical engagement with media logics that fragment attention, redistribute interpretive authority, and reconfigure communal meaning-making.

Recommendations

1. Religious leaders should move beyond a utilitarian understanding of media as mere channels for message dissemination and cultivate media-ecological literacy. This involves sustained formation in how different media environments shape attention, authority, interpretation, and community. Clergy and theologians should critically reflect on how digital visibility, metrics of engagement, and platform logics subtly redefine pastoral success, theological credibility, and ecclesial leadership. Intentional practices that recover silence, depth, ritual continuity, and embodied community should be consciously integrated as counter-formative disciplines within digital ministry.
2. Theological education should formally integrate media ecology, digital hermeneutics, and communication theory into curricula, not as optional skills but as core theological competencies. Future ministers and theologians must be trained to analyze media environments theologically, discerning their anthropological, epistemological, and ecclesiological implications. Interdisciplinary collaboration between theology, communication studies, sociology, and cultural studies should be encouraged to ensure that theological reflection remains analytically rigorous and socially grounded.
3. Church authorities and policy makers should develop coherent frameworks for digital engagement that address questions of authority, accountability, doctrinal coherence, and pastoral responsibility in online spaces. Clear

guidelines are needed to navigate the tensions between decentralization and oversight, freedom of expression and theological responsibility, innovation and tradition. Investment in research, digital infrastructure, and collaborative platforms will be essential for sustaining credible theological communication in the long term.

Endnotes

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