Images and Messages: A Christian Critique of Media's Portrayal of Older Persons

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ABSTRACT

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the proportion of people aged over 60 years is growing faster than any other age group in almost every country as a result of both longer life expectancy and declining fertility rates. While population ageing can be seen as a success story for public health policies and for socio-economic development, it also challenges the society to reflect upon and respond to negative images that distorts the identity and integrity of older persons.

Since media are not value-neutral, their images and messages tend to shape identities based on certain perspectives of ageing, most of which are constricted—often laced with fear, frailty, economic pessimism or commodification. These misinterpreted portrayals of older persons in the media which often concentrate on 'anti-ageing' sentiments and 'glorification' of youthfulness, necessitate a proper understanding of ageing process and the nature of media portrayals vis-à-vis their implications of how we describe and interact with the elderly. This paper explores the significance of media's role in constructing the image of older persons and the importance of Christian worldview approach in training, engaging and responding to ageing issues among media content producers and disseminators.

Key words: media, portrayals, images and messages, Christian worldview

I.   INTRODUCTION

Although media are highly regarded as key channels for information, education and other aspects of socio-economic and political advancements, their fundamental capacity to form or re-shape worldviews (how we see and interact with the world) is seldom examined (Kamary, 2013). The ubiquitous nature of media in urban settings has increased interactions with media contents. Today, digital contents are abundant, repetitive and captivating yet transformational—both to individuals and the society. The expansion of the so called digital world and the rise of new media applications, most significantly over the Internet, have brought media's images even closer via smartphones and tablets.

According to poll findings by *Steadman Group*, 80 percent of Kenyans trust media institutions as an authority for informing, educating and entertaining (Opiyo, 2009). Like in Kenya, many people have high regard for media communication. Media contents are not neutral, their images and messages tend to informs as well as forms people's perspectives of reality. One such identity is the image of the older

persons. The contemporary view of ageing in the media is one-sided and generally viewed as a problem. In 2009 a newspaper in the Middle East, *The National*, noted that the growing population of seniors in Kenya was "creating problems":

> It is known as the greying of Kenya. As this east African powerhouse develops a robust economy, a burgeoning middle class is starting to live longer into old age. And the growing population of seniors is creating problems that African countries have not had to deal with in the past. (Brown, 2009, para. 1)

The choices of terms used in the media reflect worldviews of those using them. In the context of ageing, the media play a vital role in reinforcing certain biases through the terminologies used—whether intentional or unintentional. Some of these man-made biases result to putting one age group against the other, for example the young against the old. When media assign descriptions to a group of people through images or text, formation of certain identities occur and potentially become popular terminology. For instance, the idea of "burden of dependency" can also be traced even among policy makers in the field of ageing as it is in media environment. This reductionist perspective of seeing ageing as problematic rather than an opportunity calls for a shift in our cultural worldview. As Troisi (2012) notes, the phenomenon of ageing is neither a problem nor does it bring about any crisis. It is seen as such only by those who look at the older persons as mere receivers. When ageing is understood as a natural developmental process, any society can easily enhance human dignity and ensure justice among age groups in the sharing of society's resources, rights and responsibilities as defined by the United Nations (UN Principles for Older Persons, 1991).

In East Asia, where the author has lived for eight years, the mainstream media and business entities frequently advance capitalistic for-profit schema with ill-conceived image of ageing. They radically promote 'anti-aging' sentiments and attitudes as though it were an abomination to grow old. In some of Korea's media and entertainment business, looks are considered as important as talent and consequently aesthetic surgery has become increasingly common. More young men and women are convinced that modifying looks to look younger can improve their career prospects. Dr. Choi Oh Kyu, a cosmetic surgeon told *BBC News* that, "…a lot of middle-aged men come in wanting to look younger. These days, in business, the mature look is no longer an asset. Everyone wants to look younger" (Gluck, 2001, para 4). The media in this context have continued to redefine attractiveness and success thus creating more pressure to attain a certain standard—tall, white skin, thin, big eyes, v-shaped jaw and b-cup.

In Kenya, older persons have been revered culturally in the past and have also enjoyed positive image in media as well as in political leadership. However, the gravity in which youthfulness is given in media content and advertising in relation to attractiveness is diminishing older people's representation. Owing to the fact that youth are the majority, there have been calls by young people (the so called young turks) to be given space in all socio-economic and political environments because they are 'strong' (Madegwa, 2014). The view that beauty or strength is equivalent to youthfulness promotes the notion that physical changes related to ageing are undesirable and hence should be eradicated.

Without an appropriate understanding of successful ageing through a holistic view which eliminates

any form of age-based prejudice, promotion of intergenerational solidarity will be unachievable. On the other hand, a fitting understanding of ageing as God's natural design can effectively edify seniors' dignity, self-esteem and sense of belonging.

II.   THE UBIQUITOUS NATURE AND IMPACT OF MEDIA

The media has become so ubiquitous that ours is a digitally saturated society. The pervasive nature of media in developed urban and suburban contexts has increased interactions with diverse media contents, including those related to ageing. Digital or media convergence remains the backbone of most digitally mediated communication. Media convergence is a phenomenon involving the interlocking of computing and information technology companies, telecommunications networks, and content providers from the various publishing world. According to *Britannica Encyclopedia* (2013), media convergence brings together the "three Cs"—computing, communications, and content accessible via one device for example, by a smartphone, one can do a number of things: check emails, stream videos, play music, play games, take pictures and still used it as a phone. For example, smartphones play the role of a clock, computer, TV, radio, and game all in one gadget. More than any other technology of mass and online communication, contemporary media allow for greater quantity of information transmission and retrieval. In the 21st century, much of data creation and control is in the hands of their users (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001). Today, digital contents are abundant, repetitive and captivating yet transformational—both to individuals and the society. The expansion of the so called digital world and the rise of new media applications have brought media's images closer to users including the elderly.

New media innovations and application in education, governance, journalism and entertainment among other fields, have significantly been characterized by the increased interaction with popular perspectives carried by widespread media. It can be argued that media has been domesticated. Baym (2010) contends that technologies are domesticated when they transition from no longer being "marvelous and strange," to being "so ordinary as to be invisible" (p. 45). For example, smart phones have already been domesticated as they are rarely considered anything spectacular but rather as a necessity in day to day life.

As the Internet spread all over the world, new kind of digital culture emerges characterized with the development of cyber communities. Digital culture presents new patterns of life and how people think, work and relate with each other. Since digital culture tends to evolve rapidly, many communities experience a gap, digital divide, between residents participating in new digital culture and those who are not (Han & Braun, 2011). This gap may contribute to how the young people view or treat those who are yet to or unable to belong to the new techno savvy culture particularly older persons.

Theories of Media Effects

Due to population ageing, a phenomenon that occurs when the median age of a country or region rises due to increasing life expectancy and/or declining birth rates (WHO, 2014), the number of seniors has

increased in many nations particularly in Europe and East Asia. In these contexts, older persons' portrayals in children animations have taken a generally progressive role although there are still a large number of negative representations and negative characterization of older persons, especially in the role of villain (Robinson & Anderson, 2006). As many of our cultures have become media saturated, television, the Internet, smartphones and tablets have become pervasive 'story-telling' apparatuses. How they repeatedly 'tell stories' impact the users' understanding because all of life involves philosophical commitments embedded in certain views of reality held by those behind the images and messages.

The influence of media on human perceptions can be explained in three theories; social learning theory, cultivation theory (Bandura, 1994; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Singnorelli, 1986) and cultic theory or communication as rituals (Carey, 1989). Social learning theory holds that human learning is influenced by people and events presented in the media (Bandura, 1994). Gerbner's cultivation theory says that television has become the main source of storytelling in today's society. Cultivation theory therefore suggests that the more time one spends watching television, the more he or she will come to see and interpret the world in terms of the values, portrayals and ideologies presented by television (Gerbner et al., 2002). Those who watch it for four or more hours a day are labeled heavy television viewers while those who view less than four hours per day, according to Gerbner are light viewers. For example, heavy viewers are exposed to more violence and therefore are affected by the "mean world syndrome", the idea that the world is worse than it actually is. According to Gerbner, the overuse of television may therefore create a homogeneous and fearful populace (Gerbner & Gross, 1976).

Carey (1989) sees communication as culture (cultic theory). He argues that communication is more than transmission since it takes place within a context of an historical timeframe and often invites participation and social roles. Similarly, Dewey (1916) recognized this "ritual view" (Carey, 1989, p. 22) of communication when he underscored that:

> There is more than a verbal tie between the words common, community, and communication. Men live in a community in virtue of the things which they have in common; and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common. What we must have in common…are aims, beliefs, aspirations, knowledge—a common understanding— like-mindedness as sociologists say. (Dewey, 1916, p. 5–6)

Carey and Dewey's understanding of communication—that is a ritual view of communication— reinforces the perspective of this study. Despite rapid changes in the development of communication in terms of technology, speed, mode of transmission and language, communication occurs within a cultural context and shapes how people interact with reality. Atwood (2010) suggests that the transmission view of communication is far too simplistic to explain the complex ways people communicate, learn, judge, and act. Carey's exploration of communication context is particularly significant to the perspective of this paper and helps to investigate a key theme of the study—how human interaction with new media cultivates certain cultural desires and shapes worldviews.

Media Use by Older Persons

Media consumption among the older persons is on the increase probably due to the expanding of access to media across all ages. Social isolation and the feelings of loneliness have been identified as key reasons why the elderly are turning to media. As Heisel (2006) notes, media consumption generally increases with age from middle age on. Among the educated elderly, newspaper and magazine reading reaches the peak at age 65 (then falls rapidly, likely due to eyesight related challenges). Listening to the radio and watching television is also popular among the seniors especially so among those who are visually impaired. Heisel also observes that television viewing, increases steadily from about 40 years of age to octogenarians (Heisel et al., 2006).

According *Pew Internet* of the numbers of older adults who are online worldwide, 50% of adults ages 50-64 are active on a social networking site. In 2011, 34% of seniors were using social networking sites up from 26% in 2010 (PRWeb, 2012). More substantial increase in social media use by older adults ages 65 and older which reported being active on sites like *Facebook*, *Twitter* and *Pinterest*. In addition *Seniors Guide Online* which helps seniors, their adult children and industry professionals in their search online for housing, home care and other options to help during an ageing challenge has also reported a rise in activity of seniors on social media (PRWeb, 2012).

Digital divide is however still a reality due to dynamicity of new media technologies. Digital divide refers to the gap between those people and communities who have access to information communication technology (ICT) and those who lack, as well as the disparity in the intensity and nature of IT among groups (Aphek, 2001). Even in digitally developed countries people that have access to ICT skills tend to be younger, better educated, living in urban areas and earn more money than people without access and skills (Van Dijk, 2005, Lorence & Park 2006). In Korea, digital divide is notable on the greater utilization by men than women and by urban residents than rural residents. While 90% of Koreans under age 30 are online, only 28% of 50-year-old and 16% of 60-year-old were online in 2006 (NIDA, 2009).

Internet Usage by Age Group. Source: National Internet Development Agency of Korea (2009)

Age group	10-19	20-29	30-29	40-49-	50-59	60 and older
Internet usage	95.5%	90%	86.4%	58.3%	27.6%	16.2%

It is important to recognize that there are challenges that seniors face in using media technology (van Dijk, 2005). Under the pressure of rapidly changing society particularly in the context of media convergence, older persons may easily develop anxieties and hence become technophobic. They are likely to experience difficulties resulting from low awareness of pros and cons of media technology, scarce senior related marketing on the media and inappropriate design of digital equipment since most of these devices are designed and marketed to attract young buyers (Independent Age, 2010).

III.   MEDIA INFORMATION AND FORMATION

Non-Neutrality of Media Images and Messages

Media portrayals change the way people perceive information and also shapes the way that they act and interact in its presence. Media form basic perceptions as much as they inform, educate or entertain. Claude Fischer (in Baym, 2010) states that technology imprints itself on users since whenever someone uses technology to receive and send information, they are not only receiving the information intended to be sent but also the "characteristics" of technology (p. 26).

From the contention that there is no neutrality in media contents leads to a call for cultural engagement—a deliberate, thought-out, philosophically-consistent activity proactively designed to examine media-mediated perspectives. In the fields of ageing and media, engaging the culture means attentiveness to the existing presuppositions and readiness to transform negative image of older persons to a positive image through the media. The place of the media in constructing, reinforcing and pacifying undesirable images of the elderly is also evident. Therefore, the quest to re-examine and positively transform media's portrayals of older persons is a vital necessity. Equipping journalists to shape a holistic worldview of ageing begins from recognition that there is no neutrality in media's role of socialization and assigning connotations. Any claimed neutrality in media images and messages only reflects an incorrect understanding of the media (Taylor &Harris, 2008). As Couldry (2000) observes, "The media process does not merely interact with the rest of society; [rather], it has a major impact on how the rest of society understands and imagines itself" (p. 54). The images and messages journalists or editors choose to use in regard to ageing may reinforce casual or systematic ageism-stereotyping.

Rim (2013) notes that ageing has had some negative nicknames; "demographic time bomb" and "age-quake" (para. 4). When rapidly ageing societies are preoccupied with finding solutions for the challenges of low fertility and ageing, there is likelihood to approach the whole issue as a "problem". In capitalist societies where the premium is put on economic productivity, older persons who are required to withdraw from production chain are often perceived as dependent hence economic and social burdens. According to Hazan (1994), the fact that the aged are isolated, constrained and "transformed into dependent human beings is not the consequence of objective difficulties in functioning but the result of fundamental dilemmas concerning the perception of the aged and the acquisition of knowledge about them" (p. 82).

This reductionist perspective of seeing ageing as problematic rather than a realistic appreciation of a natural biological process calls for a shift in our cultural perception. Che Min Rim, the Minister of Health and Welfare of Republic of Korea cautions that "The answers [to the challenges of low fertility and ageing] are likely to be negative if we look at things from the current socio-economic framework" (Rim, 2013, para. 23). Shifting from a 'problem view' to an 'opportunity view' of ageing entail a reflection, a response and commitment in addressing the factors leading to low fertility and population ageing. The uncertainty about future demographic and economic developments should compel

stakeholders to think of "adaptable or self-correcting policies to address population ageing" (Ermisch, 2008, p. 35-36). For Christians, the call towards a holistic view of ageing should be more assuring since believers are commanded to honor the elderly and also to share in their burdens (Exodus, 20: 12; Galatians, 6:2).

Negative View of Seniors in Children's Programs

Academics are beginning to recognize the scale of media's power in instilling bad images of the older persons in children through colorful animations and cartoons. A study of seven decades of *Disney Classics* concluded that the persistent portrayal of the older persons as rogues and old hags could lead to children developing a negative impression of seniors (MacRae, 2007). Some children programs aired at their foundational age could be responsible for forming and reinforcing negative stereotypes of the older persons. Media's portrayals of the elderly characters as absent-minded, ill-tempered, hapless, sinister or weak in children narratives (printed or audio-visual), is potential in constructing wrong attitude and treatment of the older persons.

Researchers have discovered that negative portrayals of older persons are automatic or subliminal (Robinson, Callister, Magoffin, & Moore, 2007). The individual view and attitudes toward older persons are learned social responses from the cultural practices as well as past experiences or contact with the elderly. Many young people acquire negative stereotypes of ageing due to emphasis of youthfulness in regard to beauty and wellness. According to Seefeldt and Ahn (1990) children fear the thought of growing old because older persons are always characterized as uglier, dirtier, less helpful, and less healthy than the youth. Television programs and advertising contents often depend on stereotypes to portray characters that appeal to viewers' sensations (Signorielli & Morgan, 2001).

Langer (2009) suggests that age-based stereotypes are often adopted in childhood even before the message is individually relevant to the children. Referred to as pre-mature cognitive commitment (PCC), these coded language embedded in media leads audience to accept certain beliefs unconditionally (Nelson, 2002). Media's images and messages tend to produce a subtle but pervasive ways for enhancing certain worldviews (Harris and Taylor, 2008). In addition, media tend to operate "liturgically" (Smith, 2009, p. 25). To say media are liturgical in nature is to identify the tendency of images and messages in media as being repetitive and profoundly pedagogical for forming and reshaping how we see and interact with the world (Boeder, 2005). When media uses undesirable portrayals in children programming, negative stereotypes get entrenched more deeply, both consciously and subconsciously.

Media influence is virtually inescapable. Adults too are impacted by media images since media are not only critical for communicating the meanings and experiences about ageing but also plays a significant role in shaping the agenda for conversing ageing matters. This may create a challenge to parenting if the parents themselves are unaware of the negative media portrayals of older persons.

Commodification of Older Persons

Commodification is a process through which social relations are reduced to an exchange relation or what Karl Marx (1978) refers to in the *Communist Manifesto* as "callous 'cash payment'." It is also defined as the transformation of a non-commodity into a commodity or to assign a monetary value to something that traditionally would not be considered in monetary terms, for example, an idea, identity, gender or age group. At the heart of commodification is consumption. As Powell and Longino (2002) assert, "…consumer society tends to reinforce negative language and images of later life" (p. 222). This way, commodification encourages older persons to demonstrate the same consumer habits as the young people.

Even when the media portray older persons in a positive light, it is often designed to depict anti-ageing messages usually for-profit agenda. The push for an "ideal" look particularly in older woman also impacts on how they see themselves. Milner, Van Norman and Milner (2012) observe that, "It leads to issues that have people denying ageing, so going to great lengths to continue to look like that ideal of a youthful person" (p. 27).

Print, electronic and online media can also endorse ideas about older people as "the other" by constructing their own identities (usually of the young people) different from that of seniors. The stereotype of perceiving older persons "as a homogenous group with special needs has exerted a considerable influence on both public attitudes and social policies towards this group" (Walker, 1983, p. 389).

Advertisers often use the term "grey market" or "baby boomers market" to design relatively positive images and messages primarily for commercial purposes (Milner, Van Norman & Milner, 2012). Commercial-motivated images emanate from economic rationalistic worldview; a notion that if something is good for the economy (profit) it is unarguably good and can be pursued. This worldview tends to explain aspects of reality and human relationships from an economic perspective; essentially commodifying human relationships (Baran & Davis, 2009).

When the media focus on the needs and the gaps presented by the growing population of the elderly yet overlook the productivity and opportunities that ageing phenomenon presents, they are likely to approach the entire subject negatively. As social identity theory holds, negative stereotyping and discrimination involves "categorization", "identification", and "comparison" among people to heighten self-images and justify discrimination of "the other" (Tajfel, 1981, Nelson, 2002). When individuals claim to know something, they are bound to reproduce the information consistent with what the media have popularized. Since media depictions of ageing are largely negative, except when commodified, media's images and messages contribute to forming cultural perception where people consciously or subconsciously absorb negative narrative on ageing. These undesirable portrayals also shape how older persons see themselves and how they are treated.

IV.   TOWARD A HOLISTIC VIEW OF AGEING

The phenomenon of ageing has been understood and addressed from varying perspectives across all

cultures. Ageing has been described as both a social construct and a natural biological process since it encompasses a broad spectrum of experiences. Old age as a life stage is a socially constructed phenomenon though it is determined biologically. Since social agents construct identities through the identity of others, old age is constructed through being young and youth is a construct of the knowledge of old age (Powell, 2006). The media play a significant role is constructing or propagating certain understanding of ageing. Recognizing the influence of the media, *UN Report of the Expert Group Meeting on Rights of Older Persons* recommends the use of the media to create positive image of older persons (2009).

Developing a holistic worldview of ageing in media goes beyond examining and practicing the traditional functions of the media to inform, educate, persuade, entertain and setting agenda for deliberations. To create a philosophical shift in understanding ageing means exploring media's transformative capacity to shape cultural perspectives—negatively or positively (Kamary, 2013). In this regard, media professions require to be sensitized on the media's common depictions of seniors as ill-informed, frail or stubborn because these characterizations only help to reinforce a negative image of the older persons and broader misunderstanding of ageing phenomenon. It robs them of their God-given dignity.

There is also a need to acknowledge the place of worldview framework in all of human existence since a journalist's (and other media content producers) fundamental view of ageing determines the images and messages they use to depict an older person. When worldview is understood as "the totality of the culturally structured images and assumptions (including value and commitment or allegiance assumptions) in terms of which a people both perceive and respond to reality" (Kraft (2008, p. 12), reassessing the consequences of terminologies and imageries used in portraying older persons becomes relevant.

Most journalists operate on the basis of popular assumptions about reality and they may have never had a chance to reflect on what it means to grow old successfully with dignity and respect. Like any person, news reporters or advertisers are also vulnerable to the popular yet negative suppositions proliferated in the mainstream media. Media carry edited realities as perceived by editors and often to suit the agenda of those who design media contents. The goals of training those who form images in media, content producers, require good discernment aimed at a better understanding of the ageing process vis-à-vis a holistic view of human beings and the inviolability of life.

Realistic understanding of ageing as a natural phase in one's life cycle can allow media experts to meaningfully motivate the society to comprehend an edifying view of seniors as contributive to the society's socio-economic framework. Significantly, media content producers can be trained to work with older persons they intend to characterize. Since dissemination of information about ageing requires good understanding of the subject, there is even a greater need for collaborative training with multidisciplinary approaches directed at developing a positive view of ageing.

To achieve a holistic view of ageing, a comprehensive, foundational and unifying biblical worldview

is necessary. A biblical worldview, also referred to as reformational worldview assumes that there is a significant faith or worldview component at the core of media perspectives and practices, and that this is best critiqued in the light of biblical norms and presuppositions (Wolters & Goheen, 2005). This perspective views the whole world as belonging to God and that God sustains the cosmos by His power. God created humans being with the potential and ability to form and develop cultural institutions such as family, education, justice, economics, politics and media. The cosmos is however impacted by sin and is in need of redemption. Christians are to engage ageing issues and do it responsibly as stewards in a God-honoring way.

Equipping Media Professionals

From the contention that education/training is not a neutral activity but involves formation of fundamental life-views, it is essential to re-examine the values which education imparts to media professionals. Such a reflection embodies the meaning and significance of the human experience and relationships. Education, not just for media related courses, should be aimed at promoting a comprehensive view of reality which recognizes the sanctity of human beings across all ages. Christian worldview offers such an approach because life is considered as God's gift. Education, from a Christian view, is understood not only as an informing but also a forming process; it is a value laden practice that nurtures both the mind and the heart.

Thus, creating a platform for sharing experiences with seniors from a biblically consistent view is imperative when equipping media professions. When journalists see the world from a creation-fall-redemption lens, they are able to seek God's wisdom as they operated within God's big story in their cultures. This will enable effective engagement of the overall socio-cultural-economic-environmental and political nature of ageing phenomenon. Preparing media content producers to grasp the scale of media's transformative capability via dissemination images and identities creates an opportunity for self-critiquing in relation to how one describes and treats others in the way that honor God.

Equipping media professions for the improvement senior's image in mass media also involves development of a holistic view of communication. As Carey (1989) states, communication involves a complex cultural context. Carey appreciates the fact that the society exists by communication and not only by transmission of information. He recognizes that communication goes beyond the traditional view of mass communication which emphasizes a linear transmission of information (like news content or advertisement) rather than an embodiment of cultural features and values. It is therefore necessitating that media workers develop all-inclusive view communication. This will enable them to be part of the effort of shaping desirable view of ageing through mass communication. Positive image of seniors means the affirmation of the basic integrity of human life and the necessity for a collaborative effort in appreciating ageing as a natural process. A "ritual" view of communication (Carey, 1989) applied to ageing, entails a quest for greater quality of life in the midst of the natural cycles of life and death, growth and diminishment, love and loss, joy and grief within the cultural framework. A proper perspective of what it means to commune and communicate can lead to the recognition that ageing is in fact a manifestation of maturing quality of life affirming the sanctity of

human existence and continuity.

To change the negative image of ageing in media requires a broader cultural shift as far as foundational life views are concerned. Academics in the field of ageing agree that there is need for a different philosophy of what it means to be old. Troisi (2012) contends that it is essential to develop a new philosophy of ageing where older persons are regarded as contributors to the socio-economic and political development of the society and not merely as beneficiaries. Media personnel are to be encouraged to actively involve older persons in the planning, running of media programs as well as 'talents'. To achieve a holistic image of ageing, participation of seniors is critical since the older persons themselves are the best agents of social change in so far as the phenomenon of ageing is concerned (Troisi, 2013).

Any attempt to equip journalists with a biblical worldview of what it means to grow in relation to ageing process, must consider the inevitable influence of media and the need for redemptive practices. In fact, as McLuhan (1967) noted, all media exist to fill our lives with perceptions and arbitrary values. McLuhan's claim that the media is so pervasive in its personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical and social consequences that it leaves no part of us untouched, unaffected or unaltered, is evident in modern life. Engaging the media, a powerful 'culture-shaping' tool, is both significance and essential for Christians seeking to be salt and light.

Biblical Insights on Ageing

According to Potthoff (1990), God is present in the experiences not only of joy, growth and becoming, but also in the experiences of loss, adversity, diminishment and death. Good ageing involves hallowing every day since God has given believers the gift of life one day at a time. The glory of a life well-lived is the glory of single days well-lived. Christians are encouraged to appreciate the day which the Lord has made and rejoice in it. In the Scriptures we read "So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom" (Psalms 90:12 New International Version). Riley (2005) suggests that as we grow older, we need to consider that "how" we grow old is far more important than how "old" we grow. He offers some helpful biblical perspectives of ageing:

> 1). God wants us to grow old wisely – Job said, "Wisdom is with aged men, with long life is understanding" (Job 12:12). The lessons of hardship, success and failure we learn in life should be passed on to the younger generation (Psalm 71:17-18) and hopefully the younger generation will have enough wisdom to listen (Proverbs 2:1-2).

> 2). God wants us to grow old righteously – The Proverb writer tells us, "The silver-haired head is a crown of glory, If it is found in the way of righteousness" (Proverbs 16:31 – NKJV). May God bless the older man or woman who, day by day, grows more closely into the likeness of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:15; Gal. 2:20).

> 3). God wants us to grow old in serving Him – Luke tells us of the prophetess Anna who,

at the age of 84 "….did not depart from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day" (Luke 2:37 – NKJV). A member of the Lord's church was heard saying, "All I can do is pray." All I can do? My, how we underestimate the power of prayer in our lives! (Ephesians 6:18; cf. Luke 18:1-8; Romans 12:12; Colossians 4:2).

4). God wants us to grow old trusting Him – God promised to His people, "Even to your old age I shall be the same, And even to your greying years I shall bear you! I have done it, and I shall carry you; And I shall bear you and I shall deliver you" (Isaiah 46:4 – NASV). (Riley, 2005, para. 2)

Growing older is a natural process (Ecclesiastes 12:1-6). It is important therefore understand how we should grow old from God's own perspective. Even where the aged among us face physical and psychological challenges as they often do, Christians are called to "Bear one another's burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ" (Galatians, 6: 2). A Christian view of ageing should therefore cultivate love and nurture for those whom society neglects. Richmond (n.d.) observes that the driving force behind the establishment of hospitals and care homes in many of the present hospital and public health systems was to 'reduce burden'. This notion of viewing older persons as a crisis and the thought of avoiding one another's burden is unbiblical and brings harm to the body of Christ. If indeed there is any truth in McLuhan's (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967) claim that the "medium is the message", then the message of the gospel is conveyed by the medium of the believers' everyday life in the world. Believers are a direct reflection of Jesus Christ, God's medium sent to be— "not just to proclaim" (Hipps, 2009, p. 169)—a message of healing (even to distorted images of the elderly) and hope to the world across all ages.

V.   CONCLUSION

There is no neutrality in the media content. Images and messages of ageing in the media reflect suppositions about reality embedded in certain worldviews. When media portrayals of older persons are predominantly negative, there is need to evaluate the fundamental life perspectives which media professionals hold and operate with. One way of promoting a holistic understanding of reality, including in ageing phenomenon, is to biblically understand and define an older person. This leads to a critique of the role of media in shaping either positive or negative views of ageing. If indeed there is a strong desire to achieve positive portrayal of old persons in media, then media specialists and contented producers must be engaged and trained from an authentic worldview perspective. More so, if media's role is indeed to give voice to the voiceless, then the media fraternity must take its place and address the issues of seniors from a holistic perspective, recognizing the challenges which older persons face originating from rapid social changes. At the same time, media content producers and disseminators can acknowledge the contribution of older persons in the society—as carriers and promulgators of cultural heritage and their contribution in other area socio-economic and political advancements.

To inculcate and promote a holistic image of the elderly, it is indispensable to involve both the media practitioners and seniors in deliberations and policy formulation on ageing. This will require collaborative effort to enhance research and training to strengthen and expand the existing inadequate research on the role of media and education in forming fundamental perceptions of reality and ageing. If understood biblically, ageing is an inevitable process and can be cherished gracefully in God-honoring way. Ageing as a biological process is dignified, elegant, attractive and engaging. When the elderly are perceived as the carriers of cultural values, custodians of wisdom, servants in God's kingdom and as significant generational link, their place in the society can be portrayed honorably even amid the natural fragility associated with old age.

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