

Proliferation of broadcast stations in Nigeria, its effects on news commercialization and citizens' access to the media

*ANDREW ALI IBBI, PH.D. & **IKADERINYO IBAMBO FUROMFATE, PH.D.

Abstract

This study sought to examine proliferation of broadcast stations in Nigeria and to determine the extent of citizens' access to the media. The paper also investigated news commercialisation and its impact on the broadcast industry, audience and the journalism profession. The study is a conceptual study and is bed rocked within the framework of two communication theories that are somewhat related; the Democratic Participant Media Theory and the Uses and Gratification Theory. The study used library research as methodology. The study found that proliferation of broadcast stations provided the audience with wider latitude of choice of programmes and stations/channels. It also discovered that proliferation of broadcast stations has brought about an interactive programming; a new innovation which has engendered effective audience participation. The study recommended among other things that the broadcast regulator (NBC) should set up effective monitoring strategy with a view to making broadcast stations socially responsible.

Key Words: News Commercialization Broadcasting Proliferation Interactivity Citizens' Access

Introduction

The mass media are basically classified into two broad categories: The electronic media and the print media. The electronic media which is the focus of this study consists of the radio, TV and Film. Radio is an auditory medium and appeals primarily to the ear; while television is an audio-visual medium; meaning that it appeals to the senses of sight and sound and often described as a demonstrative medium. Broadcasting has played remarkable role in the society since its inception as a genre of mass communication. It has a relatively potential influence on the audience and is regarded as the most powerful mass media against the backdrop of its penetrative, propagative, persuasive and socialising nature. Commenting on the nature of broadcasting, Ogwumike (as cited in Ihejirika & Ochonogor, 2014 p.127) States that "the medium has the potential of reaching the largest number of people simultaneously". Broadcasting also known as the electronic media consist traditionally of radio, television, film and lately new media forms through the internet.

Broadcasting was made possible as a result of the maximization of the potentials of the electromagnetic spectrum. Consequently, broadcasting has also been defined from the

technical point of view thus: "It could also be defined from an engineering perspective" as the encoding of information into a given channel of communication system in the electromagnetic spectrum by modulating the energy" (Okon, 2001, p.215). Further, lending credence to the above statement, Okunna (1999, p.66) informs that, basically, this technology involves the use of a transmitter which generate waves (electromagnetic impulses) that carry voice transmissions or messages which make up radio and television programmes".

Operationally, broadcasting is the transmission of voice (audio) or video (image) content simultaneously to heterogeneously dispersed audience via technological device. Basically, it involves radio and television, in recent times, radio and television transmission has begun to be distributed by cable and through satellite.

Extant literature records that the historical development of broadcasting in Nigeria has been a gradual but interesting process and could be traced to the relaying of programmes which originated from the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) from Daventry, England. It started in Lagos with redistribution (rediffusion) service in 1932 when individual homes were connected to the station

Authors' Bio

- Andrew Ali Ibibi, Ph.D., is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Mass Communication, University of Africa, Toru-Orua, Bayelsa State, Nigeria. He holds a B.Sc (Mass Communication), M.Sc (Mass Communication and Ph.D (Mass Communication) with specialization in Broadcasting and Film. His areas of research interest are: new media, film induced tourism and community broadcasting.
- ** Ikaderinyo Ibambo Furomfate, Ph.D., is a Lecturer in the Department of Mass Communication, University of Africa, Toru-Orua, Bayelsa State, Nigeria. He holds a B.Sc (Mass Communication), M.A (Communication Studies) and Ph.D (Communication Studies) with specialization in Development Communication. His area of research interest is rural development.

through wire. These homes had only listening boxes (loudspeaker) with a control knob. Listeners then had no choice of stations and programmes. Although, listeners paid small amount as subscription fee. The rediffusion service became the only broadcast channel of information dissemination in the country. Omega and Ochonogor (2014, p.8) argue that “the introduction of radio into Nigeria served the British Colonial Servant in the West African Colonies to keep Colonial Officers abreast with events in their home country.”

Unlike radio, Television Broadcasting began in Nigeria through regional initiative in 1959 when the government of the former Western Region started the first television broadcast in both Nigeria and Africa called the Western Nigerian Television (WNTV). Other regions followed with the former Eastern region establishing the Eastern Nigerian Television (ENTV) in Enugu and Northern region respectively in 1961 and 1962. The federal Government in 1962 also established its own broadcasting Service (NTS) in Lagos.

Broadcasting in Nigerian has evolved with varying degree of changes in terms of ownership, control, structure and pattern. Prior to the promulgation of decree No. 38 of 1992 by General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida’s administration, ownership and operations of broadcast stations in Nigerian was the exclusive preserve of the government. Broadcasting was under strict regulation by government owing to the pervasive nature of broadcasting (Omega & Ochonogor, 2014). Broadcasting entered a new era with the promulgation of the above stated decree No. 38 of 1992, which also gave birth to the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC). This brought about the deregulation of broadcasting in Nigeria, thereby, permitting private investors to own and operate radio and television stations. In essence it marked the turning point of broadcast ownership and operations in the country.

Proliferation of broadcast station is an offshoot of deregulation of broadcasting. By extrapolation it means that there is availability of many broadcast stations. It is however presumed that proliferation of broadcast stations would provide the citizens increase access to the media.

Statement of the Problem

The mass media which consist of the print and the broadcast media has been described as a window through which we perceive of the world outside our immediate environment. This presupposes that citizens to a large extent depend on the media for information. To achieve this fundamental objective

continuously providing information and creating citizens access to the broadcast media in particular, there has to be the availability of media outlet. Scholars argue that, proliferation of broadcast station would engender citizens’ access to the media in an ideal situation.

However, every media house has social and economic interest they protect, for any media house to remain afloat, financial involvement is required. This implies that media organisations as business enterprise has a proclivity for profit making.

In the circumstances above, a disturbing situation has been observed in the media industry’s emerging scenario; for instance, broadcasting in Nigeria and the world over is the practice of treating news as a commodity. This ugly trend of news commercialisation tends to have redefined the traditional concept of what constitute news among scholars and media practitioners. A situation where even news of community based self-help projects are to be paid for defy professional ethics and aberration of the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) code

The question then arises would news commercialisation not impede citizens’ access to the media? Put differently, how free are the broadcast stations for citizens to access information considering the emerging trend of news commercialisation? - treating news as a commodity. What justification for citizens’ access to the media and societal information needs to be sacrificed on the altar of news commercialisation, when broadcast stations air only paid news? The problem of this study is therefore preconceived in the foregoing.

Theoretical Review

This study is anchored on two theories: one media theory (Democratic Participant Media Theory) and one audience theory (Uses and Gratification Theory). Generally, media theory provides normative views on how the media are owned, operated and controlled. While audience theories usually focus on explanation of how the audience accesses the media, how they use the media and the effects of the media on them.

Democratic Participant Media Theory: This theory is a recent addition to the normative theory of the press and shares some commonality with the development media theory. It started in the 1960’s and McQuail is its proponent. Its proposition is that the media should serve everybody and everybody be given access to the media.

According to Folarin (1998, pp. 29-30), “the main thrust of the democratic participant media theory lies in its insistence that the existing bureaucracy as well as commercial and professional hegemony in media systems be broken down, so as to guarantee easier media access for all potential users and consumers”

The central point of this theory lies with the needs, interests and aspirations of the active receiver in a political society. It is concerned with the right to information, the right to answer back the right to use the means of communication for interaction in the small scale settings of the community (Hasan 2014, p.172).

Also McQuail (1983:98), KuncZick (1988:49) as cited in Folarin (1998, p.30), pointed out thus, “it reflected public reaction against the commercialization and monopolization of the privately owned media and against the centralism and bureaucratization of public broadcasting institution”.

This theory is relevant to this study in the sense that it favours multiplicity of media, citizens’ access to the media and a remonstrance against news commercialisation.

Uses and Gratification Theory: this theory was said to have been developed by Katz and Blumer in 1974. The main thrust and general assumptions of the theory rest on the notion of active audience, not a powerless audience. This implies that audience consciously choose and use specific media and content to achieve certain results. Accordingly, Wilson and Balta (2019, p.97) affirm that “the theory deals with uses to which different individuals put the media and the gratifications they derive from such media.

Further studies and conceptualization into the Uses and Gratification theory have shown that audience satisfaction can be derived from three sources: media content, exposure to the media and social context. Giving credence to this, Nwachukwu, Asak and Asadu (2013, p.69) inform that “gratification can be obtained from a medium’s content (for example accessing a particular website) from general exposure to the medium (accessing the Internet) and from the social context in which it is used (accessing the Internet with friends).”

This theory is very apt to the study. Therefore, the relevance of this theory lies in the fact that audience being perceived as active determine what

media and message to access, receive and how to make use of the media content. Considering the heterogeneous composition of the Nigerian public, the demand for variety in content cannot be met by the government broadcast stations that had dominated the broadcast industry before 1992. This implies that the proliferation of broadcast stations across the country gives the audience the opportunity to choose the station that they feel they can get gratification from.

Proliferation of Broadcast Stations

The concept proliferation of broadcast stations falls within the purview of two related terms deregulation and liberalization of the broadcast industry (electronic media). Liberalization is a term most often used in describing any process whereby a government lifts restrictions on some public or private activities. Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2011 defines deregulation as the act or process of removing restrictions and regulations.

At this juncture, it is germane to attempt an operational definition of these terms as it is applied in this study to generate a clear and expanded meaning here: Deregulation of broadcasting is the process whereby government allows private investors to own and operate radio and television station (media outlet). Liberalization and deregulation in the context of this discourse means the same thing and it is just a matter of semantics.

In this respect, the focus is on proliferation of broadcast stations. Proliferation generally is conceived as the growth by increase in number. Relating it to the broadcast industry, it means the rapid increase in the ownership and operations of broadcast stations by private investors and government. Proliferation of broadcast stations has brought about dynamic and dramatic socio-economic and political changes in Nigeria. The coming on stream of private broadcast stations has brought about a more balance reporting; a clear indication of yielding positive impact. Nigerians can now choose what to watch or listen to from a variety of available options. From 1992 when the deregulation of broadcast stations came into effect in Nigeria till now, the number of radio and television stations have continued to be on the increase every year. According to infoguidenigeria.com’s report of 2017, there are 103 public and private television stations in Nigeria. The Institute of Media and Society in 2018 stated that there were 103 government and private radio stations in the country. More licenses have been given to more broadcast station owners since then. This is a huge increase when compared to the few state and federal government owned

broadcast stations across the states of the federation before 1992.

Citizens' Access to the Media

Here, the study examines citizens' access to the media in relation to proliferation of broadcast stations in the era of news commercialization. News commercialization as used in this study means treating news as a commodity. The focus as well as scope of this study is on the broadcast media. The broadcast media by their nature is a pragmatic platform for letting the people know how they are being governed and in turn allows the citizens to express their views, and opinions on issues that affect them. Scholars are of the opinion that proliferation of broadcast stations could engender citizens' access to the media in an ideal situation. Proliferation of broadcast stations presupposes citizens' right to be informed and to enjoy their right of access to the media. However, with the commercialization of news, there is a strong indication of a pattern in gathering, processing and dissemination of news. Consequently, news is being treated as a commodity, while conventional news determinants paved way for how much money exchanges hand.

In this regard, to what extent are the citizens' gained access to the media when for every news citizens' are requested to pay certain amount as a prerequisite for it to be aired

Sambe (2008, P.264) points out thus; "they should not impede access to the media". Also, FCC commissioner and democrat Jonathan Adelstein in Baran (2013) argued:

the public has a right to be informed by a diversity of viewpoints so they can make up their own minds. Without a diverse, independent media, Citizens' access to information crumbles along with political and social participation. We should encourage the widest possible dissemination of free expression through our media (p.43)

This has brought to the fore the importance of citizens' access to the media. However, the citizens' right to information or citizens' access to the media is a two edged sword, this implies that absolute freedom without responsibility is detrimental to society.

Talking about citizens' access to the media, contemporary broadcast interactive programming has created a wide latitude of access to the media and has engendered effective audience

participation. Commenting on this Akpan and Snam (2012) sated thus:

Access implies a two-pronged action: the media organization should put in place methods of interactivity while the public should have the means to avail themselves of such facilities. In Nigeria, however, this two-pronged action is deficient. Neither the broadcast organizations are able to put in place effective means of interactivity that reach out to where their audiences are located nor the audiences able, perhaps due to geographic location or household income to access the methods of interactivity a station has made available (P. 139-153).

Access to the media through interactive programming is conditional owing to certain necessary preconditions which include; having the appropriate telecommunication technology for interaction, geographic location, and household income to access the methods of interactivity made available by broadcast stations etc. Citizens' access to the media, to a large extent has been impeded by news commercialization of broadcast stations, as even news of self-help community based projects has to be paid for.

Prospects of Proliferation of Broadcast Stations

There is a strong indication of a pattern in broadcasting prevalent with the proliferation of broadcast stations. This has engendered a new style and language in broadcasting. The following are some of the prospects of the proliferation of broadcast station.

1. It engenders creativity: Broadcasting is a very large, significant and influential aspect of the mass media; and as such requires journalists to be highly creative. Oketunmbi (2007) described one of the gains of proliferation of broadcast station thus: Another visible gain of liberalization is a higher altitude in creativity. This is so as the audience gets sophisticated by the day with new technologies and emerging media convergence. Creativity is looked at as the ability of broadcasters/ broadcast stations transform the traditional programming pattern to a more dynamic and interactive programming to be in tune with modernity, cognizance of the socio-economic, political and environmental factors. It has introduced

new style with a dynamic and varied format in broadcasting.

- b. Creating a new media organization. The organizational structure is different from the traditional format
 - c. creating new language or genre. Proliferation of broadcast stations has brought about the introduction of a new language that enables all categories of audiences to understand and flow with the programme, e.g. some broadcast stations use Pidgin English in their programming while others use the Standard English.
2. It gives audience wider latitude of choice. Audience can now tune from one station to another to listen or watch a programme that appeals to them. In other word, it widens the viewer's option in terms of choice of stations and programmes. The new era of broadcasting in Nigeria is characterized by a widespread awareness of the struggle for audience and intense competition. The government owned broadcast stations should re modify their traditional pattern of feeding the public with only government programmes and activities or refrain from praise singing and bootlicking journalism.
 - 3.
 4. It has brought about new innovation that could be described as interactive and participatory programming. In broadcasting, programming is a sine qua non in sustaining audience (listeners/viewers). It is the process of determining and scheduling the contents of broadcast operations. Interactivity in broadcasting is a widely participatory program where audiences are allowed to make contributions and express their opinions through phone in, tweets, whatsapp and email with almost immediate feedback. Interaction with the audience has become a feature of modern day broadcasting.

Akpan and Senam (2012) assert that:

Unlike in the early days of mass communication that audience participation through feedback would take sometime to occur. ICTs have brought the audience closer to the source of mass communication messages in a lively and productive relationship that has enhanced

programming and programme content (p.139-153).

Further, contributing to this, Watson and Hill (2006, p.137) as cited in Akpan & Senam contend that "technology enhances interactivity, allows the audience to respond to programmes in ways, "ranging from seeking contact with programme makers or providing instant feedback..." (p. 139)

Akpan & Senam (2012) identifies eight methods of interactivity, they include: letters, vox pops, phone-in, short message service (sms), E-mail, pre-recorded material, studio guests and experts and social media sites.

Benefit of Broadcast Interactivity.

- a) It generates awareness
- b) It enhances dissemination of useful information from the audience to the broadcaster and to other listeners
- c) It encourages active audience participation.
- d) It makes broadcast programme lively
- e) It could promote sustained behavioural changes.

However, Interactive programming is not without problems. Some of the problems associated with it are outlined as follows:

- a) Technical deficiency and technological insufficiency
 - b) On air ethics
 - c) Gate keeping problems: it misinforms
 - d) Problem of access to the media.
 - e) Problem of overrated and egoistic experts
4. It reduces taboo subject: Certain issues in society are regarded as a taboo to be discussed in public but with the proliferation of broadcast stations, subjects like abortion, sex etc are now both discussed publicly. In this regard, king (1994, p.48) points out that "the proliferation of radio and TV talk shows, all raising subjects never mentioned in living rooms before. Discussing such issues in a participatory and interactive manner demystify them and enhance quick and better understanding.
 5. Proliferation of broadcast stations widens the scope of advertisers to do a proper audience assessment using cost per thousand (CPM) which provides relevant information and effective cost management to reach the largest number of people.

Challenges of Proliferation of the Broadcast Stations

1. It whittles down professionalism: Ethics of broadcasting prescribe that everything in programming has to be written down and edited before airing. Most of the radio stations today, do not have a news editor, but just a director of news. Also Interactive programming in some radio stations such as Wazobia, Nigeria Info in Port-Harcourt, Rhythm 93.7 and Creek Fm in Bayelsa State where a disk jockey in the morning picks a story and narrates it to the audience (listeners) for them to participate by making contribution or to express their opinion about the topic. Because it is a phone-in programme many callers go beyond the scope; in some instances, participants use foul language, engage in name calling, attempts at casting aspersion on people and on television, some tweets, e-mail or send whatsapp messages that are tantamount to violation of professional ethics. These broadcast stations often times use fewer number of staffs. Does this in any way encourage professionalism?

2. Proliferation of broadcast stations has brought about concentration and conglomeration of ownership thereby encouraging preponderance of hegemonic ideas in society.

Baran (2013) Contends that:

“There is a crisis,” said FCC Commissioner Michael Copps (2011), ‘when more than one-third of our commercial broadcasters offer little to no news whatsoever to their communities of license. America’s news and information resources keep shrinking and hundreds of stories that could inform our citizens go untold and, indeed, undiscovered (p.175-176).

This is akin to the concept of oligopolistic dominance – a situation where few individuals of like minds and interest controls the mass media; in this case the broadcast media. For instance, in Nigeria, today, we have AIT, Channels, Silverbird and TVC as obvious examples of oligopolistic dominance. These media outfits own both radio and TV Stations.

3. Signal Interference: The Proliferation of broadcast has brought about increase signals overlap, jamming and interference. Some broadcast stations do not operate on the

broadcast signals or the frequency(ies) allocated to them. For instance, a hypothetical Radio Station – Radio Naija licensed to broadcast on 95.5 megahertz on the frequency modulated band would sometimes be received with a varying degree of clarity on the frequency 92.1 to 4. The effect of this is that there would be intermittent signal interference with other radio stations on a given frequency range.

4. Other sundry problem of the proliferation of the broadcast stations is that audience may get confused and develop apathy; too many stations and programmes create psychological trauma leading to information overload.

News Commercialisation

The term Commercialisation and news commercialisation in media studies need to be put in proper perspective to avoid equivocation and ambiguities. Commercialisation is a general term which is used to describe the process of transforming a non-trading or non-profit making organization into a profit driven enterprise. Applied to broadcasting, it implies the profit making motive of broadcast stations through sale of airtime to prospective advertisers, paid announcements etc to be financially self-sufficient.

On the other hand, news commercialisation has been defined by many scholars.

According to McManus (2009, p.219-220), news commercialisation is “any action intended to boost profit that interferes with a journalist or news organisations best effort to maximise public understanding of those issues and events that shape the community they claim to serve”.

Harrison (2006) contends that, “news commercialisation is an economic process of ‘commodification’ whereby media audience are primarily seen as consumers” (p. 100)

Further, Asogwa & Asemah (2012) cited in Nwosu and Ekwo, “describes news commercialisation as a phenomenon whereby the electronic media report as news or news analysis, a commercial message by an unidentified or identified sponsor giving the audience the impression that the news is fair, objective and socially responsible.

The postulations of these Scholars point to the fact that news is now treated as a commodity. Consequently, the ideas, programmes, events and activities of those who can afford become news worthy. This typifies a situation where the hegemonic class ideologies are subtly gathered, processed, packaged and disseminated as news. This is however, not without implications against

the backdrop of the tenets of the Social responsibility theory, professionalism, citizens' access to the media and media functionality precept. In this respect, sponsored information is presented to audience as a social or public service news. To buttress this position, MacBride and Colleague (1990) maintained that news is commercialized when "important developments especially in the country side are pushed aside by unimportant urban trivial news items concerning urban events and the activities of personalities".

However, Scholars have asserted that news commercialisation is a measure of improving the financial fortune of the media organisation. The question is, does the quest for financial gain a justification for news commercialisation?

Implication of News Commercialization

News commercialisation as a concept has far-reaching implications for the broadcast industry, the audience and the society because media does not operate in a vacuum, rather operates within the framework of a given society. They include:

1. Whittles down professionalism
2. Conventional news determinants are jettisoned; rather, money inducement has become news determinant.
3. News commercialization has impeded citizens right of access to the media
4. It erodes the credibility of broadcast stations
5. Imbalance information flow in the society
6. It negates the statutory functionality precepts of the press
7. Violation of National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) Code and Professional ethics.

Conclusion

It is worthy to note that the establishment and preponderance of diverse, independent and robust media are indispensable to citizens' access to the media. Proliferation of broadcast stations presupposes that citizens' will enjoy unfettered access to the media.

However, with the phenomenon of news commercialisation, there is a strong indication of a pattern in gathering, processing and dissemination of news. Consequently, news is being treated as a commodity. Conventional news determinants paved way for how much money exchanges hand. Nevertheless, proliferations of broadcast stations provide the audience with wide latitude of choice of programme/stations/channels, and has also brought about interactive programming which engenders active audience participation.

A Society where the citizens are restricted access to the media is stifled. Citizens' access to the media creates widespread awareness and bolsters information and communication flow. The prospects notwithstanding, news commercialisation is prized more than the interest of the audience, this scenario is seen to be in contra-distinction to the realities of 21st century broadcasting, where the audience is king and programmes are audience-dominated.

Further, it portends that only the rich get their ideas communicated to the public if for every news item and for any opinion you wish to express, you must pay for it. This in other words is referred to news commercialisation- treating news as a commodity. This is an apparent contradiction to the social responsibility function of the media.

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