CHALLENGES OF PROGRAMME CONTENT FOR DIGITAL BROADCAST: TARABA STATE TELEVISION IN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract
Television production is a dynamic art in the electronic media and it is central to contemporary entertainment and social trend in Nigeria. Television audiences consciously dissect professionalism from mediocrity and make choices of stations and programmes based on such indices. The exigency of switch over to digital platform by television stations across Nigeria is rife but how prepared are they? The quality of programmes is determined by the finances available for production and this is the bane of many producers who lack sponsorship by multinational organizations. The quality of programme content determines viewership and ultimately affects the revenue base of the organisations. Using Taraba State Television (TV Taraba) as a sample of a public television station and a case study, the research employed observation and oral interviews with programme producers, television station management and sections of television audiences to sample opinions on the subject for analysis. The paper concludes that the current economic recession experienced by such organizations can better be managed when critical decisions are made to solve the needs of equipment, staff welfare and training with an eye for future gains of the television entertainment business.

Introduction

The electronic media, particularly the television and radio, has active and engaging attribute that attracts significant audience. Its immediacy in terms of news and programmes on another level avail instant information or entertainment with the possibility of feedback from the audience. The audio-visual characteristic of television particularly makes it a magic medium which gives viewers access to the world from the comfort of their homes. Television images are memorable and stick to the mind because seeing is intrinsic to human nature and what one sees supersedes what one hears when committed to memory. The transitory nature of television news and entertainment draws audience on a race to keep up with timing schedule of programmes like drama series or live shows. The audience thus establishes some emotional attachment to anchors of television programmes or characters featured in drama or reality shows. This puts competition at the peak of the business of programme production where each producer looks out for ways to attract and sustain viewership. The viewership of a programme and by extension a television station determines the money it will make from sponsorship and advertisements. The increase in the number of television stations that are well positioned to deliver high quality programmes increases competition for viewership and public media stations are disadvantaged in this case primarily due to their dependence on the dictates of their sponsors.

Content refers to any material that is packaged for broadcast on television, radio or the internet via various social media platforms. While the television, radio and internet serve as the media of conveying the content to the target audience, the core of any form of broadcast is the content. It carries the message that the content designer wishes to share and this may reach the audience as news, drama series, talk show, movie, feature or documentary film and so on. Content management is critical to broadcasting because its design and choice of expression is determined by a number of factors such as target audience and the financial benefit to the stakeholders. The quality of content matters in broadcasting irrespective of the format adopted by the designer hence the subject of quality is considered in this discourse.

Television broadcasting in Nigeria started in Ibadan, the capital of the then Western Region on 31st October, 1959 with the establishment of the Western Nigeria Television, WNTV (Omosa 1). It is reputed as the first television station to be established in tropical Africa. The pioneer, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, amidst the perception by the people in the region that it was a wasteful venture, asserted that television will serve as a teacher and entertainer. Two other regional governments – the Eastern region launched Eastern Nigeria Broadcasting Service Television (ENBS-TV) and the Northern Nigeria Government established Radio Television Kaduna (RTK) in March, 1962. A month later, the Federal Government established Nigerian Television Service (NTS) in Lagos, bringing the number to four as at the early 1960s (Umeh 57). This competitive spirit in the establishment of these stations and the political aspirations they sought to promote via this potent medium kick started a process that has continued to evolve. The creation of states saw the establishment of state-owned television stations, leading to what Umeh described as proliferation of these organisations. He further posits that:

> One remarkable feature of the rapid growth in the number of television stations in Nigeria is the corresponding rapid growth in the number of both trained and untrained manpower for the industry. The Federal and State governments recruited a large number of indigenous television staff and many of these were sent to the United Kingdom, United States and other developed countries for professional television training. The resultant rapid increase in the number of trained television personnel in the country helped to bring about a remarkable increase in the number of locally made television programmes (59).

This sort of drive for training has significantly dropped particularly with the wave of recession that swept over the country, affecting the finances of states and the capacity of public media houses to perform optimally.

The establishment of Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) by the Federal Government was a major step in coordinating the broadcasting industry. This was especially evident during the second All Africa Games hosted by Nigeria in 1973. Coming together under the umbrella of Broadcasting Organisations of Nigeria (BON), all the stations were fed from a central pool for rebroadcasting instead of individual stations crowding the sports arena with their crew. *Decree No. 24 of 1977* conferred on NTA the exclusive right of broadcasting across the country in the spirit of promoting unity and reflection of the culture of each zone. Thus, NTA took over the existing television stations and added more in other state capitals where none existed as well as Abuja (Umeh 60). With the return to civilian administration in 1979, the decree was amended to become an Act and further gave the President the power to allow state governments own and operate television stations thus returning to the previous status. Many states took advantage of this deregulation and established their own television stations and by 1983, at least nine such stations were established by Anambra, Bendel, Imo, Kano, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Oyo and Plateau states. The proliferation of television stations got a corresponding increase in ownership of television sets in homes across Nigeria, boosted by the oil wealth that drove the economy at that period.

The promulgation of *Decree 38 of 1992* under General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida, now an act of the National Assembly, ended the monopoly of broadcasting in Nigeria and paved way for private ownership of media outfits. The same decree established the National Broadcasting Commission and charged it with the responsibility of regulating and deregulating broadcasting in the country (Balarabe 2767). The Commission was empowered by that law to generally set standards for quality broadcasting and they had the mandate to license stations and regulate content. This liberalisation of the right to own and operate media houses began a revolution in the Nigerian broadcast industry which has today led to license grants and the establishment of several stations for terrestrial and cable television as well as radio. The NBC's mission to "evolve defined standards in all aspects of broadcasting to effectively license, monitor and regulate an environment that encourages investment and development of quality programming and technology for a viable industry…" (NBC 1) aligns with the global demands of the sector. One of the principal demands of meeting up to global standards of broadcasting is upgrading to twenty hours operation which many public media houses have hitherto not been practicing. Some other demands include upgrade of equipment and training of manpower to operate them. In assessing the challenges of local media houses in contributing to the noble mission of NBC, this paper uses Taraba State Television (TV Taraba) as a case study to magnify the hurdles faced by public media organisations and their attempts to chart a progressive course as they join the digitisation revolution.

Nigeria's Quest for Transition from Analogue to Digital Technology

The tech craze is on an irreversible voyage and the digitisation fever is only an offshoot of the global revolution. In June 2006, participants at the Regional Radio Communication Conference (RRC-06) of the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) in Genev,a Switzerland unanimously endorsed a motion for broadcast stations to migrate from analogue to digital broadcasting (Ihechu and Uche 38). The government of Nigeria realised the need to key into ITU-led global digitisation movement in 2007 and approved 17th June, 2012, as transition date, ahead of the 17th June, 2015 deadline set by ITU. Late President

Umaru Yar'Adua kick-started the digitisation process in Nigeria on the 13th of October, 2008, with the inauguration of the Presidential Advisory Committee (PAC) on Transition from Analogue to Digital Broadcasting (*IDIGEST* 3). This date was however shifted to 31st December, 2012 and again to 1st January, 2015; but even then, full compliance has not been achieved. While some countries like the United States and at least eighteen European countries have completed their transition to digital broadcasting (Balarabe 2770), the finish line for Nigeria seems quiet far.

Experts and analysts have also identified other factors that pose as impediments to the successful migration from analogue to digital broadcasting to include unawareness, scarcity of qualified manpower, poverty, inadequate power supply and inadequate digital equipment (Agbo and Chukwuma 123; Ihechu and Uche 42). Some of these challenges were in existence in public media houses long before the decision to join the ITU led analogue to digital broadcasting platform. Nigeria's advanced plans for switch over, though beautifully made, did not advance beyond planning due to lack of political will to implement them (IDIGEST 3).

In keeping up with the mandate to key into the ITU initiative, broadcast professionals, broadcast equipment manufacturers, content providers, the academia, strategic industry stakeholders and broadcast partners have had brainstorming sessions at various times to chart a course for the switchover from analogue to digital terrestrial broadcasting. However, lack of funds has been a major setback for this objective. The digitisation project for Nigeria is estimated at N69 billion where the Federal Government is expected to provide substantial part of the budget while the NBC will independently source the remaining. However, half a decade after that submission, the funds never came. IDIGEST further notes that:

> This budget include the cost of subsidy for some homes in Nigeria to provide them with setup boxes and the cost of buying back analogue transmitters from all the operators, cost of publicity, roll-out obligations and some subsidy for signal distributors to make sure they meet up with the roll-out time, funds for content and consultants (5).

Again, commitment to the course has not translated into action thus impeding the progress of the plan and further distancing the reality of the set date for transition.

The transition from analogue to digital technology offers options for the media industry in terms of clearer picture and sound, multiple channel reception and immunity to signal distortion and interference from adjacent analogue transmission (Balarabe 2770; Ihechu and Uche 41). Signal interference common with analogue technology will be abolished as digital technology places bands in definite positions. The transition to digital technology also offers television stations the option of broadcasting of multiple television channels from only one in the current analogue system. On 30th June, 2014, Nigeria launched its first phase of the digital switchover using the NTA Star Times backbone in Jos, Plateau State (*IDIGEST* 4). The successful transition is set to give viewers a new experience and ease of access to clear signals and several stations to choose from. With the new development, viewers with analogue TV sets only need to get a Set Top Box (STB), which is a digital analogue TV converter and looks like the ordinary decoder that easily plugs into a television set (Balarabe 2770). While media organisations are making their plans for compliance with the date for switchover, the success does not end with that action. The hurdles they must surmount include adapting to demands of digital broadcasting amongst which are twenty four hours operation, qualitative programmes, upgrade of equipment and training of staff. This makes the digital switchover a journey rather than a destination for media organisations. The next section does an assessment of the place of public media houses in the equation of digital switchover.

Theoretical Framework

The definition of public media houses in the context of this paper covers media organisations that are sponsored and owned by the government at the federal or state levels. Their operations are subject to the dictates of the sponsors who determine what can be aired or restricted from public consumption via that particular medium. The instant image conjured about this group of media organisations when compared to privately owned media organisations is that of subjectivity to the political leanings of the government and interest at any given time. Premised on "who pays the piper dictates the tune" perception, the objectivity of government-owned media houses has often been questioned when government interest is on the weighing scale. Liwhu Betiang acknowledges manipulative one way communication against NBC code and abuse by political office holders especially state owned media houses which he says "are invariably treated as extensions of the states' Ministries of Information and Public Relations" (6). Nsereka also observes that private media houses in Nigeria do not enjoy subventions and grants from government like their public counterparts, yet they are established on business lines and in order and to maximise profit (58). Thus, it is likely that the latter will seek ways to attract and keep viewers through quality programming and broadcasting.

There is also the angle of chain of command which comes into play in all circumstances in the public organisations, argued by this paper from the viewpoint of Max Weber's sociological analysis of bureaucracy and later economic theories. This work draws its assessment principally from among other things, the position of the theory that public sector organisations provide goods and services that are free at the point of use and are often not constrained by market conditions. Erkoc posits that the public sector suffers political manipulation on the provision of welfare services and other factors that lead actors in the public service to act in reluctant ways on the allocation of resources (5). Ultimately, Erkoc argues that the lack of competition and the monopolistic nature of public production do not drive the actors in the public sector organisations to be wary of the efficient usage of resources compared to their competitors in the private sector (6). Bureaucracy has strangulated efficiency in so many public institutions and promoted severe laxity in performance from the topmost managerial personnel to the lowest ranking staff. Having to wait for approvals from the top to enable execution at the lower rungs of the ladder is detrimental to efficiency in sensitive sectors of the public service.

This paper holds that a wide margin exist between Nigeria's public and private media organisations in terms of operations and efficiency based on the preceding arguments and that this is conditioned by the system rather than a fault of the public sector actors. A major problem is financing. Government establishments are often victims of shortage of funds leading to neglect of vital functions. This situation became rife in the face of economic realities of recession when many states in Nigeria suffered shortage of funds to the extent of owing workers' salaries until the Federal Government bailed them out. In situations where such paucity of funds becomes severe, governments limit their expenditure to sectors they consider very much in need thus neglecting some. Public media houses are among the victims in such situation because the media is stands the chance of being considered a luxury when placed side by side with sectors like health and security. When the limited funds get to the media organisations, they in turn direct the funds to aspects they consider critical such as fuelling of generating plants in order to be able to transmit.

Staff training is a critical factor in updating the knowledge of the staff and to sharpen their skills for efficiency. This important aspect of staff development is gradually going extinct in many public institutions and has virtually stopped in others. Nsereka opines that lack of funds accounts for inadequate technical facilities coupled with amateur personnel lacking skill to operate equipment account for poor quality of programmes in public media houses (59). TV Taraba's experience falls within this boundary as organisation-sponsored trainings have faded out to extinction. Interviews with some producers aspiring to improve their knowledge and skills in the art of production indicated that they embarked on personal efforts and self-sponsorship to receive training. However, some formal specialised trainings like courses in NTA Television College in the area of television production are rather expensive and beyond the reach of average civil servants struggling to survive on low wages.

The TV Taraba Experience

Taraba Television Corporation was established on 2nd April, 1993. It got its legal backing through the enactment of *Taraba State Edict No. 2 of 1995*, the same year it was licensed by National Broadcasting Commission (NBC). The station transmits from the state capital (Jalingo) on Channel 22 UHF and Bali (Booster station) on Channel 25 UHF, at a frequency of 479.25MHZ. They transmit on 20 and 10 KW solid state transmitters, respectively. The signal covers most parts of the state and reaches parts of neighbouring Adamawa, Gombe and Plateau States. The estimated population of the State is put at above two million, while over 600,000 households are claimed to have television sets (Kundu 2). TV Taraba has a high viewership primarily due to its culture of detailed news and the contents of its programmes, many of which are local and people-based (Ukwen 36). Prior to the proliferation of cable TV, particularly in Jalingo metropolis, TV Taraba was popular among the viewing population and they keenly followed local programmes.

Taraba Television has had its fair share of romance with financial challenges of running the station. This can be adduced to many factors primary among which is the little or no access to adequate power supply to operate the production and transmission equipment of the station. It took a while following the creation of the state on 27th August, 1991 for Jalingo, the state capital to be connected to the national grid. Electricity was a challenge for businesses and households as the whole metropolis depended on power extension from Yola, headquarters of the neighbouring Adamawa state. Load-shedding was the practice and irregular power supply was a major setback for a growing city experiencing rapid rural-urban migration which expectedly overstretches facilities. Even then, the transmission station, located outside the metropolis near Mallum satellite village was not connected to the power line. The sole source of power was a diesel-powered generating plant which was expectedly difficult to maintain. Their income sources range from paid news, local adverts, domestic sponsored programmes and adverts of companies syndicated to them by advert firms based in Lagos. The organisation, like other government ministries in the state ideally gets a monthly funding for its running but these are far from regular. Again, it is mandated to meet a certain revenue generation target which is remitted into the government's treasury.

The commitment of the current administration of Governor Darius Dickson Ishaku to reposition the television and radio organisations in Taraba State translated to an accelerated procurement and installation of new equipment for the two stations. TV Taraba now has a newly constructed virtual studio in addition to its news studio as well as state of the art facilities that make live shows and automated transmission possible. TV Taraba now transmits for an average of eighteen (18) hours on Star Times platform and broadcasts on Channel 113. This runs concurrently with existing UHF channels transmission, making it possible for viewers without Star Times receivers to also watch the station's programmes. Presently, the transmitter house and studios are the only structures presently located on its fenced permanent site where uncompleted office structures stand as a proof of the wide gap between planning and execution. The administrative base of the station remains within Jalingo city centre on Barde Way at the foot of a hill that housed its first transmitter when it began operation in 1993. It is from here that operational staff who run three shifts, converge and are transported by a staff bus, which shuttles between the two points at specified times.

Economic Recession and the Challenges of TV Programmes Production

In mid-2016, Nigeria's economy slid into recession when growth figures between April and June showed a contraction of 2.06%. The oil industry, heavily relied upon, turned downwards the fortunes against Nigeria when crude oil prices fell from $114 per barrel in 2014 to $50 in 2016 – the source that accounts for 70% of the country's revenue (Martin 1). The warnings by experts for diversifying the economy and relying less on oil revenue became a stark reality for Nigeria, a country with bright opportunities in agriculture – the first driver of its economy prior to the oil boom in 1960s. Martin further observes that, a related cause of the recession was the fall in Nigeria's currency, the naira, which was allowed to flow freely as a means of kick-starting the economy, an action many critics said was delayed. The effect was a rise in cost of goods and services across the country, the ripple effect reaching every sector, the media inclusive. The rationing that set in as a result of the low funds allocated to public media organisations resulted in delayed or non-payment of workers' wages in many cases, dampening their morale. Creativity only struggles to thrive in such atmosphere thus leading to an inversely proportional low output particularly in public media organisations.

As the economic recession takes its toll on the various sectors, the public media houses ought to strategise and face the onslaught with creative responses to remain afloat.

The experience of economic recession in the US forced some weak television stations to adopt a survival strategy by sharing reporters, Television anchors, news footages etc, after laying off most of their staff (Stelter 1). Though they compete for viewers, the stations had an agreement where they collaborate in various ways to cut cost and maximise profit. The viewers watch news on different stations but find that the sources of the video sections are from the same camera and the scripts are identical – an evidence that the stations maintain a technically separate ownership but share their content. In some Nigerian public media houses, there existed a culture of programme exchange among Television stations especially in the Northern parts of the country. For example, TV Taraba had exchanged its Hausa drama productions, *Hausa Bakwai*, with Bauchi Radio and Television (BRTV) and Plateau Radio and Television (PRTV), as well as traditional dances. This strategy, in addition to expanding the programme base of the stations, was an attempt at enhancing appreciation for cultures and strengthening bonds of unity across states of the federation (Okonwo 25). The creativity of the producers, artists and technical crew of the various stations were avenues to learn from and prompt improvement by positive challenge.

The development in the television industry and the changing expectation of viewers calls for pragmatic responses on the part of key players. From the onset, the television industry was positioned for phenomenal growth as Umeh observed that so many television stations were established between 1960 and 1980, giving viewers in the Western states and Lagos options of at least twelve stations to choose from (12). This development meant competition for viewership and the quality of programmes and news determined the station's popularity. Today, such competition is on the increase, giving viewers options to numerous local and international television stations for news and entertainment across the globe. Domestic television stations therefore have the burden of promoting local content for consumption for local and international audience and at the same time achieving certain standards to meet global expectation. The challenges require practical action on the part of the media organisations, programme producers and content providers. It is no longer realistic to rely on the traditional ways of achieving results in terms of television programme production. Public media organisations ought to look beyond what has been in practice and explore lucrative avenues to meet revenue demands of their sponsors. Producers, presenters, camera operators and film editors should not only be trained but motivated to aim for professionalism.

Cheap foreign programme content strangles the promotion of local content as Betiang notes that, "the low motivation of government-employed TV producers and hard-to-come-by sponsorship encourage this over-dependence on foreign programmes that are of course cheaper and easier to acquire than local culturally relevant productions"(10). One major challenge is the funding to produce a programme. In the course of in-depth interviews with producers, the study found that they are under obligation to produce programmes without regard for how they will achieve the goal. Here is a typical scenario: A producer signs out a camera from the office for a specified period, perhaps two hours within which it must be returned for another producer waiting on cue to also use. Limited by time, he/she is forced to work within that window and accept whatever is obtainable in the circumstance; no room to be creative or explore other opportunities to garnish the work. Now consider the cameraman (who the producer has the burden of transporting to location), a part-time staff who perhaps has not received allowances in three months. He/she is armed with a camera without a tripod, doing the assignment as routine and under coercion rather than passion which result in generally poor visuals. In any case, as it is often quipped in performance parlance, “the show must go on”. This is only a scenario in a range of possible challenges encountered in the course of programmes production in public media organisations. It takes a resilient team to dare the odds and come up with what may be judged a poor production without consideration for the factors responsible for the output.

In another instance, local children programmes that can match popular animations that are trending today are feasible but will require huge resources to achieve. Public television stations are battling with major challenges of finance to operate their stations and remain on air and will hardly consider training producers on animation and also procure the necessary equipment. It will be a touch of variety and cognitive development for children to produce and air children’s programme with animation of characters reflecting the local environment, familiar names and situations. Viewers in other parts of the globe who tune in will also have much to learn and appreciate about Nigeria’s varieties of local programmes but this will only happen if the programmes have the requisite quality to sustain their attention.

These samples bring to the fore the realities that stare domestic programme producers in the face. Looking at this plethora of challenges, it is tempting to attempt justifying the programme output of public media organisations due to the existing conditions surrounding production. However, stepping into the global field of play in terms of media operations via the digital platform means unrestricted access to domestic programmes by viewers across the world thus the need to key into the system. It is no longer acceptable to compromise technical quality of domestic programmes for any reason since the stations now have a global audience. They should seek collaboration with content producers and consultants who also need to expand their scope to reach out to local stations and sell contents at affordable rates for mutual profit.

Conclusion

The forgone assessment focused on baring the challenges faced by producers in public media houses as it relates to producing programmes to meet the needs of the media houses in the face of transition from analogue to digital broadcasting. Television broadcasting requires substantial financial commitment, machinery and experienced people to handle the complex technology and organisation involved particularly expertise for the digital revolution. However, public media houses are at the mercy of fiscal allocations that are irregular, low or even non-existent. Depending on such sources are unlikely to grant them opportunities to maximise their potentials and meet up with the global competition in the digital broadcasting market. Consequently, this paper recommends the following:

a) Public media stations should explore alternative sources to raise funds to train staff, procure equipment, exchange programmes and motivate their producers to improve the quality of programmes that will attract the right audience and corresponding revenue through paid adverts and retainership.

b) Independent media experts (including professional serving staffs and retired officers) should widen their horizon to see the business opportunities in content production to sell programmes for broadcast to media houses.
c) Government at the federal and state levels should create enabling environment and particularly boost entrepreneurship through friendly loans to enable aspiring content producers procure and own television programmes production facilities.

The thinking is that adopting the above key considerations for the media industry, among others, will enable public media houses to have an edge in this digitisation revolution.

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