

AUDIENCE FEEDBACK AND PROGRAMMING IN THREE SELECTED TELEVISION STATIONS

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ABSTRACT

The place of feedback in communication is not in doubt. But whether or not it is attended to, and the level of attention given to it has always been a source of concern. This study examined the influence of audience feedback on television programming in three selected television stations in Lagos: Lagos Television (LTV), Television Continental (TVC), and Nigerian Television Authority 2 Channel 5 (NTA2 Channel 5). The purpose of the study was to find out whether or not television stations in Nigeria consider audience feedback in planning, scheduling, executing and evaluating their programmes. The following research questions were raised: Do LTV, NTA 2 channel 5 and TVC have operational feedback channels? Does audience feedback influence programming of LTV, NTA 2 channel 5 and TVC? What other Factors influence programming of LTV, NTA 2 channel 5 and TVC apart from audience feedback?

The programme managers of the stations were interviewed to find out the role which audience feedback plays in the programming of the selected stations. Also, to verify the interview data, the programme schedule the three stations for two quarters were observed along with two social media feedback channels (Facebook and Twitter).

The findings of study show that all the three selected television stations consider audience feedback in implementing their programmes except NTA2 Channel 5, with evidence that programming is also influenced by other factors, especially government activities, in government owned stations.

KEY WORDS: *Programming, Feedback, Audience, Planning, Scheduling, Television station.*

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INTRODUCTION

The importance of feedback in the communication process cannot be overemphasized. It is an essential element of the communication process that enables the source of the message to know whether he/she has communicated effectively with the audience.

Dominick (1994) defines feedback as those responses of the receiver that shape and alter the subsequent messages of the source. To underscore feedback as an essential component of communication, Idemili (1990) cited in Daramola (2003), posits that feedback helps us to modify and tailor our future messages to suit our audiences and helps us to correct our mistakes. Daramola (2003) writes that the more feedback-oriented we are in communicating, the greater our potential for communicating effectively.

Just like in other forms of communication, and in fact other media types, the concept of feedback in broadcasting is instituted to obtain audience reaction. In broadcasting, the possible feedback channels available include: letters to the station concerning its programming and programme content, telephone recording devices attached to a special phone number in which listeners or viewers, as the case may be, are encouraged to dial and present their opinions or point of view and so on. Others are: E-mail, Twitter, Facebook, You-tube, and perhaps other social media platforms through which members of the audience can air their views about a programme or set of programmes.

Apart from the aforementioned feedback channels, scholars have identified the use of audience research as a means by which broadcast stations obtain information about the composition of their audience and measure the impact of their programmes on their audiences. It can also be used to obtain the views of the audience regarding programme selection, scheduling and content.

Feedback regarding programme content or scheduling ought to influence the programming of stations. This is because the station is in business to satisfy the audience and as such needs feedback from them to know whether programmes aired actually satisfy their communication needs or not. And because the broadcast environment has become highly competitive, there is a scramble for available audience among TV stations, and only a station

manager with adequate knowledge and understanding of his station's audience preference can survive by selecting and airing programmes that are compatible with their interests and needs.

Therefore, considering the enormous growth in the Nigerian broadcast industry since its liberalization, it is necessary to know whether or not the audience component of the communication chain is given its deserved consideration in the programming of stations, especially television, with focus on three selected TV stations: Lagos Television (LTV), Nigerian Television Authority 2 Channel 5 (NTA2), and Television Continental (TVC).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions are pertinent to this study and serve as a guide to the research:

RQ1: Do *LTV, NTA2 channel5, and TV continental* have operational feedback channels?

RQ2: Does audience feedback influence programming of *LTV, NTA2 channel5, and TV continental*?

RQ3: What other factors affect programming of *LTV, NTA2 channel5, and TV continental* apart from audience feedback?

METHODOLOGY

The survey method was adopted to find out from the selected television stations if they consider their audiences in programme conceptualization and implementation. The researcher made use of the personal interview method of gathering information to find out from the three (3) selected television stations whether the responses gotten from their audience are considered in their programming.

The population of this study was all television stations in Lagos state. The reason was that Lagos state has the highest number of TV stations in the country (12 television stations currently in operation). They include: Nigerian Television Authority (NTA)2 channel 5, Nigeria Television Authority NTA channel 10, Africa Independent Television (AIT), Television Continental (TVC), ONTV, Silverbird Television (STV), Lagos Television (LTV), Murhi International Television (MITV), Channels Television, Super-Screen television, Galaxy TV and DBN.

The three selected TV stations were purposively sampled especially on the basis of ownership to enable the researcher generalize the findings of the research more reliably. Television Continental (TVC), Nigerian Television Authority (NTA5) and Lagos Television (LTV) were sampled as private, federal government and state government owned stations, respectively.

In addition, the programme schedules of the three stations were observed. Out of the four quarters of their annual programme schedules, two quarters were selected for observation by the researcher in order to ascertain whether there were modifications and adjustments in the schedule, and if these adjustments were attributable to audience feedback or other factor that might influence programming.

Also, out of the 12 programme managers of the TV stations in Lagos, three were selected and interviewed. The programme managers were selected because they are the main gate-keepers of programmes that are broadcast. Before any programme goes on air, it is approved by the programme manager who ensures that all programmes aired are in consonance with the NBC code and other ethical standards. To this extent, the programme managers of the three sampled television stations were considered most appropriate to provide the data pertinent to this study.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The importance of audience feedback in programming cannot be over-emphasized. McQuail (2007) opines that the media need their audience more than the audience needs the media. Hence, proper feedback channels should be put in place to ensure that audience members air their views, opinions and dissatisfactions about a particular programme or set of programmes as they are the main-stay of a television station. A broadcast station would not be acting wisely if it ignores complaints or reactions from its audience. Members of the audience should be encouraged to write letters or phone-in their suggestions.

Dominick (1994) commenting on this fact states that broadcasters should pay very close attention to the feedback they receive and treat it seriously. Onabajo (2001) explains that for broadcasting to be meaningful, it must be identified with the yearnings and aspirations of its audiences. As such much consideration should be given to audience feedback in programme conceptualization and implementation.

Bitner (1989), corroborating this fact states “you should never discount the impact of reader/viewer feedback. Your own letter to the editor or head of a broadcasting station can be a key indicator to personnel about what the public is thinking and why. One letter indicates to management that there are many other people who undoubtedly feel the same way but did not just take time to write.”

Technological advancement and innovations have made gathering of audience feedback much easier. The process of obtaining feedback from the audience has been extended to the internet and social networking platforms such as *twitter*, *facebook*, *Youtube*, *myspace*, etc. members of the audience can also send e-mails to the station expressing their opinions about programming content.

According to Jannarone (2012) a US research firm, Bluefin labs’ 2012 report, claims that comments posted on *twitter* and other social-media websites about television shows/programmes increased from 8.8 million in 2011 to 75.5 million in 2012. He further posits that producers say they pay close attention to comments on social-media sites to gauge audience response in real time. And that some of these producers also state that the comments posted on the social-media are not always totally representative of the people who view that particular programme. Some people can tweet more than ten times about a particular programme or comment more than 10 times on the face-book page of that programme.

Twitter has become a very popular means of generating feedback for TV programmes. According to Harrington (2012), not only do audiences tweet about what they see, but television programmes themselves can be structured in part or in full around the input provided by viewers via social media. In such cases, producers leverage the audience conversations that occur on *twitter*, and to some extent incorporate those tweets back into the show itself. *Twitter* becomes not only a backchannel to the show proper but becomes part of the show itself.

Similarly, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s live talk show *Q&A*, which focuses mainly on political themes, asks its audience to use the #qanda hashtag, and promotes the ‘best’ tweets (often the most clever, incisive, or funny) by displaying them at the bottom of the screen. Such activities raise the potential of making television a more interactive, dialogical experience (beyond the traditional broadcast model).

In addition, qualitative analysis of key themes and topics of discussion over the course of the show provides important feedback about the strengths and weaknesses of a program, well beyond what may be identified through the inherently artificial device of audience interviews and focus groups. Such analysis may also be usefully combined with conventional audience ratings and feedback tools, and in combination, these techniques enable researchers to understand audiences in an increasingly converged media environment (Simons, 2011).

In Nigeria, the concept of feedback has been instituted in many television stations across the country. However, differences in programming across these various stations depend on the use and implementation of the feedback gotten from members of the audience. Onabajo (2003) noted that many programme producers in Nigeria do not care as to the effectiveness of their programmes. He stated that many producers sit on their desk and initiate programmes for the audience and at the end do not care to evaluate how effective their programmes are by finding out audience reaction.

The focus of the stations is often on the number of persons reached instead of the effect the programmes had on each individual. For example, NTA-network once told the nation that it has over 30 million viewers. That figure is irrelevant if the programmes aired are not pleasing to the audience. Mr Nasir Zahradeen in an article written by BizCommunity.com stated that NTA's coverage of 95% of the country plays a vital role in entertainment and information dissemination, however, viewers don't seem to share this view as many of them see NTA programmes as boring and pro-government (BizCommunity, 2009)

The revised edition of the National Broadcasting Commission's code (5th edition) made provisions for members of the Nigerian broadcast audience to participate in programming. According to the code, the Nigerian audience has a right to quality programming and as such has a right to complain to the station about programme content. This puts the audience at the forefront of programming policies.

The code also stipulates, according to section 0.1.1.4(c), that every broadcast station must create a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism representing every stratum of the society, as required in a federal state like Nigeria, in which the views and opinions of everyone

are included in the national consensus. In addition, that at every programme belt, a broadcaster shall broadcast information on how the public may lodge complaints about its programming

Section 13(5) of the NBC code titled Public Right to Complain about Broadcast Content, stipulates that: Pursuant to the provisions of Section 2(1)(d)(g)(h)(i) and (l), of the NBC Act and in keeping with the need for the public to have a say on how the business of broadcasting is conducted:

- (a) A broadcast station shall broadcast at specific intervals, a standard announcement, giving its audience the opportunity to complain about the content of its broadcast;
- (b) The announcement shall include contact details of both the broadcaster and the regulator.
- (c) The announcement shall be made daily, at least once in each of the broadcast belts, namely: Morning Belt, Daytime Belt, Family Belt and Watershed Belt.

This section of the NBC code lays emphasis on the significance of the audience in programming. The audience no longer plays a passive role in programming but becomes an active member by selecting what he/she wants to see on television.

Broadcast stations may hold regular public meetings at which broadcasting personnel answer questions put to them by the public, but these meetings are usually brief and overcrowded such that it is impossible to tell whether there is much agreement among members on issues discussed and it is also possible for a few dominant individuals to monopolize the meetings (Onabajo, 2003).

Any station that doesn't regard the complaints put forth against them by members of the audience, whether individuals, organizations or corporate bodies, will be sanctioned by the Commission. According to section 2.3 of the code, members of the audience are entitled to a right of reply within 24 hours of lodging their complaints. Section of 13.0.2.1 of the NBC code also made provisions for individuals or organizations to lay their complaints to the commission, regarding programme content or conduct of a broadcast station. It states:

The Commission shall receive and enquire into any complaint; and where necessary arbitrate or impose sanctions for any non-compliance or non-adherence to the:

- (a) Content of broadcast materials
- (b) Conduct of the broadcaster

- (c) Terms, conditions and obligations of any broadcast license
- (d) NBC Act, Code and any other regulation of the Commission.

Thus, the National Broadcasting Commission Code empowers audiences to play a participatory role in programming and upholds their right to quality broadcasting and programme content.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Cybernetics is an arm of science that deals with how information is transmitted by the nervous systems of living things and by the control mechanisms of machines. It emphasizes the need and importance of feedback mechanisms.

Cybernetics theory was propounded by Norbert Wiener in 1948. Wiener coined the term 'cybernetics to elaborate on the existing theory of the transmission of messages by incorporating his idea that people send messages within a system in effort to control their surrounding environment. In his theory, he made a comparison between humans and machines, illustrating how human communication is not too different from the way a machine functions when given an order to complete a task. This implies that when a human sends a message, they are only aware that the message has been received once the recipient replies, either verbally or non-verbally.

According to McGarry (2008), Wiener's theory suggests that humans operate in a machine-like manner that is highly based on information processing and the constant need to control our environment and the environment around us. According to her, the basic function of communication in Wiener's theory is to control the environment in which one lives.

In comparing humans to machines, Wiener noted that there are two types of machines in his theory of cybernetics which are: simple machines and complex machines. Simple machines are close, clockwork-based apparatuses that do not require any communication with the outside world. They repeat their tasks in a pattern, regardless of any factors in their surrounding environment influencing them in one way or the other. For example, when a person opens a refrigerator, the light comes on and when the person closes it, the lights go off. The individual doesn't need to tell the refrigerator to illuminate when he/she opens it. The function has already been built into the refrigerator.

In contrast, the complex machines, which are more typical to human beings, rely on processing of information to act in a certain way. They complex machines are able to sense feedback from the environment and adapt their behaviour accordingly to function within the system. According to him, human beings are categorized under complex machines because we constantly send and receive messages from our environment and alter our behaviours in order to be socially accepted by our peers.

The most important aspect of the cybernetic theory, in relation to this study, is the incorporation of feedback within an environment. Wiener (1954) cited in McGarry (2008) defines feedback as the control of a machine based on its actual performance than its expected performance.” Rosney (1997) cited in McGarry (2008) notes that negative feedback maintains structure in an environment by counteracting any change that takes place within a system. Positive feedback does exactly the opposite by amplifying change in an environment.

The cybernetics theory is pertinent to this study in that it lays emphasis on the desire for humans to control their environment via communication and as complex machines; this is done through feedback either negative or positive. According to the theory, human beings adapt their behaviour to match what is obtainable in a given society because of their ability to sense feedback. When an individual is not acting within the acceptable norms of a society, that individual senses the negative feedback sent by the society and adjusts his behaviour to suit societal norms. This means that certain factors within the system influence behaviour.

The same also applies in programming. When stations broadcast programmes that do not suit the needs and interests of members of the audience, they sense the feedback from their audiences. And in a bid to retain these audiences, they readjust their programming policies to accommodate the needs and interests of the audience. This correlates with the aspect of the cybernetics theory that compares humans to complex machines and not simple machines. Programmers should not operate like simple machines that are totally oblivious to feedback. They shouldn't broadcast programmes just because they are television stations and that is what they are meant to do, they should be sensitive to feedback gotten from audiences so as to alter programme schedule and content that will be appropriate for members of the audience.

DATA PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**TABLE 1: Objectives and Target Audiences of the Television Stations**

Television Station	Objectives	Target Audiences
Television Continental (TVC)	Inform and entertain	Youths and middle-aged
NTA2 Channel 5	To foster National unity, peace and stability among various ethnic groups in Nigeria.	Nigerians within the country and in Diaspora
Lagos Television (LTV)	To oil the information dissemination machinery of Lagos state and to communicate with the rural populace in the state.	rural people in Lagos state

From table 1 above, the objectives of the three (3) stations were succinctly identified. While conducting the study, the programme manager of NTA2 channel 5 noted that fostering national unity, peace and stability among the various ethnic groups in Nigeria is the general objective of the station. However, he noted that NTA2 channel 5 has a secondary objective of satisfying the entertainment needs of the people.

Lagos Television initially was set up to oil the information dissemination machinery of the state as the Lagos state government under General Mobolaji Johnson was not sure of adequate media coverage by NTA. But, with successive governments running the state, the objective of the station has gone beyond disseminating government information and has extended to serving as a communication link between the Lagos state government and the rural populace in the state. While Television Continental, a privately owned television station, has no intervention from the government but seeks to inform and entertain its audience largely for commercial purposes.

TABLE 2: Operational Feedback Channels in the Television Stations

TELEVISION STATIONS	FEED-BACK CHANNELS							
	telephone and SMS	phone-in programmes	e-mails	word-of-mouth	social media	audience research	letters	public forums
Lagos Television	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	X	✓	X
Television Continental	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	X
NTA2 channel 5	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	X

✓ Means Yes

X Means No

All three stations agreed they have need for audience feedback. The interview with the selected programmes managers revealed that audience feedback helps the stations to evaluate their overall performance and the success or failure of their programmes.

Table 2 above shows that the three stations studied have operational feedback channels. It also shows that all three stations do not conduct forums at which audience complaints about a particular programme or set of programmes fielded and discussed.

WEB OBSERVATIONS

TABLE 3: Television Stations and Social Media Feedback Channel for One Week (May 7-14, 2013)

TELEVISION STATIONS	SOCIAL MEDIA			
	Face-Book	% of people who made comments	Twitter	% of people who tweeted
LTV	14, 417	29 (0.2%)	3, 161	0%
NTA2 CHANNEL 5	101	0%	9	0%
TVC	7, 254	0%	80	0%

Table 3 above shows the number of people who followed the three television stations on the various social media platforms i.e. face-book and twitter, and the percentage of those who made comments on the sites. Out of the 14, 417 persons who followed LTV's face-book page, only 29 (0.2%) made comments on the page and liked the page. Liking a face-book page is an indication of a positive feedback. Also, on the twitter account, none (0%) out of the 3, 161 persons who followed them made any comments. For Television continental (TVC), on their face-book page, out of the 7, 254 persons following them, none (0%) of the followers made any comments during the period of the observation. Also, on their twitter account, 0% made any comments. However, the twitter account was last updated April 6, 2013.

For NTA2 channel 5, which has the lowest number of followers (101 and 9) on face-book and twitter, respectively, among the three stations studied, none (0%) of the followers made any comment for the period studied. The twitter account of NTA2 was last updated January 28, 2013.

TABLE 4: Type of Feedback on the Social Media Channels

TELEVISION STATIONS	POSITIVE		NEGATIVE	
	Facebook	Twitter	Facebook	Twitter
LTV	25	0	4	0
NTA	0	0	0	0
TVC	0	0	0	0

Table 4 above shows that out of the 29 comments made on LTV's facebook account, 25 of them were positive while 4 were negative. The negative feedbacks were mostly about technical and audio problems of the programmes aired. NTA and LTV had no comments on their accounts during the period of observation.

TABLE 5: Audience Participatory Programmes for One Week (May 7-14)

AUDIENCE PARTICIPATORY PROGRAMMES	NO OF FOLLOWERS			
	Face-Book	% of comments	Twitter	% comments
Entertainment Splash (TVC)	4, 574	52 (1.1%)	14, 345	227 (1.6%)
Morning Desk (LTV)	-	-	-	-
A.M express (NTA)	704	0 (0%)	-	-

Table 5 above indicates that out of the 4, 574 persons following *Entertainment Splash* on Facebook, only 52 (1.1%) comments were made. On twitter, 227 comments were made (1.6%).

LTV's *Morning Desk* has no face-book page but audience members place their comments on the face-book page of the TV station. Out of the comments on LTV's face-book page, five persons commented on the *Morning Desk* show. *Morning Desk* does not have a twitter account so there was no comment. On *AM Express*, the last comment was made on the 23rd of April, 2013. There was no comment during the period of observation for this study. Also, *AM Express* does not have a twitter account.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

From the research carried out LTV, NTA2 channel 5 and TVC all have operational feedback channels. These channels include: social media i.e. facebook, twitter and YouTube, letters, emails, word-of-mouth referral, text messages, phone-in programmes and audience research.

The programme manager of TVC revealed that the feedback generated from the various operational feedback channels and the information gotten from audience research influence the programmes aired on the station. The programme schedule of TVC for two quarters (Jan-Mar 2013 and April-June, 2013) observed revealed that some programmes were adjusted, some eliminated and new ones added in response to audience needs. For example, the programmes *AY show crib* and *Yaw & MYN* were added to the prime-time belt/family belt. Meanwhile, NTA2 channel 5, gives little or no attention to audience feedback in programming of the station, because the station serves to promote government activities regardless of the time-belt or the programme already slated for that particular time, and the commercial interest of multinational advertisers. Although the station's programme schedule for two quarters (Jan-Mar, 2013 and April-June 2013) observed showed that some programmes were rescheduled, new ones added, and some eliminated, the changes were necessarily the result of audience feedback that of government intervention and commercialization.

Feedback influences the programming of Lagos Television (LTV), but in certain instances, government activities influence programming of the station as a government owned station. The programme manager revealed that a particular programme are removed or shifted if it clashes with a government activity or if the state government requests the station to cover a particular programme at a particular time.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the need for and the use of audience feedback in the three TV stations studied is dependent on the objectives for the establishment of the station. Television Continental's objective is primarily entertainment and information; NTA2 is a government owned station and has as its objectives the promotion of government policies and to foster national unity, identity and peace while Lagos Television's objective is to oil the information dissemination machinery of the state and to reach out to the rural populace. All these stations agree to the need for audience feedback in programming, hence the establishment of the various feedback channels.

However, from the study carried out, the use of feedback in programming is also dependent on the objectives for setting up the station. Television Continental as a commercial station thrives on advertisements and sponsorships and depends on a large audience to attract this, thus agreeing to the use of audience feedback in structuring its programmes. NTA2 as a government-owned station does not make use of the feedback gotten from the audience but rather base their programmes on commercial gains and government intervention while Lagos Television makes use of audience feedback to an extent but, as a state government owned station, its programming policies are still subject to influence from the government.

The findings of this study also revealed that there are other factors that influence television programming apart from audience feedback. These include competition, commercialization (advertisers & sponsors), government activities, National Broadcasting Commission (NBC), Advertising Practitioner Council (APCON), current trends in the society, nature of the target market, prime time belt and timing of the programmes i.e the particular time the programmes are aired.

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