Chapter 5
Don't Talk Back!
Community Broadcasting and the Public Sphere in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Founded on the philosophy of advancing the course of democracy and acting as a stimulus for socio-cultural transformation at the community level, community broadcasting provides access to the public sphere by making its audience the main characters in the production and dissemination of its messages thus serving as a platform for the expression of the divergent views and opinions that exist at the community level. But almost a century after broadcasting was introduced to Nigeria as part of British imperialism, this grassroots form of broadcasting is yet to fully take off. Starting with a broad examination of public service broadcasting, this chapter discusses the state of community broadcasting in Nigeria, using Habermas' concept of the public sphere, and recommends its improvement given the crucial roles of community broadcasting in the society.

INTRODUCTION

The ability of citizens to freely express their opinions, and their political and sociocultural identities without any let or hindrance from the government or the political class and with minimal legislative curbs that are consistent with a liberal society should be a given in any democracy (Bora, 2011). And central to the realisation of this fundamental democratic value is a healthy media system that is firmly placed to expressly facilitate this freedom of expression. Public service broadcasting, in all its variants, was conceptualised to espouse these democratic ideals through its programming that must take into cognisance the interests of every segment of the society, the creation of social cohesion within the society it operates, and the promotion of a sense of belonging among minority groups (Helm, 2013).

This mission for example also constituted the operational cornerstone of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) when it was set-up in the 1930s. According to Banerjee and Seneviratne (2005),

at inception, the British Broadcasting Corporation was specifically mandated to provide the following services to the British people:

Universal geographical accessibility,

Universal appeal in general tastes and interests,

Paying particular attention to minorities,

Contributing to a sense of national identity and community,

Keeping a distance from vested interests,

Direct funding and universality of payment,

Competition in good programming rather than for numbers,

Guidelines that liberate rather than restrict programme makers (cited in Bora 2011: 151).

This mission formed the basis on which the British Broadcasting Corporation functioned until the 1960s. The Council of Europe further widened the remit for public service broadciasters in 2000 to include:

…develop pluralistic, innovative and varied programming which meets high ethical and quality standards and not to sacrifice the pursuit of quality to market forces,

…develop and structure programme schedules and services of interests to a wider public while being attentive to the needs of minority groups at the same time,

…ensure that the programmes offered contain a certain significant proportion of original productions, specifically feature films, drama and other creative works, and to have regard to the need to use independent producers and cooperate with the cinema sector.

…extend the choice available to viewers and listeners by also offering programme services which are not normally provided by commercial broadcasters,

PSB should reflect the different philosophical ideas and religious beliefs in society with the aim of strengthening mutual understanding and tolerance and promoting community relations in pluriethnic and multicultural societies,

It should also contribute actively to a greater appreciation and dissemination of the diversity of national and European cultural heritage (Nissen, cited in Bora 2011: 131)

The new European Council's prescription emphasised on the need for public service broadcasters on the continent to focus on programming that projects the cultural essence of and the ethno-linguistic diversity of Europeans. But the capacity of public service broadcasters to effectively discharge these roles in democratic societies, beginning from the late part of the 20th Century, has been subjected to critical debates by media scholars (Weeds, 2013). In the main, these debates have been framed around two crucial factors that have characterised the late 20th Century and the early 21st Century; namely, advances in media technologies and globalisation. Digitalisation of the media industry in this era revolutionised broadcasting such that there is now a multiplicity of channels available to the audience to choose from.

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