AUDIENCE PERCEPTION OF AFRICAN INDEPENDENT TELEVISION'S FOCUS NIGERIA PROGRAMME

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Abstract

The research is based on the popular television show AIT Focus Nigeria, which was broadcast to discuss democratic issues in Nigeria. The study's relevance stemmed from the program's ability to remain on the news despite its candid and unvarnished examination of political issues in a nation where the Government has used intimidation and censorship against the media. The study used the agenda-setting theory and drew on scholars' understanding of the importance of broadcast media in maintaining long-term democracy and the use of broadcasting to promote the ideas of accountability, integrity, honesty, justice, and equality in the polity. The theory advances the notion that the media can effectively influence public opinion and present arguments for the kinds of innovations that proliferate in a country. This research used a survey as its primary data collection tool and a cross-sectional design. The average findings demonstrate that the Nigerian political class and electorates are aware of the AIT Focus Nigeria program, with coefficients of variations for awareness among observed cities to be 9.47%, 11.67%, and 13.59. The program has a favorable impact on the cities used, with C.V. values of 4.68%, 4.73%, and 7.81%. More than two-thirds of the respondents thought the initiative was worthwhile to continue. The research urges the opening of more channels for audience participation in the program.

Keywords: Democracy, Broadcasting, Nigeria, Television, Media, Government.

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1. Introduction

Scholars in the field of mass communication have long recognized the importance of broadcast media in ensuring long-term democracy. The application of broadcasting in the promotion of the concepts of accountability, integrity, honesty, justice, and equity in the polity has attracted the interest of experts in this field ((Fischer-Mackey, Batzin, Culum, and Fox, 2020; Dunu, 2013; Akinfeleye, 2003). According to Daramola (2003), the mainstream broadcast media's role in fostering long-lasting democracy was safeguarded, as was their right to make sure that

everyone has unlimited access to freedom of expression. Aside from the provisions that safeguard media freedom of expression, numerous countries have different constitutional safeguards that strengthen the media's contribution to the long-term maintenance of democracy.

While Section 22 of Nigeria's 1999 constitution mandates that the media uphold government officials accountable to the people, it also guarantees everyone in Nigeria the right to freedom of expression and the ability to own, establish, and manage any mainstream press for the dissemination of information (the Federal Republic of Nigeria. (1999). Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria). The growth of Nigeria's media and politics are intricately interwoven. Throughout the battle for independence, the colonial press was extremely active and had a significant impact. The Nigerian media has done the same, contributing significantly to the political evolution of the nation (Oso, 2012; Omu, 1978)). To establish peace and longterm democracy, the Nigerian government had to integrate broadcasting into the work of the nation's public mobilization agency, the National Orientation Agency (NOA) (Oji, 2006). The Nigeria Television Authority (NTA) and Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN) were formed by the Government of Nigeria in 1977 and 1978, respectively, to broadcast programs with a unity theme (Mou, 2016; Uche, 1989). During the government of Gen. Ibrahim Babangida, the broadcast industry was liberalized with Decree No. 38 of 1992, which opened the airwaves for more active engagement of broadcast stations in political activities (Oji, 2007). The Broadcasting Organization of Nigeria (BON) which oversees broadcasters in private and public sectors currently has 166 stations as members. The large number of BON members is a positive development. It has inspired a culture of competition and interest in issues related to national development (BON Membership Directory, 2021). The assertions made here concerning broadcasters' drive to incorporate development issues in their stories are consistent with Oji's (2011) interpretation of the statement made after the 2004 conference on the importance of communication for achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) held in Bellagio, Italy. These measurable benchmarks passed on to sustainable development objectives are the main gauges of how far a nation has come in terms of development.

The information above confirmed that the Nigerian broadcast media and other sister media organizations helped promote six transition programs in quick succession in 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019. Nigeria celebrated ten years of continuous democratic rule on Friday, May 29, 2009. Former President Olusegun Obasanjo designated this day to honor the nation's

democratic steadfastness since 1999. It is the longest civil rule in the country's 63-year history, which began in 1960. Since then, Nigeria has recognized June 12 as Democracy Day.

The Africa Independent Television (AIT), a private television station, began broadcasting in 1996 as a result of the broadcast industry's deregulation in 1992. The DAAR Communication Group (PLC) with headquarters in Abuja runs it. It has sustained and practiced broadcasting professionally from its inception. It is the first broadcast media company to be listed on the Nigerian Stock Exchange (NSE). It is equipped with high-definition broadcasting equipment and has been part of the Digital Satellite Television (DSTV) system since its inception. It is thought to have contributed to the growth of democracy in the country with its "Focus Nigeria" initiative, which began in 2006. It is a weekly one-hour or one-and-a-half-hour political talk show hosted by Mr. Gbenga Aruleba until he was relieved of duty in 2018. The program airs Monday through Friday at 9 a.m. and 4 a.m. as a repeat broadcast. It accepts comments in the form of e-mails, text messages, and occasionally phone calls.

Thus, the goal of this study is to ascertain whether the AIT Focus Nigeria program has succeeded in raising the anticipated level of awareness among Nigerians as well as to determine whether the program's content has been able to influence Nigerians' attitudes toward positive behaviors that are of good democratic value.

The Problem

The media is expected to carry out its responsibilities of informing, criticizing, and stimulating debate. Wilson (2005) claimed that education, enlightenment, and radicalization of society are all aims of communication. This comprises the official and informal transmission of social and technical knowledge from one generation to the next. However, Graber (2017) noted that the harshest restrictions on press freedom are those imposed by the political climate of any given nation. In Nigeria, where such conditions have long made it difficult for information to travel freely among the population, this is especially true.

Government intimidation and censorship have been employed against the private media. When Gbenga Aruleba, the anchor for Focus Nigeria, was detained, tried, and convicted under President Olusegun Obasanjo's administration, many people felt the program's demise was imminent. One could therefore argue that the media has not been given the freedom to function as it ought to. The aforementioned forced the issue of whether the AIT Focus Nigeria

Programme had affected Nigeria's democratic process. And is it accurate to say that the program provided a forum for the promotion of democratic values in Nigeria?

Study Objectives

- 1. Determine the level of awareness of the AIT Focus Nigeria program among Nigerians.
- 2. Examine the impact of the Focus Nigeria program on democratic values in Nigeria.
- 3. Choose whether or not to continue the Focus Nigeria program.

Research Questions

The following research questions were used to investigate the level of awareness and potential influence of the Focus Nigeria program in this study.

- 1. To what extent are Nigerians aware of the Focus Nigeria program?
- 2. How do Nigerians assess the impact of the Focus Nigeria initiative on their commitment to democracy?
- 3. Are Nigerians of the opinion that the Focus Nigeria program needs to be continued?

2. Theoretical Review

Concept of Audience Perception

Audience perception is the process by which the audience receives and decodes the information sent to them, passing it through their filter of experience, senses, and attention1. To tailor communications to reach the audience, it is important to understand who they are, what they are interested in, what they need, and what motivates them, Agba and Ogri(2016). It implies an audience experiencing a happy feeling and being part of something. So regarding audience engagement during gigs, this definition may suit well: 'The extent to which people watching you are interested or actively involved in your performance.'

African Independent Television, Nigeria.

Africa Independent Television, also known by its acronym AIT, is a privately-owned television broadcasting station in Nigeria. It operates Free to Air in Nigeria as the largest privately-operated terrestrial television network with stations in twenty-four out of thirty-six states in Nigeria. AIT is also broadcast via satellite television from its operational headquarters in Abuja. AIT is a subsidiary of Daar Communications plc, available throughout Africa, and via Dish Network to North America. In the United Kingdom and Ireland, it was available on Sky Channel 454 as a free-to-air channel (originally a subscription channel until 1 August 2016). An additional channel called AIT Movistar, formerly on Sky channel 330, ceased broadcasting on 28 July 2009. AIT International ceased broadcasting in the United Kingdom and Ireland on 15 October 2019. AIT started when the Head of State then, General Ibrahim Babangida, issued a decree which allowed private broadcasting in Nigeria. After this decree, the first private television network in Nigeria, Africa Independent Television was pioneered by Dokpesi, and Africa's first satellite Television station.

Literature expressions

The agenda-setting hypothesis is the foundation of the study. The agenda-setting process is one of the main goals of public opinion research. According to Oji (2011), Becker and Roberts (1992) employed the notions inherent in agenda setting, which hold that the media can do a great job of telling people what to think about, to make the case that the theory explains the type of innovation that spreads in society. The ability of the media to change the significance of events in the public consciousness is the general idea behind agenda-setting theory, according to McCombs and Shaw (1972). This is why the agenda-setting theory is used in this study to explain how the political agenda for Nigeria is created or established with the help of the Focus Nigeria What specific topics were covered by the AIT Focus Nigeria program?

How did the program impact public opinion on political issues in Nigeria?

What are some examples of the constitutional safeguards in Nigeria that protect media freedom of expression? a program that deeply focuses on issues of national importance.

According to Obafemi (2008), citizens rely on the media for political news, therefore the press must be free to source, disseminate, and interpret news on their behalf. The media's ability to affect public opinion is limitless. The media also play a crucial role in influencing politicians' agendas. By agenda, it is meant to be a list of tasks and values that must be completed or considered. A political agenda is a list of topics that need to be addressed by the government, and those who set the political agenda define the subjects that government decision-makers should examine and debate. Few studies have examined the implications of interactive agendasetting on determining whether or not politicians' ability to successfully engage the public depends on media backing for their views. The study supports the idea that politicians' efforts to sway the public and win their support are most successful when they coincide with media attention on the same subject. The findings highlight how crucial it is for politicians to collaborate with the media to promote their message. In a study of media issues, Burham (1969) found a monotonic decline in the relationship between party identification and presidential candidate preference. In a study of the 1968 elections, Beardsley discovered that voter positions concerning the candidates' perceived positions were a more potent predictor than party affiliation. The results suggest that candidates gain from enlisting the news media's help in disseminating their messages, and they provide a springboard for further investigation into the impact of candidate-media agenda convergence.

Oji and Bebenimibo (2021) assert that "in today's global village, the connective cord remains with the power of social networking." Citing Davis (2000), the authors support their claim by saying that the dissemination of information has progressed to the point where computers and networks are used by humans to communicate with one another. The research of Gilardi, Gessler, Kubli, and Müller (2022) was consistent with Oji and Bebenimibo's hypothesis. It focused on the influence new media have in establishing political ideologies and other agendas. While the authors claimed that usage of internet platforms has diminished the power of conventional old media to set the agenda, they assert the number of people who may engage in setting the political agenda may have expanded. The comparative study's conclusions demonstrate how closely intertwined agendas set in various media are despite the exceptional dominance of social networks. The study of Weber (2020) is made to be highly important by Gilardi, Gessler, Kubli, and Müller's (2022) assertion that lobbying efforts may be crucial in both limiting and assisting parties to advance their respective interests. The research by Till Weber examines the various agendas that politicians develop using comparative polls and declaration data from 42 nations as well as trends for income, gender, and education. Results

demonstrate the adoption of a slight discrepancy method to anticipate potential public criticism. The result is that agendas are purposefully designed to appear unobtrusive and acceptable by omitting subjects from uneven receptivity that voters perceive as confrontational or frightening and are pressured to be accepted.

Hayes (2008) notes that few studies have examined the implications of interactive agendasetting on determining whether or not politicians' ability to successfully engage the public depends on media backing for their views. The study supports the idea that politicians' efforts to sway the public and win their support are most successful when they coincide with media attention on the same subject. The findings highlight how crucial it is for politicians to collaborate with the media to promote their message. The researcher went on to say that the mass media established the agenda by having the ability to choose stress-specific issues, causing the public to consider certain topics as significant. The agenda-setting theory, in this light, does not assign to the media the power to influence what we think, but it does ascribe to them the power to determine what we are thinking about. The researcher concluded that rural reporting should be emphasized more in journalism training curricula because it is critical to national development.

Theoretical Review

The Hypodermic Model

The study was anchored on the Hypodermic model. In this model, the media is seen as powerful and able to inject ideas into an audience who are seen as weak and passive. The hypodermic needle was proposed by Harold Lasswell in the 1920s. Also known as the 'Magic bullet theory', it explains how the audience is directly affected by what they view and hear. It is said to affect the audience/viewer immediately or soon. It suggests that a media text can 'inject' or 'fire' ideas, values, and attitudes into a passive audience, who might then act upon them. This theory also suggests that a media text has only one message that the audience must pick up. This theory suggests that the audience is powerless towards resisting the impact of the message which, in some cases, could be dangerous. This appeared to be the case in Nazi Germany in the 1930s, leading up to the Second World War. Powerful German films, such as *Triumph of the Will* (Riefenstahl, Germany, 1935), seemed to use propaganda methods to 'inject' ideas promoting the Nazi cause into the German audience. In 1957, an American theorist, Vane Packard, who was working in advertising, wrote an influential book called *The Hidden*

Persuaders. This book suggested that advertisers were able to manipulate audiences and persuade them to buy things they may not want to buy. This suggested advertiser had power over audiences. This has since proved to be an unreliable model, as modern audiences are too sophisticated.

This theory stems from a fear of the mass media and gives the media much more power than it can ever have in a democracy. Also, it ignores the obvious fact that not everyone in an audience behaves in the same way. This theory is relevant to the study because it supports the cardinal principle of what informs actions and expressions of people about an event or issue through media and communication.

3. Methodology

The study adopted the cross-sectional design which enables the researcher to collect data from many different individuals or audiences as variables at a single point in time without influencing them, Hunziker and Blankenagel(2021). The study used a stratified sampling technique so that the audience can be divided into mutually exclusive and exhaustive subgroups that will take on different mean values for the nature of the variable being studied because of the level of coverage and signal reception from African Independent Television (AIT) watchers across the three appreciable locations where AIT maintains sizable broadcasting stations. The areas were Lagos, Abuja, and Port Harcourt. The population comprised 450 individuals drawn from residential property owners in these cities. Although there are many approaches to determining sample size, however, due to the small size of the population, the entire number formed the sample as applied in the census principle which is a study of every unit, everyone, or everything, in a population otherwise called, complete enumeration when the population is deemed small (Villar, Krosnick, & Yeager, 2012). The SPSS 15.0 version was used to statistically evaluate the data collected. It combined descriptive and inferential methods. The mean, standard deviation, coefficient of variation (C.V), and percentages were used as descriptive techniques, while the one-way ANOVA and Independent samples t-test were used as inferential techniques.

4. Data Presentation, Analysis, and Discussion of Findings

Data Presentation

A total of 450 copies of the questionnaire were distributed. Respondents returned 420 copies of the questionnaire, representing 93 percent.

Table 1: Awareness of the *Focus Nigeria* **Programmes**

S/N	Program/Variables	Cities			
		Abuja	Lagos	Port Harcourt	
1	Watch AIT	140	140	140	
2	Seen FN prog	124	122	118	
3	Watch FN Prog	120	118	108	
4	Watch FN prog FRQ	118	108	104	
5	Like the content of FN Prog	110	102	96	
6	Like the quality of FN prog	109	102	94	
7	Like the presenter of the FN prog	116	102	101	
8	Like the Broadcast Time of the FN prog	104	112	108	
Mean		117.63	113.25	108.63	
S.D		11.14	13.22	14.76	
C.V (%)		9.47	11.67	13.59	

From Table 1, the mean values are 117.63, 113.25, and 108.63 for Abuja, Lagos, and Port-Harcourt cities respectively. The coefficient of variations for the awareness amongst the cities is 9.47%, 11.67%, and 13.59. The mean results show that the Nigerian political class and the electorates are aware of the AIT *Focus Nigeria* program. However, the level of awareness varied most within Port-Harcourt city. The lowest C.V of 9.47 observed in Abuja shows that the level of awareness did not vary widely amongst the people within Abuja city.

Table 2: Positive Response to Programme Influence

S/N	Program/Variables	Zones			
		Abuja	Lagos	Port Harcourt	
1	FN Democracy	110	102	94	
2	FN Electoral	106	98	88	
3	Understand the Purpose of FN	118	108	104	
4	Knowledge gained	111	109	107	
5	Influence Political thought	105	100	97	
Mean		110.00	103.40	98.00	
S.D		5.15	4.88	7.65	
C.V (%)		4.68	4.72	7.81	

Concerning Abuja, Lagos, and Port Harcourt, the mean values are 110.00, 103.40, and 98.00 for the positive influence of the *Focus Nigeria* program.

Table 3: Proportional values for Positive response to general issues raised

S/N	Variables	% Values in Cities			
		Abuja	Lagos	Port	
				Harcourt	
1	On TV	33%	33%	33%	100%
		N=140	N=140	N=140	N=420
2	Watch TV	33%	33%	33%	100%
		N=140	N=140	N=140	N=420
3	Watch TV FRQ	31%	30%	28%	89%
		N=140	N=140	N=140	N=420
4	Watch AIT	30%	29%	28%	87%
		N=140	N=140	N=140	N=420
5	Seen FN Prog	30%	29%	28%	87%
		N=140	N=140	N=140	N=420
6	Watch FN Prog	29%	28%	26%	83%
		N=140	N=140	N=140	N=420
7	Watch FN Prog frequently	28%	26%	25%	79%
		N=140	N=140	N=140	N=420
8	FN prog Participation	23%	23%	21%	67%

		N=140	N=140	N=140	N=420
9	FN Democracy	26%	24%	22%	72%
		N=140	N=140	N=140	N=420
10	FN Electoral	25%	23v	21%	69%
		N=140	N=140	N=140	N=420
11	FN presentation style	28%	26%	25%	79%
		N=140	N=140	N=140	N=420
12	FN Presenters' acceptance	27%	24%	24%	75%
		N=140	N=140	N=140	N=420
13	Like FN Broadcast Time	25%	27%	26%	78%
		N=140	N=140	N=140	N=420
14	FN Continuation	28%	26%	21%	75%
		N=140	N=140	N=140	N=420
Mean	23.21	28.29	37.86	Mean	23.21
S.D	18.47	20.30	28.94	S.D	18.47
C.V (%)	79.58	71.76	76.44	C.V (%)	79.58

Item 14 of interest here indicates that 75% of the respondents agreed that the program should be continued.

Answer to Research Questions

The data analyzed in this study were randomly obtained from 420 respondents. The following were the deductions made from the data:

The first research question sought to determine the level of awareness of *the Focus Nigeria* program among Nigerians. The answer to research question one can be found in Table 1. From Table 1, the mean values are 117.63, 113.25, and 108.63 for Abuja, Lagos, and Port-Harcourt cities respectively. The coefficient of variations for the awareness amongst the cities is 9.47%, 11.67%, and 13.59. The mean results show that Nigerians are aware of the AIT *Focus Nigeria* program.

The second research question concerns how Nigerians evaluate the possible influence of the *Focus Nigeria* program on Nigeria's democratic values. The answer to the research question can be found in Table 2. The mean values show that the *Focus Nigeria* program influences Nigerians. The level of influence is highest in Abuja and lowest in Port Harcourt.

Considering the positive levels of influence, the C.V. is 4.68%, 4.73%, and 7.81% for Abuja, Lagos, and Port Harcourt respectively. This shows that the level of program influence is more

variant with Port Harcourt, while close to a uniform level of influence is experienced in Abuja and Lagos.

The third research question has to do with the question if Nigerians subscribe to the sustainability of the program *Focus Nigeria* and other audience-based programs on TV. The answer to the research question can be found in Table 3. The "FN Continuation" entry denotes audience acceptance for the continuation of the Focus Nigeria program from the table, it can be seen that in the opinion of 75% of the respondents, the Focus Nigeria program was found worthy and the recommendation was that the station should continue the broadcast of the program. This infers that audience-based programs of the nature of the Focus Nigeria Programme should be encouraged to aid the political cum democratic process in Nigeria.

5. Discussion of Findings

Over two-thirds of respondents say they are familiar with the Focus Nigeria program. Also, almost the same number of respondents say they watch and give attention to the program. The majority of respondents believe that the program has contributed to Nigerians' democratic values. Similarly, more than two-thirds believe the program should be continued on the AIT channel. The findings of this study are consistent with Obafemi's (2008) report, which states that "citizens rely on the mass media for political news... The media's ability to affect public perception is limitless... But there's also the media's crucial role and power in setting the agenda for lawmakers and the general public..." From a misunderstanding of Felipe Calderon's start in Valenzuela, evidence from the 2006 Mexican election reveals a significant finding: the more covered and favorably presented a politician was, the larger the proportion of public support. This finding is consistent with the direction of this study, which confirmed the impact of the Focus Nigeria program. It demonstrates that such programs will aid in the spread of democratic ideas.

6. Conclusion

Milavsky and Biswas (2006) examine whether watching the presidential debates affected viewers' opinions of the candidates more than their comprehension of the subjects. They found that Ross Perot, a relatively obscure contender, is perceived more favorably as a result of the debates. This validates the study's findings, which demonstrate the influence of politically charged programming on Nigeria's democratic process. Overall, the results indicate that the initiative will continue to support Nigeria's democracy if it is allowed to continue.

In terms of the media's function, democratic beauty has once more been demonstrated. It is apparent that a democratic regime's media repression, however severe, cannot be equated to that of a military dictatorship. In other words, under a democratic system or regime, the media has a tremendous deal of freedom.

It must be emphasized once more that Nigeria's political development and media history are interwoven. The press actively participated in the fight for independence. And it has kept up that tendency, contributing greatly to the political system of the country. The Nigerian government's machinery has continued to be greased by the media.

Recommendations

A review of the study's findings indicates that a significant portion of Nigerians is aware of the Focus Nigeria program. Also, Nigerians want the program to continue. To do this, the study suggests:

- 1. that the Focus Nigeria AIT program needs to be continued. The majority of respondents believed that a good anchorperson should continue to host it.
- 2. that greater participation in the form of phone calls and emails should be permitted to regularly evaluate the program and carry out any necessary adjustments.
- 3. that to increase awareness of the program and encourage viewers to find time to watch it, constant program promotion is required.

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