Political, cultural and educational dimensions of television in the post-colonial African states
By Tokunbo Ojo[1]

Introduction

The establishment of Moroccan television station in 1954 marked the beginning of the television age in Africa. Algeria and Nigeria followed the suit in 1956 and 1959, respectively. While Kenya, Uganda and Senegal had television stations in the mid-1960s, Cameroon and several other African countries did not have television stations until 70s and early 80s. At present, virtually all African countries have either a national television or both national and private-run television services in operation.

The introduction of television, which came at the time of decolonization process in Africa, "takes a coloration that in some respects reflects the geopolitical culture and /or commercial character of the states. For instance, in Nigeria, with its wide variety of ethnic groups and highly developed social organizations, many of which compete with the federal government for power and influence, television first came at the instance of a regional government" (Okigbo, 1998: 235).

The argument in favour of establishment of public national television was that it would be a bidding cultural force to forge cultural identity and promote national unity in the new emerging African states or newly independent African countries. In spite of the high investment cost, it was still articulated as a medium for educational purpose and

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cultural identity. It was seen as a symbol of nationhood and a panacea for educational problem, economic development and political advancement.

Given these optimistic aspirations of television at the wee hours of independence, television service was technically included among the top priorities in the national social, political and economical developmental plans in the several postcolonial African states. "In the initial stages of television, some countries put as much as 95 percent of their information budgets into this new medium" (Bourgault, 1995: 105). It is within the framework of national development that this paper explores the political, cultural and educational purposes of television in the post-colonial African states.

Background Information

Virtually all African countries have national television stations now. Some countries have both the public-owned television stations and private-owned television stations. But in spite of the significant number of private and public owned television stations, the television service is still restricted to urban cities and nations' capital cities. For instance, in Nigeria, five of the nine fully operational private television stations are located in Lagos, which the nation's capital city until 1991. All these stations came into being in the 1990s. Also, with the exception of two, all the federal government owned television stations in Nigeria are located in the capital cities of the nation's 36 states. Seven of the 21 licensed private satellite re-transmission stations are located in Lagos. The remaining 16 are also located in the strategic business-booming urban areas of the country.

Despite the considerable presence of television stations in Nigeria and other parts of Africa, the continent is still poorly served by transmitters. As Bourgault found out, "in 1988, there were 160 television transmitters [in Africa] as compared to 500 in Oceania

and 21,800 in Europe (Bourgault, 1995:105). After Bourgault's data was published, few new transmitters have been added and couple of the existing ones were upgraded. Even with this development, the continent still has the lowest transmitters and television set ownership in the world.

Based on the 1996 UNESCO's studies, about 3.5 percent of Sub-Saharan African population owns a television set. This figure is a far cry from the world average of 23 percent. The primary reasons for the low penetration of television in Africa include the poor technological state of the continent, absence of constant power supply in many countries, high level of illiteracy and low standard of living. Of the 48 countries classified "least developed countries in the world" by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the continent has 33. "In 1995 almost a quarter of the population (24%) was classified by UNESCO as technically illiterate and about 40% of the population lived on less than $1 a day. The region's share of the world trade has fallen from 5% in 1995 to less than 2% in 1997 (Jensen, 2000: 181).

Between 1960s when most African countries got independence and now, Africa has witnessed "a high number of violent conflicts, as well as the successful termination of wars, moves towards democratization and more pluralist politics in many countries, and the transition from apartheid to multi-racial democracy in South Africa (Onadipe and Lord, 2000, 5). Some of these conflicts and wars do have adverse effects on the economic and political development in Africa. However, there has been a ray of hope in Africa in the last five years. Botswana remains one of the fastest growing economies in the world. Nigeria returned to democratic rule in 1999 after over a decade of military rule. Uganda is strongly handling the AIDS epidemic in the country. In all these changes, news

media, especially the broadcasting media (television and radio), played significant roles, and they are still playing important roles, in the daily cultural, political and social affairs of African countries (Ojo, 2003).

Politics

Within the government circle in many of African countries, it is widely believed that "a government's political fortunes depend very much on how well it has harnessed the broadcast media. Elections can be won or lost not by the power of the ballot, but by the power to access to radio and television, while keeping the private press in check" (Nyamnjoh, 1998:31). This is the notion behind government's monopolization of television service in many of African countries.

In Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda, Burundi and Kenya where there is huge private enterprise' involvement in the broadcasting, the government of these countries still invest heavily in the government owned television stations. This is due to the fact that in Africa the purpose of television (and radio), as the Zimbabwean minister of information and broadcasting simply puts it, "is not merely to educate, inform and entertain as is the case in the West. Mass communication has a direct political mission….the agitational or propaganda element has to be there if mass mobilization is to take place" (as cited in Okigbo, 1998).

As Egbon (1983) and Okigbo (1998) recorded in two separate papers, Nigeria is a typical example of such. The first station in the country (and also the first station in the Black African countries) was established in 1959 after "the Premier of the Western Region, the late Chief Obafemi Awolowo [was] denied permission to air his views

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through the national radio services in reply to allegedly false accusations levelled against his party by the Governor, Sir John Stuart MacPherson" (Okigbo, 1998:237).

Knowing the power of media, Awolowo established a television in his own ruled Western region of the country. Just like Awolowo, majority of African leaders use television as a political weapon to fight opponents, legitimatize their leadership and influence public opinion on any socio-political issue. In fact, for most part of the late Felix Houphouet-Boigny's rule in Cote d'Ivoire from 1960-1993, the evening news on the Ivorian national television, which most Ivorians tuned to, usually started with the presidential thoughts of the day in bold caption (Bourgault, 1995). In Kenya and Zaire (now Democratic Republic of Congo), national television was used to project or construct Presidents Daniel Arap Moi (of Kenya) and Mobutu (of Zaire) as the fatherly figures and national pride, respectively. News cast on the national television are often structured around (a) on-going government policies/programs and activities, and (b) official daily activities of state governors, ministers, top-government officials and president.

It is imperative that I point out that this norm is not specific to those cited countries only. It is a common phenomenon in Africa. "All across the continent, the picture of the incumbent President is the most permanent icon in the television news. So the theme of politics will probably remain an evergreen in African television programming" (Okigbo, 1998: 237).

Education

The early proponents of television in Africa used educational reason as one of the cordial points to justify the establishment of television. The notion of having educational television was well-received by local populace, UNESCO and other bilateral

organizations because it was an initiative that had immerse benefits with proper implementation. It was an ambitious project that took over on a good ground in 1960s with funding within and outside the continent. At the inception, it did add credibility to Wilbur Schramm's argument that television could be an efficient tool for learning. For instance in Cote d'Ivoire, which started educational television in 1968, the "percentage of children in school increased from 54 percent in 1970 to 65 percent in 1976-77. By the early 1980s, televised education was reaching 75 to 85 percent of the school pupils. And much of the feedback showed better results in national examination on such subjects as reading and writing" (Lenglet, 1985:157; Bourgault, 1995: 117).

Given this earlier success in Cote d'Ivoire, Zambia, Nigeria and handful of other countries, one would expect that the educational broadcasting programmes, majority of which were locally produced, would sustain the test of time on the continent. But the reserve is the case. By late 1980s and 1990s, the golden hope of educational television in Africa has been dashed due to high-cost production, absence of technical-know-how, dysfunctional technological state of TV production in the continent, and a significant shift in the audience's programming preference to a less intellectual-stimulating TV programmes and more entertainment programmes. As in numerous developing countries, in many African countries today, "educational television is not the instant university" that Chu, Schramm and the early advocates of instructional television thought it would be (Okigbo, 1998).

In spite of its shortcomings, there is still a place for educational television in the African context if there are necessary resources to support the project. With a well-structured objective plan, educational television could be an avenue to bridge the

widening gap between the urban and rural viewers in Africa. Designing educative

programmes for the rural dwellers, who are predominately farmers and illiterates, on

modern techniques of farming, cattle rearing, weaving and other rural-centric

professional life in the native languages might draw more audience to the television.

These programmes, which might be aimed at the improvement of their life and

professional development, could give the rural settlers and dwellers a sense of belonging

and participation in the world of television.

Cultural

Despite the high influx of the cheap imported American sitcoms and foreign

programmes, television in Africa still provides a forum for cultural expressions.

Presentations on television touch on the social and cultural aspects of the society. Some

of them are meant to remind viewers of their historical ties, and to revitalize the richness

of communal life in the pre-colonial African societies. For instance on the network

service of the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), a 30-minute long children program,

Tales by Moonlight, is designed to keep alive the rich African oral tradition and folktales.

Set in the traditional society Africa, the customs are strictly old African attire and the

stories are told to children by elderly woman who sit under the tree with them in the

moon light evening.

Some of the featured stories include narratives of tortoise and its trickster's lifestyle

in the animal kingdom, myths of prodigal son, and communal revolt against the

authoritarian king. These tales are aimed at teaching children under age of 15 about social

morality, rewards of honesty, and respect for elders from the standpoint of the traditional

African belief system.

Apart from bringing back the oral tradition of African lives, television also stimulates the indigenous culture. "Liberia produces its series on songs and folktales, Nigeria and the Ivory Coast present African drama; all the stations make liberal use of local music, whether traditional, or modern urban jazz. Uganda has already attempted historical reconstruction (Ainsle, 1966: 187). While these local productions stimulate indigenous culture and allow orature to thrive on air, some of them are used for satire and social criticism of government policy and political elite class.

At times, they are used to raise social awareness and to mobilize people in favour of certain orientation. In Uganda, for example, there are local productions that aimed to inform people about the dangers of unsafe sex and the reality of HIV virus/AIDS. In Nigeria, now rested mini-series, *Mind Bending,* which was produced by Lola Fani-Kayode, raised social awareness about the adverse effects of drugs and alcohol on youths in late 1980s and early 1990s.

Locally produced programmes from the social and cultural perspective help viewing audiences to relate better to programmes. It is due to programmes' relevance to the lived experiences and daily life struggles of the audiences. These programmes do have strong following among the local population. But the downside is that most of these cultural rich programmes are often regionally based or specific to certain ethnic groups if vernacular language is used. The reason for this is the linguistic barrier that is imposed by the multiplicity of languages within the border of each African state.

To produce a national appealing programme or a programme that transcends ethnic and linguistic barrier, the producers and directors generally use the national adopted official language, which is usually the language of the former colonial master, as a

medium of communication and a tool of narration. Often, alongside with the official language, the well-known native languages are also used in the narrative structure in order to bring the productions closer to the cultural groups within the country.

In the light of the Herculean task of production and few shortcomings, television experience in the multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic African countries has been a positive experience. With further development in the organizational structure, quality of production, cast, and increase in financial budget, African television will be a repertoire of traditional African folktales, orature, music, dance, drama and poetry.

Conclusion

Given the social responsibilities of television in the African context, one would argue that television experience in African context has not been a disappointing one. Some of the goals of the television, which have left unrealized, could still be achieved if there are more organizational planning, better orientation, availability of technologies of broadcast production, better education of personnel, collaboration among the broadcasters and more capital.

For African television to be a force to reckon with in a more globalized world socio-political economical system, it needs to create its own identity in the world market and be more autonomous expressions of national and regional cultural interests (Wedell and Tudesq, 1997). This way it could move from being at the margin to the centre and then present the social reality and the positive image of African society to the world. Although these Africanization and radical overhaul moves require massive capital and human investment, it is possible if there is willingness on the part of all stakeholders in the African television industry to move television to a greater height in Africa.

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