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Organising a Television Service For Rural Areas

by Des Wilson*

Abstract

This paper examines the present structure and organisation of television in the country and highlights weaknesses which arise from a non-appreciation of the information needs of the people to whom television messages should be directed. It also explores the ways by which existing media facilities (traditional and modern) could be effectively harnessed to run a system that would meaningfully penetrate the rural areas. Highlighting the lack of creativity and initiative among television service policy makers, it proposes some strategies for making television move progressively from the studios to individual households.

Résumé

Cet article analyse la structure et l'organisation actuelles de la télévision dans le pays et souligne les faiblesses liées à la non appréciation des besoins d'information des population auxquelles devraient s'adresser les messages de la télévision. Il explore aussi les moyens par lesquels les structures médiatiques existantes (traditionnelles et modernes) pourraient effectivement être mises en valeur pour gérer un système qui pénétrerait d'une manière significative les zones rurales. Tout en soulignant le manque de créativité et d'initiative des décideurs de la politique télévisuelle, il propose quelques stratégies pour faire partir progressivement la télévision des studios vers les ménages.

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Introduction

This paper intends to explore the ways by which existing media facilities, both modern and traditional could be effectively harnessed to run a system that would meaningfully penetrate the rural areas. It is the opinion of this paper that the present television network is a step in the right direction but that the process can be carried beyond the level of the community viewing centre (CVC) to the level the village communication centre (VCC) and then to households.

Nigeria, the largest concentration of people in Africa, with a population figure estimated to be generally in the region of over 80 million divided among over 250 ethnic groups has the largest market in Africa and this in itself poses a great communication problem for the media managers. With electricity erratic, telephone not functioning, the Nigeria Airways in disarray, the railways just too slow for any serious communication service, and transportation a big exercise in futility, it is a great surprise that radio, television film, newspaper and other media facilities even work. A manager planning under these such conditions must be something of a genius to be able to make sense of the situation. This probably explains why a lot of the grandiose plans drawn up through foreign consultancy services do not seem to have a place in our society. Thus the present policy of always trying to model our systems after Western systems has to change to make way from a more realistic approach to our communication problems.

2. Organisation and Directors

Television suffers partly from the disabilities of government since it is totally owned and run by it. It suffers yet another disability namely, the (excessive) obsession with Western theoretical models which Western-educated managers try to impose on their society. Added to this is the more fundamental problem which arises from the latter. This is evident in the inability of the managers to innovate, create or adapt foreign models to suit their society but in the surrendering of their responsibility in a manner Carr (1962:p.3) describes as the 'tiresome obligation to think for themselves'. It is the intellectual laziness that has further reduced the effectiveness of Nigeria's television service.

Admittedly, the problems of television services in Nigeria generally are multifarious and diffuse given that 'the demands of television in terms of technology, know-how and finance (sic) are greater than those of radio' (Katz and Weddel, 1978:p.83). Television service under its present state has largely failed because in spite of these demands, it has not addressed itself to the intrinsically basic problems of rural communication. No serious attempts outside academia have been made to understand the systems of traditional and rural communication. Even so much academic studies tend to be paternalistic and lack conviction. Armed with their Western theoretical framework, such researchers tend to superimpose concepts and structures in their desire to seek a common ground for understanding.

So the question: "What are the information needs of the rural people?" Must be answered. Since more than 80% of Nigeria's over 80 million people live in rural areas, we have at least 60 million (64 ml) people or more to cater for. The present problem is how to make existing facilities available to those 60 million people, in spite of the fact that it may be considered a waste of resources to spend so much money for the entertainment of just a few as is the case now.

In determining the information needs of rural people, Dervin's (1976) taxonomy of the everyday information needs of the average citizen, Gotsick et al's (1976) categories of information for everyday survival, Ogunshyeyes (1981) synthesis of some previous studies and her classification of information needs for rural areas, and Olatunbosun's (1975) appraisal of government policies on rural areas which alleges their neglect could help in establishing a relatively adequate direction for the country. This writer has further synthesized all these previous classificatory schemes and observations into fourteen broad categories of information needs, namely,

- (i) Health
- (ii) Land and Agriculture
- (iii) Employment
- (iv) Family matters
- (v) Education
- (vi) Self and Community Services
- (vii) Financial Matters
- (viii) Transportation
- (ix) Religion and Spiritual Matters
- (x) Recreation and Cultural Matters
- (xi) Law, Politics and Government
- (xii) Crime and Security
- (xiii) Ethnic Relations
- (xiv) Housing

These categories can further be classified into two broad groups; information for preventing problems and information for solving problems. These are needs which policy-makers in government – government being sole owner of television stations in the country – and executors of government policies would do well to examine if the fruits of television must be reaped in the right season.

As a result, television services in the country should be geared towards the following ideological goals with the fourteen categories suggested above acting as props and guide: television should.

- (a) mobilize the people at the grassroots level towards national consciousness.
- (b) be a source of education and enlightenment for the masses leading them towards self-actualization and national development.
- (c) serve intra-cultural, intercultural and other communication purposes leading to group cohesion and national unity.

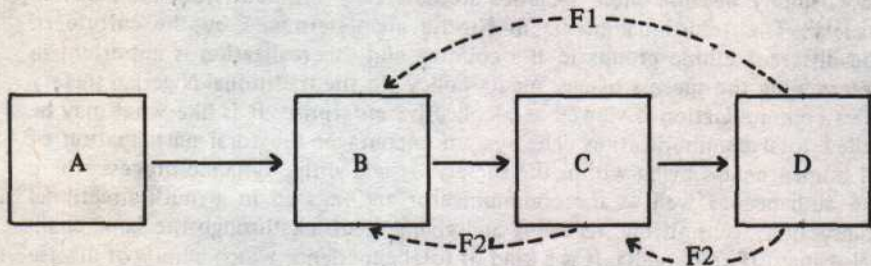
Television broadcasting in other parts of the world has become the most pervasive, and often the most persuasive means of information diffusion in these societies. 'It can disseminate information with lightning speed and impact, as well as infuse viewers with imagery and values in a subtle, perhaps almost imperceptible manners' (Cassata & Asante, 1979). But Nigerian television has not yet attained the standards that these technologically advanced countries have, simply because these societies are culturally different from the Nigerian society. The traditional media in Nigeria are determined by the culture of the different ethnic groups in the country and this realization is important in determining the success of any media policy. In the traditional Nigerian society mass communication is viewed as a collective enterprise. It is like what may be called total communication. The system encourages the total participation of all human beings living within the society. It is a virile, dynamic process where the audience as well as the communicator are engaged in a multi-directional transaction, transmitting, receiving and giving feedback through the same channel using different media. It is a kind of total experience which admits of diverse communication theories. The use of the model borrowed from the West has today created what is often referred to as communication breakdown, a misnomer for non-communication.

In order to devise a network model that can penetrate the rural communities, we must first free ourselves from the self-imposed prejudice which often comes with the treat of change. Nigerian television is currently organised under a system of almost a single ownership based on a policy of government control without individual participation. Under this pattern of ownership the government is said to hold this powerful apparatus of information dissemination in trust for the people whose interest they claim to represent. There is thus a single network service which is controlled by the Nigerian Television Authority with headquarters in Lagos. The NTA owns a network of stations in all the state capitals with the exception of Imo State whose station is located at Aba. There are at present 23 stations in the country, four of these are located in the Lagos area alone. There are also numerous sub-transmitting and booster stations in some of the states of the federation along with the community viewing centres. Some states have commenced transmission on the Ultra High Frequency channels allocated to them, notable among these are Cross River, Bendel, Oyo and Anambra. Lagos is the only state currently transmitting with the very high frequency channel and that is said to be temporary arrangement.

3. Proposed Strategy

Rural societies require a system that will take into account their social and cultural instincts as well as using those aspects of their technology which have been a source of effective communication strategy. This approach is better seen in the context of a four-step model of trado-modern mass communication strategy. This model when applied to the existing television network system will

certainly lead to a greater appreciation of television in the lives of the people of the rural areas. The four-step model (Wilson, 1982) consists of the use of a combination of traditional and modern mass communication instruments towards the achievement of the broadcasting goals of the nation. Trado-modern communication is viewed by Wilson as 'the combination of traditional communication technology and approaches with modern media hardware in a manner that both complement each other.'



A – A modern medium of communication, e.g. television.

B – Village communication centre – comprising the traditional gatekeepers.

C – Traditional medium of communications, e.g. the gong.

D – The audience/receivers

F1– Feedback from D to B

F2– Feedback from D to C and From C to B

From the above it can be seen that when a piece of information that requires dissemination to the general public is received through the medium of television at the television viewing centre within the community, the information so received may be further mediated through the channel of the village communication centres. From the village communication centre, the information is sent through the gongman who will deliver whatever information is required to the rest of the community, especially those who were unable to go to the viewing centre at the time the information was being relayed through the national network. Those who may own their own television sets could still benefit from the exercise in case they were not listening when the information first came directly from the first source. It is however clear that television pictures can never be duplicated in the minds of the audience that was not there when the event first took place. The best the traditional newscaster can do is try to recapture the spirit of the original information. That in itself could be a very difficult try. But the information so presented would serve the purpose for which it was intended.

This combination of modern and traditional media of communication allows for feedback within the same channel, a thing which is not possible using a singular system. It also makes the whole process faster than in conventional communication strategies which lead to a delay in feedback.

Traditional and rural society depends to a large extent on the authority image which pervades her social and political system. This authority image can assist in the effective dissemination of information in the rural society. Thus Lasswell's suggestion that the communication process can simply be viewed in terms of an answer to the question: Who/says What/in Which Channel/to Whom/with What Effect? may well explain the information strategy proposed in this paper (Lasswell, 1948).

It is obvious that in a multi-ethnic nation like ours, competing sectional interests, beliefs and mutual suspicion make it difficult for a more cohesive and articulate national policy to be evolved. Nevertheless, television's power should enable it to transmit national culture irrespective of the forces against it. This power should arise from a dynamic cultural policy which in turn should be based on the national ideology. For example, in advocating the need for discipline as a national philosophy, television, whose strength lies mainly in its ability to present both sound and vision simultaneously, could be more effectively used if another important question is answered: television for whom? If television must be a mass medium and if it must be seen to perform the roles for which it is known to be best suited to perform, then it must use a language that is understood by a great majority of the people who reside within the area of its coverage. This would enhance effective communication.

Whereas African communication systems are people-oriented Western communication systems are machine- or equipment-oriented. Since television managers have failed to grasp this fact, a lot of the efforts put into television broadcasting is a failure as far as a great majority of the people are concerned. It is a fact that which foreign communication researchers like Pye (1963) saw and remarked as follows:

Traditional communication processes. . . tended in general to be closely wedded to social and political processes that the very act of receiving and transmitting messages called for some display of agreement and acceptance.

This is still true today because in spite of the contradictions which exist between traditional forms of administration and the Western models which have been tried in the country the system of communication through television and other media lacks legitimization. Since traditional authority lies in the chiefs, for communication to be made meaningful to the majority of the people the traditional process which Pye speaks of must be followed. Although this might seem a rather hazardous task today, it is perhaps the only sensible way to make mass media information meaningful to the people.

One possible way is to bring together for each ethnic or linguistic community, the broadcaster, reporters etc. who are recognized by them and then put them on television to perform all relevant functions: entertainment, informational educational and correlation of the parts of society — all of these carried out in a language which a majority of them understand until such a time that a national language would evolve to make it possible for everyone to speak the

same language. The truth of the situation is, as Ugboajah (1972) points out, 'Traditional media (sic) have force and credibility. They put stability into Africa's indigenous institutions'. The legitimization of the sources of information helps to increase awareness and acceptability among the users of information.

From this standpoint, television viewing could grow in rural areas through a system of community viewing centres (CVC) which should serve populations of about 5,000. These viewing centres should form part of a village communication complex which should consist of a library, newspaper and magazine room, radio room, a hall for mass-mediated culture (like disco and cultural dances on vinyl), traditional information transmitters and others. Such centres should be funded and run by the community and subsidized by local government authorities through the assistance of the national government. (Fig. 111). Television should move from the studios to the outside, mirroring all the activities of the society — government officials, peasant farmers, and everything under the sun considered by the gatekeepers to be newsworthy. Television in Nigeria should no longer feel restricted by the spurious theories from the West which seek to stifle creativity and innovation for fear of practitioners being considered novices or even amateurs.

Nigeria boasts of over twenty six years of television broadcasting (1959-86) but certainly we should begin to care about those twenty six long years in which we still do not know how to make the simplest of the components that make up the broadcasting equipment. It has been twenty six years in which the number of sets has grown from a few hundred to over a million.¹ Nigeria's difficulty in making an effective use of television lies in her ignorance of the technology that brings the pictures and sounds we see and hear in those curious little boxes.

In Japan, for example, television broadcasting is pervasive and it is also the most persuasive means of information diffusion in that society. This is so partly because the technology is within the grasp of a large number of its citizens. It is cheap (the broadcasting system and television sets) and this makes it possible for most people to own their own sets.

Therefore, in order to devise a suitable network that could penetrate the rural communities, we must first free ourselves from the self-imposed prejudice against the local system of multi-directional transaction, transmission, reception and giving information and receiving of feedback through the same channel which characterises traditional media practices.

The total dependence on western models of communication and technology will further weaken the social system. For we must accept the truth so succinctly stated by Ainslie (1966) that:

until Africa is in uncontested control of its own communication, the struggle for full independence will still not be won.

And she goes further to state that:

. . . he who controls communications controls more than the means to transmit messages. He has in his hands a terrible power, the power to create for his audience an image of the world, and more important still, an image of itself.

This is a point of view shared by Schiller (1976) who says that:

. . . the forms, expressions, and general structure of western capitalist communications cannot be adopted intact as an appropriate model in societies seeking cultural liberation.

because the most potent of these, radio and television were organized and developed in the context of an already atomized society, each fragmented family unit living in its private home.

Whereas the traditional African communication system is community-oriented. In spite of this need to rethink and review our policies regarding television broadcasting it is clear that it is not easy to ignore Western communication systems and their products because as Schiller (1976) also notes

The system is powerful and possesses the means to prevent itself and its products globally.

But this should not deter us from developing an acceptable system. To do otherwise would be dangerous. It is clear from the recent action of the US government to withdraw from UNESCO, that media imperialism is real and since America discovered that the present UNESCO set-up has been encouraging and sponsoring projects and schemes that aim at establishing a new world information order she has quickly taken action to withdraw her financial support to that organisation.

This is certainly why we ourselves must accept the need to transform present television broadcasting structures based on Western models to something that meets our cultural needs.

4. Programming

The Nigerian Television Authority has as its objectives the following, which broadly coincide with the often held principles and functions of television broadcasting. They are divided into social, cultural, economic, political and technological objectives. These five objectives are aimed at making the medium effective in the pursuit of national goals and objectives. Within these broad objectives are embedded fourteen other objectives identified as programme objectives. (See Nigerian Television Authority: Administration Handbook). But the fact remains that these five objectives can only be meaningful if they are translated to objective reality. There is at the moment a wide gulf between the practice and the theoretical assumptions on paper.

There is thus a need for the managers of our television stations to conduct proper studies in order that they may be able to plan accordingly to meet the needs of the rural communities. This planning must take into account the cultural aspects of television. Programmes should be designed to fit into the life cycle of the people rather than use programmes that have little or no relevance to the culture of the people.

Programming times are crucial for it is important to know when the target audience will be home watching the programme directed at it. This brings to the fore the need for research units to be attached to all television stations. There should also be more community viewing centres in the rural areas.

Perhaps of the greatest importance is the need to use the language of the people in the areas covered by the television station. Local languages are important in the dissemination of information in the rural areas bearing in mind that a great majority of the peoples do not understand nor do they speak English, which very often is the medium used for all broadcasting in the country.

In addition to this, the present form of the programme presentation is trivial, lacks investigation depth (Morley, 1981) and also lacks relevance. The programmes are of low quality (Akpan, 1982); and generally, they have little entertainment and educational value and humanism but rather television programming tends to thrive on advertising foreign culture and media. An event made possible through 'large-scale efforts being made, often with impressive success, to channel our thinking habits, our purchasing decisions, and our thought by the use of purchasing insights gleaned from psychiatry and the social sciences' (Packard, 1958).

An analysis of the programme content for NTA, Ibadan and NTA, Calabar shows that the two stations like most other stations in the country are neck-deep in marketing Western culture, values and vices through the medium of undiscerning film choice. Since the market is dominated by foreign oligopolies this has led to the underdevelopment of the Nigerian film industry and also brought about the capitulation of the Nigerian film market and what Pendakur (1981) refers to as 'anxiety over loss of cultural sovereignty', (pp. 155) an opinion strongly shared by the present writer. For Nigerian television, and to wit, for Nigerian film development to make any serious impact on the society, Pendakur's suggestions towards the development of the Canadian film industry are pertinent here.

Firstly, there is a need for a Nigerian Film Development Corporation, to foster and promote the development of a feature film industry in Nigeria. This should serve as a kind of investment bank for Nigerian film makers, providing venture capital which is difficult to obtain from private sources.

Secondly, the quota of foreign films should be determined and fixed like those of other commodities in the country.

Thirdly, cooperation should be sought among the international, and indigenous capitalists, and the industry workers.¹

The state of the film industry largely determines what type of film are shown

on television. The present situation is anything but desirable. Thus writing about the state of television broadcasting in the country, Idowu Sobowale (1981) says that television has failed 'woefully to live up to expectation in several key. . . areas where it is best placed to contribute immensely to the development of the country'. He goes on to argue that it has concentrated 'almost entirely on institutions and public functionaries to the exclusion of the vast majority of citizens who both make news, pay for television and patronize it'.

This is why the efforts of the NTA Ibadan in establishing viewers associations in local government areas will assist in generating the interest of the rural viewers and also lead to the reappraisal of their present programming policies. Thus a combination of facilities at the viewing centres and the establishment of the viewers' association will enhance interest in television viewing and make its effects more greatly felt in the rural areas.

It is thus that we could say that television broadcasting is getting to the masses and that its content is also taking into consideration their viewers. For as Sobowale points out: 'The only beneficiaries of television news programmes always are those officials who are forced on the public notice and therefore, acquire recognition much larger than they deserve'.

Sobowale's views are supported by the Director General of the NTA, Mr. Vincent Maduka, who observes that 'television broadcasting as a means of communication is yet to be effective in the country'. He also highlights other problems associated with the ineffectiveness of television broadcasting, namely,

- (a) the problem of the majority of Nigerians' inability to buy television sets of their won.
- (b) television broadcasters do not reach certain neighbourhoods or certain areas do not have electricity or they do not have facilities for benefiting from television service.

Ugboajah (1979) estimates the total number of television sets in the country at 150,000 and then goes on to assert that television broadcasting does not at the moment have the desired effect on the rural societies and even in the cities. Although his estimate may seem grossly underestimated, it is an improvement on the UNESCO figure of 75,000 in 1975. The *Sunday Punch* newspaper (Nov. 10, 1985) reports the figure at 4.9 million based on an RBNL survey in 67% of urban households in Nigeria. The controversial Research Bureau Nigeria Limited's survey is also not conclusive in its assertion.

5 Conclusion

We can therefore at this point suggest the introduction of the following elements into television broadcasting in the country. This organisational strategy would go a long way in ensuring that television has the desired impact on rural societies. First and foremost, for television to have the necessary effects on viewers it must first broadcast in the language most commonly used in such areas. Thus while the network service may continue to broadcast in English,

the local stations should try to strike a balance between programmes broadcast in English and those done in the local language's of the area. For example, NTA Calabar while receiving network programmes in English should continue to broadcast in Efik, Ejagham, Bekwara and any other language that may be considered necessary by the local NTA Board.

A look at the programme schedules of the Ibadan and Calabar station for the quarter March-June 1982 shows that for NTA Calabar the average daily programmes in the local languages of the state is between 15%-20% while that for Ibadan is between 40%-50%. This near balance in the Yoruba – speaking area is not surprising because of the language homogeneity which they all share, whereas in the Cross River State there are at least as many as ten mutually unintelligible language.

This language factor has affected programme content of the station thus robbing it of the desired effectiveness. If we all agree that a majority of the people who live in the rural areas are not literate in English then we would see the need to make television broadcasting get to them in the language they understand.

Secondly, to ensure that those who are able to purchase their own sets make use of them, electricity supply should be provided in rural areas. This can either be done through the rural electrification boards or the National Electric Power Authority. This is important because of the high cost of television which should not be compounded by the needs of a power generating set.

Thirdly, more transmitters and booster stations should be built to enable programmes beamed by local stations to get to their target audience. This is necessary when one considers the vastness of some states and the inability of existing facilities to reach outlying districts. The need for this is to reach as many people as possible.

In addition, the type of programmes beamed out to these rural communities should be such that could be described as relevant to them. Thus the programme planners should be able to find out the real interests of the people of the rural areas rather than sit down in offices and allow their own interests to override those of the people.

The Outside Broadcast vans should be made to get to the rural areas in order to record their ways of life. Their activities should also be the focus of these local stations, for as Sobowale (1981) points out: 'The only beneficiaries of television news programmes always are those officials who are forced on the public notice. . .'. By presenting the things the masses do they are inexorably drawn into and attracted to television and the desired impact would be felt.

Furthermore, the Community Viewing Centres should be more effectively used as centres for monitoring the view of the viewers on the programmes of the station. Direct participation by them in determining programme content would assist decision makers in putting out relevant programmes for the local audience. More of these viewing centres should be built to get television nearer to the people. Perhaps a more feasible thing to do at the moment is to build

such centres at about five kilometres apart in every rural community with a population of not less than five thousand people. Large population centres where there can be used for educational purposes could have colour sets especially for the proposed open university programme whenever it takes off. Outside that the more expensive colour sets should be eschewed. The community viewing centres can be used for other activities by the communities and thus the cost of building community halls could thus be saved and the money used for some other purposes.

Another important way of increasing effectiveness could be through the television viewers association recently initiated by NTA Ibadan. It also has the high potential of providing a veritable avenue for feedback. Like the radio clubs it could be harnessed to form or serve as a kind of audience research and resource centre where information needs may be determined. The present experiment in Ibadan is proving, according to the authorities of the station, to be a very useful public relations forum for the station and also a very useful tool for the testing of new ideas by the station. The various communities can through this association be brought into the planning and programming policies of the television station. When these and other useful strategies are adopted television broadcasting would cease to be regarded as a purely elitist affair and seen as a real mass medium that is also serving the interests of the masses.

For all these to be effective they must be backed up by mass literacy campaigns which should in turn make rural societies better able to appreciate some of the complex communication context of television. To go hand-in-hand with these should be progressive measures aimed at improving the economic life of the people not through a massive industrialization programme but through a gradual introduction of intermediate technology in order not to create some of urban centres' social and cultural problems in these rural pockets of simplicity.

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