

Broadcasting and Democratization in Nigeria

By

**Attahiru M. Jega, OFR
Professor
Department of Political science
Bayero University, Kano¹**

Introduction

There has for long been wide recognition of the utility of broadcasting for education, enlightenment, socialization and entertainment in the contemporary world. Now, there is increasing recognition that, as is the case with mass media in general, broadcasting in particular, plays an important role in the democratic development of a nation. As Soroka has observed:

Media (both traditional and post-broadcast) are one of the principal sources of information about the world, about public policy and about government. Mass media can play a critical role in democratic accountability. They can (help to) provide information that we need to be effective democratic citizens (in Tucker 2013, 1).

Countries in transition to democracy or that are democratizing, such as Nigeria, with a huge population of largely illiterate citizens, and concerned about democratic consolidation and stabilization, need to focus attention on the role and impact of broadcasting in particular in/on their democratization processes. Simply put, democratization is the process through which citizens acquire and imbibe democratic values and put them to good use, under the rule of law, in their

¹ Currently on Sabbatical, as a Visiting Scholar, The Robinson Professors Program, George Mason University, Arlington Campus, Virginia, USA

engagements in the socio-political and governance spheres, especially in electing executive and legislative office holders and in holding them and the entire governmental institutions accountable.

Broadcasting, unlike the press, extends to the rural areas, delivers news, information, and messages in vernacular and is not conditional on literacy. Handled properly, broadcasting, especially public broadcasting, can, in addition to its traditional role, deepen and strengthen democratization, by making information widely accessible, by educating and enlightening the citizens about the utility of participation and also making the citizens well informed and engaged with the political and governance processes, and by facilitating the holding of political leaders and government(s) accountable. Broadcasting can promote democratic values and help engender democratic re-awakening. If, on the contrary, handled poorly, broadcasting can be hijacked and used by vested interests to undermine and subvert the democratization process. Vested interests can, as Sherman and Chomsky have noted, use their control to “shape news and information before it is disseminated to the public”, and make it run “counter to the democratic ideals of a free press” under liberal democracy (1988).

The extent to which broadcasting plays a positive public role in the democratization process of a country depends on: how deeply engrained the philosophy and values of public service broadcasting are; how insulated it is from the influence of commercial and other vested interests, how relatively independent it is of government control and influence, how diverse and plural it is; and how

transparently regulated it is, using a clear and popular/public oriented legal framework.

In addressing the relationship between broadcasting and democratization in Nigeria, an attempt is made to primarily address the following three questions: What are the origin, nature and character of broadcasting in Nigeria? How has broadcasting impacted the national striving for democratic development in contemporary Nigeria? How can broadcasting be reformed and repositioned to make significant contributions to the task of deepening and consolidating democracy in Nigeria? First a general introduction to set the context and framework for the presentation before returning to an exposition on the three questions.

Context and Framework

It is significant to note that in its 102 years of “creation” by colonial fiat, and its 56 years of post-colonial history, Nigeria has come a long way. This point is not generally appreciated and is often glossed over or wished away. No doubt, we have had a fractious First Republic (1960 – 1966); a terrible civil war (1967 – 1970); 8 military regimes characterized by reckless misrule (1966 – 1999); and squandermania in the Second and Fourth Republics (1979 – 1983 & 1999 – Date). Yet, Nigeria of today is not Nigeria of the 1960s, whatever indices we use to measure socioeconomic progress and development in the modern world. No doubt, Nigeria has not appropriately harnessed and maximized its vast potentials for the benefit of the majority of its citizens. But Nigeria has remained resilient and defiant of all doomsday predictions. It has demonstrated an incredible

elasticity that has refused to snap, in spite of the brinksmanship of ethno-religious and regional elites, thanks to the vigilance and activism of patriotic civil society groups.

Nigeria still faces many persistent challenges. The major challenge is that of accelerating democratization, institutionalizing good, democratic governance and consolidating democratic development. In this context, building, or rebuilding state institutions, and strengthening their capacity to discharge the main role of the state --- i.e., promotion and protection of lives, liberties and properties of citizens; impartial adjudicating of disputes; maintenance of law and order; equitable social welfare-provisioning; and engendering sound democratic and governance values and cultures --- are the associated, subsidiary challenges.

The enormity of the challenges, which Nigeria has faced and yet remained intact, would have, arguably, dismembered and scattered any other African country. In spite of reckless misrule and profound centripetal tendencies, it still stands and ambles along. The persistence of many of these challenges provides some Nigerians with grounds for despondency and disillusionment; but Nigeria's resilience also provides many others with sufficient motivation to optimistically keep looking for opportunities to stabilize, consolidate and expand the gains. It would seem that, the outcome of the 2015 general elections is being perceived by many as that yet another opportunity to stabilize the polity, consolidate the gains of democratization, and expand the scope of good governance and democratic development in Nigeria. It no doubt requires incurable

optimism to sustain this motivation and to re-direct Nigeria into becoming a stable, united and prosperous country that we would be proud to have our children and grand children live in and explore their potentials. Thus we have to continue to make concerted efforts to address the persistent challenges. All hands need to be on deck for this. We must not be hostages to our reckless and unwholesome past; we must look to the future with determination and optimism. We should see Nigerian federation as akin to a Catholic marriage; not necessarily a perfect union, but till death do us part. Hence, Nigerians need to strive hard to do anything humanly possible to find accommodation and live peacefully together, and to prevent its annulment.

Given this context, in addressing both the major and subsidiary challenges, which continue to plague Nigeria, Broadcasting, as an important aspect of information sharing, dissemination and public enlightenment, as well as socialization, and defined as “the simultaneous transmission of the same message [either in audio or video] to multiple recipients” “via any electronic mass communications medium” (Wikipedia), such as radio, television or webcasting, has a crucial role to play. As Rayboy has observed:

Public broadcasting remains a key instrument of democratization in the context of globalization... In the face of rampant commercialization of media, public broadcasting is essential to the promotion of pluralism in the public sphere (1998, 182).

Indeed, from the colonial period to date, there are multiple illustrations of value additions made by public broadcasting to our national democratic development. Over time, however, as the challenges multiply and increased in complexity, broadcasting increasingly tended to be put to negative uses, either because of the diversity of ownership or multiplicity of political, governmental and private vested interests that have come to control it. Even publically owned broadcasting media have become seized by vested interests of incumbent powers to primarily promote private or personal interests, rather than serve the public good. Public ownership has increasingly become state/government ownership and public broadcasting has become state/government propaganda. Thus, in contemporary Nigeria, whatever our vision of the new Nigeria is, Broadcasting needs to be repositioned and empowered to primarily serve public good, in order for it to make positive contributions to the task of addressing the challenges of the new Nigeria.

Broadcasting has an important role to play in the democratic development of Nigeria. It has played some of this role epileptically over the years and, by so doing, has contributed to the trials and tribulation of democratization in Nigeria. As we struggle to reposition and re-invent Nigeria as a viable consolidated democracy with stable growth and development beneficial to majority of its citizens, we need to review what role broadcasting has played; and determine what role it should continue to play positively in support of this aspiration of Nigerians.

In the next section, the origin, nature and character of broadcasting in Nigeria is reviewed as a prelude to discussing how it should be reformed and repositioned for greater and more positive role in our national democratic development.

Origin, Nature and Character Broadcasting in Nigeria

Modern broadcasting came to Nigeria under British colonial rule. It is significant to note that, in the socioeconomic and political contexts of the western developed countries (i.e. colonial powers), broadcasting evolved as a tool for public enlightenment, information sharing, education and socialization. It originated within the civil society and put to commercial uses, especially to serve the entertainment needs of the citizens, but regulated by the state. Subsequently, it came to be underpinned by a philosophy of serving the public good. In Britain, for example, a small consortium of radio manufacturers formed the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) in 1923. This company dissolved when its license expired in 1926. It became British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), a non-commercial organization, with a Board of Governors appointed by the British Government, but who are autonomous and do not report to the government. This new BBC was developed **on a philosophy and values of public service broadcasting**, with a focus on education, enlightenment, entertainment, curbed influence of commercialization and maximum independence from government control (Wikipedia). Although primarily funded by the taxpayers, the BBC exercised independence in programming and diversity and impartiality in content, in tune with the liberal democratic values of a free press, and in the context

of the aspirations of the British citizens. Over time, it essentially became a popular tribune, articulating, promoting and defending a notion of public interest and public good, a role that has been widely recognized and deeply appreciated by British citizens. BBC's role, historically, approximated the ideal of public service broadcasting under liberal democracy.

In 1935-6, the British colonial government introduced radio broadcasting in its colonies, purportedly as a public service broadcasting, with the BBC ostensibly as a model (Article 19). Hence, in Nigeria, for example, the first radio broadcasting was commenced in Lagos around this time, with the establishment of the Re-diffusion Broadcasting Service (RBS). Subsequently, the creation of the Radio Distribution Service (RDS) saw the expansion of broadcasting to Ibadan and Kano between 1935 and 1950. The broadcasting system used was wired (not wireless) transmission services to subscribers. Wireless broadcasting only commenced in 1951, with the establishment of the Nigerian Broadcasting Service (NBS).

The creation of the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) in 1957, at a time when the Western and Eastern regions became self-governing, paved the way for regional government controlled 'public broadcasting'. First, in 1959, the Western regional government established the Western Nigeria Radio-vision service and the Western Nigeria Television (WNTV) the first in Africa, under the Western Nigeria Broadcasting Service (WNBS). The Eastern region followed with the establishment of the Eastern Nigeria Broadcasting Service in 1960. The Northern region, which became self-governing

in 1959, established its own Broadcasting Service of Northern Nigeria (BCNN) in 1962, later to be known as Radio Kaduna Television (RKTv). (See Nwulu and others 2010; Mytton undated). In the same year, the federal government established the Nigeria television Service (NTS), the predecessor to the Nigeria Television Authority (NTA).

Significantly, broadcasting in Nigeria evolved very closely tied to the apron strings of the government, colonial or otherwise. The government does not only license or regulate, it controls, not least by the placement of the broadcasting institutions under the purview of government ministries/ministers. With increased recognition of the utility of broadcasting, especially radio, to reach all nooks and crannies of the country, government control tightened; to widen and deepen government access for propaganda and to put it to good use for the advancement of the vested interests of those who exercise governmental power, as well as to restrict access to those perceived as being in opposition to government.

The ways and manner by which broadcasting evolved and has been practiced in Nigeria since colonial rule, however, substantially deviated from the philosophy of public service broadcasting, which underpinned the role of public service broadcasters in advanced democracies, such as the BBC in the democratic development of Britain. From the onset, radio broadcasting in colonial Nigeria was primarily for British colonial propaganda and the advancement of colonial interests, be it in anti-communist propaganda in the aftermath of the second world war and during the cold war, or in the

promotion of cash crop commodity production, taxation, law and order, and so on. The values of free, independent and accessible press were not engrained in the evolution of broadcasting in colonial Nigeria. Rather, government control was instituted, not just in licensing, but also especially at the operational levels; which set the tone of the relationship between public broadcasting agencies and the governments in the post-colonial period.

During the post-colonial era, governments preoccupied themselves with national development agendas, such as promotion of national unity and national integration; and execution of other socioeconomic development programs. Thus the federal and regional/state governments primarily used 'public broadcasting' to promote their development programs and political agendas. Secondly, it was used to promote national integration and unity, especial in the post civil war period. Only to a limited extent has broadcasting been used to promote historical and cultural content of the peoples of Nigeria.

The post-civil war period, which was the period of "oil-boom" under military rule, witnessed a significant increase in the number of broadcasting media in the country. For example, in 1973, the Mid-West Broadcasting Commission was established, followed by the Benue-Plateau State in 1977 (Ariye, 2010). Within a relatively short time, virtually every one of the then 12 states established radio and/or television broadcasting stations.

Control and manipulation of public broadcasting services increased under military rule, but given the centralized command structure of

military regimes, the federal government moved in and took over all television stations and the major regional radio stations, and grouped them into the National Television Authority (NTA) and the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN) in 1977. This was rationalized on grounds of national security, national unity and national integration. In no time, the important requirement of pluralism and diversity of content and programming facilitative of democratization was jettisoned and replaced by a tendency towards centralized uniformity.

The impact of centralization and increased state control of broadcasting on democratization, which occurred under military rule, manifested itself very glaringly under civilian rule of the Second Republic (1979-1983). At the federal level, the ruling party commandeered access to the NTA at the federal and state levels and imposed restrictions on access by the opposition parties. At the state levels, the incumbent governors of all political parties did the same with regards to the state owned broadcasting agencies. Those with no access to federal or state broadcasting services were left on the lurch, given the absence of private avenues. A parallel broadcasting system emerged in direct competition with and antagonistic to, one another. Thus, setting in motion the unwholesome tendency of negative use of broadcasting to undermine, rather than, deepen and strengthen processes of democratization. Under these circumstances, public broadcasting services essentially and effectively became state-controlled and government directed broadcasting services, displaying crass partisanship and partiality in programming and content, especially during electioneering campaigns.

In spite of the expansion and centralization of public broadcasting services, and the unwholesome tendency it has given rise to, no serious effort was made to have a comprehensive regulatory framework, to nurture and protect responsible and ethical broadcasting, until 1992, when the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission (NBC) was established. Ironically, NBC was established under military rule by Decree, and was itself essentially under the control of the federal government, in the mode of appointment and in funding. Even though the initial Decree establishing it was replaced by another legal framework in 1999, there has only been little, if any improvement with regards to its independence and freedom from government influence in its core activities. By virtue of this it has also generally been ineffective in discharging its oversight and regulatory responsibilities.

As Nigeria grappled with the challenges of another transition to civil democratic rule in the mid 1990s, there was heightened concern amongst the political elite and advocacy for liberalization of the airwaves, in order to widen access, ensure pluralism and diversity, and curtail state control on information dissemination and manipulation of public broadcasting services. This coincided with the mounting pressure on the federal government by the neoliberal institutions of IMF and the World Bank to open up all sectors of the economy through deregulation and privatization. It was under these circumstances that the NBC received the mandate to license private operators in the broadcasting sector.

Before deregulation, there were said to be about 45 radio and 45 Television stations in the country, all owned by either the federal or the state governments (NBC). The first set of licenses for private broadcasting was granted in 1993, thus: 4 Radio; 15 open TV; 13 Cable TV. As the following Table illustrates, the number of broadcasting outfits has increased remarkably since then.

Table 1: Radio and TV Broadcasting Stations in 2012

S/no.	Ownership	Radio	TV	Total
1.	Federal Government	46	128	
2.	State Governments	107	64	
3.	Private Investors	102	33	
4.	Community	50	Nil	
Total		203	225	

Source: National Broadcasting Commission (NBC), 19/8/16.

By 2016, the number of radio broadcasting outfits issued with license has increased to 453, with the licensing of an additional 100 private radio stations in 2015. There has been an embargo on the creation of additional Television stations (NBC, 22/8/16).

In spite of privation and the regulatory role of the NBC, the phenomenon of influence of vested interests on broadcasting, whether state or private, seems to have increased and remained a major concern under the Fourth Republic (1999 – to date). While privatization and deregulation has increased the number of broadcasting services and improved pluralism and diversity of media, it has done little to bring about improvement in professional and ethical conduct in broadcasting, or to minimize the influence of

vested interests, government and private, on broadcasting. It is also arguable whether access has been widened by privatization, given the for-profit disposition of the services and their lack of independence from the influence of their owners. If anything, the unwholesome practices of the Second Republic, which were mentioned earlier with regards to use of incumbency and state control of public broadcasting services continued with impunity, with private operators joining the fray even more vociferously. The role of the Nigerian broadcasting services especially during the electioneering activities leading to the 2011 and 2015 general elections amply illustrates this.

With regards to the government controlled public broadcasters, in most cases, incumbent governments and parties at both the state and federal levels secured undue advantage and unfair and disproportionate coverage of their activities. Not only did they deny fair and equitable coverage to opposition parties and candidates, they denied access to their services to even those willing to pay and place advertisements. They lacked editorial independence and displayed crass partiality in coverage and in programming. Some acted illegally and contravened extant regulations on even declaration of results during elections. The NBC seemed helpless in checking these excesses.

With regards to the private broadcasting services, their role in the 2011 and 2015 electioneering activities made it evident that deregulation, privatization and liberalization of broadcasting do not in themselves facilitate democratization. Driven by profit motivation

or vested political interests, private broadcasting services either pander to their owners' political and partisan interests or to incumbent governments with patronage to dispense and state power to cower and intimidate. In the 2015 general elections in particular, some private broadcasters undertook partisan programming, the contents of which may have violated regulatory provisions on hate speech and/or impartial coverage.

Impact of Broadcasting on Nigeria's Democratic Development

The contemporary role of broadcasting in Nigeria's democratic development, therefore, leaves much to be desired. Over time, and especially in the past 2 decades, a lot has been gained in terms of pluralism and diversity of broadcasting services. Yet, public broadcasting has not become the instrument of democracy that it is expected to be. Internal, and, especially externally induced, constraints, are responsible for this. For one thing, colonial heritage and post-colonial state policies and dispositions, especially under decades of military rule posed considerable external constraints.

Due to the history of military rule and other forms of reckless misrule in post independent Nigeria, there has been a conflation of government in power and state institutions. Arising from this or as a result of this, public broadcasting has basically become state or government broadcasting. Hence, national broadcasting has tended to support the ideology and /or the idiosyncrasies of the government in power whether at the state or the federal level. This explains why incumbent governments see no issue in either restricting access to public media for those considered to be in the opposition or in

converting public broadcasting outfits to execute their partisan agendas, or in harassing journalists and broadcasters who have exhibited a tendency to assert their independence and impartiality in their professional conduct.

The privatization of broadcasting has witnessed a proliferation of radio and television stations owned by federal and state governments, as well as private entrepreneurs and even communities. As a result, there is pluralism and diversity in terms of many owners and operators on the scene, and different owners, operations and range of content (Article 19). However, these have not been accompanied by structural and behavioral reforms. It would seem that liberalization and privatization of broadcasting has occurred in Nigeria devoid of an appropriate policy framework, backed by a strong and independent regulatory authority. It is now imperative to bridge this gap and undertake structural and behavioral reforms, which would reposition public broadcasting services to play the role of instruments of democratic development in Nigeria.

Repositioning Broadcasting for Democratic Development

Broadcasting in Nigeria has its own challenges and internally induced constraints. Understanding these and addressing them is central to repositioning and empowering it to make positive impact on addressing the challenges of democratization in contemporary Nigeria.

Broadcasting in Nigeria is weak institutionally and it lacks democratic content. To play a greater role in national democratic consolidation, broadcasting in Nigeria needs to be significantly democratized and infused with democratic values and ideals. Thus, there is the need to broaden our conception of broadcasting from mere contribution to state-directed or government controlled nation building and socioeconomic development to include facilitation, promotion and protection of democratic development and its consolidation. Public service broadcasting needs to be strengthened to ensure that structural imbalances and lack of access do not undermine democratic development.

Broadcasting needs to undergo considerable reform to acquire democratic content, for it to play a significant role in democratic consolidation in Nigeria. Democracy cannot be nurtured with undemocratic institutions and tendencies. In particular, the government-controlled broadcasters must be transformed, in all material particulars, into public service broadcasters and strong institutions relatively independent of government. For this to happen, there has to be a clearly articulated media and broadcasting policy, backed by an excellent regulatory framework to both protect the autonomy of broadcasting institutions and agencies and ensure that they do not sacrifice the public good on the alter of vested political interests or profit motives. In addition, attention has to be paid to the following: adequate public funding; institutional independence; professionalization of staff; motivation and security of tenure for staff; strong code of ethical conduct; and a robust legal and regulatory framework.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it can be surmised that, beyond the 2015 general elections, it is the aspiration of most Nigerians that through a good democratic governance framework, Nigeria turns a new leaf, and reinvents itself into a new Nigeria, freed of the recklessness and squander-mania of the past, with a focus and discipline to diversify the economy, harness available resources and address the basic needs of the citizens. The framework for this is deepened and consolidated democracy, in which free and fair elections are regular, and in which votes count and elected executives and representatives speedily respond to the objective needs and aspirations of the citizens. Public broadcasting, if repositioned, and freed from the vested interests, which have strangulated it, has a great positive role to play towards the aspiration of Nigerians for desirable democratic development.

In this regard, the Buhari government has a responsibility, under the mantra of change for a new Nigeria, to contribute to the reform and repositioning of broadcasting, so that it can play a remarkably improved role in Nigeria's democratic development. Before coming into power at the federal level, the party now in power had been a victim of incumbent governments' influence and control on broadcasting, which made the 2011 and 2015 electioneering campaigns gargantuan David versus Goliath affairs. Now in power it has a rare opportunity to make things right; to turn broadcasting services from merely 'government broadcasters' to truly public broadcasting services; to turn the regulatory agencies, especially the

NBC, into remarkably independent, conscientious and non-partisan regulators, by law and in practice.

As broadcasting has been made plural and diverse under deregulation, there is the urgent task to make the philosophy and values of public broadcasting deeply engrained in our political economy. It is necessary to insulate public broadcasting services from commercial /private and governmental influences. It is important that they are repositioned to be impartial, non-partisan and independent. There is the need for a strong, legal regulatory framework and an effective regulatory agency that can discharge its responsibilities transparently and with integrity. Doing all these would reposition broadcasting to play a greater role in Nigeria's democratic development.

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