

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

BSQ-40

c/o Tourist Mail  
U.S. Embassy  
P.O. Box 554  
Lagos, Nigeria  
September 13, 1981

Television: The Next Battlefield

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Dear Peter,

If I were to depict Lagos in a photograph, it would be of a squatters' village: a maze of shacks built from sheets of corrugated metal, on land as fetid and filth-strewn as a garbage dump, and sprouting from the roofs of several of the hovels are television antennas.

"Television...is no more the preserve of the upper class in Nigeria," states an extensive marketing survey done for the National Television Authority last year. "It has become as much a middle and low class medium as any other." According to the survey, 28.5 percent of television viewers earn less than 1,000 naira a year (\$1,850 at the average 1980 exchange rate). That classification is too broad to show television's penetration into the poorer half of the population, since the Nigerian gross domestic product per capita last year was only N750 (\$1,387.50). Television here is chiefly an urban medium, though, and city incomes are higher than the national average. The national minimum wage, which applies mostly to city workers, was N100 (\$185) a month last year. It rose to N125 as of this month. The survey says that most of the poorest viewers are students or unemployed persons living with wealthier relatives, but the aerials over the shantytowns suggest that television is accessible to the average urban Nigerian.

Only about one in five Nigerians lives in an urban area, according to a 1980 World Bank estimate, so most Nigerians still don't get a chance to watch the tube. The federally owned NTA broadcasts from Lagos and 18 state capitals, and with 33 terrestrial transmitters the signals reach 70 percent of the country's land mass containing 80 percent of the population. Due to the lack of a power source, most of the people in this area couldn't use a television set even if they could afford to buy one. The marketing survey estimates that 21.77 million Nigerians, one-fourth of the population, who live in about 200 settlements, can receive TV signals and have electricity for a television. More than 10 million of these persons live in the 45 largest cities.

About half of the almost 2.3 million television sets in the country are in those 45 cities. The survey estimates that, on the average, 60 percent of the households in these cities have

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at least one set. In all, 12.5 million Nigerians live in homes with televisions. Because of the practice of communal television viewing, this figure probably grossly underestimates the actual television audience. I have seen groups of a half dozen or more people standing outside of homes watching television through a door or a window. For its analysis of the television audience, the marketing survey limited itself to the estimated 7.2 million adults (over the age of 15) living in homes with televisions.

The survey, based on interviews with 6,100 persons from television households around the country, found that 78 percent of the adult audience is in the 20 to 49 age group. About 23 percent of the audience had only a primary school education, and 8 percent had no formal schooling. Less than 10 percent attended a university. About 37 percent were classified as executives or professionals, 34 percent were craftsmen and 23.5 percent were students, trainees or unemployed. Less than 5 percent were listed as farm or factory workers. Almost 70 percent of the television viewers were male, although the survey cautioned that this finding could have been influenced by "social and cultural difficulties of interviewing women." Completing the income breakdown, 50 percent earned between N1,000 and N4,000 (\$1,850-\$7,400), and the remaining 21 percent were above that level.

For those families with access to television, it has become a consuming passion. More than 99 percent watch it "regularly", though the survey didn't define what that meant. Radio was said to be regularly used by 92 percent of those interviewed, and 77 percent read a daily newspaper regularly. On the other hand, respondents said they were exposed to television an average of 6.5 days a week and to radio 6.7 days a week. The average exposure to daily newspapers was 5.5 days a week. The survey found that the average television viewer spent a little less than 4 hours a day watching the set, compared with slightly more than 4 hours a day listening to the radio and 1.3 hours with a newspaper. Asked which media, of seven offered, they would forsake if they could only keep three, 53 percent considered television the most precious and only 4 percent would give it up. Radio was rated highest by 31.5 percent, while 11 percent would do without it. Only 10.6 percent valued newspapers the highest and almost 31 percent were ready to drop them. Over 80 percent said they would give up Sunday newspapers, weekly or monthly magazines or the movies. The survey summarized the effectiveness of the various media with "gross rating points", defined as "the number or percentage of people reached multiplied by the frequency and intensity of exposure." Television's GRP of 2,553 was slightly lower than radio's 2,575. The GRP for daily newspapers was 539, and for the cinema it was 64.

This comparison may be of interest to Nigerian politicians, for television here is as much a mode of information as of entertainment. In its analysis of program popularity, the survey found that news shows had the highest patronage, with 96.3 percent of the audience, and among the highest approval ratings, at about 75 percent. No doubt mindful of the popularity of television news shows and television's impact on the population, Nigeria's politicians have begun skirmishing in what appears to be the first engagement of a war over the rights to the airwaves.

Radio stations and newspapers are owned by federal and state governments, and are used by the political parties in control of the governments for partisan purposes. Until recently, television was a monopoly of the federal government. Now the main opposition party, the Unity Party of Nigeria, is determined to do battle on that field as well. In April, the UPN-controlled Lagos state government began operating a television station in Ikeja, the state capital, offering a third channel to viewers who could already watch programs from federally owned stations in Lagos and in the capital of a neighboring state. A month later, the federal government opened a second channel in Lagos on the same frequency as the Lagos state television broadcasts, effectively jamming the UPN signal in the city of Lagos, which is the federal capital. Undaunted, the UPN plans to begin broadcasting in October in the other four states it controls, and another party plans to start two state television stations. The federal government, which is empowered by the constitution to assign broadcasting frequencies, has decreed that state television stations must use frequencies on the UHF bands, reserving the 2-12 VHF channels for itself. The UHF signals have a smaller range and require more costly equipment, so state governments are refusing to obey. They argue that the federal government can better afford the higher cost of UHF broadcasting, and with its plans for telecommunications satellites, it will be less hindered by the line-of-sight limitations of UHF signals.

The opposition political parties contend that the National Television Authority favors the ruling National Party of Nigeria in its news coverage. From my observations, I would say this is true, but not blatantly so. Consideration must be given to the distinction between partisanship and patriotism. NTA news director Martini Akande told me in an interview that he is not happy leading off the evening news with shots of President Shehu Shagari "shaking hands with 15 people." He feels trapped by the law under which the television authority was established and by Nigeria's political situation. By statute, the NTA must "foster the unity of Nigeria," Akande said. Because the complexity of the presidential election forced Shagari to get a court ruling naming him the winner although he was the clear leader in the balloting, Akande feels compelled "to legitimize Shagari's election in the minds of the voters."

Akande also feels limited in his ability to provide countervailing views because of the virulence of Nigerian politics. He said he can't put UPN leader Obafemi Awolowo on the air because "every other sentence is personal abuse" against the president. The news director is aware of the enormous impact of his medium. Newspapers might quote Awolowo advising people not to pay their taxes without too much effect, but put his face on the screen and have the words come from his mouth and millions of his followers would unthinkingly obey.

"You can incite civil war," Akande said. "I'm not going to put that kind of thing on my bulletin."

He is dismayed that politicians haven't learned to criticize their opponents without stooping to "gutter language" and inflammatory rhetoric. He recalled a meeting of nine opposition-party governors who had requested television coverage. He complied, satisfied that it was a legitimate news story. The press

statement they made vilified the federal government so shockingly, "as if it was written by a bunch of students," that Akande refused to use it.

The attitudes of journalists, especially the young ones, has disheartened him, too. He had hoped that as more and more trained professionals reached positions of authority, they would refuse to promote the politics of tribalism, of fear and mistrust. When the UPN newspaper Nigerian Tribune published a story alleging that Shagari was offering payoffs to rival legislators, Akande went to the home of the paper's editor, a former classmate whose journalistic talents he admired. He asked for the basis of the story, and was stunned when the editor told him it had come from a UPN handout, unsupported by a shred of evidence.

What if he had been handed the proof he demanded?

"I would have used it," he told me. "I would have lost my job, but I would have put it on the air."

Such independence and sense of duty seems to earn Akande the respect of his bosses, but also marks him as an early casualty if the political fighting moves to television in full fury. Only once has he been told outright to attack Awolowo, he said. He refused, and the matter was dropped. Several times he has pacified government leaders, including Shagari, who were bristling after he allowed UPN broadsides on the air. He said he often ends up advising the NPN leaders on how to react, assuming the role of a political aide. As a government employee, he does not consider this to be a violation of journalistic ethics.

With the feuding between the federal government and the UPN growing sharper every day, Akande said he thinks his days as news director may be numbered. He regrets the passing of military rule, at least from a professional viewpoint, because he had more freedom and fewer worries about possible repercussions. As long as he could plead that he wasn't criticizing the government, merely giving others the opportunity to do so, the generals unhappily allowed him to continue.

"They didn't know how to deal with us," he recalled with a smile. "They hired a public relations firm and communicated to us through it."

The politicians, however, have used the press to achieve their goals since long before independence. For them, journalism is a weapon, and journalists are front-rank soldiers. Until now, television has been left out of the combat, paying the price by missing much of the excitement and relevance of politics. With the coming of the state-owned television stations, this neutrality may be violated. Akande said he doesn't know what's going to happen come October, "but it's going to be bloody."

Regards,



Bowden Quinn