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Mobile telephony and changing patterns of audiences' engagement with global media in Africa

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journals.sagepub.com/home/gmc**Abdullahi Tasiu Abubakar** 

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Abstract

This article explores the patterns and consequences of transnational audiences' engagement with global media in the digital age, focusing on experiences in Africa. It examines Nigerians' interactions with the BBC World Service, and draws on active audience theory and Joseph Nye's soft power concept to unpick their complex relationship. Using documentary analysis, focus groups and individual interviews, the study unpacks how Nigerians deploy digital devices to engage with the BBC – and how the broadcaster leverages this to extend its influence. The impacts of digital technologies on participatory programming and audience interactivity – and the theoretical implications – are also analysed.

Keywords

Audience engagement, BBC, mobile phones, public diplomacy, soft power, transnational audiences

Introduction

The spread of mobile technologies in Africa has impacted the patterns and possibly the consequences of media consumption in the continent, enhancing interactivity and audience participation (Willems and Mano, 2017). Although largely an urban phenomenon, the culture of digital engagement with news media has spread to several semi-urban areas in the continent (GSM Association, 2021; Powell, 2012). Global broadcasters such

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as BBC, Voice of America (VOA), Qatar's Al Jazeera, Germany's Deutsche Welle and China Global Television Network (CGTN) are capitalizing on this to optimize their capabilities in the battle for the hearts and minds of Africans (Abubakar, 2017; Zhang et al., 2016). The BBC World Service, in particular, has expanded its offerings in the continent by doubling the number of its African language services, deploying a multimedia strategy and widening participatory programming (BBC, 2021a, 2021b; BBC Media Centre, 2019) – a major change from its earlier days of 'Reithian restrictions on who is allowed to speak and who, supposedly, is worth hearing' (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994: 5). This has enabled the broadcaster to turn the decline of the traditional platform (radio) into a digital success in its second-biggest market in the world, Nigeria (Abubakar, 2017; BBC Media Centre, 2019).

On its part, the US Agency for Global Media (USAGM, 2019b), which operates VOA and its associated outlets, saw a three-fold increase in its digital audience worldwide in 2019 as it enhanced its multimedia offerings (USAGM, 2019a). Although lagging behind BBC in this area, VOA has a wide reach in sub-Saharan Africa, to which it broadcasts in 19 languages (14 of them indigenous languages), with Nigeria, its biggest market in the continent, providing 19.6 million unduplicated audiences weekly in 2019 (USAGM, 2019a). China Global Television Network, too, has been expanding its offerings in the continent (Zhang et al., 2016), although its audience reach was found to be relatively low (Wasserman and Madrid-Morales, 2018).

The continuous pursuit of a larger share of audiences in Africa, the spread of mobile devices in the continent, and, even more significantly, the willingness of Africans to use them for media consumption have helped create a different media experience in the continent (Abubakar, 2017; Avle, 2020; Powell, 2012). Digitization and convergence help blur production-consumption boundaries (Jenkins, 2006), and the scope and 'opportunities for audience activity and participation' have increased 'across platforms and on an international basis' (Sundet and Ytreberg, 2009: 383). A growing body of literature (Abubakar, 2017; Andersson, 2010; Avle, 2020; Chiumbu and Ligaga, 2013; Powell, 2012; Willems and Mano, 2017) has shown that audiences in Africa are increasingly leveraging the digital media environment to engage with both local and international media.

In audience research, the term 'audience engagement' conveys divergent meanings, ranging from mere measurement of website visits to assessment of audience active participation in programmes and evaluation of excessive media consumption such as binge-viewing (Hill, 2019; Picone, 2017; Steensen et al., 2020). While industry research may sometimes limit the notion of engagement to aspects of audience metrics and perceptions and producers' performance, academic studies tend to offer it a more holistic approach, encompassing analysis of producers' actions in attracting audiences, audience metrics, audience participation and in-depth examination of excessive media consumption and their consequences (Hill, 2019; Livingstone, 2019; Steensen et al., 2020). Industry research provides audience metrics, audits media performances and assesses audience perceptions (BBC, 2021a; Osipova-Stocker et al., 2021). Data from such research by the BBC and VOA were systematically utilized in this study to understand trends in audience engagement and the broadcasters' performance. But the research goes further to obtain qualitative data from BBC audiences in Nigeria to get a fuller picture of their interactions

with the broadcaster. This study considers audience engagement in its broad sense, drawing on Hill's (2019: 6) description of the term as 'research into how (audiences) experience media content, artefacts and events, ranging from (their) experience of live performances, to social media engagement, or participation in media itself'. Engagement is seen here as a multifaceted process encapsulating activities that constitute the dynamic relationship between media and its audiences.

This article explores the changing patterns of the long-term relationship between the BBC World Service and its audiences in Nigeria, and how digital technologies are employed to facilitate this. It touches on the historical background of the relationship to provide an insight into the depth of the changes that have taken place. To unpack the contemporary state of their engagement, the study specifically examines Nigerians' use of mobile devices to interact with the broadcaster. It uses data from qualitative document analysis, focus groups and individual interviews in exploring the multidimensional nature of the relationship. Drawing on Nye's (2004, 2008) concept of soft power, it explains the broadcaster's deployment of multimedia strategy to widen its reach in Nigeria with a view to enhancing Britain's influence. Active audience theory – specifically Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model – provides the theoretical framework that helps analyse Nigerians' engagement with the broadcaster and their interpretations of its content.

From wired broadcasting to a mobile relationship

BBC's relationship with Nigerians dates back to the 1930s when Britain, then a colonial power in Nigeria, began broadcasting to the country to advance its imperial interest and promote Western-modelled modernization (Ladele et al., 1979; Larkin, 2008). At that time, the BBC Empire Service – the forerunner of the BBC World Service – was beaming programmes from London to different parts of the empire, including Nigeria. It started with wired broadcasting whereby BBC programmes in English were relayed to listeners 'by means of wires connected to loudspeakers installed in the homes of subscribers' and in public places (Ladele et al., 1979: 8). The colonial administration in Nigeria, encouraged by the Colonial Office in London, installed public loudspeakers at schools, public libraries, post offices, near local chiefs' palaces and other places of public assembly where people would gather at fixed times for 'communal listening' of the programmes (Ladele et al., 1979: 14; Larkin, 2008).

The introduction of wireless broadcasting in Nigeria in 1951 saw a rapid expansion of BBC audiences in the country (Ladele et al., 1979). But it was the establishment of the BBC Hausa Service in 1957 – 3 years before Nigeria's independence from Britain – to provide 'programmes more closely designed to appeal to special local interests' (BBC, 1958: 41) that set the stage for the postcolonial relationship between the broadcaster and its Nigerian audiences. The service has over the years witnessed a significant expansion, becoming in 2010 the biggest foreign language service in the BBC on account of its audience size (BBC Global News, 2010). The broadcaster has since added three new language services (Igbo, Pidgin and Yoruba) online, targeting Nigerians as part of an expansion programme funded with a special grant from the British government (BBC, 2021a, 2021b; BBC Media Centre, 2019). The new digital services as well as the main

English and Hausa language offerings – on radio, television, mobile phone and online – have enabled the BBC to widen its reach in the country. As Africa's largest oil producer and the continent's richest and most populous country, Nigeria holds strategic importance for international broadcasters, particularly the BBC World Service (Abubakar, 2013, 2017). With an estimated population of over 220 million people, more than 375 ethnic nationalities, and complex socio-economic and religious configurations (Oyovbaire, 2001), 'Nigeria is both a major news source and a fertile ground for cross-cultural interactions' (Abubakar, 2017: 144). The current digital media environment has expanded this experience, not only in Nigeria but in Africa as a whole.

Audience engagement with media in Africa

A body of literature shows that audiences in Nigeria and the rest of Africa are increasingly using digital devices to engage with the media (see Andersson, 2010; Akinfemisoye, 2013; Avle, 2020; Chiumbu and Ligaga, 2013; Osipova-Stocker et al., 2021; Powell, 2012; Willems and Mano, 2017). For instance, audiences in Ghana (Avle, 2020), Nigeria (Akinfemisoye, 2013; Owens-Ibie and Ogwezzzy, 2011), South Africa (Chiumbu and Ligaga, 2013), Zambia (Willems, 2013), Zimbabwe (Mabweazara, 2013) and many more countries in the continent (Powell, 2012) were found to use mobile phones to engage with the media. In Ghana, mobile phones 'are now indispensable for keeping connected to radio, as much as they are for interpersonal talk and online connectivity' (Avle, 2020: 6). Willems's (2013) study of Zambian audiences details how access to mobile phones enabled radio listeners to participate actively in phone-in programmes, facilitating public debate, encouraging interactivity and enhancing their agency. 'There is clear evidence that new media have shifted the balance of power between radio producers and audiences in favour of the listeners' (Willems, 2013: 230). Changing radio practices in South Africa also suggest that improved access to the internet and mobile phones has 'expanded communicative radio spaces and transformed the nature of audience engagement' (Chiumbu and Ligaga, 2013: 242).

The changes witnessed are not limited to the audiences' experience with the local media; they extend to their interactions with the international media (Abubakar, 2017; Andersson, 2010; Osipova-Stocker et al., 2021; Powell, 2012). 'African audiences and users are increasingly in the spotlight because of the growing scramble on the continent by a range of global media companies which are driven by both economic interests and public diplomacy concerns' (Willems and Mano, 2017: 2). For instance, VOA audiences in the continent were found to engage more with the broadcaster after it expanded its programming and added digital platforms (Osipova-Stocker et al., 2021; Powell, 2012: 16). The broadcaster supplemented its traditional platforms of radio and television with interactive social media offerings and strengthened 'its service to mobile telephones and computers' (Powell, 2012: 16). It saw an increase in audience participation in its programmes and an expansion of its audience figures in many countries, including the Democratic Republic of Congo (Osipova-Stocker et al., 2021; USAGM, 2020). The BBC had a similar trajectory, although Andersson's (2010) ethnographic study of social media's (specifically Facebook's) role in BBC's relationship with its Hausa audiences in Africa suggests that Facebook had a limited role in enhancing interactivity. That was

during the relatively early days of the broadcaster's deployment of social media in its relationship with audiences in Africa. A study (Abubakar, 2017), conducted after the BBC had increased its offerings on social media, indicates that there was an increase in the level of African audiences' engagement with the broadcaster through the use of social media.

From all this, it is evident that across the continent, the increasing use of mobile devices to interact with the media has helped change the nature of media-audience relationship (Willems and Mano, 2017). Understanding this relationship requires not just industry audience surveys – which the BBC regularly carries out (and from which this study equally draws) – but also a more systematic study of how audiences engage with media content, for, as Steensen et al. (2020: 1676) argue, audience engagement with news is a 'multidimensional phenomenon'. This underlines the significance of scholarly audience research, which currently seems to be in a state of flux.

The state of audience research

The consolidation of the digital media environment has sparked simultaneous revivals of concerns over the exploitative power of the media (Dean, 2010; Qiu, 2018; Van Dijck, 2009; Willems, 2013) and celebrations of audience agency (Procter et al., 2015; Wessels, 2018). This divergence of perspectives signifies the nature of the complexity with which audience research constantly contends. Eight decades of research and volumes of works have told us a lot about the media-audience relationship, but we are still asking about 'what media and audiences do to each other' and what they do with each other (Jensen, 2019: 151). A key reason for this is that media-audience relationship is dynamic and always changing (Burton, 2005). And 'the suddenness and scale' of such changes are sometimes so dramatic that finding a right method of enquiry is problematic (Turner, 2019: 225). This extends to theoretical work as well.

A brief review of the history of audience research suggests that prevailing political and socio-economic conditions and technological changes usually determine the dominant audience theory of each period. 'Times of upheavals and technological transformations tend to project a picture of powerful media while periods of calm and consolidation tend to trumpet audiences' activeness' (Abubakar, 2013: 224), although sometimes both scenarios do exist within the same epoch. The Marxist critical theorists of the Frankfurt School were influenced by the uncertainties of the inter-War period and the novelty of the then new medium of radio (and film before it) to come up with what emerged as the media effects theory or hypodermic needle model. The impacts of Nazi propaganda in Germany and massive entertainment and advertising messages by corporate America informed Adorno and Horkheimer's (1979 [1944]) indictment of the media as an instrument of commodification of culture and stultification of the masses.

Fears about the pernicious power of the media and the passivity of the audience were, however, allayed by findings from empirical studies in the 1940s and 1950s (Herzog, 1941; Katz and Lazarsfeld, 2006 [1955]), which point to the limitations of media power and the activeness of audiences. Herta Herzog's (1941: 141) seminal study of soap opera fans, which, among other things, reveals how radio listeners derived joy from 'satisfactory consumption of radio stories', laid the foundation for the uses and gratifications

theory. Further works by Halloran (1970), Katz et al. (1973) and Blumler and Katz (1974) strengthen the model. It was built on the principles that audience members are ‘active’ and selective and that ‘the media compete with other sources of need satisfaction’ (Katz et al., 1973: 511). This was a significant shift in audience research, but it did not prevent repeated renewals of romance with the effects tradition. The current emphasis on the power of the media, including the exploitative one (such as the monetization by media platforms of the traces of data generated from audiences/users), is rooted in the effects tradition.

In today’s heady climate of media panics – over so-called fake news, election hacking, Internet and smartphone addiction, the algorithmic amplification of hate speech, viral scams, filter bubbles and echo chambers, discriminatory data profiling and data breaches, the crisis in quality journalism, the demise of face-to-face conversation, and a host of digital anxieties about youth – fears about audience gullibility, ignorance, and exploitation are again heightened in popular and academic debate. (Livingstone, 2019: 171)

However, as Livingstone (2019: 172) rightly argues, such fears may be unfounded as ‘the vast majority of the audience exercised critical literacy of one kind or another to check, deconstruct, contextualize, and resist unreasonable media influence’. This is what calls for a more nuanced understanding of audiences’ relationship with the media. A variant of the active audience theory – the encoding/decoding model – that came out of the work of Hall (1980) and Morley (1980, 1986) provides a valuable framework that could help achieve this.

Theoretical framework

The encoding/decoding model, conceptualized by Hall and developed through Morley’s (1980, 1986) empirical research, seems to strike a balance between the two extremes of the media effects and gratifications debates. It identifies three forms of audience readings of media texts – dominant/preferred, negotiated and oppositional – to demonstrate an audience member’s ability to accept, negotiate or reject the producer’s intended meaning of the texts. It endorses the uses and gratifications concept of an active audience, but goes further to view audiences in a social context and their ability to decode the meanings of media texts. Communicative exchange is neither an isolated nor a random experience; ‘the moments of “encoding” and “decoding”, though only “relatively autonomous” in relation to the communicative process as a whole, are *determinate* moments’ (Hall, 1980: 118). Originally developed to analyse television consumption but extended to other areas, the encoding/decoding model de-emphasizes the behaviourist conception of audiences. ‘Any new approach to audience studies will therefore have to begin with a critique of “selective perception” theory’ (Hall, 1980: 125). Media consumption is seen as an active social experience. ‘People don’t passively absorb subliminal “inputs” from the screen. They discursively “make sense” of or produce “readings” of what they see’ (Hall, in ‘Introduction’ for Morley, 1986: 8).

However, Wren-Lewis (1983: 195) has questioned the model’s conception of a hegemonic code and pointed to a lack of clarity on what constitute the ‘dominant

variables determining readings of televisions' and the extent to which they are 'inscribed within the TV text'. From the political economy perspective, too, the model is criticized for placing too much emphasis on subversive reading, and for missing other influences of the media, which is seen as contradictory to its basic cultural studies roots. Golding and Murdock (1991: 17), in particular, argue that the 'romantic celebration of subversive consumption is clearly at odds with cultural studies' long-standing concern with the way the mass media operate ideologically, to sustain and support prevailing relations of domination'.

Despite these criticisms, however, the encoding/decoding model has established its viability in audience research, providing an effective theoretical tool for empirical studies (Abubakar, 2013; Morley, 1980). It works particularly well in analysing the consumption of 'news and non-fiction programming' (Seiter, 1999: 20). As this study focuses on Nigerians' consumption of BBC's news and current affairs programmes, it benefits from the analytical efficacy of the model. It uses the model to help illuminate our understanding of how the Nigerian audiences interact with the BBC, how they interpret and make sense of its content.

The study also draws on Joseph Nye's (2004, 2008) concept of soft power to understand the intentions of the producer (BBC World Service and its funders), as the broadcaster plays the dual roles of providing news and promoting British public diplomacy (Sreberny et al., 2010). Scholarship has shown that international broadcasting, public diplomacy and soft power are often closely interlinked (Browne, 1982; Cull, 2009; Nye, 2004, 2008). Public diplomacy is broadly seen as an international actor's effort 'to manage the international environment through engagement' with foreign publics (Cull, 2009: 12). 'Soft power is the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment' (Nye, 2008: 94). International broadcasting is widely recognized as an instrument of public diplomacy (Browne, 1982; Cull, 2009) and 'has a long history as a means of promoting a country's soft power' (Nye, 2008: 94). Both Nye (2004) and the British government (Cameron, 2015; Foreign & Commonwealth Office [FCO], 2005) have identified the BBC World Service as a soft power resource for Britain. Taking these perspectives into account, this study attempts to answer the following questions:

- What strategies do the BBC and its funders employ for the broadcaster to reach and engage with Nigerian audiences in the digital age?
- How do the audiences engage with the broadcaster?
- And to what extent do the concept of soft power and the encoding-decoding model help us understand this relationship?

Methodology

This study employed three qualitative methods – documentary analysis, individual interviews and focus groups – to explore the relationship between the BBC and its Nigerian audiences in the digital era. The documentary analysis involved gathering and analysing

documents/data from the UK government and Parliament, the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) and BBC's publications and audience surveys. In particular, the UK's National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015, the report of the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee (2011) on BBC World Service's spending cuts (HC 849), the FCO's Lord Carter of Coles Public Diplomacy Review 2005, and the BBC World Service Annual and Performance Reviews for 2007–2008 and 2016–2020 were all gathered and analysed. Similarly, data from the NCC about the spread and use of mobile phones in Nigeria and the GSM Association on the mobile phone market in Africa as well as BBC's in-house publications (including yearbooks/annual reviews) and audience survey reports were also gathered and analysed for the study.

To get audience perspectives on their engagement with the BBC, data were collected through individual interviews and focus groups in Nigeria. Purposive sampling technique was used to select the participants – they were all BBC audiences. There was no duplication of participants: separate sets of people were selected for individual interviews and focus groups, totalling 36 participants in all. Their ages ranged from 21 to 63, reflecting the age range seen in BBC's previous surveys (BBC Global News, 2010, 2013). A total of 15 individual interviews were conducted in March–April 2013 and August–September 2019 in the northern Nigerian cities of Abuja, Katsina and Yola. The long gap between the two field trips was necessitated by the researcher's job change and associated constraints as well as security concerns in Nigeria. This turned out to have a positive impact by enabling the collection of data which reflected the changes that had occurred over the 6-year time span. Three focus groups were chosen in the same selected cities over the same periods, with members ranging from six to eight (Abuja Focus Group: 8, Katsina Focus Group: 7, and Yola Focus Group: 6). The choice of the three cities was informed by the spread of their locations in northern Nigeria where consumption of the BBC Hausa Service – which attracts the bulk of the BBC audiences in Nigeria – is high (BBC Global News, 2013; BBC Media Centre, 2019). Abuja, located in north-central Nigeria, is the country's capital and the location of one of the two BBC offices in Nigeria; and both Yola in the north-east and Katsina in the north-west have large BBC Hausa Service audiences. The interviews were conducted in both English and Hausa, tape-recorded and transcribed. Miles and Huberman's (1994) qualitative approach and Krueger's (1994) framework of analysis served as guides in analysing the data drawn from the individual interviews and focus groups, respectively. Specifically, the individual interviews were analysed through a continuous process of condensing the data (summarizing and coding the transcribed interviews), displaying the condensed data using a matrix format to get a graphic view of the emerging patterns and themes, and drawing preliminary conclusions. The analysis of each focus group began immediately after it was conducted using both the notes taken and the transcript of the recorded discussion. The process of data condensation, display and drawing of conclusions was also followed here but with additional focus on identifying group dynamics and paying attention to the extensiveness of the points made in each group. Findings from all the data sets were integrated through the triangulation protocol to produce the final report, which is presented and discussed below.

Digital expansion and promoting public diplomacy

Documentary analysis shows a combination of constant efforts by the BBC to deliver digital content to its Nigerian audiences, the UK government's funding of BBC's digital expansion, and Nigerians' willingness to consume BBC content on digital devices. The broadcaster uses a multimedia strategy to deliver content on radio, television, web, mobile phones and social media platforms to its audiences across the world. Documents reveal how its leadership decided to focus on a multimedia strategy and encourage its journalists and production staff to embrace new technologies in response to the changing media environment. When he was director of the BBC World Service, Peter Horrocks outlined how the broadcaster was reorganized on a multimedia basis to streamline its different platforms to 'tear down' what he called 'fortress journalism' (Horrocks, 2009). And when he became director of the BBC Global News Division in 2010, Horrocks told staff to make effective use of social media platforms and embrace new technologies in news production. 'If you don't like it, or you think that level of change or that different way of working isn't right for me, then go out and do something else, because it's going to happen, you're not going to be able to stop it', he said (Ariel, 2010, cited in Andersson, 2010: 4). Crucially, an integral part of the broadcaster's Royal Charter remit is to 'deliver to the public the benefit of emerging communications technologies and services' (BBC Editorial Guidelines, 2010: 5).

Those were the factors that informed the BBC's digital drive in Nigeria. Broadcasting to the country in English, Hausa, Igbo, Pidgin and Yoruba, the BBC is the dominant foreign broadcaster in Nigeria; its biggest rival, the VOA, has less than half of its audience figures there. Results of audience surveys by the BBC and VOA for 2019 show that the BBC had a weekly audience of 41 million in Nigeria as compared to VOA's 19.6 million (BBC Media Centre, 2019; US Agency for Global Media, 2019a). Nigeria has at different times emerged as the biggest driver of BBC's mobile traffic and the BBC's largest or second-largest market in the world (BBC Global News, 2013; BBC Media Centre, 2019). Data reveal that Nigeria lost its top position to India only from 2019 after the World Service made a big investment in its Indian market by adding new language services there, with special funding from the UK government (BBC Media Centre, 2019; BBC, 2021a). The BBC's 2019 audience survey shows India taking the first position with a weekly audience of 50 million, followed by Nigeria with 41 million (BBC Media Centre, 2019).

Nigeria was included in the World Service expansion programme, as Igbo, Pidgin and Yoruba language services were added in 2017–2018 to the original English and Hausa services. The expansion idea itself came from the British government, which earmarked £289 million to increase 'BBC's digital, TV and radio services around the world to build the global reach of the World Service' (Cameron, 2015: 49). This was contained in the UK's Strategic Defence Review of 2015, as announced by the then prime minister David Cameron (Cameron, 2015). It was part of the government's plan to strengthen Britain's 'soft power . . . through institutions such as the BBC World Service and the British Council' (Cameron, 2015: 11). The fact that this came directly from the prime minister and via the Strategic Defence Review rather than the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (renamed Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO)), which traditionally



Figure 1. BBC global weekly audience as of June 2019.

Source: BBC.

handles public diplomacy, underlines the significance the UK government places on expanding the country's soft power. It is worth stressing that this money is in addition to the regular funding the World Service gets from the FCO/BBC licence fees. It sometimes receives more than a third of the UK's public diplomacy budget. For instance, it got £225 million out of the public diplomacy budget of £617 million in fiscal 2004–2005 (FCO, 2005: 6). That amount continued to rise in the subsequent years – £239.5 million in 2006–2007 and £255 million in 2007–2008 (BBC, 2008) – until it reached a peak of £272 million in 2009–2010 (Hiller, 2010). From 2014, the World Service's annual funding of £254 million was transferred to BBC licence fees (BBC, 2021a). All this reinforces both the argument that the UK government considers the World Service to be a vital instrument of public diplomacy and Nye's (2004: 90) assertion that the broadcaster is 'an important soft power resource for the UK'. It is difficult to assess the level of global influence (if any) that the government's additional funding has brought or will bring for the UK, but it has apparently helped the BBC to expand its reach and increase its audience figures globally, as seen in Figure 1.

The figures of 426 million for all BBC global news services and 319 million for the World Service gave an indication that the broadcaster could surpass its original target of reaching 500 million people globally by its centenary in 2022 (BBC Media Centre, 2019; Cameron, 2015). It missed that target, though independent surveys carried out in March–April 2020 indicate that the BBC reached the 500 million audience mark in 2020 (helped by audience interest in its COVID-19 coverage) and emerged as the most visited news site among the traditional news providers in the world (BBC Media Centre, 2020a). The broadcaster's commissioned surveys put its global audience figure at 468 million in 2020 (BBC, 2021a).

Operators	AIRTEL	EMTS	GLO	MTN	VISAFONE
No. of Subscribers	51,258,382	12,568,088	51,838,290	74,673,648	137,086
Percentage (%)	26.91%	6.60%	27.22%	39.20%	0.07%

Figure 2. Number of active phone subscribers for telephony services on each of the five operators in Nigeria, as of April 2020.
Source: NCC (2020).

Mobile telephony enhances digital consumption

BBC’s digital expansion both globally and in Nigeria was helped by the rapid spread of mobile technologies. Data show that Africa is the fastest growing mobile phone market in the world, with sub-Saharan Africa having subscriber identification module (SIM) connections of 930 million and 495 million unique mobile subscribers in 2020 (GSM Association, 2021). Nigeria alone has well over 190 million active mobile phone subscribers, as of April 2020 (NCC, 2020). Although this does not translate into over 190 million Nigerians possessing mobile phones, as there are also cases of multiple ownership, it is still an impressive figure. But even more significant is the fact that over 138.7 million of those mobile subscribers have internet connections (NCC, 2020). All this reflects a phenomenal growth in the sector, given that two decades ago, there were less than one million telephone subscribers in the country (NCC, 2013). Even the combined figure of 190,475,494 subscribers in 2020 from the five mobile operators – Airtel, EMTS, Glo, MTN and Visafone (Figure 2) – reveals a considerable rise over the total of 153,086,710 subscribers recorded 4 years earlier (Figure 3).

With the spread of mobile phones in Nigeria comes a rapid increase in using the device to consume media content. Surveys by the BBC indicate that mobile phones and the internet are important platforms for news consumption across the country (BBC Global News, 2010, 2013). This study reaffirms this as all the participants in both the focus groups and individual interviews admitted using mobile phones to access BBC content at one time or the other. ‘I check for news regularly on my mobile. BBC is one of the main sites I check. I have their app’, said a secondary school teacher in the Yola Focus Group discussion. ‘But I also listen to them on radio. I never miss the morning programmes of the [BBC] Hausa Service’. A senior civil servant, also in Yola, said that although he regularly accessed BBC news both on TV and on his mobile phone, radio remained the main medium he constantly used to listen to their programmes ‘especially in the mornings’. A young female television journalist in Abuja, however, said she always consumed BBC news content on her mobile phone. ‘I am a television reporter but I can’t remember the last time I opened my TV at home. I get all my news from my phone’, she said. The mobile phone is also a popular device for accessing BBC news among some of its audiences in Katsina. ‘I mostly get my news from my handset; even the BBC, I listen to them on phone’, a local council official said in the Katsina Focus Group discussion. Four other members of the seven-man focus group said they usually use their mobile phones for BBC news consumption.

Market share by phone operators in Nigeria as at Oct 2016 (NCC 2016)				
	Airtel	EMTS	Globacom	MTN
Number of Subscribers	32,775,916	22,210,315	37,117,992	60,982,487
Percentage (%)	21.41%	14.51%	24.25%	39.84%

Figure 3. Number of active phone subscribers for telephony services on each of the four operators in Nigeria, as of October 2016.
Source: NCC.

Despite infrastructural deficits such as unreliable electricity supply and poor internet connectivity, as well as low purchasing power, Nigerians are increasingly using their phones to access news. Mitigation for those inhibiting factors comes from both the audiences and the BBC in different forms. First, Africans tend to use low-cost China-made mobile phones that have ‘longer battery life, multiple SIM cards, flashlight, and radio tuning’ (Avle, 2020: 5). This enables them to access media content even without internet connectivity and for a long time with little electricity supply. Second, the BBC and other broadcasters such as the VOA structure their content specifically for consumption on mobile phones (Abubakar, 2017; BBC World Service, 2019; Powell, 2012). And third, the World Service has forged partnerships with tech firms to make access to its services easier and cheaper or even free (of both phone and content charges) on mobile phones through various networks (BBC World Service, 2019). One such partnership was struck with the leading mobile phone operator in Nigeria, MTN Nigeria, in June 2020 ‘to deliver BBC News Minute bulletins, free of charge to subscribers of the MyMTN App in English, Hausa, Igbo, Pidgin and Yoruba’ (BBC Media Centre, 2020b). BBC’s relentless effort to deliver phone-friendly content, the affordability and availability of the device, and the sheer convenience in using it have combined to make the mobile phone an important tool for consuming BBC content in Nigeria.

Active engagement

Convergence of technologies and of content enhances audiences’ active engagement with media. Analysis of the data shows that the BBC’s use of a multimedia strategy and the spread of mobile devices facilitate Nigerians’ engagement with the broadcaster. Simultaneous delivery of textual, audio and video content online to audiences and harnessing of social networking and video sharing sites, such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter, make participation in BBC’s programmes and interactivity attractive to audiences. Most of the participants (in individual and focus group interviews) said they participated in BBC’s interactive programmes via social networking sites and mobile phones – some of them said they even sent stories/information and pictures to the broadcaster and shared its stories – serving as content consumers, creators and disseminators. ‘I am a regular participant in *Ra’ayi Riga* (‘Have Your Say’, a BBC Hausa Service

participatory programme) and I follow them on Twitter and also send pictures to them', said a student in the Abuja Focus Group discussion. 'I sent them a lot of pictures, too, during the last election (in Nigeria in 2019)', said another participant in the eight-member focus group. 'They used many of them on their website'. All the participants in this group said they engaged in some form of interactivity with the BBC and with other audiences on its webpages and social media sites. Sharing and liking and commenting (whether positive, ambivalent or negative) on BBC's content were the popular activities they said they did in their engagement with the broadcaster. Their consumption of news content appears to reflect Hall's (1980) conception of dominant, negotiated and oppositional readings of texts, vaguely represented by positive, ambivalent and negative comments, respectively.

A clearer reflection of these forms of readings is more evident among audiences in Katsina and Yola in their engagement with BBC news. Data analysis indicates that these audiences interpret BBC content in different ways and hold diverse views on the broadcaster itself. Participants in the Yola Focus Group discussion held in September 2019 recalled many recent stories they accessed from the BBC, ranging from those on the then on-going controversy in the UK parliament over Britain leaving the European Union (Brexit) to reports about the US-China trade war. The latter happened to be the leading international news story on the day of the discussion, as the trade war had just escalated after then US president Donald Trump imposed new tariffs and China responded by placing a levy on US oil. Participants focused on the story, expressing differing views:

I think America is afraid that China is going to overtake it economically, and so Trump is doing everything possible to sabotage them. But it is too late. There's nothing he can do. Em, even Americans are suffering from his action, I mean, prices of goods are rising now. They rely on goods from China. (Secondary school teacher in the Yola Focus Group)

'You're right', said a newspaper journalist in the group discussion. 'The US and the West are not comfortable with China because it is growing stronger and stronger, and challenging their dominance. But they can't stop it. It is not even helpful to their economies do so'.

Looking at their comments, it seems that both the school teacher and the journalist as well as one other participant (a businessman, who was nodding his head in approval of what they said) made an oppositional reading of the dominant narrative of the BBC reports on the issue. They took a pro-China stance and ignored the US argument in the dispute, which were well stated in the BBC's reporting of the issue. But other participants expressed feelings that show acceptance of the hegemonic code:

Well, the US is right to be careful with China. I don't like Trump as a person but I don't blame him on this. I think it is good to check China. Look at even what their companies are doing here (in Nigeria), some of the jobs that our people here can do, they bring their people from China to do them. (Senior civil servant in the Yola Focus Group)

'They're also involved in many businesses here, even bakeries', said a trade unionist in the group discussion. 'Nothing is too small for them'. But another participant in the

discussion, an accountant, said he did not support any side in the trade war between the two leading economies. 'My main worry is what this would bring to the Nigerian economy. It is likely to have negative effect on us', he added. His perspective seems to indicate a negotiated reading of the BBC's reporting of the dispute.

The diversity of the readings of BBC content and differences of opinions on the broadcaster itself could equally be seen from the data gathered from the audiences in Katsina. In the focus group discussion and individual interviews with them in March and April 2013, the participants recalled many stories they had accessed from the BBC via their mobile phones but also on radio and television. Apart from Nigerian stories, mostly about politics and the Boko Haram conflict, which most of them felt the BBC had given much prominence, they mentioned African stories such as those about the elections in Kenya and the hospitalization of former South African president Nelson Mandela (before his death in December 2013). Almost all the participants in the Katsina Focus Group felt that the BBC had treated the story about the readmission of the then 94-year-old Mandela to hospital over lung infection with respect. 'He is the most respected person in the world', said a local council official. 'And the BBC always shows him that respect. I don't know how they were treating him when Britain was supporting apartheid, but they respect him so much now'. His view, which indicates a preferred reading of the BBC's reporting, received approval from the other participants.

There was no such unanimity of opinion on the BBC's reporting of Kenya's stories dominated by the victory of Uhuru Kenyatta and the unsuccessful challenge in the Supreme Court by his main rival Raila Odinga. Some of the participants accused the BBC of showing less interest in the aftermath of the 2013 elections than it showed in that of the 2007–2008 elections, characterized by violence. 'They didn't show interest for this one because there was no massive violence', said a lawyer. 'They're more interested in bad news in Africa'. Two other participants in the discussion agreed with him. But a television producer said he felt the BBC did a good job in covering the 2013 elections and its aftermath. 'Obviously, there was less violence in this election, so there wouldn't be many stories. I think they did a good job', he said. Views from participants in individual interviews also ranged from this form of endorsement of the broadcaster, indicating preferred reading, to ambivalence (indicative of negotiated reading) and disapproval of both BBC's content and the way it was reported, signifying oppositional reading. Regardless of the position they took, these participants, too, said they also engaged actively with the BBC's digital content – liking, sharing and commenting on it – and participated occasionally in its phone-in programmes.

Audience participation is not a new issue in media-audience relationship – it has been around for long, especially in television programming (Livingstone and Lunt, 1992) – but the current digital media environment gives it additional impetus and the BBC is reaping benefits from it. Previous studies (Abubakar, 2017; Hill and Alshaer, 2010; Sreberny et al., 2010: 280) have linked the BBC's encouragement of audience participation with the UK's 'digital diplomacy initiatives', giving resonance to Nye's (2004) description of BBC as UK's soft power resource. 'Interactivity does have the multiple benefits of directly engaging the audiences, generating content from them, infusing variety in programmes, providing instant feedback and exerting subtle influence on audiences' (Abubakar, 2017: 150). Other scholars (Dean, 2010; Van Dijk, 2009; Willems,

2013) highlight the economic/commercial motives of participatory programming. Dean (2010: 4), for instance, talks of the strange convergence of democracy and capitalism in which 'communicative exchanges and their technological preconditions become commodified and capitalized'. Van Dijck (2009: 55) points to the economic meaning of audiences being producers, consumers and data providers. This forms the basis of Willems's (2013: 224) argument about the corporate logic of participation 'in the sense that audiences' use of the internet and mobile phones leaves behind a trail of personal data that can be deployed in the service of communicative capitalism'.

The economic/commercial aspects stem more from mobile networks and tech companies' profit motives, while global broadcasters' interest focuses more on influencing the hearts and minds of their audiences, which is hard to measure. Data from participants show divergence of views on the BBC and its content – ranging from approval and ambivalence to disapproval – almost matching the three concepts of preferred, negotiated and oppositional readings, expounded in Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding thesis. Not all the views fit into these categories of reading, but they do reflect the diversity of their perceptions. Regardless of whether they engaged in digital interactivity on the BBC sites or participated in its phone-in programmes or accessed its content through other devices, audiences were able to interpret and contextualize the content in many ways. 'We are all, in our heads, several different audiences at once, and can be constituted as such by different programmes' (Hall, 'Introduction' for Morley, 1986: 10). It is this ability to interpret and deconstruct media messages (Livingstone, 2019) that equally gives audiences the capacity to resist some of its harmful influences.

Conclusion

Global broadcasters have reinvented themselves in the digital era in their bid to reach and influence people across the world – and the spread of mobile technologies is aiding them. This is exemplified by the BBC World Service's expansion of its services globally and in Nigeria in an attempt to enhance Britain's influence abroad. The broadcaster uses a multimedia strategy to gain more audiences, and Nigerians are increasingly using mobile devices to actively engage with its content. This study points to new dynamics in which both the media and audiences use technologies to enhance their experiences. The digital media environment – particularly the convergence of technologies and of content – has helped shape the media-audience relationship, with the media expanding its influence and the audiences becoming more active in using their interpretative and creative power, which enhances their agency.

The cultural studies variant of the active media theory, the encoding-decoding model, originally designed to study television consumption, is still a viable tool for studying audiences. However, given the way the current digital media environment is characterized by multimedia production and interactive (often distractive) multiplatform consumption, the model cannot explain everything. In the model's original perspective, the concept of 'active' seems to be confined to the audiences' ability to select and interpret texts in varied ways – accept, negotiate or reject the dominant/hegemonic code. But now other forms of audience activities – sharing, liking and commenting – need to be added to the list. This is in addition to the increasing roles audiences also play as content

creators and users. A more inclusive model accommodating all these could provide a sharper tool for analysing the media-audience relationship in the digital age.

It is also clear from the findings that the UK increases its funding of the BBC World Service for digital expansion with the aim of enhancing British influence globally – reinforcing Nye’s (2004) conception of the BBC as a key Britain’s soft power resource. The length to which the UK governments have gone in recent years to fund this expansion further demonstrates their determination to continue to leverage on the BBC to advance the country’s interests. This research has highlighted the broadcaster’s expansion and how it employs various programming and delivery strategies to increase its audiences. Future research could specifically evaluate the consequences of such expansion on Britain’s public diplomacy and soft power.

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