

Audience Participation in and perception of AIT's current affairs programme "Focus Nigeria"

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Abstract

This study investigated the perception of people and their participation in current affairs programmes, with a spotlight on African Independent Television's (AIT) "Focus Nigeria". The survey research method was used, with the questionnaire as the major data generating instrument. The essence was to determine the extent to which members of the audience participate in interactive programmes, as well as how they perceive the programmes they participate in. A sample of 384 respondents were used for the study based on Krejcie and Morgan's sample selection procedure. However, 358 fulfilled the final selection criteria. The result derived from the study reveals that despite the importance of feedback in a democracy, and opportunity created for audience participation in current affairs programmes, the audience failed to maximize the opportunity. It was also discovered that the programme has not sufficiently provided the opportunity for meaningful dialogue due to the political nature of issues, media screening of participants as well as timing. Most respondents also perceive the programme as too political in concept and content. It was therefore recommended that better audience enlightenment should be carried out for better participation, and other issues than politics incorporated into it.

Keywords: Active participants, Audience, Current affairs, Feedback, Focus Nigeria, Participation, Passive participants, Perception, Programmes.

Introduction

One of the primary distinguishing characteristics of mass communication is the large audience, sometimes amounting to millions of people. Second, the audience is also heterogeneous, that is, it is made up of dissimilar groups who may differ in age, intelligence,

political beliefs, ethnic backgrounds, and so on. Even in situations where the audience is well defined, heterogeneity is still present. The message flow is typically one-way, and feedback, in many instances, is more difficult than in the interpersonal setting.

Prior to the advent of Information and Communication Technology, audience participation and research was not widespread and mass communication relationship was unbalanced, with the advantage tending to lie with the communicator. Broadcasters in the early days of radio and television in Europe and the United States knew remarkably little about their listeners. Today, the situation is different with programmes that make audience participation possible, such that producers can meaningfully gauge the feedback of the audience and plan effective reportage of events.

As a result of advancement in technology electronic communication has been redefined, thereby making the world a global village as predicted by Marshal McLuhan. Information and Communication Technology has created a dynamic situation in which one can communicate simultaneously at the interpersonal and mass communication levels with people who may be located in the next room, or dispersed among the farthest continents, thereby introducing the element of feedback to mass communication at certain levels through selected programmes, one of which is current affairs.

At the most basic level, audiences are vital in communication. It is for the audience that the media are constructing and conveying information and if it were not for the audience, the media would not exist. Thus, we might say successful mass communication must influence its audience. In Nigeria, the advancement in technology has brought about an increase in audience participatory programmes. Examples of such programmes include: Radio link on FRCN, Good Morning Nigeria on NTA, Tuesday Night Live on NTA, Focus Nigeria on AIT, just to mention a few.

Current Affairs Programme is a genre of broadcast journalism where the emphasis is on detailed analysis and discussion of news stories that have recently occurred or are ongoing at the time of broadcast. This differs from regular news broadcasts where the emphasis is on news reports presented as soon as possible, often with a minimum of analysis. It is also different from the news magazine show format in that the events are discussed immediately. In current affairs programmes, government officials, intellectuals, educationists, research scholars, economists, politicians, scientists, sociologists and individuals express their views. Current affairs programmes usually feature one or two guests in an interview format going in- depth on one or two issues and would usually provide opportunities for audience to make contributions on the subject of discussion.

Through current affairs programmes, media audiences can make inputs or comments on national issues, hence it is one programme type that creates avenue for audience feedback. The public owns the airwaves and has the right and responsibility to give effective feedback and to play a decisive role in shaping the communication that moves through the public airwaves. Thus, if the media are to have meaningful role in democracy, citizens need to make informed

decisions and participate in policy making processes. This can be achieved when avenues are created for popular participation among media audiences.

Focus Nigeria, a news and current affairs programme of the African Independent Television (AIT), has been on air since 2005 and is a discussion programme designed to engage all critical issues affecting Nigeria's polity, from politics to matters that affect the ordinary Nigerian. The programme analyses such issues and seeks to proffer solutions where challenges are identified, using carefully selected panel of guests with related expertise and contributions from the audience. The programme is said to have a large audience who participate via face book and twitter. One begins to wonder if the objectives of the programme, as outlined by the station, matches the perception of the audience over the years.

An analysis of the role of Information and Communication Technology in Mass communication in recent years, captures the evolving communication dynamics, in which audiences are increasingly able to function both as senders and receivers of Mass communication. It is a fact that a good deal of broadcasting activity goes on without much effort made to find out what is really happening at the other end. The researcher therefore seeks to find out how the audiences of current affairs programmes perceive them as well as understand if the need to contribute to national issues which is an objective of focus Nigeria has been satisfied.

Statement of the Problem

Communication as a process is always followed by reaction, not only because it is natural, but also because it is usually desirable, expected and even provoked. A great deal of human communication is deliberately designed to elicit some response and often, the absence of that response is in itself an indication that the sender of the message has failed in his communication purpose.

Lwahas (2004) observes that "freedom of the media allows for the formation of a public sphere in which a wide range of debate can take place and a variety of viewpoints be represented. The citizenry can thereby use the media to express their assent or dissent or explore aspects of issues not considered through official channel." Anju and Mojisola (2004) corroborate the view thus: "Leaders need to have a feeling of what the people think about them and their policies. However, to do this there must be a means or medium through which this is done." Current affairs programmes have over the years served as a platform for audience participation and contribution to issues of national interest.

Communication as pointed out by Yaroson and Asemah (2008) is a complex process which is continuous in that it involves actions, responses (reactions and interactions). To them, the elements in the communication process are: stimulus, source, message, medium, receiver and feedback. By this it is easy to say that every communication process begins with a stimulus and ends with a feedback, without which the process is said to be incomplete.

The citizens of a country are part of the decision making process of that country and their opinions are aired via the mass media. If the media have succeeded in creating an avenue for

audience participation in current affairs programmes through phone-ins, e-mails, text messages etc, it is critical that audiences of this platform be assessed to understand if the current affairs platform has overtime met the objectives against which it was established.

Thus, the major question this study attempts to answer is: How does the audience perceive AIT's Focus Nigeria and how does this perception influence their participation in the programme?

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study include the following:

- To determine the extent of audience participation in AIT's current affairs programme, "Focus Nigeria".
- To find out audience perception of the programme, "Focus Nigeria".
- To ascertain the importance and relevance of feedback in current affairs programmes.
- To find out the extent to which AIT's "Focus Nigeria" encourages meaningful dialogue and discussion of issues of public interest.
- To identify the challenges to effective audience participation in the programme, "Focus Nigeria".

Research Questions

The researchers provide answers to the following questions:

- What is the extent of audience participation in AIT's current affairs programme, Focus Nigeria?
- How does the audience perceive the programme, Focus Nigeria?
- How important and relevant is feedback in current affairs programmes?
- To what extent does AIT's Focus Nigeria encourage meaningful dialogue and discussion of issues of public interest?
- What are the perceived or inherent challenges to effective audience participation in Focus Nigeria?

Significance of the Study

This study aims at understanding audience perception of current affairs programmes with reference to AIT's "Focus Nigeria". Moreover, it goes a long way in emphasizing the importance of audience participation in television current affairs programmes in Nigeria. Producers of current affairs programmes will benefit from this research work as it will enable them know how audiences perceive the programme as well as what influences their participation. Solutions and recommendations will help media practitioners improve on programme production for audience suitability.

Finally, this work will add to general knowledge and serve as a reference material especially to media practitioners, lecturers and students of mass communication and may encourage further studies in the area.

Definition of Terms

- **Perception:** This refers to the feeling, regard, view, etc a persons holds about something or issue. It is the comprehension or an understanding of something.
- **Audience perception:** This is the way the participants of AIT's Focus Nigeria feel about and regard the programme.
- **Audience:** This refers to the media participants or receivers, and all those who are actually reached by a particular media content or media channels.
- **Participation:** This refers to taking part in a programme. The term is also used to refer to viewership. It is assumed that those who watch a programme are actually involved in participation, though they can as well fall under active or passive participants.
- **Current Affairs Programmes:** Current affairs programme is a news programme which gives some details about one or more particular news items or burning issues in the society. These programmes are designed to explain, provide details and also comment on topical events or issues. Such programmes are broadcast to explain significance, consequence and effect of one or more recent events and issues on people.
- **Active Participants:** This refers to audience members who make contributions to a programme either through phone calls, e-mails, fax, text messages and other means.
- **Passive Participants:** It is the opposite of active participants, meaning, those audience members who merely watch the programme without making any contribution or reacting to any issue.
- **Focus Nigeria:** Focus Nigeria is a discussion programme on African Independent Television (AIT), designed to engage all critical issues affecting Nigeria's polity from politics to other daily subject matters that engage and affect the ordinary Nigerian.
- **Feedback:** It is the audience response to a message. Feedback can be achieved through active audience participation like phoning in or writing in.

Review of Related Literature

In this era of democracy, there is need for people to have more avenues to express their views on issues. One of such avenues is audience participation in current affairs programmes through which the mass media and government can receive necessary feedback and feel the pulse of the people. Many scholars have argued in this regard therefore, providing the basis for literature review.

Conceptualisation of current affairs

Unalegu (2007) defines current affairs programmes as News-based television messages or package which treat in-depth, contemporary issues, subjects or events of interest to the viewing public with the aim of informing or educating the viewers. The treatment is analytical in approach and research based in background and provides facts and figures, the basis on which viewers can evaluate emerging issues and development from the various sectors of the nation's life-politics, economic, science, technology, education, business etc.

Current affairs in Television broadcasting constitutes the intellectual hub of the industry as they deal with issues, and most times, objective expert views and opinion. Current affairs analyze problems from different perspectives and the relative merits of different solutions and finally approve the best solution.

Another attempt at defining current affairs programmes is one offered by Edeh, (2006). "Current Affairs are news events, whose relevance are not limited to their immediacy alone, but accommodate events and issues that are relatively old yet presently have a bearing on the society." Edeh, discusses the concept of current affairs and argues that news has a limited definition, thus emphasis should be on the need to place events and issues in a broader context. Definition of news, he says, needs expansion to take into not only "event" but the entire "process". According to him, if truly communication can be used to mobilize public support and cooperation in any society's development, the communication's role includes not only objective reporting of "hard news" but also commentaries offering analysis and instruction. In this way they could play vital role in the worldwide struggle to promote human progress.

Current Affairs programmes fulfill the correlation role of communication that is by interpreting the facts of news, establishing relationships between past and present and putting near and distant events in perspective, (Manyam, 2010).

The aims and objectives of News and Current Affairs programmes as listed by Odetoyinbo (2001, p.4) include:

- To broaden the outlook of people with information about Nigeria, African and world events and issues and thereby enable viewers to form an enlightened opinion from the Nigerian view point.
- To encourage meaningful dialogue and discussion of issues of public interests.
- To publicize development work by governments and self help efforts by local communities.
- To spotlight shortcomings in National life with a view to correcting them and at the same time give credit when it is due with a view to encouraging good works.
- To serve as a medium of relating the feelings and aspirations of the people to government and the policies, activities and problems of government to the people.
- To cooperate with law enforcement agencies and the judiciary.
- To give publicity to events and occurrences of public interest and thereby stimulating national awareness and interpretation.
- To generate awareness and sustain interest for pressures that calls for mass support.

- To promote an awareness of African and world events and issues with a view to sharing experiences.
- To dispel rumors and remove their undesirable effect or consequences

Audience of current affairs

According to Unalegu (2007, p.7) “the audience of current affairs is a general interest audience and mostly the educated and mature.” This view is also supported by Manyam (2010) who states that, “The audience of current affairs programmes are the educated members of the society.”

Manyam (2010) also points out that people of higher status are better educated and are more likely to hold current affairs in high regard and want to know what is happening adding that they usually belong to the political, economic and social class (elite) in the society. It is on this basis that critics argue that current affairs programmes are too elitist and far removed from the masses especially the rural dwellers and the youths, who see the language of current affairs programmes as too high and hard to understand. Manyam, is also of the view that current affairs are not known to be popular among the younger generation and women as they find them boring and prefer entertainment, lifestyle programmes, musicals, sports, drama etc.

Focus Nigeria

Focus Nigeria is a one hour News and Current Affairs Discussion Programmes on weekdays. It runs between 10 and 11a.m. It was introduced in January 2006 and anchored by Gbenga Mike Aruleba. It is a public affairs programme which features public officers, civil society activists, experts, professionals, private and ordinary people, to discuss issues especially current and burning ones which are of public or national interest.

It is divided into 2 or 3 segments where the first 5 to 10 minutes are used to recap major public and political developments in the country since the last edition and take a prologue to set the agenda from the issue or topic of the day. The rest of the time is used for discussion moderated by the presenter. The third segment is occasional when there is a sponsored spotlight or documentary. The discussion segment can also be sponsored by an interested party or stakeholder, but if allegations are made against other people or institutions, such are invited and given the right to reply. Moreover, viewers are encouraged to call certain numbers or send text messages in reaction to issues discussed.

Communication and Technology

There is a consensus that the communication process is incomplete without feedback and ICT facilitates this important stage, both in the electronic and in the print media. In broadcasting, ICT has virtually bridged the gulf between broadcasters and their audience as far as feedback is

concerned. For instance, mobile phones enable many broadcast audience members to contribute to on air programmes through the expression of opinions, grievances, and commendations. This technology also enables the audience to send short text messages to broadcast stations for the purposes enumerated above. E-mails sent via the internet also come in handy for the same reasons. Oketunmbi (2005)

Recent studies have revealed that in the 21st century, the development of the internet worldwide and other computer networks have fundamentally challenged the traditional model of the media. Communication technologies have transcended old forms of communication to relay information to a much wider audience. Some of the most important telecommunication devices are the radio, the telephone, the television, the newspaper and the computer because through them people are less isolated and are quickly informed of major events.

In addition, the use of the new media, has brought about audience participation in mass communication process. According to O'Sullivan et al (2003), if older systems tended to the 'one-way' form of communication, new media allow for greater increased diversity and interactivity, to the point that they fundamentally challenge the old ideas of 'broadcasting' or 'mass' communication.

The age of people being receivers of mass information is expanding into one where they are participants in mass communication. Berger (2009) says the other emerging change in media is interactivity, which is linked to the wide dispersal of cell phones. From talks, to broadcast calls, through to SMS contributions, African audiences are responding to media content in ever increasing numbers. The audience is gaining more control over the mass communication process. Berger (2009) also maintains that "New technologies are not only changing the media dynamics when it comes to content, but are also a significant factor in creating new ways for media to interact with its audience. Blogs, mobile phones and various online devices are bringing producers of content in closer contact with the consumers of it. Feedback can be instantaneous". Advances in Information Communication Technology (ICT), according to him, "enable people to have access to information and express their opinions." ICTs are highly relevant to the media.

According to Terry (2011) "the internet and social media are transforming broadcast communications in ways that enable greater openness and participation beyond the constraint presented by one-to-many mass communications." Akpan and Pascal (2010, p.108) also assert that "The coming of the Global System of Mobile Communication (GSM) has contributed to a reduction in distance between broadcasters and the audience. The delayed feedback phenomenon is gradually being reduced. The interaction between broadcasters and the audience is more and more becoming interpersonal. It did not just happen, but was a result of the numerous innovations in communication and mass media technologies".

It is therefore established that technology is a great pivot in communication, especially interactive communication that enhances feedback. The emergence of the new media has created a new avenue towards a new path in contemporary communication.

Feedback in Communication

Feedback makes the process of communication complete and circular, rather than linear and unidirectional. Feedback is the response generated by the message receiver to acknowledge the message and the action taken. No representation of the human communication process can omit this key element. Best (2004, p.218) emphasizes that “feedback is the only way we tell senders about the understanding or misunderstanding they have created.” Therefore, it is perhaps the single most important strategy of improving communication.

Balan and Rayadu (1994, p.237) posit that:

A piece of message transmitted is said to be effective only when there is a provision for feedback, in communication. A communication process is said to have feedback, when the receiver of the message has given his response to the sender's message. On the other hand, the communicator must know how well the message has been received by the receiver, understood and interpreted and acted upon. Feedback helps to determine this process. Sending back the knowledge about the message to the communicator is known as feedback.

Feedback is one of the important essentials of good communication. It is probably the most important technique of improving communication. Two-way process ensures feedback. The communicator has to obtain feedback from the receiver of communication. Balan and Rayadu (1994), also examine feedback as the last element in the communication process but the most important one. Communication is viewed as an exchange, and for the exchange to be complete the information must go back to the sender. This is to enable him know the reaction of the receiver. The principle of feedback promotes a two-way communication. Feedback therefore invokes effective participation of the receiver.

While stressing the importance of feedback in the media, Schramm (1964, p.176) opines that “two way communication through mass media programmes helps encourage development decisions.” This means that citizens’ participation in the media can bring about vital change in the society. It is therefore apt to suggest that through effective use of feedback by the media, Nigerian citizens can actively participate in the decision making process of the country. Best (2004, p 218) is of the view that “as senders of information we need to create a climate in which the receiver will feel comfortable and willing to provide feedback.”

An effective two way communication occurs when the sender transmits the message and the receiver involves in feedback to the sender. This completes the communication circuit. It satisfies process elements like message flow from the sender to the receiver and back to the sender. This two-way communication is called feedback loop or communication loop.

Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on the Democratic Participant theory. The theory conceptualizes the need to decentralize and democratize the media so as to allow for easy access to channels of communication and the active participation of media audience in programmes. The proponent of the theory, Dennis Mcquail (1987) looks at the media as a very vital tool in enhancing free flow of information which is significant in a democracy. The theory, calls for “horizontal” in place of “top-down” communication, a concern for feedback so as to realize a complete communication circuit.

It therefore suffices to say that the process of communication can only be complete if the audience is allowed to participate by sending in feedback. Participation also eradicates linear communication and encourages interaction. The choice of the Democratic Participant theory as the model on which the study rests is predicated on the fact that Nigeria is in a democratic dispensation, as such the dissemination of information is invaluable to meaningful growth in any democracy. This means that inadequate feedback or lack of it can in the long run affect the political terrain of Nigeria’s democracy.

The theory stresses that needs, interests and aspirations of the active receiver in a political society has to do with the right to relevant information, the right to answer back and the right to use the means of communication in small-scale settings of community, interest group and subculture. By calling for democracy in the media, the theory demands that the media be interactive and participatory. Current affairs and audience participation as seen in the programme “Focus Nigeria” on AIT is a good example of how the media can be democratized.

Research Technique

The technique adopted in executing this study was the descriptive survey. Descriptive survey, according to Wimmer and Dominick (2006) attempts to describe or document conditions or attributes of a sample. According to Nwodu (2006), survey method allows the researcher to measure characteristics, opinions and behaviours of a given population, and this works on the premise that the population is too large for researchers to realistically observe the elements in the population.

Nwagbara as cited in Wilson (2006) also observes that survey is particularly useful in studies in which the population is too large to be observed directly. The choice of survey was therefore to enable the researcher sample the opinion of respondents on audience participation in current affairs programmes. The questionnaire was the major data gathering instrument considered to be effective in accommodating a large population.

Population, Sample and Sampling procedure

The population of this study comprised viewers of “Focus Nigeria” resident in Abuja, Nigeria, particularly the elites and adults. This was arrived at based on accessibility and the

researchers' belief that they are likely to have means and access to the programme. Also, observational studies have shown this category of the population to be more interested in current affairs programmes, hence they are capable of providing relevant information on the subject matter. The number of residents in Abuja as recorded in the 2006 population census was estimated at 776,298.

The research adopted the multi stage sampling technique where the sampling is carried out in stages using small sampling units at each stage. As a result, a sample of primary and secondary units was taken. A combination of cluster and purposive sampling were used by the researchers to cluster the population into smaller units first, and then sampled individuals within the cluster using purposive sampling.

. With an estimated population of 776,298, the researchers sampled a sufficient number to generate 95% confidence interval within plus or minus 5.0% margin of error. They therefore sampled the opinion of 384 members of the population. The method used for sample selection was Krejcie and Morgan's formula for determining Sample for Research activities. The formula is presented below.

Formula used for tabulated calculations is:

$$N = \frac{X^2 * N * P * (1 - P)}{(ME^2 * (N-1) + (X^2 * P * (1-P)))}$$

Where n = sample size

X² = Chi-square for the specified confidence level at 1 degree of freedom

N = population size

P = population proportion (.50 in this table)

ME = desired margin of error (expressed as a proportion)

Thus, the study deliberately included samples that could be relied on for relevant information on the topic. Respondents were classified based on educational qualification, social status and age. The researchers sampled the opinions of 384 respondents, out of which 30% of the sample (115) were students of higher institution, and 70% (269) being elites and adults of 30 years and above.

This division was made based on the observation that a lot of students spend more time on entertainment programmes when compared with the second category that has more access to television and are more interested in news and current affairs programmes such as "Focus Nigeria". Therefore, copies of the questionnaire were distributed among these audience categories.

Method of Data collection

Data for this research were collected through the administration of the questionnaire on respondents. The researchers administered a total of 384 copies on the respondents. However, 95% (358) were successfully retrieved and used for analysis.

Method of Data Analysis

Data gathered were analysed using frequency counts and simple percentages, as well as the Likert 5-points measurement scale. The analysis was done in two sections. Section A analyzed the characteristics of the study sample while section B dealt with the thematic analysis.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The data collection instrument was the questionnaire for the survey of 384 respondents in Abuja, Nigeria, after which 358 were retrieved. The analysis was therefore based on the response rate of 358. The data collected from the study were tabulated and interpreted using frequency tables and percentage scores, while the Likert scale was used to measure audience perception and participation in the programme as raised by the research questions.

Analysis of data from the questionnaire

Table 1: Frequency of watching “Focus Nigeria” on AIT

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Daily	149	42
Bi-weekly	82	23
Once in a week	84	23
Rarely	43	12
Total	358	100

The table above shows the frequency at which respondents watch the programme “Focus Nigeria”. Most respondents (149), representing 42%, watch the programme daily, while the least number (43 representing 12%) rarely watch the programme. This implies that most viewers of “Focus Nigeria” watch the programme daily; hence they are more committed than average viewers of the programme.

Table 2: Audience participation in the programme via SMS, Phone Calls or E-mails?

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	189	53
No	169	47
Total	358	100

Table 2 shows that most respondents were positive in their response, while the rest answered otherwise.

Table 3: Frequency of participating in the programme

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Daily	44	12
Twice in a week	55	15
Once in a week	59	17
Once in a month	31	9
Once in a long while	169	47
Total	358	100

Table 3 shows poor and irregular participation in the programme as most respondents participate after a long while and the rest less frequently.

Table 4: Response on awareness of the existence of “Focus Nigeria” Fan Club Site

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	153	43
No	205	57
Total	358	100

Most respondents, according to the table, are not aware of the Fan Club site. This means more awareness should be created for better participation and perception.

Table 5: Audience satisfaction and need to contribute to issues of public interest

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	40	11
Partially	33	9
No	285	80
Total	358	100

Focus Nigeria does not seem to satisfy the needs of its viewers which discourage their contribution to issues of public interest. Most respondents (285 or 80%) so confirm.

Table 6: Audience Perception of “Focus Nigeria”

S/N	Items	SA 5	A 4	UD 3	D 2	SD 1	\bar{x}	DECISION
a.	The programme is highly political	141	59	84	31	43	3.6	Accepted
b.	The programme is more elitist than general in its approach	129	70	85	35	39	3.6	Accepted
c.	The programme is educative and discusses issues of public interest	98	60	31	58	111	2.9	Rejected
d.	The programme provides a daily opportunity to contribute to burning issues in the country	37	22	18	88	193	1.9	Rejected

The table examines audience perception of the programme and indicates the levels of acceptance and rejection. The positive options are rejected while the negative ones are accepted, showing poor perception of the programme.

Table 7: Relevance of Audience Participation in TV Current Affairs Programmes.

S/N	Items	SA 5	A 4	UD 3	D 2	SD 1	\bar{x}	DECISION
a.	Opinions of citizens are vital in enhancing Nigerian Democracy	208	121	13	10	6	4.4	Accepted
b.	Feedback eradicates one-way flow of communication	185	113	29	23	8	4.2	Accepted

Table 7 examined the relevance of participating in current affairs programmes, measuring the degree of acceptance or otherwise using the Likert measurement scale.

Table 8: Extent of Audience Participation in TV Current Affairs Programmes.

S/N	Items	SA 5	A 4	UD 3	D 2	SD 1	\bar{x}	DECISION
a.	Audiences of Current Affairs Programmes on TV are mostly spectators who do not actively participate	79	125	43	90	21	3.4	Accepted
b.	The topics discussed do not generate high audience response.	75	185	60	27	25	3.8	Accepted
c.	The moderation of Current Affairs Programmes attracts active participation	6	25	33	183	111	2.0	Rejected

d.	Participation is high in Current Affairs Programmes on radio compared to television.	117	139	50	27	25	3.8	Accepted
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The table examines the extent of audience participation in current affairs programmes, indicating the degrees of acceptance and rejection.

TABLE 9: Challenges of effective audience participation in the programme

S/N	Items	SA 5	A 4	UD 3	D 2	SD 1	\bar{x}	DECISION
e.	High GSM tariff as well as poor communication network does hinder audience participation.	25	37	41	67	188	2.0	Rejected
f.	Epileptic power supply reduces the rate of viewership which, translates to low participation	99	47	22	73	117	2.8	Rejected
g.	The timing of Focus Nigeria is suitable for viewership.	41	62	40	47	168	2.3	Rejected
h.	People have the tendency to keep their opinion to themselves and are unaware of the relevance of their participation.	201	31	44	18	64	3.8	Accepted
i.	The media screens the number of participants to what it wants.	182	41	19	62	74	3.7	Accepted

Table 9 assesses the degree of acceptance or rejection of the challenges facing the programme.

TABLE 10: How to Improve the Level of Audience Participation in Current Affairs Programmes.

S/N	Items	SA 5	A 4	UD 3	D 2	SD 1	\bar{x}	DECISION
a.	The media should pay for the cost of participation.	118	47	38	72	83	3.1	Accepted
b.	Audiences should be given more time to air their views.	215	56	23	40	24	4.1	Accepted
c.	Phone calls, SMS, are preferred means of participation than E-mails.	196	81	5	21	55	4.0	Accepted
d.	The airwaves should be open to all who wish to participate	251	39	10	33	25	4.3	Accepted

e.	Participation is improved where the programme can be accessed via the social network of facebook and twitter.	289	53	3	5	3	4.7	Accepted
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All the items suggesting ways of improving participation in the programme seem to be pertinent as they are accepted.

Discussion of Findings

The main aim of this research was to find out audience perception of and participation in AIT's Focus Nigeria. This is important because audience participation in a democracy is very vital as the public owns the airwaves and therefore has the right and responsibility to give feedback and participate in policy making processes through the media. One of such platforms being current affairs programmes.

The discussion therefore, addresses the five (5) research questions raised. In addition, the discussion was aligned with the theoretical framework as well as the review of studies designed to realise the objectives of the study.

Research Question 1: What is the extent of audience participation in AIT's Focus Nigeria?

The data gathered reveal that majority of the respondents watch the programme Focus Nigeria. But the level of participation and contribution is not encouraging. Tables 2 and 3 provide a summary of the level of participation, as only 189 respondents affirm that they participate in the programme via SMS, phone calls, or emails. However, the frequency of this participation as revealed in Table 3 shows the inconsistency in audience participation as majority of the audience rarely participate in the programme.

This implies that most people just watch the programme without airing their views. This is because, out of 189 respondents who claim they participate in the programme, only 44 representing 12% are committed.

Also when asked if they were aware that Focus Nigeria had a Fan club site, most respondents said they were not aware of the existence of the fan club site. This is shown on Table 4, where 205 respondents representing 57% of the sample said no. This, the researchers assume, is as a result of poor participation. This assumption is further confirmed by Table 8, Item 'a', where respondents accepted that audiences of current affairs programmes are mostly spectators who do not actively participate in the programme.

Research Question 2: How does the audience perceive the programme Focus Nigeria?

Findings reveal that the audience perceives the programme as being highly political. This is evident in Table 6, where majority of the respondents accepted that they see the programme as highly political with a table mean of 3.6. They also believe that the programme is more elitist

than general in its approach which greatly influences the caliber of people who can participate in the programme. The elitist approach of the programme naturally screens the non-literate from participating, considering the language and nature of discussions.

Furthermore, majority of the respondents feel the programme is not as educative as it should be as it does not touch other aspects of the Nigerian society. This is seen in item 'c', of Table 6, and the suggestion of various individuals that the programme be re-designed to cover different aspects of public life as most people may not be interested in politics all the time. They also rejected the idea that the programme provides them a daily opportunity to contribute to issues of public interests with a table mean of 1.9 for item 'd'. On the whole, the audience perceives the programme as being highly political and too technical for effective participation of the average Nigerian.

Research Question 3: What are the factors that could encourage and improve audience participation in the programme Focus Nigeria?

The respondents believe their participation is influenced by their need and willingness to contribute to national discourse as is revealed in Table 12, item "a", which they accepted to be high with a table mean of 4.0. They however lamented that topics discussed do not generate high audience participation. This may be due to the nature of the topic discussed which respondents had noted to be one-sided. It was also gathered that their participation was also due to their need to contribute to national development through suggestions and other means made possible by the programme.

Research Question 4: Does AIT's Focus Nigeria encourage meaningful dialogue and discussion of issues of public interest?

This question was designed to ascertain if Focus Nigeria encourages meaningful dialogue and discussion of issues as is expected in a democracy. Findings reveal that majority of the respondents do not believe the programme has sufficiently provided the opportunity for meaningful dialogue of issues. This is due to its one-sidedness, media screening of participants as well as timing. From the opinions of respondents in the open ended question, one can deduce that majority do not feel satisfied with the timing, as they suggest a shift in timing as well as an extension of time given for contributions.

It is therefore safe to assume that although the platform for dialogue and meaningful discussion has been created by the programme Focus Nigeria, it has not been fully maximized by the audience due to some challenges.

Research Question 5: What are the perceived challenges affecting effective audience participation in Focus Nigeria?

The above question was designed to find out the challenges affecting effective audience participation in the programme as perceived by the audience. The data in Table 13 provide answers to the above question. Responses gathered show that few of the respondents feel that

high GSM tariff hinders participation, while a few others believe epileptic power in some way reduces the level of participation.

However, majority of the respondents linked poor participation to unsuitable programme timing and people's tendency to keep their opinions to themselves as they were ignorant of the relevance of their contributions to the growth of democracy. They also perceived the media as influencing the level of participation as they were assumed to screen the number of participants on the programme. On the whole, respondents assumed that timing, electricity, high GSM tariff, poor understanding of media participation by the audience and media screening are challenges affecting effective participation in the programme Focus Nigeria.

Several studies as noted in the literature review have emphasized the importance of audience participation in current affairs programmes as these platforms enable the audience to have access to information as well as express their opinions. The findings from the study corroborate Manyam(2010) who pointed out that the audiences of current affairs programmes are mostly educated members of the society. According to Manyam (2010) "people of higher status are better educated and are more likely to hold current affairs in high regard and want to know what is happening. Usually, they belong to the political, economic and social class (elite) in the society" This supports the finding in table 11, where respondents perceived the programme as being elitist in its approach, rather than general.

The suggestion by respondents that platforms be created for participation via social media like Facebook, Twitter, BBM, etc. aligns with Benkler (2000) who assumed that the new media environment is one in which the tolls of participation in public discourse and creative activity are much more widely distributed, outlining applications like Facebook, Twitter, Myspace, and other such applications. This goes to show that the suggestion by respondents is very apt and would in no small way enhance participation of audience as the social media are widely spread in Nigeria today especially amongst the youth and elites. The Focus Nigeria fan club is a good example of this platform. However, other social chat applications are more readily accessible by a majority of the audiences as suggested.

Responses from data gathered show that when audiences are allowed to participate, communication becomes bi-directional (exchange between senders and receivers) which is ideal. This corresponds with the position of the democratic participant theory that feedback in communication helps in attaining complete communication circuit. Respondents also agree that participation is important for democracy to thrive. In essence, participation is of great relevance in current affairs programmes.

Data gathered show that audiences find it difficult to participate because of factors ranging from technical, social and economic constraints. The media also compound the problem affecting audience participation by restricting the number of participants to very few. Data gathered shows that people find it difficult to participate because GSM tariffs are high and sometimes the poor communication network is discouraging. The findings corroborates the view of Akpan and Pascal (2010) that "it is common knowledge that GSM services across the country have a lot of flaws ranging from clashes to outright lack of network. When this happens, those

who could afford the cost of participation would no longer be able to participate in the programme.” The findings from table 14 reveals that audience participation in the media can be improved to a great extent, all items on the Table 12 were accepted. In item e, there was the notion that social network improves participation. By implication, advancement in technology has had a great impact on the media because before now, people use postal services to get to broadcasters but today, they have the opportunity to give direct feedback in programs. Hence the proper utilization of social network would greatly improve participation.

Findings, Conclusion and Recommendations

Findings

The findings of this study were discussed and analysed on the basis of the five research questions posed in this study. Data gathered in the study were analysed using descriptive statistics, in which tables, percentages and frequency were used to answer the research questions. The findings of the study were as follows:

- i. Most viewers of the programme are not active but passive participants despite the importance of feedback in enhancing democracy. Findings revealed their inconsistency and poor commitment in contributing to issues raised in the programme.
- ii. Majority of the audience members perceive the programme as being highly political and too elitist in its approach which influences the class of people who participate in the programme. The elitist nature of the programme serves to reduce the number of participants considering the language and nature of issues discussed.
- iii. The programme has not sufficiently provided the opportunity for meaningful dialogue due to the political nature of issues, media screening of participants on the programme, as well as timing.
- iv. GSM tariff, epileptic power, unsuitable programme timing and people’s tendency to keep their opinions to themselves, among others, are challenges affecting participation in the programme “Focus Nigeria”.
- v. Current affairs programmes are important in any democratic dispensation as they provide platforms for the audience to access information as well as express their opinions on issues. However, participation in Focus Nigeria is on the low side as revealed by the research.
- vi. The adoption and proper utilization of social media technologies as channels for feedback on the programme would in no small way improve participation in the programme.

Conclusion

Current Affairs Programmes provide a platform where issues of national interest are discussed, as decisions reached from such discussions can affect lives of the citizenry. In this light plurality of views becomes necessary such that when needs, interests and opinions of the people are known and represented in the media, if addressed properly and channeled to the appropriate authorities, it can bring about societal growth and development.

Audience participation can therefore be improved to an appreciable level as this will strengthen democracy and completes the process of communication. It is worthy to note that Focus Nigeria dwells on critical issues and should attract better participation than entertainment programmes such as raffle draws, musical shows etc. Hence, the media have a role to play in educating, empowering and encouraging the citizens regarding participation in a democratic setting.

As Sambe (2008, p182) puts it, “the mass media in Nigeria set agenda for national discourse. It is the media that sensitize Nigerians on the need to be active participants in political process during democratic eras.” The survival of freedom of expression should be ensured by the media, not just the right to receive information, but to impact as well.

The need for audience research is essential as this will enable the media to know the needs and preferences of their audience in order to produce programmes or improve programme content and format to suit the audience. Ike cited in Akpan and Pascal (2010, p115) maintains that, “Broadcasters should study their audiences to know what their problems are and later tackle such problems to enhance greater participation by the audience.” When citizens know that they can actually participate, it increases their interest in the programme.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

- (1) Producers of current affairs programmes clearly bearing in mind the significance of audience participation in programmes, should begin educating the audience on the importance of active participation and contribution to issues raised, this would go a long way to improve level of participation.
- (2) The producer should incorporate other aspects of public life into the programme Focus Nigeria, rather than focus on political issues alone. Also a general approach may be adopted to allow the ordinary Nigerian an opportunity to understand and participate in the programme as against the elitist approach presently adopted which reduces participation.
- (3) Considering the fact that majority of the respondents were not satisfied with the programme, the producer should make efforts to review timing to reach out to more Nigerians as well as give more people the opportunity to contribute on the programme.
- (4) Producers of current affairs programmes should explore new social media platforms and adopt the same in promoting audience participation. This will go a long way in solving the problem of cost as identified by respondents. Today, many Nigerians have access to new social

media technologies on their mobile phones, ipads, and other devices, therefore adopting this platform for feedback would increase participation.

(5) The importance of audience participation in a democracy should be emphasized and encouraged by media producers. The people should be encouraged to speak out while ensuring that their suggestions and contributions are taken seriously and directed to appropriate authorities. When audience members observe that their contributions are appreciated, they will make concerted efforts to participate in the programme.

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