

AUDIENCE RESEARCH TECHNOLOGY USAGE BY SELECT PORT HARCOURT -BASED RADIO STATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Taking deliberate steps to understand audience makeup, preferences, size and reach of message remains critical to effective programming and content creation in broadcasting. Broadcast stations are often advised to integrate technologies into audience research in order to understand how to segment and respond to audiences' needs. Radio stations spend money on programming and production, so it is reasonable to have a clear knowledge of the audience to effectively deliver programmes that not only meet their tastes but hit them at the right time. This is because lack of adequate understanding of the audience will likely lead to wastage of time and resources. The study used interview to survey the adoption of audience research technologies by Port Harcourt-based radio stations, and how such activity has affected their programme delivery. The findings showed that broadcast stations rarely adopt digital technologies for audience research, but are more inclined to using survey methods such as interviews, Focus Groups and telephone methods. The study recommended among others that broadcast stations should invest in audience research, and adopt more tech-based methods in conducting audience research in order to adequately understand their audience make-up, preferences and tastes for effective programming, content delivery and profitability.

Keywords: Broadcast Audience, Audience Research, Research Technology

INTRODUCTION

By indulging in research, humans attempt to gain knowledge through deliberate efforts, using laid down methods and processes. Research has been identified as an important activity in business, politics, media and academia, among others. Both scholars and industry experts have defined research in different ways, most of the definitions view research as a coordinated, methodical, investigative, experimental, interpretative and procedural activity.

On its part, broadcast audience research is a critical activity for radio stations and other broadcast media because of its ability to aid understanding of audience demographics, preferences, and viewing habits. It also enables radio stations to produce more relevant and engaging contents, and provides valuable information for sales, marketing, and business development projects or plans.

Broadcast audience research also helps to monetize content and identify new opportunities, so radio stations carry out audience research for a variety of reasons such as understanding audience need, enhancing programming, improving content relevance, enhancing new business plans and developing targeted advertising among others.

In a study aimed to ascertain radio stations' indulgence in audience research, Starkey (2009) reported that many radio stations lacked knowledge of who their audiences are, and did not take issues relating to audience make-up and preference into cognizance while deciding on programmes and creating contents for broadcast.

Braun and Schofield (2018) listed available technologies for broadcast audience research to include, Survey Sparrow and Survey Monkey which allows researchers to source audience information through questionnaire. Other tools for audience research are media measurement,

social media analytics and Google analytics, telephone recall and telephone coincidental which provide audience measurement data such as viewership data, demographics, engagement metrics, audience engagement, reach, user behaviour and audience interaction among others.

Looking at the importance of broadcast audience research as expressed above, the study focused on three Port Harcourt-based radio stations namely: Rhythm FM, Nigeria Info and Wazobia FM, and aimed to find out the technologies or tools used by the radio stations to carry out audience research. The study specifically sought to find out:

1. The intervals at which Port Harcourt -based radio stations carry out audience research.
2. The reasons given by radio stations to conduct audience research
3. How the results of audience research have affected. programming and general content delivery.

Accordingly, the following research questions were asked:

1. How often do the radio stations carry out audience research?
2. What audience research tools or techniques do the radio stations deploy for their research?
3. How has audience research result affected the stations' knowledge of their audience, programme quality and general content delivery?

Statement of Problem

The need for radio stations to conduct audience research has become more critical due to the diversity of audience make-up, constant evolution in technologies and the intense competition in the broadcast industry.

In his study, Starkey (2009) reported that there is dearth of audience research by radio stations. He expressed the need to enliven efforts towards understanding audience makeup, preferences and orientations for effective content creation and delivery. Audience research helps to give broadcast content a stamp of quality because and understanding of the audience engenders quality contents, improves patronage and shores up profitability.

Being that better programming, quality content and profit making are closely tied to audience research, it means that not to conduct audience research by radio stations is a major challenge, this challenge is what makes this study most expedient.

Theoretical Framework

Active Audience Theory

The study adopted the Active Audience Theory as its theoretical anchorage because the theory sees the audience as not docile or sedentary, but an active part of the communication process.

Stuart Hall in his work, Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse in 1973, reasoned that media audiences do not just receive information passively but are actively involved and consciously make sense of the message within their personal and social to contexts.

He argued that the audience dictates whether a message is successful or not, and expresses views that enable media content designers or programmers to become better informed about their audience make-up, size, preference and even the reach of the message.

In a world where media audiences can engage, interpret and make inputs to content, the choice of the Active Audience Theory for a study of this nature cannot be over emphasized.

Operational Clarification of Keywords

Broadcast Audience: Individuals who watch or listen to broadcast contents such as a television or radio programmes.

Audience Research: The gathering and analysis of information about people who watch or listen to broadcast contents with a view to understanding their characteristics, behaviours, needs, and preferences.

Research Technology: Tools, platforms, and methods used to gather data or make inquiries.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Audience Research: A Historical Incursion

In discussing the history of broadcast research, it is needful to understand that radio broadcasting began before that of television, and that not much was done to research about the listening public in the early days of broadcasting, especially in Europe and America where radio broadcasting began in the 1920s.

Records show that in the early days of radio, it was very often the personal likes and dislikes of a prospective commercial sponsor that counted. Westneck (2019) reports that the first form of measurement used to guide programming was obtained by counting the number of letters elicited by programmes. Some radio station managers in the US used to draw a circle on a map with a hundred-mile radius around the station to determine the number of people who lived within that circle (Gray & Bell, 2013).

Gray and Belle wrote that some of the procedures adopted earlier for audience research were entirely meaningless because differences in transmitter power, local geography, station programming, wavelengths, and numerous other factors are known to influence the size of the populations habitually reached by each station.

Gray (2010) records that in Britain where broadcasting also began in the 1920s, there was no audience research for more than ten years after its establishment in 1922. He says that the commencement of audience research in the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) was not without an argument by its decision makers because the necessity of research was not glaring to them.

Quoting, Val Gielgud, BBC Productions Director in 1930, Berger says:

“I cannot help feeling more and more strongly that we are fundamentally ignorant as to how our various programmes are received, and what is their relative popularity. It must be a source of considerable disquiet to many people besides myself to think that it is quite possible that a very great deal of our money and time and effort may be expended on broadcasting into a void”.

Also quoting a response from Charles Siepmann, BBC Director of Talks in 1930, Berger writes: “I do not share Gielgud's view on the democratic issue. However complete and effective any survey we launch might be, I should still be convinced that our policy and programme building should be based first and last upon our conviction as to what should and should not be broadcast. As far as meeting public demand is concerned, I believe that the right way is to provide for a more conscious differentiation of objectives within our daily programme (p.98).

Audience research eventually was formally established within the BBC in 1936 with the aim of serving as an instrument of public accountability as well as providing an information system for programme makers and management. Since then, there have been several special studies on particular contemporary broadcasting issues which have helped the corporation to decide on major policy issues. With the realisation of the essence of audience research in these parts where broadcasting began at its earliest stage, broadcast outfits in other parts of the world have taken steps to develop the means to understand their audiences for better programming, performance and profitability.

The Need for Broadcast Audience Research

In all human communication activities, people think about the person or persons with whom they are communicating. Broadcast stations need to think, and indeed know something about the people who are watching or listening to their programmes. The audience members of radio and

television stations are located in different geographical regions; some are located in places that are quite far-flung from the location of the stations and are not personally known to the programme planners and producers. This situation makes research about the audience very necessary.

In conducting audience research, the focus is to essentially to understand the audience make up, attitudes, tastes, preferences and challenges. Audience research also seeks to answer a range of business questions, such as what interests the people, who influences them, their problems and challenges, perception about existing products and service preferences (Johann, (2021).

According to Roque (2009), radio and television station managers require audience research to gather informed decision-making data regarding the allocation of resources, placement of programmes within another programme schedule, positioning of segments within individual broadcast programmes, and other crucial management decisions.

As critical as research is to broadcast production, some scholars have reported from their studies that there is dearth or poor conduct of audience research in the media industry because many broadcast outfits are unwilling to invest time and resources towards understanding the make-up and feeling of their audience.

Willams (2007) writes that the situation is capable of having a negative effect on not only the quality of service being provided by broadcast stations, but their ability to create programmes that meet the tastes of the audiences. Broadcasting is a peculiar form of communication, it should not be operated in a unidirectional form as if messages are consumed without any form of hesitation from the audience. Media audiences have become increasingly active, and are willing to walk away from stations that fail to offer interesting programmes, and tune to another station that understands their preferences. (Aminguri, 2008).

De Groot (2009) says that without audience research, broadcasters will definitely get it wrong in their programming and packaging, and may end up not satisfying the interest of their audiences.

They should take time to find out if children actually watch programmes meant for them, that education, agriculture, religion and other types of programmes are having the expected impact on the target audience, and that the programme targeted at farmers are aired when most farmers can be exposed to it(p.219).

Mytton (2013) corroborated the above when he wrote that audience research is an important activity in broadcast station management and operations, and that its advantages to effective programme planning, production and the economic profitability of the station cannot be over emphasized. According to him, by conducting audience research, firms can take steps towards targeting dissatisfied customers, finding an under-served customer segment and identifying un-addressed customer needs.

According to Braun and Schofield (2018) a well-researched and understood audience will engender data that will empower the radio or television station to produce programmes that not only meet audience tastes and preferences but enhance economic profitability. It can be said that the radio or television station that has a good knowledge of their audience tends to create services and programmes that meet audience needs, attract more attention and muster more information to face competition as well as earn more economic benefits.

In aggregating the views expressed in the conversation above, it can be said that broadcast stations mostly indulge in audience research to find out: what other stations know about the audience which they may require for better planning and programming, how widely the station is patronized and what the interests, tastes and preferences of the audience are, and who or what influences the audience, their challenges and views about the station and its programmes.

Berger (2008) writes that, till date, some broadcast firms, especially those in public service or state-run radio or television, are suspicious of research, especially research that adopt marketing principles and methods.

According to Penfield, Baker, Scoble, and Wykes (2014) audience research, whether a small or detailed survey, can be useful in aiding management's decisions concerning programme planning and implementation.

Techniques and Technologies for Broadcast Audience Research

A variety of survey methods are used in conducting audience research. Survey is seen as an effective design in audience research because the essence is to understand the audience make-up, tastes, needs, opinions, challenges, preference as well as the stations' reach.

According to Grant, Vernall and Hill (2018) irrespective of the method being used in conducting an audience research, it is important to ask the right questions, it is also necessary to keep demographics such as age, gender, education, income, region in mind in order to generate relevant data.

Hales (2019) says that in order to achieve valuable result in audience research, it is important to determine the type and nature of data required to present useful insights about the sample audience. This is perhaps the reason audience research can take the form of qualitative or quantitative survey, it can also be ethnographic or observational. He asserts that although, questionnaire, interviews and real life ethnography have been found useful in some audience research activities, the diary and telephone methods have earned more popularity in the early days of broadcasting, especially before the emergence of the digital media.

Sandadie (2011) identified the telephone coincidental and telephone recall as two telephone methods used by broadcast stations to conduct audience research.

Daley (2015) asserts that the emergence of the Internet and the constant development of software have brought new innovations in the conduct of broadcast audience research. He says that there are newer and computerized ways in which the audience can be studied without direct interface with them. 'Although, broadcast stations audiences are widely displaced, they belong to the emerging digitized global community that can be reached with the click of an Internet enabled devise' (p.34).

Broadcast stations that operate in more technologically advanced societies are already adopting the use of electronic and software methods in conducting audience research. Rusell (2010) posits that broadcast stations are already using the Arbitron's Portable People Meter and other digital survey tools such as survey sparrow, survey monkey, Google and social media analytics to study their audiences.

Scientists and engineers have developed software applications that monitor radio and TV with full passive and permissive viewer measurement functionality for radio and television channels ratings. The system tracks every time the channel is changed and records it accordingly. It also allows what was being listened to or viewed at the time and which channel the viewer changed to (p.47)

Also, there are plethora of other developments capable of note in broadcast audience research, especially with the convergence of the old and new media, online stations or mainstream radio and TV stations that have online versions can monitor their audience make-up, habits, preferences, needs and so on through in-built Intelligent Video Agents (IVAs) which record the number of clicks by users, their interests, likes and dislikes, as well as collate such data for the station to understand their audience. This is made possible because most online platforms are interaction-

sensitive in such a way that the like and dislike buttons clicked by users have become data gathering tools (Callahan, 2003)

Summarily, it is safe to state that the availability of research tools that are native to computer and electronic innovations has made audience measurement a lot much easier and dependable than ever, both scholars and professional broadcasters believe that the data collated through electronic and computerized methods can be quite precise, accurate and dependable.

Method

The study employed the use of interviews to gather data from 6(six) participants who were within the cadres of station managers, research directors and programme directors. The participants were purposively chosen due to their critical positions in the organization chosen for the study. Data collection was done using the interview guide while analysis was conducted using the Miles and Huberman's analytical template of data reduction, display and conclusion.

Data Presentation

Intervals of Audience Research by Radio Stations

S/N	Participants	Responses	Analysis
1.	Interviewee 1	Three times in a year	Radio stations mostly conduct audience research quarterly or three times in a year
2.	Interviewee 2	Quarterly	
3.	Interviewee 3	Three times in a year	

Technologies Adopted for Audience Research by Radio Stations

S/N	Participants	Responses	Analysis
1.	Interviewee 1	Interviews and questionnaire	Radio stations use more of interviews, Focus Group Discussion and questionnaire, they use less of extant digital technologies for audience research.
2.	Interviewee 2	Survey methods such as interviews and Focus Group Discussion. Also use telephone programmes to gauge audience preferences.	
3.	Interviewee 3	Social media handles such as Facebook and X. Also uses telephone method.	

Reason for Conducting Audience Research by Radio Stations

S/N	Participants	Responses	Analysis
1.	Interviewee 1	To understand audience make-up To determine tastes and preferences	Radio stations conduct audience research to understand audience's taste, preferences and to review loyalty and changes in consumption patterns.
2.	Interviewee 2	To review changes in audience consumption patterns.	
3.	Interviewee 3	To evaluate audience loyalty to the station.	

Effects of Audience Research on Programming

S/N	Participants	Responses	Analysis
1.	Interviewee 1	Helped to determine audience size, taste and station reach	Audience research enables radio stations to determine audience size, taste, preference and stations' reach.
2.	Interviewee 2	Better understanding of audience make-up, perception on programmes and listenership size	
3.	Interviewee 3	Enhanced a good knowledge of audience programme presences, size and taste	

Conclusion, Findings and Recommendations

One of the big gaps in the Nigerian media is the lack of inadequate, rigorous, reliable and credible broadcast industry audience measurement data that can be accepted by majority of the stakeholders in the sector. By not undertaking audience research, it is difficult to correctly understand the audience make-up, preferences and tastes. This also will make it difficult to disseminate the right message to the right audience or target at the right time.

Broadcast stations are supposed to put the result of any research conducted on their audiences to effective use, the human and material resources invested in the conduct of audience research cannot be watched to go down the drain. Without effective use of research data, its conduct would amount to effort in futility.

Research data left in the shelves will not produce any result, it is rather the intelligent use of data from research, combined with other relevant information and the creativity of the programme makers that make impact on the stations. This is because unutilized research data cannot make decisions or unilaterally effect changes, they are to be used by programme makers, schedulers, planners, announcers and many others in the industry to make more informed choices and decisions concerning their job of providing effective broadcast services to the public.

In the broadcast industry, it is a routine practice to review programmes, meaning that programme review boards need to utilize available data on their stations' audience in making decisions. Constant review of programmes using audience data generated from research has become more crucial with the emergence of more commercially funded private and independent radio stations which must take steps towards meeting the challenge of competition and maintaining audience loyalty.

From the foregoing, it can be said that research remains an essential activity in the operations of broadcast stations. Broadcast station owners and managers should carry out research on their audience for more effective programming, content creation and overall economic profitability of their stations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the conclusion above, it is recommended as follows:

1. Broadcast stations should adopt more tech-based methods in conducting audience research in order to adequately understand their audiences.
2. Such research efforts should be cognizant of the needs, tastes, challenges and demographics of the audience.
3. Station's reach should be made a cardinal objective in audience research activities to determine the coverage and possible audience size.
4. Broadcast regulatory bodies should make audience research a compulsory activity for operators to ensure adequate programme formulation and implementation.

5. Radio stations should establish or re-activate research and documentation units to enable programme review boards to have accurate data for informed programme decisions.

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