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Fundamental Issues in Mass Media Audience Research

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Abstract

The overriding influence of internet-enabled technologies has greatly disrupted the media ecosystem, resulting in new realities like audience segmentation, media convergence and mass media demassification. With the geometrical increase in the number of mass media channels, competition for audience and the growing culture of consumer sovereignty, the survival of the mass media is becoming more and more dependent on satisfying the diverse needs, tastes and preferences of the audience than ever before. Beyond the deployment of creative personnel and sophisticated media facilities, the key to satisfying the media audience lies on understanding the needs of the audience; such understanding basically comes through research. This article discussed the primacy of the mass media audience research and drew support from two theories: Active Audience Theory and Consumer Sovereignty Theory. It is a discourse in which data were mainly gathered from secondary sources like books, journals and other relevant recorded contents. While elucidating the concept of mass media audience research and its necessity, it identifies various forms of mass media audience research and offers a recipe for conducting one. The article also made an in-depth discussion of four challenges of mass media audience research. Findings revealed that audience research is indispensable in mass media practice. It is therefore recommended that for greater utilization of mass media audience research by media organizations, greater attention should be paid to the teaching of audience research by communication training institutions and greater interest in the learning of required mass media audience research skills by media professionals.

1. Introduction

There is a geometrical rise in the number of mass media channels transmitting various contents to the audience, the world over. The mass media certainly discharge other roles beyond the three perfunctory functions of information, education and entertainment. As mass media channels penetrate the already saturated audience market, they compete to offer just more than the traditional functions to the society. They serve as platforms for uniting the people, promoting people's culture, connecting people to government, providing surveillance of the environment, mobilizing the people for certain actions, selling to and for the people, offering correlation by allowing exchanges of comments and criticism, etc. The mass media also seek to generate revenue, command relevance and serve other functions for the stakeholders behind them.

For the functions of the mass media in society to be achievable, mass media contents have to be received, accepted and utilized by mass media audiences. It is the audience that makes the medium thick. The audience constitutes an integral element in the mass communication mix, yet some of the media outlets available today simply carry on, with little or no actual knowledge of their audiences. Bothered perhaps by this development, Akpan (2018) remarks:

> The questions "Who is listening?" or "Who is watching?" are surely not unwarranted
> or even remarkable question to ask. Certainly, broadcasters need to know something

about the people who are watching or listening. In all kinds of communication activity, we think about the person with whom we are communicating…Every time we speak, write a letter, or make a phone call…we consider with whom we are communicating. If we don't know, we do a little research.

The consumers of the messages transmitted through the mass media constitute the real audience of the media. With the entrenchment of the Freedom of Information Act in many jurisdictions of media systems the world over, both the need for and access to information had increased drastically (Senam, Akpan, & Mboho, 2017). This in turn has broadened the scope of mass media audience altogether. Hasan (2013) defines mass media audiences as all the recipients of mass media contents. Since mass communication involves the transmission of messages to a large number of assorted, heterogeneous people who are anonymous, the audiences of mass communication are the recipients or receivers of the message of mass communication. The audiences of the mass media are to the mass media what customers are to traders. If there are no satisfied audiences for any mass medium, such medium, sooner or later, would be out of business, no matter the intentions, expectations, and aspirations. The first step to audience satisfaction is audience identification which is just the first step in the array of activities involved in the process of mass media audience research.

According to Hicks (2021), mass media audience research is the process of collecting as much information as possible about the audience of a particular mass medium, in order to better understand who they are and what they care about. Mass media audience research is critically important because no mass medium can effectively communicate, let alone satisfy an audience it does not understand. Hicks argued further that, for the business purpose of the mass media to be achievable, reaching the right people and developing the right contents which resonate with them is crucial.

On September 28, 2021, Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari approved the establishment of 159 radio and television stations in Nigeria, bringing up the total number of functional broadcast stations in Nigeria to 625, according to the National Broadcasting Corporation's (NBC). In the words of NBC's Director General, Balarabe Ilela, "Following the approval granted by the President, NBC has released the list of 159 licenses granted to companies, communities and institutions of higher learning". Today, there are a total of 625 functional broadcast stations in Nigeria. There is also a plethora of newspapers and magazines in the country. Generally, the number of mass media outlets increases continuously.

With the plurality of options available to today's mass media audience, coupled with an increasing culture of selectivity, there is a dire need for any mass media outlet that hopes to remain afloat, to take out time to understand its audience members and what they want. Such knowledge can only be gained through mass media audience research. But no organization can effectively conduct mass media audience research except it understands the concept, context, elements, processes and procedures involved. Therefore, the focus of this discourse is to examine the fundamental issues in mass media audience research. This discourse is anchored on the Active Audience Theory and the Consumer Sovereignty Theory.

The Active Audience Theory, according to Butsch (2000), offers explanation on how people encounter media, how they use media and how the media affect them. The theory raises the argument that mass media audiences are not just passive receivers of mass communication messages, but are also those who are actively involved, often times unconsciously, in making sense of the message within their personal and social context. Their interpretation of media messages is therefore influenced by such factors as family background, beliefs, values, cultures, interests, education, etc. This implies that it would be fool-hardy for mass media organizations to go ahead to produce whatsoever content they wish for the people, without getting to know what the people wish for themselves. It is through audience research that the audiences' wishes can be understood.

Similarly, there is the Consumer Sovereignty Theory which states that, consumer preferences should determine the production of goods and services (Intelligent Economist, 2021). Propounded by William Hutt, the basic assumption of the theory is that since consumers can use their spending power as "votes" for goods, producers will respond to their preferences by producing those goods. The theory argues that in a free market economy, it is demand that should precede supply and not the other way round. This notion applies aptly in a competitive market space like the Nigeria media industry. For Nigerian media organizations to survive the prevailing competitions, they have to meet the needs of their audiences. They have to understand that the consumers call the shots and act as such. Again, such needs can only be determined through mass media audience research.

2. Mass Media Audience: Definition, Identification and Classification

There was a time when the term "Mass Media Audience" simply meant a group of people gathered at an event, a town hall or a theatre before a stage, or in a rhetoric forum to watch a stage play, a live performance, a speech exercise, or something of such sort. The concept of audience was considered then as the actual number of persons who entered a hall to hear a talk or watch a live performance. According to it was with the arrival of the mass media, especially the printing press, the radio and the television in the second half of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century, that the concept of Mass Media Audience began to mean something different. The concept of audience had to expand to mean something more than a group of people physically gathered in a single place for whatever purpose.

With the growing sophistication in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), increasing digitized contents, the near omnipresence of the Internet and World Wide Web, social media networks; the definition of mass media audience has become even more complex. The mediatization of daily life where people now do almost everything including reading, buying, selling, booking flights, banking, listening to radio, watching television all through internet-enabled platforms, the concept of audience now has little to do with physical location and passivity, but more to do with diversity, activity, connectivity, interactivity and hyper-textuality.

Perhaps, Hasan (2013) was cognizant of the shifting paradigms when she very broadly defined the mass media audience as "whosoever is the recipient of mass media content". Hasan explains further:

For instance, individuals reading newspapers, watching a film in a theatre, listening to radio or watching television, are situations where audience is large, heterogeneous, and anonymous in character and physically separated from the communicator both in terms of space and time. A large audience means that the receivers are masses of people and are assembled at a single place. It may be in different sizes, depending upon the media through which the message is sent.

It is not enough to be conversant with theoretical definition of audience. It is important to be able to identify them. An illustration would suffice. A woman is excellent at preparing goat meat, intended for sales to lovers of goat meat. But her marketing campaigns reach only vegetarians, who of course do not eat meat. It does not matter how amazing her product is, she would not be able to sell them to that audience, because that is not the right audience.

Against the backdrop of a general audience, (Susan, 2015) identifies four types of mass media audiences viz: the elite audience, mass audience, specialized audience and the interactive audience. The elite audience which are numerically few are the most educated and knowledgeable of listeners, viewers or readers, while the mass audience represents the dominant majority in the society. The specialized audience are listeners, viewers or readers of a specific interest group in the society, example Doctors, Teachers, Civil Servants etc, and the interactive audience are "those who have control over the communication process or make some input to media contents. They may be newspapers journalists or Radio or TV broadcasters", (Susan, 2015). A target audience is therefore a person or group of persons for whom a message is created.

In the context of mass media, target audience is a group of people identified as likely listeners or viewers of a programme. People in a target audience share demographic similarities, such as age, location, or socioeconomic status and as such, make programme promotion and scheduling easy, (Eastman & Ferguson, 2009). For example, the famous Big Brother Naija (BBN) show on some mass media in Nigeria appears to be majorly patronized by young adults in Nigeria and across Africa, while cartoons are basically targeted at children. It would be impossible for any media to exist or operate without a target audience. This is because if there is no audience to purchase movie tickets and recording, subscribe to newspapers and magazines and attend to radio and TV programmes, there would be no source of revenue for the medium to remain in business, (Susan, 2015).

Similarly, there is no one mass media audience for every mass medium. Although there are overlaps in the composition of audiences, every mass medium has its priority audience, just like mass media contents have their primary, targeted or potential audience. So, the first task for those entrusted with the responsibility of packaging media contents or conducting mass media audience research for a particular mass medium, would be to identify the audience of that particular mass medium.

A discussion or interview session with those already involved can give a guide. The use of questionnaire can also be helpful. For radio stations, one way to identify its audience reach is to ask callers to tell their names and locations each time they call. A newspaper can roughly tell its audience number by counting its sold copies. There are lots of social media analytic tools which can help to identify audience composition for online platforms. While the aforementioned means are some of the ways of identifying audience for media organizations, there are some complexities which have to be dealt with while using each approach.

For an effective audience research to be conducted, audience segmentation is imperative. Audience segmentation is the categorical grouping of media content consumers based on similarities in needs and aspirations of media audience. The mass media audience today can be categorized along the lines of demographics, geographics and psychographics. Remarking on audience categorization, (Vivian, 2003) noted, "Traditionally, demographic polling methods divided people by gender, age and other easily identifiable population characteristics. Today, media people use sophisticated lifestyle breakdowns such as geographics and psychographics to match the content of their publications, broadcast programmes and advertising to the audiences they seek."

2.1. Demographic Segmentation

Demographics have to do with the categorization of the audience members according to age, gender, marital status, religion, cultural background, occupation, socioeconomic status, education and membership of special organizations. Despite the fact that no one audience will be entirely uniform in all these categories, (Gamble & Gamble, 2006) stress that it is important to consider each one during audience research planning sessions. But while demographics still remain valuable today, the geodemographic approach of categorizing mass media audiences with greater usefulness had since emerged. Computer whiz, Jonathan Robbin, developed

30

the Potential Rating Index for Zip Markets (PRIZM) for geodemographics (Vivian, 2003). This implies the grouping of audiences by ethnicity, family life cycle, housing style, mobility and social rank. Invariably, audiences can be grouped based on shared characteristics within a defined geographic location.

2.2. Geographic Segmentation

When audiences are classified by geography, they are studied in terms of the region, district, city or the clime they reside or listen and view from. The essence of geographic segmentation is to determine the cultural peculiarities of audiences in order to determine what language and time would best be effective in reaching an audience. For example, a sports programme scheduled for 10:00pm would readily fit into an urban settlement due to the never-ending bustle of the city, but such programme is not likely to have the needed appeal on rural dwellers who must have long gone to bed at that time. Another importance of this segmentation is to forestall noise in the communication process; a programme would lose its appeal on audiences if it seeks to infringe on the norms and beliefs of a people hence, the imperatives of geographic segmentation.

2.3. Psychographic Segmentation

Psychographic segmentation refers to the stratification of mass media audiences based on lifestyle such as interests, activities, personality traits, attitudes, etc. It is a more personal form of segmentation which seeks to investigate the inward yearnings of the audience to discover the reason behind their addictions, preferences and choices (Senam, 2022).

The USAID (2013) further suggests that audiences can be segmented based on communication channel when determining media penetration and reach in a given locale.

Table 1. Audience categorisation

Socio-demographic Factors	Geographic Factors	Psychographic Factors	Communication channel Factor
Gender	Region	Needs/Concerns	Newspaper
Age	District	Hopes/Aspirations	Radio
Level of Education	City	Values/Attitudes	Television
Job Type/ Occupation	Urban	Interests	Magazines
Language	Rural	Activities	Social Media
Ethnicity		Opinion	Online Media
Religion		Lifestyle	Community Media
Level of Income		Personality Traits	

Furthermore, there is the Behaviourmatic Segmentation of media audience. This approach has to do with segmenting the audience according to the trend of media use (usage), loyalty or response to mass media messages.

There is also the Benefit Segmentation. This hinges on the uses and gratifications theory. Here, the audiences are categorized based on their information needs, motives for consumption of media contents or the expected gratifications of exposing themselves to the media (Senam, 2017).

Generally, audience segmentation makes way for an easy yet, effective audience research, which ultimately helps media operators to ascertain what contents to package and transmit to the audience.

3. Mass Media Audience Research: The What? The Why?

"Mass Media Audience Research" is what it sounds like: a kind of research conducted on mass media audience or potential audience to determine their demographics, attitudes, media habits, life style, preferences, purchasing behaviours, and other useful variables. It is a systematic approach towards determining the composition, needs, expectations, habits and preferences of members of a given mass media audience. It is a process used to identify and understand the priorities of listeners or viewers of a Television or Radio programme.

Audience Research, synonymous to Audience Analysis, is the process of collecting as much information as possible about the audience, to better understand who they are and what they care about (Hicks, 2021). The Compass (2021) defines it as a process used to identify, understand and influence audiences for a media organization, a project or a programme. "It is done primarily to observe, study and analyze the pre-behaviours of the viewing population as well as the specific human behaviours that are evident as a result of the influence of media exposure", (UKEssays, 2018). Mass media audience research could either mean research that seeks to determine the changing levels of media consumption among audience members, or research that seeks to understand the complex ways by which people use the mass media. A further explanation is proffered by Reineck, Schneider, and Spurk (2017), who see mass media audience research as "any rigorous empirical enquiry into the behaviour, knowledge, and attitudes of persons… receiving, engaging with, and/or non-professionally contributing to media content". Both definitions point at the consciousness required by broadcast stations in determining the factors responsible for audience preferences and interests. The essence is

to gain as much insight as possible into what informs the decision of the audience to listen to or view a programme, and what can be done to sustain their listenership or viewership. When this has been done, what follows is its analysis and use to explore potential target groups, monitor the progress of media projects, measure the outcome of media projects, evaluate the impact of media projects as well as contribute to the sustainability of media outlets (Reineck et al., 2017).

It is worthy of note that this research can be carried out not only by broadcast stations but by organizations and individuals in government and non-governmental projects or private agencies and companies who may be interested in knowing how much impact their brands, services and products have on certain populations targeted or reached by media (UKEssays, 2018).

Having clearly established the 'What?', the next point of call is the "Why?" Why is mass media audience research necessary? (Akpan, 2018) identifies five reasons why audience research is necessary. This section discusses those reasons.

3.1. Audience Research Enables a Proper Understanding of the Audience

One of the arguments for audience research is to determine their needs based on socio-demographic, geographic and psychographic factors; previous knowledge or orientation on issues, barriers or facilitators to message assimilation and channel (USAID, 2013). For socio-demographic factors, broadcast stations may need to determine characteristics such as sex, culture, age, language and religion of listeners or viewers. Geographic factors would determine characteristics like where the audiences live, work or school and how that might impact behaviour; psychographic factors would look at characteristics such as needs, hopes, concerns and aspirations, while previous knowledge would consider the familiarity of the audience with a message disseminated, pre-existing notions and beliefs about the message and or expectation of such programmes, not excluding barriers or facilitators that prevent or encourage audience members to align with the message disseminated, (Gamble & Gamble, 2006).

Audience research therefore enables the mass medium to understand its reach, coverage, audience composition, audience needs and other requirements which would help them penetrate the audiences and possibly win them over.

3.2. Audience Research Positions Mass Media Organizations to Operate Profitably

Arising from the fact that broadcast stations spend money to remain in business and must make back that money (Udoakah, 2006), it is important that they rely on audience research to identify the targeted audiences who will serve as sources of income for them. Johnson, (2006) cited in Akpan (2018) supports that "a media outlet will become financially self-sufficient or profitable only if it attracts an audience desired by advertisers". As such, designing programmes in line with identified audience needs will help a station streamline its programmes to suit the needs of its audience, rather than put them all out for an assumed audience thus, wasting resources. "There is no glory in deploying scarce resources – personnel, money, time, facilities etc – to produce a programme that ends up not being listened to or watched in great number by the target audience. This makes research into ratings, shares, resonance and reach of broadcast channels compelling", (Akpan, 2018). As such, one critical requirement for mass media audience research is that it keeps the mass media platforms alive by helping them hit the right audience, meet their required needs, attract patronage that inversely increases revenues for the owners and shareholders of platforms.

3.3. Audience Research Enables the Media to Increase their Value to Advertisers

The mass media need advertisers for revenue generation. The advertisers need the mass media for audience reach. The rating of a mass medium in the eyes of the advertisers is based on the medium's reach, spread and audience capacity. So, the media organization which has a wide audience capacity with clear understanding of the audience demographics, psychographics and geodemographics would always be preferred by advertisers. Advertisers' preference of a mass medium is a very rewarding thing to happen to any medium.

3.4. Audience Research Positions a Mass Medium to Withstand and Win Competition

When broadcast stations have a firm grasp of their audiences, they are able to relate with them on the basis of informed knowledge. They do this by keying completely into their audience needs which may not have been identified by competing stations. By so doing, they are able to keep these audiences tuned to their stations and beat competition. According to Akpan (2018), "competition in broadcasting, many times, translates into creativity in programming; but quite a lot of times, too, as it is already being witnessed, it descends into a fight for the greatest possible number of listeners and viewers and advertisers". Most radio stations, for instance, during the days of test running, request audience members to call in and state their locations. One of the reasons for that is to help the station determine how far its signals can get and measure that against the coverage of its competitors. No station can win a competition it does not understand, as such, audience research helps create that understanding.

3.5. Audience Research Conserves Resources

It would tantamount to huge waste of resources for a mass medium to deploy enormous resources (personnel, time and money) to produce programmes which are not being listened to or watched. With the outcome of an effective mass media research, a mass medium would only deploy its resources into programmes, areas, etc. desired by its audience, thereby saving the resources which would have been deployed into fruitless ventures.

Other imperatives of mass media audience research according to Hicks (2021) are that it provides material for programs by allowing media organizations to enrich their programme contents through surveys, consensus groups, and informal interviews, UKEssays (2018); it aids Media Planning and Buying; it helps in the Identification of new audiences, enables the tracking of trends in audience interests and helps to identify business opportunities.

4. Forms of Mass Media Audience Research

Audience, as discussed earlier, can be grouped into demographic categories (based on quantitative variables like gender, age, education level, religion, etc.), psychographic categories (based on qualitative variables like habits, needs, preferences, media choices) and geographic categories (segmentation to determine the cultural peculiarities of audiences). The mass media audience can also be categorized as either active or passive.

Similarly, there are different forms of mass media audience research. It is important to understand what the forms are and know when to use each of them.

Hicks (2021) identifies six forms of mass media audience research, which he labels as "Audience Analysis". The six forms are briefly discussed below:

4.1. Social Audience Analysis

This is a form of audience research that relies on social media analytics to examine the audience compositions, attitudes and preferences. With certain social media analytic tools, mass media organizations can obtain basic information about their audience members who also use the social media and can determine audiences and their preferences. Reactions, acceptability levels, needs and audience responses can be obtained through comments and responses on social media.

4.2. Branded Audience Analysis

This is a form of audience research that focuses on identifying and understanding the audience of a particular brand or media organization. The focus here is not on a programme or product of any brand or media organization. Rather, the focus is on the corporate brand of the media organization. According to a branded audience research is concerned with the creation, development and ongoing measurement and strengthening of corporate media brands.

4.3. Unbranded Audience Analysis

This is the opposite of the branded audience analysis. Here, the audience analysis is not focused on the corporate media brand. It is about understanding an audience with something other than shared media brand in mind. The focus could be on specific media programmes, television contents, online media contents, readers of a particular newspaper publication, etc.

4.4. Competitor Audience Research

This form of mass media audience research aims at understanding the composition in a bid to win it. No organization can win a competition without a good understanding of the competition and the competitors involved. Therefore, competitor audience research, Hicks (2021) notes, is when one seeks to identify and analyze data about audiences of another's competitors.

4.5. Demographic Audience Research

This form of mass media audience research seeks to decompartmentalize and analyze mass media audience members based on specific demographic categorizations like gender, age, education level, marital status, and sometimes, along their geographic locations. A particular mass media organization may wish to merely analyze its audience mix and composition, without wanting to find out their attitudes, needs, expectations, etc.

4.6. Psychographic Audience Research

This form of audience research is centred on analyzing audiences based on unifying interests and harmonizing variables such as likes, dislikes, values, perceptions, affinities, etc. It is a qualitative form of research because it seeks to know beyond numbers inert and inward attributes (Senam, 2020). The focus of psychographic audience research is to understand audience needs, interests, behaviours, patterns, decision making processes.

5. How to Conduct Mass Media Audience Research

The "How" of mass media audience research depends largely on the form of the research intended, the mass media type in focus, as well as the perspectives of the mass media organisation or its researchers. There has also not been a consensus on how mass media audience research should be conducted. This segment discusses the "How" of mass media audience research, from a plurality of perspectives.

Vivian (2003) briefly outlines how to conduct mass media audience research based to the media type as follows: For newspaper and magazine audits, the process involves simple data collection like press runs, subscription sales and unsold copies from newsstands. The circulation statistics are vetted by an independent agency, the Audit Bureau of Circulation and honoured by advertisers, et al. For broadcast ratings, the process would involve getting the reach and determining the numbers and make-ups of audiences through what is called "Demographic Breakdowns". In the United States of America, there are many rating companies as broadcast rating has already emerged as a viable industry, both for media and for advertisers.

For web audience measures, there are computer programmes and software which can determine how many view websites as well as their compositions and interests of the audiences. Vivian (2003) outlines audience measurement techniques to include interviews (conducting face-to-face interviews), diaries (distribution of forms to selected households to document what stations were on at particular times or to provide certain demographic data as well as preferences for programmes or media organization), as well as meters (installed in households to indicate time of exposure, channels of exposure, etc.).

The Compass (2021) listed the steps in conducting audience research as: identification of potential audience, selection of priority audience, identification of priority audience characteristics, identification of knowledge, attitude and practices; identification of barriers and facilitators, consideration of audience segmentation, identification of key influencers, organization of influencing audience information, and development of audience profiles. The audience profiles will end with some actionable recommendations, and fit into the overall creative process.

However, for a more simplified procedure on how to conduct mass media audience research, this paper aligns with the four broad actionable steps identified by Hicks (2021).

5.1. Select an Audience Analysis Tool

Having already had a fair knowledge of the audience through casual observation or discussions, the first practical steps in conducting mass media audience research will be to decide on the audience research tools or instruments. It is the place of the mass media audience researcher to settle on the research instrument or tool first before progressing. Are the data to be obtained using questionnaire, interview, observation, meters, diaries, social media analytics, newspaper audits, broadcast ratings, web matrix tools, etc? There are more sophisticated audience research applications (software) available today. Even before asking the audience research questions, it is important to first settle on the audience research tools, as this will serve as a guide.

5.2. Clarify What Questions to Answer

This is an important step in the audience research process, as it will provide focus and let the researcher plan ahead on which questions are important and which are not. This step involves setting out the research plan, goals, objectives, research questions and the overall purpose of the mass media audience research.

5.3. Decide the Basis for Creating your Audience

The audience researcher has to decide if what is required is demographic categorization of audience, which Branston and Stafford (2008) calls "Quantitative Audience" and describes as a "number-crunching exercise". Alternatively, the audience can be categorized along the lines of psychographics, which goes beyond numerical information to provide quantitative data on audience, such as lifestyle or buying patterns. Another way of determining this would be to ascertain if the audience is to be categorised according to psychographics, which, Akpan (2018), says combines demographic and psychographic data with geographical locations.

5.4. Conduct Actual Audience Research and Generate Report

At the end of every mass media audience research, data collected have to be collated and reported. Just like scholarly research, the goals and objectives, the methods and methodology adopted, the data obtained, the findings made, the conclusions reached, and the recommendations suggested have to be properly documented and presented as report, for practical use. While conducting the research and generating the report, Hicks (2021) reminds that it is important to keep the questions with which the process started at the top of one's mind. The audience research report is never intended to be abandoned in bookshelves or mass media organization libraries. It should therefore be put to use as a working document, if it is to serve its usefulness, as discussed in section 3 above.

5.5. Use the Data Provided to Answer the Initial Question

The responses gotten from the selected audience will serve as the ingredient needed to create and structure programme contents that will suit their needs and keep them tuned to a station or channel regularly.

Notwithstanding the process stated above, Press and Livingstone (2006) argue that considerations should as well be given to the platforms and channels to be used for reaching the audience. For instance, which medium or channel is the audience mostly found or familiar with: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Radio, Newspaper or Television? It is also needful to know what type of topics mass media contents should cover and the factors considered by audiences in choosing a station. Factors such as whether they are language conscious, musically or interactive programme inclined would go a long way in determining what to disseminate to them.

6. Challenges of Mass Media Audience Research in Nigeria

As this paper begins to wind down, it is considered that having discussed the various key elements involved in mass media audience research, taking an end-dive into some peculiar challenges affecting it within the Nigerian ecosystem is never a bad idea. Mass media audience research is not merely a subject to theorize about. It is something that media organizations must practice, if they hope to satisfy their customers and win a significant portion of the already saturated audience market. The question is: What are the practical challenges are experienced by producers and researchers vis-a-vis mass media audience research?

6.1. Limited Knowledge of what Constitute Mass Media Audience Research

In spite of the criticality of mass media audience research for the survival of the mass media especially in developing countries, there seems to be very limited knowledge of audience research in within the media system. Some media organizations, like publishers of local tabloids, are set up without any form of business plan, let alone audience research. They just carry on without audience research. All they do in semblance to audience research is just to note the number of copies published. This poor attention to audience research perhaps is one of the reasons some of such tabloids don't survive for long.

For some broadcast stations already running, what is observed as representing audience research is simply the noting of comments on the station's social media handles or asking the radio callers to offer responses to the cliché: What is your name and where are you calling from? From the discussions advanced so far in this article, it is clearly understood that mass media audience research involves more than noting numbers of sold copies for newspapers and magazines, or where a radio caller calls from, as a determinant of signal reach. Some of the mass media managers do not even know what audience research is or could do for their organizations and so could be very reluctant to pay those who know, to conduct such researches for their stations.

6.2. Paucity of Required Skills for Audience Research

Similar to the challenge of limited knowledge of what mass media audience research is, there is the challenge of paucity of required skill sets for mass media audience research. Reflecting on this challenge, Akpan (2018) notes, "It is an observable fact that in many of the training institutions for prospective and serving media personnel, audience research is not emphasized as much as other components of media training. Yet, audience evaluation is a vital part of the work of the media personnel…" It is observed that there are very few media professionals who have the required trainings and skill sets to conduct mass media audience research. Many communication graduates, even media managers, are bereft of the prerequisite skills to effectively conduct mass media audience research. This is further compounded by the fact that instruments and software required for audience analyses today were not available in time past. Therefore, tools such as social media analytics, web matrix analysis or broadcast rating calculations, would pose a comprehension challenge.

6.3. Dearth of Reliable and Up-to-date Statistical Data

Mass media audience research relies heavily on statistical data. The lack of reliable and up-to-date statistical data could pose lots of problems. For instance, the last time a nationwide population census was conducted in Nigeria was in 2006. Population statistics beyond then are mere extrapolations, which may have very huge margin of errors. So, if a mass media audience researcher requires the number of persons living in a particular locality for audience analysis, the researcher would have to choose between the devil and the deep blue sea, metaphorically speaking. The decision would be whether to rely on the actual yet, outdated headcount figure or go for the dicey estimated population. Once there is something wrong with the numbers upon which the analysis is based, there would be something wrong with the outcome of such analysis.

7. The Challenge of Audience Definition: Old Media Versus New Media

This is particularly not a Nigerian problem. But the problem is worse for developing nations like Nigeria, without very precise technologies for detailed audience mapping. For instance: Who really are the audience members of a particular newspaper medium? Is it just those who buy copies of the newspaper? How about those who consistently read the newspapers bought by others? Is it not possible that a singular copy bought by one person is read by two, three, four, five or ten persons? How about those who read portions of the newspaper online, without having access to the physical copies? Are they not part of the audience because they are not captured by the copy sales calculations? So, who really are the audience members of a newspaper?

In another instance, the Nigeria Television Authority (NTA) prides itself as the television station with the widest reach in Africa, because it has plenty stations across states in Nigeria connected to its network and has a wide coverage across the nation and beyond. But there are smaller privately-owned stations available on a globally accessed satellite television network with wider viewership than a large terrestrial television that physically covers a whole nation. This is not to say that NTA is terrestrial, though most of its stations across the states in Nigeria are.

In this era of media convergence occasioned by ubiquitous internet-driven new media technologies, there are issues like audience segmentation, media demassification, media-audience role swap, which if not properly understood, could frustrate audience research. Commenting on audience fragmentation and media demassification, Asemah (2011) notes "the idea that the mass media audience is the largest number of people who can be assembled to hear, read and watch mass media messages, is changing. Most media today, seek narrow audience segments… They are de-massifying and going after the narrower segments of the mass audience".

Perhaps troubled by the problem of audience definition in an era of disruptive convergence between the old and the new media, Press and Livingstone (2006) ask the question, "How shall we take what we know of audiences into the new field for Internet use?" The problem of audience definition vis-à-vis what was known as audience in the old media era versus what is known as audience in the new media epoch, is one of the challenges of mass media audience research in Nigeria.

8. Conclusion

This article acknowledges the centrality of the mass media audience but notes the changing norm in the definition, identification and classification of the mass media audience, particularly occasioned by the penetrative addition of the new media to the old media and compounded by the convergence of both by internet-enabled technologies. It emphasizes that, in the light of the multiplicity of available mass media channels coupled with the increasing 'sovereignty' which the mass media audiences now enjoy, any mass medium that pays little or no attention to the needs, tastes and preferences of its audiences, stands the risk of not just losing its audiences but itself to the prevailing stiff competition. The first step to satisfying audience needs, tastes and preferences is to understand what such needs, tastes and preferences are; and the surest way to gain such understanding is through mass media audience research.

This discourse identifies the forms of mass media audience research, provides a template for conducting one, and concludes by highlighting some of the challenges of mass media audience research in Nigeria. Such challenges include limited knowledge of audience research, paucity of required skills for audience research, lack of reliable and up-to-date statistical data and the challenge of audience definition vis-à-vis the propensities of the old and new media.

9. Recommendations

From the fore-going elucidations, the following recommendations are made:

i. Mass media organizations should pay premium attention to the needs, tastes, preferences and overall satisfaction of their audiences, as a way of surviving the growing competition.
ii. Media managers should regularly steward the conduct of audience researches in and for their organizations.
iii. Mass communication training institutions should pay more attention to the teaching of mass media audience research.
iv. Media professionals should seek ways to improve their skill sets in the area of audience research.

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