

Short Research Article

REGULATORY POLICIES AND COMMUNITY BROADCASTING IN NIGERIA

Abstract

The broadcast media landscape in Nigeria changed in 1992 following the approval for private individuals and organizations to own and operate private radio and television stations. In Rivers State, there are sixteen private commercial stations, in addition to two state owned, and the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria, (FRCN). Sadly, there is no single community based radio station in the state, and the story is the same in most states in Nigeria despite the important role such media platform plays. Expectedly, the commercial radio stations focus mostly on issues of regional and national interest, leaving the rural populace unrepresented and their issues underreported. Against this backdrop, this discourse investigated whether the deregulation of the electronic media in Nigeria does not cover community broadcasting. The findings revealed that the development of community radio is being stifled by discriminatory and exorbitant license fees charged by the federal government of Nigeria. In the light of this, this discourse recommends far-reaching reduction of license fee for community broadcasting, as well as the ending of license renewal as currently practiced in the country, to enable rural dwellers participate actively in deciding issues that concern them.

Key words: Regulatory policies, Rural development, Community broadcasting, License fee, Commercial broadcasting

1. Introduction

Despite the global explosion in digital news outlets, millions of people in sub-Saharan Africa continue to rely on radio as the most accessible independent news source. This is because radio has proved to be the most effective medium of information dissemination because it bridges linguistic diversity, and gives the uneducated the opportunity and platform to participate in democratic processes. Among all the media of mass communication, radio still remains the most widely and commonest means of communication in Nigeria. It has the highest audience when placed side by side with other channels of information dissemination like television, newspapers, magazines, and lately, the internet. Radio has proved to be a powerful tool for advocacy, social mobilization, information dissemination and rural development because of its ease of access and portability. In short, it is an inexpensive medium with comparatively simple technology, which makes it more suitable for illiterate and peasant communities and societies.

Myers (2008) observes that radio is the dominant mass medium in Africa and the highest audience reach when compared to other communication channels. According to the EFA Global Monitoring Report (2012), radio is a common asset and can be found in 75% of households in developing countries. Okorie (2018) posit that radio is a veritable medium that provides access to communication for a large number of people; literate and non-literate. Radio is relatively simple, affordable, and can be operated on battery in areas without electricity. One outstanding advantage radio has over other media is that one can listen to radio while engaged in other activities. For example, you can listen to an educational programme on reproductive health while carrying out other activities. Radio can be used as an advocacy tool for rural development because it enhances participation in economic activities, especially in agriculture, thereby promoting employment opportunities for the people in the rural areas. It also helps to bring government development

programmes or policies to the masses in the society and encourages adequate participation in collaborative societal development. The UNESCO (2013) World Radio Day survey indicates that at least 75 percent of households in developing countries have access to a radio. In fact, radio listenership is increasing daily due to the penetration of the internet and the ability to listen to radio broadcast on mobile phones. Data from the Nigerian Communications Commission (2021) shows that the number of mobile phone users in Nigeria was 139 million as at June, 2021. However, Okorie (2018) observes that the media in Nigeria have failed to give rural people a voice. The reason is because rural dwellers cannot access media facilities since they are mostly located in the cities, and the media houses do not have the manpower and resources to go to the rural areas to get their views and contributions to national development. As a result, most media houses recycle news items when there are plenty unreported events in the rural communities for fresh news stories and programme ideas. One way to bridge this gap is the establishment of vibrant community journalism, with special emphasis on community radio broadcasting.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

This paper is set to achieve the following objectives;

1. To determine the effects of regulatory policies on community broadcasting.
2. To ascertain the challenges facing community broadcasting in Rivers State.

1.3 Research Questions

This paper will provide answers to the following questions;

1. What are the effects of regulatory policies on community broadcasting?
2. What are the challenges facing community broadcasting in Rivers State?

1.4 Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored on two media theories, which are; the Social Responsibility Theory and the Development Communication Theory.

1.4.1 The Social Responsibility Theory according to McQuail, (1998) exist due to the growing need to reconcile some different principles of individual freedom and choice, of media freedoms; and of the obligation to society. Similarly, and on the other hand, the development theory is hinged on "... the correlated "nation-building" is an overriding objective" (McQuail, 1998, p.121). These invariably point to the fact that social responsibility theory is hinged on the growth of the society at large. Instructively, therefore, the social responsibility theory had stages of development. It was developed by Robert Hutchins through the Hutchins Commission set up in 1947 to examine the increasing influence of the press.

Watson (2003, p.97) underlying the indispensability of social responsibility in media performance enumerates the features of social responsibility theory viz;

- 1) The media have obligations to society, and media ownership is a public trust;
- 2) News media should be truthful, accurate, fair and relevant;
- 3) The media should be free but self-regulated;
- 4) Media should follow agreed codes of ethics and profound conduct under some circumstances, government need to intervene to safeguard the public interest.

Therefore, it is important to posit that the mass media should remain a bridge to enhancing governance by being accountable to the citizenry, hence, it is said that; the mass media continues to promote governmental responsibility, ensuring that, it is accountable to the people (Idemudia, 2008). To this end, Asemah, Nwammuo & Nkwam-Uwaoma (2017) avers that, the

social responsibility theory rests on the notion of free press acting responsibly and implores media practitioners to ensure representation of all facets of the society.

In relation to this study, the social responsibility theory is relevant to this study based on the fact that it advocates for the media to be free and holds that a free media must act responsibly in the society. Hence, media freedom is accompanied with concomitant obligations, and the press, is obliged to be responsible to society via the performance of certain obligations for the benefit, development and advancement of the society.

1.4.2 The Development Media Theory was propounded by Denis McQuail in 1987. The main ideology of the theory is that the media should be used for development and advancement of the lives of people in a nation, theory advises for the media to be used to champion social change in every society.

The development media theory arose as a result of the need to use the media to bridge the gap between first and third world countries. The theory became significantly known and acknowledged for its use in the developing and under developed countries all over the world. Development media theory was intended to recognize the fact that societies undergoing a transition from underdevelopment to development and better material conditions often lack the infrastructure, the money, the professional skills and even the information needed to make the transition from underdeveloped to develop, hence the need for the media to contribute significantly to the development of such societies.

This idea promotes the use of media and communication to enhance a current political system's attempts to achieve overall national economic development. The media helps society as a whole by supporting government development efforts. This idea contends that until a country is well-

established and its economic progress is well-established, media and communication must be supportive of the government rather than critical. Journalists should not criticize government initiatives to promote growth; instead, they should support the government in putting such policies in place.

This theory is relevant to this study because with the establishment of community broadcasting in societies, the wheel of development and progress in such a society will commence and more significantly from the grass root level.

2.1. What is Community Radio Broadcasting?

Thomson cited in Julius-Adeoye (2019) notes that community radio is a radio broadcast in specific locality, with its editorial reflecting the interest of the environment where it is located, and broadcast distribution limited to the locality. Similarly, Fombad and Jiyan (2019) refer to community radio as participatory broadcasting initiated and controlled by members of a community of interest, or geographical community. Furthermore, the UN Sustainable Development Goals Implementation Review Report (2018) acknowledges that community radios have become platforms to amplify voices, access to information for the underreported people, and also helps to improve livelihood and increase services in local communities. The report equally adds that community radios have become efficient platforms for bringing SDGs to the local people. Similar reports also affirm that community radios have become popular in recent years because they are creating new spaces for policy makers and the rural people to engage in the development process of their communities. The result of the absence of tier of media platform is deep information gap between city and rural dwellers, thereby excluding them from wider social, political, and economic trends in the society. Happily, the 2013 UNESCO World Radio Day statistics in 11 African countries indicates that there is a remarkable growth in community radio

stations in the continent. The survey shows that while commercial radio grew by an average of 360 percent between 2000 and 2006, community radio grew by 1,386 over the same period. This rise in the number of community radio stations could be attributed to campaigns by advocacy groups, civil society organizations, and development agencies seeking the expansion and reach of community radio stations. Their interests in advocating for rural based radio stations is anchored on the roles such media platforms play in development, especially in Africa. Such benefits include: giving power to the excluded and marginalized, and voice to the voiceless. Community radios serve as a bridge that connects policy makers and the masses at the grassroots, and by extension, build a united and vibrant society. And most importantly, community radios help to keep dialects, languages, oral and folk traditions of the community alive.

Buttressing further the benefits of community broadcasting, Kurpius (1999) lists increased diversity, in-depth coverage of news, and a deeper understanding of communities. He further asserts that such stations give greater attention to issues of importance to citizens because they focus more on coverage of issues that are of greater priority to the citizens. By so doing, issues of interest to the community are viewed from different angles. That is why a community radio is called radio for the community and by the community. Thus, Adebumiti (2016) points out that community journalism is a new area of focus for mass communicators around the globe because of the potentials to mobilize participation in governance at the grassroots level where majority of the people live in Africa and some Asian countries. This explains why community journalism is endorsed for advocacy and development communication.

Furthermore, Myers and Harford (2020) affirm in their survey that the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the relevance of local journalism in providing communities with essential information they need during crisis because it helped to create awareness on the disease and hot spots in the

communities. Other benefits of local journalism include information on how to start small businesses and their regulations, local public health, local employment opportunities, as well as giving voice to neglected smallest enterprises to have some influence on policies which affect their daily lives.

Using Phoenix FM in Zambia and its flagship programme “Let the People Talk”, which is aired twice weekly as a case study, Myers and Harford (2020) highlighted one of the characteristics of community broadcasting as in-depth focus on issues of interest. For instance, the programme is a two and a half-hour live talk show where non-paying guests, which include government representatives, answer questions from listeners. The obvious point here is that the amount of air time community radio stations allocate to programmes allows for thorough deliberations on such issues. Furthermore, community radios adopt the magazine and discussion formats which are hardly offered by commercial radio stations where most programmes are allotted just thirty minutes. Similarly, in a survey carried out by the Centre for International Media Assistance, most community radio stations focus on public interest content which are set out to improve people’s lives through local news, educational programs, public service announcements, social and behaviour change messaging, among others.

Thus, Ate and Ikerodah (2012) assert that a community oriented, less profit driven media that is managed by the people facilitate desired inclusiveness because such communication channels have the capacity to enhance effective communication and help to fast-track development in places without mass media presence. They also note that through such media, crimes could be prevented at grassroots level through civic education, while cross-gender dialogue, cultural literacy, among other things could be harnessed for development. Sadly, an in-depth analysis of

the media landscape in Africa shows that Nigeria, despite its resources and large population in the rural areas, is lagging behind in the promotion and sustainability of community broadcasting.

Meanwhile, according to the African Charter on Broadcasting (2011), Ghana and Mali are leading other African countries, including Nigeria in the provision of favourable legal framework that supports the development and sustainability of community radio sector, signaling that Nigeria's community radio sector is still underdeveloped. Interestingly, Nigeria, Ghana, and Mali all liberalized the electronic sector in 1992. For instance, the Ghana Electronic Communication Act does not restrict community radio on funding sources as they are allowed to carry as much advertising as they may wish. The Act also empowers the regulatory body to adopt policies that will promote broadcasting in rural communities, including the power to totally waive frequency authorization fee or collect part of it. Data from the National Communication Authority of Ghana (2020) indicates that the country has 437 commercial radio stations and 81 community radio stations.

In Mali, the media regulatory framework stipulates that principal revenue for community radios must not be derived from advertising. However, the stations benefit from government subsidies to the press because they offer services of public interest, or what a Malian journalist says is because "community radio is the soul of the homeland." In August 1994, the country fixed a flat rate of 100,000 FCFA for licensing by all broadcast media, and according to Mediasupport.org (2013), as at 2012, over 500 licenses were issued by the government to create associative, commercial, and community radios. Consequently, Mali has a vibrant network of community radios. Konate (2019) writes that there are three networks of community radios which are divided into associations, with the largest being the Union des Radios et Television Libres du Mali (URTEL) which has 171 community radios under its umbrella. The other networks are Kayira and TDM

that have 16 and 17 radios respectively. Interestingly, there is a specific network of 11 radios for the youth which is called “Voix de Jeunes”, and is managed by the ministry of youth and citizenship. More so, the media in Mali, is exempt from taxes because of the role they play in the society

2.2. State of Community Radio Broadcasting in Nigeria

Nigeria’s radio landscape is limited to public and commercial radio stations. The deregulation of the broadcast media in 1992 was silent about community broadcasting until 2003. Bolokan cited in Adeoye (2019) explains that community radio as the third tier of broadcast media came to limelight in the revised policy of the NBC in 2003. Even with that, there was no community radio in Nigeria until 2015 when the Lavun community radio station in Kutigi, Niger State, hit the airwaves. In a World Bank Report (2015), Adetunji Oredipe, World Bank task team leader for the Fadama II and III projects, explained that the radio station was established to enable farmers exchange ideas and have a voice on development issues that affect them. Earlier that year, the President Goodluck Jonathan administration had approved licenses for seventeen radio stations at the grassroots which were spread across the six geo-political zones of the country.

Unfortunately, majority of these radio stations are not functional. This is attributable to the discriminatory and exorbitant fees charged the broadcasting stations. For example, in 1994, license fee to operate a radio station was N 500, 000, but was raised to N3 million in addition to 2.5 percent of gross annual income in 1997. License fee was again reviewed upward in 2007 with stations in Lagos, Abuja, and Port Harcourt paying N20 million for radio and N15 million for television. The rate for license in what the NBC classified as category B locations was N15 million for radio and N11.25 million for television. The commission also created a special category for university campus radio license which was pegged at N1million, and renewable

every five years with the same amount. Sadly, license fee for community radio broadcasting in Nigeria, which is grouped in the same category as the campus radio, was fixed at a whopping N10 million, and renewable every five years with the same amount. Meanwhile, both state and federal government owned electronic media outfits neither pay license nor renewal fees. Therefore, when the application and license fees are added to the costs of setting up and operating the station, the amount becomes prohibitive for a not-for-profit outfit.

2.3. Loss of Global Donor Funds over Poor Community Broadcasting Sector

As stated earlier, advocacy groups, civil society organizations, and development agencies are pushing for increase in the number and reach of community radio stations across the world because of the role they play in rural development. To this end, these bodies are rendering support to community radio stations in the form of radio equipment, internship, capacity development, training on grant proposal writing, and connection to donor agencies. Organizations like the Ford Foundation, the Gates Foundation, Bloomberg Philanthropies, USAID, UNESCO, among others are channeling funds to media development in Africa and Asia. Even developed countries are not left out.

An example is the United States, Haslanger (2021) writes that a newly established National Trust for Local News is empowering local and community news organizations thrive in their communities. The organization is working to assist 4,000 out of the 6,500 community newspapers in the United States. Among what the body has planned to do is broker financing and train the newsrooms on new business models in local journalism. In the same vein, Myers (2009) in an analysis of funding for media development by major donors outside the US, affirms that the European Commission has spent over \$82 million or 60 million euros in media related projects in Africa and Asia, just as a UNESCO report (n.d) shows that funds for global media support

activities reached \$33 million for 2010 – 2011. Again, Myers (2014) acknowledges that donor assistance to media in the developing world is increasing yearly and is estimated to amount to \$650 million annually.

She observes that in Mali, two new radio stations were established every month throughout the 1990s and all were donor backed. Also in South Africa, 79 community stations were licensed in 1995 with most financial backings from international NGOs. Other African countries that are benefitting from these donor assisted funds are Uganda, Mozambique, Senegal, among others. As shown above, these funds are given to media initiatives in Africa, and mostly to community radio projects. What this means is that Nigeria is missing out from these international aides since there are few functional community radio stations. In the light of the above, this discourse submits that government unfriendly policies and exorbitant fees is not only denying people in the rural areas platforms for inclusive participation in governance, it is also denying potential community radio promoters such donor assisted funding.

3. Methodology

This study adopted the survey research design for data collection. The population of the study is 649,600 residents in Obio/Akpor LGA in Rivers State Nigeria. The Australian sample size calculator was used to generate the sample size of 278 for this study. The systematic sampling technique was adopted for the study, while the questionnaire served as the instrument of data collection.

4. Analysis and Presentation of Data

The researcher distributed 278 copies of the questionnaire but only 226 were validly filled and returned. This showed there was an 81% retrieval of the questionnaire from the respondents.

Hence, the data analyzed was based on the 226 questionnaire retrieved. The data gotten from the questionnaire were tabulated, summarized and adequately explained.

Research Question one: What are the effects of regulatory policies on community broadcasting?

Table 1: Effects of regulatory policies on community broadcasting

Response	Frequency	Percentage %
Exorbitant fees charged broadcast stations limits the number of community broadcast stations in operation	88	39%
Unfriendly policies deny potential donors from providing assisted funding for community broadcast stations	76	34%
Absence of community broadcast stations deprive rural dwellers a platform for inclusive participation in government	62	27%
Total	226	100%

Source: Field Survey, 2021

From the data presented in table 1 which identified the effects of regulatory policies on community broadcasting, most of the respondents 88 representing (39%) said that the exorbitant fees charged broadcast stations limits the number of community broadcast stations in operation.

Research Question two: What are the challenges facing community broadcasting in Rivers State?

Table 2: Challenges facing community broadcasting

Response	Frequency	Percentage %
Lack of state of the art equipment	30	13%
Lack of trained staff	35	15%
Inadequate funds	50	22%
Absence of community radio stations	44	19%
All of the above	67	29%
Total	226	100%

Source: Field Survey, 2021

The table above presented information on the challenges facing community broadcasting in the state and most of the respondents 67 representing (29%) identified all of the above mentioned items as the challenges.

5. Conclusion

This discourse has reaffirmed that radio is a powerful medium that could be used to reach every listener because of its outstanding capacity to cater for different language groups since it can broadcast in Standard English, Pidgin English, and in local languages for the uneducated rural poor who cannot access information through newspapers and the internet. Community broadcasting can serve as a veritable means of promoting grass root development, unfortunately, government and its regulatory agencies fail to realize that the main goal of community broadcast stations is not to make profit but rather to engender grass root development.

To this end, the study gathered that regulatory policies affects the operations of community broadcast stations in the following ways; the exorbitant fees charged broadcast stations limits the number of community broadcast stations in operation, unfriendly policies deny potential donors from providing assisted funding for community broadcast stations and the absence of community broadcast stations deprive rural dwellers a platform for inclusive participation in government

It has also identified that the absence of community radio stations for the rural dwellers, inadequate funds, lack of state of the art equipment and lack of well-trained staff as a huge challenge affecting the effective operations of community broadcasting in the state. Similarly, the commercialization and urban centeredness of the existing private broadcast stations also limits the reach and audience loyalty to community broadcast stations.

6. Recommendations

In the light of the above, this paper recommends the following:

1. License fee for a community radio station should be reduced to N1 million like that charged campus radio stations because both are not-for-profit public broadcasting outfits.
2. Community radio stations should be allowed to explore multiple ways to raise fund, including from international donors, and must be done in compliance to the regulatory commission.
3. The renewal fee that is paid every five years should be waived for community radio stations, while government should give subsidies to community radio stations that meet regular production status throughout the previous financial year.
4. The process of application for license should be simple, transparent, and less time consuming.

In the light of the foregoing, if there is relative peace and security of lives and property, the license fee is reduced, the huge money that will be saved from license will be used to hire and train personnel and if community radio stations are allowed to make regulated profit the number of community broadcast stations in operation would greatly increase in the country.

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