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

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## Abstract

This article explores the patterns of transnational audiences' engagement with global media in a digital age, focusing on experiences in Africa. It is based on a study of Nigerians' interactions with the BBC World Service, and draws on active audience theory and Joseph Nye's concept of soft power to assess the relationship. Using qualitative content analysis, focus groups and individual interviews, the study examines Nigerians' use of mobile phones to interact with the broadcaster. It also analyses how the BBC deployed a multimedia strategy to widen its global reach and attract more audiences in its dual role as a news provider and promoter of Britain's public diplomacy. The impact of digital technologies on participatory programming and audience interactivity—along with the theoretical implications—is also discussed.

**Keywords:** audiences, BBC, digital media, mobile phones, public diplomacy, soft power

## Introduction

The spread of mobile technologies in Africa has impacted on the patterns and possibly the consequences of media consumption in the continent, enhancing interactivity and audience participation (Willems and Mano, 2017). Although largely an urban phenomenon, the culture of digital engagement with news media has spread to several semi-urban areas in the continent (GSM Association, 2021; Powell, 2012). Global broadcasters such as the BBC, Voice of America (VOA), Qatar's *Aljazeera*, Germany's *Deutsche Welle* and China Global Television Network (CGTN) have capitalised on this to optimize their capabilities in the battle for the hearts and minds of Africans (Abubakar, 2017; Zhang et al., 2016). The

BBC World Service, in particular, has expanded its offerings in the continent by doubling the number of its African languages' services, deploying a multimedia strategy and widening participatory programming (BBC, 2021a, 2021b; BBC Media Centre, 2019)—a major change from its olden days of 'Reithian restrictions on who is allowed to speak and who, supposedly, is worth hearing' (Livingstone and Lunt, 1992: 5). This has enabled the broadcaster to turn a decline of its audience in the traditional platform (radio) into a digital success in its second-biggest market in the world, Nigeria (Abubakar, 2017; BBC Media Centre, 2019).

On its part, the US Agency for Global Media (USAGM), which operates the VOA and associated outlets, saw a three-fold increase in its digital audience worldwide in 2019 and subsequent annual growths in 2021 as it enhanced its multimedia offerings (USAGM, 2019, 2021a). Although lagging behind the BBC in this area, the VOA has a wide reach in Sub-Saharan Africa, to which it broadcasts in 17 languages (14 of them indigenous African languages), with Nigeria, its biggest market in the continent, providing 19.6 million unduplicated audiences weekly in 2021 (USAGM, 2019, 2021b). China Global Television Network, too, has been expanding its offerings in the continent (Zang et al., 2016), although its reach was found to be relatively low (Wasserman and Madrid-Morales, 2018).

The continuous pursuit for more audiences in Africa, the spread of mobile devices in the continent, and more significantly the willingness of Africans to use them for media consumption have helped create a different media experience in the continent (Abubakar, 2017; Avle, 2020; Powell, 2012). Digitization and convergence help blur production-consumption boundaries (Jenkins, 2006) and widen 'opportunities for audience activity and participation' across platforms and across the globe (Sundet and Ytreberg, 2009: 383). A growing body of literature (Abubakar, 2017; Andersson, 2010; Avle, 2020; Chiumbu and Ligaga, 2013; Powell, 2012; Willems and Mano, 2017) has shown that audiences in Africa are increasingly leveraging on the digital media environment to interact with both local and international media. This study extends the literature by offering insights into the patterns and particularities of Nigerian audiences' engagement with the BBC World Service in the digital age.

The term audience engagement itself conveys divergent meanings, ranging from mere measurement of website visits, to full assessment of audience active participation in programmes and evaluation of excessive media consumption such as binge-viewing (Hill, 2019; Picone, 2017; Steensen et al., 2020). While industry research may limit it to just areas of audience metrics/perceptions and producers' performance, academic studies tend to give it a more holistic approach, encompassing analysis of producers' actions in attracting audiences and audience participation as well as in-depth examination of excessive media consumption and their consequences (Hill, 2019; Livingstone, 2019; Steensen et al., 2020). Industry research provides audience metrics; audits media performances; and assesses audience perceptions (BBC, 2021a; Osipova-Stocker et al., 2021). Data from such research by the BBC and VOA were systematically utilized in this study to understand the trends in their audience engagement and performances. But the research went further to collect qualitative data from BBC audiences in Nigeria and get a fuller picture of their interactions with the broadcaster. The study conceptualises audience engagement holistically, drawing on Hill's (2019: 6) description of it as 'a broad term for research into how (audiences) experience media content, artefacts and events, ranging from (their) experience of live performances, to social media engagement, or participation in media itself'. Engagement is seen here as a multi-faceted process encapsulating activities that constitute a dynamic relationship between the media and its audiences.

This article primarily explores the changing patterns of the long-term relationship between the BBC World Service and its audiences in Nigeria, and how digital technologies are employed to facilitate it. It touches on the historical background of the relationship to provide an insight into the depth of the changes that occurred. To unpack the contemporary state of their engagement, the study specifically examines Nigerians' use of mobile devices to interact with the broadcaster. It uses data from qualitative document analysis, focus groups and individual interviews to analyse the multi-dimensional nature of the relationship. Drawing on Joseph Nye's (2004, 2008) concept of soft power, it explains the broadcaster's deployment of a multimedia strategy to widen its reach in Nigeria in a bid to enhance Britain's influence. Active audience theory—specifically Stuart Hall's (1980)

encoding/decoding model—provides the theoretical framework that helps understand Nigerians’ interactions with the broadcaster and their interpretations of its content.

### From wired broadcasting to mobile relationship

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

The introduction of wireless broadcasting in Nigeria in 1951 saw a rapid increase of BBC audiences in the country (Ladele et al., 1979). But it was the establishment of the BBC Hausa Service in 1957—three years to Nigeria’s independence from Britain—to provide ‘programmes more closely designed to appeal to special local interests’ (BBC, 1958: 41) that set the stage for a postcolonial relationship between the broadcaster and its Nigerian audiences. The service has over the years witnessed a significant expansion, becoming in 2010 the biggest foreign language service in the BBC on account of its audience size (BBC Global News, 2010). The broadcaster has since added three new language services (Igbo, Pidgin and Yoruba) online, targeting Nigerians as part of an expansion programme funded with a special grant from the British government (BBC Media Centre, 2019; BBC, 2021a). The new digital services as well as the main English and Hausa languages’ offerings—on radio, on television, online and on mobile phone—have enabled the BBC to widen its reach in the country. As Africa’s largest oil producer and the continent’s richest and most populous country, Nigeria has strategic importance to international broadcasters,

particularly the BBC World Service (Abubakar, 2013, 2017). With a population of over 200 million people, more than 375 ethnic nationalities, and complex socio-economic and religious configurations (Oyovbaire 2001), ‘Nigeria is both a major news source and a fertile ground for cross-cultural interactions’ (Abubakar, 2017: 144). The current digital media environment has expanded this experience, not only in Nigeria but in Africa as a whole.

### Audience engagement with media in Africa

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

The changes witnessed were not limited to the audiences’ experience with the local media; they extended to their interactions with the international media (Abubakar, 2017; Andersson, 2010; Osipova-Stocker et al., 2021; Powell 2012). ‘African audiences and users are increasingly in the spotlight because of the growing scramble on the continent by a range of global media companies which are driven by both economic interests and public

diplomacy concerns' (Willems and Mano, 2017: 2). A significant proportion of VOA audiences in the continent began to interact more regularly with the broadcaster after it expanded its programming and added digital platforms (Osipova-Stocker et al., 2021; USAGM, 2021a). The broadcaster supplemented its traditional platforms of radio and television with interactive social media offerings and strengthened 'its service to mobile telephones and computers' (Powell, 2012: 16; USAGM 2021a). It saw an increase in audience participation in its programmes and a rise in its audience figures in many countries, including the Democratic Republic of Congo (Osipova-Stocker et al., 2021; USAGM, 2021b). The BBC had a similar trajectory, although Andersson's (2010) ethnographic study of social media's (specifically Facebook's) role in BBC's relationship with its Hausa audiences in Africa suggests that Facebook had a limited role in enhancing interactivity. That was in the early days of the broadcaster's deployment of social media for audiences in Africa. A different study (Abubakar, 2017), done after the BBC had increased its offerings on social media, indicates that there was an increase in the level of African audiences' engagement with the broadcaster through the use of social media.

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

### The state of audience research

The consolidation of the digital media environment has sparked both a resurgence of concerns over exploitative power of the media (Van Dijck, 2009; Dean, 2010; Qiu, 2018; Willems, 2013) and celebrations of audience agency (Procter et al., 2015; Wessels, 2018). Such divergence of perspectives illustrates the complexity of audience scholarship. Eight decades of research and volumes of works have told us a lot about media-audience

relationship, but we are still searching for answers to the recurrent questions of ‘what media and audiences do to each other’ and what they do with each other (Jensen, 2019: 151). A key reason for this is that media-audience relationship is dynamic and always changing (Burton, 2005). And ‘the suddenness and scale’ of such changes are sometimes so dramatic that finding a right method of enquiry is problematic (Turner, 2019: 225). This extends to the theoretical realm as well.

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

Fears about the pernicious power of the media and passivity of the audience were, however, allayed by findings from empirical studies in the 1940s and 1950s (Herzog, 1941; Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955/2006) that point to the limitations of the media and activeness of audiences. Herta Herzog’s (1941: 141) seminal study of soap opera fans, which among other things reveals how radio listeners derived joy from ‘satisfactory consumption of radio stories’, laid the foundation of the uses and gratifications theory. Further works by Halloran (1970), Katz et al. (1973) and Blumler and Katz (1974) strengthened the model. It was built on the principles that audience members are ‘active’ and selective and that ‘the media compete with other sources of need satisfaction’ (Katz et al., 1973: 511). This was a significant shift in audience research, but it did not prevent repeated renewals of romance with effects tradition. The current claims about the power of the media, including the



exploitative one (such as the monetization by media platforms of the traces of data generated from audiences/users), are rooted in the effects tradition.

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

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

### Theoretical framework

The encoding/decoding model, conceptualised by Hall and developed through Morley's (1980, 1986) empirical research, maintains a sort of balance between the two extremes of the media effects and gratifications debates. It identifies three forms of audience readings of media texts—dominant/preferred, negotiated and oppositional—to demonstrate an audience member's ability to accept, negotiate or reject the producer's intended meaning of the texts. It endorses the uses and gratifications' concept of active audience, but goes further to view audiences in social context and their ability to decode meanings of media content. Communicative exchange is neither an isolated nor a random experience; 'the moments of "encoding" and "decoding", though only "relatively autonomous" in relation to the communicative process as a whole, are *determinate* moments' (Hall, 1980: 118). Originally formulated to analyse television consumption but extended to other media

forms, encoding/decoding model deemphasises behaviourist conception of audiences. 'Any new approach to audience studies will therefore have to begin with a critique of "selective perception" theory' (Hall, 1980: 125). Media consumption is seen as an active social experience. 'People don't passively absorb subliminal "inputs" from the screen. They discursively "make sense" of or produce "readings" of what they see' (Hall, 'Introduction' for Morley, 1986: 8).

However, Wren-Lewis (1983: 195) has questioned the model's conception of hegemonic code and pointed to a lack of clarity on what constitute the 'dominant variables determining readings of televisions' and the extent to which they are 'inscribed within the TV text'. From the political economy perspective, too, the theory is criticised for placing too much emphasis on subversive reading, and for missing other influences of the media, which is seen as contradictory to the model's basic cultural studies' roots. Golding and Murdock (1991: 17), in particular, argue that the 'romantic celebration of subversive consumption is clearly at odds with cultural studies' long-standing concern with the way the mass media operate ideologically, to sustain and support prevailing relations of domination'.

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

The study also draws on Joseph Nye's (2004, 2008) concept of soft power to understand the intentions of the producer (the BBC World Service and its funders), as the broadcaster plays dual roles of providing news and promoting British public diplomacy (Sreberny et al., 2010). Scholarship has shown that international broadcasting, public diplomacy and soft power are often closely interlinked (Browne, 1982; Cull, 2009; Nye, 2004, 2008).

Public diplomacy is broadly seen as an international actor's effort 'to manage the international environment through engagement' with foreign publics (Cull, 2009: 12). 'Soft power is the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment' (Nye, 2008: 94). International broadcasting is widely recognised as an instrument of public diplomacy (Browne, 1982; Cull, 2009) and 'has a long history as a means of promoting a country's soft power' (Nye, 2008: 94). Both Nye (2004) and the British government (Cameron, 2015; Foreign & Commonwealth Office [FCO], 2005) have identified the BBC World Service as a soft power resource for Britain. This research attempts to answer the questions: What strategies do the BBC and its funders employ for the broadcaster to reach and engage with Nigerian audiences in a digital age? How do these audiences engage with the broadcaster? And to what extent do the concept of soft power and encoding-decoding model help us understand this relationship?

## Methodology

The study employed three qualitative methods—document analysis, individual interviews and focus groups—to explore the relationship between the BBC and its Nigerian audiences in a digital era. The content analysis involved gathering and analysing documents/data from the UK government and Parliament, the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) and BBC's and USAGM's publications and audience surveys. In particular, the UK's National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015, the report of the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee on BBC World Service's spending cuts (HC 849), the FCO's Lord Carter of Coles Public Diplomacy Review 2005, USAGM's audience surveys and performance reports of 2019 and 2021, BBC World Service Annual and Performance Reviews for 2007-2008 and 2016-2020, and the BBC Group Annual Report and Accounts 2020/21 were all gathered and analysed. Similarly, data from the NCC about the spread and use of mobile phones in Nigeria and the GSM Association on mobile phones market in Africa as well as BBC's in-house publications (including yearbook/reviews), editorial guidelines and audience survey reports were also gathered and analysed for the study.

To get audiences' perspectives on their engagement with the BBC, data were collected through individual interviews and focus groups in Nigeria. Purposive sampling technique was used to select the participants: they were all BBC audiences. There was no duplication of participants: separate sets of people were selected for individual interviews and focus groups, totalling 36 participants in all. Their ages range from 21 to 63, reflecting the age range seen in BBC's previous surveys (BBC Global News, 2010, 2013). A total of 15 individual interviews were conducted in March/April 2013 and August/September 2019 in the northern Nigerian cities of Abuja, Katsina and Yola. The long gap between the two field trips was necessitated by the researcher's change of job and its associated constraints as well as security concerns in Nigeria. This turned out to have a positive impact as it led to the collection of rich data that reflected the changes that occurred over the six-year time span. Three focus groups were conducted in the same selected cities over the same periods, with members ranging from six to eight (Abuja Focus Group eight, Katsina Focus Group seven, and Yola Focus Group six). The choice of the three cities was informed by the spread of their locations in northern Nigeria where consumption of the content of BBC Hausa Service—which provides the bulk of the BBC audiences in Nigeria—is high (BBC Global News, 2013; BBC Media Centre, 2019). Abuja, located in north-central Nigeria, is the country's capital and the location of one of the two BBC's offices in Nigeria; and both Yola in northeast and Katsina in northwest have high BBC Hausa Service audiences.

The interviews were conducted in both English and Hausa languages, tape-recorded and transcribed. Miles & Huberman's (1994) qualitative approach and Krueger's (1994) framework of analysis served as guides in analysing the data drawn from the individual interviews and focus groups respectively. Specifically, the individual interviews were analysed through a continuous process of condensing the data (summarising and coding the transcribed interviews), displaying the condensed data using a matrix format to get a graphic view of the emerged patterns and themes, and drawing preliminary conclusions. Analysis of each focus group began immediately after it was conducted using both the notes taken during the group discussion and the transcript of the recorded discussion. The process of data condensation, display and drawing of conclusions was also followed here but with additional focus on identifying group dynamics and paying attention to the

extensiveness of points made in each group. Findings from all the data sets were integrated through triangulation protocol to produce the final report—presented and discussed below.

## Digital expansion and promotion of public diplomacy

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

Those were the factors that informed the BBC's digital drive in Nigeria. Broadcasting to the country in English, Hausa, Igbo, Pidgin and Yoruba languages, the BBC is the dominant foreign broadcaster in Nigeria—with its biggest rival, the VOA, having less than half of its audience figures there. Results of audience surveys by the BBC and VOA for the year 2019 show that the BBC had weekly audience of 41 million in Nigeria to VOA's 19.6 million (BBC Media Centre, 2019; USAGM, 2019, 2021b). Nigeria has at different times emerged as the biggest driver of BBC's mobile traffic as well as the BBC's largest and second-largest market in the world (BBC Global News, 2013; BBC Media Centre,

2019). Data reveal that Nigeria only lost the top position to India from 2019 after the World Service made a big investment in its Indian market by adding new language services there, with special funding from the UK government (BBC Media Centre, 2019; BBC 2021a). The BBC's 2019 audience survey shows India taking the first position with weekly audience of 50 million, followed by Nigeria with 41 million (BBC Media Centre, 2019).

Nigeria was also included in the World Service expansion programme, as Igbo, Pidgin and Yoruba language services were added in 2017/18 to the original English and Hausa services, though apparently not at India's scale. The expansion idea itself came from the British government, which earmarked £289million to increase 'BBC's digital, TV and radio services around the world to build the global reach of the World Service' (Cameron 2015: 49). This was contained in the UK's strategic defence review of 2015, as announced by the then Prime Minister David Cameron (Cameron 2015). It was part of the government's plan to strengthen Britain's 'soft power...through institutions such as the BBC World Service and the British Council' (Cameron, 2015: 11). The fact that this came directly from the prime minister and via the defence strategic review rather than the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (renamed Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office [FCDO]), which traditionally handles public diplomacy, underlines the significance the UK government places on expanding the country's soft power.

It is worth stressing that this money is an addition to the regular funding the World Service gets from the FCO/BBC licence fees, which sometimes is more than a third of the UK's public diplomacy budget. For instance, the World Service received £225million out of the public diplomacy budget of £617million in fiscal 2004/05 (FCO, 2005: 6). That amount continued to rise in the subsequent years—£239.5million in 2006/07 and £255million in 2007/08 (BBC, 2008)—until it reached a peak of £272million in 2009/10 (Hiller, 2010). From 2014, the World Service's annual funding of £254million was transferred to BBC licence fees and to last until April 2022 (BBC, 2021a). All this reinforces both the argument that the UK government considers the World Service as a vital instrument of public diplomacy and Nye's (2004: 90) assertion that the broadcaster is 'an important soft power resource for the UK'. It is difficult to assess the level of global influence (if any) that the

government's additional funding has brought or will bring for Britain, but it has apparently helped the BBC to expand its reach and increase its audiences globally, as seen in the following graph (Figure 1):



Source: BBC

**Figure 1:** *BBC global weekly audience as of June 2019*

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

## Mobile telephony enhances digital consumption

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

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

Source: NCC

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



## Market share by phone operators in Nigeria as at Oct 2016 (NCC 2016)

	Airtel	EMTS	Globacom	MTN
<b>Number of Subscribers</b>	<b>32,775,916</b>	<b>22,210,315</b>	<b>37,117,992</b>	<b>60,982,487</b>
<b>Percentage (%)</b>	<b>21.41%</b>	<b>14.51%</b>	<b>24.25%</b>	<b>39.84%</b>

Source: NCC

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

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

Despite infrastructural deficits such as unreliable electricity supply and poor internet connections, as well as low purchasing power, Nigerians are increasingly using their phones to access news. Mitigation for those inhibiting factors comes from both the audiences and the BBC in different forms. First, many audiences in Africa tend to use low-cost China-made mobile phones that have ‘longer battery life, multiple SIM cards, flashlight, and radio tuning’ (Avle, 2020: 5). This enables them to access media content even without internet connectivity and for a long time with little electricity supply. Second, the BBC and other broadcasters such as the VOA do structure their content specifically for consumption on mobile phones (Abubakar, 2017; BBC World Service, 2019; USAGM 2019, 2021a). And third, the World Service forged partnerships with tech firms to make access to its services easier and cheaper or even free (of both phone and content charges) on mobile phones through various networks (BBC World Service, 2019). One such partnership was struck with the leading mobile phone operator in Nigeria, MTN Nigeria, in June 2020 ‘to deliver BBC News Minute bulletins, free of charge to subscribers of the MyMTN App in English, Hausa, Igbo, Pidgin and Yoruba’ (BBC Media Centre, 2020b). The BBC’s relentless effort to deliver phone-friendly content, the affordability and availability of the device, and the sheer convenience of using it by the audiences have combined to make mobile phone an important tool of consuming BBC content in Nigeria.

### Active engagement

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'They're also involved in many businesses here, even bakeries,' said a trade unionist in the group discussion. 'Nothing is too small for them'. But another participant in the discussion, an accountant, said he did not support any side in the trade war between the two leading economies. 'My main worry is what this would bring to the Nigerian economy. It is likely to have negative effect on us,' he added. His perspective seems to indicate a negotiated reading of the BBC's reporting of the dispute.

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

apartheid, but they respect him so much now'. His view, which indicates a preferred reading of the BBC's reporting, received approval from other participants.

There was no such unanimity of opinions on the BBC's reporting of Kenya's stories dominated by the victory of Uhuru Kenyatta and the unsuccessful challenge at the Supreme Court by his main rival Raila Odinga. Some of the participants accused the BBC of showing lesser interest in the aftermath of the 2013 elections than it showed in that of the 2007/8 elections, which were characterised by violence. 'They didn't show interest for this one because there was no massive violence,' said a lawyer. 'They're more interested in bad news in Africa'. Two other participants in the discussion agreed with him. But a television producer said he felt the BBC did a good job in covering the 2013 elections and its aftermath. 'Obviously, there was less violence in this election, so there wouldn't be many stories. I think they did a good job,' he said. Views from participants in individual interviews also ranged from this form of endorsement of the broadcaster, indicating preferred reading, to ambivalence (indicative of negotiated reading) and disapproval of both BBC's content and the way it was reported, signifying oppositional reading. Regardless of the position they took, these participants, too, said they also engaged actively with the BBC's digital content—liking, sharing, and commenting on, them—and participated occasionally in its phone-in programmes.

Audience participation is not a new issue in media-audience relationship—it has been around for long, especially in television programming (Livingstone and Lunt, 1992)—but the current digital media environment gives it additional impetus and the BBC is reaping from it. Previous studies (Abubakar, 2017; Hill and Alshaer, 2010; Sreberny et al., 2010: 280) have linked the BBC's encouragement of audience participation to the UK's 'digital diplomacy initiatives', giving resonance to Nye's (2004) description of the BBC as UK's soft power resource. 'Interactivity does have the multiple benefits of directly engaging the audiences, generating content from them, infusing variety in programmes, providing instant feedback and exerting subtle influence on audiences' (Abubakar, 2017: 150). Other scholars (Van Dijck, 2009; Dean, 2010; Willems, 2013) highlight the economic and commercial motives of participatory programming. Dean (2010: 4) talks of strange

convergence of democracy and capitalism in which ‘communicative exchanges and their technological preconditions become commodified and capitalized’; and Van Dijck (2009: 55) points to the economic meaning of audiences being producers, consumers and data providers. This forms the basis of Willems’s (2013: 224) argument about the corporate logic of participation ‘in the sense that audiences’ use of the internet and mobile phones leaves behind a trail of personal data that can be deployed in the service of communicative capitalism’.

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

## Conclusion

Global broadcasters have reinvented themselves in the digital era in their bid to reach and influence people across the world—and the spread of mobile technologies is aiding them. This is exemplified by the BBC World Service’s expansion of its services globally and in Nigeria in an attempt to enhance Britain’s influence abroad. The broadcaster uses its multimedia strategy to gain more audiences, and Nigerians are increasingly using mobile devices to actively engage with its content. This study points to new dynamics in which both the media and audiences employ technologies to enhance their experiences. The

digital media environment—particularly the convergence of technologies and of content—has helped shape media-audience relationship, with the media expanding its influences and audiences becoming more active in using their interpretative and creative power to enhance their agency.

The cultural studies' variant of the active audience theory, the encoding-decoding model, originally designed to study television consumption, is still a viable tool of studying audiences. However, given the way the current digital media environment is characterised by multimedia production and interactive (often distractive) multiplatform consumption, the model could not explain everything. In the model's original perspective, the concept of 'active' seems to be confined to audiences' ability to select and interpret texts in different ways—accept, negotiate or reject dominant/hegemonic code. But now other forms of audience activities—sharing, liking and commenting—needed to be added to the list. This is in addition to the increasing roles audiences also play as content creators and users. A more inclusive model accommodating all these could provide a sharper tool of analysing media-audience relationship in a digital age.

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

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