Selective believability: a perspective on Africans' interactions with global media

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Abstract

The transformation of the media landscape, facilitated by advances in communications technologies, has changed the dynamics of media-audience relationship and posed new challenges to reception research. Perhaps nowhere is this as profound as it is in transnational audience studies, for cross-cultural interactions have never been wider. This chapter attempts to highlight a new perspective on African audiences' engagement with global media and point to new postulates in audience research. It briefly reviews key reception theories, ranging from the effects tradition to active audience paradigm and encoding-decoding model. It then offers a case study on Northern Nigerians' interactions with international media, particularly the BBC World Service, to unveil the patterns and consequences of such interactions. The mainly Muslim Northern Nigerians were found to be high consumers of Western media products, especially the BBC's, but with high level of selectivity. Although they regard BBC as the most credible broadcaster that aids their understanding of international affairs and influences their everyday lives, they still see it as a Western ideological instrument that portrays the West positively and depicts the Islamic world and Africa negatively. The findings reveal patterns and particularities of postcolonial audiences' consumption of transnational media that suggest new theoretical postulates in reception research. They indicate the audiences' tendency to exhibit a phenomenon of 'selective believability' in their interactions with international media. They also highlight the mediating roles of religion, culture, ideology and other extra-communication factors in such interactions; and identify the dynamics of credibility and believability. Credibility appears to be a necessary but not sufficient condition for believability in audiences' consumption of dissonant messages.

Introduction

There is a growing consensus that digitalization and convergence are exerting significant influence on the production and consumption of media products (Jenkins, 2006; Sundet and Ytreberg, 2009). No such consensus, however, exists on the exact consequences of those changes on the lives of audiences. The rapid transformation of the media landscape has not been matched with corresponding audience studies. Actually, qualitative audience research is in decline Michelle, 2007) and needs revival. This has become more imperative in the current 'hypermedia space' where the old and new media are 'locked in an inter-dependent, mutually re-enforcing, complementary relationship' (Kraidy and Mourad, 2010, p.11) and where audiences simultaneously act as producers and consumers of media texts.

The old media's skilful integration of the new media to create multiple platforms, through which they reach fragmented audiences, is reflected at both local and global scenes—a classic example of which is the BBC World Service which is now a multimedia broadcaster delivering programmes 'on radio, on television, online and on mobile' to an estimated 239 million audiences in the world (BBC Global News, 2012). A large proportion of these audiences are Africans. In fact, Nigeria—with more than 23 million weekly audiences—is the World Service's largest market in the world, followed by Tanzania which has an estimated 12.2 million weekly audiences (FACOM, 2011). In April 2003, the World Service itself claimed that its impact in countries like Nigeria, Kenya and Tanzania was 'as great as (the impact of) Radio 2 (Britain's most listened to station) in the UK' (cited in Aitken, 2007, p.14). This confirmed an earlier finding that as 'proportions of the general population, the audiences to the BBC in English in Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone and Zambia are higher than anywhere else in the world' (Mytton and Forrester, 1988, p.469).

The BBC is not the only international news media African audiences interact with regularly; they do so with several others, including the Voice of America (VOA), Germany's *Deutsche Welle*, Cable News Network (CNN), Radio France International, France 24, Qatari's *Al-Jazeera*, China Central Television (CCTV), China Radio International and so on (Abubakar, 2011). This is in addition to their consumption of global entertainment media, which is a massive area in its own right. The focus here,

though, is on the sub-Saharan Africans' consumption of news and current affairs programmes of the global broadcasters, some of which are broadcast in African languages, such as Hausa, Somali and Swahili. It is an area with potentials far beyond audience research. Fardon and Furniss (2000), for instance, argue that Africans' exposure to international broadcasters could make them more informed about the global scene than some of their Western counterparts.

> The Swahili, Hausa or Somali services of the *Deutsche Welle*, the Voice of America or the BBC's World Service may allow supposedly local, isolated, rural people of "under-developed" parts of Africa to be better informed about international scene than some of their counterparts in the supposedly information-rich US or EU (European Union)
>
> (Fardon and Furniss, 2000, p.2)

Striking also is Africans' undying interest in international news media, in contrast to the decline of such interest in some parts of the world. A new report shows that 'almost half of VOA's entire audience worldwide is in Africa' (Powell, 2012, p.22), even though 'the 2012 budget for VOA Africa is $13 million'—a third of what the US budgeted for broadcast to Latin America in the same year (p.24). China's international broadcasting outlets are also expanding rapidly in Africa. And although there is no accurate data to reveal the level of their impact, the investments must have been propelled by the potential for positive reception in the continent. The determined efforts of the global broadcasters to reach and influence the hearts and minds of African audiences, and the Africans' willingness to engage with them, provide a fertile ground for audience research. But although there are some efforts on that mainly through audience surveys by the broadcasters themselves, a systematic approach appears to be lacking. There is hardly any concerted effort to study the phenomenon 'in its full complexity' (Michelle, 2007, p.193) using conceptual framework that could yield results in their proper context and allow for theorisation of African audiences' interactions with global media.

This chapter is an attempt on that. It looks at Africans' relationship with global news media, reviews the key audience theories, and suggests a new model that attempts to describe the nature of the relationship. It offers a case study of Northern Nigerian audiences' interactions with international media, particularly the BBC World Service, to provide the empirical basis that helps formulate new theoretical postulates.

Reviewing the theories

Audience theories are largely the products of prevailing political and socio-economic milieu as well as technological changes that shape the media landscape of a given period. 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. The tense climate of the inter-war period and the vibrancy of the then new medium of radio—and movie before it—created the atmosphere that yielded the media effects theory or hypodermic needle model. The media were then seen as powerful weapons that sway the minds of passive mass audiences. The root of this belief could actually be traced back to the First World War when the media (the press and film at that time) were used for propaganda to weld 'millions of human beings into one amalgamated mass of hate and will and hope' (Lasswell, 1927, p.220). This perspective was gaining consensus in the 1920s and 1930s when the Marxist critical theorists of the Frankfurt School injected fresh intellectual vigour into it and enhanced its theoretical base.

In their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944/1979), Adorno and Horkheimer analysed what they saw as the process of commodification of culture and stultification of the masses. 'The flood of detailed information and candy-floss entertainment simultaneously instructs and stultifies mankind,' they argue (p. xv). This view was informed by their perceptions of how malleable masses were subjected to Nazi propaganda in Germany, and of the massive entertainment and advertising messages corporate America was bombarding people with in the United States. 'Movies and radio need no longer pretend to be art,' they argue. 'The truth that they are just business is made into an ideology in order to justify the rubbish they deliberately produce' (p.121). The media have been turned into commercial enterprises to reinforce consumption capitalism, and be reinforced by them.

However, audience studies in the 1940s and 1950s (Herzog, 1941; Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955/2006) began to produce results that questioned the potency of media and passivity of audiences. Herta Herzog's pioneering work, *On Borrowed Experience* (1941), detailing American housewives' consumption of radio programmes, offers new insights into audiences' engagement with the media. The

audiences, she notes, were the ones using the radio—not the other way round. Her work laid the foundation of the uses and gratifications model. Further works on the model (Halloran, 1970; Katz et al., 1973; Blumler and Katz, 1974) equally stress the shift away from the emphasis on the power of the media to the power of the audiences. Its key elements include the conception of audiences as being 'active' and selective and that 'the media compete with other sources of need satisfaction' (Katz et al., 1973, p.511). Despite its tendency to exaggerate the power of the audiences, gratifications model provided a significant paradigm shift that transformed reception research in the post-war period.

It does not, however, halt the resurgence of some variants of effects tradition, such as the cultivation theory, espoused by George Gerbner and Larry Gross (1976) following the spread of television and growing violence in the United States in the 1960s. It equally got a boost from the findings of behavioural studies, such as the 'Bobo doll experiment' (Bandura and Walters, 1963), which concluded, among others, that children do copy violent behaviour from violent media content. Similarly, the popularity in the 1960s and 1970s of the cultural imperialism thesis (Schiller, 1969, 1976)—built with a strand of effects model—enhanced its veracity then. Even in the current media landscape, the convergence of the old and new media and the role they play in the Arab Spring (Pintak, 2011) tend to revive the argument in favour of the 'powerful' media.

But despite its resilience, and the diversity of its variants, the effects tradition fails to withstand serious scrutiny. As noted earlier, empirical studies have discredited it, and many scholars believe it is too simplistic and incapable of explaining the complexity of media-audience relationship (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955/2006; Ang, 1996; Gauntlett, 2005; Morley, 2006). Its seeming revival associated with the convergence of the old and new media and their role in the Arab world's crisis emanates from the misconception of the audiences' role in the new setting. In reality the current scenario proclaims the activeness of the audiences rather than their passivity. Convergence and the growing pervasiveness of the social media do not only give greater impetus to the active audience argument, but they also enhance audiences' relative control of the media content itself (Jenkins, 2006; Sundet and Ytreberg, 2009).

The concept of active audience, although popularised by the gratifications model, is common in many audience theories. Its relevance in minimal effects paradigm (Klapper, 1960) and encoding/decoding model (Hall, 1980) and its resurgence in the current configuration show its enduring quality. The limited effects theory, usually identified with the work of Joseph Klapper (1960), tends to avoid the mistakes of stripping the media of its influence, but instead highlights the mediating roles of other forces that limit the influence. Klapper's work, based on massive research conducted in different spheres by many authors, assesses the effectiveness and limitations of the media on its audiences.

> Within a given audience exposed to particular communications, reinforcement, or at least constancy of opinion, is typically found to be the dominant effect; minor change, as in intensity of opinion, is found to be the next most common; and conversion is typically found to be the most rare.
>
> (Klapper, 1960, p.15)

He argues that factors such as 'predispositions and related processes of selective exposure, selective perception, and selective retention' as well as group norms and interpersonal influence, though external to communications, do play mediating roles to limit the influence of the media (pp.18-19). Subsequent studies reaffirm this position and highlight the mediating roles of psychological, sociological and cultural factors in audiences' interactions with the media, revealing clear cases of selectivity particularly in their consumption of dissonant media products (Vidmar and Rokeach, 1974; Morley, 1980; Liu and Johnson, 2011).

Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model, on its part, is premised on audiences' readings of media texts. It identifies three forms of such readings—preferred/dominant, negotiated and oppositional—which correspond respectively to an audience member's tendency to accept, negotiate or reject the producer's intended meanings of the texts. It was based on this framework that Morley carried out his *Nationwide Audience* (1980) research in Britain with wide acclaims. However, Michelle (2007, p.187) argues while 'this model remains fundamentally useful, Hall's decoding categories have been over generalized in both concept and application'. Seiter (1999, p.20) suggests that it works 'better for news and non-fiction programming than it does for entertainment programming'.

Whatever their strengths and weaknesses, however, none of these models has provided all the explanations regarding media-audience relationship. This is mainly because media-audience relationship 'is dynamic…evolving and changing' (Burton, 2005, p.1). And it is with this in mind that Morley's (2006) idea of 'multi-dimensional model', which incorporates the insights of different models to capture the various dimensions of media-audience engagement, seems relevant. This study therefore employs a multi-dimensional approach to examine African audiences' interactions with transnational media, taking into consideration the influence of social, religious, ideological, cultural and other extra-communication factors into such interactions. It essentially draws from the minimal effects paradigm and encoding/decoding model to investigate the patterns and consequences of Northern Nigerians' relationship with international media, focusing primarily on their engagement with the BBC World Service.

Northern Nigerians' interactions with global media

Northern Nigerians have a long history of interactions with other peoples and cultures outside their territory both directly through trades and travels and wars, or such similar means, and indirectly through many forms of mediated communications. One of the most defining encounters they had was with North African traders through which they came into contact with Islam, which later became not just a religious belief but a state ideology for the largest part of the region. The other encounter was with the Europeans along which came Christianity and colonialism and consequent westernisation of state institutions. Added to these key encounters are several others that collectively form the Northern Nigerians' complex political, socio-economic and cultural experiences.

As a geopolitical entity, Northern Nigeria was declared a British protectorate in 1900 after the transfer in 1899 of territories in West Africa that were under the trading rights of the Royal Niger Company based on the Berlin Treaty of 1885 (Lugard, 1904). Prior to that declaration the territories were actually made up of Sokoto Caliphate, Bornu kingdom and smaller autonomous communities with their respective independent rulers. Borno and Sokoto Caliphate were vast Islamic entities with well-
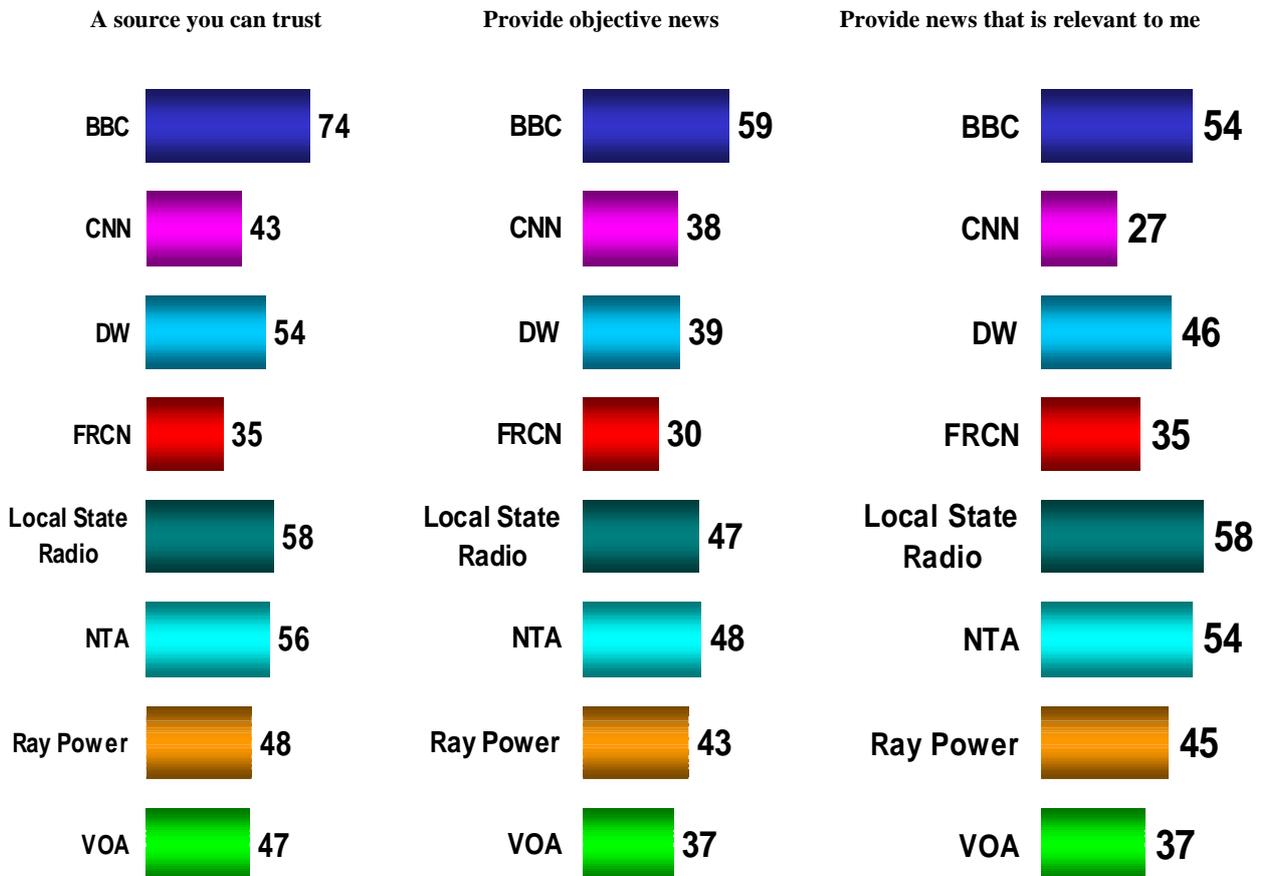
organised system of government based on Sharia. After their conquest, Britain left the old system largely in place and operated 'Indirect Rule' whereby local rulers exercised power under the supervision of colonial administrators (Lugard, 1922). British Common Law was brought in to run alongside the Islamic and traditional legal systems.

The Northern Protectorate was merged with the Southern Protectorate in 1914 to form the present-day Nigeria which gained independence from Britain in 1960. Northern Nigeria is currently made up of 19 states (and Federal Capital Territory Abuja) out of the 36 states of the Nigerian federation. It covers roughly two-thirds of the country's territory of about 923,768 square kilometres and has a larger percentage of its estimated population of over 170 million in 2013—based on the figures of the National Population Commission which in its 2006 census found Nigeria's population to be over 140 million (FGN, 2007). The predominant religion of the region is Islam, although there are large numbers of Christians and other non-Muslims, particularly in the southern part of the region. Northern Nigeria has an estimated 250 indigenous ethnic groups—there is no agreed definite number of ethnic groups in Nigeria (Oyovbaire, 2001). Hausa-Fulani are the largest group in the region with Hausa language serving largely as the lingua franca and English as the official language.

It was Britain that introduced broadcasting to Northern Nigeria to promote the interests of the then colonial regime and to bring a Western model of modernisation in the area (Larkin, 2008). The BBC was perhaps the first foreign broadcaster to reach the region in the 1930s and the experience took a greater dimension in 1957 when BBC Hausa Service was introduced to transmit 'programmes more closely designed to appeal to special local interests' (BBC, 1958). Since then the relationship between the broadcaster and the Hausa-speaking people of Nigeria, Niger, Cameroun, Chad, Ghana, Sudan and other countries with large Hausa speakers has been widening. The service has been expanding and its weekly audience figures increasing, reaching 23.2 million in 2012 (BBC Global News, 2012). The offerings are on radio, online and on mobile. This is, of course, in addition to the English broadcasts on multiple platforms including television, giving the World Service an unparalleled advantage in Nigeria over competing broadcasters. Several BBC audience surveys in Nigeria (BBC World Service, 2007, 2008; BBC Global News, 2009, 2010) show that its audience figures

are consistently higher than those of its major competitors—the VOA and *Deutsche Welle* (both target the region with their Hausa and English broadcasts). The surveys also indicate that Nigerian audiences consider BBC to be the most trustworthy of all the broadcasters, including the local stations (see figure 1). Other global broadcasters, such as CNN International, *Al-Jazeera*, Radio France International (which also broadcasts in Hausa language) and many others have their relative shares of audiences in the region. It is under this situation that the BBC maintains its engagement with its Northern Nigerian audiences, with programming centred mainly on news and current affairs that have been the daily diets of these audiences.

Nigerian audiences' ratings of the major foreign and local broadcasters (2007/08)

	A source you can trust	Provide objective news	Provide news that is relevant to me
BBC	74	59	54
CNN	43	38	27
DW	54	39	46
FRCN	35	30	35
Local State Radio	58	47	58
NTA	56	48	54
Ray Power	48	43	45
VOA	47	37	37

Base: those who have ever listened/watched each provider

Figure 1 Source: BBC WS/Ipsos MORI (2008)

In the ratings for 'trust' and 'objectivity', the BBC is adjudged the best among both the local and international stations. In the rating for 'relevance' it comes second only to the Local State Radio stations (which are very close to people as they broadcast local stories in local dialects etc), and draws with the NTA (Nigerian Television Authority)—which equally has local stations in all the 36 states and Abuja. The other foreign stations—CNN, DW (Deutsche Welle)and VOA—perform at least better than the federal government-owned FRCN (Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria) in reputational ratings of 'trust' and 'objectivity'. The only local private station included in this survey, Ray Power, gets an average rating on all the three criteria.

Methodology

There is no doubt that Nigerians do interact with transnational media and such interactions do impact on their lives, as the BBC's audience surveys suggest. But the exact patterns, consequences and systematic explanations of such relationships are what the surveys do not provide. A qualitative research approach guided by a multi-dimensional conceptual framework (Morley, 2006; Michelle, 2007) was employed here to unravel them. It primarily uses in-depth individual interviews and focus group discussions to interrogate the audiences' long-term consumption of transnational media products. The primary data drawn through these qualitative methods was supplemented with statistical data obtained from the BBC's audience surveys to help provide both the general and specific insights into the Northern Nigerians' interactions with global media. Specifically, a dozen in-depth individual interviews and six focus group discussions were conducted between January 2010 and August 2012 with audiences from different socio-economic, occupational, professional and political backgrounds in the Northern Nigerian cities of Abuja, Kano, Katsina and Yola as well as in Gwagwalada town (of the Federal Capital Territory) and Njoboli village (near Nigeria's border with Cameroun in Adamawa State). Factors such as the need for geographical spread, urban-rural representation, administrative convenience and nature of the audiences' distribution and demography influenced the choice of those places. All the respondents (for both the focus group and individual interviews) were drawn through purposeful sampling.

Apart from the diversity in the geographical locations of the groups, each group (with members ranging from five to nine) has its unique characteristics in terms of social strata and professional and occupational backgrounds of its members. The groups were roughly categorised as follows: the Working Class, the Lower Middle Class, the Middle Class, the Political Class, the Youth and the Peasant Group. Most of the respondents are Hausa-speaking Muslim Northern Nigerians (though some of them are not native Hausa speakers). They all interact regularly with the international media. The interviews with four of the groups were conducted in Hausa language while with the remaining two—the middle class and youth groups—were conducted in English language. They were all tape-recorded (translated into English, for the Hausa ones), transcribed and analysed.

The in-depth individual interviews were conducted with 12 respondents, aged 25 to 70, who had varied backgrounds and experiences. They comprised of a civil servant, a local newspaper publisher, a petty trader, a nurse, a television producer, a female school administrator, a factory worker, a university lecturer, a veteran trade unionist, a one-time female newspaper editor, a postgraduate student and an ex-soldier-cum-parliamentarian. Each of them was interviewed face-to-face at length, lasting about 15-30 minutes per respondent. Ten of them who are fluent in English language were interviewed in English, the remaining two—the petty trader and factory worker— were interviewed in Hausa. All the interviews were tape-recorded (the Hausa ones translated into English), transcribed and analysed.

Findings and discussion

The data obtained from the respondents reveals the patterns and impact of their interactions with global media and offers guides on the nature and trajectories of such relationship. Northern Nigerian audiences were found to be high consumers of transnational media products, particularly the news and current affairs programmes of the BBC World Service, which they rated as the most credible and trustworthy. But they also tend to show high level of selectivity in their consumption of global media messages, rejecting dissonant messages and believing those that conform to their prevailing beliefs. They access the media through multiple platforms: shortwave radio, cable and satellite television, the internet and mobile telephony. Participation in interactivity programmes appears to be more of an activity of the technology-savvy urban middle class, though the rural dwellers too indicate interest in the contents of such programmes.

High consumption of global media

The rate of global media consumption among Northern Nigerian audiences is high, with virtually all the respondents stating that they regularly access a range of international broadcasters, particularly the Hausa services of the BBC, VOA, Radio *Deutsche Welle* and Radio France International. Most of them also watch global news media such as the CNN, Sky News, France 24 and *Al-Jazeera*. These responses are typical:

> I can consider myself as a very regular listener of the BBC in that, at least in a week, I listen to BBC every morning for five out of seven days. I do listen to CNN; I do listen to *Al-Jazeera*, Sky News and Radio France International (*Postgraduate student*).

> I listen to Voice of America and BBC, but more frequently the BBC, and virtually every morning I do listen to it (*Female school administrator*).

Many tend to listen to as many global broadcasters as they could have access to, often on daily basis and usually in the morning. This is consistent with the findings of the BBC's surveys (BBC World Service, 2007, 2008; BBC Global News, 2009, 2010), which show that Nigerians consume a variety of foreign media products and that the morning period serves as the peak time for radio listening. The convenience of using radio and its simplicity and cost effectiveness seem to make it a ready instrument for such utilisation. The relevance of radio in the lives of Africans was well explained in previous studies (Spitulnik, 2000; Larkin, 2008; Abubakar, 2011) and the evidence here has not only reinforced those findings but also provided additional insights into Africans' engagement with the radio. Both radio and television serve as the key instruments through which the respondents regularly interact with the global media. But the new distribution technologies too are becoming increasingly important and many audiences, especially the middle class, are using the internet and mobile telephony to access global media products. In many cases, they utilize the multiple platforms of these media to consume their products—as the following responses reveal:

> Most of the information I source is from the internet. Of course, I do watch TV and listen to physical radio (too) (*Deputy Editor in the Middle Class group*).

> I usually listen to the BBC, CNN and VOA… I watch them on satellite television (and) access them on the internet and my handset (though) not regularly (*Female student in the Youth group*).

> I listen to BBC, Voice of America and the Hausa service of Radio China. For television I watch *Al-Jazeera*, France 24 and CNN… I do also access them on the internet in my (mobile phone) handset (*Factory worker*).

The rapid spread of new communications technologies in Africa has enabled many global broadcasters to devise means of utilising them to reach audiences who, as this research shows, are also embracing them with enthusiasm. Both the BBC and the

VOA are devoting resources in expanding their multimedia strategies in Africa (FACOM, 2011; Powell, 2012). The VOA, for instance, found that 'Africans use mobile phones in a very different way than Americans do, enabling the broadcaster to provide long-form (programme) services over the telephone' (Powell, 2012, p.24) and a BBC survey found that 14 per cent of 'Nigerians listen to the radio on their mobile weekly' (BBC Global News, 2010).

The use of multiple platforms by the audiences and their interactions with a variety of media might have produced a clear picture of their engagement with the international media. But it is the additional data from the respondents that helps produce an even fuller picture of the pattern: the cultural factor effects. For some of the audiences listening to international radio broadcasts has become a habit inherited from parents and developed into a culture that is being passed from one generation to the other.

> First of all, we listen to BBC because it has been a tradition from our great-grandfathers; we inherited it, it is like a norm when you are growing up in the North (Northern Nigeria). You have your father who is always listening to the BBC Hausa Service to keep abreast with world affairs and internal political and social happenings in the environment (*University lecturer*).

This radio listening 'tradition' was equally noticed by Abdulkadir (2000) in his study of Hausa radio culture in Nigeria. His conclusion is that majority of Hausa-speaking Northern Nigerians do not only regard radio listening as 'a habit', but they also 'see it as a Hausa cultural value' (p.130). This explains the popularity of international broadcasters among these audiences and the high consumption of their products. Overall, the responses reveal the audiences' pattern of consumption that is characterised by regular interactions with a variety of global media through multiple platforms, predominantly radio and television, and enhanced by a culture of engagement developed from the desire of wanting to know what is happening around the world.

Credibility and influence

One of the most crucial elements in media-audience relationship is the issue of credibility and trustworthiness of the media. The level of audiences' perceptions of media credibility determines to a large extent the level of influence that media may

have on their lives (Rampal and Adams, 1990). The credibility question is even more crucial on the consumption of news and current affairs programmes. And since the respondents here have shown that they do engage with the BBC more than they do with any other international media, it is vital to find out their assessment of its credibility and trustworthiness. The bulk of the responses reveal that their perception of the BBC's credibility is very high. All but one of the respondents rated BBC as the most credible and trustworthy international broadcaster that serves as a benchmark against which the authenticity of other media's reports are often adjudged. They used the attributes of accuracy, independence and impartiality as well as the timeliness and depth of coverage of events as their criteria to give BBC the best credibility rating.

> I tend to look at the BBC as the most credible medium in terms of the BBC's editorial policy of getting all sides of the news (*Postgraduate student*).
>
> I do not doubt all the reports I get from the BBC… Why? Because there is no media organisation that explains to us the way things are as the BBC does (*Farmer-student in the Peasant Group*).
>
> I do believe some news reports I get from the BBC and the rest of them. At times I do believe about 70 per cent of the news report I get (*Petty trader*).

This positive credibility rating reinforces the findings of the BBC surveys in Nigeria, which suggest such perception for the station (BBC World Service, 2007, 2008; BBC Global News, 2009, 2010). A previous study in Asia (Rampal and Adams, 1990) also reported positive credibility ratings for both the BBC and VOA and concluded that such perceptions enhanced their effectiveness in their public diplomacy roles. High consumption of media products and positive perceptions of their credibility do enhance their efficacy. It is essential then to find out how effective global media are in influencing the lives of their Northern Nigerian audiences. But, as many researchers (Klapper, 1960; Liebes and Katz, 1993; Liu and Johnson, 2011) argue, it is almost impossible to measure with precision the level of such effectiveness because the existence of intervening variables makes assessment of media influence very difficult. Still, since the respondents have confirmed both high consumption of global media products and good credibility rating for at least the BBC, it is important to find out directly from them how much influence they think these media exert on their lives.

> Well, actually I cannot quantify it because I can say 80-90 per cent of what I
> know internationally, I know it through the BBC (*Ex-soldier-cum-parliamentarian*).

> Sometimes what I get from the BBC is like what I get from school (*Student-teacher in the Working Class group*).

> Listening to (international broadcasters) has helped me…it shows me how to
> secure my rights from the government (and) how to deal with other people; it
> enlightens me of other religions (*Farmer-teacher in the Peasant Group*)

> I developed a lot of interest in sports through (listening to) the BBC World
> Service (*Sports Editor in Middle Class group*).

It is clear from the responses that the BBC and other global broadcasters have indeed been effective in enhancing these audiences' comprehension of international affairs and in providing them with contents that influence their lives. Fardon and Furniss's (2000) observation that interactions with transnational media may enable supposedly isolated Africans to be better informed of the global scene than some Westerners might have also gained resonance with these findings. In terms of analysing the audiences' reading practices too, Hall's (1980) concept of preferred reading appears to be applicable here; these respondents seem to have accepted the intended meanings of the messages they have been getting. In the case of the farmer-teacher's response, it appears to have even gone a bit further, entering into the realm of the powerful media thesis—though in its positive, rather than negative, context.

Complexity of dissonant consumption

The respondents' high consumption of Western media products and their admission that they do influence their understanding of international affairs may ordinarily presage their amiability towards the West. But the data suggests otherwise: majority of the respondents perceive the West—mainly United States and Britain—negatively. Many of them consider the West as being antagonistic to the Muslim world and respond in like manner. They view the issue from a "we-versus-them" prism, placing the West on the side of the otherness. There are elements of ambivalence, marked by "I-like-them-but" responses, but the overwhelming views reveal negative perception of the West—as these responses show:

> I have read much about history and I know how the West has been very
> unfair in trade, in investment, in colonialism (*University lecturer*).

I respect them (US and Britain), but I don't love them that much (*Local newspaper publisher*).

Honestly, America, in our view as Muslims, is not fair to us because when one man commits certain offence, even if he is not a Muslim or (he is) merely a nominal Muslim, they would twist it and link it to good Muslims (*Panel beater in the Working Class group*).

[T]he Gulf war was the first thing that made us feel like the Western world was capable of being brutal against Muslim countries (*Female ex-editor of Hausa newspaper*).

Negative perceptions of the West (particularly the United States) by Muslims is not a new phenomenon; previous studies did show that such unfriendly feelings are actually mutual (Gentzkow and Shapiro, 2004). But a display of anti-Western sentiment by high consumers of Western cultural goods presents an interesting scenario for reception research. It reveals the complexity of audience selectivity and reinforces the conceptual basis of diversity in audiences' decoding practices. The respondents' narratives in this case provide evidence of their oppositional readings (Hall, 1980) of Western media texts—and perhaps evidence of negotiated reading in the case of the local publisher. More evidence of oppositional readings and selectivity (Klapper, 1960; Liebes and Katz, 1993) was also found when they expressed their perceptions of the Western media's coverage of the Islamic world and Africa.

When they (Western media) present issues concerning Nigeria, Africa and other Third World countries, the analysis is always one of crises, anarchy, economic troubles, crimes and everything (*Male student in the Youth group*).

To a large extent I don't think they are fair to the Muslim world (*Female school administrator*).

The overwhelming feeling among the respondents is that the Western media, including the BBC, portray the West positively and depict the Islamic world—and to some extent Africa—negatively. From the depth and tone of all their responses, it is evident that high consumption of Western cultural goods has not really endeared the West to them. On the contrary, it produces 'boomerang effects' (Klapper, 1960, p.13), yielding negative consequences. The situation provides evidence of oppositional and critical readings of Western media texts (Hall, 1980; Liebes and Katz, 1993) by these audiences. It also confirms that extra-communication factors such as cultural,

religious, ideological, sociological and psychological factors play important roles in the audiences' interactions with the media (Klapper, 1960). Here the respondents' Islamic and African identities appear to have dissuaded them from accepting contents they consider inimical to those identities.

Selective Believability

The key findings of this study validate many existing models on the activeness and selectivity of audiences as well as the influence and limitations of the media. But they also provide new perspectives that point to new conceptual and theoretical postulates in audience research. The contradiction in combining high consumption of media products and high credibility rating of the media with high selectivity, for instance, is a new phenomenon the explanation of which the existing models do not provide. Similarly, the depth of influence extraneous factors exert in audiences' interactions with the media appears to be stronger than previously thought.

In the first instance, the audiences' high consumption of BBC's products and positive perception of its credibility, while at the same time rejecting some of its messages, present an obvious contradiction. Equally contradictory is their negative conception of the West, despite admitting that the Western media—which they say portray the West positively—do aid their comprehension of global affairs. The respondents themselves do acknowledge these contradictions, when pointed out to them, and their key explanation is that credibility does not automatically translate into believability. A gap seems to exist between them and extra-communication factors do play mediating role.

This is what brings in the concept of 'selective believability', which is coined here to explain the complex nature of the media-audience relationship unveiled in this study. It explains the audiences' high consumption of the products of credible media with high selectivity occasioned by the mediating roles of extra-communication factors. The phenomenon was unexpectedly noticed in the course of this research when respondents, apparently unconsciously, shift their views, often radically, from one opposing position to the other—and when reminded of such radical shift, they almost always offer identical answers to justify their decisions. For instance, often at the beginning of the interview they would unequivocally affirm their confidence in the

credibility of the BBC, stressing its trustworthiness, how much they rely on it to judge the accuracy of other media's reports and so on; but midway into the interview, when issues related to the coverage of the Muslim world or Africa were raised, they would suddenly, of their own volition, shift their position and accuse the BBC of being unfair in its coverage of such issues. Instantly, the trust that they said they have of the station would vanish from their discussion, and its reports on such issues dismissed as inaccurate or unfair.

This happened with remarkable regularity and consistency among almost all the respondents. Take the case of this tailoring business owner in the Lower Middle Class group: he had at the early part of the focus group interview said he trusted the BBC '*very well*'. However, midway into the discussion, when the issue of BBC's coverage of Islamic nations came up, he made a dramatic U-turn and said the BBC had been less than honest in that respect. '*Things like America's invasion of Iraq, you would find that the* (BBC's) *reports are contradictory,*' he said. His case was even less dramatic than that of a shop owner (in the same group) who said he preferred to get news '*directly from the BBC because whatever happens around the world and in Nigeria, if I don't get it from the BBC, I don't feel comfortable*'. But when the same issue of BBC's coverage of the Islamic world was raised, his perspective changed radically: '*I think they exaggerate things when it comes to Islam... I think there are fabrications...because they are dealing with Islamic nations*'. The same medium he said he felt uncomfortable without is the one he swiftly accused of engaging in 'fabrications'. There was also the case of a teacher in the Working Class group who had earlier said he trusted the BBC so much it influenced his change of attitude but later stated that he became so annoyed with its '*unfair*' reporting of Saddam Hussein that he at one time '*stopped listening to it completely…and shifted to Al-Jazeera*'. Such cases of selectivity are rampant in all the data. And the phenomenon is more complex than the previously identified concepts of selective perception, selective exposure and selective retention (Klapper, 1960).

Unlike the previous studies which measured short-term consumption, as Klapper (1960) admits, this research assesses long-term consumption (offering the audiences ample opportunities to narrate their vast experiences) and in the process identifies the depth of influence their predispositions and other extra-communication factors have in

their interactions with the media. In some cases, it is the respondents themselves that explain why they are selective. The following comment from a councillor in the Political Class group illustrates a conscious effort to select: '*I honestly select what to believe because there is no radio or television station that has no agenda… So I assure you that we are selective, to avoid becoming victims of their propaganda*'. While for him—and indeed his group—selectivity in this case serves as a defence mechanism to guard against becoming victims of 'propaganda', for some the selection is apparently influenced by ideological conviction, as the case of a deputy political editor in the Middle Class group shows: '*When you listen to any medium…you tend to select based on your ideological conviction or your interest*'. Whatever maybe the motivating factor, it is clear that in all the enumerated cases neither the content nor the credibility of the media erased the audiences' power to select what they want to believe. And it is this resilience—this ability to withstand other forces that the three previously identified selection processes do not often withstand—that sets the concept of selective believability apart.

There are other distinguishing features too. The consumption of wide range of media messages (including dissonant messages) which is evident here contrasts sharply with the concept of selective exposure, which is the tendency of the audiences to expose themselves to only those messages that 'accord with their existing attitudes and interests' (Klapper, 1960, p. 19). Although there are elements of selective exposure exhibited by some of the respondents here—as in the case of the teacher who suspended listening to BBC because of its anti-Saddam reporting and switched to *Al-Jazeera*—careful observation shows that they are not exclusively selective exposure. The same man, for instance, when asked which medium he trusted more between the BBC and *Al-Jazeera*, said: '*On issues that relate to Islam, I trust the Al-Jazeera more; but on those issues which are not related to Islam, I trust the BBC more*'. His case was actually a case of inter-media selectivity which sits well with the concept of selective believability (not selective exposure).

Another distinguishing attribute of selective believability is that it does not seem to have obvious link with selective retention, though it may have an element of it. Selective retention is mainly the tendency of the audiences to forget unsympathetic messages 'more readily than they forget sympathetic' ones (Klapper, 1960, p. 19).

Although no test was conducted in this study to find out which of the messages the respondents retain more, the respondents do not appear to be forgetful of unpleasant messages. They seem able to remember dissonant messages as accurately as they do congenial ones. They were able to recall unsympathetic messages of yesteryears. Some of them recalled vividly unpleasant media reports of 20 years—as the case of the former female editor who cited instances of alleged biased BBC reporting of the first Gulf War of 1991 shows.

Of the three previously identified selective processes (selective exposure, selective perception and selective retention), what selective believability appears to have more in common with is selective perception—the tendency of audiences to reject 'unsympathetic material…or to recast and interpret it to fit their existing views' (Klapper, 1960, p. 19). They were probably exhibiting that tendency here when they, for instance, perceive the West negatively, even though the media they consume portray the West positively. They were also possibly displaying it when they shift their view of praising BBC for its 'credibility' in its coverage of general subjects to that of condemning it in its 'unfair' coverage of the Islamic world. And, of course, all the selective processes (including selective exposure and selective retention) are cognitive activities that deal with handling of messages based on previous experiences and personal idiosyncrasies. Selective believability just appears to be a more complex cognitive activity with perhaps stronger involvement of extraneous forces of beliefs, cultural values and attitudes.

The concepts of selectivity and active audience are, of course, not without their own controversies even among those scholars who in principle accept their relevance in audience studies. Ang (1996), for instance, has warned against 'cheerfully (equating) "active" with "powerful", in the sense of "taking control" at an enduring structural or institutional level' (p. 139). Similarly, Morley (2006) questions audience works that 'exaggerated, and wrongly romanticized the supposed power and freedoms of media consumers', arguing that it is wrong to assume that audiences are in constant struggle with the media, 'in which they constantly produce oppositional readings of its products' (p. 102).

They have valid points. The findings here do not show the audiences appropriating the 'power' of the media—nor do they reveal only the oppositional readings of its products; there are negotiated and dominant readings too. This study essentially unveils the complexity of media-audience relationship. The findings do not only revalidate the concept of selectivity but also reveal its current dynamics in the face of the changing media landscape. They clearly show that audiences do actively select and interpret media messages in 'myriad ways' (Ang, 1996, p. 139). They also reveal that selectivity can take different forms and that selective believability—which the study identifies—appears to be a complex and comprehensive form of selectivity that combines both the elements of selective exposure and selective perception on one hand, and the stronger involvement of extraneous forces such as beliefs, cultural values and attitudes on the other. The findings highlight the strong roles extra-communication factors play in audiences' interactions with the media and identify the dynamics of credibility and believability. Credibility, this study shows, is a necessary but not sufficient condition for believability in audiences' consumption of dissonant media messages.

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