Prof. Gilbert Motsaathebe

Indigenous Language Media in Africa, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa

Email : gilmot2000@ yahoo.co.uk

ORCID: https://orcid. org/0000-0002-8681-6945

UNDERSTANDING THE DYNAMICS OF BROADCAST OPERATIONS DRIVEN BY A CONVERGED DIGITAL ECOSYSTEM

ABSTRACT

Broadcast Media Africa's 2021 conference in Cape Town, South Africa, was dubbed the "Broadcast Media Convention of Southern Africa" and was organised in partnership with the Southern Africa Broadcasting Association. The conference drew attention to several issues, including the technological developments affecting broadcasters and the effect of Covid-19 on broadcasting operations. This article is based on the paper presented there. The article notes that the broadcast industry has evolved drastically over the past few years. However, with rapid technological developments and new trends in the increasingly digital and converged media markets, broadcast managers increasingly must look for new strategies to stay afloat in the competitive and media-rich environment in which broadcast institutions operate. The article posits that the new media ecosystem has essentially brought to the fore one aspect, which was always known but often took for granted – the importance of the audience. The article appraises the developments in the converging environment to improve our understanding of how African broadcasters could continue to innovate successfully.

Keywords: media convergence, broadcast media, digitality, digital media, Broadcast Media Africa

UNDERSTANDING CONVERGENCE

According to Chakaveh and Boge (2007: 811), media convergence is a phenomenon of communication "where every mass medium eventually merges to the point where they become one medium due to the advent of new communication technologies". The media convergence theory illuminates the recent trends of media convergence widely defined as a form of cross-media cooperation, usually involving broadcast, print, photography, and internet sites (Hurley 2016). This cross-media cooperation happens at the levels of production and distribution via digital tools and internet platforms. Thus, media convergence integrates

different media formats, content, and style for easy distribution via multiple media platforms, including legacy media such as radio and television as well as digital platforms and applications such as podcasts, websites, YouTube, and popular social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp. Convergence theory, therefore, makes assumptions about the fusion of various media forms and content with multiple distribution channels available to the public. It further explains how this fusion leads to an engaged audience that is becoming increasingly fragmented because audiences now have more control over the type of content they want to access at a particular time and place.

Importantly, convergence can be seen at the level of content digitisation where content is adapted for use on multiple media platforms and at the corporate concentration level where fewer large companies own more different types of media. From a convergence point of view, media organisations have had to adapt to the multimedia platforms provided by technological development to cater to an increasingly fragmented audience whose habits of obtaining information continue to be revolutionised by the technology at their disposal. It is precisely this fragmentation of audience that has wreaked havoc on the broadcast industry and left it in an adapt-or-perish mode.

CURRENT CONTEXT – TILTING THE SCALE

Media convergence has resulted in what could be referred to as "titling the scales". This shift presents a challenge for media practitioners to meet today's dynamic audiences' demands. This is because broadcasters cannot afford to lose their audience. After all, they are in the business of content production with the audience as critical customers.

In the past, broadcasters enjoyed the monopoly of content production and dissemination. This situation has changed because the audience can produce their own content and distribute it to reach a mass audience. In the past, media organisations were in control and they dispatched content in an asymmetrical way from the broadcasters to the audience who had little choice over the situation. Audiences now have other means of accessing the content they need on the internet or through pay per view or streaming, which enables them to watch what they want when they want to. Of course, such viewing habits complicate broadcast programming and scheduling, which used to be more structured and segmented because the broadcasters knew their market share and could easily measure their ratings. Being able to measure their ratings enabled television broadcasters to attract advertisers strategically.

Now audiences participate more in the content produced by prominent broadcasters on Twitter, WhatsApp and Facebook. For example, broadcasters have begun using WhatsApp voice notes from the audience in their programmes to incorporate audience views. This makes the audience co-creators in content generation. Information technology also allows users to interact actively with the content by commenting or sharing. These technologies are also more flexible compared to television, so users can produce their own content to share online to reach a mass audience, making them "produsers" (producer + user). They also allowed for the creation of online streaming platforms such as Showmax and Netflix.

The nature of new media content provides more flexibility in terms of how the audiences engage with it. As Mathurine (2013) states, "media content can now be saved, copied, archived, searched, related to other content, and shared via social networks". An audience could access content and be able to share it with friends and strangers at the press of a button, leading to a loss in potential revenue that could have been generated from that content.

The audience is now more in control of what they can watch, when to watch it, and how/where. Furthermore, users can choose from various programmes on websites and apps. Broadcasters themselves have taken full advantage of technology by making available multiple digital channels online and mobile applications. This participation of broadcasters in the online space has increased immensely during the lockdowns necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic. For the first time, news anchors could present news from home/their living rooms.

However, nowadays it is no longer just about producing good content. It is also about ensuring that the content reaches a mass audience that is not easy to quantify. They are widely dispersed across an array of multimedia platforms. The media must produce content for those platforms, and as each platform requires tailor-made content, it is not just about one-glove-fit-all. Every platform has its specific dimensions and requires tailor-made content.

Furthermore, direct broadcast satellite services such as DStv have developed a system where individuals who own a specific decoder can save programmes so that they can watch them later. This does away with the transitory aspect of traditional television. Television stations have also developed subscription-based applications that individuals can download onto their smartphones or laptops, so that they view content whenever they want to. Smart television is a traditional television set that is connected to the internet. An individual who owns a smart television can browse the internet and stream videos or music. Smart televisions also allow viewers to access their online streaming services like Netflix, Amazon Prime and YouTube.

IMPLICATION FOR THE KEY PILLARS FOR A SUCCESSFUL BROADCAST ORGANISATION

These developments have affected the broadcast business and shook the key pillars. A successful television station requires skilled personnel, good content, financial viability, and up-to-date technological infrastructure and equipment. These aspects are interrelated and mutually inclusive. For example, organisations cannot have great content if they do not have money, the right people to produce such content, and the equipment to produce it. However, the technological disruption has presented significant challenges to, among others, audience behaviour, content, business, production, and scheduling. As a result, media institutions now must look at innovative ways of running their enterprise in a market where audiences are in control of what they need from the media. These have implications for scheduling, programming, advertising revenue, digital skills, broadcasting business, and technological infrastructure.

The critical factors in this arrangement include sustainability of the current funding models, management models and organisational structure for the digital age, digital savvy staff, and programming and scheduling. As indicated, the challenge is even more pressing for public service broadcasters that play a critical civic role. Furthermore, the problem is far more acute for developing countries due to various factors that include a lack of clear funding strategies, management issues, overbearing political interference, and pitiable adaptation to the new media context.

Sustainability of funding of broadcasting

Broadcasters in Africa tend to adopt a hybrid model that generates revenue from advertising and other sources such as television licences or government support. Ratings and revenue are critical in this business model. In the case of public service broadcasters, the problem is that "hybrid funding can lead to tensions between public and purely commercial broadcasters when it leads the former to chase ratings and revenue at the latter's expense" (Thomas 2009: 34). The larger your audience, the more advertising you are likely to attract. Audiences are drawn to the quality of the content. Hence Phillis' (1997: 79) decades-old assertion that "we must work hard to ensure that our programmes are fresh and relevant, that they connect powerfully with the lives of all who pay for us" still rings true.

Advertising is often a challenge as advertisers may dictate where they want their products to be placed and can threaten to withdraw at any time if they feel that they do not like the content. Television broadcasters may end up being beholden to advertisers as they do not want to lose them and lose money. Collection of revenue from licence fees is often challenging, especially if people feel that the programming quality does not warrant any revenue collection. In such cases, one could experience a culture of non-payment and other evasive techniques.

Additionally, the subscription fee as a form of financing in Africa has been problematic because only those with the financial means can afford those services. Other forms of funding for public service television, such as donor funds, are scarce in Africa and are often tied to stringent conditions. This is a big issue because financial pressures can easily constrain the media's professional obligations (Motsaathebe 2013).

The problem with government funding

When it comes to government funding, it could be difficult to differentiate between government-controlled television and genuine public service television. When a television station is controlled by the government, it becomes a government mouthpiece instead of the public watchdog that the public service broadcaster ought to be. According to Price and Marc (2011: 09), the ideal funding should have the following characteristics: "(a) it is guaranteed for many years so that politicians cannot interfere; (b) it is sufficient to achieve the multiple tasks the public service broadcaster must perform; and (c) it allows some opportunity for accountability".

Management models and organisational structures for the digital age

Typically, broadcasting institutions have been characterised by various management approaches and structures. These include organisational structures such as the hierarchical structure, matrix structure, horizontal structure, network structure, divisional structure, line organisational structure, and team-based organisational structure (Ahmady & Mehrpou 2016; Bevacqua 2019).

Broadcasting institutions usually have a hierarchical, matrix or line organisational structure. Authority follows from top to bottom, where various sections of the stations are organised according to their functions under managers who report to their superiors according to their organisational hierarchy. Such a structure typically consists of three levels of management, namely top-level, middle-level, and low-level. The question that needs to be interrogated is which management model or models are suited for the current environment. This is even more important because management approaches derive from organisational science, mainly focusing on manufacturing and service industries – in which production processes differ from those of the media industry. This requires careful rethinking. This is because the media industry deals with a product of a different nature; for example, broadcasting content is more about creativity and the cautious application of knowledge, skills, and technology, than the automation seen in most industries. Running a broadcast institution is different from running a mass-production factory (Thomas 2009: 43).

It is also clear that some countries do not have the advantage of a strong economy that characterises much of the developed world (Price & Marc 2011); therefore, broadcasters in countries such as those that are located in the Global South have to double their efforts to find funding in a constricted economic environment. Where government funding is used, it is essential for public service television broadcasters not to lose their independence, which enables them to serve their mandate of public good and hold the same government accountable to the public. In essence, the financial and management problems often experienced by broadcasters require them to rethink their management strategies.

Skilled staff

The digital media environment requires more employees who are skilled in producing and disseminating television content via different online platforms. Therefore, the development of digital technological skills in staff is a challenge that needs to be taken more seriously to give public service television in Africa a competitive advantage. Besides, the new technological environment meant that people at different levels of the organisation might have better knowledge and possess most of the skills required in the digital environment. Therefore, broadcasters must be careful not to be bogged down in hierarchical structures.

Programming and scheduling, media convergence

One of the main challenges is effectively reaching the widely dispersed audience with the quality content they require. In an environment characterised by multiculturalism, multilingualism and exclusion, the focus is more on personalised and interactive content and not the one-size-fits-all type that audiences have become accustomed to through scheduling and programming over many years. Programming is moving towards multi-platform activity and increased focus on audience participation and engagement. However, some poorer communities who do not have the means to access online services may remain excluded. For example, in many countries the cost of data remains unaffordable to many poor communities.

Another factor is that audiences want relatable content that they can identify with. To alleviate the problem of losing the audience, public service broadcasters must ensure that they do not compromise on the quality of their programmes. Thus, broadcasters must still ensure that their programmes are engaging, informative, developmental, educational and entertaining.

SPECIFIC CHALLENGES FOR PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING

The new media ecosystem also puts public service broadcasting in a precarious situation. For example, at the core of public service broadcasting is the principle of universality, which means that public service broadcasting must be accessible to every citizen throughout a country. In addition, the principle of diversity means that the broadcaster must offer varied programming. Commercial broadcasters do not have the same mandate and can easily target content that generates profit. The problem with public broadcasters is that they have a completely different mandate, which goes beyond commercial imperatives. Their public service mandate restricts how they could operate profitably in the same way as commercial broadcasters do.

The licencing conditions under which these broadcasters operate require them to serve the public first and have specific quotas of certain content, whereas commercial broadcasters have very few restrictions. In Africa, for example, public service broadcasting plays a vital role in servicing the public. Africa is a diverse continent, and individual countries have multiple languages and cultures that need to be addressed through public service television content. Many countries, especially in Asia and Africa, are characterised by marginalisation and inequality, exacerbated by low living standards and insecurity for specific communities.

National television services must provide for these varied communities, including marginalised communities (for example the San, Khoi and Nama people in South Africa, Namibia and Botswana). These relatively small communities are often excluded from the national (social, civic, cultural and economic) life. This means that programming mainly motivated by profit motives may not accommodate specific communities.

Limitation of funding/fundraising

The mandate of public broadcasting limits how it can fundraise as it strives to remain independent from funders who are more likely to impose conditions that may conflict with its order. Price and Marc (2011: 8) are correct in observing that "while financing is always a critical issue, in many of the most developed societies, there is the luxury of choice: a strong economy, a group of supportive viewers, and a legislature with ample funds to allocate." This is not the case in Africa and other lesser developed countries, often characterised by a weak economy.

Furthermore, state-controlled and public service broadcasting differ minimally in many parts of Africa. The governments in many countries wield considerable control over broadcasting. These institutions are often used for political mobilisation, stifling opposition and dictating programming, particularly in elections. These practices conflict with the mission and defining characteristics of public services broadcasting. Public service broadcasting must play a civic role in reaching out to all citizens with varied programming that serves broader developmental agendas. It is characterised by a desire to serve the public, which means it must serve the more general interest of various communities within its sphere of influence. Hence Jakubowicz (2011: 79) describes it as the "voice of a nation". It is characterised by the principles of universality/access, diversity, independence, and, most importantly, a public good (Independent Television Commission 2005).

A highly commercialised environment

Public broadcasting must compete in an environment that is highly commercialised. There is minimal viable funding because the essential virtue of independence that is the cornerstone of public broadcasting may be compromised by funders who want to impose conditions that conflict with the public broadcast mandate.

The interactive nature of multimedia platforms could enhance public deliberation and engagement, which is important as it gives the public more power to let their voice permeate the public sphere. It however debilitates the asymmetrical way in which content has always been transmitted. Furthermore, media content can easily be copied, archived, and shared to an individual's mass audience, making it very difficult to generate viable revenue from such content. Much has been written about the role of public service broadcasting but the focus has recently changed to the sustainability of these broadcasting institutions due to the current media environment characterised by multimedia platforms (Bardoel & D'Haenens 2008; Enli 2008; Motsaathebe 2018).

BROADCAST MEDIA AND RECENT CHALLENGES

At the height of the Covid-19 lockdowns we saw broadcasters seizing the opportunity to fully utilise technology with many presenting news from their homes. They took full advantage of the technology available. The television industry also uses mobile apps and websites. Their channels are also available on YouTube. For example, the SABC streamed live on Facebook. When referring to local content production, the audience wants content that they can relate to and where they are co-creators. For that reason,

we have seen companies such as Netflix investing heavily in local content in Africa. Dovey (2021) equally stresses the need for more local production in Africa. What is problematic about a streaming platform such as Netflix is that it is not regulated in the same way as other broadcasters. Chamberwa (2021) has noted Netflix's growing popularity in Africa, and South Africa in particular. As Chamberwa (2021) points out, Netflix challenges the monopoly of a company such as Multichoice in South Africa, while at the same time gaining an unfair advantage by producing and profiting from the content without any policy intervention. This means that policy makers need to find a way to ensure the levelling of the playing field between online based content producers and traditional content producers who are often subjected to stringent regulations.

THE ROAD AHEAD

The new environment offers the opportunity to expand to and thrive on digital platforms. For example, there is a need for efficient and competent executives who are dexterous in digitality. Poor management, resignations and continual talks of turnaround strategies characterised the public broadcast service environment in the past.

Training in new media

Related to this, television broadcasters need to train employees in new media platform services. Young employees are usually more versatile with digital technology because they have been more accustomed to it. This means that managers may have to consider this reality and give those with the relevant skills space to contribute to managerial strategies or even bring them in as part of their management structures at different levels of the organisation. This also relates to team-based management, which is appropriate for managing television broadcasting in the current digital environment.

Content production, programming and scheduling

Previously programming has been a distinct aspect for public television broadcasters. Still, the audience would be difficult to target with relevant programming like daytime programmes, children's programmes, primetime news, adult viewing and sports, which have characterised television programming for a long time and attracted vast audiences. As mentioned before, good programmes attract audiences who, in turn, attract advertisers. For commercial broadcasters, these numbers translate into good advertising revenue. In terms of content, it is also evident that the content distributed online is driven by audiences creating their own content, which is relatable and depicts their realities.

Commercial broadcasters often opt for specialist channels such as sports, fashion, and so forth. Such programmes are usually accessed by subscription. This may not be viable for public service television stations as they have a different mandate that requires inclusive content. Nonetheless, public service television has maintained a strong presence in Africa due to its critical civic role.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Broadcasters will have to continue following the market. This means that they need to intensify efforts to disseminate content according to audience preferences. They must also ensure that they supply more content that involves audiences as co-creators. Furthermore, they may have to increasingly follow the trend of influencer marketing in which personalities who are followed the most online and command a large audience and influence their attitude can be utilized to help attract audiences for broadcasters. These influencers could help to promote shows on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and other social media platforms to attract an audience. There is also a need for broadcasters to find a meaningful way to cater for the marginalised and the excluded communities who do not have the means to partake in the digital space. The other important area that requires attention is the upskilling and reskilling of broadcast media professionals to meet the skills requirements for multi-level online streaming. Ultimately there is a need to find ways to address increasing stratification and inequalities in service provision and viewership. At present, the increased monetisation of content results in the exclusion of the poor members of the community who cannot afford certain services provided by broadcasters. Convergence also makes it possible for companies to reduce labour and material costs, use the same media content across several media outlets, and increase brand presence. This aspect, however, needs to be handled with care to ensure that it does not result in job losses in an environment where there are already high unemployment rates. As indicated, there are many challenges and questions for those setting policy goals to ensure sufficient diversity, independence, and accessibility of electronic media in the digital environment. There is therefore a need for more research that looks at how the digital disruption interfaces with existing inequalities in society and the extent to which the convergence accommodates those who have been left at the margins of citizenship.

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