

# The Internet and International Broadcasting: Towards a Global Public Sphere

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## Abstract

This paper interrogates the nexus between the internet, international broadcasting and the quest for a sustainable global sphere, especially as it pertains to Nigeria. It examines the importance of shifting from a public to a global public sphere in international broadcasting. ‘Sphere’ in international broadcasting is being constantly re-defined and reviewed on account of the introduction of the internet and new media forms into broadcasting, and which have consequently globalised hitherto ‘localized’ public discussions of issues. The introduction of new communication technologies have considerably expanded the public space for discussions and debates. This paper therefore recommends that Nigeria broadcasting stations that offer international broadcasting services should make more and effective use of new media platforms for their broadcasts as well as properly utilize new communication technologies to package programme contents in order to be more relevant and involved in international broadcasting.

**Keywords:** International broadcasting, Internet, Global sphere, Public sphere, New media, Nigeria

## 1. Introduction

The idea of communicating beyond national borders is encapsulated in the concept of international communication. International broadcasting stems from international communication but deals with the use of electronic and broadcast tools for communicating with audiences in foreign countries. According to (Onabajo, 2000) international broadcasting is aimed at objectively creating inter-community (between countries) exchange of information through the means of broadcasting.

Global inter-community exchange of information is achieved using international broadcast mediums which include radio, television, cable networks and the internet. By their broadcasts and programmes they introduce important socio-political discussions into the public sphere. This is especially true in democracies. Public discussion and participation in state and societal affairs are the hallmark of true democracy. Public sphere focuses on bringing important issues to the plane of public discussion. The concept and theory of public sphere advocates and describes the creation of a space where citizens of a country share opinions, ideas and criticisms of happenings within their state to influence political actions; while serving as a quasi-regulatory institution.

Public sphere can be either national or global and international broadcasting has a role in determining if public sphere will be global or not. International broadcasting tends to enlarge the space for public discussion of issues and events beyond the country of origin, and the Internet facilitates this process. International broadcasting has made omni-directional flow of information all across the world easy and accessible. That is why it is now possible that within minutes of an occurrence or event, it is already a world news. By broadcasting to other countries, people in those countries become aware and thus discuss, share their own opinion and comments. These discussions and positions in some ways affect the nature of decisions and actions taken by the home government on those issues. This goes to highlight the shift from a national public sphere to a global public sphere. The focus of this paper is to shed light on the nature and shift of the public sphere from national or local sphere to a global sphere in this age of new communication technologies that seem to strengthen

Marshall McLuhan's concept of a global village.

## 2. The Concept of International Broadcasting

International broadcasting is a type of broadcasting utilising radio, television, direct satellite broadcast, and the Internet for dissemination of news and information across national boundaries with the aim of projecting a country's image and ideals. International broadcasting is purposeful communication with other countries. This is captured in the definition by (Alao, Uwom & Alao, 2013:95) describing international broadcasting as "a form of broadcasting that is deliberately aimed at a foreign, rather than a domestic audience." Another authors, (Asekun-Olarinmonye, Uwom, Chioma & Olatubosun, 2014: 25) note that "it is a deliberate dissemination of broadcast messages to an audience outside the borders of the broadcast organization's territory." It entails transmitting ideas, messages, values, culture and the 'nationness' of a country to other countries through broadcast channels. It is in this light that (Price, Haas & Margolin, 2008:6) posit that international broadcasting is:

a complex combination of state-sponsored news, information, and entertainment, directed at a population outside the sponsoring state's boundaries. It has largely meant the use of electronic media by one society to shape the opinion of the people and leaders in another.

International broadcasting started with radio broadcasting, and then moved on to television, following its invention in the 1930s, and now it is carried out through satellite and the Internet. According to (Asekun-Olarinmonye et al., 2014:25):

The first international broadcast took place in March 1927, with a Dutch shortwave radio broadcast for the Netherlands's colonies in the Dutch East Indies. In May 1931, France began broadcasting to its territories overseas, and in December the following year, the BBC began ten-hour daily English language broadcasts to its overseas dominions and colonies. Early international broadcasting included but is not limited to: Radio Moscow, Vatican radio, Deutsche Welle, radio Free Asia, Voice of America (VOA), and British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC).

The major audience of International broadcasting are: Governments: International broadcasting is targeted at governments of foreign countries; to build and strengthen ties, to project and explain foreign policies, as well as share opinions on world events. Expatriates: International broadcasting is a means for the country's nationals in other countries to listen and watch programmes from their home countries. For them, it is a means to stay in touch with home. Business Organisations: International broadcasting showcases the economic and business resources and potentials of the host country to investors in foreign countries. This is to increase investment in the home country which will boost the economy. Journalists: Journalists monitor news from all around the world; and so, international broadcasting provides them with ready source for news and information about foreign countries.

### 2.1 Rationale for International Broadcasting

Countries engage in international broadcasting for different reasons. These include, being perceived favourably by other countries as well as broaden their sphere of influence.

The following are majorly the rationale for international broadcasting: dissemination of political and social ideologies, norms and practices, boost the acceptance of their foreign policies, expression and projection of

culture and language, encourage foreign business investments as well as enhance economic and trade goals, promote tourism, dispel negative thoughts and change perception of the country (propaganda). In times of conflict, international broadcasting is coordinated with military strategy and, increasingly, is wheeled into service as part of post-conflict peacekeeping (Price, 2001).

## **2.2. Nigeria's International Broadcasting**

In Nigeria, international broadcasting began with the establishment of Voice of Nigeria (VON) in 1961. Today, Voice of Nigeria (VON) and Nigerian Television Authority International (NTAi) are the national channels for international broadcasting in the country. Private broadcasting stations such as, Channels International, African Independent Television through its cable (DAAR Sat), and TV continental (COMSat), also engage in international broadcasting. The objectives of these international broadcasters are drawn from the central function enunciated for VON, which states:

The Corporation shall ensure that its services reflect views of Nigeria as a Federation and give adequate expression to the culture, characteristic, affairs and opinions of Nigeria and also its presentation of news and programme shall enhance Nigeria's foreign policy and image (Asekun-Olarinmonye, et al, 2014).

In a study conducted by (Asekun-Olarinmonye, et al, 2014). assessing Nigeria's international broadcasting by Nigerians in Diaspora, it was discovered that Nigerian international broadcasting and broadcasters are filling a void in the information need of Nigerians abroad by delivering information on socio-economic and cultural life of Nigeria. However, majority of the respondents rated the quality of the programmes on international television stations as poor, though they regarded the reliability of information disseminated by Nigerian international broadcasters as credible. They recommended that the stations package their programmes well since the stations are like image makers of the host country and that more professionals should be featured on these stations to appeal to foreign audiences.

## **3. The Concept and Theory of Public Sphere**

Democracy is a government of the representation and thrives on discussion and deliberations on issues by citizens for government to address. That forum for discussion is known as the public sphere. The public sphere is the bedrock of democracy. It provides the platform for the expression, structuring and channelling of ideas and views on political matters. The idea of public sphere borders on the idea of participatory democracy and how public opinion becomes political action.

Public sphere is a discursive platform (real or abstract) where citizens of a country identify and discuss societal and political issues and through the discussions influence political and state decisions. Describing the public sphere, (Castells, 2008:78) submits:

The space of communication of ideas and projects that emerge from society and are addressed to the decision makers in the institutions of society...(It) is an essential component of socio-political organization because it is the space where people come together as citizens and articulate their autonomous views to influence the political institutions of society.

In the public sphere people discuss topical, political and societal issues and thus opinions and attitudes which

serve to guide national affairs, affirm or challenge the status quo in society are generated. Thus, the public sphere serves as a regulatory institution; a social apparatus for checks and balances on government and societal affairs. This is affirmed by Seyla (1992) who states that, “the basic ideal belief in public sphere theory is that the government's laws and policies should be steered by the public sphere, and that the only legitimate governments are those that listen to the public sphere.”

The concept of public sphere was advanced by Jurgen Habermas in his book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962). He defines the public sphere as a “society engaged in critical public debate”. Habermas in Soules (2007) expresses that the public sphere is a virtual or imaginary community which does not necessarily exist in any identifiable space, made up of private people gathered together, as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state. He notes that the success of the public sphere was founded on rational-critical discourse; everyone is an equal participant and the supreme communication skill is the power of argument. Soules (2007) citing Habermas claims that the public sphere can be animated by "opinion-forming associations" - voluntary associations, social organizations, churches, groups of concerned citizens, grassroots movements, trade unions-to counter or refashion the messages of authority.

The public sphere is thus like a production site; open to every citizen for discussion of state affairs where ideas and opinions are articulated, distributed, and negotiated to influence state affairs. It is about creating a space for monitoring and state affairs through informed and critical discourse by members of the society.

#### **4. Public Sphere and International Broadcasting**

Public sphere and International broadcasting are closely linked. International broadcasting has been fully examined in a previous section of this paper. However, it is important to remember that it is used to disseminate news and information across national boundaries with the aim of projecting a country's image and ideals. Public sphere as defined by Odugbemi (2008) “is a space where free and equal citizens come together to share information, to debate, to discuss, or to deliberate on common concerns”, is relevant to international broadcasting because it is the fulcrum on which international broadcasting hangs. An article in a World Bank publication, *CommGAP* establishes the link between communication and public sphere .... “The development of mass communication has changed the nature of the public sphere from a physical structure to a communication structure... Therefore, today's public sphere goes beyond space and includes all channels of communication through which citizens can send and receive information.” It should be noted however that public sphere can only be made possible if the communication is two-way, i.e. aside from sending information; receiving feedback makes the concept of public sphere complete.

In Nigeria, international broadcasters have also adopted the notion of public sphere as defined above. Many international broadcasters in the country send information and receive and monitor feedback using various social media and internet platforms. Channels Television, a privately owned international broadcast station in Nigeria was instrumental to dissemination of political news to people in Nigeria and outside the country during the 2015 general elections in Nigeria, thus influencing political action. The station created a public space whereby Nigerians and non-Nigerians monitored the elections, discussed the conduct of the elections, results, and raised issues on what transpired in the country. The station used interface platforms like Twitter, YouTube, Facebook and many others to achieve this and to get feedback from global audiences.

## 5. National to Global Public Sphere: The Internet in International Broadcasting

It has been noted in previous paragraphs that public sphere can be categorised into two namely national and global. Habermas model of public sphere described a national or state public sphere, but with Internet and direct satellite broadcasting, and globalization, there seems to be shifts from national public sphere to global public sphere (Castells, 2008; Chowdhury, 2011; Kahn, Gilani & Nawaz, 2012).

Describing the emergence of a global public sphere, Kahn, Gilani & Nawaz (2012) submit:

The new public sphere is emerging out of the digital gadgets starting from a 'computer' then connecting them into 'network', which started within a building, then cities, states and finally 'global-networks' came up with the gadget of 'Internet', a global platform giving every citizen an opportunity to become an 'international-citizen'

A global public sphere can be defined as deterritorialised spaces for discussion made possible by global communication media and the Internet. It leads to the formation of public opinions across national boundaries. In a global public sphere, issues in one country/region are no longer discussed and buried in that country, they become part of global public discourse by global citizens. With just a click of the button, news and information about a country are readily available to people everywhere in the world. People and groups from various countries in the world can express their thought, opinions, give suggestions, and the dimensions of the discourse influence state and political decisions.

It is in this regard that Hjarvard (2011:1) enunciates that:

Although political leaders are still most sensitive to public opinion articulated within their own national boundaries, they cannot afford to ignore the public opinion articulated through the global media. This transnational public opinion represents a political force in its own right, and it has the ability to influence national opinions and, thus, to change the national political basis of power.

International broadcasters understanding the concept of global public spheres now have channels and internet sites to serve as rallying points for a global audience. In Nigeria, *Channels Television*, has its web page, Twitter handle, as well as YouTube account for dissemination of programmes. Such, provides forum for individuals to discuss national and international issues, thus bringing to life the concept of public sphere as anyone can gain free access and express their opinions.

A series of events bear witness to the emergence of a global public sphere; indicating global consciousness, debate and decision making. The series coordinated bombing in Paris on November 13, 2015 where 130 people were killed by suicide bombers of ISIL had people from different countries in the world condemning the attacks and calling it an act of terrorism. People on social networks on the internet showed solidarity. Many heads of state and heads of government, as well as the United Nations, offered messages of condolence and solidarity in the wake of the attacks.

Again in Paris, there was the *Je suis Charlie* campaign in January, 2015, a world campaign in support of freedom of the press following the killing of twelve people at the office of *Charlie Hedbo*, a French satirical weekly newspaper. Following this there was a march in France, led by 14 world presidents in solidarity against the violence. In 2014, the abduction of over 200 school girls from Chibok, Adamawa state, Nigeria by Boko Haram also sparked global interest, discussion and activism. The story made headline news for different

international news media such as CNN, BCC, Al Jazeera. CNN even sent their crew to Chibok, Nigeria and updates and exclusive interviews were broadcast. Online platforms and social media made the issue viral with the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls. Human rights activists around the world decried the acts and Presidents of different countries spoke against the abduction and offered their help in rescuing the girls.

All these are cases of how international broadcasting enhanced by the Internet leads to a global public sphere. One in which people regardless of their nationality express their opinions, discuss issues advancing support or opposition for issues/persons. The global public sphere serves as an organizing tool and a means for debate, dialogue, and collective decision making on a global level and is largely dependent on the global/local communication media system around the world. This creates global consciousness and has implications for political behaviours voting patterns, and on the decisions of governments (Castells, 2008).

## 6. Conclusion

The reality of a global public sphere is here to stay. This is perpetuated by internet enhanced international broadcasting where international broadcasters utilise internet tools means to reach foreign audience. The implication of this is that Nigerian international broadcasters should disseminate information, messages, and programmes that will steer global discourse about Nigeria in ways to achieve the country's purpose for international broadcasting.

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