A CRITICAL REVIEW ON VARIOUS FEATURE OF RESEARCH IMPLICATING MASS MEDIA AUDIENCE

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ABSTRACT

In order to survive in today's increasingly competitive mass media landscape, it is paramount to cater to the diverse requirements and preferences of the audience. Understanding these needs requires extensive research, which can be achieved through gathering data from secondary sources such as books, journals and other relevant recorded materials. This research delves into the ideology of mass media audience research, its different forms, and offers guidance on how to conduct it effectively. However, there are several challenges that need to be overcome, including limited knowledge in audience research, a lack of necessary research skills, difficulty in obtaining reliable statistical data, and the challenge of defining audiences in the context of both traditional and new media. Given these obstacles, prioritizing mass media audience research is of utmost importance.

Keyword: Mass media, Audience, Research, Challenges.

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INTRODUCTION

The number of mass media channels transmitting content globally has continued to increase. While these channels are primarily known for providing information, education, and entertainment, they also serve other important roles. In a saturated market, they strive to go beyond their traditional functions and act as platforms for uniting people, connecting people to government, promoting culture, providing environmental surveillance, mobilizing action, facilitating commerce, and encouraging the exchange of comments and criticism. However, for these functions to be successful, audiences must receive, accept, and utilize mass media content. Therefore, understanding the audience is crucial. Many media outlets today have little to no knowledge of their audiences. This raises the important question: "Who is listening? Who is watching?" Just like in any form of communication, broadcasters need to have an understanding of who they are communicating with. The real audience of mass media consists of the consumers of the messages communicated through these channels [1]. The

implementation of the Freedom of Information Act worldwide has significantly increased the need for and access to information, consequently expanding the scope of mass media audiences [2]. Mass media audiences refer to all recipients of mass media content. Since mass communication involves transmitting messages to a large and diverse anonymous audience, the recipients or receivers of these messages are considered the mass media audiences. Similar to traders and their customers, the mass media relies on satisfied audiences to stay in business, regardless of intentions, expectations, and aspirations. Audience satisfaction begins with audience identification, which is the initial step in researching mass media audiences [3, 4].

Mass media audience research involves gathering extensive information about the audience of a specific mass medium. The goal of this research is to gain a better understanding of the audience and what matters to them. Understanding the audience is crucial for effective communication and the success of any mass medium. Hicks argues that reaching the right people and creating content that resonates with them is vital for the success of the mass media business. The number of mass media outlets in the country continues to grow, with an abundance of options available to today's audience. To stay afloat, mass media outlets must understand their audience and preferences through research. Without a thorough understanding of the basic concept, background, elements, processes and the procedures involved, an organizations cannot effectively conduct this research. Therefore, this discussion aims to examine the fundamental constrains surrounding mass media audience research [5, 6].

Mass media audiences are not merely the passive recipient of messages but actively engage in interpreting and making sense of them within their personal and social circles.

Factors such as family background, beliefs, values, cultures, interests, and education influence how they interpret media messages. It would be unwise for mass media organizations to produce their contents without considering their audience's preferences and desires. Audience research is essential for truly understanding the needs of the audience [7, 8].

Consumers have the power to influence producers by using their spending power as "votes" for the goods and services they desire. In a current market economy, the demand should manage supply. This concept holds great importance in a competitive market. The media organizations must meet their audience's needs to survive in this fierce competition. They must recognize that consumers hold the power and act accordingly. Once again, mass media audience research is vital for determining these needs.

AUDIENCE CLASSIFICATION

In the past, the term "Mass Media Audience" referred to a totality of people gathered at an event, such as a town hall, theatre, or rhetoric forum. It simply meant the number of individuals physically present to listen to a talk or watch a performance. However, with the advent of mass media, such as printing press, radio and television in 19th and 20th century, the concept of Mass Media Audience evolved.

Today, due to advances in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), the proliferation of digitized content, and the widespread use of the Internet, the definition of mass media audience has become certainly more complex. Audience engagement is no longer confined to a physical space but extends to diverse and active online interactions. The concept now encompasses connectivity, interactivity, and hyper-textuality.

Broadly the definition of the mass media audience as "whosoever is the recipient of

mass media contents." [9]. A large audience is characterized by its heterogeneity, anonymity, and physical separation from the communicator. The audience size can vary depending on the medium used to transmit the message.

Customarily, the demographic polling procedure divided the people by gender, age, and many other easily identifiable population attributes. Presently, media professionals use sophisticated lifestyle breakdowns such as geographics and psychographics to dispense their contents and advertising to the interested audiences they seek [10].

Demographic segmentation involves categorizing audience members based on factors such as age, sex, marital status, religious believes, culture, profession, financial/socioeconomic status, educational level and membership in special organizations or society. It is essential to consider all these categories while conducting an audience research. However, it is emphasized that no single audience will be uniform in all aspects [11]. A more useful approach to categorizing mass media audiences is the geodemographic approach. Jonathan Robbin developed the Potential Rating Index for Zip Markets (PRIZM), a geodemographic tool that groups audiences based on ethnic believes, life style, living standards, mobility and social rank. This allows audiences to be grouped based on shared characteristics within a specific geographic area.

Geographic segmentation involves categorizing audiences based on their geographic location. This allows media professionals to tailor content and advertising specifically for that region or area. When studying audiences based on geography, factors such as region, district, city, or even climate are taken into consideration. The purpose of geographic segmentation is to understand the cultural differences among audiences in order to effectively reach them

with the right language and timing. For example, a sports program scheduled for 10:00 pm would be suitable for an urban area due to the bustling nature of the city at that time. However, it may not have the same appeal to rural dwellers who would already be in bed by then. Another important aspect of this segmentation is to avoid any communication noise. If a program goes against the norms and beliefs of a particular group, it would likely lose its appeal to the audience. Therefore, geographic segmentation is crucial for successful communication.

Psychographic segmentation is another form of segmentation, which categorizes mass media audiences based on lifestyle factors such as interests, attitudes, activities and personality traits. This type of segmentation seeks to understand the underlying reasons behind audience habits, preferences, and choices [12, 13].

REASONS OF MASS MEDIA AUDIENCE RESEARCH

Having established the "What?" clearly, the next question is "Why?" Why is mass media audience research necessary? identifies five reasons for the necessity of audience research. This section discusses those reasons.

Audience Research Allows for a Proper Understanding of the Audience

One reason to conduct audience research is to identify their demands based on demographic, geographic and/or psychographic factors. Socio-demographic factors include sex, culture, age, language, and religion. Geographic factors consider the audience's location, work, and schooling, and how these factors might impact their behavior. Psychographic factors examine the audience's needs, hopes, concerns, and aspirations. Previous knowledge takes into account the audience's familiarity with the message, pre-existing beliefs, and expectations. It also considers any barriers or

facilitators that may affect the audience's alignment with the message. Therefore, audience research allows mass media organizations to understand their access, coverage area, target composition and other similar requirements. This understanding helps them connect with their audiences and potentially win them over.

Audience Research Positions Mass Media Organizations to Operate Profitably

In order to remain profitable, broadcast stations must rely on audience research to identify their target audience. It is crucial for them to attract the desired audience for advertisers in order to achieve financial success. Therefore, it is essential to design programs that meet the needs of the identified audience to avoid wasting resources. Conducting research on ranking, financial contributions, resonance and reach of broadcast channels is compelling as it ensures that valuable resources are not wasted on programs that do not attract a significant number of the target audience. Audience research is critical for mass media platforms as it helps them reach the right audience, meet their needs, and increase revenue.

Audience Research Enables the Media to Increase their Value to Advertisers

Advertisers depend on mass media to reach a large audience, and the rating of a mass medium is determined by its reach, coverage, and audience size. Media organizations that have a broad audience base and a thorough awareness of audience demographics, psychographics and geodemographics are sponsered. This preference by advertisers is advantageous for any type of medium [14].

Audience Research Positions a Mass Medium Win Competition

When broadcast stations have a clear understanding of their audiences, they are able to meet their needs in ways that other stations may not have recognized. This allows them to maintain their audience and outperform their competition. In order to

assess the reach of their signals and compare it to their competitors' coverage, radio stations frequently ask audience members to call in and provide their location during test runs. A thorough understanding of the competition is essential for success, and conducting audience research plays a vital role in achieving that understanding [15].

Audience Research Preserves Resources

It is wasteful for a mass media outlet to invest significant resources - personnel, time, and money - into producing programs that go unnoticed or unwatched. By conducting effective audience research, a mass media outlet can focus its resources on creating programs tailored to the desires of its audience, thus avoiding fruitless endeavors.

FORMS OF MASS MEDIA AUDIENCE RESEARCH

Six forms of mass media audience research has been identified, which are referred to as "Audience Analysis." [16] They are briefly described below:

Social Audience Analysis

This research method utilizes social media analytics to analyze the composition, attitudes, and preferences of the audience. By employing social media analytic tools, mass media organizations can gather essential information about their audience population size while also identifying their preferences and needs through comments and responses.

Branded Audience Analysis

The primary focus of branded audience research is to identify and understand the target audience of a specific brand or media organization. Unlike other types of research, which may concentrate on individual programs or products, branded audience research delves into the corporate brand itself. Its main objective is to create, develop, measure, and strengthen corporate media brands.

Unbranded Audience Analysis

On the other hand, unbranded audience analysis does not center around the corporate

media brand. Instead, its goal is to comprehend an audience based on factors other than a shared media brand. This could involve examining specific media programs, television and online content, readers of a particular newspaper, and so on.

Competitor Audience Research

Competitor audience research is conducted with the goal of gaining a comprehensive understanding of the competition in order to gain an advantage. It is crucial for any organization to have a clear understanding of their competitors and their target audience in order to achieve success. This research involves the collection and analysis of data about the target audience of other competitors [17].

Demographic Audience Research

Demographic audience research aims to analyze the audience of mass media by categorizing them according to specific demographics, such as gender, age, education level, marital status, and occasionally geographic location. This type of research focuses solely on understanding the audience's composition, without delving into their attitudes, needs, or expectations.

Psychographic Audience Research

Psychographic audience research involves analyzing audiences according to their common interests, values, perceptions, and affinities. This form of qualitative research delves deeper than mere numbers, diving into the inner characteristics of the audience. The objective is to comprehend their needs, interests, behaviors, patterns, and decision-making processes.

STEPS TO CONDUCT MASS MEDIA AUDIENCE RESEARCH

Researchers propose a simplified procedure for conducting mass media audience research, consisting of four actionable steps [18]:

Choose an Audience Analysis Tool

Prior to commencing the research, the researcher must select the appropriate audience research tool or instrument. This may include broadcast ratings, questionnaires, interviews, observations, web matrix tools, meters, social media analytics, diaries, newspaper audits, or other sophisticated audience research applications.

Design the Research Questions

Once the audience research tools are chosen, it is crucial to establish the specific questions that need to be answered. This clarity will help focus the research and ensure the collection of desired information.

Categorization of the Audience

Initially, the audience researcher must decide on the basis for categorizing their audience. This can be achieved through demographic categorization, which involves analyzing numbers to understand the audience, or through psychographic categorization, which delves beyond numbers to consider lifestyle or purchasing patterns. Another consideration is whether the audience should be categorized based on both demographic and psychographic data, along with geographical locations.

Conduct Research and Generate a Report

Subsequently, the researcher needs to carry out the actual audience research and generate a report. Similar to scholarly research, all aspects of the process should be adequately documented and presented in the report, including goals, objectives, methods, data, findings, conclusions, and recommendations. It is important to keep the initial questions in mind throughout the research and report generation process. The audience research report should not be left unused on bookshelves or in mass media organization libraries. Instead, it should be a practical working document.

Figure 1: Various forms of mass media audience research.

CHALLENGES OF MASS MEDIA AUDIENCE RESEARCH

In conclusion, it is crucial to acknowledge the specific challenges that arise in conducting mass media audience research in the Nigerian ecosystem. This research is not just a theoretical concept, but a practical requirement for media organizations that seek to meet their customers' needs and stay competitive in a crowded market. The key question is: What are the practical obstacles encountered by producers and researchers in the field of mass media audience research?

Limited Knowledge

Despite the critical importance of the mass media audience research for the continuity of mass media, particularly in developing countries. There is a lack of understanding within the media system. Certain media organizations, like local tabloid publishers, operate without a business plan or audience research. They continue without conducting audience research, solely focusing on the number of copies they publish. This neglect of audience research may be a contributing factor to the short lifespan of these tabloids. Some broadcast stations rely on inadequate methods for audience research, such as monitoring social media comments or asking generic questions to radio callers. However, true mass media audience research goes beyond simply counting newspaper sales or determining the location of a radio caller. Unfortunately, many media managers are unaware of the importance and benefits of audience research, which leads to a reluctance to invest in research efforts [19].

Paucity of Required Skills for Audience Research

Another challenge in the mass media industry is the insufficient skills for conducting audience research. Media training programs do not place enough emphasis on this aspect, resulting in a shortage of professionals who possess the necessary knowledge and skill set. Furthermore, the lack of modern tools and software for audience analysis adds to the complexity of this issue [20].

Reliable Statistical Data

Accurate audience research requires reliable and current statistical data. However, in countries like Nigeria where the last nationwide population census was conducted in 2006, there is a lack of such data. As a result, researchers are forced to make challenging decisions, relying on outdated figures or estimated population numbers that may potentially affect the analysis results.

CONCLUSION

In order to thrive in today's highly competitive landscape, mass media organizations should make the demands, preferences and overall satisfaction of their audiences a top priority. To achieve this, media managers should regularly conduct audience research within their organizations. Additionally, media professionals should actively seek opportunities to improve their skills in the field of audience research. Various forms of mass media audience research are identified and a template for conducting such research is outlined. The article concludes by shedding spotlights on prominent challenges faced by mass media audience research.

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