

Democracy And Mass Media in Nigeria: A History of Channels Television, 1995 - 2023

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Abstract: *The advent of Western-styled broadcasting in the Nigeria in 1959 with the establishment of the Western Nigeria Television (WNTV) has resulted in the development of television stations in Nigeria. Private entrepreneurs latched on this opportunity in the 1990s to establish media centers which have grown to become a powerful medium of mass communication with several privately owned stations licenced. This therefore reduced or practically removed government's monopoly over television stations. This paper examines the establishment, evolution, and impact of Channels Television in shaping the media landscape of the country. This study employs a qualitative historical methodology, drawing on primary sources especially oral interviews and secondary sources as well as historical narratives to trace the development of the station from inception. Findings in the paper reveals that Channels Television founded in 1995 has distinguished itself through professionalism, investigative journalism, and commitment to ethical media practices leading to several awards and accolades. The study discovers that Channels Television since her creation by her founders and since the beginning of broadcasting has influenced the general Nigerian populace through her Mission and Key milestones, Institutional growth and expansion, professionalism and media ethics, editorial independence and news credibility, and have faced notable challenges and political pressure as well as contributed to democracy and political development of Nigeria. This study concludes that the station despite numerous challenges have laid a good legacy for private television stations in Nigeria.*

Keywords: *Historical evolution, Democracy, Mass media, Professionalism, and Television Station*

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I. Introduction

Television broadcasting has played a significant role in the political and socio-economic transformation of Nigeria. Since the advent of Western-style broadcasting in the country in 1959, television has grown to become a powerful medium of mass communication. In the post-independence era, government monopoly over television gradually gave way to private sector participation, especially following the deregulation of the broadcast industry in the 1990s. Among the private television stations that emerged, Channels Television has distinguished itself as a beacon of professionalism and independent journalism.¹ Despite the crucial role of private media in democratization, there has been limited scholarly attention to the historical development and societal contributions of specific television stations like Channels Television. This gap in historical and media scholarship necessitates an in-depth study of Channels Television as a case study for understanding the evolution of private media and its impact on Nigerian democracy and governance.

This paper therefore attempts to trace the historical development of Channels Television Nigeria; examine the role of Channels Television in promoting democracy and public accountability; identify the challenges faced by Channels Television and evaluate its contributions to the media landscape in Nigeria premised on the following questions; What were the historical circumstances that led to the emergence of Channels Television? How has Channels Television contributed to democratic governance in Nigeria? What challenges has Channels Television faced since its inception?

This study focuses on the historical evolution of Channels Television from its inception in 1995 to the present. It examines its programming, political engagements, and contributions to public discourse. Limitations

include the unavailability of internal corporate data and restricted access to proprietary information. The study adopts a qualitative research design, relying on oral interviews, documentary sources such as academic publications, news archives, official reports, and historical records. The analysis is thematic and narrative in style, reflecting the historical progression and interpretive insights from both primary and secondary data.

This study contributes to the historiography of Nigerian media by providing a detailed account of one of the country's most influential private television stations. It enhances our understanding of the role of media in democratic consolidation and the challenges of independent journalism in Nigeria. The media in Nigeria has evolved significantly from its colonial origins. While the early press was largely elitist and nationalist, the post-independence era saw the expansion of state-owned broadcasting services. The liberalization of the broadcast sector in the 1990s led to the emergence of private television stations, allowing for more pluralistic media voices.²

Television Broadcasting in Nigeria

The history of television in Nigeria began with the establishment of the Western Nigeria Television Service (WNTV) in 1959 in Ibadan, marking the first instance of television broadcasting in sub-Saharan Africa.³ Initially state-owned, the television industry served political and developmental agendas of regional governments. The subsequent establishment of the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) in 1977 consolidated federal control over public television.⁴ However, empirical studies suggest that the monopoly of NTA led to stagnation in innovation and objectivity. For instance, according to Okunna in his work *Teaching mass communication: A multi-dimensional approach*,⁵ NTA's structure enabled governmental influence over content, often at the expense of pluralism and independent reportage. Public stations were predominantly used to promote government policies, limiting critical engagement and civic participation. This factor has been argued to have necessitated the call for more independent television media outlets.

Television broadcasting has remained a powerful tool for mass communication, national development, and socio-political engagement in Nigeria. Nigeria's broadcast industry has evolved, comprising both public and private stations with varied ownership structures, content focus, and audience reach. This was as a result of the liberalization of the broadcast sector in the 1990s which led to the proliferation of private television stations, creating competition and influencing the dynamics of news reportage, public enlightenment, and entertainment.⁶

The Emergence and Impact of Private Television Stations in Nigeria

The deregulation of the broadcast industry under Decree 38 of 1992 led to the emergence of private television stations such as AIT (Africa Independent Television), Channels Television, Television Continental (TVC), and Silverbird Television.⁷ The establishment of these stations brought a dramatic change to terrestrial broadcasting in Nigeria, in terms of content, professionalism, and competition, hence challenging the dominance of public broadcasters and broadcast networks like NTA. An empirical analysis by Adaja⁸ reveal that private stations have significantly improved investigative journalism, program innovation, and audience engagement. For example, according to Idowu⁹, Channels Television has gained national and international recognition for its balanced reporting and coverage of elections, insecurity, and economic reforms.

Another theme in studies on private television stations in Nigeria is their contribution to deepening democracy. Adeyanju and Ojebuyi in their study "Private television and electoral participation in Nigeria: A study of political talk shows"¹⁰ discover that political talk shows and debate programs on private stations increased political awareness and citizen participation during the 2015 and 2019 general elections. Also, Ojebode argued that private television stations have played a pivotal role in fostering political awareness and enhancing civic engagement. According to the study, these private media by providing platforms for public discourse, investigative journalism, and coverage of electoral processes, have deepened political discourse and become integral to democratic development.¹¹ However, Omenugha and Oji in their own study "News commercialization, ethics and objectivity in journalism practice in Nigeria"¹² noted that commercialization pressures have also led to sensationalism and infotainment-driven content in some private outlets hence reducing their credibility and objective political reportage.

Aside works on the impacts of private television stations, some other works have equally evaluated the impacts of public television stations in Nigeria. Ekwueme and Obayi in their study "Public broadcasting and development communication: A case study of the NTA"¹³ reveals that public television stations have proven to be more effective and have wider coverage in rural outreach than many private televisions, and this has made the public television to contribute immensely to health, agriculture and national emergencies information dissemination to the grass root. However, surveys like that of Okoro and Odoemelam titled "Broadcast media and political education in Nigeria: A perception study."¹⁴ Show that many Nigerians belief public television to be biased and also a tool for government's propaganda. More than 68 per cent of the study's respondents agree to the fact that in public owned television station, their programs are government centred and more of government's propaganda.

This response aligns with the views of Asemah that a major factor that reduced general public trust in the government owned television station is the fact that those stations relies on government for sponsorship, hence they are obligated to align more with broadcasting government programs more.¹⁵

Nwabueze and Ezebuenyi carried out a comparative analysis of the public and private television stations in their study on “Public and private media in Nigeria: Comparative analysis of performance and public trust,”¹⁶ illustrates that while public television remains vital for rural development and educational programming, private stations outperform in investigative journalism, real-time reporting, and audience appeal among urban youth.

Also, Edewor, Salawu and Akinwale in an analysis of the two in the work titled “Audience perception of public and private television stations in Nigeria”¹⁷ discovers that more than 70% of urban respondents preferred private stations due to their perceived credibility, professionalism, and program variety, while in contrast, public television retained stronger viewership in rural areas, where access to pay TV or cable may be limited.

The Establishment of Channels Television

Channels incorporated which birthed Channel television was founded in 1992, by John Momoh, a seasoned Nigerian broadcast journalist a year before the Nigerian government deregulated the broadcast media and the station Channels began broadcasting in 1995.¹⁸ Several factors are discovered to be responsible for the emergence of Channel Television. For instance, according to Uche¹⁹, the emergence of Channels Television was partly in response to the credibility crisis faced by state-owned broadcast stations like the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), which was increasingly seen as a government mouthpiece. Other factors include the need to provide authentic and reliable news to Nigerian viewers²⁰ and also, the desire to cultivate high ideals in news reporting with objectivity and fairness, aiming to satisfy the public's right to be informed.²¹

The station began as a private television station with a strong emphasis on news reporting and investigative journalism, thereby filling a crucial gap in Nigeria's media ecology.²² To back-up some of the above claims about the factors that necessitated the creation of Channels television in 1995, this present study finds the work of Ojebode to be relevant in which he argued that Channels Television was born out of a desire to offer an alternative to the state's hegemonic control over the airwaves, a concern that gained momentum during Nigeria's transition from military to civilian rule. Its foundation was thus anchored on a vision to provide impartial and professional news content to the Nigerian public.²³

This argument was also up held by most respondents to this study, for instance, one of the respondents asserted that “the station was created with the focus of challenging the status-quo which was that the government controlled the media and the narrative, hence there is need for the people to have an alternative source that will not feed them what public media feeds them with.”²⁴ The above discussion reveals that there are many factors responsible for the emergence of the television station however a common view is that it emerged just in time to tackle the challenge of having the television media dominated by government owned and controlled television station.

Thus, a recurring common opinion about the founding philosophy of Channels Television in this study is that the establishment of Channels Television was driven by a desire to redefine broadcast journalism in Nigeria, hence, it sought to fill the gap left by a declining public broadcast system. as asserted by a journalist, “Channels was born out of professional frustration with the politicization of the NTA. John Momoh wanted a platform where news would be factual, prompt, and objective. That was the foundational philosophy”²⁵ This assertion is further supported by empirical literature like that of Idowu that the station was envisioned as a non-partisan platform dedicated to professionalism and public service journalism, in contrast to the heavily state-influenced NTA.²⁶ Thus, Channels television station officially began transmission in 1996 and was envisioned as a platform for impartial and professional journalism.²⁷

Mission and Key Milestones of Channels Television

The station's mission is to produce and broadcast television programs that meet the highest standards of quality and integrity. Its early operations focused on news reporting and current affairs, distinguishing it from other entertainment-focused stations. Channels quickly earned a reputation for credible journalism.²⁸ Among the many achievements of Channels television, are key milestones like in the year 2000 the station gained national prominence through live political broadcasts and investigative documentaries. And in 2005 it became the first Nigerian TV station to be nominated for the International Emmy Awards, and by 2010 the station expanded to multiple digital platforms and established bureaus in London and Washington, D.C. among other major landmarks.

Institutional Growth and Expansion of Channels Television Nigeria

Another dominant theme is the structured and strategic institutional development of Channels Television over the years since its creation. It is observed that Channels television have grown in coverage across Nigeria over the years, for instance, while the company commenced her “operations in Lagos, south western Nigeria, It has since grown to include three other Stations in Abuja, Edo and Kano states, and also has bureaus in almost every state in Nigeria, including stringers and affiliates in other parts in Africa.”²⁹ Also, Channels television remains one of the most prominent private television stations in Nigeria and “it is being watched everywhere especially in official settings like banks and offices in urban areas, this explains how fast and wide it has grown”³⁰

On the factors that led to their rapid expansion, respondents noted that unlike many private stations that emerged post-deregulation, Channels invested in newsroom culture, staff development, and news infrastructure.³¹ A major correspondent of the Television noted that: “We were always in training sessions especially training on the ethics of news casting, and interviews. The station uses BBC standards, CNN fellowships you name it. Our strength is not in flashy programs, but in systems and standards that works.”³²

This standard training according to respondents helps the television station to maintain a good reputation, growth and general expansion. Like Adaja also noted in his study, that Channels Television built its reputation on “newsroom discipline and continuous professional development,” enabling it to win several international awards, including the Nigerian Media Merit Award (NMMA) multiple times.³³ These awards according to the study enhanced the growth of the television station.

Although, as indicated by some respondents, Channels television is still limited in coverage, for instance “it is not yet firmly covering local areas or rural settings where there are no “free to air” or limited access to internet in Nigeria, hence its growth is much more felt in the urban areas”³⁴ The challenge militating against Channel’s expansion as noted by Adeleke reveals the general concern on the coverage of private television stations in Nigeria, that unlike the public stations which have access to state resources and is able to reach more local populace in the rural setting, private stations like Channels television relies on services of companies like Multi-choice and other satellite outlets to help people access their services. This aligns with the assertions of Ekwueme and Obay³⁵ about the fact that public television stations have wider reach especially in the rural areas when compared with private television stations which have wider audience in the urban centres where cable services and access is common.

Professionalism and Media Ethics of Channels Television

Professionalism and media ethics is one of the major strength of the organisation that aids her growth and expansion.³⁶ Several studies have examined the journalistic culture of Channels Television, often praising its adherence to ethics and professionalism. For example, Akinwalere³⁷ conducted a comparative analysis of broadcast ethics across Nigerian television stations and found that Channels Television ranked high in impartiality, factual accuracy, and minimal sensationalism. These findings were corroborated by Idowu³⁸ who noted that the station’s editorial policies emphasized balance and objectivity, especially during political elections and national crises. Another factor to prove this point is that the station has consistently won multiple international awards, including the “Best Television Station of the Year” by the Nigerian Media Merit Award (NMMA) over 13 times³⁹ this signals its consistent credibility in the media industry.

However, there have also been some widespread criticism about the culture of professionalism in Channels television for instance, “there have been reports of unprofessional practices by workers affiliated with the station also, there have been instances of their reports questioned by the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation on the basis of ethics”⁴⁰ to further reinforce this factor, Premium Times, in her 2021 report noted that “in April 2021, the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission (NBC) fined the station and temporarily suspended its operations for interviewing a spokesperson of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), a separatist group.”⁴¹ Although the station refers to this action as government’s efforts to victimise the station, yet it reflects a lapse in their professionalism and adherence to existing codes that guide media outlets like theirs.

Editorial Independence and News Credibility of Channels Television

Editorial independence and credibility is a major issue for media and media outlets in Nigeria. Hence, one of the most prominent themes across the interviews in this study is the Channel television station’s commitment to editorial independence. Respondents noted that even during political tension or media clampdowns, Channels maintained a balanced news style. A media analyst explained thus: “Although Channels has faced some official clamp down and challenges like being sanctioned a few times, yes. However, they are still among the few noted not for peddling falsehood or rumours but more for touching nerves of the political elite with objective reportage”⁴² Aside the analysis above, empirical studies like that of Oso⁴³ and Okoro and Odoemelam⁴⁴ have established that Channels Television is widely perceived as the most credible news station in

Nigeria, often cited for its balance and professionalism in covering sensitive national issues such as elections and insurgency.

Some notable case studies of professional coverage and reports on sensitive national issues by Channels television include;

Exposé on Electoral Violence during the 2011 General Elections: In the 2011 general elections, Channels Television aired a series of reports highlighting irregularities and violence in key electoral hotspots, including states in the North-Central and South-East regions. The coverage influenced public opinion and led to INEC reforms in subsequent elections. This made political analysts and civil society groups to give credit to Channels with shaping discourse around electoral reform.

Documentary on Boko Haram Insurgency and Government Response (2013): Also in 2013, Channels Television produced an in-depth documentary exploring the rise of Boko Haram, the failures in counterterrorism, and the humanitarian impact of the conflict. The report, aired in segments on primetime news, featured interviews with displaced persons and security experts and received accolades for its balanced reporting and humanitarian emphasis.⁴⁵

Live Coverage of the EndSARS Protests (2020): Channels Television played a crucial role in broadcasting live updates during the #EndSARS movement, often at personal risk to its reporters. Their coverage included street protests, police brutality incidents, and government reactions. The channel's broadcast of the Lekki Toll Gate shootings brought international attention to the protest and was cited by global human rights organizations. Although for doing this, the station faced threats of sanction but stood firm in its commitment to free press principles.⁴⁶

Investigative Report on COVID-19 Palliatives Hoarding (2020): In 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, Channels aired investigative footage revealing warehouses in several states where government-provided COVID-19 palliatives were hoarded. The report sparked outrage and forced government officials to issue public explanations, thereby reinforcing Channels' role in enforcing accountability. These case studies highlight Channels Television's consistent engagement with pressing national issues, its resilience in the face of political intimidation, and its influence in shaping national discourse.

However, the television station have also been criticised for several issues among which is breaking of broadcasting codes, which in March 2023 made the station to be fined 5 million naira by the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation.⁴⁷ It was noted that "Channels television also sometimes through engagement of the general public in reports through "eye-witness accounts" project half-truths or one sided stories"⁴⁸

Contributions to National Development and Democratic Tenets

Channels television is discovered to have greatly influence national development and democratic development in Nigeria through many ways, one of the ways identified is through her major programs. Channels television airs many programs but some are more prominent for news dissemination, for instance some of the prominent politically oriented programs include; Sunrise Daily anchored by Chambalain Usoh and crew, Politics today by Seun Okinbaloye⁴⁹ among others.

These programs are noted to contribute to political and national development through "serving as platform to expose the hidden facts about political maneuvering and set agenda for political parties and politicians to be accountable to the society"⁵⁰, enlighten the People on their rights as Voters and educate them every time⁵¹, expose and educate voters to their electoral rights and choices.⁵²

Also, Channels television contributes to political development through her national discourse on politics and democratic consolidation. Respondents emphasized how programs such as *Sunrise Daily* and *Politics Today* serve as platforms for civic education and political accountability. "It's on Channels you see opposition and government side-by-side, explaining policies to the public. That's democratic engagement in action"⁵³

This factor becomes more important especially during periods of elections and the studies of Adeyanju and Ojebuyi reaffirms this importance when they noted that Channels Television significantly influenced voter awareness and civic discourse during the 2015 and 2019 general elections⁵⁴, thus, further substantiating the station's impact on political participation.

The role of Channels Television in promoting democratic governance has been widely documented, for instance Ezeah and Nwachukwu⁵⁵ emphasized that its flagship program, *Sunrise Daily*, has contributed significantly to political discourse and civic education by hosting politicians, analysts, and civil society leaders to debate pressing national issues.

This made Channels Television to be notable during Nigeria's 2011 and 2015 general elections. To underscore this important contribution of the station to democracy during the two elections, Okon and Asak⁵⁶ explained that the station's coverage was characterized by depth, balance, and neutrality, contributing to a more informed electorate. A further study by Adeyemi and Olayinka on media influence in voter decision-making found that over 45% of their respondents trusted Channels Television as a primary source of credible electoral news.⁵⁷

The above assertions indicates that Channels television station contributes in specific ways to democratic and political development of Nigeria, although the station have also come under serious criticism for being bias or favour one political candidates over another for instance “her broadcast and representation of Goodluck Jonathan as against Muhammadu Buhari during the presidential election in 2015 have come under wide acclaimed to mean that the station favours his candidacy to that of the opponent.”⁵⁸

Challenges Facing Television Broadcasting in Nigeria

Both public and private stations face systemic challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, regulatory interference, funding constraints, and digital migration hurdles among others. According to Agba, Odoemelum, and Nwammuo,⁵⁹ while private stations often rely on advertising revenue and face political pressure, public stations are heavily underfunded and prone to government control. Another challenge is that noted by Adebayo, that the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC)’s regulatory actions have also sparked debates around media freedom. An instance is the NBC’s sanctions against Channels TV and AIT, which critics argue reflect attempts to silence dissenting voices in the media.⁶⁰

Despite its numerous achievements, Channels Television has faced several challenges, particularly political pressure and regulatory sanctions. A recurring concern from respondents was the dilemma of balancing press freedom with regulatory compliance. “Every major election cycle, we face heightened scrutiny. Sometimes, it’s the NBC. Other times, security agents want to know our sources. It’s a tightrope walk.”⁶¹ Also, a further evaluation reveals that the station have come under series of scrutiny by the Nigerian Broadcasting corporations a couple of times thus reflecting a challenge to her operations as noted by some of its workers “we face a lot of challenges to our operations, we are mindful of threats to our reporters and also political sabotages to some of our investigative reports and reporters, also, it is not unusual to have our correspondents attacked on the field when they are working, all of these affects our operations directly or indirectly”⁶² To establish this challenge, the work of Adebayo claims that “private broadcasters like Channels face institutional pushback when their reportage contradicts official narratives,”⁶³ This reflects a broader tension between media independence and state power in Nigeria.

II. Conclusion

The data gathered and analysed in this study reveals that the evolution of Channels Television is deeply rooted in a vision of professional journalism, shaped by strategic leadership of its founders, a strong editorial ethos, and resilience in the face of political and regulatory pressures. The history of Channels Television in Nigeria reflects a dynamic interplay between professionalism, democratic engagement, technological innovation, and regulatory challenges. However, this thematic finding suggests that the station's legacy is not just in its longevity but in its consistent pursuit of news credibility, public service, and media innovation in Nigeria as Channels Television continues to navigate the political sensitivities of operating in a volatile democratic context.

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