

# **Media Use, Knowledge of World Affairs and Image of Nations Among Nigerian Youth\***

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## **Abstract**

Much of what people know about foreign countries is learned from the mass media rather than from personal experience. This study investigates media use, knowledge of world affairs and images of people and nations among a sample of 368 Nigerian under-graduate students.

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# **Usage des Médias, Connaissance des Affaires Mondiales et Image des Nations au sein de la Jeunesse Nigérienne**

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## **Résumé**

Le gros des connaissances que possèdent les gens s'acquiert à partir des mass média plutôt que par le contact personnel. Cette étude a examiné l'usage des médias, la connaissance des actualités mondiales, ainsi que les perceptions des différentes nations et peuples parmi un groupe de 368 étudiants des universités nigériennes.

## Introduction

Nigerians are voracious consumers of mass media messages. They are served by over 300 publications, 89% of the population own radio sets and 12.4 million homes own television sets (Research and Marketing Services, 1990). The national television network claims an audience of 30 million viewers for its network news. Even satellite dishes have started appearing in upper middle-class homes. In fact, Nigeria owns and consumes more media messages than all developing black African countries combined.

The growing complexity of modern society renders it difficult to sample first-hand the vast volume of experiences that societies are offering. Nigerians, like their counterparts worldwide, are turning to the mass media to be informed, educated and entertained.

There is, therefore, more reliance on the mass media for impressions, as personal attributes become blurred and generalisations become more sweeping. People notice a trait which marks a well-known type, and then complete the picture by means of stereotypes and images they carry about in their heads.

Furthermore, by the process of agenda-setting and gate-keeping, the media control the images that reach their audience. Agenda-setting refers to the press giving prominence to certain issues in society, causing people to think about and discuss them. Gate-keeping is the selection of items considered newsworthy, and, at the international level, it begins with the choice by news agencies which determine the news to be received worldwide.

This process continues at the national, organisational and editorial levels. The end result is an agenda of news items which provides audiences with a selected perspective that affects their image of the world. It has been said that the power of the media lies in their ability to create images of social reality by which the public or society may structure relevant views of the world (Lippmann, 1922).

It was partly because media reality and media agenda influence audience perception of social reality that the debate about a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) was born. A series of research in the 1970s and 1980s showed that there was a glaring imbalance in the quality and quantity of news flow about developing countries; the depiction of these developing countries in international mass communications tended to be negative and biased (Nordenstreng and Varis, 1974; Tunstall, 1977 ; Masmoudi, 1979;



MacBride *et al.*, 1981). This resulted in racial and sectional implications on mutual understanding and peaceful co-existence among peoples of the world as evidenced by the NWICO debate.

The mass media are the chief cultivators of stereotypes. In different Asian countries, Tan and his colleagues (Tan *et al.*, 1986; Tan and Suarchavarat, 1988) found that their respondents had not had much personal contact with Americans, and that their stereotypical characterizations of Americans were based largely on the consistent portrayal of Americans in the television programmes which the respondents watched frequently.

Even at the national level, media content has exploited stereotypes and myths that inhibit peaceful co-existence and understanding. The Nigerian media tend to uphold existing stereotypes associated with people from different parts of the country. For example, in a Nigerian television situation comedy "Village Headmaster", Okoro represents a popular image of the Ibo man as shrewd and stingy. In another programme, "New Masquerade", Jegede represents the Yoruba man as loud but physically weak. In "Samanja", the lead actor represents the Hausa man as a semi-literate who loves to rule. This cannot augur well for Nigeria because, as Gerbner's cultivation hypothesis states, the more people are exposed to the mass media, especially television, the more they will come to believe that the real world is like the one they observe (Gerbner *et al.*, 1977; 1986).

## **Aims of Study**

The main aim of this study was to investigate the images of people and nations held by Nigerian undergraduate students. Images are defined as perceptions among Nigerians (negative or positive) of nations, and their nationals. The study sought answers to the following questions:

1. Do Nigerian youth expose themselves more to local news and information than to foreign news and information?
2. Do Nigerian youth know more about developed nations than they know about neighbouring African countries?
3. How do Nigerians perceive (selected) nations and people?
4. What knowledge and perception do Nigerians hold about selected nations and their people?
5. How are these images formed in the minds of the respondents? Are the images media-based or do they emanate from other sources?

## Literature Review

In the modern world, much of what people know about foreign countries is learned from mass media rather than from personal experience. Media experts suggest that the influence of the media on our social realities depends on both our dependence on the media for information and on our direct experience with the responses to be learned or assimilated (Adoni and Mann, 1984). This influence will be greatest when dependence on the media is high, and direct experience with the response to be learned is limited. Lippman (1922) observed many years ago that people could not possibly experience most events of the real world first hand and, lacking first hand access to reality, they must depend on the environment or reality provided by the mass media. He argued, however, that this media environment or reality is pseudo because it does not correspond with the real world. It is a construct of realities created by the media.

Several theoretical formulations support the expectation that the perceptions of social reality will correspond closely to the mass media "realities" because the images of the world portrayed in the media will be internalised and accepted as accurate representations of reality by media audiences. Bandura's social learning theory (1977), for instance, explains how people learn by observation, not only behaviour but also values, stereotypes and beliefs. In testing their cultivation hypothesis, Gerbner *et. al.* (1982) have shown in several studies that heavy television viewing is correlated to several real world perceptions. Tan and his associates (1986) have also found empirical support for the cultivation hypothesis, showing that foreign audiences accept the characterizations of Americans as portrayed in specific American television programmes they watch frequently. In one study, using undergraduates in Taiwan and Mexico, the researchers found that the frequency of viewing two TV programmes, "Dallas" and "Dynasty", in these countries was related to stereotyping Americans as aggressive, cruel, dishonest and pleasure-loving (Tan *et. al.*, 1986). In a similar study in Thailand, Tan *et. al.* (1988) found that television is a major source of the stereotypes of Americans held by Thai students.

Agenda-setting theory explains how the pseudo-reality of the mass media is created. Through the process of gate-keeping, the news media present the public not with a picture of the world as it is, but with an agenda of their own which is a selection of reports about what is happening in the world. This final agenda has a strong long-



term influence on the society's images of the people and places reported in the media. The central hypothesis of the agenda-setting theory is that an audience member will adjust his or her perception of the importance of issues in accordance with the amount and type of attention devoted to those issues in the medium used (McLeod *et al.*, 1974). It is partly because media agenda can influence audience perceptions of reality that the developing countries have been adamant in their demand for a new international and communication order.

The argument is that the existing order is biased against developing nations because the Western media, which dominate international communication, present to the world images of developing countries which are predominantly negative by showing the countries in terms of failure, violent crises and disorder (Masmoudi, 1979). In their study of communication problems all over the world, the MacBride Commission confirmed the presence of these false and distorted images of developing countries in the world media (MacBride *et al.*, 1981).

Despite efforts to ameliorate this problem, foreign news in all regions of the world is still predominantly negative (Martin and Chaudhary, 1983). In a content analysis of cover page headlines in four Nigerian and American news magazines (*Newsweek*, *African Guardian*, *Time* and *Newsweek*) published in 1988, Izam (1989) found that all the magazines carried a substantial amount of negative news on their cover pages, with Nigerian news magazines carrying more negative headlines on Nigerian issues than their American counterparts. This suggests that Nigerian mass media report Nigeria more negatively than positively. In a study of images of the world through the eyes of the Nigerian press, Sobowale (1987) found a preponderance of tragedy and crime news stories over the six-year period of the study, 1980-1985.

The study also showed that, although Africa dominated the foreign news in Nigeria, the coverage given to Third World countries by Nigerian newspapers was not significantly more than that given to the developed nations. The implication is that, in addition to the relative unimportance of Third World issues on the international media agenda, developing countries do not seem to give more attention to other developing countries on their own media agenda than they give to developed countries. This could result in media audiences in developing nations knowing more about people and places in the developed world than those in other developing countries.

Available studies suggest that education is often positively

correlated with knowledge of foreign countries. In their study in an urban centre in Venezuela of the influence of exposure to foreign news on the images of nations, McNelly and Izcaray (1986) found that education remained the dominant independent variable in predicting knowledge of foreign countries. The researchers also discovered a tendency for the younger educated people to be more knowledgeable about the foreign countries used in the study.

Underlying the news flow controversy is the assumption that the mass media can contribute to people's understanding or misunderstanding of each other's countries. Since education is also positively associated with exposure to international news, it is of interest to note what understanding or images the educated youths in Nigeria have of the people and nations reported in the Nigerian mass media.

## **Method**

Two universities in Lagos were selected for the study. One of them is the University of Lagos (UNILAG), which is a federal university and so admits students from all over Nigeria. The second is Lagos State University (LASU), which admits students from Lagos state and its environs.

By a simple random sample, we selected two faculties from each university: Arts and Engineering from UNILAG and Education and Science from LASU. Each faculty has about five departments. Using a table of random numbers, we selected one department from each of the selected faculties. The departments which fell into the sampling frame were English and Civil Engineering for UNILAG and Chemical Science and Physical and Health Education from LASU. A questionnaire was then administered to the entire student population in the four departments; 386 completed questionnaires were returned, representing a response rate of 70%.

A series of questions were asked on media exposure, knowledge of world affairs and assessment of selected nations and their businessmen. Respondents were asked to give their views about the people of various countries using some selected adjectives, half positive and half negative.

Five personalities were selected for this study: American, British, Japanese, Kenyan and Nigerian. The purpose of the study was to determine whether the perceptions of the various nationalities were



the result of personal encounter or derived from the mass media. The independent variables were age of respondent, sex, year of study in the university, father's income and whether the respondent was raised in urban or rural Nigeria.

## **Analysis**

The distribution in the sample was 68% male and 32% female. One-third of those interviewed were from the Department of English, one-quarter from Civil Engineering, one-fifth from Chemistry and the remaining one-fifth from Physical-Health Education. The majority (94%) of the students interviewed were undergraduates while the remaining 6% were postgraduates. The mean age was 23 years with the youngest being 16 and the oldest 42. The data also show that 93% of our respondents were single, 6% married. The remaining 1% were separated or divorced. Interestingly, about 91% claimed to live in the urban areas of the country and only 9% were rural dwellers. Further, 55% claimed that their fathers were professional men, 30% abstained from providing any information of their father's occupation while the remaining 15% indicated skilled and semi-skilled fathers.

In terms of education, about a third indicated their fathers had high school education or less; about 42% had first degrees or above while the remaining one quarter abstained from answering that question. Almost 50% of our respondents did not provide any information on parental income, but 9% indicated low income brackets, 13% middle income group and 29% upper middle income.

We can then say that our respondents were young undergraduates, unmarried and urbanites. The parents of about one half of them are graduate professionals in the middle income category. The background of the other half could not be properly established as information was not provided by the respondents.

## **Media Ownership and Accessibility**

Here we attempted to establish ownership and accessibility to both radio and television among the students. The study found that two-thirds of the students claimed to own radio (Table 1) and over 84% indicated that they had access to a radio. It also found that over one-third of the students claimed to own a television in their room, while three-quarters indicated that they had access to television. The data,



therefore, show some significant differences between television ownership and accessibility, perhaps due to the cost.

*Table 1: Electronic Media Ownership and Accessibility*

	Own radio (N = 372) (%)	Access to radio (N = 279) (%)	Own T.V. (N = 357) (%)	Access to T.V. (N = 314) (%)
Yes	65	84	39	74
No	35	16	61	26
DK	-	-	-	-
Total	100	100	100	100

Our data suggest that more students own and have access to radio than television; a radio set is definitely less expensive. Table 2 shows that 98% of the students claimed to expose themselves to radio, television and newspapers either sometimes or regularly.

*Table 2: Exposure to Mass Media Among Students*

Media use	Listen to radio (N = 367) (%)	View television (N = 356) (%)	Read newspapers (%)
Never	2	2	3
Sometimes	61	59	66
Regularly	37	39	31
Total	100	100	100

The data thus show that the students interviewed in this study are heavy consumers of mediated messages with only 2% claiming no exposure to any mass media. This heavy use of mass media can be attributed to both ownership and accessibility to these facilities.

In a series of questions on news and current affairs, almost all of our respondents listened to Nigerian news either regularly or sometimes (Table 3). Similarly 84% of them also claimed to listen to both African and non-African news either regularly or sometimes, an indication that they are well informed on what happens both on the continent and abroad.

*Table 3: Exposure to News and Current Affairs Among Students*

Frequency of Exposure	Nigerian news & current (N = 358) (%)	African news (N = 356) (%)	Non-African news (N = 361) (%)
Never	2	17	16
Sometimes	56	69	68
Regularly	42	14	16
Total	100	100	100

Our data suggest that the students are good listeners of news and current affairs, but that they listen more regularly to national news than to African and non-African news. Only less than one-fifth (17% and 16% respectively) of the students said that they not to listen to African or non-African news.

We next asked them to rank the type of news they preferred to listen to most of the time. Nigerian news came first with 59%, African news came second with 36% and Third World news third and fourth with 35% (Table 4).



*Table 4: Rank Order of News Preference of Respondents*

Type of news	Rank 1 (N = 349) (%)	Rank 2 (N = 265) (%)	Rank 3 (N = 256) (%)	Rank 4 (N = 156) (%)
Nigerian	59	26	11	10
African	6	36	30	31
Third World	5	14	35	35
Industrialised world	30	24	24	24
Total	100	100	100	100

The table shows that national news was ranked not only the most popular type of news among students, but also very high compared to the other type of news, indicating students' appreciation of news from their own local environment.

On the question of accessibility to news magazines, the study found that almost all (96%) of the students indicated that they read Nigerian news magazines (Table 5). The data also show that 89% read foreign news magazines as well. Nigerian human interest and entertainment magazines were read by 86% and the remaining did not. Similarly, 76% read foreign human interest and entertainment magazines, while 14% did not.

*Table 5: Access to Local and Foreign Magazine*

	Nigerian news magazines (N = 346) (%)	Foreign news magazines (N = 350) (%)	Nigerian entertain- ment mag. (N = 354) (%)	Foreign entertain- ment mag. (N = 348) (%)
Yes	96	89	86	76
No	4	11	14	24
DK	-	-	-	-
Total	100	100	100	100

The data show that both local and foreign magazines are popular among students. When asked to rank order the type of magazines they read most, Nigerian news magazines were ranked first, foreign news magazines second, Nigerian entertainment magazines third, foreign entertainment magazines fourth, and comics fifth (Table 6). The data thus suggest that the most popular magazines among students are the Nigerian news magazines, foreign news magazines and Nigerian entertainment magazines, with comic magazines ranking very low.

*Table 6: Rank Order of the Type of Magazines Read by Respondents*

Type of magazine	Rank 1 (N = 336) (%)	Rank 2 (N = 386) (%)	Rank 3 (N = 278) (%)	Rank 4 (N = 154) (%)	Rank 5 (N = 128) (%)
Nigeria news	51	20	15	11	11
Foreign news	16	33	20	24	6
Nigerian entertainment	15	24	30	27	6
Foreign entertainment	12	18	19	31	15
Comics	6	5	16	7	62
Total	100	100	100	100	100

### **Knowledge of African and World Events**

Here we attempted to measure the students' knowledge of both African and world events. In answer to a series of questions about Africa such as: "How long was Mandela in prison? Who is the longest surviving African Head of State? Who is the President of ECOWAS? and Where is Mombasa located?", we found major significant differences in the level of knowledge among our students. The data show that 18% scored zero while only 7% scored all four correct. One-fifth (21%) of the students scored one correct. Over 50% scored two or three points, indicating that the students know very little about African events.



Similarly, to the questions on developed nations such as: "What is the name of the Japanese currency? Is the U.S. the largest palm oil producing nation in the world? Is the Berlin wall still very much in place? Is Michael Jackson a white American?", we found that 45% scored correct on all questions; 13% scored zero; 7% scored one point; 9% scored two and 26% scored three. Looking at the data, one could say that the students are more knowledgeable about events in developed nations than those in their own continent.

Finally, we measured the students' level of knowledge on world affairs by totalling their scores on knowledge of African affairs and of developed nations; we then ranked them low to high. We found that 21% of the students had low knowledge of world affairs; 39% had medium knowledge and 41% high knowledge. The unusually high knowledge of world affairs is attributable to the high scores of the students on issues related to the developed nations.

### **Relationship Among Variables Studied**

We computed Pearson product-moment zero order correlations to establish the relationships between age, year of study at the university, some selected mass media variables and knowledge of African and world affairs.

The variables, year of study and age, were not significantly correlated with mass media variables and knowledge of African and world affairs. However, year of study correlated significantly with age ( $r = .248$ ). The other exceptional correlations were between age and radio listenership ( $r = .200$ ) and between age and knowledge of African affairs ( $r = .171$ ), both of which were statistically significant at .01 level.

As Table 7 shows, there were significant inter-correlations among the mass media variables. The highest correlations were between listening to African news and non-African news ( $r = .442$ ); listening to news generally and listening to African news ( $r = .370$ ); and listening to news and newspapers readership ( $r = .361$ ). The lowest significant correlation is that between radio listenership and television ownership ( $r = .161$ ). These are all statistically significant at the .01 level and above using a one-tail test (Table 7).

Table 7: Zero order correlations between demographic, media use and knowledge of world affairs variables.

Zero order	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Year of study	-	.248**	.085	.044	-.029	-.35	-.028	.026	.041	-.029	-.009	-.112	-.015	-.036
2. Age		-	.084	.200*	.019	.068	.023	.104	-.074	-.078	-.096	.171*	-.015	.126
3. Own radio			-	.220**	.133	.036	.079	.287**	.021	.081	.231*	-.074	-.107	-.080
4. Listen to radio				-	.358**	.259**	.172*	.161*	.234**	.241	.094	.098	.001	-.012
5. Listen to news					-	.370**	.337**	.170	.270*	.361*	.094	.048	.017	.044
6. Listen to African news						-	.442**	.126	.092	.187*	.197**	.214**	.041	.127
7. Listen to non-African news							-	.062	.144	.208**	.228**	.179*	.065	.098
8. Own T.V.								-	.285**	.126	.192	.029	.082	.078
9. Watch T.V.									-	.357**	.129	.063	.017	.023
10. Read newspapers										-	.201**	.167*	.024	.051
11. Read foreign news											-	.065	.005	.033
12. African affairs												-	.330*	.674*
13. Developed nations													-	.731*
14. World affairs														-

\* Statistically significant at .01 level (one-tail test)

\*\* Statistically significant at .001 level (one-tail test)



These findings suggest that those who own and listen to radio also own and view television. They listen not only to general news but also to African and non-African news, and they also read newspapers. These relationships show that our respondents are heavy consumers of mediated messages.

With regard to students' knowledge of African and world affairs, we found that these variables did not correlate with age, year of study or mass media variables. This finding suggests that the students could have probably acquired this knowledge of African and world affairs much earlier before entering the university and that their knowledge may have come from different sources other than the mass media.

That notwithstanding, we found significant intercorrelations between knowledge of African and world affairs. In fact, the highest correlation is between knowledge of developed nations and world affairs ( $r = .731$ ). This is consistent with our earlier statement that the unusually high score of our respondents on knowledge of world affairs is probably attributable to the high scores of the respondents on issues related to the developed nations. The next highest is between knowledge of African affairs and knowledge of world affairs ( $r = .674$ ), and finally knowledge of African affairs and that of developed nations ( $r = .330$ ). These are statistically significant at the .001 level (one-tail test).

### **Respondents' Image of People and Nations**

Part of this study examined the image of people and of nations held by our respondents. They were asked a series of questions on their image of Americans, British, Japanese, Kenyans and Nigerians.

The study found that the Nigerian youth see Americans generally as scientific, industrious and materialistic in that order. On the other hand, the American businessman is seen as resourceful and aggressive. Over three quarters of our respondents claimed to have met an American but only 15% have ever visited the United States. Interestingly, three-fourths of our respondents claimed that their encounter with Americans was personal and only one-quarter of them said that encounter was through the mass media.

The British were generally seen by the Nigerian youth as courteous, industrious, scientific and materialistic, in that order. Their businessmen were seen as trustworthy, resourceful and exploitative.

Almost all of our respondents claimed to have met a British person. One-quarter of them claimed to have visited Britain and three-quarters of them said that the encounter with the British was personal rather than through the media.

The Japanese were seen as industrious, courteous, and materialistic. On the other hand, the Japanese businessman was seen as trustworthy, resourceful and aggressive, in that order. Only about one-half of our respondents said that they had seen or met a Japanese but almost none of them had visited Japan. The encounter is about evenly distributed between the media and personal encounter.

We then looked at the image of two African nations, Kenya and Nigeria, as perceived by the Nigerian youth. They see Kenyans basically as industrious, with Kenyan businessmen as trustworthy, resourceful and aggressive. Only 41% of the respondents said they had met a Kenyan, while only 6% had ever visited Kenya. Their impressions of Kenyans were derived equally from personal contact and the media.

Finally when we asked the respondents to rank Nigerians generally, they saw them as materialistic, arrogant and aggressive. Nigerian businessmen were seen as crooked, incompetent and exploitative. The data indicate that while Nigerian youth see most other nationals used for this study in a positive light, they see their own nationals in negative terms.

## **Summary and Conclusion**

Our data show that our respondents are young undergraduates, unmarried and urban dwellers. The parents of about one-half of them are graduate professionals in the middle-income categories. The background of the other half of the respondents could not be properly established as the respondents did not provide the necessary information.

The study found that more students own and have access to radio than to television sets. The data suggest that the students used in this study are heavy consumers of mediated messages. Our data also indicate that they invariably prefer local news and current affairs to international news. They also ranked local news magazines and entertainment magazines ahead of foreign ones.

On knowledge of African and developed nations, the students invariably knew more about developed nations than neighbouring African nations. On the image of the people and nations studied, the



students saw most of the countries studied positively but perceived their own countrymen negatively.

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