

Television in Uganda: Is there room for documentaries?

Before the 1990s, any Ugandan who wanted to watch television (TV) had one choice; the state owned Uganda Television (UTV). Even then, very few households owned TV sets. In rural areas, an entire village could watch an evening news bulletin or a football match in the compound of one “affluent” resident. Liberalization of the media, however, has resulted in high growth of the television industry in Uganda.

By November 2012, there were 78 licensed TV stations with 44 of them operational. They broadcast mainly in English and local languages. Although most of them are based in Kampala, Uganda’s capital, none of the country’s regions is without a TV station -- even northern Uganda, troubled by war for two decades until 1997 has three.

There are three major TV stations in Uganda namely; Nation TV (NTV), Wavah Broadcasting Service (WBS) and the government owned Uganda Broadcasting Corporation (UBC), formerly UTV. These tend to serve a wider audience as they are national in geographical reach and programming. They use the most spoken languages countrywide, English and Luganda.

Bukedde, another Kampala based TV station, which hit the airwaves two years ago and transmits only in Luganda, has become very popular among people of central Uganda where the language is most spoken. Based on that popularity, it is now expanding to cover other regions.

Other stations with considerable viewership include NBS, popular for sports news and live coverage of events such as strikes, plus Top and Light House TV stations which are Christian based.

Apart from UBC TV, which is 100% owned by the government, the rest of the TV stations are private. WBS is owned by local businessman Gordon Wavamunno while NTV belongs to the Aga Khan family.

Multichoice, the South African based company, is the largest provider of pay-TV services in Uganda. This is popular among the middle class. Viewers subscribe for different packages including sports, movies, documentaries and music. Most of the content it carries is foreign - from production houses or televisions outside Uganda.

In local TV programming, news attracts the highest viewership especially for stations NTV, WBS and Bukedde. UBC news is less popular because it tends to focus more on the activities of the president and his ministers than critical issues of the day.

Football is very popular among men, especially the English Premiership. Soaps are mainly watched by women and children.

Documentaries, especially on wildlife, are highly popular amongst those who have access to Multichoice services. Many Ugandans profess a liking for documentaries but this area is still weak in the local TV programming because of the costs involved in documentary production.

Although Multichoice provides hundreds of connections to international programming, from football to music and films, access is limited to those who can afford the monthly charges for its different packages. Most viewers access its programmes through bars, restaurants and video clubs (local cinema halls). Those facilities charge an entry fee or sell their drinks at slightly higher prices to enable them sustain their subscriptions.

Ugandan TV stations tend to allocate a lot more airtime to entertainment - music, movies, live shows and the like. They typically cover development issues, such as access to water, environment, agriculture and health, in the news. They leave financing of development TV programmes, including documentaries, to Government institutions and NGOs. As expected, the latter only use them to promote their institutions or activities. After producing their documentaries, they pay the TV stations to get them aired. Beyond that, there is no in-house sustainable programming for local documentaries.

There are, however, development documentaries about Germany shown on WBS and UBC at least twice a week. These are mainly relayed from DW TV. UBC shows more development documentaries than any other TV, including those about Japan and from around Africa. UBC also airs some programmes from BBC at least once a week. NTV on the other hand only shows documentaries for which it has been paid - but it somehow compensates for that through short travel programmes highlighting issues within Uganda and in nearby countries including Rwanda and Somalia.

The Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) says it is more concerned with ensuring that broadcasters keep their content within set standards than controlling their level of programming - local or foreign.

“Content which abuses our cultural values, for example, cannot be accepted,” says Eng. Jonas Bantulaki, the director of Broadcasting at the UCC. But, he adds, “the commissions is currently monitoring select TV and radio stations to get an insight into their programming.

“We are monitoring 10 TVs and about 40 radios for four months. We want to discuss with the broadcasters to determine the amount of local content they should have in their programming.”

On the gender side, Ugandan men are more likely to watch television in local bars than at home. Many say that they don't like to compete with their families over TV

programmes because the preferences are usually different. It is mainly women and children who watch TV at home.

About five million Ugandans have access to internet but very few watch video programming via it. This is because apart from being expensive, the speeds are slow due to small bandwidth. Even in Kampala, internet is mainly accessed by those working in offices, and not all offices. Most people actually only access text and still pictures from the internet due to the slow speed and high costs involved in downloads. Beyond Kampala, internet access is still very limited.

The mobile phones, although well spread, are still used in the basic way of text and voice communication. Whereas mobile communication operators may provide video or TV services, many Ugandans will be failed by weak handsets, electricity access or illiteracy among other issues. With programmes such as documentaries, the rural communities are mainly reached through mobile cinema because they lack access to TV sets and their access to electricity is also still very low, estimated only at 6% coverage.

The television industry in Uganda is, however, expected to register further growth when digital technology is introduced in 2013.

“When the digital environment catches up there will be a difference. There will be demand for content and broadcasters have to keep up with that. I expect more broadcasters to come,” says Eng. Bantulaki.

Bantulaki says the UCC will gradually shift Ugandans from analogue to digital starting with Kampala and moving upcountry.

“By the global deadline of 2015 we shall be done,” he says.

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