Reality Television, User-Generated Content and Quality Assurance

Adaora Nwando Arah
Department of Theatre and Film Studies
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Abstract
The proliferation of new media with its on-demand access to content anytime, anywhere, and on any digital devise, facilitates quick and easy access to information, but also poses new threats to any consuming society in its real-time generation of new and unregulated content. Hence, while this may allow for greater diversification of the creative experience, the question of quality assurance looms large and begs for attention, especially amongst the theatre artists. This paper, through an examination of the prevailing trends in the practice of this genre of television programming world-wide, underlines a dire need for the Nigerian theatre artist to give attention to the possibilities and potential of the new media. It also highlights the issues of morality and ethics that bedevil the Reality TV genre as it is known today and investigates possibilities of quality control and assurance. The conclusion is that there is a need for the theatre practitioner to align with appropriate authorities to make relevant inputs for regulation, promotion and sustenance of quality assurance.

1. Introduction
Communication media are evolving in such an unprecedented and definitive manner that the common description "super-highway" seems inadequate to capture the ramifications and possibilities of

this technologically driven and all important human endeavour. The emergence of new digital channels of communication does not only assure faster speed of information dissemination, allowing a huge increase in volume of communication, it has also altered the meaning of geographical distance and has provided opportunities for interactive communication, which development has signalled a potentially radical shift of who is in control of information, experience and resources. As W. Russel Neuman puts it, we are "witnessing the evolution of a universal interconnected network of audio, video and electronic text communications that will blur the distinction between interpersonal and mass communication and between public and private communication" (p. 37).

Gamble and Gamble aptly capture this changing media environment.

> Television is also changing; ABC, NBC, CBS, PBS and FOX no longer have a monopoly on viewership… Media scarcity is disappearing as an issue. Content once directed at mass audience is suddenly being tailored to reflect the interests of smaller groups… We are becoming more user-active… changing from couch potatoes to insatiable chatterers and web surfers who think nothing of spending hours visiting with each others in computer chat rooms, playing virtual reality games… the lines between consumer and provider and blurring. (2002 p. 557)

Associated with new media is the democratization of the creation, publishing, distribution and consumption of media content which generation is unregulated and real time, while new media itself, generally, refers to on-demand access to content anytime, anywhere, on any digital devise, as well as interactive user

feedback, creative participation and community formation around the media content (Thompson 5).

While television programmes, feature films, magazines, books or paper-based publications in their primal forms cannot be included in new media, where they employ digital technology that enable digital accessibility and interacting, they can be grouped among new media.

It is on this premise that this study seeks to examine Reality Television with its attendant new media features including user-generated content and use of interactive digital technology, its possible influence on the Nigerian society and the likely demands on the communication professional and practitioner to gain a foothold and exert control over content generation in order to achieve quality assurance.

2. Media Influence, Society and Socialization

Socialization, which can be simply described as the process through which an individual is formed and made to fit into a society, is a complex process extending over a number of years and involving various people and institutions (O'Sullivan et al, 1994. p.19). However, prominent among these agencies of socialization is the media as a primary source of information.

Learning is an important part of the socialization process and the media serve as important sources of information for a wide range of topics. Today the television, primarily, serves as source of information on social trends, local events, politics, and provides entertainment of all sorts. Inherent in these media presentations are information that form and shape our attitudes, perceptions and beliefs. Again, it is implicit in the claim that the media provides its audiences with "windows on the world" or with "definitions of social reality" that the media act as "powerful agencies capable of

shaping and directing public and private understandings of the world and awareness of its social, economic, moral, cultural, technological and political affairs". (O'Sullivan et al, 1994. p. 19).

The mass audience is eclectic and heterogeneous. The effect of mass media on culture and by inference, socialization, is changing. At one time, the media bound people culturally, especially, early radio and television networks. People across a nation, whether diverse or otherwise, heard the same broadcasts - comedy, drama, music, news and sports. In Nigeria the early radio and television stations WNBC, the FRCN and NTA had the monopoly. The result was a strong cultural cohesion where the children could tell the moral lessons culled from "Tales by Moonlight" and the adults could swap stories about the recalcitrant, mean and moody Uncle Gaga of "Cockcrow at Dawn" or the antics of Chief Zebrudaya Okoroigwe Nwogbo alias four-thirty . However, media practitioners in current times are increasingly pandering to niches and not the whole. The mass audience of earlier days has fragmented. As John Vivian puts it, the result is "fragmentation in the culture, which is sometimes polarizing, at other times simply diverging. Either way, there has been a loosening of cultural cohesion" (20).

The power of the media to create and perpetuate stereotypes has tremendous effect on people's self-image which could be a source of concern. In Nigeria, for example, the Igbo man is the quintessential grabber and mercenary. This stereotype is widely supported by various mass media especially through jokes circulated on new media via user generated content. Again, Alison Cooper notes that in the US and Europe, every imaginary young black thief or underachiever portrayed on television does not make life easier for real black people. As she puts it "when all that many white employees see of young black men is mug shots on crime

shows, is it any wonder that three out of five black men in London are unemployed?"(9).

If the influence of mass media on society could, be said to have been substantial a few decades ago, it has now become more pervasive with the advent of new media. This fast and easy mode of information dissemination, while it has created a more politically aware and sympathetic audience, has also birthed new dangers to society. Cyber crimes abound and face book related rapes and murders are on the increase. There is also the problem of invasion of people's privacy and trial by media. The "my oga at the top" incidence and the attendant media hype in Nigeria, is just one of such nuisance. In this incidence, the 'first family' of Nigeria at that time was the choice victim with all the disparaging remarks leveled at the president, and his wife portrayed as the epitome of dumbness.

2.1 What is Reality Television?

Reality television as a form of mass media shares a vital quality with other social media which employ web and mobile based technologies. These internet-based applications support dialogue and introduce substantial and pervasive changes to communication between organizations, communities and individuals, allowing for the creation and exchange of user-generated content.

By definition, Reality TV is essentially unscripted programming that, purportedly, does not employ professional actors and focuses on footage of real events or situations. It is non-fictional programming in which portrayal is presumed to present current, historical events or circumstances, however unlike other programme types in this category, the intent is not to inform but to entertain.

Oxford Dictionaries .com defines Reality shows as television programming in which "ordinary people are continuously filmed, designed to be entertaining rather than informative. Unlike scripted shows like sitcoms, dramas, and newscasts, reality television does not rely on writers and actors, and much of the show is run by the producer and a team of film editors. Reality TV relies on the camera capturing everything as it happens. Whether it is shot in a real setting with real people (much like a documentary), in front of a live studio audience that participates in the programme or uses hidden surveillance. Michael Pollick writing for wisegeek.com "what is a Reality Show" opines that it "features talent culled from the ranks of "ordinary" people, not professionally trained actors. Producers typically shoot hundreds of hours of footage per episode and use creative editing to create a narrative thread. Subjects may be given some rudimentary directions off-screen, but the point is to allow the performers to act and react as normally as possibly". Pollick continues, "A reality show is not to be confused with a documentary, in which the subjects are asked to ignore the cameras and behave naturally. Many reality producers encourage participants to play to the camera as characters or use private taped conversations called confessionals, as a form of narration".

Again, Reality shows differ from other 'real life' programming such as documentaries, interviews, vox populi, and even talk shows in the sense that a 'situation' is created and 'ordinary' or real people (not actors) are placed in that situation to respond 'naturally 'or handle the way they would. They are continuously filmed and beamed out to the public. However, the success of these shows depends largely on the ability of the producer to select a cast that the audience will respond to. They must be people who will mirror the society of the day and at the

same time be stereotypical enough to cause a sensation, engender conflicts and tension to raise ratings.

Reality shows also often use a host to run the programme or a narrator to tell the story or set the stage for events that are about to unfold. It relies on the camera capturing everything as it happens, whether it is shot in a real setting with real people (much like a documentary), in front of a live studio audience that participates in the programme or uses hidden surveillance.

Reality Television in the context of this study would refer to an unscripted and recorded presentation, whether dramatic or documentary, which uses untrained actors (or ordinary people) in ordinary or arranged settings, responding to situations in an unrehearsed manner. Such a recorded material may also employ web and mobile based technologies which would introduce subtle and pervasive changes to communication between the actors, the producers and the audience, especially allowing for creation and exchange of user-generated content.

2.2 Reality Television and Democratization of Content

Joseph R. Dominick believes that broadcasters were the first to realize the potential of user-generated content, a factor of democratization of media content (236). As the internet becomes even more ubiquitous, more services are becoming available that make it even easier to create and distribute content. With prices of quality cameras plummeting and computer software becoming increasingly powerful and accessible, it is easier to make videos and with services like YouTube, U stream or even just one's blog, an individual can instantly make his content available to anyone in the world, free of charge too.

User-generated content has also been characterized as "Conversational media", as opposed to the "Packaged Goods

Media" of the past century (Battelle). It is a two-way process in which people are encouraged to publish their own content and comment on other people's contributions. This marks a shift in the role of the passive audience, and an ever-growing number of participatory users are taking advantage of interactive opportunities through digital media technologies such as question-answer databases, blogging, podcasting, social networking, social media, mobile phone photography and the likes.

Thus, digital media technologies including electronic text, graphics, moving images and sound are combined and structured into a digital computerized environment which allows people to interact with the data. Such environment could include the internet, telecoms and interactive digital television. When used in television, audiences are allowed to be part of the shows they watch through the use of external outlets.

Some of the best example of how interactive media has changed the face of modern television can be found in television reality shows like the earlier mentioned Reality programmes, *Big Brother, Project Fame West Africa, American Idol* and *Nigerian Idol*. However, this study will look closer at one of these user-generated new media television realities shows, *Big Brother,* its content and impact on the Nigerian society.

2.3 Quality Assurance

Onocha in Ofojebe and Ezugoh defined quality as the "degree of excellence and that which is relative with attribute and characteristics" (398). They also quote Morgatrod and Morgan in Fredrickson as referring to quality assurance as the "determination of standards, appropriate methods and quality requirements, by an expert body, accompanied by a process of inspection or evaluation

that examines the extent to which practice meets these standards" (398).

Such definitions as those stated above though explicit, describe an experience which possesses the qualities of measurability, prescribed methods and determined standards. They also imply a controlled environment in which process can be measured and feedback easily obtained. Moreover, professional practice needs to be informed by ethical considerations and accountability measures, touching a middle place between incident-centred and all- encompassing critiques and between structural factors at industry and genre levels and situational measures of agency and differentiation (Mast 1).

Margaret Rouse in an online post for Search Software Quality, opines that in the world of economics, quality assurance refers to any systematic process of checking to see whether a product or service being developed is meeting specified requirements. A quality assurance system is said to increase customer confidence and a company's credibility, to improve work processes and efficiency, and to enable a company to better compete with others. It is imperative to differentiate between quality assurance and quality control in order to properly understand the role of the theatre practitioner in this quest for standard maintenance.

2.4 Quality Assurance Vs Quality Control

Quality Assurance is a managerial tool that involves the establishment of a good quality management system and the assessment of its adequacy. It is process- oriented and focuses on defect prevention. It is a set of activities for ensuring quality in the process by which products are developed. Quality Control, however refers to a corrective tool that involves the activities or

techniques used to achieve and maintain the product quality, process and service. These set of activities focus on identifying defects in the actual products produced. Quality control is attained by finding and eliminating sources of quality problems through tools and equipment so that customer's requirements are continually met.

Quality assurance (QA) and quality control (QC) are dependent on each other. The QC process receives input from the QA process, and in turn, gives its feedback to the QA process so that the QA can validate its operational process (differen.com).

2.5 The *Big Brother* Show

Big Brother Africa is the African version of the *Big Brother* reality game show which began in America. The show which debuted in 2003, initially involved twelve countries within Africa with two countries being added in season four and two other countries added in season seven. Nigeria participated in the premiere show and has always provided a housemate or two ever since then. In the show, each country provides a contestant (known as a house mate) to live in an isolated house while trying to avoid being evicted by viewers and ultimately winning a large cash prize at the end of the show which runs for 90 days. The show which is currently in its eight season is shot and produced in south Africa and broadcast on various stations, mainly on M-Net, and in Nigeria, on Africa Magic Entertainment Channel.

A typical day in the *Big Brother* house will begin with the just awakened housemates ambling into the living room from their rooms to look for breakfast and take care of usual morning ablution. There could be exercises after which the housemates assemble at Big Brother's bequest, via a voice on the overhead speaker, to receive instructions on the day's task, which could

range from reciting poems to more physical tasks, performed in teams. There is also an individual private time with Big brother (a disembodied voice) during which time the housemates share their thoughts, especially on other housemates, and nominate who they would like to leave the house. The housemates take turns to prepare their meals and work on group projects. When it is night they turn-in for the night in a common male and female room.

However, the *Big Brother* house is as far from tame as the described day sounds. There is a lot of backbiting, quarrelling, arguing and back stabbing as the housemates try to scheme each other out of the game. Alliances are formed, friendships struck up, enemies made and affairs begun. The public display of emotions, whether of anger, love and lust seem epic on dimension, in front of millions of viewers. This is nothing to compare to the wild parties, public baths and showers in the nude or in skimpy briefs and the sex scenes that dot the show.

Many moralists have spoken out against the show. Some countries like Malawi banned the show (though the ban was overturned) and Nigeria, sometime ago, threatened to ban it from being aired in the country. When the heat became too much for the Big Brother team, the show was revised and the shower hour was limited to air late in the night and not as often. Again, the show has to be subscribed to, otherwise only an abridged 30 minute version of it can be received, in some cases, once a week.

The 2017 edition of the show was titled *BBNaija* 'See Gobe' held for 11 weeks, from January 22 to April 9, and featured 14 housemates (and two fake ones sent in to spice up the show). In the tenth week of the show, nine of the housemates (and two fake housemates) were evicted from the house, leaving the top five. These were further whittled down to two finalists, out of whom Efe

Ejeba emerged winner. Efe went away with the prize of N25 million and a car.

The show raised mixed reactions with most of its negative criticism emanating from the older generation and the clergy on grounds of morality and promotion of base values. Collins Yakubu-Hammer of News Agency of Nigeria, writing for *Premium Times Nigeria* describes the show as full of intrigues "characterized by hate, love, pretence, lies and strategies to excel. However, other critics were more vitriolic in their attack. The media adviser to former Nigerian president Goodluck Jonathan, Rueben Abati notes:

> …the show was a big distraction, crass capitalism at its most cynical edge, a source of unmanageable madness in homes and on the streets. MultiChoice, through its Big Brother Naija and Big Brother Africa franchises, seems committed to the promotion of base values, chiefly adultery, prostitution, love of money, nudity and sex. What has just ended as Big Brother 2017 was nothing other than the corralling of some human beings into a zoo, pressured to behave like nothing but animals. The organizers made money devaluing other human beings…(par 24-27)

Other negative sentiments raised by the show concerned the choice of South Africa as location for the shooting of the reality programme, thereby depriving Nigerians a veritable source of employment and revenue. The organizers of the show presented the unavailability of requisite logistics as reason for their defection.

2.6. New Media, Participatory Culture, and the Challenge of Quality Assurance

The definitions of quality assurance as presented herein describe a process which involves the qualities of measurability, prescribed methods and determined standards. The fact remains that though the activities of new media can be monitored and measured in terms of effects and methods, the user-generated content format also implies a lack of control of environment. New media breeds a participatory culture where there is a relatively low barrier to artistic expression and civic engagement, also a strong support for creating and sharing one's creations. Faced with a phenomenon of this nature, the issue of quality control and assurance pose a dominant problem.

Jelle Mast further notes that the ethical problem with reality shows is accentuated by its hybrid nature. She insists that "it is precisely the coexistence of conventionally distinguished repertoires of information and popular entertainment, fact and fiction, or private and public that complicates ethical judgments" (2). Writing online on "Confronting the challenges of participatory culture", Henry Jenkins lists the potential benefits to include "opportunities for peer-to-peer learning, a changed altitude toward intellectual property, the diversification of cultural expression, the development of skills valued in the modern workplace and a more empowered conception of citizenship".

He, however, warns that despite all the perceived potential, there is need for policy and pedagogical interventions because of the challenges young people face in learning to see clearly the ways the media shape perceptions of the world. Jenkins et al further states that there is need for the young to have access to the skills and experiences needed to become full participants, to be able to articulate their understanding of how media shapes

perceptions and for them to be socialized into the emerging ethical standards that should shape their practice as media makers and participants in online communities.

Graeme Burton appears to agree with Jenkins et al as regards the role of those authorities, upon whom the responsibility of imparting ethical standards fall, in protecting the young from dangerous effects of so much exposure to new media. He opines:

> "One has to bear in mind that - especially for older children they have both technical competence and access to new technologies … One immediate implication of all this is that parents carry far more responsibility than they did regarding what their children see and use". (127-128)

Concern over the influence of new media on the Nigerian society is growing. Some of these concerns are not particular to the Nigerian society and O'Sullivan et al describe them as its abilities to "manipulate whole populations' attitudes… degrading or debasing cultural traditions and standards, eroding the authentic and replacing it with the "trivial" and "vulgar"… (21-22). The *Big Brother* show, with its flagrant disregard for ethical and moral barriers, broaches the issue of the role of the artiste as the propagator of cultural values as the popularity of this show among the youth of the African nations (Nigeria, for example) is unquestionable.

Voting audience alone in the Big Brother show exceed two million in number and a recent survey conducted among 80 Nigerian adults between the ages 18-50 at the Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, in the course of this study, shows that 23 respondents or 29% chose Big Brother Africa as their favourite reality show. 36% or 29 respondents said they never watch BBA and out of the other 28 respondents (over 35%) who just watch, 4

people say they do always, while 24 only watch sometimes. Of course, this means that out of eighty Nigerian youths who were questioned, 51 of them, watch the Big Brother Africa show, whether regularly or whenever they can. On the issue of projection of the wrong cultural values, 22 respondents, that is, about 27% would love to always receive the full and uncensored version of the programme all the time while 25 people or 31% would not mind having it now and then. Again, 52% believes the show projects African values while 45% think it does not.

Given the growing popularity of this genre of television programming, many communication experts believe that there is need to seek and apply regulatory approaches to offensive content arising from reality TV broadcasts. For this, there is need for the establishment of well-defined controls which would serve to standardize both production models and reactions to the programmes. The role of the theatre artist here is clearly in the place of quality control and not essentially in quality assurance. He must set standards by 'dominating' or this television genre, producing balanced, informative and morally approved programmes with sound ethical judgments to protect the increasingly fragile fabrics of society. Reality shows like musical contests, talent hunts, survival matches are also popular with the youths and promote healthy competition with good social ethics.

3. Conclusion

The mercuric advancement in science and technology of mass media has quickened global changes and has placed great responsibility of enormous dimensions on today's media person and communicator. According to Aliede "multiplicity of compelling challenges stare communication professionals in the face. These tasks are so obvious and necessary to a level of forcing

the practitioners to find ways of complying and conforming with some of the demands in order to sustain their relevance in the field" (317). The communicator must take cognizance of the changing taste among groups in society, the competitive media environment as well as the need to foster skills and the cultural knowledge necessary to deploy those technological tools towards his own end.

This is made even more compelling by the looming issues of standards, quality, ethics and control posed by reality television and the on-demand access provided by new media. If the theatre/media practitioner and other communicators will maintain their place as progenitors of the creative arts, they must assert their presence in the virtual world with ethical and structural standards and work in concert with appropriate regulatory bodies to evolve and support regulatory measures and approaches to offensive content and infringements of rights of privacy.

The problem of regulation of reality TV broadcast content is a global one with audiences divided over appropriateness of its user-generated messages. It must be stressed that there is no clear-cut or easy way out of it. Writing on these content regulatory perspectives and challenges in the United States of America, Eliza Varney, quoting Freedman states that "the regulation of broadcasting content poses a dilemma between the need for intervention in order to protect the interests of the public on the one hand, and considerations for freedom of expression on the other hand". However, he also submits that:

> What constitutes 'bad' television content is often a matter of taste. However, if such content is perceived by policy makers as 'politically or socially undesirable', it can be subject to restriction or prohibitions through negative content regulation. (par 3)

Again, there is a stress on the legal handle to the problem solution, thus the responsibility of quality assurance, as regards television, while it rests on every practitioner, is ultimately a policy issue, as such lies heavily on the government regulatory body. Quality control, on the other hand, must be ensured by the practitioners of media arts..

As responsible consumers and practitioners, there is need for media artists to be alert to changes in the mass media world by learning and adapting to the ways new technology is affecting us all. It is also necessary to apprehend that the real changes are in "content" rather than in the technology of any particular medium, because what really informs opinion is the content, hence, the need to appropriate the tools of this new media.

Finally, there is need to for the regulatory authorities to develop safeguards on new media, especially for children. Preventing the commercialization of online media for children may be impossible, but there is the possibility to influence the design of new software programmes which will enable parents and guardians screen out certain content areas or restrict the information that children can give out. Government must explore these opportunities even more than it has, especially as they apply to interactive television shows. Some screening software already available includes such programmes as Net Nanny, Cyber Patrol and Safe Surf.

Above all, regulatory agencies like the National Broadcasting Commission must rise to this steep challenge of policing and controlling what seeps into the nations visual media in the guise of reality television. This calls for a synergy between the regulatory bodies and recognized practitioners, to delineate boundaries and define ethics needed to sanitize contents. The nation's censor's authority must be involved in this task. While the theatre practitioners supply the necessary tools for quality control,

the regulatory bodies must take responsibility for ensuring that an effective management system which will assess these tools and prevent the crass descent of standards and values is put in place.

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