Emergence, Growth and Challenges of Films and Home Videos in Nigeria

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Chapter 13

Economic and Technological Threat to Continued Growth of Home Video Industry in Nigeria

Olusola O. Isola

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Introduction

WITHIN two decades, the home video industry in Nigeria has grown to become one of the three biggest in the world in spite of the economic difficulties the country faced during the period. The industry is now among the top employers of labour and it is providing social and economic support for other sectors of the Nigerian economy. However, while most of the activities of the home video industry revolve around artistic content, production and marketing, the local technological input into the industry is virtually non-existent. The business model being adopted in the industry is not dynamic enough to sustain the pace of innovations and activities in the industry, which is interfacing with the global environment at a very fast speed. Also, the legal framework that guides the activities of this industry remain largely static for a dynamic and crucial sector of an economy which continues to attract new entrepreneurs, professionals and investors whose orientation and vision are structured towards competition in the global environment.

As this piece will show, the dynamic foreign-sourced technology which sustains the pace of the home video sector in Nigeria and the dearth of innovation and clear foresight of the drivers of the industry may soon consume this vibrant industry in a fast-liberalizing global environment. This could however be prevented if appropriate proactive measures are taken to make the industry expansive and dynamic enough to meet up with the technology that sustains it in order to cope with the emerging global environment which would drive the industry into the future. As will be seen, this responsibility is not only that of the entrepreneurs in the industry, but also requires an evolution of deliberate government policies to protect and advance the industry which is being threatened by the massive consuming capacity of the global popular culture, backed up by new information and communication technology.

Growth and Features of the Nigerian Home Video Industry

The Nigerian Nollywood is regarded as the third largest film industry in the world after Hollywood in the United States and Bollywood in India. The phenomenal expansion of the film industry since the late 1980s is remarkable, when it is considered that this was a period when Nigeria was experiencing severe economic depression which affected other sectors of the country's economy negatively and depressed the standard of living of the citizen. It is also remarkable to note that the rise of the home video industry coincided with the recession in the cinema and travelling theatres, and radical depression in the night life of urban centres in Nigeria. In addition, the diminishing qualities of television programmes in the country aided the popularity of home videos, which audience turns to when they are dissatisfied with the content of free-to-air television programmes. At that time, cable and satellite television were not yet in vogue and even no private television station was yet licensed in Nigeria.

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In the 1970s through the mid-1980s, travelling theatres found romance in television because of the popularity of the medium. However, all the television stations in Nigeria were run by either the state or federal government since private owners were not allowed then to invest in the electronic media. The romance of theatre groups with the television was not sustainable and short-lived since most of the state television stations were running on state funds and could not support the activities of artistes because of limited commercial drives in those stations. Barber (2000:245) recounts:

> ....travelling theatre troupes faced numerous difficulties when working with the sole institutions in charge of TV broadcasting in Nigeria in the 1980s, namely the NTA. Although production on TV gave the actors and their companies greater exposure to the public, they did not find the NTA a dependable business partner. NTA defaulted on payments, did not respect copyright and paid royalties only haphazardly.

Independent film producers and directors who were producing soap operas and dramas for the television faced nightmares in getting sponsors for their programmes. Many such programmes were yanked off the television screen due to lack of sponsorship and as a result of disputes with corporate sponsors and television station management, thus boosting the resolve of the producers and artistes to explore other opportunities in other media. Barber reveals that this frustration exposed the theatre companies and independent film directors to celluloid films as a preferable medium to expose their creative works. They were able to retain control over their products and could exercise greater control over profits gained from the production of their creative works in audio-visual format.

However, recession began in the cinema due to reduced night life in urban centres. Since the theatre companies had

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already been exposed to film production and producers and directors were comfortable with it, the transition from cinema to home video was easy. Moreover, home video production offered the advantage of cheaper production cost and minimal technical expertise. Film directors were able to produce video films in a shorter period with a lower budget than they could do when they were working on celluloid. At the initial stage, the quality of production was low. Shaka (2003:46) aptly describes the trend then:

> Technically speaking, most of the video films of the late 1980s were of poor production quality. Most were hastily shot with VHS cameras which resulted in extreme depreciation and poor picture quality after editing. Besides, the camera and lighting crews were mostly amateurs with little knowledge of camera operation and lighting for the screen. Since most of the directors' knowledge of screen narration was limited, the productions were extremely stagy, with the camera functioning purely as photographic equipment offering a peeping window into the narrative world of the video film.

However, producers were able to learn fast and improved on their skills. Fortunately, video viewing had become a leisure activity preferred by the audience since its access did not depend on advanced literacy. Over time, the home video industry expanded beyond theatre companies and producers' abilities to finance production of films. Marketers and other financiers became involved in financing the production process which eventually enhanced the quality of films produced beyond what it was at the initial stage. Though this financing trend has attracted criticism because of the overbearing influence of marketers and businessmen in film production, it is important to note that this trend is not peculiar to Nigeria. It is the same in the Western world where even the

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promotional budget for a production sometimes exceeds the actual production cost of films. Larger budget productions are now possible in Nigeria because of more access to financial resources and better quality equipment for production, though not comparable with Western productions. Nevertheless, Nigerian home videos now compete favourably in the international environment and some have in fact won awards at global competitions in the last decade.

There is a delicate balance between production economics among the home video business concerns on the one hand, and the urge to express creativity among the home video artistes on the other hand. Film producers and marketers adopt strategies that enable their businesses to be profitable while fulfilling audience needs for satisfaction from patronizing the films. Serialization of narratives is a common trend in the home video industry, which enables film producers and artistes to maximize profit out of their artistic endeavours. Serialization is a unique property of video technology where narratives are spread over two or more video cassettes that are released independently over a period of several months. Hobson (quoted in Adejumobi, 2003:52) says such serialization "has established characters, settings and an unfolding narrative, whose plots and story lines continue from one episode to another." Allen (1995) describes it as "organization of narrative and narration around enforced and regular suspension of both textual display and reading activities."

Though serialization is also common in other parts of the world, short serialization is a major trend in the home video industry in Nigeria (Adejumobi, 2003). Usually, the first instalment of serialized home video ends without a resolution of the conflict at the heart of the narrative. This is unlike European and American films each of which presents at least a partial resolution of the plot which could give an inkling of the event in the successive series. However, since

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serialization is tied with commercialization of fictional narratives, it offers home video marketers the opportunity to lure the audience into expectation about subsequent series through creation of sometimes undue and unnecessary suspense. This trend may however be vitiated by new technology which is offering the audience prolonged period of watching hours at a sitting. Moreover, emerging technology may force a shift from the current business model in the film industry whereby film marketers determine the fate of video film production as against audience preference in the production and marketing of films.

Most of the hardware that drives the home video industry in Nigeria is foreign-sourced. Cameras, editing equipment and sometimes even props and costumes are imported. It is still a mystery why investors have not shown interest in how to manufacture some of the equipment locally in spite of the phenomenal expansion in the home video industry in Nigeria. Typical of the Nigerian economic environment, producers source for second-hand equipment from Asia, Europe and America when some of the equipment needed for production are not available or affordable. However, a new trend of business specialization is emerging in the industry whereby some business concerns now major in equipment acquisition and hiring to film producers. Thus, it makes more economic sense to hire equipment at a cost which is built into the production expenses of a film.

Agencies that specialize in representing artistes, in locating and managing shooting sites and in building and managing props are now springing up. Thus, in spite of the limitations initially imposed by technology, the home video industry is able to advance through the participation of investors in relevant specialized areas. The producers' responsibility is to be able to source for a veritable avenue of finance for a project and locate a good script. Even then, there are now

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agencies that specialize in script syndication, while others are assisting producers to locate appropriate finances to run their projects. This business model, although not entirely strange elsewhere, is driving the home industry in Nigeria, even with little support coming from government which is yet to fully realize the importance of this industry in the face of contemporary global competition.

Another important feature of the home video industry is the emergence of various guilds associated with the industry. Within the industry, we now have the actors' guild, producers' association, and marketers' association among others. The intention of the various trade associations is to regulate the activities of their members. Like any other sector of the economy, the problems associated with quality control became apparent in the home video industry in Nigeria. This concern largely informed the emergence of most of these guilds and associations which have now put up measures to regulate the operation of their members. However, not much impact of these guilds has been seen, especially in relation to ethics in the industry. A common feature among these associations and guilds is the constant internal bickering among their members, especially in relation to leadership ascension. They tend to devote more time and attention to resolution and even escalation of such internal conflicts which impact negatively on the major objectives for which such associations were formed in the first instance.

A major problem facing the home video industry in Nigeria is the extant copyright law which is not suitable for the pace of development of the industry. In spite of the dynamism of the industry to date, it is the same copyright law which applies to written text that also applies to film production in its entire ramification. Pirates are so much ravaging the industry that it has taken the resilience of the entrepreneurs to have survived for so long. New technologies are even

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making the industry to be more vulnerable to the activities of pirates because the facilities to illegally copy productions are the easiest to obtain. Many producers, artistes and financiers who had invested in the industry had run bankrupt and been frustrated out because of activities of the pirates. Over the years, the activities of video clubs and video rental shops have thrived at the detriment of the industry. After a while, the industry had learnt to contend with these illegal rentals and seemed to strike a compromise when the operators association was formalized.

Government has initiated regulations of the production aspect of the industry. The National Film and Video Censors Board, which was established in 1993, has put in place various regulations, among which is the classification of contents and the establishment of quality standards for materials that could be broadcast or sold in the open market. In spite of this however, there are still some shortcomings in the production quality of some of the home videos, especially with regard to the likely impact of their contents on the moral fabric of the vulnerable demographic group and the delicate socio-cultural environment of the audience of locally produced home videos. This trend has however not vitiated the contribution of the industry to popularizing Nigerian culture, especially in the global environment.

In spite of the constraints faced by the industry, its products have broken through geographical barriers and it is carving a niche for itself in the global cultural context. Its products are today available in many parts of the world and the global satellite television broadcasting channels are fast realizing that they could no longer ignore Nigerian Nollywood products, to the extent that some channels are now emerging to offer Nollywood films to the global audience.

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The Threats and Opportunities of Digital Video Discs

Initially, Nigerian home video productions are offered through VHS cassette. This is fast giving way to Video Compact Discs (VCDs). With the digitalization of recording, editing and other production facilities, even the VCD will soon give way completely to Digital Video Discs (DVDs). The ultra-clear multipurpose DVD is the latest technology in home video storage and recording and it will certainly determine the future direction of businesses in the Nigerian film industry. The broadcast time of a single small dish of DVD could mount up to 30 hours. Its sound and picture quality is incomparable with VHS and VCD.

Video programmes recorded on the DVD also have the advantage of being subtitled in several languages without one interfering with the others. All it requires for its operation is for the viewer to press the appropriate button to switch on to his preferred language. The advantage of this facility is that the marketing of films can be done globally to any language group. It only depends on how adventurous and aggressive a film marketer is. However, it also compels film production to meet global standard because of the stiff competition in the industry. The implication of this is that the Nigerian home video is no longer subject to local standard alone but also to global standard which imposes more production responsibilities in terms of quality.

Perhaps the greatest threat of the DVD to the home video industry in Nigeria is the serialization trend in the production of home videos, which is a popular trend, as earlier described. Production in the DVD format will compel film producers to extend serialization time beyond the traditional period since it is now possible for a viewer to sit through one programme for many hours on the same DVD dish. In addition to this, the activities of pirates will be more enhanced with

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the arrival of DVD, especially in the face of absence of strict copyright regulations. DVD has made it possible to offer as many as twenty films on the same small DVD dish. In essence, as many series as possible of a production could be pirated and offered to the audience through one single dish. This could be detrimental to the commercial interests of film producers, marketers and artistes.

The Threats and Opportunities of the Internet, (Video Streaming)

The internet has brought a new dimension into entertainment access across the globe. Time and distance have been rendered irrelevant to access to information and entertainment, and this is bound to also have an influence on the home video industry. Streaming media is a unique feature of the internet, which refers mainly to the delivery mode rather than the content of the communication. It is a multimedia mode that is normally displayed by the source and continuously received by the end user (*Wikipedia*, 2007). This system enables radio messages, television programmes, movies and other mass mediated information to be streamed down to the audience through a secondary system, this time the telecommunication system, especially the internet. The system is making films and other entertainment programmes instantly available on demand. This mode of access to entertainment is becoming popular, especially among the younger sector of the population. Sometimes such entertainments are subscribed to or are accessed free of charge but accompanied by commercial advertisements.

The opportunity this internet video streaming is offering home video is that it removes the boundaries for expansion of the marketing of Nigerian home videos into the whole world. Already, some marketers have developed websites dedicated to marketing and promotion of Nigerian home

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videos where they make previews of such videos possible. Some are making it possible for the audience to subscribe to watch the videos online or to purchase a copy of such home videos online. This enhances the contribution of the Nigerian art industry into the global popular culture and bolsters the struggle against cultural imperialism with such contribution from the indigenous folk culture into the evolving global culture. Apart from this, it has the potential of expanding the financial base of artistes, producers and marketers, including all participants in the home video industry if well managed.

The threat, however, is that this technology has expanded the scope for piracy, which is the bane of the home video industry in particular and creative ventures in general. Since the laws governing the activities of operators of the internet are still evolving, even in the global environment, this imposes new challenges on drivers of the Nigerian home video industry to monitor illegal offering of the industry's products on the internet. Even after tracking and detecting piracy of works on the internet, the mode of arresting and prosecution, and where the prosecution would take place, is bound to pose a big challenge. In the process, much funds, energy and goodwill may be lost and home video investors will be the loser for it. Therefore, the responsibility now falls on the industry to evolve creative and dynamic ways of tackling this challenge, which is bound to continue into the future.

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The Revival of the Cinema

The cinema has experienced a recession since the early 1990s because of the insecurity associated with going to the cinema in the late hours of the day. This trend greatly boosted home entertainment, and accounted for the boom in home video production, especially in this part of the world. However, we are now witnessing a gradual resurgence of the cinema with new strategies adopted by investors in the cinema sector. Part

of the strategies adopted in reviving it is combining the cinema with other leisure modes whereby fast foods, bars, gambling, children entertainment and shopping, are made possible in the same venue. In addition to this, internet communication has made it possible for new films to be premiered in different locations across the globe accompanied with large promotional efforts. This attracts people to cinema houses to witness such events which are often celebrated as global events with attendant pomp and ceremony. In Lagos for example, the Silverbird Cinema and NuMetro Cinema are becoming major entertainment and shopping locations and they are getting popular by featuring mainly foreign-produced movies. These and other newly emerging cinema houses have not yet found a deal to feature locally made films, but they are latching on the economic and cultural liberalization of government to expand their business scope. Nevertheless, they are slicing off a fairly large cut from the entertainment budget of middle-class households in areas where they are located. It is expected that this trend will continue to grow and could give the cinema a new impetus in the entertainment industry, which is gradually drawing people outdoors.

The challenge of the revival of cinema to the home video industry is that producers should now begin a re-examination of the delivery methods of the industry's products to the audience. There is now a necessity to rethink their business model with a view to interfacing the cinema with other modes of delivery if the industry is to have a fair share of the newly emerging cinema audience. Moreover, the cinema is capable of expanding the revenue base of film producers if they are able to mobilize sufficient commercial advertisements from other productive and service sectors of the economy. The interface between satellite technology and the cinema has expanded the cinema audience from local to global, and this could provide another goldmine for film producers.

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Funding of the Home Video Industry

The economy of the home video industry in Nigeria is tied to the emerging global economy. Since there is a growing specialization in all the various aspects of the industry elsewhere across the world, it is expected that various corporate bodies would continue to specialize in equipment hiring and leasing, project financing, artistic management, script syndication, prop construction, costume hiring, marketing and marketing support, and so on. This is good for the expansion of the industry. Also, the growing trend of distributors bankrolling film the production budget, which is not peculiar to the video industry in Nigeria, will continue. However, the disturbing trend of promoters and marketers directly interfering in professional production decisions of films must end. Many directors and producers have complained about film marketers imposing particular story lines, actors and even shooting locations and props on them in the production process. This trend is capable of negatively affecting creativity, which may not be favourable to the growth of the industry.

This problem has only imposed on film producers the challenge of diversifying the sources of funding. It is imminent that the production budget would continue to grow if Nollywood will compete with other film industries across the world. It is therefore imperative that the industry should begin to diversify the sources of its funding. This they could do by exploring opportunities available in the financial sector of the Nigerian economy or even in international finance bodies when it involves transnational productions. Happily, the financial sector is gradually warming up to the film industry as the new economic environment has encouraged them to explore business opportunities in previously neglected sectors. The commitment and competence displayed by the players in the home video industry would determine how much they could exploit the opportunities available in the finance industry.

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The Future of the Industry

Since the future of the industry is tied to technology, demography and economics, it is important that the industry must begin to explore other multi-media avenues for delivery and promotion to grow into the future. Apart from the opportunities offered by the internet, producers in Western countries, for example, now tie bestsellers to chartbuster films. Books containing pictures and stories about epic productions are published and offered to the public in an effort to promote the film while it is still hot in the market. This is a veritable way of popularizing film productions while also making extra money on the side. This enhances market penetration of the film to reach segments of the population that prefer reading but otherwise would not show interest in going to the movies. Reading those bestsellers could encourage them to acquire the film or even visit the cinema to see the film.

Also in terms of contents, producers need to adopt a new narrative strategy that will encourage the audience to purchase two or more instalments of a single story without feeling that the film is being unnecessarily prolonged. Currently, it is observed that most of the films that are serialized in Nigeria are the types that can be offered in a single episode. This has led the audience to think that the producers are out to exploit them with the unnecessary serialization of story lines and bringing about scenes which may not be relevant to the main theme of films. This also could be a reflection of the lack of ingenuity of producers and, if not improved upon, could be an albatross for Nollywood.

The ethical conduct of players within the home video industry in Nigeria is a cause for big concern to the audience. The industry is increasingly being identified with dubious activities which are daily adversely affecting the credibility of the industry. An edition of *The News* magazine (June 23,

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2007) did a feature story titled *Nollywood Crooks,* on how home video films were prominently advertised with popular actors who did not participate in any form in the productions or who had appeared only as an extra, all in the quest to lure the audience into buying such films. Also, there have been instances where production qualities have not matched the advertised quality, which the audience often find deceptive and offensive. Furthermore, there are constant complaints of exploitation by actors and contractors who had fallen victim of producers, directors and marketers' exploitation and non-fulfilment of contractual agreements. All these are just examples of the numerous ethical problems that are pervasive in the home video industry in Nigeria which are capable of stunting the industry's growth.

Conclusion

While one will not advocate more stringent government rules and regulations than the extant ones to guide the industry in order not stall creativity, it is the responsibility of the various guilds, associations and individual key players in the industry to watch out against breaches of ethical values. The only thing that the industry enjoys in the audience is the public confidence that is reposed in it. If this confidence is eroded, then it is doubtful if the home video industry would be able to recover in the face of the global competition in the very near future.

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