

The phone-in programme
By Benson Idonije

The "phone-in" device has become popular in broadcasting in recent times. Radio and television stations now use it greatly all over the world to put people in touch with people, generate audience participation, whip up the sentiments and views of audience on issues of interest.

This technique has always been there, but it was despised and looked down upon because after all, it is a cheap way of building programmes, it does not make any challenging demands on the creative ability of the producer. The telephone lines are there, and all that there is to it is to invite telephonic calls. Before you know it, the station is inundated with calls from respondents who are willing to air their views and bare their minds; and in no time, without any serious effort, one to two hours of air time is filled.

Events have proved that if properly handled, the "phone-in" technique can turn out to be interesting and effective, especially in these hard times.

The fundamental aim of the "phone-in" is to allow for a democratic expression of views on an issue, but the reason it is being utilised as a popular programme technique in recent economic recession, a global phenomenon of which Nigeria has its fair share.

Time was when target audiences listened with involvement and commitment to radio programmes. Some ardent listeners even formed themselves into clubs for the purpose of according programmes and their presenters appreciative worship. I had a fan club in far away Ghana in those days for "The day afternoo. I still remember that people rushed home from work and wherever to listen with engrossed interest to "Shaky Shaky and Alao", a drama programme on the adventures of Alao, the master driver. Those were the day. Things are no more what used to be. Times have changed and the people have changed along with the times. Life styles and listening habits have altered. The harsh economic conditions of today have affected the listener's priorities, his habits and all entertainment and leisure are now in the background. In some cases, they have disappeared completely from the order of priorities. Survival now takes precedence over every other thing.

The 'phone-in' has therefore become a useful tool not only for winning the listener, but also for compelling him to listen, carrying him along and enlisting his participation. Otherwise there is no guarantee that he is paying attention.

Useful as the "phone-in" is, it can become boring if not properly handled. It can even get a station into big trouble if its legal implications are not cautiously guarded against.

I listened to Ray Power 100 FM one Saturday morning when telephone lines were thrown open to the public on "the effects of drug abuse. Instead of inviting an expert to the studio, a presenter answered questions from the lay man's point of view, until a lady

expert from Aro Mental Hospital, Abeokuta phoned to shed more light. However, I listened to another one on the 'ultimate Morning Show' on the 23rd of July. In this case, an expert was in the studio, and this is highly commendable. The topic was "stress in relation to hypertension." The programme was however boring because the presenter did not steer the course of the conversation by asking the doctor, follow-up question that would have exposed the various facets of the topic to the listener. As a result, the same questions kept coming in, and the same answers were attracted.

On the other hand, I listened to "Saturday Afternoon Jams," a request programme which was beautifully handled on the 20th July by Yemi Adenuga who I consider an asset to the profession. She anchored the programme and stimulated conversation with precision, eloquence, politeness and geniality.

"Phone-in" programme types are many and varied, but the ones that are commonly in use on local stations are "Request Programmes", "The Specific topics", where views are expressed by all on a particular topic, and "The expert in the studio" programme in which an expert in any field of endeavour answers questions from callers. "counseling" is also in this category, but whichever type it is the presenter is very crucial to its success. He can mar or make the programme. His professional responsibilities are many but it is not a job for every broadcaster.

The presenter of the "phone-in" must have some intrinsic qualities. In the first place, he must have a good general knowledge so that he can have view on every point, and direct affairs intelligently. He must be a critical listener and a quick thinker so that he can ask questions with precision and discretion. He should be interested in people and must have a good knowledge of current affairs. Needless to say that he must be wise, witty, genial, sharp, fluent, eloquent, with a good radio voice.

Armed with these qualifications, let's look at his role. He must be impartial and should not take side unnecessarily, otherwise the democratic nature of the programme will be destroyed. The phone-in presenter should be able to stimulate conversation by asking questions that are capable of eliciting answers, and should show politeness in the process. It is important that he is proficient in the law of libel and defamation so that he can terminate a caller who becomes obscene, overtly political, commercial and illegal. He needs total alertness and presence of mind to be able to accomplish this task. A station can be sued or even closed down because of the lapses of a presenter.

The 'phone-in' can be interesting and delightful in the hands of a presenter who knows his onions, but how democratic is the technique for the expression of views, but how democratic is the technique for the expression of views. Even though the 'phone-in' extends invitations to all and sundry, only those who have access to telephones can participate. This is one of the problems that it poses.

On radio and television programmes in the Lagos area for instance, callers are always forthcoming from Ikoyi, Victoria Island, Festac Town, Surulere, Yaba, Ikeja. What happens to people in Oshodi. Amukoko, Mushin, Ajegunle, Ilasamaja and other parts of Lagos, who may want to take part. Ganiyat Adekoya Ganiyat Adekoya Ganiyat Adekoya`