6. Television

6.1 Key changes and developments in the television marketplace in the past five years

Over the past five years the television market in Sierra Leone has seen only minimal change. Since television stations are expensive to run in comparison to radio stations, and since it is more expensive to own and operate a television set than a radio, Sierra Leoneans tend to be listeners rather than viewers. Viewing television in a post-war country with a weak economy is a luxury, not a necessity. Due to incessant power cuts, only the affluent with generators can watch TV (Tam-Baryoh, 2001).

![Figure 4: Broadcasting and Ownership Status of Television Stations](chart)

SLBS, the state-run TV broadcaster, is trying to increase its national broadcast footprint. Until recently, SLBS-TV only covered Freetown, but now also transmits to the southern town of Bo and to Kenema in the east. SLBS primarily covers news from government functionaries and general national politics, as well as some environmental issues. It also shows movies, mainly from Nigeria.
At regional/local level, there is a second TV service, the private commercial ABC-TV, based in Freetown. It was established in 2005 and covers only half of the city. Apart from SLBS-TV and ABC-TV, there are no other TV stations operating in the country. TV signals from neighbouring Guinea (Conakry) can, however, be received, depending on the sophistication of the set, and some people subscribe to foreign satellite services.

As well, four other companies have registered to operate television stations in the country but are yet to come on air (see Table 1).

Table 1: Television Stations Registered with the IMC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Station</th>
<th>Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 ABC Television</td>
<td>Commercial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Open Door Communications (TV)</td>
<td>Religious/commercial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Fortune Television</td>
<td>Commercial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Afritex Television</td>
<td>Commercial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Starr Television</td>
<td>Commercial</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: IMC, 2005

6.2 Investment and growth in the television sector in the past five years

Specific audience figures for the two domestic channels, SLBS-TV and ABC-TV, could not be obtained. Television ownership is thought to sit at just 7% of the population (World Bank, 2004), making the TV market a small one, and lack of reliable electricity means only those who can afford a private generator are able to watch. The only significant advertisers are mobile phone companies, oil marketers and Asian shopkeepers. Most businesses rely more on radio and newspapers for their advertising needs.

There are a small number of subscribers to satellite television, primarily subscribing to the South African-based MultiChoice DStv service. The one-off cost for the satellite television service is around US$700, with a monthly subscription for the basic satellite package of US$30 (Trend TV, personal communication, April 2006).

6.3 Plurality, ownership and control

SLBS-TV was established in 1934, but was moribund from 1980 to 1993. It had stopped broadcasting due to mismanagement and the hard economic realities of the late 1980s. It was rehabilitated by the Valentine Strasser military government in early 1994 and initially began broadcasting in black-and-white. The government arguably has an overriding influence on the content of the state-owned station SLBS-TV. For example, in 2003, a popular programme called Bottom Line, which provided a critique of policy issues, was stopped. Its producer, frustrated with censorship, took up a job with an NGO (Sesay & Hughes, 2005). There are plans to remove government’s excessive control over the SLBS. An 18-month preparatory period for the SLBS to become a public broadcaster began in October 2005.

The privately-owned television station established in 2005, ABC-TV, is owned by Sierra Leonean, Allieu Shaw, and has a slightly more international focus than SLBS.
6.4 Diversity

There is not much difference between the programming on the two channels, as they both re-broadcast from international stations such as CNN and the BBC. Politics dominates SLBS-TV, while commerce takes precedence on ABC-TV. When ABC-TV does allow political and local content, it is usually sponsored. A discussion or sports programme may be associated with or sponsored by a political interest so that it can bring the much-needed funds into the station. SLBS-TV also carries commercials. ABC-TV programmes are mostly sourced from the US, UK and South Africa. However, local programmes are occasionally featured, depending on the availability of space and time.

6.5 Quality of television output and programming

The quality of the programmes on the two local TV stations shows signs of improvement – as they are now moving from ready-made programmes from Europe and America to doing local programmes from the provinces. However, the news programming is still mainly sourced from foreign television, leaving much need for increased local content.

6.6 Specific challenges

The Sierra Leonean TV sector faces many challenges, including:

- the lack of a reliable electricity supply hindering the operation of the stations and the ability of viewers to power their TV sets; and,
- the smallness of the viewer market, making advertising difficult to come by.

Key findings

- There are only two stations operating in Sierra Leone, the state-owned SLBS-TV and the privately-owned ABC-TV.
- SLBS-TV transmits to the capital Freetown and two other areas of the country, while ABC-TV is only available in parts of Freetown.
- The lack of a reliable electricity supply hinders the sector.
- The number of TV viewers is small, limiting the potential for advertising sales.
- Many programmes are sourced from abroad, resulting in a lack of local content.