

## 'Nigeria's Netflix' takes Nollywood to a global audience

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**An episode of Shuga, a popular soap opera set in Kenya, is playing on a screen at the offices of iRoko TV - an online platform commonly dubbed the "Netflix of Africa".**

In a corner of the room, facing the rest of the operation and separated by a glass partition, sits Jason Njoku, the company's founder.

Born and brought up in London, Mr Njoku is now Lagos-based and building what is proving to be a revolutionary tool, as Nollywood - Nigeria's Hollywood - moves on from DVD to digital platforms.

Since 2011, iRokoTV has racked up millions of views, its founder says, "connecting African films with fans globally" with its huge online catalogue.

The company pays filmmakers about \$10,000 (£5,900) to \$25,000 for the digital rights to stream their content for a period of time.

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In fact, Jason Njoku says the group spends \$3m-\$4m a year on licensing and producing content, hoping to make back the money in two to three years.

Subscribers pay a monthly fee of \$8 with unlimited access to movies from around Africa on the iRoko TV platform, although most productions come from Nigeria and Ghana.

"There's always that star power thing...similar to Hollywood, similar to Bollywood, similar to any content industry around the world," says Mr Njoku.

"You look at the stars, you look at the director...super important...you also look at the quality of the actual movies themselves, and we try to sync that with the audience, so, every ten movies we view, we only buy one or two of them."

It is a model that not many would have thought about a few years ago, but today iRoko's success has seen the emergence of other competitors.

One, Pana TV, secured the rights to the acclaimed film *Half Of A Yellow Sun*, which stars Hollywood's Chiwetel Ejiofor and Thandie Newton.

The industry is growing, and is said to be a major employer in Nigeria, contributing to 1.4% of the country's GDP.

### Lights, camera, action

In a quiet Lagos suburb, three dozen people, most of them in their twenties and thirties, crowd a room in silence, listening to a passionate prayer led by a man in the centre.

As soon as he is done, they disperse and work on the film set begins.

This is the making of The Calabash, an ambitious 100-episode film series that lawyer-turned-filmmaker Obi Emelonye hopes to get on-screen, including on iRokoTV, before the end of the year.

"It's a very tasking, almost stupid episode to film 100 episodes in a go without \$1bn, but we can show that with a good story, with dedication, with a committed cast and crew, with a bit of luck, you can achieve great things," says Mr Emelonye, with a smile.

A power cut darkens the room and filming pauses.

In less than a minute a generator outside the building drones into life, the lights come back on, and production continues almost as if nothing happened.

The challenges on set are evident, but when the production is complete there are even greater challenges getting the films out to the viewers while still paying the filmmakers.

Nigeria's film industry churns out some 50 films a week, surpassed only by India's Bollywood.

Most of these are released on DVD, and sold cheaply on the streets around Nigeria, although the industry has now garnered a huge following across Africa and among Afro-Caribbean communities around the world.

But this is not necessarily good news for the filmmakers.

"Distribution is the biggest problem for Nollywood," says Mr Emelonye.

"DVD is dying out and since we are still dependent on DVD then our industry suffers."

This nation of 160 million people only has about 14 functional cinemas, which mostly screen Hollywood blockbusters.

## Choosing the alternative

Weaving one's way through a sea of human traffic in the Idumota section of Lagos Island, one of the older parts of the city, you see a series of shops peppered with posters of Nollywood titles like Funke The Illiterate and Brazil Return.

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The DVD market is still thriving and there's hardly a better example of this than in Idumota.

"Some films sell out very quickly... as soon as people know who the actor is they come and buy the copies," says Kelechi Kene, a vendor.

He adds that although he has heard of digital platforms like iRoko, they do not pose any threat to businesses like his which sell films on DVD.

Filmmakers fear that outlets like these are not properly regulated and so pirates can use them to make a fortune.

Despite the growth and success of digital innovation observers feel the sector is far from achieving its potential without proper legislation on rights and distribution.

"Outlets like iRokoTV, Pana TV and Ibaka TV are only offering streaming services," says Ayeni Adekunle, editor-in-chief of Nigeria Entertainment Today.

"We need to be able to buy these films online because the filmmakers need to make their money back and they are not doing that right now. Having said that, we see these platforms going beyond hosting films to now creating their own content, which is a good thing"

Connectivity is still a major problem for many viewers, with erratic internet connections that are still not affordable for most Nollywood fans.

Pay TV is also taking a large share of the viewership.

Africa Magic, for example, now has several channels that air African content including productions in Yoruba, Hausa and Swahili.

Despite their popularity, iRoko's Jason Njoku doesn't see them as competition.

"We have films that people can watch whenever they feel like, and pause, rewind or skip," he says.

"You can't do that with TV and that's why we feel there's so much to achieve here."

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