

## The Battle of Television Remote Control: Emerging Trends in the Wake of Digital Transmission in Kenya

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**Abstract:** Many countries across the world have migrated to the television digital platform, not so for some countries in Africa. For the first time multiple channels are available even in areas which had none before, giving the audiences wide choices of selections. In Kenya, four digital distributors have been licensed, and content providers have to decide on which of the four to piggy back its broadcast on. In this evolving transformation, the active audience paradigm seems to have been rejuvenated. The pertinent question therefore is what are the emerging trends in Kenya with this myriad of channels? What is happening in homes, how is television remote control used? In a qualitative study, a group of university students voluntarily accepted to observe how people use the television remote control in their homes for three consecutive days. A focus group discussion was then organized. The emerging trend was that, the remote control has become the center of interest in most homes, and there are times and moments when there are battles over it. The heads of the households feel they have a natural 'ownership rights' and have a final say on the channel to be watched whenever there's competitive interest among the family members. This is more prevalent where the fathers are the head, they take custody of the remote control gadget, and the rest of the family has to go with their taste. There is also an increased amount of binge viewing where few programs are watched to conclusion, the commercials taking a heavy toll. Though the study cannot be generalized to the larger public because of the small number of participants involved, it raises some interesting insights.

**Keywords:** Remote control, digital migration, digital era.

### INTRODUCTION

In uses and gratification theory [1], there is explanation on why people chose certain media over others, and or certain television programme over another. Chamberlain [2] argued that we have entered an era of demassification in which the individual media user is able, through newer technologies, to pick from a large selection of media. The ubiquitous nature of television sets across the world is no longer a point of discussion. However, the surreptitious innovations and add-ons continue to impact on the viewing experience. A case in point is the addition of the remote control. The first television remote control device known as *the lazy bone* was introduced in 1950. It used a cable that ran from the set to the viewer. However, it's drawback to the customers' was the unsightly cluttering cable within the living rooms.

In 1955, Eugene Polley came up with an improved wireless version known as the plasmatic [3]. From this modest beginning, the television remote control has come to define viewing, production and programming [4]. The audience dalliance with the remote control device has spawned metaphors to capture the act of channel switching - like grazing,

zapping, channel surfing, clicking [5]. It makes viewing more relaxing [6].

The earlier notion of passive television audience [7] who were 'turned into zombies, transfixed with bourgeois' ideologies' (p.17), has largely been disabused by the active viewer; who bring other representation and discourses to our viewing [8]. There are moments when watching television could be a mere ritual [9, 10], but it is no longer a passive activity, it even structures and keeps us socially integrated within a community [11].

For developing countries like Kenya, the TV remote control device hardly had any use with a single station in operations - *The Voice of Kenya (VOK)*. Television broadcast was first inaugurated in Kenya in 1962 [12], and was quickly nationalized to fall under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, a typically controlled government mouthpiece. Voice of Kenya was the default setting for the few who could afford the black and white monochromes. In 1991, the media market was liberalized allowing a second channel; *KTN* to operate and, for the first time the remote control was finding a use in Kenyan homes. Over the years, many stations have been setup. The

country has also successfully transitioned from analogue to the digital broadcast platform as mandated by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU). With the increased broadcast band, The Communication Authority of Kenya (CA) has licensed over 84 more television stations [13]. Locally established stations can choose to transmit their signals in any of the three licensed broadcast carriers i.e. Signet, Pan African Group (Pang) and Africa Digital Network (ADN). Already 40 free to air stations are on air.

The myriad of station options to the viewer and the use of the remote control within homes is a point of interest. Studies elsewhere have revealed interesting insights on the use of the remote control device [14]. However, within the African markets, such studies have not been carried out, especially with the global analogue switch-off. An estimated 3.5 million households in Kenya own television sets, however 1.3 million remained in television blackout after the government switched off the analogue transmission and migrated to digital. With a myriad of TV channels options, what are the emerging trends in the use of the remote control within Kenyan households? To answer this question, we posed the following questions: (1) Where is the remote control when watching TV; (2) in family households, what happens when there are competing interests on channels to watch; (3) what else happens during the viewing moments and what do they do? The significance of this study is that, having an insight of what happens within the homes could be of interest to program makers and the behavioral patterns of homes. The regular surveys rarely capture these insights and such studies are rare within the Kenya context.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Watching television programs have changed in ways that pioneers and innovators such as John Logie Baird could never have imagined [15]. The introduction of the remote control device, first appearing inconsequentially, continues to impact viewing experience. A study by NBC discovered that 25% of its audience changed channels when credits rolled, to counter this, it introduced a format known as ‘squeeze and tease’ in 1999, where credits were consigned to a third of the screen, scrolling simultaneously with promotional spots to keep the viewers hooked [16]. Taking note of the viewers, restless, fickle nature, and their control with the handy little device, productions have continued to be remodeled to quick and flashy cut productions to hook the audience and retain their attention.

Channel switching is a common phenomenon referred to by many adjectives such as clicking, channel flipping, skipping, zapping etc. Demographically, younger viewers are more likely to ‘zap’ channels than older viewers are, and their children are more likely to

increasingly become zappers. They are more likely to change channel to avoid commercials [17].

A study by Ferguson [18] dubbed ‘channel repertoire’ in which he was seeking to find out how people use remote control devices on televisions, VCRs, and subscription channels. He wanted to determine the frequency of flipping channels. In a self-report assessment, 412 respondents reported that they flipped the channels, because of boredom, curiosity, to avoid commercials, avoid missing a better program and to watch two or more programs at the same time. He also found out that availability of numerous channels could not be equated to increased viewing. The self-report measurement was problematic as it assumed that the respondent can accurately estimate the number of times per hour the RCD (Remote Control Device) was used to change the channel.

Advertisers are concerned with channel zapping, having spent money to buy a spot within a broadcast [19] in tapped programs where commercials are inserted in between. Gilmore & Secunda [20] found out that audience-zapping habit partially exposed them to the advertised product. In addition, this did not aid in the full recall of the product, which was the target of the advertisers. The same could apply to a live broadcast where the audiences flip the channel to avoid the commercials. In another study, Bailey, Fox and Grabe [21] examined the channel changing behavior of TV news audience who seek high and low sensational stories, focusing on the viewing duration and attention paid to stories that varied in sensational content, and packaging.

Arousing content packaged in sensational format was the overall favorite, for both low and high sensation seekers. The availability of many channels could trigger an audience to flip through seeking for arousing contents in other kinds of program genre. However, Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi [22] observed that with a myriad of competition, programs are created not for content purposes but to capture the audience attention with the design of quick cuts and overlay music.

Pashkevich *et al.* [23] argue that skipping commercials might not be a bad thing after all; it could actually enhance viewer pleasure of a given program. In a randomized online study, where the viewers had options to view or not to view a commercial by taping a skip button, this improved their viewing experience, as they felt empowered to choose commercials they would want to watch and skip whenever they do not feel like watching. It also enhances advertiser’s value for content owners. Skipping options in social media platforms is now a common practice. For television, the remote control could play a similar role.

What is the prevailing trend within the households, who controls the remote and how do they use it. Gender politics has been observed in the use of the TV remote control. Walker [24] argues that men tend to flip the channels more often than woman and dictate on what the couple watch. In a study on how couples use the remote control involving 36 of them, majority of them in heterosexual relationships, revealed that men are likely to be in charge of the remote control, and watch what they want on television regardless of their partners wishes. "I would say that the only thing that is frustrating when we turn on the TV, and he just flips through the channels," one woman said. "It drives me crazy because you can't tell what's on, because he just goes through and through and through." The men's dominance of the TV remote control, regardless of other users is not a new phenomenon [25], could the same trend be reflected in the patriarchal Kenyan society, and how does this influence the viewing patterns. The assumption is that availability of myriad stations could result in better experience of television viewing. Though this is not always the case, audiences create a habit of regularly watching a few stations [26].

### Family viewing

Television broadcast, was once considered a mass exercise, a focal point of interest in the living rooms where the whole family congregated on a single set for viewing. It has increasingly broken any national, regional and even cultural boundaries and they no longer count. International content continue to be localized, and manufactured like any other conglomerate's products to a niche audience [27]. However, Meyerowitz [28] argues that television still provide a basis of common experience and a source of conversation. For example, president Obama's inauguration on CNN live transmission was experienced across the globe in what he refers to as 'evanescent experience' by varied audiences' (p.145-7). However, the television mediated communication; with the technological add-ons like the television, remote control has dissipated the mass audience notion [29]. With the proliferation of channels and technical innovation, the 'simultaneity' of television viewing experience may cease with audience fragmentations. The technical gadgetry has become inconspicuous and domesticated within the homes. In many occasions, the television set would be found within the sitting room, an area Morley refers to as a 'center of politics of gender and age' (p.271), and especially with the presence of the remote control, contestation do arise within families. Silverstone describe the viewing exercise as a rite of passage. The audience immerses themselves in the other 'worldliness'. The audiences are knowledgeable on program scheduling structures and repetitive nature of news treatment before they are transported back to regular reality.

Television viewing in Kenya is still a family affair, with a single set in many of the households,

while the country successfully transited to the digital platform, shutting down all analogue transmissions. This has ushered in multiple channels with the audience spoilt for choice. Middle class families in Nairobi spend up to 32 hours per week watching Television. A study by Munyoki & Kirigo [30] on factors that influences teachers' preferences of television stations within Langata Constituency, Nairobi, found that news coverage was the foremost attraction, followed by other characteristics such as content, presenters, and quality of reception. In addition, Citizen Television - a free to air channel was the most preferred by the majority of the teachers. This is corroborated by a wider survey study, which rates the station highly nationally. Though these studies are not specific to the use of TV remote control within households, it gives an insight of the audience preferences. With these changes in the structure of broadcast and the 'disruptive technologies', similar broadcast experience will not be possible as we move towards a 'more fragmented lines'. There will be less and less broadcast experience now that the analogue transmission no longer exists

### Uses and gratification Theory

The uses and gratification theory argues that audience members are motivated to media for specific psychological and social need gratifications. This is premised on two assumptions about the media audiences; that individuals are active in making choices on selecting media and messages, and secondly, that individuals are aware of their motivation for information and entertainment. Example, an audience can be selectively driven to watch a television documentary rather than a soap opera.

Seeking to understand the uses of television remote control at the household level, this study draws on the uses and gratification theory, which relies in its applicability to a variety of media contexts and interest [31]. Sundar and Limperos [32] observes that "technology itself could be responsible for creating new gratifications" (p. 506). This could include add-ons like the TV remote control; its possession and use.

The television audiences are considered active in their programs' choice, a selective orientation that could be based on motivation and individual preferences. The addition of the remote control complicates the dynamics of the viewer especially where there's a single television set with members of varying interest. What is the trend in these households on how television is watched?

Ferguson [33] argues that the more one finds viewer attitudes that suggest viewer and selective activity, the more one expects these viewers to seek out additional channels. However, a plethora of channels does not mean increased viewing moments, rather audience tend to stick with a selected number of stations to view. This could create an interesting scenario in

Kenya, with the many licensed television stations and multiple channels to choose from each time. Moreover, one's age, gender, and other characteristics play a role in media selection and entertainment activities [34]. Fathers have been observed to switch channels whenever they want to in their living rooms without explaining their behavior or consulting other television viewers. Criticism of uses and gratification has questioned the assumption of active audiences and their ability to self-report regarding motivation and media use. Further criticism points out the lack of discretion between components such as needs, motives, and behavior.

## METHOD

There was a challenge in deciding the best methodology for this study, considering that such studies are rare in Kenya and to an extent the rest of the world. McLeod et al support the argument that there is little research in family television audiences, partly due to methodological difficulties encumbered by time constraints, costs, and recruitment challenges. However, Morley and Silverstone who have carried out wide research in this area, vouch for qualitative techniques in analyzing broadcasting within the routines of everyday life. Therefore, interpretive qualitative design was found to be the most appropriate for this study. It had been employed before by Liebes and Katz, posits that a research technique should be judged by whether, it is the most appropriate to answer the research question. The interest in this study was to understand the trend in television remote control usage within selected households in Nairobi.

The participants in this study were recruited from undergraduate students of Multimedia University and The University of Nairobi, journalism and broadcast classes respectively, with a total number of 96 students. 73 volunteered to carry out the exercise to observe the usage of remote control within their houses. Some observational studies of family groups in homes and in laboratory settings have been carried out before. This study therefore, takes up this mantle to explore this area further using interpretive qualitative methodology.

## Measures

The students were to observe, in a nonintrusive manner for a maximum of two hours in a day within their homes how the remote control is used. At the start of the observation, they were to stake their spot where the television set was located within the house and look out for the following; the position of the remote control at the beginning of the exercise; if it is in custody of any member of the household, how frequently does he/she flip the channels? In addition, what else are they engaged in when watching television? What happens to the remote when there are competing interest on what to watch? They were then to record this in a notebook to the best of their understanding in a narrative form. This took place between June 29 and July 6, 2015. This

observation technique borrows from Rust [35] in a study observing how parents and children shop together in a supermarket.

Out of the 73 who volunteered to participate as observers, 55 field notes were accepted as they were duly completed while 18 were incomplete and were excluded in the data analysis. To strengthen the validity of the data, seven focused group discussions were organized in the campuses to corroborate on the findings as a supporting method. Discussion was also chosen as an appropriate method. TV viewing generally generates conversations whether at the moment of watching or after. Participants, were from broadcast classes, the nature of their course usually draw examples from regular TV programming which generally generates debates in class. Therefore, it is only plausible to have a focus group discussion to keep alive the conversational nature of television.

## RESULTS

Data from the household observation were coded carefully to ensure a high degree of accuracy and consistency. The same was done to the focus group discussion. A report was then done to summarize the two data. To ensure anonymity of the participants in the analyzed data, the respondents who were also the discussants were identified as group A - G corresponding to the seven groups. To quote them verbatim, a participant in a group would be referred to as A1, C1 etc.

### Position of the remote control during viewing

Corroborating the findings from the observations and the group discussions, majority tended to agree that; the member of the family who was set to watch or switched on the television, automatically retained the remote in his/her hand or had it within the vicinity. It served like the center of power or pleasure in viewing.

*A3: Whenever my sister wants to watch, the first thing she does is ask for the remote... Once she is in possession of it, she is in charge of whatever she wants and switches the channels at will. Even when the television is on, she will find out where the remote control is first... it is like her key or something like that.*

*B5: When it's time for news in the house, we don't need to be told we have to hand the remote to my dad... he gets furious when he wants to start watching news and the remote cannot be found, he'll make everyone look for it in the house until it is found.*

Many viewers would like to be in control of the TV remote when watching television. Moreover, non-possession or looking for it could be anguishing and time consuming. In a study involving 1000 participants, it was found that men spent up to 18 and half days across their lifetime searching for the remote



control comparable to 12 and half days that women spend searching for it. This seems to correspond with the finding of many of the participants in this study, that there is an issue repeatedly in locating the remote control.

D4: *It is a greed in the house, on a central point where the remote control should be placed, and the last person to use it must return it to that place where everyone can access it... At times in the house, the remote control is found in the kitchen or even the bedroom...someone walks with it there and forgets to return it.*

A6: *Because of the continuous loss and search...and dropping it several times, the battery case even disappeared, so ours is back to manual operation...where you have to switch it on and even change the channels physically ....which is not very enjoyable since you have stand each time to change the channels... there are instances when you can watch what you don't enjoy because you are lazy to stand and change the channel.*

F1: *The remote is always on the sitting room coffee table, this is after so many issues with it...till my mother said it shouldn't move from there... it s one thing which is never cleared from that position even when there are visitors, and the table needs to be used, that's when sometimes it could be kept somewhere else.*

A5: *My siblings, i.e my brother and sister will always hide the remote especially when there is a cartoon program they want to watch...so that no one else gets hold of it*

### **What else they do when watching**

Studies elsewhere indicate that TV viewing is not an exclusive exercise and the audiences are always engaged in other activities if not in a conversation. Many of these earlier studies did not include the usage of remote control as a variable. It has become the 'other activity' the viewers engage in. In Kenya, the digital transition and the availability of multiple channels is a relatively new phenomenon.

E5: *My parents watches news with the remote control in the hand... especially my dad, whenever commercials start he switches to the next station i.e. KTN or NTV so it's always back and forth.*

E2: *My dad also watches all the news channels at the same time, starting with whichever channel is fast to begin the news, and then flicks to another channel when one story ends. Even when he is watching CNN, he will switch back to Aljazeera when a story is over.*

C4: *My brother hardly watch a channel for a long time, he is always changing from one program to another he will take a short break, but within a moment he will*

*have switched to the next...he changes almost five times between the music shows.*

G5: *Commercials have become so many during news time and it is as if the stations have colluded to have them the same time, because during news you would want to switch from one to the other just to find they are also showing commercials...that's when you look for something else.*

B6: *Once my mum is ready to watch...at that time, she may be taking tea or porridge, and she prefers religious stations or any preaching program she finds interesting. She will not be switching the channels like everyone else but just watches to the end.*

In a world of fast changing, innovative technological gadgets, many of the participants mentioned the cell-phone use, as an integral part of viewing to the extent of superseding channel flipping.

G1: *When my brother is watching super sports, and his team is winning he is also on whats-up throughout with his friends, I think they tease each other, especially those who are losing. In fact, he's on the phone more than even watching.*

A7: *My sister always has the phone on the side, and always texting, at times about the program or catching up with friends; she's not the type to just concentrate on the TV...the phone looks more important to her than even what she is watching.*

D2: *My dad actually holds the remote so that the channel cannot be changed, he listens to the radio news in vernacular, and he calls friends to share trending news.*

F3: *The station was changed often...they switched to NTV to wait for The Trend from 8 – 9 pm, they were also busy on the phones tweeting to get a chance for their messages to be read by Larry Madowo during 'The Trend'.*

### **Dealing with competitive interest on what to watch**

As mentioned earlier in this paper, until 1991, only a single free to air television channel existed in the country - VOK. Even after the market was liberalized and KTN channel was setup, television watching was a simple affair. Everyone watched what was on offer and families hardly had any issues to haggle or debate on what to be watched. The introduction of a plethora of channels, courtesy of the digital migration has created many choices for the audience. It is also inevitable that every television set purchased has a remote control. So watching television within families is not always a smooth affair and interests tend to collide.

A6: *When there are issues on which channel to watch, my dad always has the final say, and if he gets hold of*

*the remote control....it's better you went to sleep as he has to finish what he is watching even if everyone complains...sometimes he dictates what program to watch and which channels.*

*F4: My sibling would hide the remote control especially when am back early from school. They would want to continue watching their cartoons while they know I would switch to the soap operas. They would at times cry out loud to mum and I would be requested to let them watch for a moment....but when mum is not around they don't have an option, they head to play with their toys.*

*B6: There's usually a clash of interest, especially between my brother and my sister, to an extent where my father tells everyone to purchase their own television sets if they insist on having their interest catered for all the time.*

*C4: There are usually bad arguments in the house to an extent where people have picked their days where they have priority on what the rest of the family members watch....there was a time my brother actually boycotted watching.... feeling that we ladies in the house always dominated the remote control and he could not watch the documentaries he loves.*

*E2: watching television is anon issue, my brothers watch most of the staff on the computer, and my parents are not TV enthusiast.*

## **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

The pleasure of watching television is partly embedded in the control of the television set via the remote control. Many viewers would like to possess the remote control while watching television. This was not the case for many years, when a single station served the whole country. Phillipson [36] in a study where viewers spend many hours looking for the remote control, implying it is central in the home. To ease locating it, and avoid altercations in the home, a central position where everyone can access it, has to be agreed upon.

Regarding what else the audience is engaged in while watching, with a remote control in the hand, flipping channels is a common phenomenon. Audiences avoid commercials this extends to watching some programs concurrently. Prime news time from the leading free to air stations - KTN, NTV and Citizen are flicked from one to the next during commercial breaks. This has implication on program production and programming. Advertising cost is highest within the primetime news as comparable to other slots. It means that the advertiser might not be getting the intended exposure and investment returns when audience avoid their commercials and switch to other stations.

Television viewing is not an exclusive undertaking. The audiences are engaged in other activities like talking or even house chores. However, there is an additional activity of the audience engaging in the social media via the ubiquitous cell phone presence in the country. Many of the respondents point out that the habit is so ingrained that they share the moments almost equally with viewing. Low attention viewing is therefore gaining ground, courtesy of the technological innovation, like the mobile phone.

Many households in Kenya still possess a single television set despite the myriad number of channels offering a wide variety of programs targeting different demographics and interest in the audience. Competing interest on what to watch do occur in homes. This makes everyone want to take charge of the remote control. Men have been known to dictate or use their authority on what else everyone watches during such moments. In Kenyan homes, the TV remote control rekindles house and patriarchal politics. Children would want to have their way, to watch cartoons or other teenage programs. However, this could be determined by the adult in the house, who would have their way first if they have an interest in watching something. Fathers have their due respect, and it's a gone conclusion that even in matters of television viewing they have the ultimate say on the remote control and what to be watched especially where there are differing interests.

## **LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

This study highlights some valuable findings related to the use of television remote control within some Kenyan homes. However, there are several limitations, which should be taken into account when evaluating the result of the research and interpreting the conclusions. The study involved a small group of undergraduate students, their population cannot be generalized, to the larger Kenyan population, but it offers insight information. The methodology could also be improved. The observation and the self-report narrative are not easy to validate. However, the group discussions, from the two institutions, revealed corroborative findings. Livingstone [37] argues that though such a method could be open to criticism on their reliability and representativeness because the individuals analyzed are much smaller than those examined by quantitative researchers are. Qualitative methods 'have notable advantages in terms of sensitivity, richness and complexity' (p.166). Future research could employ survey methods with a representative participant base. It could further enquire what are the popular programs and different gender habits in the use of the remote control.

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