Assessment of Attitudes of TV Audiences regarding Migration from Analogue to Digital TV in Nairobi, Kenya.

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Abstract: The road to digital migration has been bumpy. Among the challenges is the fact that viewers had not understood the importance of digital migration and thus were not convinced to invest in the Set Top Boxes and digital TVs. Many Kenyans live below the poverty line and therefore they could not afford to migrate to digital TV. The Communications Authority of Kenya’s (CA) move to award Pan African Network Group (PANG) a foreign Chinese company and SIGNET a government entity as the only two licensed signal carriers to distribute digital broadcasting frequencies on behalf of local broadcasters saw the Consortium of three local media houses contest the decision in court. To date, the controversy is far from over with the consortium still crying foul. As both sides have sought to sway public opinion to their cause, honesty and objectivity have been tossed out of the window with critics attributing public reluctance to embrace digital TV majorly on the attitudes of the public towards the process. A study was carried out in Nairobi, Kenya to assess the attitudes of the public towards the digital migration process and possibly interrogate the reasons for continued resentment among the public towards digital migration. The study triangulated two different theories to give credibility to the study and also to corroborate different viewpoints in order to complement the findings of the study. The theories are: Diffusion of Innovation Theory and Technology Acceptance Theory which explains how users go through a stage of accepting and using technology and possible reasons for resistance to embrace technology which jointly depends on individuals’ attitude. The study employed a mixed method research design and made use of both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection and analysis. It is believed that this study will trigger further debate and discussions. The study concludes that digital migration was rushed and that the public were not adequately prepared for it. The study recommends the need for creating awareness on the importance of digital TV. Also, the need for government to subsidize the cost of Set Top Boxes and Digital TVs. Perhaps these could lead to a change in attitudes and see more households embrace digital TV.

Keywords: Digital Migration, Digital TV, Pay TV, Set Top Box, Communication Authority of Kenya (CA), Ministry of Information and Communication, Pan African Network Group (PANG), Government Broadcasting entity (SIGNET) and Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC). African Digital Network (ADN), The Consortium of the three leading private media houses namely: Nation (NTV), Kenya Television Network (KTN) and Citizen TV.

“1. Introduction”

The genesis of the controversy surrounding the digital migration process in Kenya began when CA stated that unlike in analogue broadcasting, there would only be few licensed signal carriers for the digital TV. CA went ahead and awarded PANG a foreign Chinese company and SIGNET a government entity as the only two licensed signal carriers to distribute digital broadcasting frequencies on behalf of local broadcasters. The consortium of leading local private media houses NTV, KTN and Citizen TV would emerge strongly and contest the move in the courts. It would then emerge that the consortium had lost bid in the first round of the tendering process no wonder they were crying foul. The aggrieved local media pointed accusing fingers at CA claiming it had floated the licensing bid in the tendering process. Consequently, they appealed to the public procurement and lost again, they then appealed to the then Principal Secretary- ICT who offered them a conditional license which they rejected and in lieu turned to the courts.
The public helplessly watched as the regulators forced the three local media houses out of analogue broadcasting leaving (80%) of Kenyans staring at blank screens. The local broadcasters analogue transmitters located in Limuru were forcefully shut down by the authority. The consortiums request for a three month delay to migrate from analogue to digital was rejected by the Supreme Court. They argued that they wanted more time to import their own Set Top Boxes that would distribute their own content.

Calls by civil, religious groups and human rights organizations that government reconsiders its stand on digital migration were often ignored. The Kenya Union of Journalists, Media Owners Association and Media Council of Kenya joined the conversation by strongly condemning the regulator saying that the move risked rendering many journalists jobless. The unions raised concerns with how the president had declined to arbitrate in the journalists jobless. The unions raised concerns with how the president had declined to arbitrate in the matter even as it boiled over. They also raised concerns that the state run broadcaster Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC) and K24 TV which is owned by the president remained on air while the others had been forcefully switched off.

What followed were chaos erupting in the Capital Nairobi. Thousands of residents poured in the streets of Nairobi protesting against CAs move to forcefully switch off the three private media houses. They accused the ruling regime of being insensitive and losing touch with the struggles of the common public and demanded a roll back to analogue TV. These chronology of events triggered public outcry across the country with many taking to social media to express their frustrations. To date the findings reveal that the controversy is far from over and the public is still demanding a roll back to analogue TV audiences are still traumatized by the blank TV screens in their living rooms and that most of them have resulted to excessive consumption of alcohol and drugs as an alternative source of pleasure and entertainment. The respondents cited harsh economic times as the main reason for not migrating to digital platform. The respondents further said that they were also confronted with the reality of buying another TV set with audio and video output and a powerful antennae in order to receive monetized content. They explained how most of them had been confronted with the reality of buying another TV set with audio and video output and a powerful antennae in order to migrate to digital platform. Musa (2014) says that attempts by the consumer rights groups to have the government subsidize the costs of digital TVs and Set Top Boxes have been ignored and that Pay TV is beyond reach for most people.

In order to ascertain this, the study sought to find out how many respondents had subscribed to Pay TV. The study found out that (70%) of the respondents were not subscribed to Pay TV. From the findings it came out that the monthly subscription fee for digital TVs retail at Ksh 4,000 and Ksh 50,000 respectively and the monthly subscription fee for the Pay TV is Ksh 5,000 depending on the service provider.

The study sought views of the respondents on whether the Set Top Boxes are affordable. The study’s findings revealed that majority of the respondents (70%) said Set Top Boxes were not affordable. The study found out that to date most TV audiences are still traumatized by the blank TV screens in their living rooms and that most of them have resulted to excessive consumption of alcohol and drugs as an alternative source of pleasure and entertainment. The respondents cited harsh economic times as the main reason for not migrating to digital platform. The respondents further said that they were also confronted with the reality of buying another TV set with audio and video output and a powerful antennae in order to migrate to the digital platform. Musa (2014) says that attempts by the consumer rights groups to have the government subsidize the costs of digital TVs and Set Top Boxes have been ignored and that Pay TV is beyond reach for most people.

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“3. Results and Discussions”

Over time, public hostility towards the digital migration process across the country has ballooned. According to Gichane (2014), digital TV is out of reach for most people. Most people in Kenya live below the poverty line especially in Nairobi which harbors informal settlements and largest slums in Africa like Kibera, Mathare, Korokocho, Mukuru, Kangemi and Baba dogo. Consequently, Ochieng, (2014) argues that these individuals can hardly afford their basic needs and so buying a digital TV or a Set Top Box which is a luxury was not going to be a walk in the pack. Set Top Boxes and digital TVs retail at Ksh 4,000 and Ksh 50,000 respectively and the monthly subscription fee for the Pay TV is Ksh 5,000 depending on the service provider.

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became more frustrated after their expectations were never met.

Nyabuga and Booker (2013) claim that government’s failure to regulate the service providers is an indication that it has self-interests in the market. These sentiments are also shared by the public at large. It was imagined that digital TV would transform TV viewship to a great extent and to ascertain the reality on the ground. The study sought the views of respondents on whether digital TV had transformed viewship and their lives at large. The study showcased that majority of the respondents (81%) disagree with this. Instead they are of the view that it’s an extra burden on their already strained budget.

The findings suggested that only the sports market has benefitted from the switch off. This has been due to the local demand for sports especially football where a huge number of Kenyan football superstars play in prestigious English and European premier leagues. The findings also exposed that literacy level is an issue that cannot be ignored. Many people were not aware that digital migration was inevitable and that the switch off was actually going to happen that soon. They continue to point an accusing finger at government for switching off their TV sets.

The study further sought the views of respondents on whether they were at ease operating digital TVs. The study found out that majority of the respondents (60%) do not operate the digital TVs with ease. The respondents said that they had difficulty navigating through the menu and it took them long to switch from one channel to another. Some respondents confessed how difficult it was to operate their digital TVs and they relied majorly on their sons to operate it for them. In addition, the study sought to investigate how the respondents generally feel about digital migration.

The findings disclosed that majority of the respondents (81%) were generally unhappy with the digital migration. Majority of the public were not amused with the regulators performance in the digital migration process with many reading malice in the process. The respondents also recalled how government had frustrated the whole process in order to fully control media content and its operations. The respondents further lamented how they had been forced to acquire the Set Top Boxes to keep their families entertained. The respondents sympathized with local media houses who had been the biggest casualties. The local media houses had previously held various market segments since and now they had been forced to share advertising revenue with the new entrants.

The study showcased how the past few months had seen many private media houses lay off their staff all in the name of cost cutting. The respondents feared that many journalists are at risk of losing their jobs as a result of the transition to digital TV. The study also exposed how most public are a worried lot, they claim digital TV has come with pressure from other cultures of the world. They are worried that the western culture has now dominated the content of programming. The young generation has become more vulnerable to the western culture since it is proving difficult to inhibit the flow of information on digital platform.

The findings suggested that the disadvantages of digital TV out way the advantages. The cost of a digital TV, a Set Top Box and the monthly Pay TV subscription fee continues to be a nightmare. The findings showed that digital TV signals unlike analogue TV signal is either there or not, it does not gradually improve until you get a clear signal. You either get a clear signal or none at all. What this means is that tuning your old aerial becomes harder and switching channels becomes slower for viewers.

Additionally, Mbatha and Ocholla (2011) argue that frequent loss of signal, channels disappearing and disconnection of pay TV by service providers are a reality in every household. Similarly, depending on the quality of your decoder, noise, rain and other conditions like motorcycles and vehicles passing by may affect your reception.

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“4. Conclusion”

The public had high expectations with the introduction of digital TV but from the study’s revelations, their frustrations are far from over. According to Lugalambi (2010), it was believed that viewers would be able to access channels that meet their standards of quality and increased engagement in that the Set Top Boxes (STB) and digital TVs built-in interface pots for your cell phone, memory tick and modem. These would also mean that viewers would be exposed to better viewing pleasure through High Definition Resolution, access to an electronic program guide that helps one to navigate, identify the current screening program and even see the proceeding program. Clearly these transformation are yet to be seen.

The publics’ negative attitude towards the digital migration process can be attributed to the fact that most public cannot afford digital TV. Additionally, government’s laxity to hid calls by consumer rights
groups to subsidize the costs has seen many doubt its commitment to a smooth transition therefore adding pain to injury. Critics have wondered why government is treating serious issues of public concern with velvet gloves. From the study’s findings one can conclude that government has always been unhappy with the content aired by local media and therefore want to have control of what is being received on public TV sets.

Finally, since it will be counter unproductive to engage in a discussion to whether a roll back to analogue signal is possible or not, the study agrees with Gathara’s (2015) conclusion that the incumbents from their narrow sightedness decided to pick a fight on a ship that had already sailed lost the bigger picture. Perhaps only time can heal the bitter feeling of betrayal and wide resentment that has mounted in the hearts of many with regards to the inhumane manner in which the digital migration process was conducted.

“5. Recommendations”

According to Gituku (2013), Set Top Boxes are currently retailing at an upwards of Ksh 4,000 in a country where the gross national income is at Ksh 6,145 far below the minimum income of Ksh 8,000. The price is likely to go up in the short term due to demand arising from bungling of awareness and the transition period. Local media and consumer rights groups need to lobby government further to subsidize the cost of these gadgets. This move could help change the attitude of the public towards digital TV and probably have government win the public over to their side.

The study strongly believes it’s not too late to change the attitudes of the public regarding digital TV. Going forward, the government needs to rethink a strategy that can be used to enable the entire country to migrate smoothly to digital platform. These could mean engaging various stake holders in formulating a workable plan to achieve (100%) transition to digital TV. This could entail boosting the already existing infrastructure that could hasten the migration process the same way it made primary education and maternal health care accessible to every individual.

In addition, civic education needs to be spread across the country to sensitize the public on digital TV. These could help change the wide resentment and the already existing negative perception that digital TV is for the elites and the upper class. Lastly the concerns that service providers are taking advantage of naive public cannot be ignored. Information regarding Free to Air TV channels and Pay TV channels have to be availed to the public. Any service provider found exploiting consumers should have his broadcasting withdrawn and to face the full force of the law.

“6. References”


