Balancing Audience's Needs and Producer's Expectations in Television Serial Drama Programming

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Abstract: The study sheds light on how the TV station executives balance the entertainment needs of its audience and the producers' expectations within a changing digital broadcast environment. The study is anchored on uses and gratification and the encoding and decoding theories. The research employs a mixed-method design by using survey questionnaires (415), FGDs, and in-depth interviews with 5 TV station executives and serial drama fiction producers in Kenya. The results indicate that the station executive takes centre stage to fulfil the urban audience's needs and the producers' needs respectively. The station executives contextualize the viewers and the serial drama producers as "profit vessels" and any decision made towards them should culminate in economic benefit to the station.
Keywords: TV station executive, serial drama producers, urban audience, economic benefit.

Abstrak: Studi ini menjelaskan bagaimana eksekutif stasiun TV menyeimbangkan kebutuhan hiburan pemirsa dan ekspektasi produser program drama dalam era perubahan siaran digital. Studi ini memakai teori *uses and gratification* serta teori *encoding-decoding* dengan dasain *mixed-method.* Teknik pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui survei pada 415 responden, *focus group discussion*, dan wawancara mendalam pada 5 produser stasiun TV dan produser serial drama fiksi di Kenya. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pengelola stasiun mempunyai peran sentral dalam memenuhi kebutuhan penonton urban dan kebutuhan produsen serial drama. Produser eksekutif stasiun TV mengkontekstualisasikan pemirsa dan produser drama serial sebagai *'profit vessels'* yang mengarah pada keuntungan ekonomi stasiun TV.

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Introduction

The television station executive is considered the fulcrum of audience entertainment, by their position as critical decision-makers in television programming production and scheduling. However, the technological innovation and disruptions in the broadcast systems across the globe are undermining their traditional role as the central determinants of audiovisual consumption to the larger public TV viewers. Kenya is a member of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) which mandated all its member states to migrate to digital transmission platform by June 2015 (Oxford Business Group, 2014). In February 2015, the national regulator, the Communication Authority of Kenya (CA) discontinued the analogue transmission to force all broadcasters to migrate to the digital platform. In protest, three main popular TV stations, i.e. *Citizen TV, KTN* and *NTV*, with over 55% of audience share (KARF, 2016) switched off their signals for a month over the uncertainty and disquiet over their content control and distribution by a third-party licensee.

The Communication Authority of Kenya indicates that the digital signal now covers 78% of the Kenyan population (CA, 2017). They further observe that the cumulative number of digital set-top boxes purchased as at 30th June 2017 stood at 729,477 for free-to-air set-top boxes (FTA-STBs) and 3,788,417 for pay-tv (CA, 2017). Other market studies seem to reinforce the changing trend in the broadcast industry. The ownership of set-top boxes (STB) now stands at 56% countrywide, while the digital TV sets which do not necessarily require STBs now stands at 27% (KARF tracker, 2017). Digitalization is hailed as a game-changer; that it will guarantee a better quality of reception, choices in programming and thus freedom to the viewers (Ugangu, 2018). However, Steemers (2014) argues that digitalization and its accompanying technologies like the internet is creating an unprecedented impact in the old broadcast model of production and distribution. The analogue system structure has been the backbone for many TV station executives and their shareholders. Doyle (2016) observes that emerging platforms like the subscription video on demand (SVOD) such as Netflix is steadily shifting audiences and

economic power away from broadcasters and creating opportunities for independent creators. In the Kenyan context, startups like *Viusasa,* a video aggregate and distribution company plays a similar role as Netflix. They seek out a variety of video content genres from independent producers and repackage them for download resales at a discounted fee. For close to 30 years, many forms of electronic information and entertainment were under the state-controlled broadcaster. First, the Voice of Kenya (VOK) and later Kenya Broadcasting Cooperation (KBC). The media was liberalized in 1991 (Nyabuga & Booker 2013). Within a short period, 66 free to air TV stations were licensed (Opanga, 2015). The establishment of a myriad of stations and the innovation within the digital broadcast industry has brought into focus the role of the TV station executive on how to balance the viewer's needs and negotiate desirable programmes with the producers.

There are 5 leading free to air TV stations in Kenya, namely, Citizen TV, NTV, KTN home, K24 and KBC with an accumulative national audience share of 64% (KARF, 2019). Similarly, there has been growing concern over the kind of content broadcast across the increased channels. In this regard. For instance, the CA (2016) has a policy that mandates all the free to air (FTA) television stations, to programme a minimum of 40% of locally produced contents in their first year of operations and cascade it to 60% in their fourth year of broadcasting. The policy is meant to promote and support the growth of domestic productions and safeguard the local cultures (CA, 2016). Thus the station executive is a pivotal link in this demand as they balance their organizations', and viewers' interest. They make critical decisions in programming and linkages with the content creators. Nevertheless, in the ubiquitous television entertainment industry, one popular programme genre in all the five local TV stations is the serial drama fiction. A competitive arena where the domestic productions are playing catchup in popularity with their foreign versions and more so in the primetime hours of 8-9 pm. This is significant because the dearth in local content consumption and production has been established as a point of concern and the country is yearning to find a

solution (Mutunga & Wagumba,2019) This further reinforces the vantage position of the station executive as decision-makers to provide insight and possible direction to the industry.

To understand their viewers, the station executive borrows from the uses and gratification framework which focuses on how people actively seek out specific media to satisfy specific needs (Blumler, & Katz 1974; Abelman, & Atkin, 2011). In this connection, the executives rely on audience media surveys confluence, conducted by third-party institutions to understand their audiences and programme preferences. Estibals (2000, 81) argues that the European and American TV stations prioritize programmes with better ratings for schedules.

The second theoretical framework to guide the study stems from the cultural studies domain. Hall (1980) advanced the audience reception theory perspective. Within the discourse, the encoding and decoding model (Hall,1980) explains how the media producer develops an idea with shared rules and symbols with the intension of positive reception without any distortion. However individual receiver's background and disposition create varied meaning which could be dominant, negotiated or oppositional reading of the message.Davis (2004) supports Hall's line of thought by encouraging the need to recognise the connection between media producers and media receivers. The media producer, in this case, is the serial drama fiction producer and the receiver is the station executive.

In the study, the station executive is defined as the person appointed by the station managers to determine appropriate programmes and their schedules using agreed and intuitive perimeters. Other television organizational structure could refer to them as programme managers or controllers. The references for audiences and viewers are used interchangeably and are those who are targeted/ and watch television programmes. The producer here could represent writer-producer or the director. The person with the final decision in a serial drama production. And digitalization embodies the modern digital broadcast transmission and accompanying production infrastructure.

The Station Executive and the Viewers

Television is regarded as a 'producers medium' (Newcomb & Alley, 1983) implying a free reign for the producer or creator of television programmes and that three of the significant creative parts of television series production, i.e. 'story, casting and editing are under the producers' control' (Cantor cited in Thompson 1990,.7). However, this is not so; television executives could hold sway on programming and even productions. Television series balance the delicate need to turn a profit to remain on the air and also meet the audiences' recreational needs (Ang, 1991; Brinker, 2015). Gray, & Lotz, (2012) further argue that it is critical to understand the television institution, why new programmes are created, scheduled within a given timeframe while others are rested. The station executive holds a pivotal position in this structure.

Lallo (2014) argues that the executive producers and their analysis of programmes hold sway in serial drama productions. He further quotes Francesca James, the executive producer, director and an actor in the TV serial drama *All My Children,* saying that "Focus groups are the killers of daytime television". These controls are under the station executives and marketing departments, so writers and producers have little say. Hill (2010) observes that their intervention could, in some instances be in order; she cites the case of the pilot episode of *Desperate Housewives (2004),* a one-time popular soap opera. The suggestions of the executive producers, at an advanced screening, partly contributed to its success. This further reinforces the power of the station executives

The foremost interest of television station executives is to entertain the audience and further retain them for advertisers. In the context of innumerable TV stations and fragmentation of the audience, Mareno, Serrano & Garcia-Uceda (2013) developed an audience satisfaction model, referred to as a cognitive-affective model for the consumption of television programmes. The model measures the quality of the programme as perceived by the programme consumers of entertainment, news and cultural programmes. Quality here is assessed as interest in the programme, the suitability of the

programme to the viewers' tastes and utility. The authors conclude that there is a causal relationship between the quality of the programme and audience satisfaction. And to adapt the programme to the viewers' demands, they suggest that the audiovisual programmers; the role the station executives play to consider the dimension of a programme to interest the audience, suit their tastes, entertain or inform them and appeal positively to their emotions while watching. These findings closely relate to an earlier observation by Perse & Rubin (1988) that the critical predictors of soap opera satisfaction include watching to seek exciting entertainment and escapist relaxation. It is emerging that satisfaction is a core component of the viewers' consumption of entertainment programming.

These findings could be of interest to the station executive operating in a competitive multi-channel operation where the viewers are spoilt for choice in programme selections (Blumler, & Katz 1974; Abelman, & Atkin, 2011). In this study, the audience gratification can also be understood by their response towards the station executives acquisition and scheduling their favourable serial drama programmes. However, the commercial pressure in audiovisual productions is an overbearing factor in many a drama production (Allen, 1985; Caldwell, 2008; Okwuowulu, 2012). Thus, the station executive closely monitors the marketing/commercial department. Wamuyu (2018) argues in an empirical study of two long-running domestic TV drama productions- *Inspekta Mwala* and *Machachari* on Citizen Television that there was a disconnecting between the creative production team and the marketers. The marketers were unaware of the content they were to sell; similarly, the producers were also oblivious of their viewers' and advertisers' reaction to their productions. In a fast-changing digital environment with multiple options, does such a disconnecting influence the viewers' perception of the station executive? Therefore, this study attempted to know what are the audiences' responses towards the station executive programming of serial drama fiction in the competitive digital broadcasting environment; how do the station executives respond/meet

the audiences entertainment needs in a serial drama fiction genre in the new digital broadcast dispensation.

The Serial Drama Fiction Producer

The television medium is regarded as the producer's creative domain, more so the drama productions (Newcomb, & Alley, 1983). However, within the Kenyan changing digital broadcast context no study has scrutinized the relationship between the producer and the station executives, especially in a liberalized competitive broadcast environment. Additionally, the digitization and innovation in infrastructure like the internet have blurred the boundaries between media production and consumption (O'really, 2007). The prevailing digital environment enables the viewers to 'produce' and distribute their content even through social media platforms (Bruns, 2012). Television station programmers further operate in an environment where the selection, scheduling and retention of programmes are highly dependent on audience ratings (Estibals, 2000). This suggests a delicate balance to the producer to navigate in the dynamic production environment and meet the station executives programming needs.

Cantor and Pingree (cited in Allen, 1985, p. 50) observe for instance, that 'no soap opera writer operates under the delusion that the soap opera is a canvas upon which to bear his/her creative soul. The writer's job is to generate the largest possible audience of consumers of the sponsor's product. Thompson (1990, p. 1) agrees that 'creation in television is an issue of power, not just imaginative power or intellectual power but organisational, occupational and entrepreneurial power as well; or a producer has to go the extra mile to mobilise a team to bid on their behalf and a clout to talk to station executives'. Henderson (2007) points out that when there is contention between a producer, script or an actor, it is evident that the executive producer's decision will override the rest.

Ford (2008) further argues that soap operas are created as much by the audience that debates, critiques, and interprets them than through the production team itself. Tully and Ekdale (2012) carried out a study on TV serial drama edutainment production known as *The*

Team (2007-2008) in Kenya. They wanted to determine the audience reception to the storyline and characterization as intended by the producer among other variables. They concluded that there was a disconnecting between the producers' message intention and the audiences' reception to a significant storyline segment. Nonetheless, this was an essential step in understanding the audience and producers' relationship in a serial drama genre. However, it did not interrogate the producers' relationship with the station executives. Scholars like Cohen (1999), Hoffner and Buchanan (2005) argue that Serial drama viewing pleasure is further engrained by the audiences' building parasocial relationships with the characters, even beyond the intended storyline.

The serial drama fiction producer has a double role to fulfil the viewers' entertainment needs but foremost, they need to convince the station executive to sanction their productions and schedule them. The foregoing discussion reveals the delicate balance of the producer working within an industry presumed to be his/her forte (Newcomb, & Alley, 1983). Further to that, the producer grapples with enabling and sophisticated environment with facilitating infrastructure to 'produce'. Nevertheless, for the producer to create attractive productions for the station executives' consideration, they would need to start from Halls (1980) encoding and decoding argument, In this case, the producer considers the station executive as the audience. Davis (2004) reinforces this line of thought by arguing that the Halls model encourages the need to distinguish the link between the media producers and media receivers. The media producers in this case are the serial drama fiction producer and the receiver is the station executive. Halls (1980) argue that communication is a process and media production is connected in circulation, distribution/ consumption and reproduction. It is therefore critical to determine the relationship between the producer and the station executive from the 5 leading free to air TV stations in Kenya (ie Citizen TV, KTN, NTV, K24 and KBC) by answering the following questions; what is the perception of the serial drama fiction producer towards the station executives in programming and production? How do the station

executives balance their organizational and serial drama producers' interests in programme acquisition and scheduling.

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Methodology

This study took an explanatory study design. It drew from a wider quantitative data (415) which was to determine the viewers of serial drama fiction in Nairobi, Kenya. Further to that, using purposive sampling technique, 57 participants were identified (from the 415) respondents) for their knowledge and insights on serial drama programming and volunteered to be part of FGDs. It is from this group of 57 participants that the study engaged to form the FGDs team to interrogate their perceptions of the station executives. Additionally, these findings reinforced the findings of the quantitative question. The final phase of data collection involved 16 Key informant Interviews (KII) with the TV station executives and the producers. They lasted between 45 minutes to 2 hours each and were audio-recorded.

The data was first cleaned for completeness, consistency and further converted to numerical form. SPSS was used for data analysis and to produce descriptive statistics and an appropriate graph. The second phase of the analysis was qualitative. Patton (2002) observes that qualitative analysis transforms data into findings. The data was first logged according to the dates and time, the place where they were conducted, and the persons with whom they were gathered. After the transcription, thematic coding was used as suggested by Hansen et al. (1998) and Silverman (2003), categories and patterns on the data started to come out. The thematic areas were derived from the theoretical framework although total anonymity is impossible, the study has ensured that the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants were ensured through the removal of any identifying characteristics before widespread dissemination of information. Instead of identifying the participants, pseudonyms ware used.

Findings and Discussion	**Audience Response towards the Station Executive in Programming**

A closed-ended questionnaire was administered to the participants; they were to check provided statements which best reflected their perception. If they marked '1' it meant that they strongly agreed with the statement, '2' agree, '3' neutral, '4' disagree and '5' strongly disagree. It was later analysed using SPSS software and the findings reported in percentage scores. The quantitative finding in the first question was reinforced FGDs. Subsequently, in-depth interviews and KII dominate the analysis.

Viewers Response towards the TV Station Executives

Figure 1 below indicates that 59.5 per cent (6/10) of the respondents agree that the station executives are professionals and considerate to their viewing interest. However, it is in contrast to 20% (2/10) who disagree that given an opportunity to act as a station executive, they could do a better job at the station. Further to that, 55.8 per cent (6/10) is specific that the managers understand them in TV drama serial programming and another 65.8 per cent (7/10) also agree that they like the kind of drama serials their favourite station screens.

Figure 1 'Viewers Perception towards the TV Station Executives
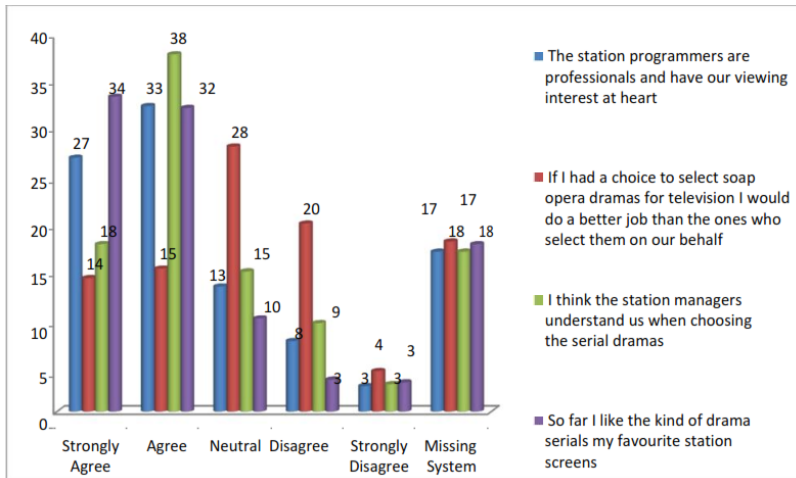
Source: Research Data 2020

In the focused group discussions, various arguments were raised in connection to the station executives.

> **E4:** *I think the people who plan for us the programmes are experts…I can't say I can do a better* job*, there is something they know that people like us do not.*

> **B5:** *What they programme for us is just okay.*

> **C2:** *I am not an expert…I don't see the problems with KTN or even Citizen pengine tu (may be only) KBC ndio wagejaribu (KBC should have tried). the station inkaa old (laugh) (The station appears warn out).*
> *Programme zaozikonashida hapo wagejaribu kurekebisha (I don't have a problem with the programming of other stations like KTN or Citizen, the problem is at KBC if they could correct some of their programmes)*

The above discussion suggests confidence towards the station executives among the participants. However, they might not have an idea of how the station executives contextualise their tastes and feed it into programming. They consider themselves inexperienced to interrogate the station executives seeing them as the experts. The problem is that such kind of unchallenging attitudes could lead to poor programming. However, they are fully aware of the need to improve KBC programming and organisation. The station is public with a mandate to serve the population irrespective of its commercial interest. The viewers' perceptions seem to tally with the executive producers. They reign in confidence over their knowledge of their audience as captured in the extract;

> **H12:** *I think generally there is an appreciation. Across the board… we even crossed that bridge of having to discuss you know, do Kenyans watch local content? Absolutely. Do they appreciate it? Absolutely. Do they like it? Absolutely. Do they know what they want? Absolutely not. Because even if you ask somebody right now… stop five people in the streets and ask them, what shows would you like us to start local? It will always be, um you know a show like… You know a show like… Churchill Show.*

Many of the studied TV stations operate as commercial institutions. Therefore, they strive to create a balance between excellent programming and economic interest. Nevertheless, they appreciate local programming, but it's a dicey affair even for the station executives to determine successful shows. The participants statements like '*I think the people who plan for us the programmes are experts…I can't say I can do a better…job*' or '*What they programme for us is just okay*'. This corroborates the station executives' argument that one might not be absolute with the audiences' and programming. However, within the uses and gratification framework, the viewers' positive response to the station executive programming is an endorsement of their freedom of programme selections (Blumler, & Katz 1974; Abelman, & Atkin, 2011). It depicts them as knowledgeable about their audience tastes. Some are even bullish (like H12) on their superior knowledge of their

audience tastes. Additionally, this reinforces Gray & Lotz (2012) criticism over the overall criticism on the reception theory as a domain of the middle class viewing pleasure and ignoring the influence of the media houses ownership, ideological and political leaning as strong determinants on what goes on air. The station executive is within the realm of decision making in the media houses and thus the audience positive perception towards them is a pointer to their programming skills.

The of Station Executive's and the Audience's Entertainment Needs

The station executives or their appointees' work within a structured environment to design and schedule appropriate programmes to their viewers. On a face to face interview they reveal some of their perspective of the audience they programme for:

> **H14:** *Our viewers are skewed towards women and children…and we are an aspirational channel so there are dramas we reject…we rely on ratings and therefore producers need to listen to us because we also pay them.*

> **H12:** *Everything here is a bit young. Yeah okay? So that is primarily who we talk to, and we obviously have to also keep in mind a national audience. So even if you go upcountry you will find us perhaps you know, deep mashinani (deep in rural). But we are also a very peri-urban station.*

The above arguments suggest that the studied TV stations predominantly target a young population, more precisely, women and children and try to balance between an urban and a rural audience. However, these are the perspective of commercial stations. The station executive in a public station has a different approach as captured in the following excerpts:

> **H15:** *As National public station KBC our mandate is to entertain and meet various audience needs…we might differ with commercial stations that not every programme has to make commercial sense.*

> **H13:** *We are sensitive to audience feedback…we know them and there are instances when programmes have been rested because of audience feedback.*

Though the station executives are keen and respond to audience feedback, there is an underlying economic interest which also determines programme suitability as expressed below.

> **H11:** *Purchasing foreign drama is cheaper for our viewers the station… they are syndicated selling to so many countries…local productions from my experience local productions had no sponsor…s the cost was quiet high…to produce a local show was more expensive …that was one of the secrets people could not understand and even the management.*

> *H15 I wanted to have Kenyan movies…after previewing the content was low….such movies you find there are very few movies….they cannot run for 13 weeks….the challenge we are lucking quality they are few….and I can tell you quality is a problem.*

In consideration of their viewers, the station executives have to contend with the prevailing production environment. The foreign productions are cheaper because of their syndicated marketing model. Further to that, there is a challenge of quality in domestic productions and forces the station executive to resort to foreign programming to fulfil the audience entertainment needs. The station executive' approach also seems to supports Moreno et al (2013) audience satisfaction model which measures the quality of the programme as perceived by the consumer. In this study, the station executive is perceived as the foremost consumer (Davis, 2004). And eventually represents the primary viewers in programming and scheduling.

Balancing the Organizational and Serial Drama Producers' Interests in Programme Acquisition and Scheduling

The finding indicates that the television station executives work within prescribed institutional parameters. In commercial television economic opportunity in programming overrides every aspect of its operations as shared in the extract.

> **H13:** *We have to balance between our shareholders…good programming and the audience…at times it's not easy to know what's going to work.*

> **H12***: It's just business and this is what I keep saying ultimately you know. You can cry all you want. KTN, NTV, K24, CITIZEN we are commercial stations. When we make decisions, it is going to be first in the interest of business and it will be second in everybody else's interest.*

Working in television programming requires insights and dexterity of balancing varied interest. Nothing is certain. As argued in the theory, the serial drama producers' sets off from a dominant position in their productions (Halls, 1980). However, the station executives who are their consumers have a condescending attitude towards the producers' expectations as outlined by some of them.

> **H16:** *The programme producers need to listen to the executives. I am in touch with the viewers by virtue of the office…When their programme is launched they are usually keen on the SMS audience feedback platform.*

In serial drama production and programming, good story content is critical as it addresses the audience's pertinent issues. However, the station executives doubt the producers' skills and a sustainable market which might require government policy intervention as pointed out in the excerpt

> **H12:** *So, when we select content, we keep the audience in mind….what sort of stories are national stories? But told well, produced well strong storylines…. it's a story about betrayal they are like, yeah something like that happened to me. You know, the story about overcoming diversity.*

> **H2:** *Does the market produce enough writers to sustain TV drama fiction stories I don't think so? - Does the market have enough work to sustain the writers? maybe not…there is a need for government intervention? Always. Policy, implementation, incentives and compliance*

The producers work at the behest of the TV station executives. They claim to be more knowledgeable about their viewer's preferences and characteristics than the producers'. Ang (1991) and Brinker (2015) argue that television series balances the need to turn a profit and also meets the audience's recreational needs. Therefore, the serial drama producers might not even have a freewheel in implementing their programmes or ideas at the stations, contrary to the widespread industry belief; that the film/TV producers are authoritative, command respect and at times are untouchable. Lallo (2014) reinforces that influence from executive producers has led to alteration of storylines and change of characters in the dramas.

The TV station executives strive to create a balance between excellent programming, audience satisfaction and dealing with the content creators -in this case, the producers and writers. The executives or their representatives share their pertinent concerns in the following extracts;

> **H14:** *You know a lot of the challenges we face here even with the local shows is scripting. You know, it's not the filming and the packaging itself. It's sometimes the storyline is so weak I think its training….. So what you do have is people who did stage, and now want to write for TV. It doesn't work. You know it just doesn't work.*

> **H13:** *We don't have very good writers either there needs to be a school for scriptwriters for television.*

> *H12: Another challenge we have had with our storytelling here is that it's too Kenyanised. You know. We don't tell a universal story…. So I could be in my traditional gear but I'm talking to you in English. We are acting in English. And you see I can relate I can understand. And we sit there and think yeah.*

The station executives are concerned that the market is bereft of good TV writers, and this ultimately affects the quality of the drama productions. As business entities operating in an open competitive environment, they have the leeway to select suitable productions from anywhere-including the Telenovelas, which are cheaper. It thus suggests that the local producers could be discriminated in programme selection over foreign productions. The weaknesses in the local productions as pointed out by the station executives has even been envisaged by the Communication Authority of Kenya policy (CA, 2016). It mandates a cascaded 40-60% quota for domestic productions over and above foreign programming. This is to boost local production and consumption which is low (Mutunga & Wagumba, 2019).

The Perception of the Serial Drama Fiction Producers towards the Station Executives

The findings are that there is an air of distrust between the producers and the station executives. Partly driven by the economic interest and the prevailing digital dispensations. This is revealed from the interviews of the two entities as expressed in some of the anecdotes;

> *H9: The war with the stations have actually not been the platform but the content when you control that you control the advertising money and everything…and the dynamics have been shifting…. the traditional TV is going to be dead in the next few years…people are moving into phone ….. there is still suspicion on the side of the big 5…we finally understood we used to be slaves of this TV stations …I can produce my content and sell it to anyone…*

> **H4:** *I have not done many productions with the local stations but the few I did you would agree with someone thinking you have a deal the next day he is not picking your call.*

The producers perceive an overwhelming control on their productions from the TV stations to a point of exploitation. Further to that, some of the stations themselves need to adapt to the changing circumstances. Some of the producers would also want to chart a different direction, as captured in the following extract.

> **H1:** *I think each channel is unique…as a producer, you cannot sit and say I cannot be commissioned …persistent persistent….who say you can only work for NTV, KTN….why not find a model for the small stations. I think in this digital internet the easy way of relying on the big station is a lame excuse.. as producers we need to be creative and …need a business model.*

According to some of the producers, opportunities are opening up unlike what has been prevailing.

> **H10:** *The changes we have seen is that the local TV stations are talking to us now at least I have 3 shows if it was not for that…I would be told you continue with your high-quality shows while we have our friends produce for us….I think it's a good thing the broadcasters will have to come to us…instead of giving something or going to their friends….yes they do give jobs to their friends …*

The changing digital dispensation with the availability of multiple channels is creating an impact on the industry. However, producers have a perception of unethical practices by the station executives in the commissioning of programmes. And as agued by Steemers (2014) and reinforced by these findings, digitalization is bearing unprecedented impact in the production practices and that any producer and station executive should take note and adapt to the changes. The encoding and decoding framework guides the producer (Halls,1980) who seeks to influence the station executive to acquiesce to his/her programme. This

is not always the case and the producer should strive to understand the needs of the station executive in programming.

Other findings indicate that some producers acknowledge their social-cultural storytelling challenges which compare poorly with other destinations which have made a stride in television drama productions as captured in the following excerpt;

> **H1:** *We have a culture crisis in telling stories even for the stations…there is something to learn even from those Nigerians...Indian culture has a way of telling their stories…sheng (Colloquialism) is a morphing language…I realize sheng (Colloquialism) is part of our urban culture…*

But they are also aware that creating a winning story in the Kenyan context is still a daunting task. Nigeria and India are their contemporary in many aspects of development. However, their television drama stories emanate from a rich cultural and traditional underpinning, which is lacking in Kenya, where even the language choice in a story is still problematic. The study can further suggest that there is a need to bridge the gap between the creators and the station executives. TV stations are the quickest outlets for many of the dramas, at the same time, a station would be more successful if it sources or commission it's programming from a variety of sources and not confine itself to few known entities.

Conclusion

Throughout this study, the writers explore the relationship between the television station executive with the viewers of programmes in a changing broadcast dispensation. The study has uncovered that majority of the viewers highly regard the station executive in providing them with attractive programmes. About 66% agree that they programme their favourite serial drama fictions and describe them as professionals and experts. Nevertheless, they have a low opinion of KBC programming among the 5 stations studied through their station executives (others are Citizen TV, KTN Home,

NTV and K24). The stations answer to their selectivity and gratification (Blumler, & Katz 1974; Abelman, & Atkin, 2011). The second finding is that the station executives prioritise economic interest in their programming and planning over all other variables. The foreign programmes are purchased and programmed because they are cheaper and of better quality in comparison to domestic productions. The stations mainly target women and children, further to that the station executives, in theory, claim their programming priority is to meet their audience needs, however, a programmes economic viability is highly sought before its consideration. The third finding is that the relationship between the station executive and the producers is that of distrust. There is a perceived condescending attitude by the station executive towards the producers in programming productions and scheduling. However, this is a result of weaknesses in their productions (weak storytelling) which some of the producers acquiesce to as social-cultural challenges within their production environment. Thus the producer framework of encoding/decoding model (Hall, 1980) on the station executive seems to meet oppositional reading on many occasions. However, the producers have welcomed the changing digital dispensation which is offering them alternative avenues for their content. Steemers (2014) observed the impact of digital technology in the old system of broadcasting. Opportunities are now available which enable bypassing of television stations. The other finding is that the need for government intervention in terms of policy and regulations is in order under the prevailing circumstances. The station executives have indicated the overriding commercial interest at their stations(apart from KBC) which also give them the leeway to purchase foreign productions at will. The need to boost domestic productions and consumption is well observed (Matunga & Wagumba, 2019). Further to that, the station executives lament over weak productions and expensive outlay, Therefore, the 40-60% mandatory quota in local content programming is a safe bet to bolster the industry. And this can only be undertaken by a government entity.

Correspondingly, this study recommends bridging the relationship between the station executives and the serial drama

producers, making the former play an advisory and consultative role in the productions. This can be achieved by organizing regular forums and workshops for the two entities. The executives have better insights into their audience from the data provided by marketing survey agencies. The study also recommends upscaling of storytelling/writing skills in serial drama fiction. Experts can be invited to facilitate workshops for the producers. There is also a need for station executives to extensively adopt the use of digital platforms in production infrastructure and communication. This is to prepare and continuously keep in tune with the audience changing tastes. Another recommendation is that the government should develop an incentive and reward system for the television stations which promote domestic content beyond the 60 per cent local content requirement. It should be offered in the form of licensing rebates and certificate of recognition. The regularity of such support should enhance the quantity and quality of the productions.

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