

# The evolution of TV viewing

By  Leslie Adams

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*If you watch too much TV, your eyes will turn square!*



Source: [www.unsplash.com](https://www.unsplash.com)

Common folklore among Boomer parents, this old proverb was usually disapprovingly relayed when children spent long periods passively staring at the television.

But this generation of kids is now all grown up – and so has the world of media that surrounds them. And while eyes have yet to turn square, their viewing habits have fundamentally changed.

The days when you would see the whole family slouched on the couch, tuned in to watch the latest episode of *The Fresh Prince*, are very much in the past. As technology progresses, the broadcast basket has expanded to see a plethora of new streaming players enter the market.

Our adoption curve has ramped up and we've become sophisticated digital citizens, which entails a change in how we consume broadcast content.

There are massive shifts in the global television audience thanks to this advent of tech and yes, you guessed it – the pandemic – there are also certain factors that are unique to the South African landscape, which give rise to a distinct set of

behaviours.

Here are how our viewing habits have changed over the past few years.

## From zombie to zealot

There are different viewer 'states', meaning how we consume content and our general receptiveness to outside intervention. We can categorise these as an 'active' viewing state (think of a sports fan yelling at the referee on a screen) and a 'passive' or 'escapist' viewing state.

The square-eyed TV zombie is a stereotype, but there's certainly truth in the fact that certain television content nudges us into a passive viewing state, where we mindlessly consume what is shown on the screen before us.

Our viewing state will determine the level of attention that content gets. Consider a podcast on a niche topic, such as mental health, which broadcasts bespoke content to a highly-engaged audience.



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Streaming generally pushes audiences into an active or engaged viewing state. We choose what we want to watch, when we want to watch it, and we pay for it. I can speed through this series and devour it all in one sitting. Let me skip to my favourite scene. I feel like watching a romcom, let me have a look for one.

At the 2021 Consumer Electronics Show, Sandeep Gupta, vice president and general manager of Amazon's Fire TV, commented on how differently viewers stream compared with how they used to watch TV. "People today don't scroll through lists to watch whatever is on anymore. They know what they want and how to get it."

Streaming brings us back to a fully-engaged, zealous viewing state – like we saw in the early days of TV. We're invested now.

## From appointment to on-demand

Appointment viewing is where a viewer would tune in to watch a certain show, on a certain night, at a certain time. There are a few factors that have catalysed a huge shift away from appointment-based to on-demand viewing (watching what I want, when I want).

The first factor, unsurprisingly, was the Covid-19 pandemic. When consumers were trapped at home, we saw a boom in streaming services. Our workday had changed during lockdown, with people working all hours of the day, and no longer willing to only watch their favourite shows at certain times. Viewers became accustomed to the convenience and freedom that on-demand viewing entailed, and even with the pandemic in the past, these behaviours remain.

Cites one Deloitte study on The Future of TV and Video: "on-demand video has radically changed consumer behaviour: consumers increasingly expect relevant and attractive TV and video content that can be accessed anytime, anywhere, and in the format that best suits their immediate needs."

Secondly is the not-so-little factor of loadshedding, when it goes dark, consumers now access their favourite shows on their charged-up laptop or cellphone. As a result, we've seen viewers move away from the TV and toward their devices, where they can stream their favourite shows or movies to their hearts' content.

Finally, is the power of the algorithm. The intelligence of streaming services is getting smarter and algorithms are increasingly sophisticated. We're becoming accustomed to having a viewing experience curated and customised to our personal preferences – and we aren't going back.

## From fee to Freemium

As the proliferation of streaming services continues, competition for eyeballs heats up. But SA viewers remain under financial pressure thanks to the rising cost of living and so, we're fickle. If budget is limited, we'll cancel our Showmax subscription when the new season of *Emily in Paris* is on Netflix one month, and then cancel Netflix in favour of Showmax when *The Wife* is on the next.

Added to this is the fact that big players, such as Netflix, are reaching saturation point in their subscriber bases, and are looking for new ways to monetise.

As a result, streaming providers are increasingly offering ad-funded programming or ad-supported tiers to prevent stagnation in their viewer numbers, while viewers will be looking to providers to offer more value. Viu, for example, is an AVOD platform that dominates the local market, with an audience bigger than that of Netflix, Showmax and eVOD combined.

This is where the 'freemium' and ad-funded video on demand (AVOD) models are rapidly gaining ground, as cost-conscious viewers don't have to rack up steep subscription fees. Instead, they can binge their favourite shows in exchange for watching a couple of ads.

## ABOUT LESLIE ADAMS

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