Are remotes out of control?

SAN JOSE, California

(AP)

As the creator of television's first wireless remote control nearly 50 years ago, Robert Adler spawned generations of viewers who do their channel changing from the couch.

But today, the retired engineer is just as confounded as millions of others who fumble with the remote controls that clutter their coffee tables and routinely fall into the cracks of sofas.

Nearly every audio or video electronic gizmo comes nowadays with a remote control, and despite so-called universal remotes designed to alleviate the proliferation, advancements in this must-have armchair accessory still elude many consumers. The latest models require technological bravado, are expensive, or don't work as expected.

Adler, 90, has three remote controls in his suburban Chicago home -- one each for his TV, VCR and DVD player. He has trouble navigating them just to play a movie. But he's never dared condense his collection into a universal remote.

"I think it's scandalous how little the people who design these things seem to keep in mind that people don't know it by heart as they do," he said.

Today's remote controls commonly sport 30 to 50 buttons to accommodate the growing features -- and complexities -- of modern electronics, from picture-in-picture modes of dual-tuner TVs to the ability to zap past commercials.

The average American household has four remotes, according to the Consumer Electronics Association. Others estimate the average is even higher, especially as home entertainment expands to include satellite or cable boxes, media centers, and TiVo-like digital video recorders. Some companies are even making remote controls for personal computers, which are becoming entertainment hubs themselves.

Zach Scribner, a 25-year-old sound engineer in San Francisco, bought a $15 universal remote about two years ago to tame eight-clicker chaos. To his dismay, it worked with only one of his two TVs and his VCR, but not his DVD player or any part of his stereo system.

"It's not so universal -- it's regional," he said.

That's because basic universal remote controls under $50 are limited to the thoroughness of the maker's database of remote control codes. Usually, cheap universals actually can operate only five to eight devices. So if your CD player's make and model isn't supported by that universal remote, you're stuck.

"That's why people go from six to three remotes -- and not one --and that doesn't help their cause," said Ramzi Anmari, a vice president at Universal Electronics. The company provides universal remote technology to electronics companies and licenses its database of infrared remote codes.
Still, remote controls sold as aftermarket accessories are a growing business: U.S. shipments increased to 33.2 million units in 2003 from 30.7 million in 2002, according to the Consumer Electronics Association.

Industry observers say low-end models still account for the bulk of the sales, even though more sophisticated all-in-one type remotes have emerged in the past few years.

On the cutting edge are remotes featuring touchscreens, wireless technology that allows signals to work through walls, or even Internet access. The makers of the Guide Remote, which already displays a user's customized TV listings, hope to let users soon vote on reality TV shows via the remote.

Some companies, like NoviiMedia and BravoBrava!, have developed software to turn other devices, such as personal digital assistants, into uebercontrollers. Agilent Technologies recently announced an infrared transceiver that can be built into mobile phones and turn them into remote controls for CD players and other home appliances.

"These are the advanced guard of controllers, but the mainstream market for remotes is still people who are just changing TV channels, pausing the DVD, and switching from the DVD to TV input," said Jim Barry, a Consumer Electronics Association analyst.

Universal remotes that run closer to $100 or higher are smarter and more flexible. They can "learn" or pick up function codes via an infrared zap from a gadget's remote that isn't on the universal remote's pre-designated database. They also often have more "macro" buttons that users can program to do a series of tasks with a single click.

For instance, a user could have a "macro" button turn the TV on, switch it to the A/V mode, power up the home theater receiver, set it to DVD mode, and turn on the DVD player -- a common process that would otherwise entail juggling three different remotes.

The $200 Harmony H659 by Intrigue Technologies tries to ease user agony by providing pre-labeled buttons such as "Watch TV" or "Listen to Music" that do the "macro" programming for you, automatically sending the right commands to your components.

The Harmony remote can be programmed via the Internet. Users can go online to describe how they use their gaggle of gadgets and hook their remotes to the computer to download the necessary codes and commands.

Climb higher on the price scale, spending more for the remote than for some coffee tables, and there are models that can operate more than a dozen devices -- not only audio and video components but sometimes your air conditioner, too.

The $500 Home Theater Master MX-800 controls up to 20 devices. The new $700 Sony Navitus Remote Control controls 18 and sports a fancy color LCD screen that presses back against your fingertip to confirm each command.

Royal Philips Electronics' top-of-the-line $1,699 iPronto universal remote can wirelessly connect to the Internet to display news or e-mail, as well as a TV programming guide on its LCD screen.

These are remotes you'd rather not lose.

But even the dilemma of a misplaced remote has been tackled.
The new $80 Radio Shack 8-in-1 Kameleon is the first universal remote control to include a finder feature. If the remote disappears, a user could press a button on a separate finder device for up to 14 seconds to make the remote control beep loudly.

The Kameleon itself, which controls up to eight devices, doesn't have any buttons. Instead, a blank LCD display lights up with on-screen buttons once the internal motion sensor is triggered. Depending on which mode you want to be in -- say, TV, cable box, or DVD -- then only that keypad layout would illuminate.

Remote control technology has come a long way since Adler's two- and four-button models of the Zenith Space Command in 1956. The Space Command could turn the TV on or off, change the channel, or mute the volume. For Adler, that's user heaven compared to today's remotes.

"You need a pilot's license to use these."

Audio engineer Zach Scribner poses with the nine remote control devices he uses at home.