

Television Use and Consumption of Elderly Americans

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INTRODUCTION

While parents, educators, and media critics have done much hand-wringing over the potential effects of modern television on today's youth (Domingues-Montanari, 2017), research suggests that the oldest among us might be more at risk when it comes to troubling screen time; the elderly watch more TV and benefit less from it than younger people (Depp, Schkade, Thompson, & Jeste, 2010). Thus, the purpose of the present research is to offer insight into how the elderly in the United States use, consume, and are affected by television, both in traditional legacy media settings and in newer digital media formats. This entry begins with background information, including definitions and a discussion of the changes in modern television consumption. Next, TV use by senior citizens and the potential effects of that use is discussed. Finally, solutions, recommendations, and potential future research avenues are offered.

BACKGROUND

The focus of this encyclopedia entry is to understand the impact of television consumption on the elderly population. With the advent of digital technologies impacting and transforming how we consumer media it becomes imperative to clearly define the two main concepts of this chapter. For the purposes of this study, the following terms are defined as indicated:

Elderly population: The term “elderly” can have different meanings depending on the source (Weeks, 2013) with the origination of the word coming from the word “elder” and generally means old (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.). The United States Social Security office considers people over the age of 66 eligible for full retirement with full benefits (Borland, 2017). However, most of the research presented here focused on this population seems to reference people over the age of 60 (e.g. Fouts, 1989 or Eggermont & Vandebosch, 2001) as being part of the “aging” population. This population is of particular importance because it is an under-researched growing population. The U.S. Census Bureau as cited in the Population Reference Bureau (2015) projects the number of Americans aged 65 and older is projected to double to 95 million by 2060 - sharing nearly a quarter of the population (Mather, Scommegna, & Kilduff, 2015).

Television Consumption: With nearly 80% of Americans watching some form of television on a daily basis and it is considered “America’s favorite pastime.” For the purpose of this study, the American

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Time Use Survey (ATUS) from the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) defines “watching TV” as the definition of television consumption, “As defined in the ATUS, “watching TV” refers to any time people said their main activity involved watching TV, videos, or movies. This includes the time they spent watching live programming, viewing DVDs, and streaming shows on their TV sets, computers, and portable devices. It does not include time spent viewing movies at a theater” (Krantz-Kent, 2018).

The Changing Landscape of Traditional Television Viewing

Television consumption, as with most media consumption, has changed drastically in the last 20 years (Einav & Wolf, 2019). Internet use has shown to cut into television time, particularly for the most experienced internet users (Cole, 2003). Younger audiences, those born in 1980 and after, are driving these changes, as they expect more options as well as a more personalized media consumption experience (Einav & Wolf, 2019). Almost half of all adults, 22-45 years old, are not watching traditional TV (Poggi, 2017). What has developed is a new age of “cord cutters,” those who end their pay TV subscription from cable and satellite, and “cord nevers,” those who never paid for those services to begin with and never intend to. These two groups are also responsible for the rise in over-the-top (OTT) television services, TV delivered via the internet through online services such as Netflix and Hulu (Einav & Wolf, 2019, para. 19-20). By 2017, according to Parks Associates, 69 percent of U.S. broadband households were OTT subscribers, with more than half paying for more than one service. This trend is expected to continue as about 75% of all TV households in the U.S. have a connected device, with the average household having 3.9 connected devices (Frankel, 2019).

Content providers for streaming services have exploded in recent years as well. Netflix is probably best known for originally delivering movies to homes via mail to today becoming a powerful streaming service. In fact, some even reference “the Netflix Effect” as being when a new series catapults the fame of a program or actor overnight (Morgan, 2019). The sharable nature of the availability of this content creates accelerated viewing and popularity like nothing seen in the past. In addition to Netflix and Hulu, the market is flooded with previous cable channel content providers (TBS, TNT, CNN) and premium content providers such as HBO – each creating streaming applications and online portals. For example, a recent acquisition of Time Warner by AT&T has created a new company called WarnerMedia, aimed to compete with the likes of Netflix (Sims, 2019). Just as the devices have changed so has the production and distribution of content. These changes will undoubtedly continue for the foreseeable future as digital technology continues to evolve.

TELEVISION CONSUMPTION TRENDS OF ELDERLY AMERICANS

Despite the hype of digital, networked, and mobile technology, television is still the most voracious consumer of time for older Americans. Research suggests that as people age, their consumption of television increases. This is particularly true among senior citizens, who rely on TV more than any other form of media (Fouts, 1989; Nielsen, 2014). In fact, the average American over 65 spent 30 more minutes per day watching television when compared to the year 2003 (Kopf, 2019). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2018), of all age groups, older Americans spend the most time watching television. Trending from 2013-2017, the average hours per day watching television for 55-64 years of age was 2.9 hours per day. Americans over the age of 65 spent an hour more watching an average of 4.1 hours per day while those over the age of 75 watch an average of 4.5 hours per day. This trended significantly

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