

MDI ALERT

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LOST LINEAR VIEWERS

We took a look at how many viewers various linear TV networks have lost since 2015, based on Nielsen data presented by **Variety**, and the results are quite interesting. For example, the average commercial minute "viewer" projection in primetime for the CBS broadcast TV network in 2015 was 9.4 million. But despite growth of about 8% in the total TV household population, it declined about 52% to 4.5 million by 2023.

The accompanying table presents similar statistics for the other broadcast TV networks as well as a variety of cable channels. As can be seen, the CW took the largest hit, declining by 74% in average minute "viewers"; however, all of the broadcast TV networks were down significantly as were most of the cable channels (see table).

On closer inspection, linear content suppliers that programmed mainly entertainment fare, like USA, Syfy or TBS, were most vulnerable to competition from streaming. However, the Spanish language channels and those that favored documentaries (i.e. Discovery and A&E) also lost a lot of ground. Channels like Comedy Central, which target younger viewers, also suffered large losses and though it is not shown in the table, this is also the case for channels specializing in children's fare.

There was one notable exception to the declines: cable news. While hind runner CNN showed a minor loss of about 12%, Fox News was up 6% and MSNBC, thanks in large part to its highly critical coverage of Trump's polarizing behavior, more than doubled its audience from a mediocre 576,000 to 1.2 million, an increase of 118%.

**AVERAGE MINUTE PRIMETIME
AUDIENCE BY NETWORK**
2015 vs. 2023

	2015 ¹	2023 ¹	% Change
Broadcast TV Nets.			
ABC	6,894	3,888	-44
CBS	9,419	4,508	-52
NBC	7,751	4,537	-41
Fox	5,198	3,353	-35
The CW	1,745	453	-74
Cable			
A&E	959	432	-55
Bravo	872	571	-34
CNN	672	591	-12
Comedy Central	569	233	-59
Discovery	1,549	702	-55
ESPN	2,022	1,700	-16
Fox News	1,775	1,889	+6
Food Network	1,129	672	-40
HGTV	1,458	943	-35
History Channel	1,536	715	-53
MSNBC	576	1,220	+118
SYFY	1,006	285	-73
TBS	1,876	786	-58
TNT	1,766	938	-47
Telemundo	1,441	859	-40
Univision	2,551	1,265	-50

¹In millions.

Source: **Variety**, based on Nielsen ratings.

As a whole, these comparisons tell us several things. First, the linear TV networks made very few adjustments in their choice of program content once it became evident that they were losing younger and middle aged viewers to streaming. Instead, they've continued to use the same program suppliers and presented essentially the same menu to viewers as before, resulting in the predictable loss of many viewers. At first, the losses were mainly in the frequency of viewing. People who watched a linear channel or a broadcast TV network say, four nights a week, began to reduce that number to three times weekly then twice and finally, some gave up almost entirely.

Could these losses have been avoided? Perhaps. The linear TV networks could have sought out new program suppliers and tested new formats, especially those featuring the same kinds of content that were being used by Netflix to woo linear TV viewers. But in most cases the linear TV program execs were wedded to profit sharing pacts with producer "partners" in the lucrative syndication aftermarket fostered overly long runs for shows that had outstayed their welcome to create more episodes that would boost syndication rerun incomes.

The networks who had "partnership" ties to producers of former hit shows like *Seinfeld* sought additional income by allowing these shows to be licensed to Netflix and other streamers. Unfortunately, this error also made the streamers' libraries more popular, drawing viewers to them and away from content offered by the linear TV programmers. By the time the networks finally wised up about this blunder and stopped being so generous to their competitors, it was too late.

The third error was the failure of many linear TV networks to effectively promote their content, especially to younger audiences who were the earliest defectors. There was the occasional exception, mostly by cable channels, but in the main the networks missed a golden opportunity to promote their shows during the early days of the streaming revolution.