

MDI ALERT

June 04, 2024

TUNING VERSUS VIEWING: WHY THE CONFUSION?

Time and time again we see presentations, articles and posts citing "viewing" stats of one kind or another. Yet, often these are not viewing stats at all, but rather set usage presented as a surrogate for viewing, as if both were the same thing. They aren't. While it is obvious that TV content can only be viewed if that content is shown on a screen, many people don't understand how misleading set usage information can be. This is especially the case when it comes to TV "audience" measurement where the tendency is to rely on "big data" panels that employ set-top box usage or ACR tracking, rather than on smaller panels where respondents signify whether they are "watching" when a set is turned on and when the channel is changed, such as Nielsen's National People Meter panel.

To demonstrate the difference between tuning and viewing, we have created a hypothetical scenario that segments the TV home universe into three parts, each represented by a particular type of household. Home #1 has a single resident, Joe, a 24-year-old. Home #2 has three residents: Mark, aged 44, his wife, Jen, aged 43 and daughter, Emma, aged 10. Home #3 has two residents: Bob, aged 75 and wife, Judy, aged 72. Let's pretend that, in aggregate, these three households provide a picture of what happens in all TV homes when a TV set is used.

Table 1 indicates a typical day's TV set usage and viewing for our three sets of TV home residents. The first column tells us that when a TV set was used by one or more of the three homes; an "X" indicates such usage. We have also used an "X" to indicate whether any of our six individuals were also viewing. So, between 7-8AM, the only such activity was in Home #3, when both Bob and Judy watched TV.

As shown, Joe, the sole resident of Home #1, didn't watch any TV until 8PM, and his total daily consumption for the day occurred between 8-11PM, probably with movies or a drama series and most likely via streaming. Home #2 shows a different pattern as the TV set was in use quite often, but most of the time it was attended by only one of the residents. The sole exception was between 8-9PM when both household heads watched together. Finally, Home #3 had the most set usage and the most occasions when both of its elderly residents watched together. Co-viewing occurred 5 times but the other set usage in this home was of a solitary nature.

Table 1
A DAY'S VIEWING BY THREE TV HOMES AND THEIR RESIDENTS

	TV Set	Home #1		Home #2			Home #3	
	On	Joe	Mark	Jen	Emma	Bob	Judy	
7AM	X	--	--	--	--	X	X	
8AM	X	--	--	--	--	X	--	
9AM	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	
10AM	X	--	--	--	--	--	X	
11AM	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	
Noon	X	--	--	--	--	--	X	
1PM	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	
2PM	X	--	--	--	--	X	X	
3PM	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	
4PM	X	--	--	--	X	X	--	
5PM	X	--	--	--	X	X	X	
6PM	X	--	--	X	--	--	X	
7PM	X	--	X	--	--	X	X	
8PM	X	X	X	X	--	X	X	
9PM	X	X	X	--	--	--	X	
10PM	X	X	--	--	--	--	--	
11PM	X	--	--	X	--	--	--	
Midnight	X	--	--	X	--	--	--	

Source: Media Dynamics, Inc.

Table 2 presents a summary of set usage versus viewing by individual residents. Here we see that in Home #1, with its solitary resident, there were three hours of set usage and three hours of viewing, so the two metrics were, indeed, reflective of each other. But that was not the case in Home #2 where the TV set—or sets—were on for 8 hours but Mark watched three hours, Jen watched four hours of TV and Emma watched for only two hours. The situation in Home #3 was also different. Here, total set usage was the highest (10 hours for the day), but its individual residents were more likely to be viewing because they are retired and therefore more present than 40-somethings Mark and Jen, both with jobs outside of the home.

The summary line in Table 2 is also interesting as it closely matches the norm for TV viewing that is seen in Nielsen's People Meter findings. As in our hypothetical, the average TV home resident is involved with only half of the household's set usage occasions and that percentage varies by type of home. For single resident households, set usage and viewing are equally valid metrics. But for the young family (Home #2), the average resident is present and viewing less than half the time, while for the older home, tuning reflects viewing about 70% of the time.

Table 2
**SUMMARY OF A DAY'S SET USAGE
 AND VIEWING IN THREE HOMES**

		Hrs. of Set In Use	Hrs. of Viewing	% of Set Usage Viewed
Home #1	Joe (aged 24)	3	3	100
Home #2	Mark (aged 44)	8	3	38
	Jen (aged 43)	8	4	50
	Emma (aged 10)	8	2	25
Home #3	Bob (aged 75)	10	6	60
	Judy (aged 72)	10	8	80
Average		8	4	50

Source: Media Dynamics, Inc.

Obviously, the distinctions we raise have important implications for media planning and buying. For example, based on set usage, many TV shows will appear to target homes with adults aged 30-50, especially those with children and, as such households often fall into the middle or upper income brackets, the impression may be that the same shows target upscale viewers. However, the adults in such homes are in fact usually relatively light viewers so a paradox arises: set usage tells you that most TV shows are "seen" by adults aged 30-50, yet when the same shows are rated only on viewing, a preponderance of older audiences is reported. So, beware of the set usage metrics that are presented as viewing stats; used in that manner they are bogus.