

CROSS-PLATFORM DIMENSIONS 2020

ALERT

THE MULTITASKING CONUNDRUM

Nielsen's second quarter 2018 **Total Audience Report** adds more detail, not to mention some confusion, to the multitasking story. Many people in the media and advertising business have been led to believe that the simultaneous usage of electronic media—TV, digital and audio—is a very frequent occurrence, especially during commercials. Indeed, some actually think that a typical viewer, by which they really mean a light viewing, digitally inclined Millennial or middle-aged adult, always has a smartphone handy when watching TV and always turns to it when TV commercials appear.

The Nielsen report is based on a survey where participants were asked highly generalized questions about how often they watched TV and used a digital device simultaneously, as well as a similar question for TV and audio. As shown in Table I, claimed multitasking rates for TV and audio were very low compared to TV and digital. This is hardly surprising, since 65-75% of audio activity occurs in cars or other away-from-home venues where TV sets aren't available. As for TV and digital, only 9% reported that they "always" use TV and digital simultaneously, while 36% claimed to do so "very often" and 28% claimed to "sometimes" do this. Finally, 27% claimed to "rarely" or "never" simultaneously use TV and digital.

The problem with this sort of self-reporting research is its lack of specificity and highly impressionistic nature. The terms "always" and "never" may be clear enough, but "very often," "sometimes" and "rarely" can mean totally different things to each respondent. One person's "very often" may be another person's "sometimes," and so on.

Other studies, however, have explored the incidence of multitasking by observing audiences as they were exposed to specific TV shows. One of these was conducted in 2014 by the Council for Research Excellence (CRE) with a sample of 273 former members of Nielsen's Peoplemeter panel, who were observed as they watched TV in normal, at-home circumstances, over an

extended period of time. “Granular” notations of multitasking activity were noted in 10-second intervals. All told, 34,987 observations were made, representing an average of 495 per respondent. The results indicated that when TV was the primary medium in use, multitasking took place only 15% of the time; of these, the largest amount involved “audio” distractions (43%) followed by “computers” (28%), reading (11%) and the telephone (7%). With smartphones even more prevalent now, were an updated version of this study conducted, we would expect to see a higher incidence of smartphone distraction, especially during commercials.

Table I
SIMULTANEOUS USE OF DEVICES

	TV + Digital	TV + Audio
Always	9%	2%
Very Often	36	4
Sometimes	28	13
Rarely	15	28
Never	12	53

Source: Nielsen, Total Audience Report, Second Quarter 2018.

The CRE’s 2016 report, which observed 126 viewers watching TV between 5-11pm under at-home conditions, provides a sense of how multitasking has progressed. Each respondent had a second screen available, and their behavior was monitored by “observational glasses” and cameras. This iteration of the study found that when the TV set was on, the “viewer” was absent from the room 23% of the time. Of those who were present when an ad was on, 48% were distracted either by looking at a second screen or by other activities, with the second screen accounting for about half of the distracted viewer activity.

What does this tell us? For one thing, when Nielsen reports an average commercial minute audience, it is highly likely that a number of these “viewers” have left the room, but not reported it to Nielsen, as was observed in the CRE study. It is also likely that absentee viewing is higher during commercial content than program content; if we take the CRE finding of a 23% absentee viewing rate across all viewing minutes, and raise that figure to 30% for commercial viewing, these would be counted as commercial minute viewers by Nielsen. If the amount of time devoted to commercials was 25% (a typical figure for TV), then it is easy to calculate the probable percentage of absentee viewers in the CRE study as follows: 30% during ads and 16% during program content (see Table II).

Table II
AVERAGE EVENING VIEWER BEHAVIOR DURING PROGRAM AND COMMERCIAL CONTENT

	During Program Content	During Commercials
Out of Room	16%	30%
View TV Screen	50	27
View Second Screen	19	34
Other Distractions	15	9
TOTAL AUDIENCE	100	100

Source: Media Dynamics, Inc.’s interpretation of CRE’s findings.

Our reworking of the CRE data shows that second screen activity is a major, although not a complete obstacle to TV commercial viewing: approximately three out of 10 people would count as actually seeing either the commercial on the TV or turning to the second screen. But this does not tell us if the respondent did one activity or the other exclusively. This is the key question when it comes to defining multitasking, and it remains unanswered. It might well have been that 50% watched part of the average commercial, saw enough to get the point (or enough to lose interest) and turned to their devices.

While these small sample studies are interesting, there has not yet been a nationally projectible study on multitasking. One reason is the underlying assumption that existing audience measurements actually determine who is watching program or commercial content. They don't. All that is produced is a tally of device usage, cross-referenced with what content is on the screen. Secondly, there is no clear and functional definition of "viewing." Is eyes-on-screen the gold standard? Should it be combined with duration: how much of the ad was seen? Are people who only watched part of the ad included?

Finally, the element of timing must be considered. Nielsen's second quarter 2018 **Total Audience Report** found that digital media garnered 36-41% of the three media (TV, radio, digital) usage total during the daytime, but in primetime, TV's share rose to 52-57%, while digital's dropped to 27-30%. So clearly there are limits to the amount of multitasking that takes place, based on reports of when activity occurs. If it were true that 100% of TV's audience turns to their smartphones whenever a commercial appears on the TV screen, which is about 25% of TV's total content, one would expect a much higher percentage of digital usage during primetime, and Nielsen's data does not show this.