Communications and entertainment

What do people in the UK watch and listen to? We explore a recent Ofcom report

Communication on the move

The Ofcom ‘Communications Marketing Report’ (2018) is a mine of information for sociologists about what is happening in terms of the UK population’s use of the media and in relation to popular entertainment trends. The data provided are often based on samples of the population numbering only a few thousand respondents, but attempts are always made to ensure that these are representative samples.

Figure 1 shows how, over a period of just 11 years, ownership of the smartphone and access to the internet on mobile phones has rapidly increased, as the take up of home landlines has started to fall. Home internet connections are also steadily rising. We are increasingly a society of communicators and information gatherers on the move.

Figure 1 Take-up of communications services (2018)

Source: Ofcom Technology Tracker. Data from Q1 of each year 2007–14, then half 1 2015–18

Base: All adults aged 16+ (2018 n=3730)

Popular culture

The Ofcom report also maps how our consumption of popular culture is changing. Not only are younger people using television less and less as a source of entertainment, but the staple diet of the big attraction soaps from just a few years ago is quickly losing its capacity to pull in large audiences.

Some TV events can still attract substantial national viewer head-counts — major live sports, and the final episode of BBC’s bodyguard drama (12 million viewers), for example — but soap operas are no longer the national draw they once were. Figure 2 shows the extraordinary, sudden decline of ‘water-cooler’ national TV moments in less than a decade, signalling a much more fragmented and more individualistic approach to popular TV entertainment today.

What impact might this have on our national culture? And why did sport have such a rise in UK TV audiences in the years 2012 and 2016? We will let you answer that one.

Source: BARB average audiences for programmes in selected genres

Figure 2 Number of TV programmes with 8m-plus audiences, by genre (2011–17)

Podcasts

If younger people, especially, are deserting conventional TV viewing, then where are they going, and what are they watching and listening to? Part of the answer to this comes from access to online opportunities to watch films and other kinds of entertainment on subscription at a time of one’s own choosing. But it may also come from growing interest in the tailored radio podcast.

According to surveys by RAJAR (Radio Joint Audience Research), the number of UK adults who listen to a podcast each week increased from 3.2 million (7% of adults) in 2013 to 5.9 million in 2018 (11% of adults). This increase is across all age groups, but the steepest growth in the past year was among 15–34 year-olds (see Figure 3). In other surveys, more than a fifth of those surveyed said they had started listening to podcasts only in the last 6 months, indicating that the reach and popularity of podcasts is accelerating, especially among the young.

How and what we consume as entertainment says a lot about who we are, how age might divide us, and perhaps about how we see ourselves as a nation. You can find out more on this from the Ofcom report, here: www.tinyurl.com/yangssp9.

Source: RAJAR, Q1 of each year

Figure 3 Weekly podcast listeners, by age (2013–18)

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