Communication and identity

The media we use to receive information are changing fast. Here, John Williams dissects the data from a recent Ofcom report, and considers how these figures reflect changes in identity and family life.

We live in a media-saturated society, and this shapes the way we entertain ourselves and interact with our friends. It is also a part of the way we form our identities, as we live through the ‘digital selves’ we establish on Facebook and other social networks. The media regulator Ofcom’s annual Communications Marketings Report is a vital data source on social interaction. It is based on findings from a representative national survey of UK adults. The 2013 report identifies a number of significant media trends.

Impacts on family activities

These changes impact on traditional shared family activities, such as watching television:

- 62% of UK adults have media multitasked and just over half (53%) are regular media multitaskers (i.e. they ‘stack’ or ‘mesh’ while watching television, see below).
- 25% of UK adults regularly engage in media-meshing (interacting or communicating usually via phone or text about the television content they are watching).
- 49% are regularly media-stacking (conducing unrelated media tasks, such as internet browsing, while watching television).

Men and women are equally involved in stacking and 20% of all UK adults claim to do both stacking and meshing at least weekly.

Despite these changes, around 90% of all people who own tablets still watch a single screen with other members of the household at least some of the time, though 52% of tablet owners also watch another screen in the same room at least some of the time (Figure 2).

Hand-held devices

In 2013 over half of all UK adults claim to own a smartphone (51%), a figure that has doubled over the past 2 years. Household take-up of tablets computers (such as the iPad or Google Nexus) has undergone an even sharper rise, from 11% in 2012 to 24% in 2013 (Figure 1).

Age and gender differences

- The public sector channels — BBC1, BBC2, BBC4 and BBC News — attract older than average audiences.
- The children’s channels CBeebies and CBBC attract a much younger audience, along with BBC3.
- ITV, ITV3 and ITV4 all skew younger than the average population, but while ITV4 skews strongly male, ITV and ITV3 skew towards the female.
- Channel 4 viewers are broadly in line with the general population.
- E4 skews younger, consistent with its target audience (Figure 5). Do your own television preferences fit with this graphic?

‘Snail mail’

Almost two-thirds of UK adults say they still rely on the post as a form of communication. Most adults (87%) are satisfied with the postal service, increasing to 93% among those who rely on it. This is a useful reminder that, no matter how fast technology moves, social trends are a combination of patterns of continuity and change.

John Williams is a managing editor of Sociology Review.