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Who decides how much TV youngsters watch?

Some time ago, SHEU were approached to investigate young people's habits of TV watching and its regulation by parents. The study was conducted in rather an unusual way. Instead of including questions as part of a local paper survey, as we have done in the past, we made the survey available as an opt-in online survey. The sample, therefore, has a rather different origin and we might be suspicious that the young people completing the survey are far from typical. So, we will try to assess how far this suspicion is justified. Over 400 young people have completed this survey while it has been available, with the largest group being 14-15 year old females.

Watching TV

How many hours did you spend yesterday watching TV?

92% watched TV at all during the previous day. This compares with 89% in the SHEU publication 'Young People into 2006',¹ when the previous day was always a school day. For the 'Young People into 2007'² sample, the figure is 87%. In the online sample, 30% watched more than 3 hours yesterday; again, this compares with about 20% in the 'Young People into 2006'¹ sample. For the 'Young People into 2007'² sample, the figure is 14%. These comparisons suggest that the 'accidental' online sample are not very different in their habits to the more typical population in the 'Young People'³ series, but they do seem to be heavier users of TV.

How many hours would you normally spend watching TV on a weekday (Monday to Friday) and at the weekend?

30% said they would normally watch over 3 hours on a weekday, a figure which increases to 40% for the weekend.

How many hours yesterday did you spend using a computer (for games, Internet or other use)?

83% spent any time using a computer; 21% spent more than 3 hours. The figure for 'computer games' was 15% in the 'Young People into 2006'¹ sample and 11% in the 'Young People into 2007'² sample.

Have you talked with any of the following people about how much TV you watch?

32% of the sample has talked with their mother about how much TV they watch, and 26% with their father. A surprising 51% had talked with friends.

Who decides how much TV you watch?

An overwhelming 75% say they decide for themselves. However, this figure climbs with age; it drops below 70% for Year 7 pupils, and below 60% for year 6 pupils. 22% say mother decides and 16% say father decides.

How do you think your mother feels about how much TV you watch...?

22% say they don't know, 39% say their mother doesn't mind, 34% say mother would like them to watch less (including 9% who say 'a lot less').

How do you think your father feels about how much TV you watch?

24% say they don't know, 44% say their father doesn't mind, 27% say father would like them to watch less (including 9% who say 'a lot less'). It would be interesting to know if the parents actually had the views ascribed to them, and if the parents of the 20+% who say they don't know what their parents think, in fact *had* made their views clear.

When you watch TV, are you...?

49% say they are usually on their own, a figure which rises throughout the age

groups from about 1/3 in primary school pupils to 2/3 among sixth form students.

How many TVs are there in your home?

2% say none, 12% one, 21% two, 25% three and 40% four or more.

Do you have your own TV?

62% have one all their own, while a further 9% say there is a TV shared by children.

What times do you usually watch TV during the week (Monday to Friday)?

56% say they watch TV before and after their evening meal and 40% watch later, after 9pm. This latter figure again climbs with age, from 20% of Year 6 and 7 pupils to about half of sixth form students. 22% watch TV before school.

Is the TV ever on when nobody is really watching it?

52% say 'Yes, sometimes', while 16% say often and 10% very often.

Is the TV ever on when you are eating?

Just 15% say never. 36% say yes, sometimes, while 26% say often and 23% very often.

When watching TV, do you usually...?

56% say they start watching TV to find out what is on; 30% say they know what is going to be on most of the time and 14% say they will check details in a newspaper or magazine.

How much did you enjoy filling in this questionnaire?

22% said not at all; 45% said a little with 21% saying 'quite a lot' and 12% 'a lot'. It's hard to know what to wish for here: something that is very engaging and exciting may well distort responses!

Conclusion and discussion

TV clearly retains a substantial hold on the leisure time of young people. The amount of time they spend as they get older is increasingly under their own control, not least because of their access to their own TV - 62% across all ages. About 30% of their parents, however, would like them to watch less TV - in some cases, a lot less.

There is something here about at least letting your children know what you think

about what they do. I was reminded, by the 20% or more of the young people who say they don't know what their mother/father thinks of their TV watching, about some work I read about many years ago concerning smoking.⁴ In that research, it was found that the children of smoking parents thought that their parents either did not mind or might even approve of them smoking. In fact, the opposite was true: smoking parents, on the whole, very much hoped that their children would not smoke. This led to the development of a cunning homework, whereby pupils were led to investigate the attitudes of their parents and others in the home towards smoking.

It's important to note that the content of the TV being watched is not mentioned in the survey; we often say that the best TV is better than the worst book (and, I dare say, even better than the worst homework). TV can be 'good for kids'⁵ and a resource for learning and social interaction.

When we started this research a few years ago, we hardly anticipated the rise of computer availability and certainly not the popularity of social networking online. If we were to start again today, we would undoubtedly have wanted a few questions about this pastime too.

References

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