

Watching television as a nation

Have mass TV audiences gone for good?

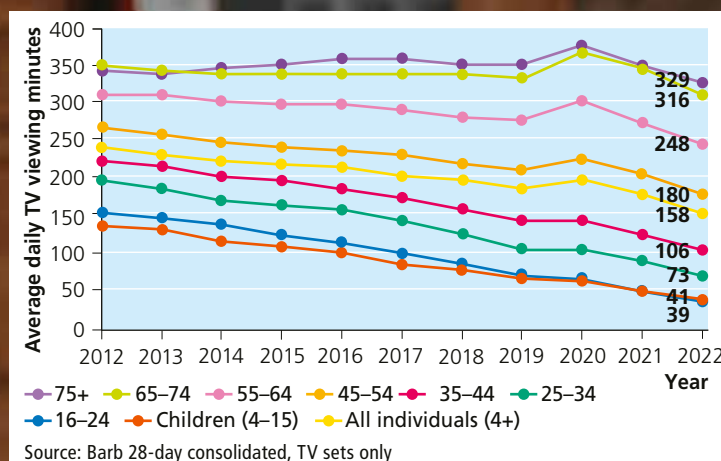


Figure 1 Average daily minutes of broadcast TV viewing by age (2012–22)

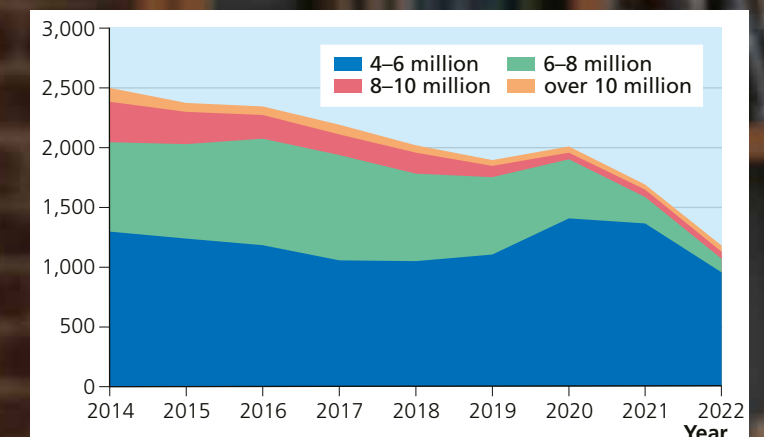


Figure 2 Number of TV broadcast transmissions with an average audience above 4 million (2014–22)

The end of the ‘water cooler moment’

Media sociologists used to argue that television broadcasts were a moment when the nation gathered to share a common, inclusive experience — one to be discussed the next day around that mythical water cooler. TV is still important in this respect, but our patterns of on-screen consumption are changing. Arguably, this is also changing our social relations. The advent of video and subscription TV channels, and our capacity to watch what we want, *when* we want, means that we are not quite ‘sharing the TV moment’ in the way we once did.

In today’s highly complex and diverse society, and with lots of media options, do you think television still has a role to play in bringing people and communities together? If not — and thinking sociologically here — does that really matter anymore?

Viewing figures

Ofcom’s *Media Nations* report of 2023 outlines the key trends. Over the last decade, all of us are watching less broadcast TV than we used to and younger people’s TV viewing is falling faster than that of anybody else. See Figure 1. Children and young adults under 25 have collectively decreased their average daily viewing by 73%, even since 2012.

Mass audiences

This also means, of course, that occasions when many — or most — of us are gathered around our TV sets to watch *the same thing* are also falling in number. In fact, the number of transmissions achieving ‘mass audiences’ is in steep decline, even over a very short period.

In 2014, 2,490 broadcast transmissions attracted more than 4 million TV viewers, but in 2022 there were only 1,184 — a 52% decline. See Figure 2. The pattern was across most genres, but news (down

72%, from 537 to 148 programmes) and soaps (down 42%, from 754 to 438 programmes), are the most prominent contributors to this drop. Does this matter? What do you think these changes say about us as a society?

What are we still watching together?

So, if we *did* get together as a nation to watch TV in 2022 what did we typically watch? The answer seems to be ‘live’ sporting events, reality TV and, perhaps surprisingly, major live events involving the monarchy. International sport certainly symbolises national identity, and 2022 did offer two highly unusual and significant events around the Royal Family that seemed to touch a nerve. See Table 1. This suggests that mass television viewing can still help articulate deep-seated sentiments and ideas we hold about shared rituals and the importance of patriotism and belonging.

Table 1 Top 10 most-watched programmes in the UK, highest performing episode per title (2022)

Rank	Title	Channel	Date	Share (%)	Average audience (millions)
1	FIFA World Cup: England vs France (QF)	ITV1	10/12/2022	68.4	16.1
2	The State Funeral of HM Queen Elizabeth II (part 2)	BBC One	19/09/2022	61.1	13.2
3	The Queen’s Platinum Jubilee	BBC One	04/06/2022	66.2	13.2
4	I’m a Celebrity ... Get Me Out of Here!	ITV1	06/11/2022	52.9	12.5
5	The Tourist	BBC One	01/01/2022	47.1	11.4
6	Happy New Year Live!	BBC One	31/12/2022	55.8	11.3
7	Women’s Euro 2022: England vs Germany (F)	BBC One	31/07/2022	64.1	11.2
8	Trigger Point	ITV1	23/01/2022	43.8	10.9
9	Strictly Come Dancing	BBC One	17/12/2022	55.0	10.7
10	The Thief, His Wife and The Canoe	ITV1	17/04/2022	41.9	10.1

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