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ABSTRACT

After critiquing the usual estimates of the importance of television as a source of news, the national audience for television news over a two-week period is identified from the 1974-1975 W.R. Simmons study (which uses a diary technique for gathering data). Analysis showed that, in the two-week period, 49% of the adult population did not watch a single evening network-television news program; only one adult in four watched more than four network news programs. On the average weekday, about one adult in five watched network-television news, while four out of five read a newspaper. The audience for network-television news is described demographically and is compared to the national audience for newspapers. People who use both media and those who use neither are also identified and described. (Author/AA)

The Myth of Television News

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The Myth of Television News

If there is one claim that pervades the literature of communication research, it is the dominance of television as a source of information and influence in the United States. A glance at almost any issue of a research journal in the field reveals one or more studies of television justified by its alleged significance as the most important source of information for two-thirds of the American public.

This claimed power of television is often also the basis for individuals and groups who want to change the relationship between broadcasting and the government. Efron, for example,[1] after finding massive bias in television news -- a claim which others disputed[2] -- argued that the television's dominance nessitated stricter enforcement of the fairness doctrine. And Sen. William Proxmire,[3] arguing from a similar premise of television's influence, concluded that governmental control of so potent a medium should be avoided, recommending an end to the same fairness doctrine.

Most of the claims about the influence of television are based on a series of studies carried out periodically for the Television Information Office by the Roper Organization.[4] The commonly cited figure that two-thirds of the American people receive most of their news from TV is based on responses to the questions:

> First, I'd like to ask you where you usually get most of your news about what's going on in the world today -- from the newspapers or radio or television or magazines or talking with people or where?

The proportion of respondents who mentioned television in answering this question has risen steadily from 51% in 1959 to 64% in the 1976 survey, the latest one

published by the Television Information Office. The full table is reproduced as Appendix 1.

This finding has been questioned on several grounds, but the point that first comes to mind is that the question allows multiple responses. While 64% of the respondents mentioned television, half (49%) mentioned newspapers, and one-fifth (19%) mentioned radio. In all, an average of 1.44 responses per respondent was given.

A second table (Appendix 2) breaks down the multiple responses and suggests lower figures for all media. One-third (36%) mentioned only television and one-fifth (21%) listed only newspaper. About one respondent in four (23%) named both television and newspapers. The remaining 20% mentioned other combinations of media. If one is concerned with the people in the country who get news only from television -- a more realistic way to look at the potential power of the medium -- the appropriate figure is one-third, not two-thirds.

When the study was replicated with a small sample of respondents who were directed to select only one response, the relative importance of television was reduced.[5]

Beyond that, there are conceptual questions about the use of an ambiguous phrase like "get most of." Clarke and Ruggels[6] list five possible meanings of the Roper phrase, ranging from frequency of exposure or time displacement to self-reported influence or psychological gratification. When they asked respondents to name the "best" source for specific public affairs news stories, the newspaper was mentioned more frequently than any other source for all types of public affairs

stories, international, national, state, county and city.

Edelstein[7] has criticized the definition of "get most of" news as the most credible or influential source, arguing that credibility of the source of information is seldom the basis on which an individual decides to use or not to use the source. Proceeding from the loose assumption that behavior is more a function of the individual's needs and gratifications than a response to an environmental stimulus, Edelstein asserts that media ought to be evaluated in terms of their psychological utility to the individual rather than some arbitrary criterion such as credibility. He instructs respondents to specify which source of information is most useful to them in a specific situation rather than the one they rely on most or find most credible.

In a wide range of studies in several parts of the country and overseas, the situational approach produces findings that conflict with the Roper studies in two ways.[8] First, the importance of television relative to newspapers and magazines is reduced severely; and second, the basis on which individuals select specific media varies from source to source and situation to situation, but it seldom includes source credibility. Newspapers are often chosen for their information content or the reader's ability to determine the time, place and manner of reading. Radio is frequently cited for its convenience and portability, magazines for their depth of content and, to a lesser extent, their credibility. Credibility is mentioned infrequently and then more often as a negative factor than positive: people may avoid a source of information because they regard it as lacking in credibility, but they seldom seek out a source because they consider it highly credible.

Edelstein required a respondent to deal with a specific situation and to define the criteria by which he or she evaluates his or her behavior in that situation. In contrast, the Roper approach, in the tradition of attitude research, assumes that behavior is consistent across situations and that the attitude -- an affective evaluation of an object across situations -- in some sense determines or influences the behavior. Those of us who have done any research trying to link general attitudes to behavior know how risky that assumption is.[9]

It is possible that the real consistency is not across situations but across people dealing with the same situation, and that the actual variance is not among people but among situations. In other words, attitude researchers often assume that a specific individual or type of individual will act, based on some hierarchy of attitudes and values, more or less consistently across a variety of situations. But it may be that most individuals or types of individuals respond similarly to a specific situation on some basis other than attitude. They might behave quite differently in a different situation. The research built on this framework calls for the investigator to define the situation explicitly to the respondent to ensure that the respondent is dealing with the specific situation defined by the researcher and to make certain the researcher knows how the respondent is defining the situation.

As noted above, an individual's statement that he "gets most of" his news from television or the newspaper or some other source can mean several things. These meanings may or may not be related to some generalized criteria of evaluation and may or may not be related to his or her actual use of mass media. If media use were related to various criteria of evaluation -- use most, rely on most, most credible, etc.[10] -- the dominance of television ought to be reflected in behavioral

measures of media use as well. It is not.

One of the most interesting studies reported by the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior -- the famous study of the effects of television violence on children -- involved an examination of the audience of one of TV's most violent programs, the evening network news.[11] The study, which received little attention when the full report and supporting volumes were released, involved an examination of 1969 data from the massive, nationwide Simmons studies. The studies consisted of two-week diary audits of most media behavior by a national sample of more than 3,000 women and 3,000 men. The analysis, based on cumulative exposure to the early evening network news over the two-week period, showed that half of the American public (54% of the women, 52% of the men) did not watch a single network evening news program in the two-week period. Only 20% of the men and 17% of the women watched as often as six times in the full two-week period.

Comparable data for newspaper readership were not obtained, but the study did ask about newspaper readership "yesterday" where yesterday was a weekday. In contrast to television news viewing newspaper readership was claimed by 90% of the respondents. On the average weekday, according to this study, less than one American adult in four can be found watching the network evening news while about nine out of ten can be found reading a newspaper.

A nationwide survey of media use by the American Newspaper Publishers Association in 1971 included a more detailed breakdown of television news viewing.[12] Consistent with the Simmons study, the ANPA survey showed that 27% of the adult population watched television news between 5 and 9 p.m., the time bracket that

includes the evening network news. But in addition, 25% watched after 9 p.m., 5% watched before noon and 7% watched between noon and 5 p.m. The proportion of adults who watched TV news at all "yesterday" was 48% of a national sample of 1,714. The study also showed that 77% of the total sample read a newspaper "yesterday," a figure that is similar to those reported in a number of other studies.

These two studies indicate that the audience for newspapers on the average weekday is considerably more than the audience for any television news -- 77% of the public vs. 48% -- and dramatically more if only the major evening network news is included -- 90% vs. 22-25%.

Nielsen rating data indicate a level of viewing of evening network programs more consistent with the ANPA figures of total TV news viewing than with the Simmons study. According to the Israel and Robinson study, Nielsen reported 39% of the households tuned in national television news during the period that the Simmons diary study covered. But ratings -- at least those obtained by Nielsen's meter attached directly to the set -- measure only when the set is on, not how many people -- if anyone at all -- are watching.

The problems of getting people to describe their own behavior accurately are well known to researchers, and most agree that measures of specific, recent behavior -- e.g., yesterday's behavior -- are more accurate than generalized statements, such as self-assessments of what a respondent "usually" does. But there is some question whether we are even capable of correctly describing what we did yesterday.

A small but significant study commissioned by the Surgeon General's Committee dealt with the issue.[13] Researchers studied 20 families, a total of 93 individuals, in the Kansas City area who allowed television sound cameras to be placed in their homes for six days to watch them watch TV. One camera was placed over the TV set facing viewers; the other was directed at the set from the opposite side of the room, allowing researchers outside the home to observe members of the family in front of the set and the set itself at the same time. In addition respondents filled out questionnaires about their media use during the six-day test period. Two parts of the study are pertinent here.

When asked about the amount of television they watched over the six-day period or the amount yesterday, respondents overreported viewing by 40-50% compared with researchers' observations of the videotapes of actual viewing. Diary reports in which respondents indicated their viewing of specific programs overestimated viewing by about 25%. Another useful analysis compared the time the set was turned on with the behavior of the members of the family. Not surprisingly the set was playing to an empty living room a good deal of the time. Movies (one of several categories of program content) had the largest audience in the sense that people were watching 76% of the time that the set was tuned to that type of program. Commercials had the lowest viewership -- people watched only 54.8% of the time they were on -- and news did not fare much better. At least one member of the household watched only 55.2% of the time the set was tuned to news.

All of this suggests that estimates of the audience of television news based on Nielsen metered samples or self-reports of viewing yesterday or in general may seriously inflate the actual audience. Even diary estimates may not adequately take into account the kinds of things people do while watching: talking,

reading, leaving the room for short periods, etc. Clearly, watching television news does not consist of giving one's uninterrupted attention to the TV for the entire newscast.

The notion that television news viewing is a casual, passive activity often interrupted by other activities is also supported by a study of the audience for the impeachment hearings. While most of the research on the Watergate and impeachment hearings has concentrated on the opinions that were influenced and the people who did watch the televised hearings, it is also important to keep in mind that a good many people in the country did not watch very much (or at all) and did not become psychologically or physically involved in the drawn-out episode that started with the break-in at the Democratic national headquarters in 1972 and ended, finally, with Nixon's resignation in 1974.

A survey in Seattle (which has a slightly higher level of education than the country as a whole) at the time of Nixon's resignation indicated that almost half (48%) of a sample of 346 respondents did not watch the House Judiciary Committee hearings at all and only one in four (26%) watched more than five hours of the 40 daytime hours broadcast live or the 40 hours of public television repeats in the evening. A series of questions which probed the circumstances surrounding viewing indicated that most viewers approached the hearings casually: Most watched only a few times and then for an hour or less; most were doing something else at the same time; and many said they would still be using mass media if the hearings had not been available. The authors describe the public response to these hearings as "casual surveillance, glimpses of the hearings as time and circumstances permitted, when they permitted at all. It is a picture of history in the making observed by people on the run." 14

In sum, there are two general objections to the assertion that most of the people in the United States get most of their news from television and that television is the most influential source of information. First, the credibility or some other generalized evaluation of a medium is not functionally related to the use of the medium. Rather, each medium has certain characteristics which make it useful to different types of people in different circumstances. Asking which source of information is the most credible in general is simply asking the wrong question.

The other objection to the assertion of the dominance of television arises from various studies that show that viewing of television news is inconsistent with the claims that two-thirds of the American people get most of their news from that medium. Both Nielsen ratings and self-reports of viewing indicate that exposure to television news is considerably less pervasive than exposure to newspapers, and both of these measures tend to overestimate viewing. The Simmons technique of daily diaries of media use (which appears to be more accurate) over a two-week period suggests that the major television news programs reach only a fraction of the people reached by newspapers.

Even without considering the conceptual problems of determining the bases of media use and influence, it is clear that data on exposure to various media are inconsistent with the assertion of the dominance of television. It is also clear that not enough is known about the precise levels of exposure to various news media over extended periods of time. It is to this problem that we address this paper.

Study Design

The annual Simmons studies are useful data bases for the study of media use for several reasons. They use a diary method for TV use which seems to be the most accurate measure. They cover three major news media -- television, magazines and newspapers (although the measurement of newspaper readership is not as detailed or as complete as one would like). They cover a longer time period, two one-week periods. And they are based on large national samples of about 6,000 respondents.

With a grant from the University of North Carolina University Research Council, we were able to purchase the most recent Simmons study available for public use (1974-75) and analyze it in relation to several of the questions raised above. In particular, we wanted to update the figures for exposure to television news reported by Israel and Robinson and, compare television news viewing with newspaper readership.

Data were collected over two separate seven-day periods in November, 1974, from 5,621 respondents who filled out a diary of all network television programs they watched and indicated for each 15-minute segment whether they gave the program their "full attention," "some attention," or whether they were "out of the room." The sum of these three measures was designated as "total viewing."

In addition, personal interviews were carried out during each seven-day period which determined, among other items, the readership of a newspaper "yesterday" where yesterday was a weekday. Thus, for the two-week period, we have a detailed listing of all network television programs watched, including the level of attention paid to each, and the readership of newspapers for two weekdays during

that period. Newspaper readership was coded for the two days together as zero or one newspaper, two, three or more papers. The survey also included extensive information about the individual respondent and his or her household.

For purposes of this analysis, we drew an interval sample of 20% of the total data set, producing a working sample of 1,122 respondents representative of the American adult population.

Results

Table 1 shows the total number of evening network television programs watched over the two-week period and the total number to which respondents gave their full attention. It should be noted that the figures refer to the number of

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Table 1 about here

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programs watched, not to the number of days on which evening network news programs were viewed. Respondents who watched two network newscasts on one day would be credited with watching two programs.

The results of this recent nationwide survey are dramatic enough to warrant this emphasis:

In a two-week period, half (49%) of the American adult population did not watch a single evening network television news program; in that period, only one American adult in four (25%) watched more than four network news programs.

In a two-week period, well over half (59%) of the American adult population did not give their full attention to a single evening network television news program; in

that period, only one American adult in seven (14%) gave their full attention to more than four evening network news programs.

We do not have comparable data for newspaper readership, but the data available are sufficient to provide dramatic contrasts. Over any two weekdays in that same period, one adult in four (27%) read one or no newspaper; two out of five adults (44%) read two newspapers; and three out of ten adults (29%) read three or more newspapers.

It is possible to calculate a model of television and newspaper use on an "average" weekday by adding all of the respondents who watched TV news 14 or more times, half of those who watched seven times, etc., and by performing a similar calculation for newspaper readership. From this model, we can estimate that on the average weekday, less than one adult in five (19%) watched network television news while four out of five (80%) read a newspaper.

In Table 2, we see both total viewing and full attention to network news by selected demographics. The level of viewing is collapsed into three categories: none at all, one to four programs and five or more programs.

In both measures of exposure to television network news, the patterns are similar. Viewing is unrelated to sex or race; county size and region of the country are

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Table 2 about here

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modestly related; age, education and occupation are significantly related to exposure to network news. People who watch the network news on television tend to be elderly -- this is the factor which most clearly identifies the network

news viewer -- less educated and not working. Viewing is heaviest in non-urban counties and in the South. Similar patterns are apparent when we look at full attention to viewing although differences in county size and region of the country disappear in this analysis.

Demographic characteristics of readers of newspapers are shown in Table 3. All of the demographic and geographic characteristics are significantly related to newspaper readership. The heaviest readers tend to be men, people of middle age,

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Table 3 about here

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well educated, white, in professional and managerial occupations, living in urban areas and in the East.

The users of television as a source of news tend to be older and at the lower end of the social and educational spectrum, while the users of newspapers are the opposite: well-educated, middle-aged cosmopolities. But, these variables interact in complex ways, and the data also indicate that viewing of television news, on the whole, is modestly but positively related to readership of newspapers. People who watch network news also tend to read newspapers. This relationship is shown

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Table 4 about here

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in Table 4. Of particular interest are the people at the extremes of this bi-variate analysis, those who pay attention to neither medium and those who pay attention to both. Selected demographics are shown in Table 5.

Of the four variables included in this analysis, the one characteristic which

best identifies the non-news-consumer is age. Almost half (42%) of the people watched no television news and read a newspaper less than once a day or not at

Table 5 about here

all are under 30 years of age. This group also includes a higher proportion of women, blacks and grade school graduates than the total population. The heavy consumers of both television news and newspapers, in contrast, tend to be heavily middle-aged and older people, whites, men and people with at least a high school education.

Discussion

It can be argued that newspaper readers are the cosmopolites while viewers of television news frequently live outside the eastern urban centers and are closer to the lower end of the social, educational and economic spectra. This is true to some degree, but these differences are already well known and do not by themselves account for the startling discrepancy between the Roper assertions and the actual media behavior of the American public.

Media use seems to be partly a function of time and cognitive skills. Age is the factor which most clearly identifies the frequent viewer of television news, and the elderly, of course, have the most time available to watch television. The elderly also tend on the whole to be less educated and more likely to have physical impairments, both factors which make reading difficult.

Newspaper readers, in contrast, are identifiable not by age but by education. Use of newspapers increases sharply with education. Newspapers are an efficient

source of information for individuals with the cognitive skills to read them quickly, efficiently and selectively. These skills, once acquired, stay with an individual at least until later life when physical and mental deterioration begins to set in and reading becomes more burdensome.

Age and education taken together can account for a large part of the differences in media use by various segments of the American population. Differences in the availability of media based on geography and urbanization are also important. But what these factors do not account for is the dramatic disparity between the Roper assertions and the levels of actual viewing of television news.

Part of the problem is ambiguous methodology. Part of the problem is a complex interaction of psychological and sociological factors which influence media use. Clearly, we do not completely understand why people use the media they do. But one thing is clear. The data on exposure to television news do not support the claim of television's dominance. And as we continue research to learn more about why people use the media they do, we do not aid our search by accepting uncritically the Roper claim that two-thirds of the American people get most of their news from television. We should not perpetuate this myth of television news.

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Table 1: Total Viewing and "Full Attention" Viewing of Network News.

Number of network news programs watched over two-week period:	Total Viewing (n=1122)	Full Attention (n=1122)
0	48.8%	58.6%
1-2	16.0	17.8
3-4	10.5	7.0
5-6	8.1	6.7
7-8	6.6	3.7
9-10	5.5	3.8
11-12	2.8	1.3
13-14	0.4	0.4
15+	1.3	0.8

Table 2: Characteristics of Viewers of Television Network News.

Total viewing of:	None	One-Four	Five + Programs	
Total (1122)	49%	27%	25%	
Sex				
Male (565)	48	28	25	
Female (557)	50	25	25	p=.62**
Age				
Under 30 years (264)	63	23	14	
30-44 years (353)	58	27	16	
45-59 years (291)	42	29	30	
60+ years (214)	26	28	46	p=.00
Education				
Grade school (102)	34	29	36	
High school (560)	51	25	24	
College (460)	50	27	23	p=.02
Race				
White (1039)	49	27	25	
Minority (83)	52	24	24	p=.8%
Occupation				
Professional, manager (238)	44	29	27	
White collar (223)	55	24	21	
Blue collar (262)	52	31	18	
Not working (399)	46	24	30	p=.00

Table 2: Characteristics of Viewers of Television Network News (Cont.).

Total viewing of:	None	One-Four	Five+ Programs	
County Size				
25 largest metros (598)	54	25	21	
150,000+ (306)	43	29	28	
35,000+ (118)	42	29	29	
Below 35,000 (100)	42	27	31	p=.01
Region				
Northeast (300)	51	27	22	
Central (316)	48	30	22	
South (286)	43	27	30	
West (220)	55	20	25	p=.03

Full attention to:	None	One-Four	Five+ Programs	
Total (1122)	59%	28%	14%	
Sex				
Male (565)	56	22	14	
Female (557)	61	26	13	p=.21
Age				
Under 30 years (264)	74	19	7	
30-44 years (353)	70	26	6	
45-59 years (291)	49	33	18	
60+ years (214)	34	36	30	p=.00
Education				
Grade school (102)	45	30	25	
High school (560)	60	27	13	
College (460)	60	28	12	p=.01
Race				
White (1039)	58	28	13	
Minority (83)	63	22	16	p=.42
Occupation				
Professional, manager (238)	56	32	12	
White collar (223)	65	27	8	
Blue collar (262)	62	26	12	
Not working (399)	54	26	20	p=.00
County size				
25 largest metros (598)	63	26	12	
150,000+ (306)	54	31	15	
35,000+ (118)	53	31	16	
Below 35,000 (100)	54	29	17	p=.68

Table 2: Characteristics of Viewers of Television Network News (Cont.).

Full attention to:	None	One-Four	Five+ Programs	
Region				
Northeast (300)	60	27	13	
Central (316)	59	29	12	
South (286)	57	28	15	
West (220)	56	28	16	p=.81

*Numbers in parentheses refer to number of respondents in each group.
**Significance levels are based on chi square test.

Table 3: Characteristics of Newspaper Readers.

Number of newspapers read in two days:	None or One	Two	Three or more	
Total (1122)*	27%	44%	29%	
Sex				
Male (565)	25	42	33	
Female (557)	30	46	25	p=.01**
Age				
Under 30 years (264)	40	42	18	
30-44 years (353)	24	47	30	
45-59 years (291)	20	42	38	
60+ years (214)	27	43	29	p=.00
Education				
Grade school (102)	46	38	16	
High school (560)	25	47	28	
College (460)	25	42	33	p=.00
Race				
White (1039)	25	45	30	
Minority (83)	49	29	22	p=.00
Occupation				
Professional, manager (238)	19	39	42	
White collar (223)	23	45	32	
Blue collar (262)	32	43	25	
Not working (399)	31	47	22	p=.00
County size				
25 largest metros (598)	26	40	34	
50,000+ (306)	27	48	25	
35,000+ (118)	28	53	19	
Below 35,000 (100)	33	43	24	p=.00
Region				
Northeast (300)	24	42	34	
Central (316)	24	45	31	
South (286)	34	43	23	
West (220)	27	47	25	p=.02

*Numbers in parentheses refer to number of respondents in each group.
**Significance levels are based on chi square test.

Table 4: Viewing of Television News by Readership of Newspapers.

Newspapers read:	None or One	Two	Three or more
TV newscasts viewed:			
None	15%	20%	14%
One to four	7%	12%	7%
Five or more	5%	12%	8%

n=1122, p=.02

Table 5: Demographic Profile of Viewers of Television News and Readers of Newspapers.

Age

Newspapers read:		None or one	Two	Three or more
TV newscasts viewed:				
	Under 30	42%	30%	19%
None.	30-45 yrs.	28	42	41
	46-59 yrs.	20	19	29
	60+ yrs.	10	10	11
		31%	20%	11%
One to four		33	30	34
		15	32	33
		21	18	22
		19%	13%	9%
Five or more		18	24	15
		21	28	43
		42	35	33

Sex

Newspapers read:		None or one	Two	Three or more
TV newscasts viewed:				
	Male	43%	48%	58%
None	Female	57	52	42
		50%	55%	52%
One to four		50	45	48
		47%	43%	63%
Five or more		53	57	38

Table 5: Demographic Profile of Viewers of Television News and Readers of Newspapers (Cont.)

Race

Newspapers read:		None or one	Two	Three or more
TV newscasts viewed:				
	White	88%	95%	94%
None	Minority	13	5	6
One to four		85%	96%	97%
		15	4	3
Five or more		86%	95%	93%
		14	5	7

Education

Newspapers read:		None or one	Two	Three or more
TV newscasts viewed:				
	Grade school	14%	3%	3%
None	High school	52	51	53
	College	33	46	45
One to four		15%	10%	5%
		44	56	37
		41	34	58
Five or more		19%	14%	9%
		33	53	51
		47	33	40

Appendix 1: Sources of News from Roper Surveys.

"First, I'd like to ask you where you usually get most of your news about what's going on in the world today -- from the newspapers or radio or television or magazines or talking to people or where?"

Source of most news:	12/59 %	11/61 %	11/63 %	11/64 %	1/67 %	11/68 %	1/71 %	11/72 %	11/74 %	11/76 %
Television	51	52	55	58	64	59	60	64	65	64
Newspapers	57	57	53	56	55	49	48	50	47	49
Radio	34	31	29	26	28	25	23	21	21	19
Magazines	8	9	6	8	7	7	5	6	4	7
People	4	5	4	5	4	5	4	4	4	5
All Mentions	154	157	147	153	158	145	140	145	142	144
Non't know/ no answer	1	3	3	3	2	3	1	1	-	-

Appendix 2: Analysis of Multiple Responses.

	12/59 %	11/61 %	11/63 %	11/64 %	1/67 %	11/68 %	1/71 %	11/72 %	11/74 %	11/76 %
TV only	19	18	23	23	25	29	31	33	36	36
N'pers only	21	19	21	20	18	19	21	19	19	21
Both N'pers and TV (with or w/o other media)	26	27	24	28	30	25	22	26	23	23
N'pers and other media but not TV	10	11	8	8	7	6	5	5	4	4
TV and other media but not n'pers	6	7	8	6	8	5	7	5	6	5
Media other than TV or n'pers	17	15	13	12	10	13	13	12	12	11
DK/NA	1	3	3	3	2	3	1	-	-	-