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ABSTRACT

Data from three representative national surveys were studied to determine to what extent profiles of television viewers of different levels of viewing frequency fit with expectations based on theory and earlier research. A group of 4,552 respondents were surveyed in 1975, 1976, and 1978 by personal interviews and were classified as to status as nonviewers (less than one-half hour per day), heavy viewers (more than six hours per day), and viewers (one-half to six hours per day). Nonviewers and heavy viewers each comprised about 5% of the total pooled sample. Results indicated that the greatest difference between viewers and nonviewers lay in family structures, with nonviewers more likely to be never-married and childless, as well as being employed on the professional level. Heavy viewers were rated low in education, income, and employment status; most were female. As a whole, heavy viewers seemed to be removed from ongoing society, while nonviewers were better educated and about as well integrated and active as average viewers. (DF)

TELEVISION VIEWERS, NONVIEWERS, AND HEAVY VIEWERS

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TELEVISION VIEWERS, NONVIEWERS, AND HEAVY VIEWERS

Speculation is abundant concerning television viewers' true nature. One perspective is that moderate or heavy viewers are better off than television abstainers, since television brings news and other information useful in social settings. Another point of view implies that people who abstain from television are better integrated and more involved in society than viewers, and as nonviewers have the time necessary to take good care of themselves, their families, their careers, and their community obligations. A third idea is that viewers and nonviewers are basically the same except for the obvious difference in their choice of pastimes.

This paper uses recent data from three representative national surveys to help determine the most appropriate characterization of viewers (1 to 6 hours of TV a day), nonviewers, and heavy viewers (more than 6 hours of TV daily). Here we ask to what extent profiles of viewers, nonviewers, and heavy viewers fit with expectations based on theory and earlier research.

Viewers, Nonviewers, and Heavy Viewers

What do we know of television nonviewers? In 1977, the Detroit Free Press paid $500 to five families for a month's abstinence from television. Subsequent news reports on the "nonviewers" suggest that life goes on without the tube (after a painful ten-day withdrawal period) and that the medium serves a variety of functions which can be seen in both "good" and "bad" terms. The Free Press nonviewers became ill at ease among co-workers, relatives, and friends who viewed and discussed

television content day by day (cf. Atkin, 1972). Many missed the feeling of comfort they got from viewing, though others found themselves more comfortable in discussions of current events as they turned to newspapers for news and information.

In academic research, Jackson-Beeck (1977) reports that there are many significant differences between representative samples of viewers and nonviewers, but no easily recognizable pattern of differences to indicate that nonviewers comprise a characterizable, cohesive group, nationwide. Nonviewers surveyed in 1975 were concentrated in the sparsely populated Western states, but at the same time they were most frequent in urban settings. Many were professional, technical, or kindred workers but they made less than $5000 per year.

Earlier, among a probability sample of households in Madison, Wisconsin, Westley and Mobius (1960) found television nonowners at both the upper and lower educational and occupational extremes. In particular, nonownership was frequent among professionals and people with graduate education. Family composition also was an important factor with nonownership most common in one-adult households and in families without school-age children. Robinson (1972) further reports that nonowners are more likely to pay social calls (and to get more sleep) but that TV owners actually spend more time in contact with their immediate families.

Bower (1973) does not study nonviewers per se but classifies Minneapolis-St. Paul respondents according to their level of television exposure (whether light, average, or heavy). The light viewers who watched less than ten hours a week like Robinson's (1972) nonowners went out more often than average or heavy viewers. They were more likely

to attend concerts, plays, lectures, meetings, and talks. As for the heavy viewers who watched television 20 or more hours a week, these respondents generally were less active than others except in terms of media use. Compared to viewers, they were equally likely or more likely to read newspapers and magazines, listen to radio, and go to movies.

Generally speaking, when television exposure is treated as a continuous variable measured in hours, it is strongly associated with sex, race, age, education, and income (cf. Comstock et al., 1978; Robinson, 1977). Women tend to watch television more than men, nonwhites more than whites, the very old and very young more than the middle-aged. College education typically implies less television exposure than high school education, with the middle-class watching more than the very rich and very poor.

Useful and extensive as this general information on television viewing is, however, it does not provide specific details necessary to fully describe television viewers, nonviewers, and heavy viewers. As overall associations fail to disclose qualitative distinctions between people or groups, what is needed in addition are virtual descriptions of television viewers, nonviewers, and heavy viewers, in the flesh.

Methods

Data on television viewers, nonviewers, and heavy viewers come from three of the General Social Surveys conducted by the National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago. In 1975, for the first time, these annual surveys included the question, "On the average day, about how many hours do you personally watch television?" Subsequently, the item was included in the surveys on a rotating basis, being asked again in 1977 and then in 1978.

Respondents to the General Social Surveys are chosen probabilistically, including adults 18 years old or older from the Continental United States. The 1977 and 1978 surveys are based on stratified, multistage area probability samples of household clusters. Households where interviews took place were selected from predetermined lists of addresses. In 1975, the same sampling procedures were followed except that interviewers filled quotas calling for equal numbers of men and women, once household clusters were chosen according to probability methods.

In each of the three surveys analyzed here, respondents were interviewed in person, usually for an hour. They answered questions about themselves, their families, their work, and their beliefs, in omnibus style. Thus, the key question about television viewing was buried amid a barrage of questions, reducing the risk of respondent sensitivity.

In all, 4552 respondents were surveyed in 1975, 1977, and 1978. Of these, 1490 were interviewed in 1975, 1530 in 1977, and 1532 in 1978. For the purposes of this analysis, data from the three separate samples are pooled to provide n's large enough for accurate description of the extreme heavy viewers and the few existing nonviewers.

Nonviewers are defined as respondents who report viewing less than half an hour of television on an average day (that is, less than one half hour newscast). Heavy viewers are defined as those who report viewing more than six hours on an average day. All told, there are 209 nonviewers and 216 heavy viewers, with the remaining respondents classified simply as "viewers" (who watch anywhere from one-half to six hours a day). This means that nonviewers and heavy viewers each comprise about five percent of the total pooled sample.

Viewers', nonviewers', and heavy viewers' personal and social characteristics are indicated in each survey by identical items. Some characteristics (such as race, sex, and location) were determined by the interviewer, without asking. Other characteristics such as age and education, were determined in a straightforward manner (e.g., "What is your date of birth?"). Exact question wordings are available in the Cumulative Codebook for the General Social Surveys, 1972-1978 (Davis, 1978).

Results

As shown in Table 1, there are some obvious, significant differences between nonviewers', viewers', and heavy viewers' personal characteristics. Women are most likely to be among those spending more than six hours watching television on an average day. Heavy viewers are more often young (under 30) compared with nonviewers and viewers, who tend toward middle age (30 to 59). Eleven percent of the nonviewers and twelve percent of the viewers are nonwhite, while nonwhites are much more frequent (23 percent) among the heavy viewers.

Comparing viewers and nonviewers in terms of race and age, there are no meaningful differences between viewers and nonviewers in terms of sex though earlier research (Jackson-Beeck, 1977) found more female nonviewers than male. On the other hand, nonviewers differ greatly from viewers and heavy viewers when family characteristics are considered (Table 2). Twenty-eight percent of the nonviewers report never being married, compared with 14 percent of viewers and 15 percent of heavy viewers. Not surprisingly, the nonviewers are likely to be childless as well as unmarried, with 38 percent having no children (compared with

Table 1: Personal Characteristics

	Nonviewers		Viewers		Heavy Viewers	
Sex* **	n	%	n	%	n	%
Men	95	46	1847	45	59	27
Women	114	55	2264	55	157	73
Age* **						
Under 30	55	27	1037	26	85	40
30 to 59	109	53	2148	52	73	34
60 and over	43	21	911	22	56	26
Race* **						
White	183	88	3659	89	165	76
Nonwhite	26	12	452	11	49	23
N	209		4111		216	

***$p \leq .01$ (chi square)

Table 2: Family Characteristics

Marital Status***	Nonviewers		Viewers		Heavy Viewers	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Married	88	42	2708	66	131	61
Widowed	25	12	410	10	26	12
Divorced or Separated	38	18	411	10	27	13
Never married	58	28	581	14	32	15
Children* **						
None	79	38	1059	26	44	21
One or two	62	30	1618	40	106	49
Three through five	46	22	1177	29	50	23
Six or more	19	9	239	6	15	7
Caretakers at age 16						
Both natural parents	152	75	3116	77	151	71
Natural parent and step-parent	13	6	266	7	17	8
One natural parent	30	15	505	12	33	15
Relatives	8	4	156	4	12	6
Siblings*						
None	14	7	245	6	12	6
One or two	82	39	1242	30	48	22
Three through five	55	26	1365	33	74	35
Six or more	57	27	1254	31	80	37
N	208		4106		216	

*$p \leq .10$ (chi square)
**$p \leq .01$ (chi square)

26 percent of viewers and 21 percent of heavy viewers). Nonetheless, Table 2 indicates that more than half the nonviewers have one or more children, and that there is no real difference in proportions of nonviewers, viewers, and heavy viewers with six or more children.

Concerning family background, here as in earlier research nonviewers are more likely than others to have just one or two siblings. In contrast, heavy viewers come more often from large families, as 37 percent have six or more siblings compared with 27 percent of nonviewers and 31 percent of viewers. The heavy viewers also are slightly more likely to come from broken homes. Twenty-nine percent report lacking one or more natural parents at age 16, compared with 23 percent of viewers and 25 percent of nonviewers.

An unusual number of heavy viewers (10 percent) reported being unemployed, laid off, or looking for work (see Table 3). This compares with five percent of viewers and three percent of nonviewers. Both of these latter groups tend to be employed, predominantly outside the home (nonviewers slightly more than viewers). Heavy viewers tend not to be employed outside the home but instead are likely to keep house (52 percent). When the heavy viewers are employed outside the home, it is unusually often as service workers (21 percent) or equipment operatives/laborers (28 percent). As Table 3 further indicates, viewers and nonviewers are quite alike in their occupations (both quite different from the heavy viewers) except that five percent more nonviewers than viewers are involved in professional, technical, or kindred work (27 percent versus 22 percent of viewers).

Still, it should be noted that a good number of heavy viewers (23 percent) are involved also in professional, technical, or kindred

Table 3: Social Characteristics

	Nonviewers		Viewers		Heavy Viewers	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Current Employment* **						
Working part-time or full-time	127	62	2329	57	38	18
Unemployed, laid off, looking for work	7	3	213	5	21	10
Retired	17	8	426	10	30	14
Student	8	4	109	3	5	2
Keeping house	41	20	980	24	112	52
Other (e.g., disabled, too ill to work)	9	4	54	1	10	5
Occupational Classification* **						
Professional, technical, and kindred workers	57	27	890	22	53	23
Managers and administrators, sales workers	22	11	588	14	10	5
Clerical and kindred workers	33	16	726	18	32	15
Craftsmen and kindred workers	21	10	505	12	14	7
Equipment operators, laborers	40	19	797	20	60	28
Farmers, farm managers, farm laborers, and farm foremen	5	2	84	2	1	1
Service workers	31	15	521	13	46	21
Education* **						
Less than high school	62	30	1352	33	121	56
High School	93	45	2087	51	90	42
Junior College	9	4	99	2	0	0
Bachelor's	30	14	396	10	3	1
Graduate	14	7	171	4	1	1
N	208		4102		216	

***$p \leq .01$ (chi square)

work. Apparently, they focus on the technical or kindred aspects of such work, since the group is so poorly educated. Just two percent report attending college, compared with 25 percent of the nonviewers and 16 percent of the viewers. In fact, the majority of heavy viewers (56 percent) did not complete high school.

But while nonviewers clearly have more education than viewers or heavy viewers, their education does not always pay off. As Table 4 shows; nonviewers are about as frequent as viewers in the $20,000 income bracket, but more nonviewers than viewers have income less than $5000 yearly (true of personal and family income alike).

The three types of viewers are quite similar in terms of urbanization, as shown in Table 5, though nonviewers and heavy viewers are slightly more frequent in urban and suburban settings. However, nonviewers differ greatly from viewers and heavy viewers in their region of residence. They are disproportionately present in the Western states (29 percent versus 15 or 16 percent of viewers and heavy viewers). As for the heavy viewers, they are unusually well represented in the South Central region (20 percent of heavy viewers versus 13 percent of viewers and 15 percent of nonviewers). Here, it is interesting to note that nonviewers and heavy viewers have something in common, as both groups are concentrated in rather remote areas of the country, if we take the East and Midwest as national hubs of activity.

By virtue of their relatively remote location, nonviewers and heavy viewers may have somewhat greater need for time-consuming activities, compared to viewers. Of course, the heavy viewers' prime choice for time consumption is television, a fact illustrated indirectly by Table 6. No matter what type of organizational activity is in question,

Table 4: Before-Tax Income

	Nonviewers		Viewers		Heavy Viewers	
Personal* **	n	%	n	%	n	%
Less than $5000	57	40	773	30	43	62
$5000-$9999	29	20	710	28	16	23
$10,000-$14,999	26	18	552	22	7	10
$15,000-$19,999	15	11	275	11	2	3
$20,000 or more	15	11	241	9	1	1
N	142		2551		69	
Family* **						
Less than $5000	54	27	586	15	74	38
$5000-$9999	43	22	845	22	52	27
$10,000-$14,999	39	20	835	21	38	20
$15,000-$19,999	19	10	600	16	16	8
$20,000 or more	43	22	967	25	14	7
N	198		3833		194	

***$p \leq .01$ (chi square)

Table 5: Physical Location

City Size	Nonviewers n	Nonviewers %	Viewers n	Viewers %	Heavy Viewers n	Heavy Viewers %
Medium or large cities (50,000 or more)	66	32	1149	28	77	36
Suburbs	53	25	955	23	40	19
Towns, villages, small cities	31	15	675	16	34	16
Open country, unincorporated areas	59	28	1332	32	65	30
Region* **						
Northeast (Maine, Vermont, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania)	35	17	880	21	41	19
South Atlantic (Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, Georgia, West Virginia, North Carolina, Florida, South Carolina, Washington, D.C.)	38	18	835	20	36	17
North Central (Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Kansas, Ohio, Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan)	44	21	1218	30	64	30
South Central (Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, Arkansas, Mississippi Texas, Louisiana, Oklahoma)	31	15	521	13	43	20
West (Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico, Oregon, Washington, California)	61	29	657	16	32	15
N	209		4111		216	

***$p \leq .01$ (chi square)

Table 6: Memberships

	Nonviewers		Viewers		Heavy Viewers	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Fraternal groups*	20	10	435	11	13	6
Service clubs**	14	7	390	10	10	5
Veterans' groups***	11	5	323	8	4	2
Political clubs*	10	5	177	4	3	1
Labor unions*	24	12	673	17	24	11
Sports groups**	27	13	804	20	27	13
Youth groups	21	10	403	10	14	7
School service groups*	31	15	570	14	18	9
Hobby or garden clubs***	16	8	390	10	7	3
School fraternities or sororities**	10	5	178	4	2	1
Nationality groups	6	3	118	3	4	2
Farm organizations**	2	1	173	4	0	0
Literary, art, discussion or study groups***	37	18	359	9	8	4
Professional or academic societies***	34	16	533	13	5	2
Church-affiliated groups***	73	35	1600	39	48	22
N	208		4067		214	

* $p \leq .10$ (chi square)
** $p \leq .05$ (chi square)
*** $p \leq .01$ (chi square)

this table indicates that heavy viewers are less likely to be members (with one exception, where they tie nonviewers' rate of membership in sports groups). In particular, heavy viewers are much less likely than viewers or nonviewers to be members of professional or academic societies (2 percent versus 13 percent of viewers and 16 percent of the nonviewers).

As for nonviewers' membership activities, it is notable that they are only about as active as viewers, generally speaking, despite the fact that they must have more time available to participate. The one area of outstanding participation for nonviewers is in literary, art, discussion, or study groups. Eighteen percent are members, compared to 9 percent of viewers and 4 percent of heavy viewers, suggesting that some nonviewers can be called "culture buffs," as Bower (1973) suggests.

Discussion

How to describe television viewers, nonviewers, and heavy viewers? Overall, the features distinguishing nonviewers do not suggest any one immediately recognizable "type" (cf. Jackson-Beeck, 1977). For example, while there are disproportionate numbers of nonviewers at or below the poverty level, we see nearly equal proportions of viewers and nonviewers who make $20,000 or more per year. At the very least, it must be concluded that there are two types of nonviewers -- rich and poor -- as Westley and Mobius reported in 1960, concerning TV nonowners.

The area of greatest difference between viewers and nonviewers seems to lie in their family structures. Nonviewers are significantly more likely to be never-married and childless. Their childhood homes are more likely to have been intact, and populated with fewer siblings

than is true of heavy viewers. In present time, nonviewers are more likely to be employed outside the home, disproportionately often as professionals. Compared to viewers and heavy viewers, the nonviewers' educational levels are unusually high, but the financial payoff is uncertain.

In contrast, heavy viewers mainly represent one end -- the low end -- of the social hierarchy. Distributions of their characteristics tend to be lopsided, particularly when it comes to education, income, sex, and work force status. The majority failed to complete high school and are now housebound. Most (73%) are women and many are nonwhite, compared to viewers and nonviewers. Many are employed (when they are employed) as service workers or operatives. Typically, their incomes are low. Combined with these facts, the heavy viewers tend to be socially inactive.

In conclusion, if we wish to describe television viewers in terms of prevailing perspectives on media use, the chosen perspective would incline to the negative. As a whole, heavy viewers seem to be removed from ongoing society, as Lazarsfeld and Merton (1949) and Berelson (1960) suggest, and they are concentrated at the bottom of the social stratification system. Nonviewers, on the other hand, are a diverse lot, but on the whole they are better educated and about as well integrated and active as average viewers.

Of course it would be helpful to have even more detailed information on television viewers, nonviewers, and heavy viewers, but this awaits further research. For the present, with the information here, we hope that readers' knowledge of television's place in contemporary life has been enhanced.

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