

Librarians Watching Television
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Introduction

One night, I phoned a colleague at home to ask a question. “I’d love to chat,” he said, “but *Star Trek* is on.” After hanging up, I started to wonder: why does every librarian I know watch *Star Trek*? As I started wondering about this idea, another colleague complained that the students in her graduate LIS classes spent more time watching *Friends* than they spent doing their homework. A 1999 article reported that the majority of librarians enter the field because they enjoy books and reading (Gordon & Nesbeitt, 1999). However, it seemed to me like television was taking a more prominent role in the lives of librarians, perhaps to the exclusion of books and reading.

To investigate this, we sent an e-mail survey to several library-oriented electronic mailing lists, asking recipients to tell us which television programs they watched regularly and which they had watched last week. We also asked how many years the recipients had worked in libraries and what type of libraries they had worked for, in order to learn more about the television viewing habits of different types of library employees.

How do Americans use television?

Television sets can be found in 98 million American homes, and most homes have more than one television set. What’s more, these television sets do not sit idle. The *Statistical Abstract* reports that 90 percent of American adults surveyed indicated that they had watched television in the week prior to their survey – regardless of employment status, education level, or household income (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000, p. 567). The General Social Survey, which has been administered periodically since 1972, indicates that since the 1970s, the average daily television viewing time for Americans is increasing, and the proportion of people who don’t watch television is decreasing (Xiaoming, 1994). In other words, more people are watching more television.

The popular view of television viewing is that it keeps us indoors, antisocial, and apathetic. Communications researchers have several theories about the effects of television viewing on the public.

Television acts as a socializing agent (O’Guinn & Shrum, 1997). It teaches us how to behave, how to speak, and how to relate to other people. Television shows us how other people behave in various situations, allowing viewers to gauge the appropriateness of that behavior. Television also teaches us what to expect of other people. Viewers expect their doctors and lawyers to act the way they act on television. This expectation influences the way they interact with their doctors and lawyers, and the way their doctors and lawyers feel that they have to behave. “Absent direct experiences, people are more inclined to

accept television depictions of professional roles, and in the event these depictions are inaccurate, develop a distorted view of professional roles” (Pfau & Mullen, 1995).

Television acts as an informant. It tells us what issues are important, and what we should think about them. Televised events and situations raise issues in viewers’ minds, and in the case of television programs, provide resolutions that reinforce conventional views of good or bad behavior (Iyengar, 1991).

Television replaces social engagement (Kanazawa 2001). It provides us company when we’re lonely, and people with whom we may associate at our will. The people portrayed on television become the people we know best. We don’t need to establish relationships with the people next door – we’ve got friends at home.

Television replaces civic engagement (Putnam 2001). It provides us with a constant source of information and entertainment, allowing us to view the home as both a shelter and a purveyor of activity. We don’t need to go to the library, the bowling alley, or the church – television has all that and more. We don’t need to improve our community, because everything looks nice on television.

How much television do librarians watch?

In 1999, the general population spent 1,588 hours per person watching television, 30.5 hours per person per week (U. S. Census Bureau, 2001, p. 567). A survey reported in the 2001 *Statistical Abstract* reports that 93.5 percent of American adults reported watching television in the week prior to being surveyed (U. S. Census Bureau, 2001, p. 567). Statistics indicate that men watch more television than women, people who lack a high school education are more likely to watch television than those with a high school or greater education, and the unemployed are more likely to watch television than people employed either part- or full time (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000, p. 567). The field of librarianship is mostly made up of employed older women with master’s degrees. This suggests that they might be less likely to watch television than other populations.

Of the 506 respondents who answered this survey, 66 percent considered themselves “regular” television watchers; 82 percent said there was at least one television program that they watched regularly. Respondents watched an average of five programs regularly, though some respondents watched no programs and one respondent claimed to watch 32 programs regularly. Eighteen percent of respondents said that they didn’t watch any program regularly. Both public and academic library respondents watched an average of five programs per week. Approximately 71 percent of academic library respondents indicated that they were regular television watchers, compared to 66 percent of public librarians. Library administrative staff watched an average of 3.13 programs per week; non-administrative staff watched 4.04 programs per week. However, 70 percent of administrative staff and 68 percent of non-administrative staff said they watched television regularly.

What television programs do librarians watch?

For the most part, librarians have the same viewing preferences as the general public. Eighty percent of responses were received between October 17 and October 23, and these were compared to Nielsen ratings for October 8-14. Two of the library respondents' programs tied for tenth place. Six of the top 11 programs from library respondents were in the top 11 slots of the Nielsen ratings, and another two of the librarians' top 11 programs were in Nielsen's top twenty. The remaining three fantasy-oriented programs, which placed below Nielsen's 50th most-watched program, may be a library-related anomaly.

Nielsen ratings for the week of October 8-14, 2001 indicate that 15.3 percent of American households tuned in to *West Wing*, the second most-popular program. However, this program was a runaway success and the most popular show among library respondents, 25.3 of whom watched this program.

The television program watched by the most American households, 17.9 percent, was *Friends*. Among library respondents, *Friends* was the second most-popular television show, earning 21.3 percent of the library audience.

ER and *Law and Order* tied for third place in the Nielsen ratings, with 14.4 percent of American households watching. These programs were the third and fourth most popular programs with librarians as well, earning 19.8 percent and 17.4 percent of the librarian audience respectively.

The fifth most-popular program among librarians was *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which was watched by 13.4 percent of library respondents. This was the 82nd most popular show according to Nielsen ratings, watched by 3.7 percent of households. 11.3 percent of library respondents watched *Enterprise*, the sixth most-popular program among library respondents. Nielsen ratings found that *Enterprise* was the 66th most popular show, watched by 5.0 percent of American households.

Will and Grace was the seventh most-popular television program with library respondents, earning 11.3 percent of library viewership. Nielsen ranked *Will and Grace* eighth, with 12.4 percent of the American household audience.

Two shows, *Angel* and *Frasier*, tied for the eighth most popular program among library respondents, with 7.9 percent of the library audience. Nielsen rated these programs as the 90th and 17th most popular programs among American households, with 2.9 and 10.1 percent of American households watching.

There was another tie for library respondents' tenth most popular program, *Survivor* and *The Practice*. These programs were watched by 7.6 percent of the library respondents. Nielsen ranked the programs as 16th, watched by 10.3 percent of households, and 7th, watched by 13.2 percent of households, respectively.

Top Program Choices for Public and Academic Librarians

Survey respondents included 237 academic librarians and 182 public librarians. In order of popularity, the top eleven programs for academic respondents were *West Wing*, *Law & Order*, *ER*, *Friends*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *The Simpsons*, *CSI*, *Enterprise*, *Frasier*, *Survivor*, and *Will & Grace*. *Survivor* and *Will & Grace* tied for tenth place. The top ten programs for public library respondents were *West Wing*, *ER*, *Friends*, *Law & Order*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Enterprise*, *Will & Grace*, *Frasier*, *Angel*, and *Judging Amy*.

Public librarians were more likely than academic librarians to watch *Dark Angel* and *Everybody Loves Raymond*.

Top Program Choices for Administrators and Non-Administrators

Survey respondents included 111 administrators and 370 non-administrators. In order of popularity, the top ten programs from administrators were *West Wing*, *Law & Order*, *ER*, *Friends*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Frasier*, *Enterprise*, *CSI*, *Will & Grace*, and *NYPD Blue*. The top ten programs from non-administrators were *West Wing*, *ER*, *Law & Order*, *Friends*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Enterprise*, *The Simpsons*, *Will & Grace*, *Frasier*, and *Angel*.

Library administrative staff were less likely than non-administrators to watch *Dark Angel*, *Friends*, *Mystery*, and *That 70s Show* than administrators. Administrators were more likely to watch news-related programming than non-administrators.

How reliable is this survey?

As with every empirical research project, it is important to address the limitations of this project. The e-mail survey technique used to collect the data resembles the telephone recall technique used by some television researchers. The limitations of the telephone recall technique also apply to this survey: first, that respondents might not remember what they watched seven days ago as clearly as they remember what they watched yesterday, and second that respondents may remember repetitive events like watching *West Wing* every Wednesday better than they remember watching one-time-only events, like a baseball or hockey game (Webster, Phalen, & Lichty, 2000, p. 122).

Another limitation has to do with the nature of television watching. Viewers now tend to exhibit a “grazing” pattern when watching television: they flip through other channels to see what else is on. Thus, a respondent may have said that she watched *Survivor* when in truth she might have started watching, grown restive, and started grazing through other channels to see what else was on.

There is a possibility for sampling error. Over 500 completed surveys were received, but this is a small number compared to the 150,000 library jobs in the United States (Crosby, 2000, p. 9). Although we attempted to mail the survey to a wide variety of library-oriented mailing lists, the majority of respondents were academic or public librarians. School and special librarians were underrepresented in this survey.

Conclusion

This survey looked at librarians' television viewing habits, and found that librarians' habits are similar to those of the general public, with a few notable exceptions. Most of librarians' favorite shows are also popular in the Nielsen ratings, and the top four favorites with librarians are also the top four favorites with the general public. Librarians seem to prefer fantasy-oriented program choices, such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* or *Enterprise*, to a greater degree than the general public. This suggests that librarians want imagination and exploration of new ideas from the programs they watch. Public and academic librarians shared notably similar tastes in television programming, and watched the same number of programs. Library administrative staff watched less television than non-administrators, but were more likely to watch news programming. This might suggest that their administrative duties allow less time for leisure and require administrators to keep in touch with their communities.

The stereotypic view of librarians is that they are intellectual, and shy, and bookish – in short, people who prefer books to social interaction. Television portrays librarians as female, white, and antisocial guardians of the library. Occasionally, librarians are portrayed antithetically to this image, though such portrayal reinforces the stereotype (Black, 1993), or they are figures which inspire terror and fear (Radford & Radford, 2001).

While the profession of librarianship has been historically based on books and reading, some librarians show a strong affinity for television as well. Watching popular television programs allows librarians to participate in an entertainment ritual that involves millions of other Americans, but a ritual that they can perform on their own or with a selected group. Librarians also see television as a source of information. Over 11 percent of respondents watched some sort of news program. Cooking, gardening, and domestic arts were also represented in librarians' television viewing choices.

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