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How Americans Get TV News at Home

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Overview

Even at a time of fragmenting media use, television remains the dominant way that Americans get news at home, according to a new Pew Research Center analysis of Nielsen data. And while the largest audiences tune into local and network broadcast news, it is national cable news that commands the most attention from its viewers.

Almost three out of four U.S. adults (71%) watch local television news and 65% view network newscasts over the course of a month, according to Nielsen data from February 2013. While 38% of adults watch some cable news during the month, cable viewers—particularly the most engaged viewers—spend far more time with that platform than broadcast viewers do with local or network news.¹

On average, the cable news audience devotes twice as much time to that news source as local and network news viewers spend on those platforms. And the heaviest cable users are far more immersed in that coverage—watching for more than an hour a day—than the most loyal viewers of broadcast television news. Even those adults who are the heaviest viewers of local and network news spend more time watching cable than those broadcast outlets.

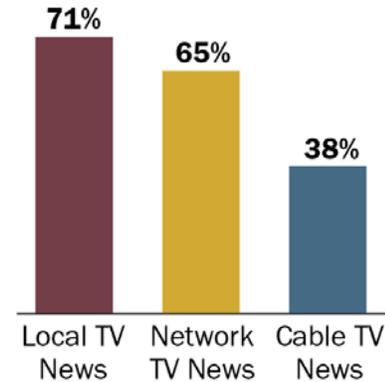
The data in this study was prepared specifically for the Pew Research Center by Nielsen, the primary source of ratings and viewership information for the television industry. This comparison of in-home network and local television, cable and internet news consumption offers a unique look at how people get news across different platforms in a rapidly changing media environment. It is based on Nielsen’s national panel of metered homes and reflects viewership in the month of February 2013, which largely coincides with the first television “sweeps” period of the year. (See [Methodology](#))

The numbers in this report dovetail with other data about television news viewership. [A 2012 Pew Research Center survey](#) of news consumption habits shows that local television remains the most popular way of accessing news. And Pew Research’s annual [State of the News Media report](#) shows that the nightly network newscasts draw far larger audiences than the prime-time cable news shows.

But the deeper level of viewer engagement with cable news may help to explain why cable television—despite a more limited audience—seems to have an outsized ability to influence the national debate and news agenda. Previous Pew

TV News Viewing

Percent of Americans Reached



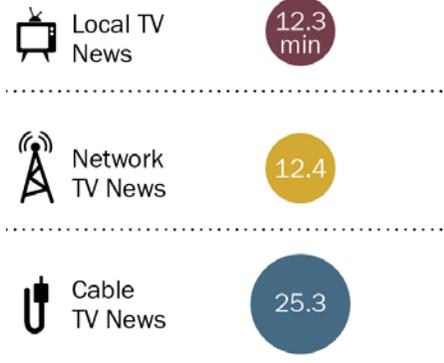
Source: Nielsen data, February 2013

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Time Spent With TV News

Minutes per Day

ALL VIEWERS



Source: Nielsen data, February 2013

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¹ This measure uses the standard of watching for at least six minutes over the course of one day in February 2013.

Research Center [data](#) have shown that in prime time—when the audience is the largest—cable talk shows tend to hammer away at a somewhat narrow news agenda that magnifies the day’s more polarizing and ideological issues. The Nielsen data make it clear that cable’s audience is staying for a healthy helping of that content.

In one finding that may seem counterintuitive in an era of profound political polarization, significant portions of the Fox News and MSNBC audiences spend time watching both channels. More than a third (34%) of those who watch the liberal MSNBC in their homes also tune in to the conservative Fox News Channel. The reverse is true for roughly a quarter (28%) of Fox News viewers. Even larger proportions of Fox News and MSNBC viewers, roughly half, also spend time watching CNN, which tends to be more ideologically balanced in prime time. (The channel’s new version of Crossfire, which debuted on Sept. 9, follows its formula of delivering opinion from both the left and right.)

Some of the key findings from this initial analysis include:

- While the largest portion of Americans watch local and network TV news at home, those who tune into cable news do so for an average of 25 minutes a day. That is more than twice as much time as local and network TV viewers spend getting news on those platforms.
- Even heavy viewers of local TV news and network news spend *more time* watching cable news than they do watching these respective platforms. The heaviest local news viewers spend, on average, 11 more minutes watching cable news than local news. The heaviest network news viewers spend about one more minute watching cable news than they do network news.
- Across all three platforms, there is a very large gap between the heaviest news consumers and everyone else. The top third of network news viewers in terms of time spent, for example, average almost 32 minutes a day watching network news. The next third spends about one-sixth as much time, or five minutes, watching network news.
- There is no news junkie like a cable junkie. The most dedicated cable news viewers average 72 minutes, more than an hour, of home viewing a day. That compares with about 32 minutes for the heaviest network news viewers and 22 minutes for the most engaged local news audience. There is, however, a precipitous drop—to only three minutes a day—for the second most dedicated group of cable watchers.
- There is widespread news consumption across different platforms, particularly with broadcast news. Fully 90% of network news viewers also watch local news and 82% of local news viewers also tune in to network news. The result is that more than half (58%) of U.S. adults watch both network and local news.

How Many Watch TV News and When

Emerging digital technology has changed news consumption choices and habits, and in a report [released last fall](#), Pew Research Center found that local television has experienced viewership declines in the last several years, most acutely among young people. Additionally, Pew Research has documented [significant declines](#) in Americans’ reliance on newspaper and radio over time.

At the same time, the Nielsen data provide a reminder of the central role television still plays in news consumption in the comfort of home. Almost three-quarters of Americans, (71%) watch local TV news and almost two-thirds, (65%) watch network news over the course of a month. And more than one-third (38%) of Americans watch news on cable television.

Although broadcast television may have a wider reach, cable news handily wins the competition for the time and attention of news consumers at home. People who watch cable news do so for an average of about 25 minutes a day, compared with the slightly more than 12 minutes a day local television and network news viewers spend on those platforms. Some of this is no doubt due to cable news' role as an around-the-clock, news-on-demand operation.

On every television platform, viewership is largest in the evening and nighttime hours. The number of viewers watching cable news is quite stable between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m., begins to grow modestly in the late afternoon and then peaks between 8-11 p.m.

The local news audience is highest during the late 11 p.m. newscast, with about 15% more viewers than the slots from 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. The early morning newscasts, from 6 a.m. to 7 a.m., generate about 60% of the viewership that the late night program does.

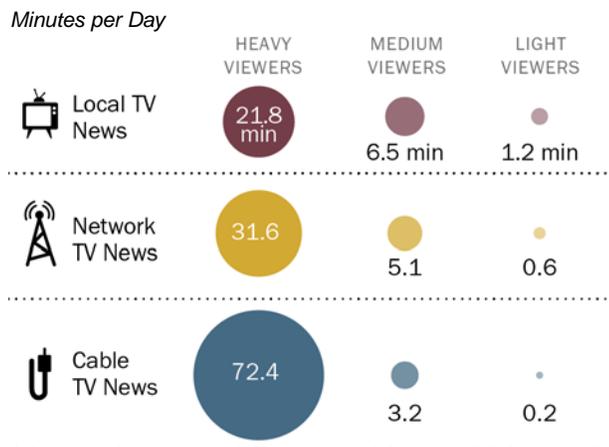
Heavy vs. Light TV News Viewers

A deeper analysis of television news watchers reveals major differences in the amount of time they spend on that activity. To illustrate this, the audience data were sliced into thirds based on the time spent watching each platform, and Nielsen averaged the viewing time for each of the three groups of viewers.

Overall, people in the top category for each platform—the heaviest users in terms of time spent—are far more engaged than those in tiers two and three. That is particularly true for cable. The heaviest users of cable news devote, on average, one hour and 12 minutes (72 minutes) a day to that platform. Viewing time drops off dramatically for the bottom two-thirds of cable news viewers. Those in the middle tier average slightly more than three minutes of viewing time and those at the bottom catch a glimpse for less than a minute.

Similarly, for local TV news, the top tier of viewers averages almost 22 minutes a day, compared with six and a half minutes a day for those in the middle tier and one minute for those on the bottom rung. At the network news level, the most engaged viewers watch for almost 32 minutes a day. But that drops off to slightly more than five minutes for the next tier and less than one minute for the lightest viewers.

Average Time News Consumers Spend on Various Platforms



Source: Nielsen data, February 2013

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News Viewing is Dominated by the Very Engaged

According to the numbers, people who are heavy users of any type of television news tend to be heavy viewers of other platforms. But the heaviest viewers of cable news far outpace heavy viewers of local and network news, racking up almost 50 more minutes a day, on average, than the most dedicated local news viewers and approximately 40 more minutes than the top tier of network news viewers.

Even the heavy viewers of local and network news spend more time watching cable news than they do watching network and local news.

The most devoted local news viewers spend an average of about 22 minutes a day on local news compared with about 32 on cable. (They also spend almost 24 minutes a day watching network news.) The heaviest network news users spend about a half minute more (32 minutes) watching cable than network.

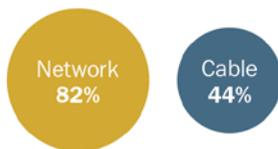
The heaviest cable news users also spend more time watching local news (almost 14 minutes) and network news (almost 17 minutes) than the average viewer does (around 12 minutes). But that time is low compared with the 72 minutes they spend watching cable news in the home.

Crossing Over: Many People Get News from More Than One Source

The Nielsen data clearly indicate that those who watch television news on one platform are likely to watch it on another—particularly when it comes to broadcast news. The greatest overlap occurs between local and network newscasts, which often are on the same channel. Fully 90% of network news viewers also watch local news and 82% of local news viewers also tune in to network news.

Cross-Platform News Consumption

Percent of Local News viewers who also watch...



Percent of Network News viewers who also watch...



Percent of Cable News viewers who also watch...



Source: Nielsen data, February 2013

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The crossover is not as great from broadcast news (network and local) to cable. Slightly less than half—about 44%—of both network and of local news viewers also watch cable news.

Similarly, cable news viewers, while a smaller group overall, are heavy consumers of local and network news. Indeed, cable viewers exhibit the heaviest news consumption habits of any group measured here.

Three out of four cable viewers (76%) also watch some network news and even more (82%) watch some local news.

Overall, more than half of adult Americans watch more than one form of television news. The biggest cross platform viewing involves the broadcast platforms, with 58% of the adult population watching both local and network news. Slightly more than half as many, 31%, watch local television and cable news, followed by the 29% of the population that watches both network and cable television news.

Hand Me the Remote: Viewers Flip Among Cable News Channels

The three major cable news competitors differ somewhat in their viewership levels, with CNN reaching 20% of U.S. adults, Fox News reaching 18% and MSNBC reaching 14%. CNN's viewership lead is supported [by years of data](#) showing it has a wider reach than its competitors, but weaker "appointment" viewership, meaning it is less successful in getting viewers to tune in regularly for scheduled programs, especially in prime time. That helps explain why CNN consistently trails Fox News Channel in the rating wars since Fox News has a clear lead over competitors in its prime-time programming.

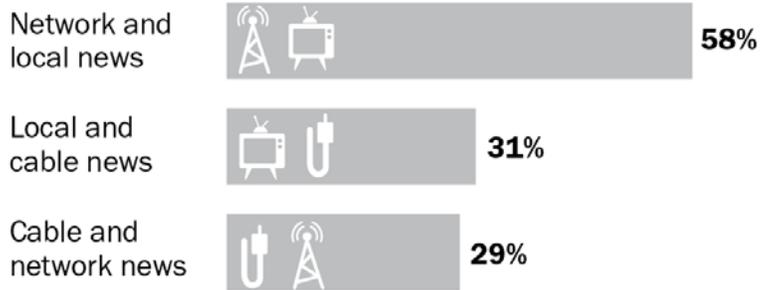
One of the most striking findings in this analysis is the degree to which viewers of one of the three cable news channels also view the competition. While the formats of the three major cable news channels are quite similar, there are significant ideological differences, most pronounced in prime time.

In the evening, Fox News boasts a lineup of conservative talk show hosts while MSNBC features a team of liberal ones. CNN, the original cable news outlet, has built its brand around national and global reporting of breaking news events. It also airs opinion in prime time, but includes commentators from both the right and the left.

The perception is that because of their distinct identities—and particularly because of the divergent ideological leanings of Fox News and MSNBC—the cable news channels appeal to different, politically segmented audiences. However the data show something different.

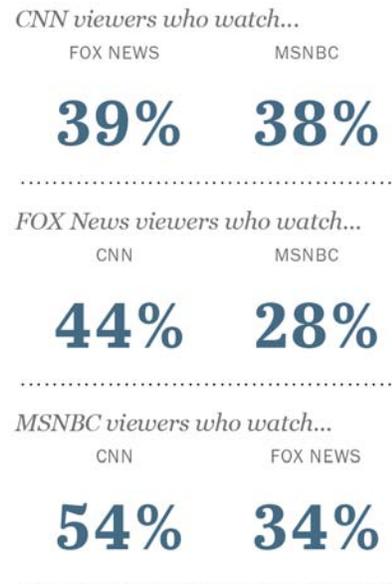
- More than one-quarter (28%) of the people who watch

Many Americans Consume News on Two Platforms



Source: Nielsen data, February 2013
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Cable News Cross-Platform



Source: Nielsen data, February 2013
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Fox News also tune in to MSNBC. An even higher number (34%) of MSNBC viewers turn on Fox News.

- There is even more crossover viewing when it comes to CNN. Slightly more than half (54%) of MSNBC viewers watch CNN, while 44% of Fox News viewers tune in to CNN. Healthy segments of the CNN audience also watch Fox News (39%) and MSNBC (38%).
- Overall, 5% of the adult American population watches both MSNBC and Fox News. That is slightly lower than the percentage who watches both CNN and Fox (8%) or CNN and MSNBC (also 8%).
- Despite some crossover, there are also viewers who watch only one of the three cable channels. Here, Fox News Channel narrowly has the largest singularly dedicated audience. About one-quarter of American adults, (24%) watch only Fox News, 23% watch only CNN and 15% watch only MSNBC.

Online News Consumption at Home

According to the February 2013 data used in this study, about 38% of Americans access news online at home via a desktop or laptop computer. Nielsen's online numbers—based on those who access news websites—do not measure those getting news at home from a smartphone or tablet device. This data also reflect the fact that those getting online news at home generally spend very small amounts of time on that task. On average, that amounts to 90 seconds per day getting news online.

Looking at the data by intensity of use, the heaviest online news users spent only about four minutes a day on that activity. Medium online news searchers spent about 18 seconds per day at that task, while light users spent less than six seconds.

Overlap Among Cable News Sites

Some of the most popular news websites are affiliated with the three major cable news channels. Though all three are consistently among the top 10 [most trafficked news websites](#), their audiences are fairly small as a percentage of U.S. adults.

Nbcnews.com (formerly MSNBC.com) is one of the most trafficked news sites on the web, but it still only reaches about 9% of adults in America, according to Nielsen. About 6% of the public gets news on cnn.com each day. In addition, 5% of Americans get news from foxnews.com.

When it comes to news consumers visiting multiple sites, 37% of those who visit foxnews.com also go to nbcnews.com, while 22% of those who visit nbcnews.com view foxnews.com. In addition, 28% of those

Cable News Websites Cross-Platform

CNN.com visitors who also visit...

FOXNEWS.COM

NBCNEWS.COM

26%

33%

FOXnews.com visitors who also visit...

CNN.COM

NBCNEWS.COM

28%

37%

NBCNews.com visitors who also visit...

CNN.COM

FOXNEWS.COM

21%

22%

Source: Nielsen data, February 2013

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who visited foxnews.com and 21% of those who visited nbcnews.com also go to cnn.com. Among cnn.com users, 26% also went to foxnews.com and 33% also went to nbcnews.com.

For the most part, there is more crossover news consumption on the television side of the three competitive cable news outlets than there is on their digital properties.