

Is TV phasing out?

WASHINGTON - In our media-saturated society, this rates as man-bites-dog news.

The number of homes with TV sets in the United States is declining, even as the number of U.S. households keeps growing.

This is a first, according to the Nielsen ratings service, which issued the 2012 edition of its "Television Audience Report" earlier this year.

The number of households with a TV this year was estimated at 115.9 million. Nielsen projects the 2012 number to be 114.7 million, a drop of 1 percent. That figure is 200,000 households below 2010's estimate of 114.9 million.

That would increase the percentage of households without any TV to 3 percent, the highest percentage in more than a generation - since 1975 to be exact, according to Nielsen.

One reason for the decline could be poverty, with some households unable to afford digital technology. Some people may be choosing not to watch TV at all, while others are using their computers to watch programming available on the Internet.

But don't expect there to be a trend toward family game nights or knitting circles. For the 97 percent of us who still have TVs in our homes, we're using them more.

Weekly TV usage has jumped by one hour to 59 hours, 28 minutes. That averages out to close to eight-and-a-half hours each day. The numbers went down by seven minutes between 2006 and 2007, but over the past 40 years there's been a steady climb.

The percentage of one-TV households also is on the wane. By Nielsen's calculations, one-TV homes were a majority in 1975, but by 1980 were relegated to plurality status, meaning less than a majority, but still a greater percentage than homes with two TVs, or three or more.

The two-TV household took the lead in 1990 with 41 percent compared to 35 percent one-TV homes, and 24 percent three-or-more-TV homes, but by 2000 those numbers

flipped: 41 percent of homes had three or more TVs, 35 percent had two TVs, and 24 percent had but one.

The 2012 numbers? Three-TV households now register 56 percent of all U.S. homes, solidifying the majority status it's enjoyed since 2007. Two-TV homes total 29 percent, while one-TV households account for just 14 percent.

If Nielsen's numbers are accurate – and networks pay big bucks to slice and dice Nielsen's ratings data to make their airtime pitches to advertisers – then Americans are making the transition to digital delivery of their TV in more ways than one.

Use of digital video recorders has climbed to 41 percent of all households with TV, Nielsen said. The use of digital cable, which offers more channels than the packages offered during cable's early years, has climbed to 51 percent. And two-thirds of all TV households – 67 percent, to be precise – employ high-definition TV.

Despite calls in some quarters for a la carte buying of cable channels, Americans seem to want ever-more choice in their viewing. Fifty-one percent of households have digital cable. Ninety percent of TV households use a cable or satellite service, leaving just 10 percent to muddle through solely with over-the-air channels – even though the digital-TV revolution has multiplied the number of channels available in most areas of the country with just the use of a simple antenna.

Ever since TV users could start time-shifting what they watched by recording programs for later viewing, or by buying or renting prerecorded tapes or discs to watch on their TV, the use of playback devices has been a mainstay.

However, the percentage of households with VCR players has dipped to 57 percent, according to Nielsen. But the bigger surprise is that DVD players are projected to slip in U.S. households next year, from 88 percent to 85 percent.

This could be a sign that more Americans are counting on video-streaming services like Hulu and Netflix to get entertainment on their home computer. And Nielsen did not include computer screen time in its computations of TV-watching habits.

Knitting needles, anyone?

Pattison is media editor for Catholic News Service.