

Survey notes attitudinal differences in heavy, light TV watchers

WASHINGTON - A newly published survey shows notable differences in the attitudes of heavy TV watchers and light TV watchers on several social and political issues.

According to the survey's findings, heavy TV viewers - defined as those who watch four hours or more each evening - are less likely to volunteer their time or to make charitable contributions than light TV viewers, defined as those who watch an hour or less each night.

The heavy TV viewers are also less likely to go to church, less likely to place limits on the availability of divorce, and less likely to describe themselves as pro-life than those who are light TV viewers.

They also are more likely to believe the government should be responsible for providing retirement benefits to Americans, more likely to prefer government health care to private health care, and more likely to say they would cheat a restaurant that underbilled them - but less likely to believe the media are harming America's moral values.

The survey was conducted by telephone with 2,000 respondents in March by the Culture and Media Institute, a new program of the Media Research Center, a media watchdog group based in the Washington suburb of Alexandria, Va. The survey had a margin of error of plus or minus 2.2 percentage points.

In the survey, 25 percent of the respondents said they watched more than four hours of television each evening, while 22 percent said they watched an hour or less of TV every evening. For the rest of the respondents, TV viewing ranged between less than one hour and four hours.

"We're not saying it's science, but we think it has some very interesting correlations," said Bob Knight, director of the Culture and Media Institute, during a June 6 forum in Washington at which the survey findings were released.

S. Robert Lichter, president of the Center for Media and Public Affairs and a speaker at the forum, took note of a survey conclusion that there has been a decline in the nation's morals over the past 20 years. "People have seen a decline in morals forever, and they've been right forever," he said. "You have to differentiate between perception and reality."

Lichter also cautioned against reading too much into the survey results. Even though heavy TV viewers hold the attitudes they do, he said, "that doesn't mean that television brought people to those conclusions."

It is also true, Lichter said, that TV viewing is heaviest among lower-income groups and nonwhite populations. Those groups tend to identify with the Democratic Party, which advocates many of the policy positions shared by the heavy-TV watchers. "We have to be careful with the chicken and the egg," Lichter said.

Movie critic and radio talk-show host Michael Medved, another speaker at the forum, said TV watching "changes the culture" by making people more pessimistic and fearful, more impatient and more superficial.

"We don't have a (TV) news business," Medved said. "We have a bad-news business," which makes viewers pessimistic and fearful. TV news, he added, does "a good job in showing you horrible things," part of what he called a credo of "if it bleeds, it leads."

One sign that TV viewers are increasingly impatient is the complaint among elementary schoolteachers that their students "can't sit still because of TV," Medved said. Another sign, he added, is that men, emboldened by the availability of the remote control, now watch only 18 minutes of a TV program on average. That figure, according to Medved, is only as high as it is because men tune in to TV sports.

One recent manifestation of TV's superficiality came in the aftermath of a recent televised debate among the Republican presidential hopefuls. Rather than discuss aspects of the theory of evolution brought up in the debate, commentators spent more time on "how good Mitt Romney looks," Medved said. Romney, the former Massachusetts governor, is one of the GOP candidates.

The amount of time spent in front of the TV by heavy-viewing Americans, according to Medved, dovetails with U.S. Department of Labor findings that TV is turned on in the average American household 29 hours a week. “Even if you watch the Discovery Channel (and) the History Channel four hours a night it’s still going to have a negative impact,” he said.