

Smartphones, Web eating into TV time

By Ryan Nakashima, AP

LOS ANGELES—The use of Internet-ready devices like smartphones appears to have seriously cut into the time Americans spend watching traditional TV, new Nielsen data show, potentially undercutting the notion that mobile devices merely serve as “second screens” while people are plopped in front of the set.

Data provided to the Associated Press show an increase in the number of 18- to 34-year-olds who used a smartphone, tablet or TV-connected device like a streaming box or game console. That grew 26 percent in May compared with a year earlier, to an average of 8.5 million people per minute.

Those devices, which all showed gains in usage, more than offset declines in TV, radio and computers. In the same age group, the demographic most highly coveted by advertisers, use of those devices fell 8 percent over the same period to a combined 16.6 million people per minute.

Nielsen’s inaugural “Comparable Metrics” report for the first time presents data on average use per minute, making it possible to directly compare various devices.

It’s not a one-to-one tradeoff, however. Sometimes people are using smartphones while watching TV, or using them outside the home where it wouldn’t cut into TV time. Some mobile device use is also, well, to watch TV shows. The study counts all apps, Web surfing and game play but not texts or calling.

Still, the trends are strong enough to confirm a trend in other Nielsen data that found viewing of traditional TV—through a cable or satellite connection or an antenna—peaked in the 2009–10 season.

The audience for TV viewing alone fell by 10 percent, to 8.4 million people a minute, in the 18-to-34-year-old category.

The new Nielsen data doesn't break out time spent specifically streaming TV.

Since Nielsen inaugurated its tracking service in 1949, average daily TV viewing has grown steadily, from 4 hours and 35 minutes a day to a peak of 8 hours and 55 minutes in 2009–10. That increase coincided with growing numbers of TV sets sold and the proliferation of programming on cable.

But viewership has been declining ever since. From late September until mid-November this year, daily TV watching accounted for only 8 hours and 13 minutes, Nielsen said.