

AN ENQUIRY INTO TELEVISION VIEWING

By Robert Silvey, Head of Listener Research, B.B.C.

IN the autumn of 1948, when the post-war Television Service had passed into its third year and TV licences were approaching the 100,000 mark, the B.B.C. set on foot the first of what it is hoped will be a series of enquiries into the nature of the television public and the impact of the new medium upon its leisure habits. A random sample of TV households was selected—1,000 in all—and each was visited by an interviewer. In nearly 900 of these households interviewers were successful in enlisting the co-operation of a responsible adult. The age and nature of the TV set, and data upon which the socio-economic grade of the family could be estimated, were recorded and an enumeration made of the members of the household, their age, sex and education. The informant was then asked to arrange for each member of the household over the age of sixteen to keep a record of his or her activities during the evenings of one week. Special 'log books' were supplied in which each evening was sub-divided into quarter-hours. Spaces were provided for showing what programme, if any, had been listened to or viewed, and which of nine types of activity had been pursued, whether coincidentally with listening or not. To provide a Control Group, interviewers were instructed to select, whenever they made an effective contact with a TV household, the nearest non-TV household they could find and there to go through the same procedure.

Interviewers paid two more calls on each home—one during the course of the week to see that the logs were in fact being completed, and a final call to collect them. Interviewing was spread over three discrete weeks, and finished early in December 1948. The final report was based on a Television Group of 873 TV households, with a population of 2,724, and a Control Group of 856 non-TV households, with a population of 2,628, while the total number of evening 'logs' completed by the adults of the TV Group was 15,869 and by those of the Control Group was 11,434.

It was found that the overwhelming majority of TV households (82 per cent.) possessed separate TV receivers and nearly all of these had sound receivers as well. Only 18 per cent. possessed combined TV and sound receivers (all the Control Group possessed sound receivers). More than half the TV receivers in use had 6 inch by 7½ inch screens, 29 per cent. had 8 inch by 10 inch and 11 per cent. 10 inch by 12 inch screens.

The enquiry revealed that television was no longer, if indeed it ever had been, a rich man's toy. More than half the TV homes were found to be lower middle or working class. Although there was clearly a long way to go before TV was evenly spread throughout all socio-economic classes, there was unmistakable evidence that television was spreading 'downwards' through the social pyramid. Thus, whereas 57 per cent. of those families which possessed TV sets when the Television Service was resumed in 1946 were well-to-do or upper middle class and the remaining 43 per cent. lower middle or working class, the corresponding proportions of 1948 buyers were 39 per cent. and 61 per cent.

Comparison between the TV and Control Groups showed that although these groups were built up of pairs of families living side by side, to the outward eye differing from one another in the single respect of possessing or not possessing a TV set, there were in fact significant differences between them. It was found that neighbouring families do not enjoy the same socio-economic status to anything like the same extent as might have been anticipated. The TV Group, for example, included 21 per cent. who could be classified as well-to-do, whereas among their next-door neighbours only 10 per cent. could be so described. At the other end of the scale only 18 per cent. of the TV Group consisted of the families of manual workers, whereas the Control Group included 35 per cent. There was, however, far less difference between the educational level of the TV and Control Groups. (Indeed it was clear that in the well-to-do and middle class strata television was rather more likely to be found in the homes where the educational level was the lower. This tendency was reversed in the manual working class; there the higher the level of education the greater the probability of finding a television set.) For the sociologist the conclusion would seem to be that although population of London and the Home Counties is far from homogeneously housed in terms of income, homogeneity in terms of educational level is much more nearly approached.

Another difference between the TV and Control Groups was that in the middle classes, and especially among the well-to-do, families with television sets tended to be larger than those without them, having more children and old people. In the manual working class, on the other hand, TV tends to be found in those homes where, although there may be rather more old people, there are fewer children and young adults and more adults of full working age. This suggests that the presence of children in a home and the presence of old people each act as a stimulus to acquire television, but that the gratification of children's wishes to have a television set is more dependent upon the economic circumstances of the family.

Fortunately analysis showed that these differences between the groups with and without TV were not of sufficient magnitude to invalidate comparisons of their leisure habits. It is in fact fair to regard the pattern of behaviour disclosed by the logs kept by the Control Group as a picture of how the TV Group would have behaved had they not acquired television sets.

This comparison shows that families which had TV did not on that account listen to sound broadcasting materially less between 6.00 and 8.00 p.m. and between 11.00 p.m. and midnight. Their listening in the half-hours before and after the evening TV transmission was, however, appreciably diminished. But during the period of the TV transmission an average of only 14 per cent. were listening—less than one-third as many as would have done so had there been no television set—while 49 per cent. viewed—an audience made up of 32 per cent. drawn from sound, together with 17 per cent. diverted from other activities.

All three sound services—Home, Light and Third Programme—yield up their quota to television. Indeed one of the most significant findings of this enquiry was that the deprivations of TV affected each of the three sound services to an equal degree. As to the 17 per cent. who were diverted from other activities, by far the larger proportion (14 per cent.) were people who would have been at home in any case. This category—those 'at home but not listening' between 8.30 and 10.00 p.m.—averaged 32 per cent. of the Control Group, whereas among the TV Group the proportion at home but neither listening nor viewing averaged only 18 per cent.

Starting as it does at 8.30, the evening TV transmission has comparatively little effect on the meal-time habits of viewers. (Even in London and the Home Counties, apparently, there are few people who are still eating their evening meal as late as 7.30 p.m.) Television tends to thrust such activities as reading, writing letters and social activities, into the earlier and, to some extent, the later part of the evening, without diminishing their frequency, but it does appear to reduce the total amount of time spent in domestic duties in the evening. When the displaced duties are performed, if they are performed at all, is not clear. They may perhaps be undertaken during the day-time and therefore outside the purview of their enquiry, or it may be that the promise of watching television causes them to be done more expeditiously in the early evening.

If possessing a TV set causes substantial modifications in the habits of those who are at home, it appears to have comparatively little power to keep at home those who would otherwise go out. Thus, whereas the average proportion of the Control Group who were not at home between 8.30 and 10.00 p.m. was 22 per cent., the corresponding proportion of

the TV Group was 19 per cent.—only 3 per cent. less. Among the many activities in which those not at home were engaged was cinema-going. This did not in fact account for more than a small proportion, but this is of less significance than the fact that the differences between the Control Group's and the TV Group's cinema-going was substantial. Whereas an average of 3.3 per cent. of the Control Group were at the cinema during television transmission hours, the corresponding proportion of the TV Group was only two-thirds of this figure—2.2 per cent.

In all that has been said so far the TV Group has been considered as a whole; but it is of the first importance that variations between the behaviour of one type of viewer and another should be examined; for the television public is growing, and its composition changing, and if, for example, there are marked differences between the behaviour of new and 'veteran' viewers, or between that of viewers of various socio-economic classes, the pattern of behaviour of the TV public as a whole will alter as the balance between its component elements shifts.

Analysis in terms of the length of time that viewers had possessed their television sets revealed the extent to which, as the novelty of TV ownership wears off, viewing diminishes and old habits re-assert themselves. For example, among viewers who had had TV sets for less than a year, 51 per cent. were viewing and 11 per cent. listening at TV times, 19 per cent. were at home but neither viewing nor listening and the remaining 19 per cent. were out (including 2 per cent. at the cinema); but among viewers who had had their sets for at least two years, 41 per cent. were viewing, 16 per cent. were listening, 21 per cent. were at home but doing neither and 22 per cent. were out (including 3 per cent. at the cinema). Thus viewing had diminished by one-fifth, and listening had increased by half as much again, though still of course remaining far below its Control Group level. The proportion out (including at the cinema) had reverted to a level not far short of that of the Control Group which, by definition, had never possessed TV sets.

It may be remarked parenthetically that even if, as this evidence suggests, cinema-going habits are only temporarily disturbed by the acquisition of a TV set, and that in a comparatively short time viewers are going to the movies as frequently as they ever did, viewers are week by week exposed to television for far longer than they are at the cinema. The enquiry shows that even the veteran viewers whose cinema-going habits had almost reverted to normal, were on the average watching sixteen evening TV transmissions for every visit to the pictures. The social implications of this fact are too obvious to need stressing.

Analysis by socio-economic group showed some equally important differences, important because it is to be expected that, as time passes,

the lower socio-economic groups will constitute an increasing proportion of the TV public. A comparison of the well-to-do viewers on the one hand and of the manual working class viewers on the other showed that when among the well-to-do 37 per cent. were viewing, 16 per cent. listening, 24 per cent. at home but doing neither and the remaining 23 per cent. were out, among the working class the corresponding proportions were 51 per cent., 14 per cent., 18 per cent. and 17 per cent. Thus viewers in the highest socio-economic class were viewing less, but listening more, were more often prepared, though at home, to leave their radio and TV sets silent altogether, and were also more often out, than were viewers in the lowest socio-economic class. (Analysis showed that the differences described above were greater than could be accounted for by the fact that working class viewers were more prevalent among new than among veteran viewers.)

Besides showing that viewers, even after the first novelty of ownership has worn off, watch TV far more often than they would have listened to sound broadcasting, the enquiry also showed that viewers discriminate between programmes much less than do listeners—and this tendency is just as apparent among veteran as among new viewers. To some extent, no doubt, this is attributable to the absence of any choice, and the limited length of the TV transmission. If the viewer wants to watch television then there is at present only one programme he can view, and the normal period of evening transmission is only an hour and a half.

It seems very doubtful, however, if this is the whole explanation, for another factor must be taken into account. Since television engages the sense of sight as well as the sense of hearing, its capacity to hold the attention of its audience is incomparably greater than that of sound broadcasting, which must perpetually compete with visual counter-attractions. The enquiry was able to express the effect of this in quantitative terms. Only one viewer in twenty intimated that while he watched TV he made an attempt to do something else at the same time; whereas eleven listeners in twenty showed that when listening in the peak hours of the evening they were simultaneously engaged in some other activity. But, whatever may be their relative importance, it seems clear that the absence of alternative TV programmes, the limited period of present TV transmissions, and TV's claim upon both eye and ear, together have brought about a situation which sharply differentiates viewing from listening, namely that viewing, far more than listening, is indulged in as an end in itself. In practical terms this means that, even after its novelty has worn off, people watch TV irrespective of programme content to a far greater extent than they listen with similar pliancy to sound broadcasting.

It would, of course, be very unwise to assume that conclusions drawn from observations on the phenomenon of viewing today are going to be valid for tomorrow. Whatever else is in doubt it is certain that television programmes will not remain the same, and so long as new forms are being evolved TV will in a sense continue to be novel. Furthermore, TV is still so young that viewers who have had their sets only two or three years have to be regarded as 'veterans'. It may therefore be some years before it will be possible to say with certainty that there are viewers for whom the novelty of TV has entirely worn off. Nevertheless, if viewing continues to be regarded not only as a means to an end but also as an end in itself, then as television becomes more widespread there will be more and more people who are as viewers far readier than they were as listeners to pay heed to programmes which are unfamiliar, and perhaps at first uncongenial, to them. Highbrows and lowbrows may each be expected to view with greater catholicity than they have in the past been prepared to listen—though whether with greater tolerance remains to be seen. It must be left to others to speculate upon the possible future role of television as a catalytic agent in changing the pattern of contemporary culture.