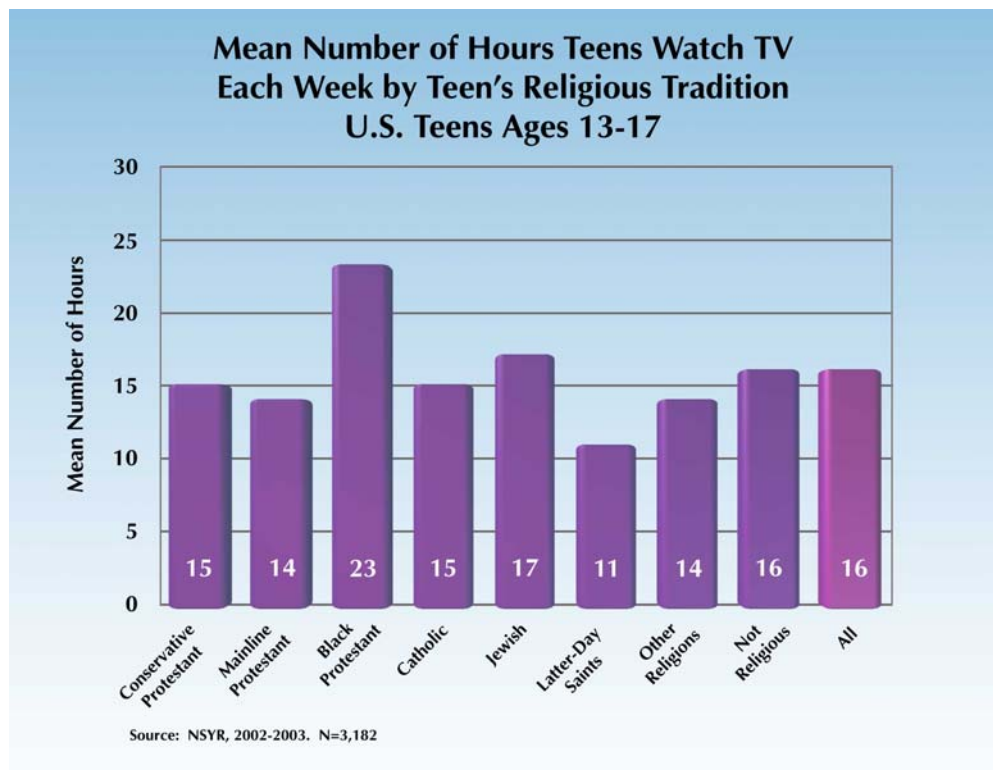


Teens Exploring TV’s “Vast Wasteland”

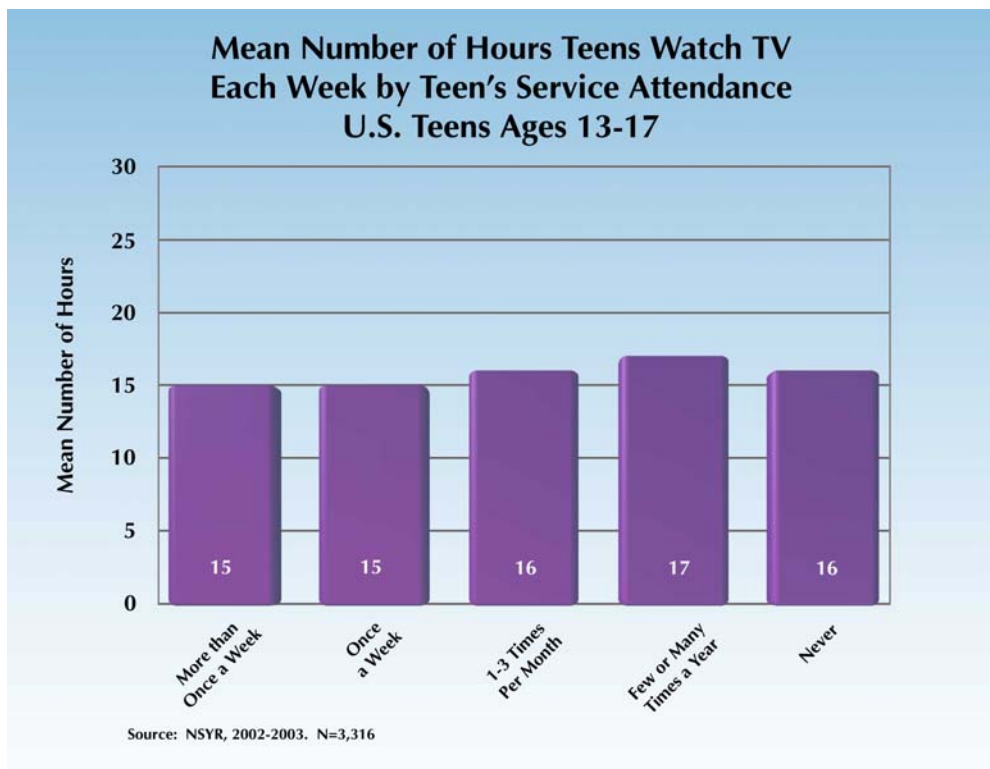
When Newton Minow made his now-famous “vast wasteland” speech to the National Association of Broadcasters in 1961, he described television programming as a “procession of game shows, violence, audience-participation shows, formula comedies about totally unbelievable families, blood and thunder, mayhem, violence, ... more violence and cartoons.” More than 40 years later, television is more violent and contains more sexually oriented situations than ever, leading religious leaders to be wary of television and to sometimes blame TV for many of society’s ills.

Regardless of what’s on and the possibility of harm, teenagers *are* watching television. According to researchers with the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), in a survey of more than 3,000 U.S. teens ages 13-17, teens report watching an average of nearly 16 hours of TV per week (not including watching movies on video, DVD or cable, which was addressed in a separate question). There are, however, substantial differences between teens from different religious traditions. Teens affiliated with black Protestant denominations watch an average of nearly 23 hours of TV per week — more than teens from other religious traditions and teens who are not religious. Conversely, Mormon teens average less than 11 hours of television per week — much less than most other teens. While conservative Protestants tend to be more critical of elements in popular culture, such as television, teens affiliated with conservative Protestant denominations appear to watch about as much TV as Catholic, mainline Protestant and “other religion” teens.



“The denominational differences in TV watching are surely affected by other factors,” stated Phil Schwadel, a postdoctoral research associate with the NSYR, based at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. “Nevertheless, denominational differences remain even after considering factors such as family structure and social status,” he commented.

Previous NSYR updates show how religion affects various aspects of teens’ lives, such as watching R-rated movies, using the Internet, and getting along with parents. However, despite recurring religious rhetoric critical of popular culture, most measures of religiosity, other than religious tradition, have little effect on TV viewing habits. Teens who attend religious services more than once a week, for example, average only one less hour of television per week than teens who never attend religious services (15 and 16 hours, respectively). Other measures of religiosity, such as the importance of faith in daily life, also exert little influence on teens’ television viewing. Non-religious factors, such as family structure, race and social status, appear to exhibit more influence on TV viewing. For instance, teens living in two-parent homes watch an average of 15 hours per week, while teens living in single-parent homes average more than 18 hours of TV per week.



“It’s important to note that the hours of television viewing are reported by the teens,” Schwadel added. “There were no questions about the content of the programming — in other words what channel was being watched. So we are not able to determine if more highly religious teens are watching inspirational programs or MTV.”

This analysis is based on two questions from the NSYR Survey: “*About how many HOURS, if any, on a typical WEEKNIGHT do you spend watching television, not including the movies we just talked about?*” and “*About how many HOURS, if any, in a typical WEEKEND do you spend watching television, from Friday night to Sunday night, not including the movies we already talked about?*” These references to television viewing do not include watching movies on video, DVD or cable, which was addressed in a separate question.

The National Study of Youth and Religion is funded by Lilly Endowment Inc. More than 3,350 teens along with one of their parents participated in the random-digit-dial telephone study of U.S. parent-teen pairs. The purpose of the project is to research the shape and influence of religion and spirituality in the lives of U.S. adolescents; to identify effective practices in the religious, moral and social formation of the lives of youth; to describe the extent to which youth participate in and benefit from the programs and opportunities that religious communities are offering to their youth; and to foster an informed national discussion about the influence of religion in youth's lives to encourage sustained reflection about and rethinking of our cultural and institutional practices with regard to youth and religion.