

TV shock: more of us are watching it

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IT'S a total turnaround. And it's good news for everyone - except people who believe television is an agent of Satan turning the human brain to mashed potato. Australians are going back to the box.

Most weeks this column may look like a collection of lame jokes and wacky theories, but actually its job is to record social change in Australia. Today we've got a doozy.

Around this time every year we bribe a boffin to dissect the OzTAM data coming from people-meters attached to sets in 3000 capital city households and answer a simple question: "Are Australians watching more TV or less TV?" During the noughties, the answer has been a consistent "less". While pay TV has been booming, free TV has been on a slow slide to oblivion - particularly with viewers aged 16 to 39.

You might consider the drift away from traditional entertainments by people under 40 to be a good thing, if they were going outside and getting exercise, or engaging in studies designed to make them more productive citizens. In fact, their substitutes have been video games, social networking, porn and illegally downloaded movies. Until now.

When this column asked the big question this year, the computer generated an answer that put the boffin's eyebrows on permanent arousal. Here's the essence of it. Total viewing of prime time TV is up 3 per cent on last year, and viewing by 16-to-39-year-olds is up 7 per cent.

So far this year, an average of 5,147,000 Australians in the mainland capitals have been watching TV each night between 6pm and 10.30pm. In the same period last year, the average was 4,981,000. In 2008, it was 5,051,000.

The devil is in the details. While total viewing is up, viewing of the traditional free to airs (ABC, SBS, Seven, Nine, TEN) is down 6 per cent. That's because they've carved off sections of themselves as new digital stations. On average, 433,000 urban people a night watch the mini-mes (technically known as the DTT channels) - up from 74,000 last year (when most of the DTTs weren't yet born).

So the digitals have been a hit, even if they've stolen viewers from their parents. Have they stolen viewers from pay TV, as the networks hoped? No, but they've slowed pay TV's growth. On average, 798,000 urban people a night watch subscription TV in prime time - a rise of 1 per cent on last year's figure, and up 5 per cent on the 2008 figure. The pay moguls remain happy because their numbers with viewers 16-39 are up 11 per cent on last year (while pay viewing by over-55s is down 5 per cent).

Since the 16-39s are the future let's look at them more closely. It turns out they are enthusiastic consumers of the new digital channels. Some 42 per cent of the audience of GO! is aged between 16 and 39. They just can't get enough of *The Big Bang Theory*, *Top Gear* and *Two and a Half Men*, pictured. But they are also 38 per cent of the audience of ABCNews24 and 37 per cent of the audience of ONE (Ten's all-sport channel).

Some might say, of course, that the turnaround is simply a consequence of the rise in Australia's population. But why did it only kick in this year? The population was rising rapidly over most of the noughties, a decade when free-to-air viewing was dropping consistently.

This year something new must have been added. You'd have to conclude that those arrogant old dinosaurs have finally done a clever thing. By playing to niche markets, the networks have pulled back younger viewers, stopped the slide and secured their future for one more decade.

For more details, and to join the discussion, go to [smh.com.au/opinion/blog/the-tribal-mind](http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/blog/the-tribal-mind).

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