88% of Americans use a second screen while watching TV. Why?

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When it comes to tech, I like to think I’m a pretty hoopy frood. I added the System Tuner UI to my Android phone’s settings. I’ve crimped my own ethernet cables. I got *Wing Commander III* running, back when that required the dark arts of HIMEM.SYS tweaking. What I’m trying to say is: I am *with it*!

Except when it comes to staring at screens while staring at other screens. I just don’t suss it. But apparently 88 percent of Americans do.

Bond Capital | Mary Meeker
One of the little info-nuggets that has been ricocheting

around my brain this year came from Mary Meeker's annual "Internet Trends" report. Meeker, a venture capitalist with Bond Capital, presented her research at the Code Conference back in June, amid the heat of the Arizona desert. Her presentation was, as usual, a massive (300+ slides!) data dump of interesting information on all things Internet, but the item that most intrigued me was right there in the lower-left corner of slide 38.

According to data from Nielsen, the TV metrics company, 88 percent of Americans "use a second digital device while watching TV." Seventy-one percent of Americans "look up content related to content they are watching," while 41 percent of Americans are busy messaging "friends/family about content they are watching."

Can this possibly be true? And can it be good for us?

In which things get really existential

Ars has reported on human brains and multitasking for more than a decade, and the general consensus seems to be: we don't, as a species, do it very well. Sure, we can handle two tasks at once, but only after we have learned one so well it can be handled almost unconsciously. (Think driving down the interstate while having a conversation, then bringing your attention back to the road and realizing you've been on mental "autopilot" for the last five minutes.) But attempting to do two new and/or creative tasks at once just doesn't work well.

Couple this research with the more recent concern over screens, "screen time," and the importance of attention, and I'm surprised at Nielsen's findings. My attitude, when watching TV, is that a show you pay attention to precludes the use of phone or laptop; if you're using another screen, you're not actually watching the show. Pick better shows to watch,

people! And then *watch* them!

But this approach quickly acquires moral dimensions: *I am superior to you because I watch better television in a more attentive way. No CSI: Cyber in this house!* But is this "entertainment as elitism"?

I got to thinking about the ways in which we use television, and not all of them involve watching dark prestige dramas with 80+ Metacritic scores. Perhaps you're watching (ugh) live TV, either because you are a masochist or you love sports. (If you are watching baseball, perhaps it's both!) Picking up a smartphone during commercial breaks is arguably better than being bombarded with the consumerism of late-stage capitalism.

Say you use your TV not as a way to consume compelling crafted content, but as background noise that helps you relax. (I highly recommend Sunday afternoon golf for this purpose.) Tooling around on a laptop while the TV plays in the background is now not quite so odd.

Or perhaps you watch TV simply as a way to kill time. Perhaps you're in pain, or recovering from illness, or simply bored out of your mind. The goal is not necessarily to direct your full and undivided attention to the screen; it is to get through the day until something better comes along. Using a second screen here, too, makes sense.

Or maybe you are alone but want TV to be a more social experience. For whatever reason, in-person socializing won't work, so you keep up a running group text with friends who are watching the same episode. My wife and I recently tried this when she was away for a week, watching episodes of *Seinfeld* together on Hulu while attempting to keep up a run of clever commentary by text. It went… okay.

Still, I can't shake the feeling that the majority of time spent using one digital device while another displays video content nearby is low-quality time, where we aren't *really*

paying attention to what's on either screen and so are using the planet's resources, cluttering our lives with extra noise, and reinforcing our slavish devotions to screens for little to no benefit.

In my darker moments, I suspect that mental clutter is the point of it all, as we seek to be "distracted from distraction by distraction." We are "filled with fancies and empty of meaning" in order to keep ourselves from the terror of our own deeper thoughts, our own loneliness and boredom, our own existential despair. Those inner voices can terrify—so the lengths we go to blot them out are remarkable. "Not here," we tell ourselves. "Not here the darkness, in this twittering world!"

Yet one key point of T.S. Eliot's poem is that—if we can bear them—silence, negation, and the "dark night of the soul" may lead us not to death but to transformation and even salvation.

This holiday season, I've been paying closer attention to my own use of screens (and of audio content, which is a whole other thing that can serve some of the same purposes). The results of this scrutiny are not always pleasant, so I'm trying to be more deliberate about what I watch and listen to. I'm trying to cultivate more silence and stillness, and I'm especially trying not to use two screens at once except in emergencies… or during the most dire Christmas specials that my family wants to watch on TV. After all, there's an exception to every rule.

How's it going? I'll let you know next year. But for now, I'd love to hear from you. Why do you use two (or more) screens at once? Are you happy with the results, or does this generally feel like "lost" time? Join the discussion in the comments below.

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