

# TV's weird 2020: Viewership plummeted, but time spent increased

**ARTICLE** | **FEBRUARY 08, 2021**

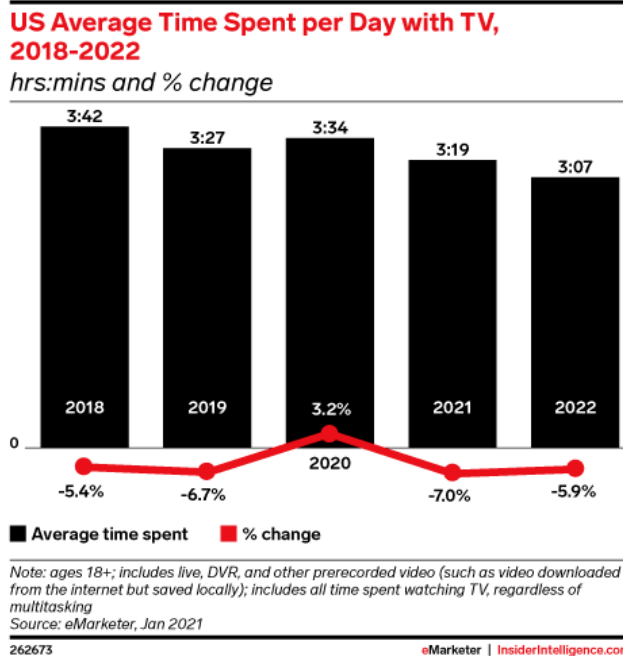
**Ethan Cramer-Flood**

Early in 2020, as the pandemic was getting underway, Americans flocked to their TV sets at a rate unseen in years. Initially, US households were glued to the news, as uncertainty over the coronavirus drove viewership. In the following weeks, the TVs mostly stayed on, as the initial wave of lockdowns kept Americans stuck on the couch with lots of new time to kill.

Thanks mainly to these factors, our Q2 2020 time spent forecast projected that traditional TV would reverse its longstanding user and time spent declines, at least temporarily. As it turns out, we were half right.

We previously estimated that the number of TV viewers ages 18 and older would increase by about 10 million throughout the year. Instead, cord-cutting unexpectedly accelerated, viewership declined by roughly 10 million, and 2020 ended up with 20 million fewer adults watching TV than we thought (landing at 204.2 million). However, those who stayed ratcheted up their time: Among US TV-watching adults, daily time spent with TV increased by a robust 9.2%, to 4 hours, 31 minutes (4:31) per day. Thanks to this boost by those who kept their cords, TV time among the whole adult population

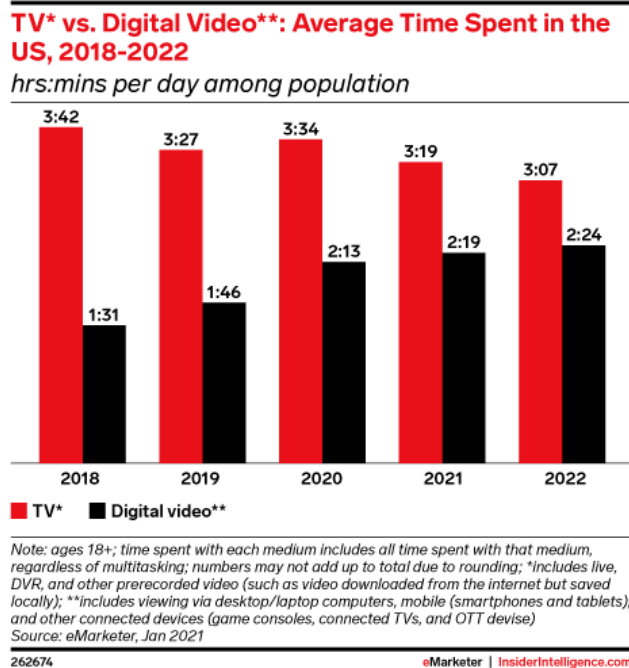
increased year over year in 2020 for the first time since 2012, jumping from 3:27 in 2019 to 3:34.



As the US slowly emerges from the pandemic and enters a year with less time spent at home, no election coverage to monitor, and (hopefully) fewer gripping national news events, TV will not retain its 2020 gains. Although the return of more reliable and nearly-full-length sports seasons will help TV, viewers are showing increasing willingness to access sports via livestreaming or to forego them entirely. After declines in the number of adult TV viewers accelerated from 2018 (-2.3%) to 2019 (-3.9%) to 2020 (-4.7%), we forecast another 2.4% drop this year, and fewer than 200 million adults will be regular TV watchers in 2021 (199.2 million).

As always, digital video is the leading culprit, rather than any structural pivot away from watching TV-style content in general. Combined time spent with TV and digital video by US adults has held remarkably steady over the years: From 2013 to 2019, the two categories' time spent sum hardly budged, ranging from 5:13 to 5:17 per day every year. Instead, the story has been about digital video stealing share from TV within that metric. Subscription OTT's explosive popularity in 2020 exacerbated this trend more than ever.

Time spent with digital video among US adults grew by a remarkable 25.4% in pandemic-disrupted 2020 to 2:13, leading to a record 5:47 per day spent with TV-plus-digital video. But digital video's share has never been larger.



As digital video, digital audio, gaming, social networking, and all the other apps continue eating away at TV's time, two remarkable downward thresholds will be crossed. This year, less than a quarter of US daily time spent with media will be with traditional TV; and next year, fewer than 75% of US adults will watch TV at all. That latter figure was 98.8% as recently as 2011.

To learn more about how a pandemic-disrupted 2020 impacted time spent with digital video, smartphones, CTV, subscription OTT, and digital audio, Insider Intelligence subscribers can read our recent report:

**Report** by Ethan Cramer-Flood Feb 04, 2021

## US Time Spent with Media 2021 Update

