

Chapter 10

Happiness and Television Viewing



Abstract Watching TV is a major human activity. Many people are tempted to watch television rather than to pursue more engaging activities. Individuals with incomplete control over their own behaviour watch more TV than they consider optimal for themselves. Their well-being is lower than they could achieve. Heavy TV viewers, and in particular those who lose a great deal of time that might have been spent doing something else, report lower life satisfaction. Long TV hours are also linked to higher material aspirations and anxiety.

An Important Consumption Activity

Watching television today is one of the most important leisure activities for most people in most countries. People in Europe spend almost four hours per day viewing TV. This average varies considerably between countries. While only about ten per cent of people in Switzerland watch television more than three hours a day, more than thirty-eight per cent do so in Greece. In the United States, people spend more than five hours per day, on average, in front of their television sets. In many countries, watching TV occupies almost as much time as working.

Subjective time use data are often criticized as being inaccurate or biased. “Watching television” might not be understood in the same way by all respondents, and they might not differentiate between television viewing as a primary, secondary, or even tertiary activity. Respondents might not even correctly remember all the times they watched television, or they might revert to social norms or to images they would like to have of themselves. Nevertheless, answers to such questions seem generally to be a reliable measure for television viewing behaviour.

As watching television is a totally voluntary, freely chosen activity, it seems obvious that people enjoy it, because they would not do it otherwise. This implication is shared by standard neoclassical economic theory. Individuals are assumed to know best what provides them with utility. They choose the amount of TV consumption that provides them with most utility. However, recent developments, particularly in behavioural economics, have cast doubt on this conclusion. In general, it is not possi-

ble to infer the utility by simply observing a particular behaviour, because individuals do not always act rationally. People may also be subject to habits over which they do not have full control. They may consume some goods, such as drugs, alcohol, or tobacco, to a greater extent than they find to be good for themselves. They suffer from a self-control problem. One consequence of this is that, according to their own evaluation, smokers consider themselves to be better off if smoking is restricted by a tax. Happiness research has shown empirically that individuals overestimate the utility of future income at the same time as they underestimate the benefits of interacting with other people. The consumption decisions made by individuals are systematically distorted according to their own evaluations.

People suffering a self-control problem are mainly induced to watch too much television because it offers immediate benefits—entertainment and relaxation—at very low immediate marginal costs. Many costs, such as not having enough sleep and underinvesting in social contacts, education, and career, are experienced only in the future. People with time-inconsistent preferences are therefore unable to adhere to the amount of TV viewing they planned or which they would consider optimal for themselves in retrospect. Extensive TV consumption, consequently leads to a lower level of individual utility than could be achieved.

Effects of Television Watching on Happiness

Data on subjective well-being can be used to study whether people make systematic mistakes in their choice of the amount of time they devote to TV watching. The following empirical analysis considers data from more than 42,000 individuals in 22 different countries in the period 2002/03.

The econometric estimate lends support to the hypothesis of over-consumption. Controlling for all other influences, excessive TV viewers report lower life satisfaction. People who are subject to time constraints but still watch TV for many hours are particularly affected by lower life satisfaction.

There is ample evidence that individuals may suffer self-control problems with television consumption. Some forty per cent of adults and seventy per cent of teenagers in the United States admit that they watch too much TV. Short- and long-term evaluations of TV consumption tend to diverge. Many people state that they do not enjoy television in general, but consider the programmes they saw last night to be pretty good.

Some individuals abstain from watching television totally, because they know that they would otherwise not be able to control their viewing behaviour. They cancel their subscription for cable TV to avoid “zapping” too much, lock their TV set away in a cupboard, or place an uncomfortable chair in front of it.

People who watch less than half an hour of TV a day are more satisfied with their lives than people who consume any other level of TV time. For those watching TV for anything between half an hour and two and a half hours, average reported life satisfaction is lower than in the group of people watching for less than half an hour.

The negative effect is even larger for people watching for more than two and a half hour a day.

These findings suggest that extensive TV watching makes people worse off, because it indicates overconsumption due to a self-control problem and misprediction of future costs.

The size of the effect of TV consumption on happiness can be compared to other influences on happiness. For example, the difference in life satisfaction between those watching more than two and a half hours and those watching less than half an hour is more than one third of the difference in life satisfaction between people who are with a partner and those without. The difference is about the same as that between people with upper secondary education and those who only completed primary school or the first stage of basic education.

Effects Differ Between Groups

The correlation between TV consumption and life satisfaction is estimated for the whole population and thus represents an average effect of TV viewing across individuals. However, self-control problems in television consumption do not affect everybody in the same way. It is most likely that some groups of people suffer higher disutility from extensive TV consumption than others.

People who can use time more profitably when not watching TV are said to have higher opportunity costs of time. This includes the self-employed, for instance craftsmen, lawyers, architects, and artists. The same applies to individuals in high positions such as managers, top bureaucrats, and politicians. These people can freely transfer time from leisure to work. For these groups of individuals, the self-control problem of watching too much TV generates considerable costs. Their happiness is drastically lowered if they are unable to fully control themselves. In contrast, people with a great deal of time available, such as the unemployed and the retired, suffer little if any disutility when they fail to watch the amount of TV they would consider optimal for themselves. TV consumption significantly lowers the life satisfaction of individuals with high opportunity costs of time, while it has a smaller negative effect on the life satisfaction of individuals with low opportunity costs of time.

The negative correlation of television consumption and subjective well-being has been interpreted as over-consumption leading to a lower happiness level. However, this correlation could well be the result of reverse causation: it is quite plausible that unhappy people watch more TV than happy ones.

Literature

The relationship of television viewing and happiness is treated in:

Bruni, Luigino, and Luca Stanca. 2006. Income Aspirations, Television and Happiness: Evidence from the World Values Survey. *Kyklos* 59 (2): 209–225.

Some of the evidence presented in this chapter is taken from:

Frey, Bruno S., Christine Benesch, and Alois Stutzer. 2007. Does Watching TV Make Us Happy? *Journal of Economic Psychology* 28 (3): 283–313.

The broader context of television watching as a social activity is discussed by:

Corneo, Giacomo. 2005. Work and Television. *European Journal of Political Economy* 21 (1): 99–113.

Kubey, Robert, and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. 1990. *Television and the Quality of Life. How Viewing Shapes Everyday Experience*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

A fascinating case of time inconsistency and the problem of self-control is the subject of:

DellaVigna, Stefano, and Ulrike Malmendier. 2006. Paying Not to Go to the Gym. *American Economic Review* 96 (3): 694–719.