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EXCLUSIVE CMO TODAY

Delayed Nielsen Data Will Show Traditional TV Back on Top (for Now)

For a moment, it seemed like streaming had finally overtaken television. But February's numbers on viewing time—using a new demographic data source—say not so fast

By Patrick Coffee [Follow](#)

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Nielsen made a change in the way it estimates the size of U.S. audiences for broadcast and streaming in its monthly Gauge reports. KRISTOFFER TRIPPLAAR/SIPA USA/REUTERS

Quick Summary ∨

- A forthcoming Nielsen report suggests U.S. viewers spent more time watching traditional TV than streaming in February, reversing well-established trends.

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Streaming TV's ascendance over broadcast and cable isn't as complete as it seemed, a report from the measurement firm Nielsen is set to suggest.

Streaming accounted for 41.9% of U.S. TV viewing time in February, compared with 47.4% for so-called linear TV, according to unreleased Nielsen data described by people with direct knowledge of the numbers.

That's a reversal from Nielsen's most recent monthly Gauge report, which said TV viewing in January was 47% streaming and 42.7% linear, as well as Nielsen's announcement last year that streaming had surpassed broadcast and cable viewing in May for the first time.

The shift wasn't entirely unexpected. Nielsen had warned clients that its broadcast and cable TV figures could see a boost in February after it began using a study from the industry's Advertising Research Foundation to inform its estimates of the demographic groups in U.S. households and the technologies they use to watch TV. The company previously drew those estimates entirely from its own volunteer panels.

Nielsen also communicated the impending change to clients multiple times in recent months, according to a spokeswoman.

The actual numbers, however, weren't available to clients until earlier this month.

YouTube's estimated share of viewing on TV sets was 11% in the report for the month of February, compared with 12.5% in January. Estimates similarly declined to 7.5% from 8.8% for Netflix, to 3.3% from 4.1% for Amazon Prime Video and to 2.4% from 3% for Roku.

Other streamers including Disney+, Paramount+ and Tubi also saw their numbers drop.

Nielsen had planned to publicly release the February report on March 17, but delayed it for a week after some streaming platforms asked for more information. The delay was first reported by Variety.

Streamers are seeking more data to determine how much of the drop in share of viewership can be attributed to the adoption of ARF data as opposed to actual viewing shifts since January.

“The question should be, if you had applied this methodology a year ago, then what would the numbers have been a year ago?” said Hernan Lopez, founder of Owl & Co., an advisory firm that focuses on media consumption trends.

The results suggest Nielsen has historically undercounted the prevalence of broadcast and cable relative to streaming, said Lopez.

But February also included NBCUniversal’s coverage of the Super Bowl and the Winter Olympics, benefiting Peacock, NBC and the company’s cable networks. Peacock was the only streaming platform to see a lift in the February data, to 2.7% of total viewership from 1.9% in January.

Snoop Dogg at the Winter Olympics, carried on NBCUniversal. ANDREAS RENTZ/GETTY IMAGES

Nielsen incorporated the ARF study after the Media Rating Council, an industry self-regulatory group, asked the company to use an independent source to address perceived inaccuracies in its demographic data, said George Ivie, executive director at the MRC.

In a statement, Nielsen said, “Different methodologies produce different results,”

adding that the new methodology would “create a one-time shift in viewing data, reflected in the February 2026 Gauge.”

Nonetheless, it saw long-term trends hewing toward streaming. “Streaming viewership is expected to continue to grow,” the company said.

Outcomes have varied month to month throughout the five-year history of the Gauge, but streaming hasn’t previously lost as much ground to traditional TV as it did, at least on paper, in the February report.

The news arrives just ahead of the annual upfronts and newfronts events, when broadcasters and streaming platforms pitch upcoming inventory to marketers and ad buyers.

Although the share numbers in the Gauge are distinct from the Nielsen audience estimates that underpin most TV ad deals, they could help buyers demand more data from streamers to prove that viewership among key demographics is growing at a healthy clip, according to Ross Benes, senior analyst at eMarketer.

But it won’t change the fact that eyeballs are moving toward streaming, said Benes.

“This is something, I think, that matters a lot to marketers right now,” he said. “It probably doesn’t matter much to the consumers—and might not even matter to marketers long-term, because the trends will be what the trends are.”

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