



Media And Youth: High School Students' Perceptions Of Radio And Media In 2005

By Drew Kondylas

Just over a month ago, I had the privilege of working as a Volunteer Instructor for a non-profit program in Washington, D.C. called **Presidential Classroom**. The stated mission of that program is to prepare young leaders for responsible citizenship and provide outstanding high school students the chance to explore the political process firsthand. The week I chose to volunteer, a special focus week titled *Media and Democracy*, allowed the students in attendance to investigate the relationship between the news media and government, with analysis of a free press, a well-informed citizenry, and a democratic government.

Getting the chance to spend so much time with such an amazing group of students allowed me to gain unique insights into their opinions and perceptions of the media. In preparing for the week, I created a survey that examined those perceptions and was presented to the nearly 200 students that participated. Based on that survey, and dozens of conversations with students, we were able to get a good idea of how high school students perceive the media – including radio, indecency, the FCC, iPods, MTV, and much more.

Before we examine the results of the survey, a brief overview of the respondents is necessary. Due to the nature of the program, including admission requirements, the students surveyed for this article may not represent the average high school student. While respondents came from 38 different states, the vast majority are considered to be the “best and brightest” in their schools. They consistently test in the top percentiles, are actively involved in a variety of activities both in and outside of school, and are actively engaged in the study of the media. All respondents were either juniors or seniors in high school at the time of the survey. Students were split fairly evenly with regard to political affiliations and beliefs. The group was also composed of roughly 60 percent females. With those “disclaimers” in mind, let’s investigate media and the youth, and their perceptions of radio and the media in 2005.

Radio Still Has Reach

Within the music and broadcast industries today, there are mixed feelings about the state of the business. Studies continue to tell us that radio is still the most effective, most far-reaching, and most prevalent form of media currently available. However, there are signs that the strength is beginning to degrade – declining TSL, falling CD sales, lower tour revenues – due in part to new technologies and fragmented attention. As a result, one of the main focuses of our study was how the participants use radio, and how they see the industry.



First, when asked where they learn about new music, nearly one-third of respondents (31 percent) said they initially hear new songs and artists on the radio. That was second only to hearing about it from friends (37 percent) and more than two times higher than discovering it online (13 percent). Radio is still one of the best places to hear the newest music, and that seems to be the reason that people listen. So, while TSL has been declining, people are still listening.

They’re also listening at many different times during the day, and the trends in that area seem to be holding fairly steady. Leading the dayparts as usual, 35 percent of respondents said they listen to radio during the Morning Drive, while 24 percent said they listen during the Afternoon Drive. Not surprisingly, only two percent of respondents listen during the Midday shift (since they are most likely in school), but they more than made up for it in the evening hours – 23 percent said they listen between 6 p.m. and 10 p.m. while 34 percent said they listen between 6 p.m. and Midnight. About five percent of respondents also said they listen during the Overnight shift.

As for specific TSL figures, about 43 percent of respondents said that they listen to radio at least one to three hours per day and 19 percent said they listen more than three hours each day. On the downside, more than 37 percent said they listen less than one hour each day. What should be most concerning for radio, however, is the behavior of respondents when a commercial break comes on. Forty-six percent of respondents immediately change stations while 24 percent change to a CD or cassette and five percent change to a digital music player; that means that 75 percent of the people we surveyed are lost once a commercial break starts. Conversely, only 10 percent of respondents listen through all the commercials while 14 percent listen through some commercials and then change.

We also asked participants to tell us how they believe consolidation has affected radio. More than half of respondents (52 percent) on our survey said they believe large corporations have not changed radio. However, 35 percent did say they believed large corporations have made radio worse while only 13 percent thought radio has improved.

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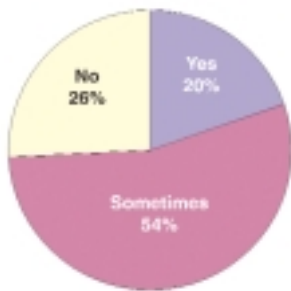
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The FCC, Indecency, And MTV

One of the benefits of working with Presidential Classroom is the exclusive access to Washington politicians and insiders. Because the focus of the week was *Media and Democracy*, the program was able to convince **Bryan Tramont, Esq.**, Chief of Staff to former FCC Chairman **Michael Powell**, to participate in a seminar and take questions from the students. While that seminar was closed to the press and the content is officially off the record, the one thing that became clear was that the FCC is coping with the issue of indecency in much the same way as the broadcast industry. Feeling inundated with conflicting opinions, they continue to deal with other issues including Low Power FM, Voice Over IP, satellite radio, and wireless telephony all at the same time. Those sentiments were also reflected in the results of the survey, which showed that the students attending the program – like the FCC and much of the country – are divided on the issue of indecency, and even its definition. The charts below show two of the questions concerning indecency and indecent content and some of those results.

Should the Federal Government regulate "indecent" content on the radio?



Do you think the content of Howard Stern's radio show is "indecent"?



Even MTV could not escape the confusion that has been created in the last 18 months. When asked to describe the content of MTV's programming on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = "Not sexual" while 5 = "Too Sexual"), the results were mixed. While the majority of those surveyed agreed that MTV does include sexual content, the pervasiveness of that content was still unclear. Twelve percent of respondents indicated the MTV's programming was "Too sexual" while a significant 55 percent thought it was "Overly sexual" in nature (4 or 5 on the scale). In addition, more than one-third of respondents fell right in the middle, describing MTV's content as "Sometimes suggestive but not generally offensive" (3 on the scale). On the other hand, just one percent of respondents thought MTV was "Not Sexual" and nine percent indicated it was "Not generally sexual" in nature (1 or 2 on the scale). Finally, dealing with the overall perception of the channel, nearly 85 percent of respondents believed MTV would actually be better described as "Entertainment Television" while the remainder believed it is truly "Music Television."

The Effect Of On-Demand Technology

Last week, a new study conducted by **Arbitron** and **Edison Media Research** concerning on-demand devices was released and described the changing behavior caused by those new technologies. One major finding in that study, titled *Internet & Multimedia 2005: The On-Demand Media Consumer*, was that users of on-demand devices listen only slightly less on average (15 minutes) than non-users. According to the study, that trend also holds true across younger demographics. While the study did not show a drastic difference, there were indications that the new technologies are changing the landscape.

Several questions asked by **FMQB** in the Presidential Classroom survey yielded comparable findings to those in the Arbitron-Edison study. For example, according to our survey, 38 percent of respondents owned an iPod or MP3 player while in the Arbitron-Edison study, 27 percent of 12- to 17-year-olds and 18 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds own an iPod or MP3 device. What was most interesting in our survey was the manner in which those devices have affected listening. The Arbitron-Edison study found that 82 percent of those surveyed claimed that they would continue to listen to terrestrial radio in the future as much as they do today despite technology advancements. In addition, 70 percent said that they would continue to listen to over-the-air radio as much as they do now despite that technology progress.

While those results are somewhat forward looking, our survey indicated that behaviors are already changing, sometimes significantly. Of those respondents that do own an iPod or MP3 player, 27 percent indicated that the device has caused them to listen to the radio "a lot less" while 22 percent indicated that the device had "not at all" changed their listening habits. Overall, when asked if the device had caused participants to listen to the radio less on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = "No, Not At All," 5 = "Yes, A Lot Less"), 42 percent of respondents marked an affirmative response (4 or 5 on the scale) while 40 percent marked a negative response (1 or 2 on the scale). This data would seem to indicate that while people feel they may not change their listening habits, the reality of owning a device and using it regularly does have a considerable impact.

As with any survey, the results are only as useful as the changes that are made with the findings in mind. We covered significant ground on our survey and attempted to create questions that reflected the important issues within the industry today. Hopefully, we can all find the time to glean something effective from the findings and continue to improve our business and our industry. Full details of the Arbitron-Edison Media Research survey can be found at arbitron.com or edisonresearch.com. For more information on Presidential Classroom, to volunteer, or to recommend a student for attendance, please visit presidentialclassroom.org or call 800.441.6533.

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