More people watch cable TV

Tired of same content on free-to-air, 64 per cent of households with cable here tune to cable shows

Cable channels have eaten into free-to-air TV's share of the viewing pie in Singapore.

On any given night, about two-thirds or 64 per cent of households with cable television are tuned to a cable programme instead of a free-to-air (FTA) channel.

This has gone up from four years ago. In 2005, the share of cable programmes in homes with cable was 59 per cent.

Media watchers say the figures confirm anecdotal evidence that more households are watching cable programmes. While it may seem obvious that homes with cable would watch more cable than free-to-air programmes, some media watchers say this is not necessarily so.

Mr Bharad Ramesh, deputy leader of media agency MindShare, points to the situation in Malaysia.

In Malaysian homes with cable TV, free-to-air TV has a 47 per cent share of the viewing pie. This is higher than the 36 per cent share enjoyed by free-to-air TV in Singapore homes with cable.

About 45 per cent of Malaysian homes with television subscribe to Astro, the cable TV provider. In Singapore, 46 per cent of homes with television subscribe to StarHub.

Mr Ramesh says: "Just because you have cable at home, it does not mean that free-to-air will lose out. If you have good content, people will watch that channel."

Mr Soh Yew Peng, course manager at Ngee Ann Polytechnic's School of Film & Media Studies, agrees that content is king. "People are sick of the content on free-to-air TV as you see the same few actors and there is no variety."

MindShare's analysis of TV viewing habits in Singapore is based on raw data from TNS Peoplemeter's survey of 750 homes. TNS is the official research provider commissioned to measure TV viewing here.

As at the end of June this year, there are 330,000 homes in Singapore with StarHub cable, slightly less than half of the 1.145 million households with TV access. The data does not take into account SingTel's Internet Protocol TV. For the same period, there are 101,000 homes which subscribe to SingTel mio TV.

Commenting on the viewership figures, Assistant Professor Foo Tee Tuun from the Nanyang Technological University's Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information says free-to-air TV has to cater to everyone "from the age of eight to 85".

Cable's strength is its ability to cater to niche interests ranging from sci-fi shows to children's programmes to Taiwan politics.

This observation is consistent with MindShare's analysis which shows that the viewership of niche free-to-air channels such as Channel NewsAsia, Suria and Vansantham in all homes with TV is about the same as the share the channels enjoy in homes with cable.

Assistant Prof Foo, who is deputy head at the Division of Electronic and Broadcast Media, points out that the 10 or so free-to-air channels are competing with over 140 StarHub channels.

He says: "If you compare channel to channel, I suspect that MediaCorp's ratings are pretty high but comparing free-to-air viewership to cable viewership as a whole, cable's figures would be higher."

StarHub declines to give information on its top cable channels and programmes.

Per cent is the comedy series about house husbands, Daddy At Home, which stars Li Nanxing and Chen Hanwei.

One rating point is approximately equivalent to 1 per cent of all TV households tuning in.

The most popular home-grown show on Channel 5 is Singapore Idol, with a rating of 4.1 per cent.

When asked to comment on the viewership figures, MediaCorp points out that according to the Nielsen Media Index 2009, free-to-air television reaches 3.534 million, or 93.1 per cent of viewers aged 15 and above on a weekly basis. This is an increase from last year's figure of 3.443 million. The index also shows that cable reaches 1.839 million, or 48.4 per cent of viewers aged 15 and above.

The Nielsen Media Index is regarded as the most authoritative annual media survey in Singapore.

Assistant Prof Foo says that among free-to-air channels, Channel 5 faces the greatest challenge because it does not produce a lot of its own shows.

A substantial part of its line-up, from reality shows such as The Amazing Race to serial dramas such as CSI, is from the United States, which means that it goes head-to-head with cable.

He said: "It needs to produce more original programming in order to compete. But free-to-air also needs to cater to the segment of the population that does not have cable."

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