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The Entertainment TV Opportunity

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Introduction: The Entertainment Opportunity Hiding in Plain Sight

On a Wednesday night in December 2025, nearly 5 million people tune in live to watch the finale of *Survivor* season 49. They're not just watching—they're engaged, leaning forward, avoiding social media spoilers, and planning tomorrow's water cooler conversation. By the next morning, 2 million more catch up before someone ruins the tribal council blindside.

This isn't sports. It's entertainment television.

And it's been delivering this level of engaged, appointment viewing for decades—generally at a fraction of the cost that advertisers pay for comparable reach in sports programming.

Entertainment TV represents the foundation of television viewership. In 2024, entertainment programming accounts for roughly 64% of all TV viewing hours, reaching over 70 million cable households regularly.

From competition reality like *The Voice* and *Dancing with the Stars* to procedural dramas like *NCIS* and *Law & Order*, from late-night comedy to cooking competitions, entertainment programming delivers massive reach across diverse audiences—and does so with remarkable efficiency..





The Case for Entertainment TV

Yet for all its scale and effectiveness, today entertainment TV operates in the shadow of sports when it comes to advertiser attention and investment.

Sports commands CPMs of \$60 or more; entertainment programming delivers comparable audiences at \$25-30 per thousand viewers. The pricing disconnect creates one of the most significant arbitrage opportunities in television advertising today.

This paper makes the case for entertainment TV not as an alternative to sports, but as the strategic foundation for efficient reach-building.

We'll explore what entertainment TV actually encompasses, who watches it and why, how viewing behavior creates engagement opportunities, and where the pricing inefficiency creates strategic advantage for advertisers who understand the data.

The opportunity isn't about choosing between sports and entertainment. It's about recognizing that while sports generates headlines and cultural moments, entertainment TV quietly delivers the reach, frequency, and efficiency that drive actual business outcomes—if you know where to look and how to buy it.

Let's start by defining what we mean when we talk about entertainment television.

1. WHAT is Entertainment TV?

Defining the Category

Entertainment TV encompasses the vast majority of television programming consumed for enjoyment, for distraction, for emotional engagement, for social connection, for escape.



Entertainment TV is defined as much by what it *isn't* as by what it is:

It's not sports—those live events that command premium prices and drive same-day urgency.

It's not news—the information programming that spikes during crises and elections.

It's not utility content like weather, financial programming, or home shopping. And **it's not the educational or documentary fare** that skews heavily toward information delivery.

Entertainment TV exists in the space around and between: programming designed to engage viewers emotionally, deliver narrative satisfaction, and create shared cultural moments that ripple through workplaces and social media feeds.

From competition reality shows where millions watch live to avoid spoilers, to serialized dramas that build loyal audiences over years, to sitcoms that become comfort viewing in syndication—entertainment TV delivers consistent, predictable reach across diverse audiences at pricing that reflects fundamental market inefficiency.

The Entertainment TV Taxonomy

The entertainment landscape spans a diverse range of formats and genres, each with distinct audience appeal and viewing patterns.

The breadth of this taxonomy matters for advertisers because different genres concentrate different audience segments—and smart targeting means finding where specific audiences over-index while costs remain attractive.



Entertainment TV Taxonomy with Representative Examples

DRAMA

Procedural Drama:

- **Crime/Police** — NCIS; Law & Order; Blue Bloods; FBI
- **Medical** — Grey's Anatomy; The Good Doctor; ER; Chicago Med
- **Legal** — Suits; The Lincoln Lawyer; Perry Mason

Serial/Prestige Drama:

- **Character-driven** — Mad Men; Breaking Bad; This Is Us; Yellowstone
- **Period pieces** — Downton Abbey
- **Mystery/Thriller** — True Detective; The Sinner

Soap Operas:

- **Daytime serials** — Days of Our Lives; The Young and the Restless; General Hospital

TALK, VARIETY & LATE NIGHT

Daytime Talk

- **Celebrity/Entertainment** — The Kelly Clarkson Show; The Jennifer Hudson Show
- **Issue-oriented** — The View; The Talk

Late Night

- **Traditional format** — The Tonight Show; The Late Show; Jimmy Kimmel Live
- **Alternative formats** — The Daily Show; Last Week Tonight

Competition Variety

— America's Got Talent

REALITY TV

Game Shows (Studio-based):

- **Quiz shows** — Jeopardy!; Wheel of Fortune; Who Wants to Be a Millionaire
- **Physical/puzzle** — The Floor; The Wall; Deal or No Deal
- **Classic revivals** — The Price Is Right; Family Feud; Match Game

Competition — Performance/Skill:

- **Survival/Strategy** — Survivor; The Amazing Race; Big Brother
- **Singing** — The Voice; American Idol; The Masked Singer
- **Dance** — Dancing with the Stars; So You Think You Can Dance
- **Drag** — RuPaul's Drag Race
- **Culinary** — Top Chef; MasterChef; Hell's Kitchen; Chopped
- **Design/Creative** — Project Runway; Making It

Lifestyle & Documentary Reality:

- **Social/Relationship** — Real Housewives; Kardashians; Vanderpump Rules
- **Home Improvement** — Fixer Upper; Property Brothers; Love It or List It
- **Lifestyle Documentary** — Antiques Roadshow; Pawn Stars
- **Instructional/Educational Cooking** — America's Test Kitchen, Good Eats, Barefoot Contessa
- **Travel Documentary** — Anthony Bourdain: No Reservations/Parts Unknown; Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives

Dating/Romance Reality

— The Bachelor/Bachelorette; Love Island; Married at First Sight

COMEDY

Sitcoms:

- **Multi-camera** — The Big Bang Theory; Young Sheldon; Mom
- **Single-camera** — Modern Family; Abbott Elementary

Sketch Comedy

— Saturday Night Live; In Living Color

SCRIPTED GENRES

Science Fiction/Fantasy:

- The X-Files; Resident Alien

Action/Adventure

- Hawaii Five-O; MacGyver

Horror/Supernatural

- The Walking Dead; American Horror Story

DOCUMENTARY SERIES

News Magazine

- 48 Hours; 20/20; Dateline NBC (True Crime-y)
- 48 Hours; 20/20

Nature/Science:

- Planet Earth; Shark Week Shows; Life Below Zero

Historical

- American Experience; Ancient Aliens

ADULT ANIMATION

- The Simpsons; Family Guy; South Park; Bob's Burgers
- Rick and Morty; King of the Hill; American Dad

The Evolution of Entertainment TV

From the 1970s through today, entertainment television has woven itself into the fabric of American collective memory through milestone debuts and cultural moments that entire generations experienced simultaneously.

The premieres of shows like *All in the Family*, *The Cosby Show*, *Friends*, and *The Office* became shared reference points that defined eras, while event programming like the 1983 *M*A*S*H* finale (106 million viewers!) created water-cooler moments that transcended the screen.



The TV landscape has fundamentally transformed as the medium fragmented from three dominant broadcast networks into hundreds of cable channels and streaming services, splintering audiences into ever-smaller segments.

Yet long-running entertainment franchises have demonstrated remarkable staying power even as they evolve—*Law & Order* has spawned multiple iterations across decades, *The Bachelor* franchise has expanded into a multi-night programming empire, and competition formats like *The Voice* or *Survivor* have become institutions that reinvent themselves season after season.

These enduring series accumulate outsize cultural influence as they persist across years or even decades. The following pages highlight selected milestone moments mapping the evolution of the major entertainment TV genres — Drama, Comedy, and Variety/Reality, from the 1970s to present.

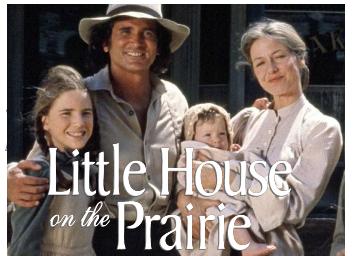
Enjoy the trip down memory lane... and sorry if we missed your favorites!

Entertainment TV – Drama – Representative Milestones – 1970-present

1970s



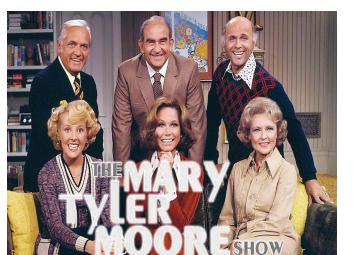
1972-1983, NBC
Multi-year #1 show,
106MM viewer finale



1974-1983, NBC
Era-defining
family drama



1968-2003, NBC
Revolutionary detective
format, Emmy wins



1970-1977, CBS
Groundbreaking work-
place drama, 29 Emmys

1980s



1978-1991, CBS
#1 show 1980-1985;
"Who Shot J.R.?" craze



1984-1990, NBC
Iconic visuals and use of
cars, fashion & music



1981-1987, NBC
26 Emmys; redefined
police drama genre



1982-1988, NBC
"Hill Street Blues" in a
hospital; critical acclaim
but ratings-challenged

1990s



1994-2009, NBC
#1 for 6 years; launched
G. Clooney (& N. Wylie)



1993-2002 & 2018, Fox
Cult conspiracy classic;
nerd "event TV"



1993-2005, ABC
20 Emmys; pushed
content boundaries



1990-2010 & 2022- NBC
Novel 2-part format;
earworm theme sound;
franchise still running

2000s



2000-2015, CBS
#1 2002-2005; spawned
massive franchise



2005-present, ABC
Cultural juggernaut;
longest ABC drama



2004-2010, ABC
Event television; cultural
obsession



2004-2012, Fox
Acerbic addict lead; 5
Emmys; international hit

2010s



2010-2022, AMC
Cable ratings record;
17M+ @ peak; franchise



2003-present, CBS
#1 drama for multiple
years; consistent 15M+
viewers



2016-2022, NBC
Emmy winner; cultural
phenomenon



2015-2020, Fox
Hip-hop drama; massive
debut (26M viewers)

2020-25



2018-present,
Paramount
Cable phenomenon;
15M+ viewers



2018-present, CBS
Top 10 drama; spawned
franchise



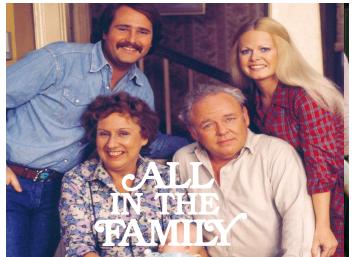
2021-present, CBS
Reboot hit; 8M+ viewers



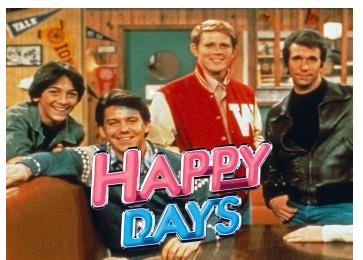
2010-2024, CBS
Iconic police family
drama; *Boston Blue*
spinoff still on CBS

Entertainment TV – Comedy – Representative Milestones—1970-present

1970s



1971-1979, CBS
#1 show for 5 consecutive years; 20+ Emmy Awards



1974-1984, ABC
Beat All in the Family in 1976-77 season



1972-1977, NBC
Top 10 sitcom; cultural groundbreaker



1972-1978, CBS
Critical darling; sophisticated comedy

1980s



1984-1992, NBC
#1 show for 5 consecutive seasons; 23M-35M viewers



1982-1993, NBC
28 Emmy Awards; 93M viewers for finale



1982-1989, NBC
Top 5 show; launched Michael J. Fox career

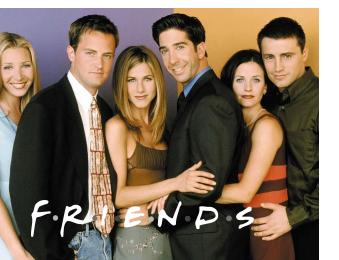


1985-1992, NBC
11 Emmy Awards; groundbreaking casting

1990s



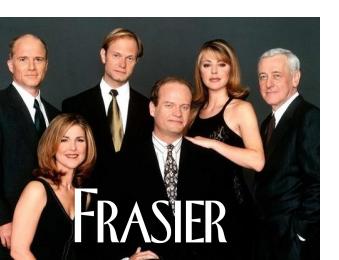
1989-1998, NBC
Cultural juggernaut; 76M viewers for finale



1994-2004, NBC
Defined generation; massive cultural impact



1991-1999, ABC
#1 sitcom in mid-90s; 35M viewers at peak



1993-2004, NBC
37 Emmy Awards; most-awarded comedy ever

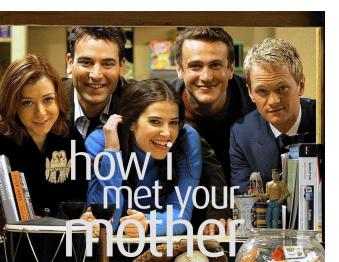
2000s



2007-2019, CBS
Longtime #1 comedy; 20M+ viewers at peak; created franchise



2005-2013, NBC
Cultural phenomenon; career-launcher; lives as streaming giant



2005-2014, CBS
Generation-defining; 13M finale viewers



2013-2021, NBC/Fox
Critical acclaim; Emmy winner



2006-2013, NBC
16 Emmys; critical darling; meme generator

2010s



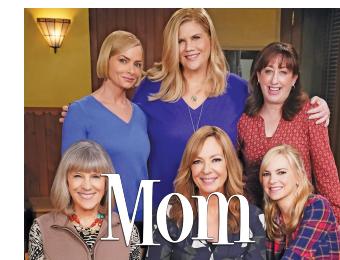
2017-2024, CBS
Spin-off hit; reliable ratings



2009-2020, ABC
22 Emmys; generation-defining family representation



2013-2021, NBC/Fox
Critical acclaim; Emmy winner



2013-2021, CBS
8-season run; consistent performer

2020-25



2017-2024, CBS
Young Sheldon sequel; solid ratings



2021-present, ABC
Emmy winner; broad appeal; critical darling



2021-present, CBS
Breakout hit; 7M+ viewers



2018-2024, ABC
Roseanne continuation; consistent performer

Entertainment TV – Variety / Reality – Representative Milestones – 1970-present

1970s



1962-1992, NBC
Defined late-night variety format



1968-present, CBS
News magazine that became appointment viewing



1975-present, NBC
Revolutionary sketch comedy; cultural institution



1975-present, ABC
Today Show (1952->) competitor; expanded morning variety genre

1980s



1982-1993, NBC
1993-2015, CBS
Redefined late-night talk format; network transition



1979-present, ABC
Born in Iran hostage crisis; first late-night news



1989-1974, NBC
Showcased unique people, not stars



(1989-2020, Fox/Spike) -
Long-running reality documentary

1990s



1992-2019, MTV
Reality TV pioneer; contemporary YA issues



1989-present, ABC
Family reality entertainment



1995-2007, MTV
Travel/adventure reality pioneer; *Real World* sib



1999-present, ABC
Global franchise, revived genre in prime

2000s



2000-present; CBS
Competition reality pioneer; cultural phenomenon; local fans



2002-2016, Fox;
2018-present, ABC
#1 show for 8 consecutive years; dominated decade



2006-present, Bravo
Culinary competition; Emmy winner



(2001-present, CBS) -
15 Emmy Awards for Best Reality-Competition

2010s



2005-present, ABC
International franchise; moved to streaming (2022) then back to broadcast



2006-present, NBC
Long-running summer ratings powerhouse



2011-present, NBC
Dominated decade; Emmy winner



(2002-present, ABC) -
Dating franchise phenomenon

2020-25



2019-present, Fox
Massive ratings hit; cultural phenomenon



2020-present, Fox
Multigenerational appeal; natural product integration



2018-2021, NBC
Parks & Recreation stars host creative competition reality



2023-present, ABC
Audience extension spinoff; ratings success

Why People Watch: The Psychology of Entertainment Viewing

People don't watch entertainment TV by accident.

They choose it deliberately because it delivers specific psychological and social benefits that other content types can't match:

Escapism and relaxation provide temporary relief from daily stress and cognitive demands.

After a difficult workday, viewers actively seek entertainment that lets them disconnect—whether that's losing themselves in a drama's narrative world or enjoying the low-stakes pleasure of a cooking competition.

Emotional engagement creates powerful connections with characters, storylines, and outcomes. Viewers don't just watch—they care.

They root for contestants on *The Voice*, worry about characters in serialized dramas, and experience genuine emotional responses that create memorable associations with brands appearing in those contexts.

Social connection drives much entertainment viewing behavior. Water cooler conversations, social media discussion threads, and shared viewing experiences (both physical co-viewing and virtual) turn individual consumption into communal experience.

The pressure to "stay current" with popular shows creates appointment viewing behavior that rivals sports for live/same-day concentration.

Ritual and comfort make entertainment TV a reliable presence in viewers' lives.

Weekly viewing routines, comfort re-watching of familiar favorites in syndication, and seasonal program cycles create habitual viewing patterns that deliver predictable reach for advertisers who understand these rhythms.

Primary Viewing Motivations for Entertainment TV

Need State	ESCAPE	RELAXATION	ENTERTAINMENT	SHARED EXPERIENCE	COMPANIONSHIP	PASSING TIME / DISTRACTION
Description	<i>Immersion in quality content and different worlds</i>	<i>Unwinding and reducing tension after demanding days</i>	<i>Pleasure-seeking and emotional experiences</i>	<i>Social connection and cultural participation</i>	<i>Addressing loneliness and creating ambient presence</i>	<i>Filling gaps and avoiding boredom</i>
What it delivers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Temporary relief from daily stress and worries Absorption in narrative worlds distinct from real life Highest sense of personal engagement with content 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mental downtime, cognitive relief, mood improvement, stress reduction Comfort through familiar, predictable content Low-effort entertainment consumption 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enjoyment and mood management Emotional connection to characters and stories Varied emotional experiences across genres 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shared viewing experiences with co-viewers Collective participation in current cultural moments Topics for social conversation ("water cooler" discussions) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sense of connection when alone Familiar voices and characters as "company" Parasocial relationships with recurring characters 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Instant gratification to fill empty moments Alternative to being alone with thoughts Punctuation of waiting periods or transitions
Viewing behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creates impetus to watch at first opportunity (live TV) Particularly strong for younger audiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Preference for comedy, light entertainment, familiar dramas Viewers happily re-watch programs they've seen before 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Active selection based on mood and desired emotional state Genre preferences reflect personality and life stage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Drives appointment viewing & creates urgency to avoid spoilers Generates social media discussion during/after viewing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Preference for familiar programs and personalities Talk shows, sitcoms, and procedural formats work well 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Flexible viewing across devices and platforms Particularly prevalent among younger viewers with more free time
Entertainment TV advantage	Excels at this need state through high-quality programming and serialized storytelling	Broadcaster TV is most likely to fulfill this need state	Core strength; primary reason TV viewing remains "entrenched in our lives"	Live TV and first-run content excel; creates cultural currency	Serialized formats build ongoing "relationships" between viewers and characters	Episodic, repeatable formats make it easy to dip in and out across dayparts

Source: Based on Thinkbox/MTM Research: "The Age of Television: The Needs That Drive Us" and other academic research; summary compiled by Anthropic Claude

These motivations matter because they explain entertainment TV's engagement levels and appointment viewing behavior—attributes advertisers typically associate only with sports, but which entertainment programming delivers at significantly lower CPMs.

Motivations and Benefits – Entertainment TV vs. Other Content Types

Entertainment TV vs. Other Content Types

Viewing Motivation	Entertainment TV	Sports	News
Escape & Immersion	★★★★★ Strongest	★★★★☆ Moderate	★★☆☆☆ Weak
Relaxation	★★★★★ Strongest	★★★★☆ Moderate	★★☆☆☆ Weak
Entertainment	★★★★★ Primary purpose	★★★★☆ High	★★★★☆ Moderate
Shared Experience	★★★★☆ Strong	★★★★★ Strongest	★★★★☆ Strong
Information Seeking	★★☆☆☆ Low	★★★★☆ Moderate	★★★★★ Primary purpose
Companionship	★★★★★ Very Strong	★★★★☆ Moderate	★★☆☆☆ Low

Source: Based on Thinkbox/MTM Research: "The Age of Television: The Needs That Drive Us"

The Scale of the Opportunity

Entertainment TV isn't a niche. It's the foundation of television viewership. Even as sports' share has grown from roughly 13% in 2013 to 19% in 2024, entertainment programming still accounts for approximately 64% of all TV viewing. That's not just volume—it's massive, diversified reach across networks, dayparts, and audience segments.

The network landscape itself tells the story of entertainment TV's breadth. Broad-appeal networks like USA, TBS, and TNT deliver general entertainment across genres. Targeted networks concentrate specific audience interests—Food Network for cooking enthusiasts, HGTV for home improvement fans, Bravo for reality devotees.

But critically, most viewers don't limit themselves to single networks or genres. They sample across the landscape, watching procedural dramas one night and reality competition the next, creating multiple efficient touchpoints for advertisers who understand how to aggregate this dispersed viewing behavior.



Top Entertainment Networks by Reach

Showing sustained reach of major entertainment networks despite overall viewing fragmentation

This diversity creates opportunity: while sports inventory concentrates demand (and drives up pricing), entertainment programming disperses audiences across dozens of networks and hundreds of programs—many of which deliver strong audience concentration at pricing that doesn't reflect their targeting value.

The challenge isn't finding entertainment TV inventory. It's using data to identify which specific programs and networks over-deliver against specific target audiences—and building reach efficiently by aggregating those undervalued opportunities.

That strategic approach—defining precise audiences, finding where they concentrate in entertainment programming, and building reach through smart aggregation—is how sophisticated advertisers extract maximum value from entertainment TV's scale and efficiency.

The next sections examine exactly who watches entertainment programming, how they watch it, and where the pricing inefficiency creates arbitrage opportunity.

Top 20 Entertainment Cable Networks
October 2025



2: WHO Watches Entertainment TV?

The Breadth of the Audience

Entertainment TV's reach advantage starts with a simple fact: it attracts everyone. Unlike sports programming, which concentrates heavily among specific demographics (particularly men 18-49 and 50+), entertainment programming delivers reach across age groups, genders, and household types.

This breadth creates strategic flexibility.

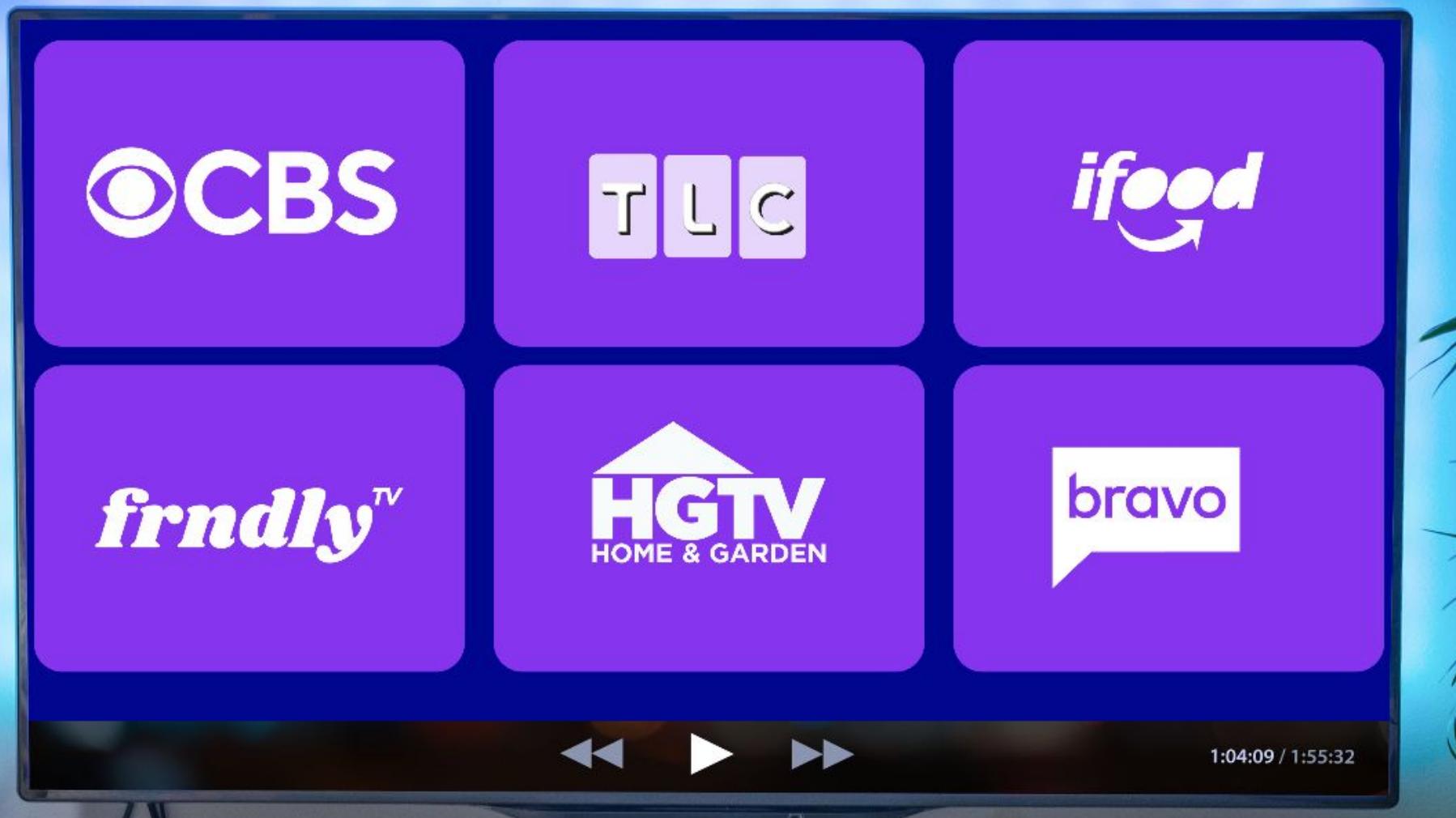
Procedural dramas like *NCIS* and *Law & Order* deliver strong reach among adults 50+.

Competition reality like *The Voice* and *Survivor* attract younger-skewing audiences alongside older viewers.

Game shows pull entire families. Late-night talk both young adults and older viewers.

Food Network and HGTV deliver strong concentration among women 25-54.

The diversity of content creates multiple entry points for reaching specific audience segments—often with several programs per week delivering strong concentration against any given target.



The cable era accelerated this segmentation. Networks like Food Network, HGTV, Bravo, and TLC emerged specifically to serve viewer interests that broadcast networks couldn't efficiently address. These specialized networks don't just deliver niche audiences—they deliver passionate, engaged viewers who choose that content deliberately. A marketer targeting home improvement enthusiasts doesn't need to guess where those viewers concentrate. They're watching HGTV. And that concentration creates targeting efficiency that generic daypart buying can't match.

Also, most entertainment viewers don't limit themselves to single networks or genres. The person watching *Property Brothers* on HGTV also watches procedural dramas on USA, reality competition on CBS, and late-night talk on NBC. Entertainment viewing is sampling behavior—audiences move across networks and genres based on what's on, what they're in the mood for, and what creates must-see moments.

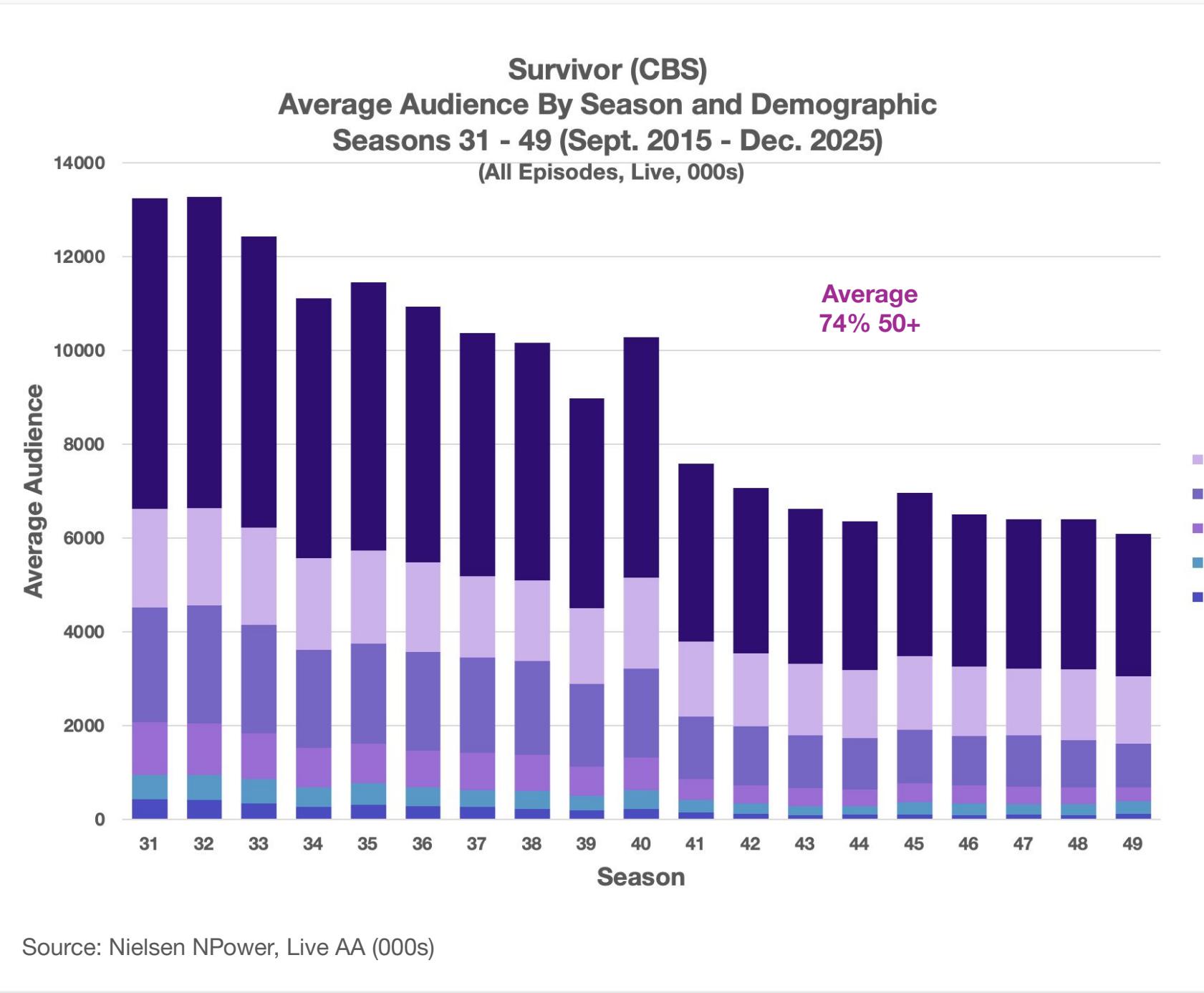
And unlike live sports programming, which is stale as soon as it airs, much entertainment programming lives on for years or even decades in reruns and syndication, extending its reach and cultural significance to new audiences on additional channels over time.

These sampling patterns creates opportunity for advertisers who understand how to aggregate reach efficiently. Rather than concentrating spend in a few high-profile (and high-cost) programs, smart buyers identify where specific target audiences over-index across dozens of programs and networks, then build reach by aggregating those undervalued touchpoints. The strategy isn't about finding the single perfect program. It's about using audience data to find the 30-50 programs per week where a target audience concentrates—and buying them all at efficient pricing.

Audience Evolution

Entertainment audiences have evolved significantly over the past decade, shaped by technology changes and shifting viewing habits. DVRs made it easier to keep up with serialized programming without the anxiety of missing episodes. Streaming services trained younger viewers to expect on-demand access. And the rise of cord-cutting concentrated linear TV viewing among older, more traditional audiences.

These shifts have resulted in a significant decline in linear TV viewing overall, as viewers have shifted to streaming. But popular shows retain significant audiences — the average live + same day audience for *Survivor* on CBS remains over 5 million — a substantial chunk of simultaneous engaged viewers. For many audiences, entertainment TV remains the most efficient baseline source of reach.

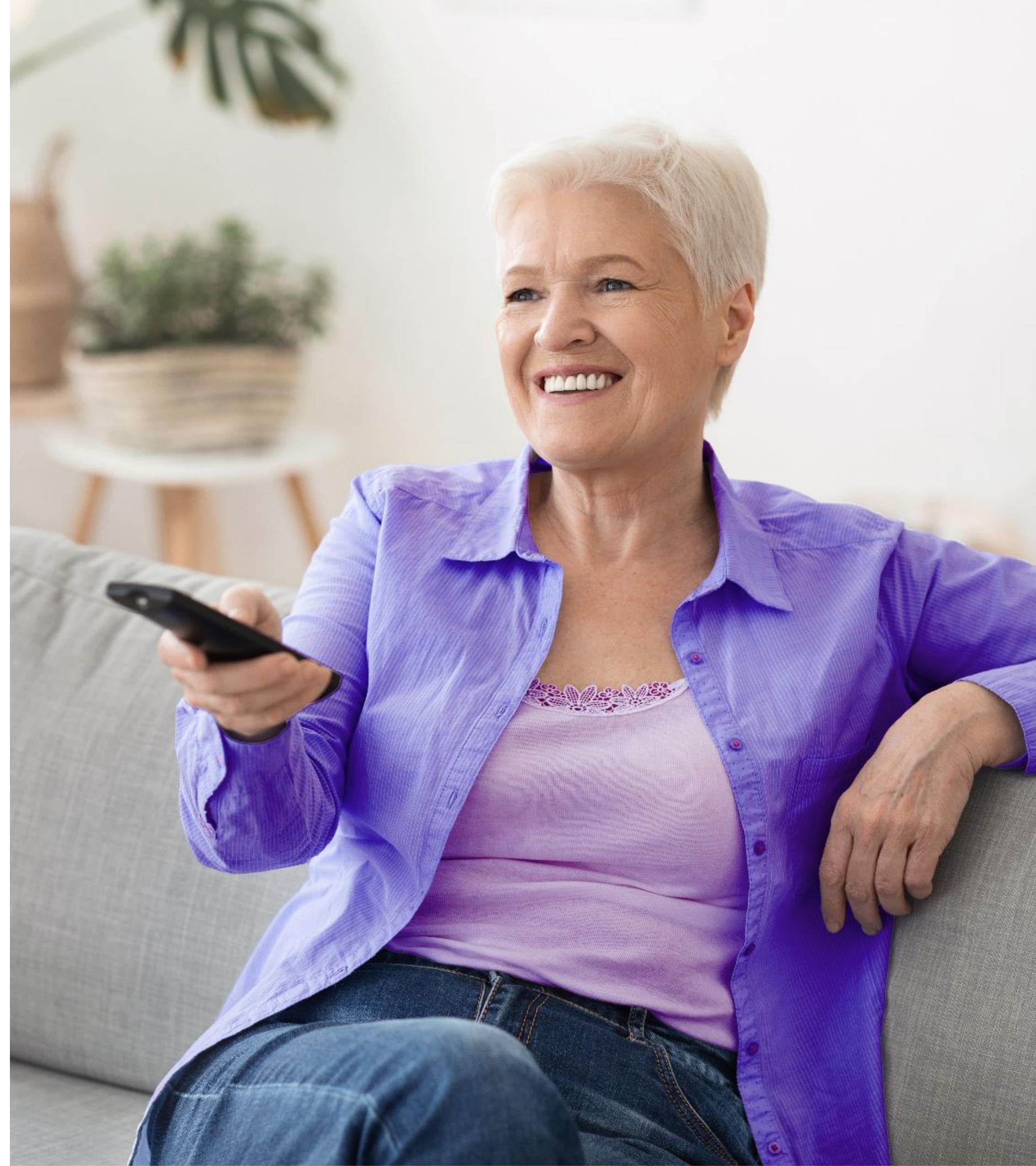


Entertainment TV Retains Value

These demographic and viewership shifts don't diminish entertainment TV's value—they clarify it. Linear entertainment programming now delivers strongly among adults 50+, [a demographic with significant purchasing power and lower digital media consumption.](#)

But perhaps the most important audience insight isn't about who watches entertainment versus sports. It's about overlap. Sports audiences are also entertainment audiences. The person watching *Sunday Night Football* also watches *NCIS*, *Survivor*, and late-night talk shows. This overlap creates strategic opportunity: entertainment programming delivers reach against the same audiences sports reaches—but at half the CPM. Smart reach strategies start with entertainment's efficiency, then layer sports selectively for cultural moments and visibility.

For brands building reach efficiently, this audience concentration creates targeting opportunity: you can reach adults 50+ through entertainment programming at CPMs significantly below what you'd pay in sports or through digital channels attempting to reach the same demographic. Other channels can be used to fill in additional reach.



3: HOW Audiences Watch: Engagement and Loyalty

The Appointment Viewing Phenomenon

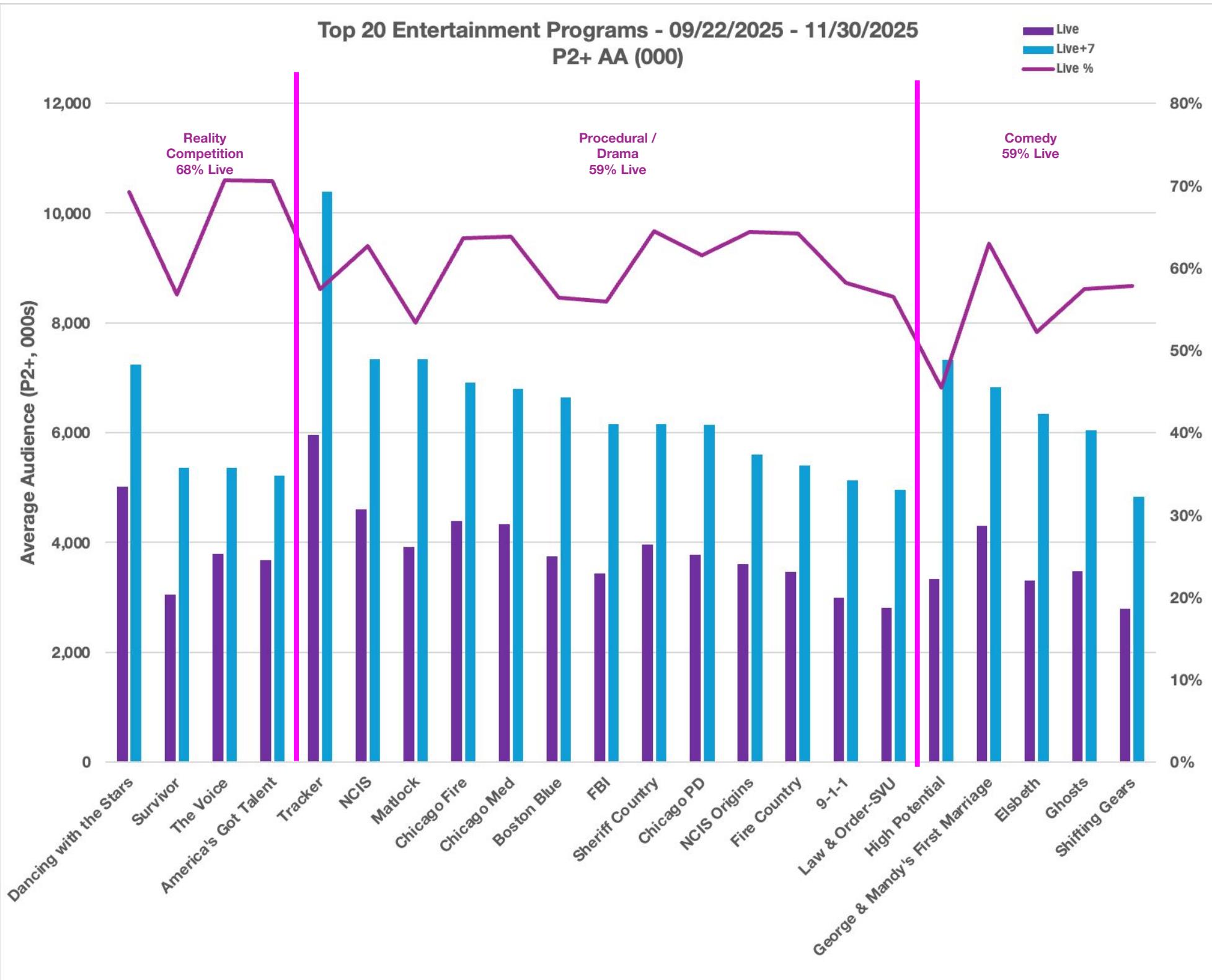
The conventional wisdom says DVRs and streaming killed appointment viewing outside of sports and news. The data tell a different story. Certain entertainment programming—particularly competition reality and serialized dramas—maintains remarkably high live and same-day viewing rates because audiences actively choose to watch in real (or near-real) time.

Take *Survivor* as the canonical example. After 47 seasons and nearly 25 years on the air, *Survivor* still delivers millions of viewers who watch live on Wednesday nights. Why? Because waiting means spoilers. Social media makes it nearly impossible to avoid learning who got voted off if you delay viewing. Workplace conversations happen Thursday morning. The communal experience of watching together—even if "together" means posting reactions on social media in real time—creates value that time-shifted viewing can't match.

This behavior extends across competition reality programming. *The Voice*, *The Masked Singer*, *Dancing with the Stars*, *Big Brother*, *The Bachelor*—these shows drive live and next-day viewing because the social experience matters and spoilers spread instantly. Even when streaming options exist, linear viewing often happens first because streaming services typically release reality competition episodes next-day rather than live. Linear TV gets first crack at the engaged, attentive audience.



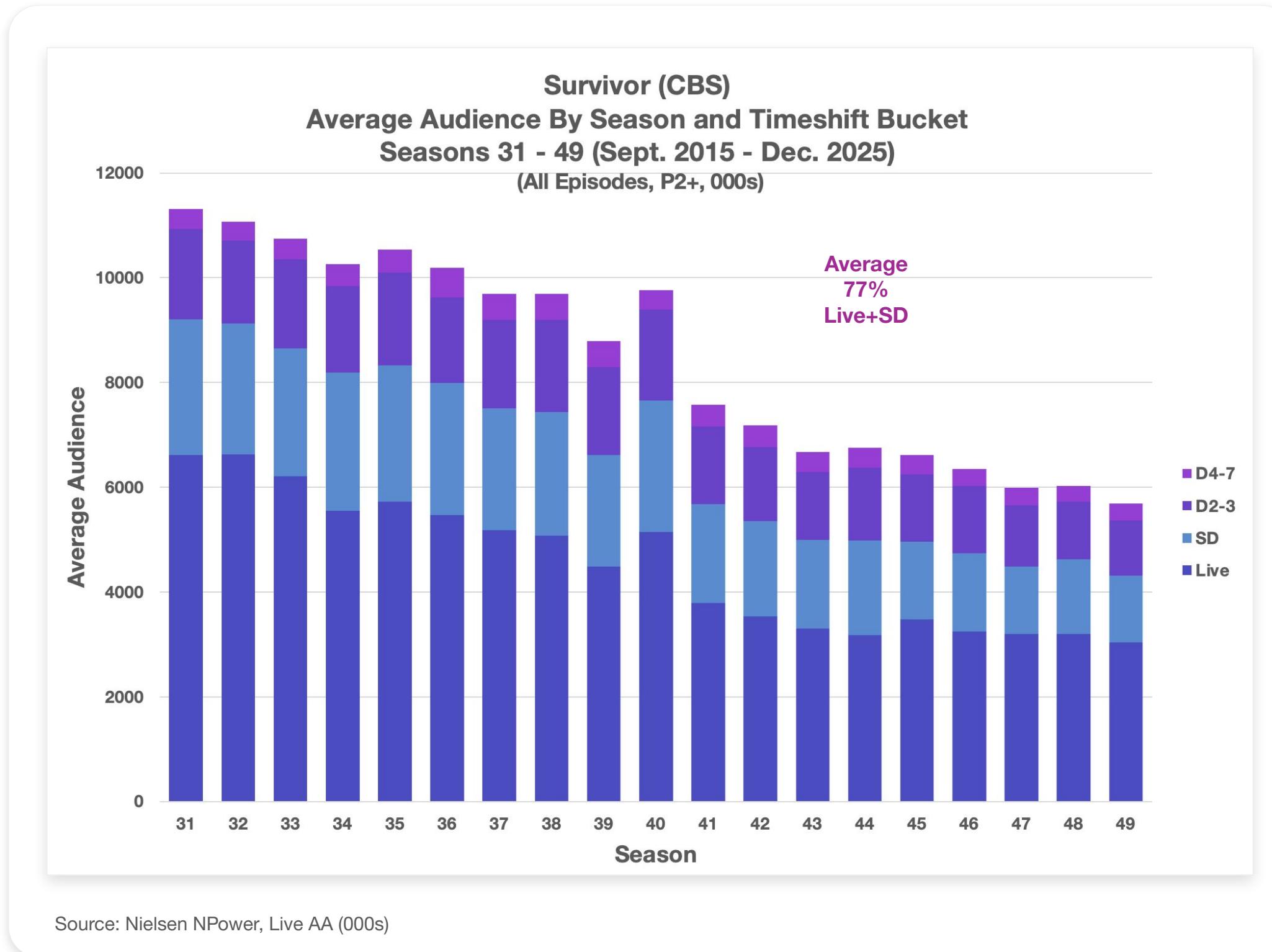
Entertainment Programming is Usually Viewed Live



The viewing distribution reveals the pattern: nearly 70% of competition reality shows viewing is live. And live viewing accounts for almost 60% for primetime dramas and comedy programs.

This concentration creates advertising value. Brands reach audiences when they're engaged, paying attention, and experiencing the programming as a shared cultural moment.

Reality Competition Shows: The Sports of Entertainment TV?



In particular, reality competition shows (***Survivor, Dancing with the Stars, The Voice, Top Chef, etc.***) offer similar levels of engagement, loyalty, and especially in live viewership, helping to build reach quickly.

That's fundamentally different from reaching fragmented audiences across a week of time-shifted viewing (which has different but also significant value in building reach and frequency).

The Water Cooler Effect Persists

Beyond competition reality, certain serialized dramas have maintained appointment viewing behavior through strategic content design.

AMC pioneered this approach with *Mad Men*, *Breaking Bad*, and *The Walking Dead*—creating "must-discuss" programming that drove Sunday and Monday night concentration. Viewers didn't want to miss the conversation. They didn't want spoilers showing up in their social media feeds. They wanted to be part of the cultural moment.

Network television understood this decades ago. *M*A*S*H*, *Dallas*, and primetime soap operas built massive audiences through cliffhangers, shocking plot twists, and season-ending events that made delayed viewing feel like social exclusion. "Who shot J.R.?" became a cultural touchstone because 76% of American TVs tuned in to find out together.

The mechanics have changed—social media replaced water coolers—but the psychology remains the same.





Longer Arcs; Loyal Viewers

Procedural dramas and sitcoms operate differently. Shows like *NCIS*, *Young Sheldon*, and *Ghosts* deliver comfort and consistency rather than appointment urgency. Each episode is relatively self-contained and major story arcs happen slowly over time. Their viewing curves show more time-shifting and DVR usage. But this pattern doesn't indicate lower value—it indicates different value. These programs deliver reliable weekly reach, building frequency against target audiences who return consistently even if they watch on their own schedule. And lifestyle reality shows like *America's Test Kitchen* and *Property Brothers* have built large libraries of episodes across many seasons that can be watched in a modular fashion live or binged via broadcast marathons, on-demand or via DVR.

The strategic implication: entertainment TV offers multiple engagement models, each creating different advertising opportunities. Competition reality delivers concentrated, engaged, appointment viewing. Serialized dramas drive cultural conversation and next-day viewing. Procedural programming builds consistent weekly reach. Library content draws narrower audiences on longer-tail networks. Understanding these patterns allows advertisers to match content strategy to campaign objectives—using appointment programming for launches and urgency, procedural programming for sustained reach-building.

4. WHY the Pricing Disconnect Creates Opportunity

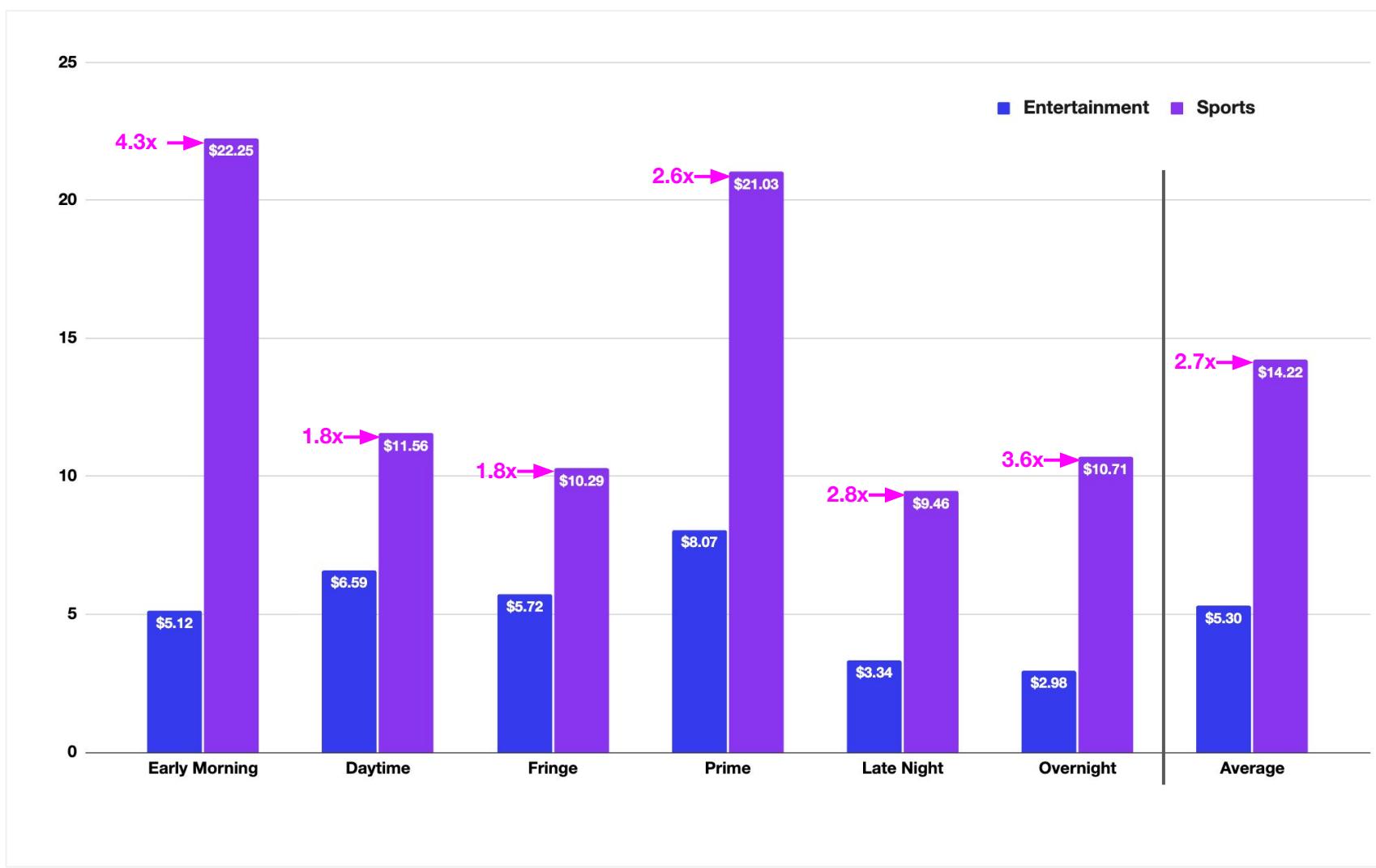
The Efficiency Gap

Here's where market psychology creates arbitrage opportunity.

Entertainment programming delivers 64% of TV viewing, reaches diverse audiences, and maintains strong engagement through appointment viewing and cultural moments.

Yet it trades at roughly half the CPM of sports programming.

Indicative Household CPM for Entertainment and Sports Networks by Daypart



Source: Simulmedia data, 2026 forecast, unweighted average across networks in each category

The numbers are stark.

Premium sports inventory—NFL, major college football, NBA—commands \$60-100+ persons-level CPMs. Marquee events like the Super Bowl or playoff games reach multiples of that. Meanwhile, entertainment programming delivering comparable audience size and composition trades at \$25-35 CPMs.

Both reach adults 25-54.

Both deliver attention.

Both create brand exposure.

But actual household CPM data (shown at left) show one costs twice as much or more.

This pricing gap isn't new, but it has widened over the past decade as advertiser demand concentrated in sports while entertainment inventory remained relatively efficient. The gap exists not because entertainment delivers inferior results, but because of perception. Sports feels premium. The CEO likes it. It's defensible in board meetings. It generates headlines.

Entertainment feels... ordinary. And ordinary doesn't command premium pricing, **even when it delivers premium results.**

What Drives the Gap?

Three factors sustain this pricing inefficiency:



Advertiser psychology treats sports as strategically important and entertainment as functional media buying. CMOs want to tell boards they sponsored the NFL.

They want the cultural cachet of marquee events. Entertainment buys don't generate the same executive excitement, even when they deliver better reach ROI.

This psychological premium gets built into pricing—sports commands scarcity pricing not just because demand exceeds supply, but because advertisers assign strategic value beyond pure audience delivery.

Buyer behavior concentrates demand in sports because that's where budgets and attention flow. Media agencies staff up for sports negotiations. Brands earmark sports budgets separately from general TV spending.

This concentrated demand creates artificial scarcity—not because sports inventory is genuinely scarce, but because too many advertisers chase the same marquee placements.

Entertainment inventory remains abundant and underpriced because fewer sophisticated buyers compete for it.

Market fragmentation disperses entertainment audiences across dozens of networks and hundreds of programs while sports concentrates audiences in tentpole events.

This fragmentation requires more sophisticated buying—using audience data to identify and aggregate undervalued inventory rather than simply buying the most visible placements.

Brands without that analytical capability default to sports' simplicity, leaving entertainment efficiency for those who can execute programmatically.

The Strategic Implications

The pricing disconnect creates clear strategic opportunity: entertainment TV delivers efficient reach foundation that sports can't match. For brands building reach cost-effectively, the playbook reverses the traditional sports-first approach:



Start with entertainment programming as reach foundation. Use audience data to identify where target audiences concentrate across entertainment inventory.

Aggregate these placements to create a foundation to deliver the broad penetration that drives brand growth, achieving 60-70% target reach at significantly lower total cost than sports-first strategies.

Layer sports selectively for visibility and cultural moments. Once an efficient reach foundation is established, add sports placements strategically, targeting specific marquee events that deliver cultural presence and brand visibility.

This both/and approach delivers higher total reach at lower cost than exhausting budgets on expensive sports inventory before building entertainment reach.

Measure and optimize on reach efficiency, not prestige. Track cost per reach point, not just cost per impression. Recognize that reaching the same person through entertainment programming costs half what sports does.

That efficiency compounds: the same budget builds 40-50% more reach through entertainment-first strategies than through sports-first approaches, capturing the pricing gap's full value.

5. SO WHAT? The Entertainment-First Playbook

Foundation Before Visibility

Focusing on visibility before establishing a reach foundation is inefficient.



- The traditional TV buying approach starts with sports and news—securing marquee placements first, then filling remaining budget with entertainment programming.
- This sports-first strategy makes psychological sense (boards want to hear about NFL sponsorships) but delivers poor reach economics. It exhausts budget on expensive inventory before building efficient foundation.
- In other words, thinking back to the discussion of the [“reach jar”](#), overinvesting in a few marquee sporting events might make the boss happy, but other strategies may fill more jar for the same budget.

The data-driven approach inverts this priority:

Step 1:

Define precise audiences beyond demographics.
Move past broad "Adults 25-54" targets to behavioral and attitudinal segmentation. Who are the actual people you need to reach? What do they watch? Where do they concentrate? Modern audience targeting enables precision that makes entertainment TV's diversity an advantage rather than a challenge. You're not buying broad dayparts—you're buying specific audience concentrations wherever they appear.



Step 2:

Build reach foundation through entertainment programming. Use audience data to identify the 30-50 entertainment programs per week where your target audience over-indexes. Aggregate these placements to build 60-70% reach at \$25-35 CPMs. This foundation delivers broad penetration efficiently, ensuring your brand achieves mental availability across the category. The goal isn't sexy placements—it's reaching enough of your target audience enough times to drive business outcomes (as discussed in [Paper 2-Why Reach Matters](#))



Step 3:

Layer sports selectively for cultural presence.
Once efficient foundation is established, add sports placements strategically. Target specific marquee events that deliver visibility, cultural conversation, and brand prestige. Use sports not as primary reach vehicle but as enhancement—the placements that generate executive excitement and PR value while entertainment programming delivers the actual reach efficiency.



Step 4:

Manage frequency holistically.
Track reach and frequency across entertainment and sports placements combined. Avoid overexposure in sports while underdelivering reach through entertainment. The goal is optimal frequency distribution—reaching as many people as possible 3-5 times per week, not reaching sports audiences 10 times while missing entertainment concentrations.

Finding Sports Viewers on Entertainment TV

Premium sports programming can provide significant same-day reach. But as shown at right, that same audience can be reached in long-tail entertainment programming with **double the reach for the same budget** over a month.

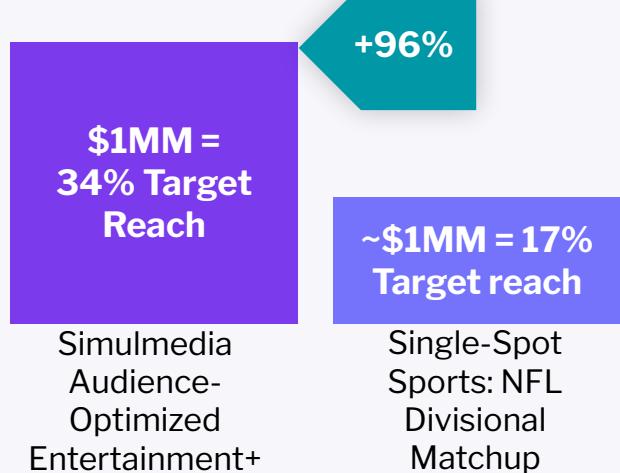
While long-tail entertainment may not replace the marquee value, attention profile, and quick reach build of premium sports, it can reach the same audiences more efficiently.

A data-driven both/and strategy that allocates at least some budget to long-tail entertainment can bring a significant bump in both reach and efficiency compared to sports-only investment.

Plan Comparison: Sports Viewer Audience on Entertainment Programming

Campaign Comparison Active Sports Viewer Target

Target = MRI: Consistent NFL or NBA viewer – 61MM people, 18.79% of P2+



	Long-Tail Entertainment+	Marquee Sports
BUDGET	\$1M	~\$1M(est)
NETWORKS	79	1.
SPOTS	2,210	1*
FLIGHT	1 Month	1 Day
% REACH	34%	17%

*1x :30 FOX NFL Divisional Round Spot

1/18/25 – 11:03 PM

Washington Commanders at Detroit Lions

Spend Across 79 Entertainment+ Networks



Longer-tail Buying Requires Smarter Allocation

This table shows how the proposed budget allocation across 79 entertainment networks achieves **double the reach** against the **same audience of active sports viewers** compared to a single spot in marquee sports programming.

If budget permits, such a buy could be combined with the sports spot to increase campaign reach while controlling frequency.

Percentage of Budget Allocation by Network
Active Sports Viewer Target
Simulmedia Audience-Optimized Entertainment+ Plan

 AETV	<1%	 COOK	<1%	 FYI	<1%	 JUST	<1%	 NMX	<1%	 TBS	1%		
 AHC	1%	 COTV	1%	 GRIT	GRIT	3%	 LAFF	1%	 OVATION	1%	 TLC	TLC	<1%
 ANTENNA	1%	 COZ	1%	 GSN	7%	 LOGO	LOGO	<1%	 OXYGEN	2%	 TNT	TNT	<1%
 BBCA	<1%	 DAM	<1%	 HALL	<1%	 MAG	1%	 POP	1%	 MTV	TNZ	<1%	
 BET	<1%	 DLIF	<1%	 HALLMOV	5%	 MET	9%	 RFDTV	<1%	 TRAVEL	<1%		
 BOOMER-ANG	<1%	 FETV	FETV	 HGTV	<1%	 MOTOR TREND	3%	 ROR	<1%	 TV LAND	1%		
 CARTOON	<1%	 FOOD	<1%	 HI	2%	 MSNBC	11%	 SCIENCE	<1%	 TWC	<1%		
 CATCHY COMEDY	1%	 FOX BUSINESS	<1%	 HLDRM	1%	 MYS	<1%	 SMITH	<1%	 UP	1%		
 CMTV	<1%	 FOXNEWS	5%	 HLN	5%	 NATGEO	1%	 STORY	1%	 VH1	<1%		
 CNBC	1%	 FX	<1%	 ID	1%	 NATGEO WILD	<1%	 STV	<1%	 WE	<1%		
 CNN	17%	 FXX	<1%	 INSP	7%	 NEWS NATION	2%	 SUND	1%				

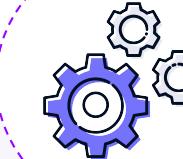
Source Simulmedia TV+ platform

What This Strategy Delivers

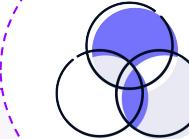
Entertainment-first buying delivers measurable advantages:



40-50% or more additional reach per dollar compared to sports-first approaches. The same budget achieves significantly higher target audience penetration.



Flexible optimization across dozens of networks and hundreds of programs. Rather than depending on a few marquee sports events, entertainment-first strategies distribute across diversified inventory that can be shifted, optimized, and scaled based on performance.



Complementary frequency management between entertainment and sports. Rather than cannibalizing the same audience repeatedly through sports concentration, entertainment-first strategies build reach broadly before adding sports for incremental visibility.

The strategic insight is simple but powerful: entertainment TV isn't the alternative to sports. It's the foundation that makes sports placements more effective.

Brands that understand this hierarchy fill the [“reach jar”](#) efficiently and within budget—building efficient reach first, adding visibility second. They thereby extract maximum value from television's unique combination of scale, attention, and audience targeting.



Rocks = Marquee Sports

Pebbles = Long-tail Entertainment

Conclusion:

The Efficiency Hiding in Plain Sight

The entertainment TV opportunity lives in the gap between perception and reality of inventory value compared to sports programming. This paper made three arguments, each grounded in viewing data and market economics:

- **Entertainment programming dominates the TV landscape**, delivering 64% of viewing hours across audiences and genres. It's not a niche or a filler category; it's the foundation of television viewership. And the wide variety of entertainment-focused networks and programming supports reach against both broad and specific target audiences.
- **Entertainment TV delivers engagement and appointment viewing comparable to sports**, particularly in reality competition franchises that drive live and next-day viewing through spoiler-avoidance and social conversation. The "water cooler effect" didn't disappear with DVRs—it migrated to specific entertainment programming that audiences choose to watch in real time.
- **The pricing gap between sports and entertainment creates measurable arbitrage for data-driven advertisers.** Entertainment programming trades at half or less the CPM of sports while delivering comparable audiences and engagement. That efficiency gap doesn't reflect inferior performance. It reflects advertiser psychology, buyer behavior, and market concentration that systematically undervalues entertainment inventory.





The Strategic Implication

The strategic implication is clear: entertainment TV isn't an afterthought when sports budgets are exhausted. It's the foundation where efficient reach lives.

Sports can deliver visibility and cultural moments, but entertainment delivers the reach, frequency, and efficiency that actually drive business outcomes. The brands winning on television understand this hierarchy—and they're building strategies that capture the pricing gap's full value.

The opportunity is sitting there, hiding in full view. Eight million people watching *Survivor*. Procedural dramas delivering consistent weekly reach. Reality competition creating appointment viewing at half the cost of sports.

The only question is whether you're going to keep chasing expensive prestige placements or start building reach where the efficiency actually lives.

What Comes Next

This paper made the case for entertainment TV as the efficient reach foundation for television advertising.

The next papers in this series explore how to execute that strategy:



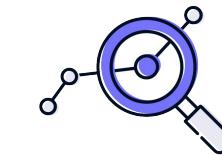
Audience-Based Buying

How data-driven planning identifies undervalued inventory and builds reach efficiently across entertainment programming



Measurement & Attribution

Modern approaches to proving TV's business impact and optimizing for outcomes rather than outputs



The Both/And Strategy

Balancing entertainment efficiency with sports visibility for maximum reach and cultural presence