

**Doug Schoen** Contributor*I'm a political strategist, pollster, author and commentator.*

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Radio: The All-But-Forgotten Medium With The Biggest Reach

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You wouldn't know it from all the media coverage focused on streaming video and streaming music, but recent Nielsen data shows radio actually has the most reach among American media consumers. 93% of adults listen to the radio each week as compared to 87% who watch TV, a substantive difference.



Iraqi radio collector and restorer Karim al-Aqidi shows old radio sets in his apartment in Baghdad. Aqidi, 56, graduated from art school with a degree in painting, but dedicated himself to his hobby of repairing and restoring radio sets which, for him, tell the history of Iraq. (ALI AL-SAAFI/AFP/Getty Images)

In terms of the American population, this means that 243 million people over the age of 12 are listening to old-fashioned broadcast AM/FM radio every week. It may all come down to the fact that as long as we have cars, we'll be listening to the radio. And since I can't see a time coming when that won't be the case, it's quite clear that radio – and its tremendous reach – is here to stay.

In this sense, radio is the true “mobile” medium despite what technology companies will have you believe. Recent research shows that most of our time spent on mobile devices (smartphones and tablets) actually takes place at home or in the office – not when we're mobile at all! But radio listening occurs when we're out and about in our cars.

Americans are a completely captive audience during this time. Sure, they can switch the station or even turn it off, but we all know that more often than not there's some programming on in the background, even during conversations.

It follows that a new survey demonstrates how effective radio can be at converting awareness into sales in specific circumstances.

Earlier this month, Amazon held its first global sale event called Amazon Prime Day. Afterwards, Cumulus/Westwood One commissioned an IPSOS study to determine how effective radio, TV and online advertising were at driving purchases. The results may surprise you as much as they surprised me:

Of those exposed to radio ads, 52% made a purchase. That compares with 48% of people who saw ads online and 39% who saw TV ads. (The online study surveyed 1,005 Americans July 17 to July 20, 2015, via the IPSOS U.S. eNation service.)

"The greatest Amazon Prime Day purchases occurred among millennials, households with children and those with a full-time job – precisely the profile of the American radio listener," said Pierre Bouvard, the chief marketing officer of Cumulus/Westwood One.

Marketers are increasingly focused, as we know, on targeting specific audiences. In that regard, the wide variety of radio formats is a dream for advertisers because radio is so targetable.

Take men for instance, one of the most elusive targets for advertisers. We know from Nielson data that NFL games on Westwood One reach one out of every five men ages 18-49 and one out of every four men ages 35-64. That's a huge audience full of the demographic marketers have been hunting for years.

Furthermore, despite how often the media reports on newer forms of advertising, it is in fact free broadcast radio – yes, a mass market medium that's been around since the 19th century – that often most effectively reaches and truly influences consumers.

The implications of results like these are profound for the communications and advertising industries and as a marketing professional with over 35 years of experience, I found this data nothing short of fascinating. It's quite clear that we should all be paying more attention to radio, its reach and potential to help our businesses. It's doing the job with expert efficiency.

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