

If The Idiot Box Rules, Are We Getting Dumber?

Last week's column on Indonesia's changing media scene worried quite a few media watchers. The steady decline in the popularity of print and radio, without a corresponding rise in other media raised a variety of questions. Is everybody just glued to that idiot box, that magic box, that window to the world, at the cost of everything else? If the internet isn't picking up all the slack, what's everybody up to?

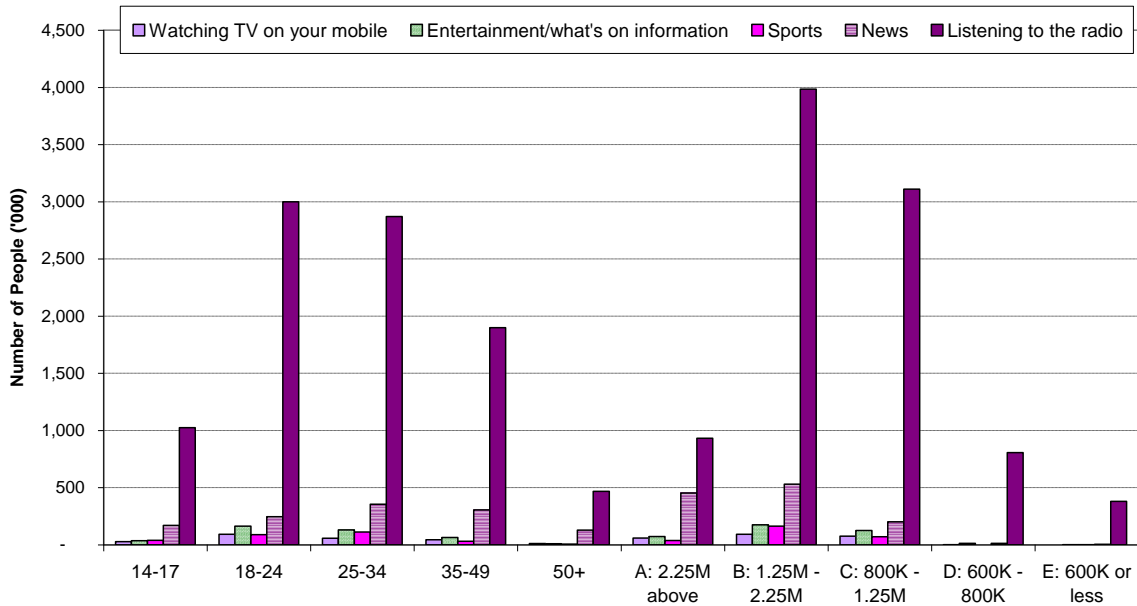
With a constant 99 per cent of an ever-growing population 'passively' watching television, instead of 'actively' reading a newspaper or magazine, the concerns are understandable. But the answers to the questions aren't simple, they are multi-faceted. There are a myriad of influences, some of which I will attempt to weave into a brief and simple explanation. To begin with, economic progress is creating bigger incomes for more people but it is also increasing pressure on time and energy. Unemployment is down to record levels, consumer confidence is up, but so are consumer prices. More people wanting more of the good life are more out and about than before, leaving the newspaper and the magazine languishing. At shopping malls and office lobbies, screens are popping up everywhere.

Bigger and better television screens with more channels delivering more news, more entertainment and more sports are engaging bigger audiences every day, across every echelon of Indonesian society. That is no reason for concern. More people are getting bite-size chunks of news throughout the day, with little effort and often at no cost. If every picture is worth a thousand words, the chances of getting dumber are slim indeed. Perhaps the only pictures worth worrying about are the games played on screens, not on fields. Mindlessly traversing imaginary galaxies or fighting unreal foes with twiddling fingers cannot be good for developing young minds. I have no evidence to support this opinion, other than the glazed looks of occasional teenagers I catch in action. It remains an affliction of the affluent minority, for now.

The fact that newspaper readership has grown in middle-class, upper-class and middle-aged Indonesia is a telling comment on social cross-currents. There are visible exceptions, like the dramatic growth of Jawa Pos in recent times, catapulting the title to No. 1 on the national landscape. That kind of growth has been stunted by the disinterest of the young on the one hand and rising prices affecting the working class on the other. The young who can afford to buy a magazine aren't, but many are taking to the internet instead. Voices like *detik.com* are getting stronger, but high costs and slow speeds continue to stymie the growth of this international phenomenon in Indonesia. The medium is growing, but has yet to fill the gap created by the loss of readers. It is an explosion waiting to happen.

The slide in the number of radio listeners has a much simpler explanation. It seems the 10 million lost collectively by the medium in the last three years have migrated to listening to it on that other new medium that has seen a meteoric rise, the mobile phone. Today, there are some 10 million cellular subscribers listening to the radio, on their phones! They may not be using it to listen to the radio for as long or as often as they used to, but they are still listening on the go. It is a signal of our changing habits, an indicator of the virtually unlimited potential of mobile telephony in the years ahead.

FUNCTIONS USED ON THE MOBILE PHONE IN THE LAST FOUR WEEKS



Every other type of use, other than voice and SMS, pales in comparison. Not surprisingly, the more unconventional uses of the phone is more popular among the younger generations. What is indeed surprising is the popularity of this growing habit even among large numbers of people 35 years and older. The fact that the phone is morphing into the radio sheds light on the path ahead. It has yet to become popular as a TV, though some occasionally use it as one. The impact of the big screen at home cannot be duplicated, especially for the 2.5 million households that pay for satellite or cable TV. When embraced by more businesses big and small, the mobile phone will overtake the internet and the laptop as the device of choice for just about any application. While the actual user population remains relatively small today, consumer interest in 3G handsets continues to grow steadily. From banking transactions to entertainment, the scope of usage is limited only by our imaginations.

In the meantime, the reading habit isn't exactly dying. People, young and old, are still reading books, but the form may change from paper to glass or plastic over time. Music is alive and well, with the demand for portable players of the newest kinds continuing to blossom everywhere, including Indonesia. Critics of couch potatoes will point to the low level of active participation in sports. On the other hand, Indonesia's excellent scores for Body Mass Index leave little room for concerns about obesity. There are health concerns other than the square-eye syndrome to worry about.

These conclusions are based on Roy Morgan Single Source, a syndicated survey with over 25,000 Indonesians 14 years and older interviewed each year. The information gathered is projected to reflect over 85 per cent of Indonesia's population 14 years and older. It is used by more marketers and advertising agencies across more industries and media than any other single resource in the country.

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