

*Does TV Consumption Affect Health and Well-being?  
Evidence from a Natural Experiment on the German Public*

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A common but false belief is that research has provided convincing evidence on the negative well-being effects of watching television. To establish causal evidence, we argue that regional heterogeneity in the provision of media during their implementation period can trigger differences in TV consumption that are free of selectivity issues. The happenstance that we exploit took place in the mid-1980s when Germany lifted a ban on private television. While TV consumption had already reached high levels in other countries, the average German still watched less than two hours of television per day. In the sequel, the legalization of private television brought up new channels that increased consumption significantly. However, citizens in many areas of the country did not watch any of these new programs due to reception problems, as the responsible public institution failed to establish satellite or cable TV in a timely manner. Hence, the officials of the emerging TV channels looked for other ways to reach the German households, and they found a way that establishes our natural experiment: terrestrial frequencies that by chance were still open. All across Germany, there are dozens of transmitter stations that were built in the 1960s and up to this day provide the country with free terrestrial TV signals.

We are the first to exploit original data from the official records for all of Germany's TV transmitters in the late 1980s. We merge our technical calculations on the reach of each station's signal with data from the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) study, which includes exact hours for someone's time use on a typical day regarding a broad set of categories (job, housework, television, etc.). Most importantly, the data gives us the great opportunity to analyze the causal effects of watching TV for various standard outcomes in the fields of health and happiness.