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# 'Tonight Show' Audience a Decade Younger

By [BILL CARTER](#)

One of the big questions facing [Conan O'Brien](#) was this: How can he succeed with the older "Tonight Show" viewers? The answer: by making them younger.

In Mr. O'Brien's first month as host, the median age of "Tonight Show" viewers has fallen by a decade — to 45 from 55, a startling shift in such a short time. This audience composition means advertisers can now address almost exclusively young viewers on "Tonight," and [NBC](#) is already contemplating a shift in how it sells the show.

In network television, where audiences tend to age up consistently, this is an eye-popping development. But the shift is not all good news for NBC. One way Mr. O'Brien has lowered the age is by losing many older viewers.

"The Late Show With [David Letterman](#)" has already posted one week in which it drew more viewers than Mr. O'Brien, who reached the smallest audience in "Tonight" show history, just 3.3 million viewers, about two million fewer than [Jay Leno](#)'s average as host.

(The next week Mr. O'Brien bounced back and edged past Mr. Letterman in total viewers, 3.7 million to 3.5 million. It was an unusual week as the death of Michael Jackson elevated a third competitor, "Nightline" on ABC, to most-watched status with 3.9 million viewers for its half-hour.)

The numbers in late night have been tossed around with unusual aggression as NBC and [CBS](#) jockey for the spin's high ground. If cash follows youth, as it often does in television, NBC may not care much.

"Conan's performance is, honestly, extraordinary," said Alan Wurtzel, the president for research at NBC, adding that the show had overwhelming strength in the youngest demographic, viewers 18 to 34. "These kinds of transitions are hard, especially with an iconic program like the 'Tonight Show.'"

For its part, CBS argues that NBC's claims about demographic superiority are strained, pointing to several weeks of declines for Mr. O'Brien in many audience groups. "Conan's strength is almost entirely in men between 18 and 34," said David F. Poltrack, the president for research at CBS. "We're gaining in other categories." Mr. Letterman, for example, is up more than 50 percent among viewers over 50.

On the sidelines, advertising executives are taking a skeptical approach. Generally they concede that dominance in younger viewers remains a big advantage, while also questioning whether "Tonight," always the "big tent" in late night, risks becoming too much a niche show, as Mr. O'Brien seemingly thinks the herd of older viewers.

"The idea of buying network TV was to get those big boxcar ratings," said Steven J. Farella, the president of the media buying agency TargetCast TCM. "They don't usually get boxcar numbers anymore, but we don't need minivan numbers."

The argument in marketing offices is likely to continue. "We really don't know anything yet," said Shari Anne Brill, the senior vice president and programming director for Carat USA. She said the preseason ad sales period, known as the upfront, had not yet taken place; and, she said, there is the unresolved question of how Mr. Leno will fare when he moves into the weeknight 10 p.m. period for NBC.

"He could potentially eat some of Mr. O'Brien's young," she said.

John Rash, senior vice president of the Campbell-Mithun agency, said, "All audiences have value, but the 18-to-49 audience has more value. You will make higher profits if you win with that audience." He added, "You can still say you're the No. 1 show if you are more profitable."

That is exactly what NBC is doing. After one week the network sent out a hyperventilating press release declaring Mr. O'Brien the "new king of late night."

Mr. Poltrack scoffed that the claim was preposterously premature, pointing to falloffs in succeeding weeks among groups like women 18 to 49. In his first week, Mr. O'Brien was up in that group from Mr. Leno's performance by 32 percent; by the third week, he was down 28 percent.

Mr. Poltrack said the gap had especially narrowed among viewers 35 to 54. "I think eventually we will win that category," he said.

One NBC executive, who asked not to be identified when citing what is usually confidential information, said the show had been selling about 65 percent of the commercials during "Tonight" on its 18-to-49 rating, and 23 percent on viewers 25 to 54, and only 12 percent on the youngest category, viewers 18 to 34.

But Mr. O'Brien has been so overpowering in that last group that NBC can still be expected to shift more money toward that demographic — and to try to charge advertisers a premium for it, the executive said.

That may meet with resistance. Several ad agency executives said that young men could be reached more readily than in the past on Web sites and cable channels like Comedy Central and Spike, so networks deserve less of a premium for attracting them.

Some of that is probably negotiating talk. But Mr. Farella said he would worry about making "Tonight" look like a cable show.

"I don't think that's O.K.," he said. "The goal of a broadcaster is still to be exactly that."

Mr. Rash said the changes in the "Tonight" audience were to be expected. "Jay Leno was younger than [Johnny Carson](#), but he was from the same modern comedian construct, whereas Conan O'Brien is perfectly postmodern in his approach," he said. "That may be alienating to older viewers. But he has to play to his strengths. Television and politics are the same: it's a mistake to ignore your base."

Mr. Wurtzel argued that Mr. O'Brien had no intention of turning "Tonight" into a niche show.

“I think we’re going to see growth,” he said. “The show has to calibrate. Conan is reshaping the profile of the show’s audience. It’s going according to plan.”

Both he and Mr. Poltrack offered one consistent analysis using exactly the same words: “Let’s see where we are in September.”

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