



AMERICA 250 | AMERICAN TV MOMENTS 5 NIGHTS AMERICA WATCHED TOGETHER

A celebration of the nights the whole country tuned in

As America marks its 250th anniversary, Nielsen took a look back at some of the largest scripted television events in the nation's history. For as long as we have had living rooms, we have gathered in them, and the biggest broadcasts are a record of the nights when tens of millions of us watched the same thing at the same time.

Super Bowls dominate the modern record books, so this countdown sets the games aside. What remains is more revealing: a tapestry of unforgettable moments when our country showed up all at once. These are the five biggest entertainment audiences in American television.



No. 5 | **76.3 Million**
average viewers, P2+ | NBC



May 14, 1998

***Seinfeld* says goodbye ("The Finale")**

After nine seasons, the show about nothing became the event about everything, as viewers across the nation tuned in for one last night with Jerry, George, Elaine and Kramer.



No. 4 | **80.4 Million**
average viewers, P2+ | NBC



May 20, 1993

***Last call at Cheers* ("One for the Road")**

After eleven seasons, the country pulled up a stool for one final round at the Boston bar where everybody knows your name.



No. 3

83.0 Million
average viewers, P2+ | CBS



November 21, 1980

America finds out who shot J.R. in *Dallas*

Eight months of guessing ended in one Friday night as *Dallas* answered the most famous cliffhanger in television history. (Spoiler alert: it was Kristin.)

76% of TVs in use that night, tuned to one show



No. 2

87.7 Million
average viewers, P2+ | ABC



January 30, 1977

Roots reaches its finale (Part VIII)

Over eight consecutive winter nights, ABC's adaptation of Alex Haley's family saga held the nation still, and the final chapter drew the largest audience for any drama in television history.

All eight nights of *Roots* rank among the most-watched telecasts ever measured



No. 1

105.9 Million
average viewers, P2+ | CBS



February 28, 1983

***M*A*S*H* says goodbye, farewell and amen**

The most-watched episode of television ever broadcast, as six in ten American homes tuned in for the 4077th's farewell and streets across the country reportedly emptied for the night.

Untopped by anything, on any network, for 27 years

HONORABLE MENTIONS: MORE NIGHTS IN THE AMERICAN STORY

Beyond the top five, the record books show more compelling nights when the country pulled up a chair, from Beatlemania, to one last cup of coffee at Central Perk. How Nielsen counts the audience has evolved along the way, so each era below is measured in its own currency.

MEASURED IN SHARE OF HOUSEHOLDS

The earliest entries in Nielsen's rankings are recorded in homes. These figures are the share of all US TV households that tuned in.



1964

The Beatles on The Ed Sullivan Show

45.3% of US TV households | (Feb 9)

Four musicians from Liverpool stepped onto a New York stage, and American popular culture split into before and after.

1967

The Fugitive catches the one-armed man

45.9% of US TV households | (Aug 29)

Dr. Richard Kimble's four-year chase came to an end, and nearly three of every four sets in use were there for it.



1970

The Bob Hope Christmas Show

46.6% of US TV households | (Jan 15)

Hope's annual special brought his USO tour home to American living rooms, one of the highest-rated entertainment broadcasts ever measured.

MEASURED IN TOTAL AUDIENCE (P2+)

Later measurement carried persons estimates for viewers age 2 and older. These figures are people watching in the average minute.



1976

Gone with the Wind comes to television

52.9 million viewers | (Nov 8)

The most famous film Hollywood ever made finally premiered on network TV, and its two-night broadcast stood among the biggest movie audiences in history.

1983

The Day After stops the country cold

49.9 million viewers | (Nov 20)

A made-for-TV movie set in Lawrence, Kansas became the most talked-about broadcast of its decade.



2004

Friends says one last goodbye

52.5 million viewers | (May 6)

The most recent scripted telecast in Nielsen's all-time record books, proving the gathering power of a great finale carried into the 21st century.



WAIT. WHERE IS THE MOON LANDING?

July 20th, 1969

By nearly any estimate, more Americans watched Apollo 11 touch down than almost anything before or since, with Nielsen data from that night showing the overwhelming majority of TVs in use tuned to moon coverage. It is missing here because Nielsen's all-time telecast rankings cover individual sponsored programs on a single network, and the landing was a news event covered separately by multiple networks.

Measurement itself also looked different in 1969, built on household diaries and set meters that counted homes rather than people. So the moon landing still reigns as television's greatest unofficial champion.

Top five figures are Nielsen average audience projections, persons 2+, for individual network telecasts, excluding sports. Honorable mention figures are labeled by era: household ratings for 1964–1970, persons 2+ projections for 1976–2004. Source: Nielsen Television Index historical archive.



The world's premium media intelligence platform