

The impressive resilience of digital audio

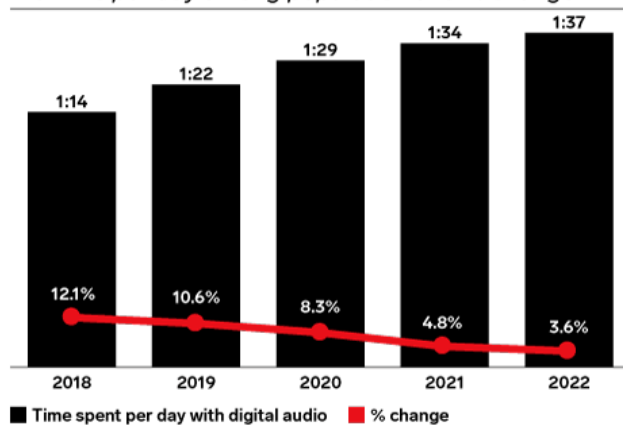
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Early in the pandemic, digital audio took a huge hit in user engagement and in the amount of time listeners were spending with the medium. Many observers, including us, predicted dire results in the short term. However, the rest of the year played out very differently than those early weeks, and we ultimately revised our 2020 estimate from a 1.0% decline in the time US adults spent with digital audio to 8.3% growth, for a total of 1 hour, 29 minutes (1:29) per day.

Digital Audio: Average Time Spent in the US, 2018-2022

hrs:mins per day among population and % change



Note: ages 18+; includes all time spent listening to digital audio, regardless of multitasking; digital audio includes music/other audio content delivered within a website or app (e.g., AM/FM online streams), podcasts (streamed or downloaded), radio stations, and streaming services; excludes other downloaded audio files (e.g., music MP3s) and digital terrestrial/satellite radio services that are delivered over the air
Source: eMarketer, Jan 2021

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This is a deceleration from digital audio's strong growth rates in recent years, but only marginally. Given the massive loss of commuting time in 2020—previously a major driver of digital audio's popularity—the lesson of last year is that digital audio is far more resilient and adaptable than we thought.

As people stayed home in the early days of the pandemic, time spent initially swung heavily toward traditional TV and social media, and soon thereafter to all forms of digital video and gaming. However, as the months passed, consumers gravitated back to digital audio with gusto, even as behavior and patterns of usage changed substantially.

Listeners developed new habits and preferences while working and schooling from home. Apps like Spotify and Pandora reported increased usage via smart speakers and smart TVs, and increased usage at unusual times of day; for instance, weekday usage began to resemble weekend usage. Podcasts, too, reportedly saw an unexpected spike in popularity, as long-form audio engagement became easier to undertake at any given time of day.

We estimate that digital audio accounted for 11.0% of total media time per day for US adults last year and will account for 11.7% in

2021 (1:34 per day). The figures among qualified users are even more dramatic: Active digital audio listeners spent 2:05 per day with such media in 2020, and we anticipate that cohort will add another 5 minutes this year. More than 70% of US adults listened to digital audio content at least once a month last year, and 91.7% of this occurred via mobile.

Notably, 2021 will mark a major milestone between traditional radio and digital audio: 50.8% of US adults' total audio time will be spent listening via digital services. This will be the first time digital audio surpasses traditional radio in time spent, albeit ever so slightly.

To learn more about pivotal moments for digital audio, TV, subscription OTT, and social media in the US, Insider Intelligence subscribers can read our recent report:

Report by Ethan Cramer-Flood Feb 04, 2021

US Time Spent with Media 2021 Update

