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As The Country Opens Up, Radio Listening Is Returning To Pre-Pandemic Levels

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Media

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WASHINGTON, DC - MAY 28: Outgoing traffic is seen on I-395 on the eve of Memorial Day long weekend ... [+] GETTY IMAGES

The pandemic forced millions to stay-at-home as businesses were temporarily closed, curtailing commuting hours. As working-remotely became a way of life, some office workers moved away from central cities to sparsely populated outer suburbs and second homes. These workers relied on Zoom calls, emails, chat rooms with more “[personal time](#)” to consume media.

It has been well documented that at-home media consumption changed during the pandemic. For example, video game playing, streaming video, listening to podcasts and streaming audio all grew. Conversely, the ratings for most television programs including premiere sporting events and awards shows plunged (although TV networks are [questioning Nielsen](#)). Additionally, according to Edison Research “[Share of Ear](#)” report, the pandemic in-car radio listening dropped by 37% when first quarter 2020 is compared to second quarter. In-car radio listening rebounded when restrictions were lifted in the third quarter of 2020.

Prior to the pandemic, the Census Bureau’s annual “Journey to Work” survey for 2019 reported the average one-way commute in the United States grew to a record high [27.6 minutes](#), a 10% increase from 2006. In addition, a record high 9.8% percent of commuters said their daily one-way commute now exceeds one hour. Commuter time is longest (over 30 minutes) in metro areas with a population of over three million. Motor vehicles (i.e., cars, trucks, vans), whether driving alone or carpooling remain, by far and away, the most popular mode of getting to work, accounting for 85% of all commuters.

Even with the increase in web enhanced connected cars, the most popular source of audio infotainment in cars remains AM/FM radio. According to Edison Research in first quarter 2021, terrestrial radio accounted for 87% of all ad-supported in-car listening, followed by SiriusXM (6%), podcasts (5%), ad-supported Pandora (2%) and ad-supported Spotify (1%).

In fact, roughly 45% of all radio listening occurs in cars, 32% at home and another 23% of listening at work. Roughly 40% of all radio listening occurs during either AM drive time (M-F 6 a.m.-10 a.m.) or PM drive time (M-F 3 p.m.-7 p.m.) dayparts. The most listened to time period is Mid-day (M-F 10 a.m.-3 p.m.) which accounts for about 27% of all radio listening.

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According to a recent [blog post](#) from Cumulus Media [CMLS +1.4%](#), using a variety of sources, there is strong evidence the economy has been opening up. [Car travel](#) has been on the rise as employees are returning back to their workplaces. As a result, radio listening (with traffic reports) has been reverting back to pre-pandemic levels.

For example, according to [Geopath](#), which measures vehicular traffic for out-of-home media, reported in April 2021, weekly miles traveled grew by 67% when compared to April 2020, at the height of the pandemic. Vehicular traffic was even +1% when compared to April 2019. Furthermore, [Apple Maps](#) noted in April 2021, car trip requests increased by 131% when compared to April 2020, reaching its highest level since September 2020.

In addition, workers have been headed back to the office. According to the Federal Reserve, in April 2021, 62% of workers were commuting full-time, 18% were commuting some of the time and the remaining 20% were working exclusively from home. The Census reports in 2019, 6% of employees worked from home.

With the country reopening and travel and commuting to work on the rise, radio listening has also been on the upswing. According to [Nielsen Audio](#) NLSN +1.3%, in April 2021, across the 48 largest (portable people meter) markets, the average weekly cume for AM/FM radio listening was 98% of March 2020 levels. Moreover, in April 2021 the average quarter-hour listening of AM/FM radio reached 95% of March 2020, a 23% increase from April 2020. In the smaller “diary only” radio markets, the average weekly cume has been unchanged from the previous year.

"Audio is the soundtrack of the U.S. recovery, with AM/FM radio the leading way for businesses to open and reestablish themselves," said Suzanne Grimes, EVP Corporate Marketing, Cumulus Media and President, Westwood One. "People are back in their cars, returning to the office and taking much-awaited holiday trips - we are seeing this growth in consumer movement reflected in a surge of interest for our Cumulus Media assets."

With radio listening returning and many businesses and retailers fully opened, ad dollars are expected to return. [BIA Advisory Services](#) project in 2021 local radio, despite competition from digital media, will generate \$12.6 billion in ad dollars, a 9.7% increase from 2020. BIA notes that local radio still maintains sizable audiences that many local and national advertisers want to reach.

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