

**An Argument For
Qualitative Ratings**

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Are traditional television ratings systems "woefully inadequate? A challenge to the accepted ways of measuring audiences.

BY DONNA L. HOFFMAN

"It used to be easy," a network vice president told Sally Bedell Smith of *The New York Times* recently. "You watched 'M*A*S*H' on Monday night and you'd put that in the diary. Now, if you have 30 channels on cable you watch one channel, switch to a movie, watch a little MTV, then another program, and the next morning with all that switching all over the place you can't remember what you watched."

The plethora of choices on the dial now available to the American viewing public, and to the guinea pigs who provide the numbers for Nielsen and Arbitron, makes it clear that the traditional rating systems in use today simply cannot—and do not—convey all the information needed to understand audience response to programs. Many changes have taken place in television viewing habits, not the least of which is the burgeoning popularity of the videocassette recorder (indeed the recent opening of a new video store in mid-Manhattan caused a stampede more frenzied than any sale in Filene's basement).

The effect of these changes has prompted a concerned and critical look at the "house-count" focus of current audience measurement methods. Help may be on the way. Other measurement methodologies—very promising

ones—are beginning to emerge. These new systems may have major implications not only for advertisers but also for producers and programmers—and eventually for the television audience.

A television program's rating determines its value both to the network broadcasting it and to the advertiser buying time within it. In essence, ratings determine the cost of advertising.

Though a great deal of time, money and effort go into the measurement process, the ratings have their critics. Many of them say that the viewer samples are not truly representative of all segments of the viewing public. It is well known that several segments of the population are under represented: notably blacks, Spanish-speaking Americans, high-income Americans, those who live alone and those who watch television in places other than at home (for instance, in dormitory meeting rooms, bars, clubs, etc.).

There is also the criticism that the ratings are inflated, or at the least biased, because viewers who agree to have a meter attached to their television sets have an interest in television that viewers who do not agree do not have. In real life, we're all critics, and how many times have you heard someone say, "But nobody called me!"

In addition, diary methodologies are criticized for being flawed measures of viewing reports. As the viewing experience becomes more complex (through cable and multi-channel

choices), the diary task becomes confusing. Forgetting, reporting after viewing has long since occurred, and faulty recall are common problems.

Beyond these methodological problems are more serious concerns regarding the substantive drawbacks of the traditional ratings systems. It has been charged that ratings in use today encourage bland programming, overemphasize viewer homogeneity, may lead to premature program cancellation, cause frenetic schedule shuffling and contribute to failing program quality. High ratings, of course, do not necessarily equal high quality. Worse, the fact remains that we really do not know who, if anyone, is viewing when a rating is recorded.

The quantitative ratings and accompanying descriptions of audience composition available today from Nielsen and Arbitron are used in a number of ways by executives in the television and advertising industries to make programming and commercial decisions. A careful analysis of the status of audience measurement reveals that these traditional ratings are woefully inadequate for the task they have been put to.

Measuring Attitudes and Response

The ratings systems measure levels of channel viewing cross-tabulated by age and sex categories. While this information is unquestionably useful, it does not provide an assessment of audience attitudes toward programs, nor can it be accepted as a substitute for the fine-grained knowledge of how viewers actually behave during the viewing of programs. In other words, ratings do not really measure audience response.

A number of methodologies have been proposed over the years for a qualitative assessment of the television audience. These methodologies have arisen in recognition of the fact

that the television audience is not the passive, fully attentive and engaged set of viewers the industry thinks it is.

One such system is TvQ, established in 1958, which operates a nationally-represented panel of 1,200 households that are surveyed by mail. Users of the service are supplied with two pieces of information: 1) awareness levels of programs, and 2) audience evaluations of programs on a five-point scale ranging from "poor" to "one of my favorites." TvQ has the two broad uses: 1) to uncover new programs that are potential hits but whose ratings are not yet high, and 2) to flag long-running hits whose "popularity" is declining, even if their ratings are still high.

Currently, none of the methodologies developed for the qualitative assessment of the viewing audience has emerged as an industry standard, in the way the quantitative Nielsen or Arbitron ratings has. This is largely because, until now, the broadcasting and advertising industries believed the ratings could tell them everything they need to know, i.e. "if they watch it, they like it." Along with this is the bias against so-called "soft" data, toward "hard" numbers.

It is important to keep in mind, however, that qualitative measurement systems also result in "hard" numbers; it is just that the numbers describe a different aspect of viewing behavior—i.e. attitudes toward the program and the viewing experience, rather than how many television sets are tuned in to the program. Nevertheless, the numbers that emerge from the traditional ratings systems are simply trusted more. Consequently, quantitative ratings continue to dominate advertising and programming decisions.

Attitudes toward these so-called qualitative ratings systems are beginning to change. Recently, there has been a revived trend toward a more qualitative examination of the viewing audience; an examination that goes

beyond house-count description. This trend can be traced, in part, to the emergence of innovative telecommunications technologies available for everyday household use.

By 1990, it is estimated that over 75 percent of the households in the United States will be using at least one of these many new technologies. These include cable TV, pay cable, subscription TV, multipoint distribution systems, direct broadcast by satellite and videocassette recorders.

This technology parade threatens television as we now know it. Industry sources suggest that the growth in mass media advertising revenues in this country will come through fragmentation and segmentation of the mass audience. Current network dominance is being challenged as satellites offer alternative means of program dissemination, as increased programming is made available through cable and pay TV, and as tape playback systems give viewers new freedom in the way in which they select and schedule their viewing. Some experts feel these new technologies will whittle away at network dominance.

Coupled with this is the fact that these qualitative ratings are needed for cable television programs because they do not attract the very large, mass audiences that the network programs do. Therefore, some alternative means of measuring audience response and demonstrating the utility of these programs as media vehicles is needed. Qualitative ratings may provide the means.

In addition, while the networks are losing audience share, ad rates for time on network programs are going up, up, and away. So, again, there is a need to go beyond the numbers and examine what is really going on out there with the viewers and their television sets.

Recently, I directed a conference at Columbia University entitled "Beyond Ratings: New Directions in Audience Measurement Research." Sponsored

by the Research Program in Telecommunications and Information Policy of the Columbia Business School, the conference brought together over 100 experts from industry and the academic world to discuss the implications of all these changes for the way we measure audience response.

We explored diverse perspectives that included both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. All the approaches we looked at went beyond a numerical and demographic accounting of the television audience by incorporating program attitudes, viewing behaviors and even product usage information into their measurement schemes. Conference findings were both revealing and exciting.

New Viewer Studies

For example, Television Audience Assessment, Inc., an organization established in 1980 to examine viewing habits in depth, reported on a fascinating new study. The goals of TAA are to construct and test a system of audience measurement based on viewers' qualitative responses to the programs they watch—their attitudes toward the program and behavior engaged in during the program—as compared with the quantitative systems, which really measure only the behavior of the television set (whether it's on or off), not that of the viewer.

IAA aims to demonstrate to the television industry the utility of this system as a supplemental form of program ratings for cable and broadcast television. When combined with the traditional quantitative reports of audience size and composition, these new measures of audience reaction will allow industry executives to make decisions from a more complete information base. Their extensive data base provides information on viewer involvement with programs and commercials and on their selection patterns and behaviors while watching television.

The crux of TAA's qualitative rating system are two indexes that measure how enjoyable and involving television programs are. The Program Appeal index measures viewer evaluation of the program's entertainment value and the Program Impact index measures the degree of emotional and intellectual stimulation of the program.

TAA intends these two indicators of a program's performance in the marketplace to supplement, not replace, traditional ratings. They offer a systematic assessment of a program's ability to satisfy and involve its viewers. They believe that what is most striking, from the industry point of view, is what viewers' involvement means for commercial exposure and effectiveness.

The major findings from TAA's most recent study are that all programs are not equally appealing to the audience and that different programs appeal to different audience subgroups. TAA found that a program's appeal is stable from episode to episode. They found no significant relationship between the size of a program's audience and the Program Appeal index.

With respect to the Program Impact index, TAA found it to be most sensitive in discriminating among programs. Not surprisingly, programs high in impact were also high in appeal. One finding that emerged from their work is that viewers are more attentive during viewing of high impact programs. In addition, their findings suggest that programs higher in impact will deliver more of the audience to the commercial message.

Research conducted by TAA demonstrates that viewers involved in a program give more attention to the program and are more likely to stay in the room for a program's commercials. In two separate studies—one of 1,615 viewers in simulated home environments, the other of 3,000 viewers who kept diaries—increased involvement in programs as measured by TAA's Program Impact index was found to be

directly related to a reduction in the number of distracting activities people engaged in while viewing. While 44 percent of the viewers who rated a program they were watching low in Impact were doing something distracting while it was on, only 18 percent of those who rated a program high in Impact were distracted from their viewing by something else.

TAA believes that enhanced exposure of the audience to advertising is not the only commercial benefit of programs that are highly involving. Using a special experimental laboratory design, they tested Impact and Appeal indexes for their influence on how viewers perceive commercials. They found that the Impact measure, in particular, was a good predictor of viewers' reactions to a program's commercial. Viewers, TAA concluded, generally find commercials more memorable, likable, credible and persuasive when placed in a show they rate high in Impact than when placed in a show they rate low in Impact.

Daniel Anderson, a psychology professor, and his colleagues at the University of Massachusetts have also been conducting some extraordinary "online" research on television viewing. They installed time-lapse video cameras into the homes of 100 families from the Springfield, Massachusetts metropolitan area for ten days.

One video frame was recorded each 1.2 seconds that the television set was on, or at a ratio of 36 hours of real time to one hour of tape time. The camera that shot the viewing area was equipped with a wide-angle lens with auto-servo iris that allowed it to record in widely varying light levels encountered in homes. The equipment automatically began recording when the television set was turned on and stopped recording when it was turned off. Over a 20-month period, about 4,600 hours of recording were obtained this way.

Anderson's analyses of home viewing behavior have led him and his

colleagues to develop a new theory of TV viewing suggesting a number of principles that describe visual attention to television. They have shown that visual pauses are maintained in part by viewers' tendency to timeshare television viewing with concurrent activities.

Content and Involvement

During the pauses, viewers tend to monitor the audio, signaling interesting or entertaining content. When the viewer detects a cue, he or she looks at the TV; certain cues, however, may predict uninteresting content and may actually inhibit looking at the TV. Once a viewer is looking at the TV, visual attention is maintained by the viewers' relatively active involvement with the content. Anderson believes that these principles can account for the flow of visual attention to television.

A final principle, "attentional inertia," says that the shifts in attention are not accomplished instantaneously, despite the frequent shifts in looking to and away from the television screen. Instead, the phenomenon of attentional inertia indicates that it may take from 15 to 20 seconds for attention to build. When it is complete, the viewer is resistant to external distraction and will tend to pay attention across major changes in content (like commercials) which might otherwise shift attention away from the television set.

In my own work, using the TAA data base collected in Springfield, I discovered that *Program Impact* actually consists of two dimensions: an intellectual and an emotional component. The results indicate that programs drawing smaller audiences tend to be judged higher in intellectual impact than programs drawing larger audiences. In essence, most viewers tend to shun intellectually demanding viewing.

The somewhat curious result was observed that the size of a program's audience is inversely related to the appreciation viewers have for it. Though there were only a limited number of television programs in the sample, support for the reliability of the result comes from another, independent source. Researchers in the United Kingdom also observed a negative relationship between audience size and audience enjoyment. They classified programs into two types, information and entertainment, and found that when these programs are lumped together the correlation between audience appreciation and audience size is negative.

Anderson's work complements TAA's work and my work by showing that a viewer in reasonable proximity to the television set does not guarantee an attentive viewer. The *Program Impact* and *Program Appeal* indexes can help show when viewers are more likely to pay attention to the program, and consequently, to the commercials embedded within the program.

So what are the implications of all these developments for television viewers and the television industry alike? To the extent that qualitative ratings systems are implemented as a supplemental source of information, then we might expect to see: Qualitative ratings systems as aids to develop, select, and schedule programs and to assist in promotional decisions.

Rather than just trying to develop shows that go for high ratings, programmers can develop shows that go for high-impact scores. Programs can be developed on the basis of whether they tap the intellectual or emotional dimension, or perhaps both. In fact, it may, as John J. O'Connor recently suggested in *The New York Times*, be "time to leave the endless calculations of data banks and to return to the more durable standards of common sense and the perhaps indefinable but unmistakable element of adventurous good taste."

Promise and Potential

Since research is beginning to indicate that quality programs may have a bigger pay-off in terms of the advertisement within the show, then it is in everyone's best interest to develop programs which involve viewers. We need only witness the commercial success of such high affective-impact shows as *Dallas*, *Falcon Crest* and *Knots Landing* and high cognitive-impact shows like *60 Minutes* to see this.

Audiences respond to the programs that they watch. They have attitudes toward the program and they engage in behaviors during viewing of the program. The traditional ratings in use today do not take this information about audience diversity into account. If these attitudes and behaviors differ systematically for programs with similar ratings, then we are losing information by not attending to these differences.

The promise and potential of qualitative ratings are inspiring, to say the least. At long last we may have found effective relief for the harrassed program executive who must program against tough competition. At long last he or she may not have to reach for the lowest common denominator but, instead, should be able to program for a discriminating audience that will also respond to an advertiser's message. When qualitative ratings in media and programming decisions become routine—and more than simply supplemental descriptors of viewing behavior—I firmly believe that the audience, in the last analysis, will be the beneficiary. The time has come for a change. ■

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