

Producing Audiences Through Television Metrics Caryn Murphy's Response

Television ratings have always provided a necessarily flawed gauge of program and network popularity. Although scholars have documented the ways that Nielsen ratings have mediated the needs of networks and advertisers with an audience sample just large enough to appease both groups, the data that these ratings provide have long been a valuable source of information in terms of how many people are tuning in to particular programs and channels. Although recent events including the Olympic Games in Beijing and the Democratic and Republican National conventions have yielded Nielsen ratings that suggest that large audiences continue to flock to broadcast networks in traditional viewing patterns, audience structure has in fact shifted dramatically over the past few years as viewing practices have evolved with new time-shifting and alternate format technologies.

Within the our current media landscape, cable and satellite services regularly provide digital video recorders and on-demand options that allow viewers to watch a particular show at a time of their own choosing. Television programming is increasingly readily available online through pay-per-download services including iTunes, and many broadcast and cable channels make their series available online through free streaming services. In addition, although video-sharing services including YouTube are regularly monitored by industry sources, individuals continue to upload television content to these sites, making them readily accessible to millions of users. In this media environment, it is literally impossible for networks to dictate how viewers will consume television and Nielsen ratings have become, for advertisers, an uncertain resource at best. In order to reach a new compromise that suits the needs of networks and advertisers, Nielsen and others have created new services that attempt to measure evolving modes of viewership.

The NielsenConnect service tracks an audience sample across their usage of print and electronic media, including online sources. Nielsen compensates for a limited sample size by collaborating with other sources, including comScore, to augment and cross-check their data. ComScore, a relatively new market entrant that monitors online habits, relies on a sample of two million users that have voluntarily agreed to allow their Internet activities to be monitored. Another new company, Optimedia, has begun to make its name with a "Content Power Ratings" report that claims to measure the audience for television programs according to size, appeal, interest, and streaming. While each of these services conducts some amount of primary research, they also rely on data provided by other services to enhance their credibility. The capabilities of these services are limited by some of the same problems that have plagued traditional Nielsen ratings over the years, including relatively small sample size and sample bias.

This roundtable's guiding question refers to Nielsen ratings as a "convenient fiction," a truism that I think points the way toward the multitude of questions that must be asked of new metrics that claim to improve upon the old system. The most detailed Nielsen data, with each audience sample broken down by size, demographics, and viewing habits, has always been sold at a premium to interested parties. As new services stake claims about their ability to measure larger audience groups and new modes of viewership, this is a key time to question exactly how they acquire their data and their methods for measuring individual media use. In particular, my research is interested in interrogating the assumption that evolving modes of viewership are primarily dominated by young viewers. Is the relationship between age and technological adoption based in market wisdom about prevailing trends, or is it based on hard data that new

modes of media access make it increasingly easy to measure? While new ratings services make appealing claims about measuring media interactions across a variety of platforms, the extent to which they legitimately offer “new” information that improves upon the limited nature of the old system should be a question of first concern to media scholars.