

Daniel Chamberlain's Response to "Producing Audiences Through Media Metrics"

The question of television metrics has been for decades tied directly to the paper diaries and set-top boxes provided by Nielsen. While the television industry has agreed to use this system as the basis for the sales of advertising time – and, by extension, programming decisions – it has long been recognized as seriously flawed. The major criticisms against this approach revolve around its reliance on user compliance and sampling. These critiques are relatively minor, however, compared to the devastating critique that the system was ultimately designed to measure average viewership of programming blocks rather than actual viewer attention or the specific viewership of commercials.

Although the collective feet-dragging of the U.S. television industry has taken decades, it is finally responding to changing technological, economic, and cultural conditions by designing and deploying programs designed to provide "anytime anywhere media metrics." Nielsen's efforts toward measuring time-shifted, place-shifted, and television-off-television viewing is also a direct response to the challenge of emergent media delivery systems that inherently provide detailed user data. Taking together the changes offered by Nielsen, by television distributors, and by emergent players, I think that we can productively approach the question of changing metrics from at least five different perspectives.

First, we can think of new metrics as a response to technological and behavioral changes. As digital video recorders are in 25% of U.S. television households, the iTunes store sells millions of television episodes, and many viewers enjoy the availability of television programming on the Internet, the major players in the television industry have grudgingly (and perhaps only temporarily) agreed to support new Nielsen metrics designed to capture time- and place-shifted viewing. Put simply, the introduction of digital video recorder technology undermined the existing ratings system by complicating the challenges of measurement, introducing new types of advertising to be measured, raising the bar for accountability, establishing new competitors in the media ratings market, and ultimately laying bare the profound failings of the existing system.

Second, the demand for new metrics represents a response to new televisual mobilities and a fresh respect for contemporary media spaces. From delivering new reports on out-of-home viewing to developing software and hardware that turn mobile phones and iPods into mobile people meters, Nielsen has plans to expand its traditional systems of media measurement beyond the living room. The holy grail for this type of ambient media monitoring is a device or system that can measure an individual's daily exposure to all forms of media, noting which billboards, moving image advertisements, radio ads, and even product placements make impressions.

Third, changes in media metrics are a response to a convergent media culture. This is seen in Nielsen's shift from "television" to "media" measurement, its investment in leading web metrics company Net Ratings, and its corporate focus on integrating metrics for online and set-based viewing. Such convergent tendencies are

inherently part of the technology offered by Nielsen's emergent competitors in user data generation – TiVo's digital media recorders and Apple's iTunes nexus of software, hardware, and services both deliver multiple media forms and capture detailed usage metrics across media types.

Fourth, new metrics are a belated response to the surveillant capabilities of emergent media. Web sites track user actions, mobile phones track geo-location and calling patterns, iTunes knows how many times a song is played, and multiple-service providers like Google track and store vast quantities of behavioral data. Indeed, surveillance is required for these services to deliver on their promises of customized, mobile, and flexible media experiences. This is taken to the extreme by TiVo, which has recast itself as a market research organization mining its second-by-second user data and working directly with advertisers and existing research companies. As these emergent competitors produce metrics of their own they also put pressure on established research organizations to partner with, purchase, or compete against them. At the same time, traditional broadcasters have gingerly begun streaming their own programming online, capturing the resulting data streams. Crucially, the surveillant and productive capabilities of emergent media devices is both a technological and a cultural phenomenon, relying equally on sophisticated media interfaces and on a society that is increasingly and troublingly at peace with behavior monitoring.

Fifth, all of these factors come together in a desire to reconfigure viewer categories. The tyranny of 18-49 still gets plenty of press, but advertisers have advanced their decades-old interest in targeting small groups of individuals. The television industry has responded by producing niche programming, establishing branded distribution networks, and introducing new demographic and psychographic categories to the televisual landscape. The well-known examples of Lifetime, Bravo, the CW, and HBO are just the tip of the iceberg, as contemporary targeting aims to consolidate knowledge about technological platform, time-shifting, mobility, and user preferences to more traditional demographic and psychographic patterns. In many cases this results in the production of new audience categories – tweens, fans, gays, conservatives, “lost boys,” etc. – that provide a new gloss on an old pattern. At the extreme, customizable and surveillant emergent media technologies allow audiences to produce themselves as singularly addressable entities.