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The Underdog Network: The CW and Its Elusive Digital Audience

The CW serves as a useful case study for the questions posed by this roundtable because as the newest kid on the network block, it not only has much to prove but also isn't burdened by years of precedent. Though the network is co-owned by legacy companies CBS and Warner Bros., the CW may embrace innovative methods of audience measurement because it is building a history of viewership rather than protecting longstanding assumptions about its audience. Operating at a financial deficit for most of the years of its existence, the CW has largely downplayed its Nielsen ratings to explore new methods to quantify its wider audience across digital platforms.

The CW, born from the marriage of UPN and the WB in 2006, has struggled with the traditional ratings delivered by the Nielsen Company because its target audience of women aged 18-34 is a demographic less likely to consume television the old-fashioned way: live as it airs on TV. As a result, executives at the CW believe their actual audience to be much larger than the numbers generated by the Nielsen meter and diary methods. The CW's demographic of digital natives is also highly prized by advertisers, so finding ways to count them as viewers can only increase the CW's appeal as an advertising vehicle.

In its earliest years, the CW struggled to increase its ratings by keeping tight control of its content. For example, in 2008, the CW removed full episodes of *Gossip Girl* from its website, cwtv.com, to encourage more live viewing. This move only lasted a few months, however, as the network hastily returned the episodes to its site after noting a dramatic upsurge in illegal downloads for *Gossip Girl*. After that point, viewers could find full episodes of the most recently aired episodes of the CW's signature series only on its website and only 72 hours after its TV airing. This three-day delay was consistent with Nielsen's timeline for delivering the C3, a composite of live and 3-day delayed DVR viewing. Moreover, by filtering all viewers exclusively through its own website, the CW could promise its advertisers their four million website visitors would not view CW programs legally through another site. As evidence of the success of this streamlined streaming approach, the CW was the first network to sell advertisers combined time on both television and web-based airings of their programs.

In the past year, the CW has revised its digital distribution policies considerably; these shifts coincide with a new leader at the helm, CW president Mark Pedowitz. In late 2011, the CW signed a one billion dollar deal with Netflix to stream past seasons of its programs. It also entered a streaming deal with Hulu Plus and reduced the delay in episode streaming on cwtv.com from 72 hours to only eight hours. This embrace of a more widespread digital distribution network reflects the CW's best understanding of its core audience. As explained by Rick Haskins, the CW's executive vice president of marketing and digital programs, "This millennial generation is the 'I know what I want, when I want it and how I want it.'... You need to supply them the product, however they

want to consume it." It also testifies to the network's increasing confidence that it can supply advertisers with audience measurement data beyond the TV.

Central to the CW's digital strategy has been its consistent rejection of and public antipathy for the Nielsen Company and its longstanding methods of audience measurement. During the first year of *Gossip Girl's* airing, program creator Josh Schwartz commented, "The show is a new beast. Shows that the old system of measuring audiences isn't relevant when it comes to a [program] like this." Thus while the CW often ranks dead last among the broadcast networks in Nielsen ratings, it alternatively ranks highly with such indicators as Trendrr and Facebook "likes" (50 million according to one count). Unsatisfied with what Nielsen offers and driven by a need to quantify its digital reach, the CW has combined a series of measuring technologies to set its prices, from Google's DoubleClick data (for total viewers), Nielsen's Video Census (for demographic data) and Rentrak (for set-top box data).

I highlight the example of the CW not because it has found the magical formula to monetize mobile and other streaming platforms but rather because it has issued the starkest challenge to the hegemony of the Nielsen Company. Scholars like Ien Ang have long questioned the legitimacy of the "convenient fiction" of the ratings, but today the inherent weaknesses in the ratings system have only become more obvious as Nielsen has struggled to establish a sound means to measure beyond the TV. In this moment of technological transformation, I hope we can explore further how the contemporary moment has not only increased opportunities for competitors to Nielsen but also for scholars to question the fundamental logics of a system that transforms viewers into currency.