People-meter systems in the changing TV climate

Dr. Heikki J. Kasari outlines the issues facing TV audience measurement across the globe, and highlights areas for future action

INDEPENDENT AUDITING OF people-meter systems is 'a critical element in validating quality control procedures as well as ensuring full disclosure of the methodology used by the research institute to users of the resulting data' (1).

Among the 75 countries that use a people-meter panel for TV audience measurement (Médiamétrie website, 2005, www.mediametrie.fr) many have commissioned an independent audit within the past ten years. Changes in viewing behaviour have created uncertainty about the future, and at the same time subscribers to many people-meter services have been looking for new ways of exploiting people-meter data.

An audit does not necessarily provide the full recipe for making things perfect in the near future; neither can it give an absolute rating of how much better or worse the audience measurement system is compared to other similar systems. It can, however, give an assurance of things being on the right track; in other words, the people-meter operation is run according to the best research practices. A 'landmark' audit was commissioned by the Committee on National Television Audience Measurement (CONTAM) in the US after the introduction of people-meters in 1987. In the $1 million study, all components of the audience measurement system were contracted to several independent research and engineering companies for inspection. For understandable reasons, European people-meter audits have been much more minor in scale.

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Audience fragmentation

Within the past few years several scenarios have been published on the future of TV audiences, a good source is the Week of Audience Measurement Conference Proceedings 2002-2003 (organised jointly by ESOMAR and ARF. For audience research the message has been simple: people-meter systems become obsolete before we know it. The basic argument has, however, remained the same since the start of satellite television in Europe: audience fragmentation.

It is undoubtedly true some audience fragmentation has happened within the past 20 years, but there is also a counterforce, audience concentration. In a quite recent report one of the basic findings was: in most European countries the majority of viewing time is spent with very few channels (2). Apart from the UK and Germany, the TV markets are still very concentrated and therefore the pressure to increase people-meter sample sizes may not be as strong as some of the sceptics want to believe. Even if Nielsen US goes for a sample size of 10,000 households in 2006, European countries can still settle for much less.

Thus, there may be more time for overhauling the people-meter systems, but changes have to be on the agenda, not only because of audience fragmentation: digital television, increases in out-of-home viewing and the introduction of mobile TV are among the forces changing the audience landscape the future. In the UK, overhauling the system is already of immediate urgency: out of more than 130 channels covered by the TV audience measurement system, only the top ten channels have average weekly ratings above one rating point (1%), and less than 60% of total viewing time is spent with terrestrial channels, while digital penetration (at household level) has already exceeded 50% (3).

Changing methodologies

While the TV scene is changing, research methods are also under constant pressure for development. Response rates have a tendency of being fairly low and still decreasing, and even if the panel structure is controlled, there is no absolute guarantee that all increasingly diversified viewing habits are represented well enough. Another danger is the over-representation of heavy viewers in the panel – unless the volume groups (H/M/L) are controlled in recruiting the panel. To alleviate these problems, 'imputation' has been suggested by some researchers in the US: find out from all available research sources the viewing behaviour of the whole public – including those who would never be willing to become panel members – and impute it to the people-meter panel.

This idea was debated in some of the ARF research seminars as early as the late 1980s, and only last year Nielsen Media Research (US) set up an operation called the Council for Research Excellence (CRE). During 2006 approximately $2.5m. is being used to study the differences between the viewing behaviours of panel members and those who refuse to join the panel (source: mediaweek.com).

Another solution is to get viewing data from all homes, not just from a people-meter panel. This was a dream in the US when the concept of the 'information highway' was launched, but it remained only as a theoretical idea (ARF, 1997). Recently the same idea has emerged again in using digital set-top boxes for analysing viewing patterns in all homes – not just a sample of them – within a cable system.

Also, digital TV as such may create problems for people-meter operations. For instance, the mosaic screens (EPG, menus, reformatting the screen, banners, new formats of advertising) can make channel identification difficult; thus, channel-identification systems based on

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picture matching may have to be replaced by an audio-matching system (EBU, 2003).

The people-meter systems face a great number of challenges. The following topics are on the agenda of many joint-industry committees:

- sample expansion
- weighting
- quality initiatives
- out-of-home measurement
- personal people-meter testing
- new technology measurement (internet, mobile TV, multimedia).

Future

In many of the published scenarios for the future it has been left open when the future starts. It appears in audience research we are already living the future. Some of the recently published audience measurement contracts prove it. The new TV audience contract in Germany for years 2005–2011 set a requirement for a new audience measurement technique (a new type of people-meter) to be in place for the year 2007. The new Radio Joint Audience Research (RAJAR) contract, using the PPM for the next two years in parallel with the old diary method, gives the opportunity to get acquainted with electronic radio audience measurement.

Changes in both the technology infrastructure in homes and also in viewing behaviour will have implications for TV audience measurement. In an EBU publication some of the key developments were described as follows:

'The evolution of the television environment in Europe requires a full revision of the audience measurement systems due to several incumbent factors:

- The audience fragmentation, which is partly consequent of digital penetration, but already affects the European television analogue landscape, due to the availability of hundreds of local stations, of regionally-differentiated cable providers and of international channels;
- The increasing need to deeply analyse the market by splitting the audience into more and more detailed categories;
- The reproduction of different platforms and broadcasting modes, each requiring specific technical solutions for including every audience part in the reported market;
- The development of interactive services and new tools for time shift viewing, whose likely consequence will be an increased individualisation of viewing behaviours, making it even more complex to achieve statistical synthesis;
- Collaboration rates of panel members represent a critical issue since they are already close to the lower threshold in some countries and are generally in a downward trend;
- New type of information is presently required by the industry (channel managers, programme makers and advertisers), who are considering how the TAM systems should evolve in order to maintain their proper role of common currency for this market' (3).

The practical implications for future TV audience measurement were also assessed in the same EBU publication. This was based on survey and personal interviews covering 21 countries; their JIC members, TAM providers, TV stations, advertisers and agencies. A summary follows.

Panel maintenance

- increase of sample size
- increase of rotation
- strict supervision of actual vs ideal panel composition

Costs (higher costs caused by several things)

- detailed quality control
- larger sample size
- more installations (increased rotation and sample size increases)
- new financial base; additional players (bouquet providers, digital content providers)

Research solutions

- mathematical models used when data are not sufficient
- data fusion, used especially for small target groups
- separate digital HH panels often needed
- new measurement techniques needed

Weights and controls

- geography, demographics, socio-economic variables; in combination with the multitude of TV environments
- sample design, psychographic variables; increased variability of weights

Establishment survey

- multimedia, more solid financing
- new reception modes to be included.

In order to portray truthfully the programme audiences the audience research methods have to respond to changes in audience behaviour in the digital environment. For the planning of marketing and advertising, a generally fragmented audience but at the same time a small but loyal audience to special interest channels is a new challenge. The challenge to TAM systems is how the special interest audiences will be catered for in a national audience measurement system. Today most of the small channels are not represented well enough in the TAM to allow the analysis of audience composition. Still many of these channels are used by the advertisers since the air-time costs are relatively low and the weekly reach may also be attractive (with a promise of the targeting based on a special interest among the viewers). However, only if the TAM system has a large enough sample size – or a boosted sample, or even a separate panel for digital reception – will true audience behaviour be discovered. ■

1. *Towards Global Guidelines for Television Audience Measurement (GGTAM), produced by ARM, sponsored and published by EBU, Geneva, 1999, page 59.*
2. *EBU Member Audience Trends, European Broadcasting Union (EBU), Geneva, 2004.*
3. *Measuring the Television Audience of the Future – Audience Measurement Challenges in the Digital Age, in collaboration with ARM (Audience Research Methodology Group) and GEAR (Group of European Audience Researchers), European Broadcasting Union (EBU), Geneva, 2003.*

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