

Rate the Ratings

Kaluvoya Anitha

Assistant Professor, Head Dept. Of Communications and Journalism, St. Francis College for women, Hyderabad, AP, India

Abstract

Television Industry which has changed the face of communication field today in India is now undergoing major changes as people are quickly adopting digitalization. This rapid growth is indicating the revolution in digital technology but at the same time it raises concerns towards the content value in Television programming. The entire Television business is based on TRP ratings and this commercial interest of the media owners has led to many controversies over the years. The commercial outlook of the media owners and the advertisers is making common man a scapegoat of this business, to trace some interesting aspects of this issue the present paper not only aims at identifying the methods adopted for gathering ratings of Television channels but also focuses on why ratings have created so many controversies and what are its consequences and current developments.

KEYWORDS: Television Industry, TRP, Media owners, Advertisers, Content value.

Introduction

Television being a popular means of communication today, is playing a very vital role in moulding the public opinion. From one government owned channel in 1959 called Doordharshan, currently there are 1148 Permitted Private satellite television stations in India, as of December 2013. (**Business Standard, 2010**) In addition to that there are more than 100 Government channels. Hindi-language television channels have the highest market share. In addition numerous regional channels are available throughout India, often distributed according to languages. What are these figures indicating? Yes, they are indicating the growth of the communication world today. But the main question of concern here is, is this growing communication reflecting the real choice of society? To a large extent the answer is 'NO'. Why is there a huge growth in television channels in India? Do people in India watch all these channels? What is the future of these channels? Do they really survive in the market? To find out answers for these questions, one must understand the ratings mechanism, which is actually determining the fate of media owners. This paper aims at tracing some of the controversies related to ratings mechanism, the real calculations around the TAM India ratings and the need of BARC ratings under such circumstances.

To what extent ratings represent public choice? If this question is asked to media owners, the answer would be "No they don't", but if the same is asked to TAM India, they answer "everything is alright". This gives an understanding that there is some confusion with TAM ratings. To what extent can one take these ratings as final? Whether they represent the real choice of people is still a question mark. Taking this as the main focus, this paper not only identified the problems faced by the media owners, but also the strategies adopted by the TAM India in terms of taking the opinion of public. This paper not only focuses on how the ratings are gathered, but

also the reliability and validity of these ratings and their future effects, including few new developments.

What are ratings? Why are they important?

‘Television’ is a good means of entertainment for viewers and is at the same time a very big business for owners. What not strategies will be adopted by these owners to catch the attention of the audience to get advertising revenues in return for their firm. By entertaining audience with films, serials and informing audiences with news, these channel owners get ratings which are the source for them to claim advertising revenue. That is what the media business is all about... this gives an understanding that the three important groups of people of the media business, i.e., the audience, owners and advertisers are tied together with one thread which is “RATINGS”.

Who calculates these Ratings?

The minute we hear ratings, what strikes our minds is ‘Nielsen’, **Nielsen ratings** are the audience measurement systems developed by Robert F. Elder and Louis F Woodruff that were sold to Nielsen Company, in an effort to determine the audience size and composition of television programming in the United States. Nielsen Media Research was founded by Arthur C. Nielsen, a market analyst, whose career had begun in the 1920s with brand advertising analysis and had expanded into radio market analysis during the 1930s, culminating in Nielsen ratings of radio programming, which was meant to provide statistics as to the markets of radio shows. The first Nielsen ratings for radio programs were released in the first week of December 1947. They measured the top 20 programs in four areas: total audience, average audience, cumulative audience and homes per dollar spent for time, and talent.

In 1950, Nielsen moved to television, developing a ratings system, using the methods he and his company had developed for the radio. That method has since become the primary source of audience measurement information in the television industry around the world.

Nielsen Media Research has become the de facto national measurement service for the television industry in the United States and Canada and is known here, in India, as TAM India. Nielsen measures the number of people watching television shows and makes its data available to the television and cable networks, advertisers and the media. Nielsen uses a technique called **statistical sampling** to rate the shows— the same technique that pollsters use to predict the outcome of elections. Nielsen creates a "sample audience" and then counts how many in that audience view each program. Nielsen then extrapolates from the sample and estimates the number of viewers in the entire population watching the show. That's a simple way of explaining a complicated, extensive process. Nielsen relies mainly on information collected from TV set meters that it installs, and then combines this information with huge databases of the programs that appear on each TV station and cable channel. This research is worth billions of dollars. Advertisers pay to air their commercials on TV programs using rates that are based on Nielsen's data. Programmers also use Nielsen's data to decide which shows to keep and which to cancel. A show that has several million viewers may seem popular to us, but a network may need millions more watching that program to make it a financial success. That's why some shows with a loyal following still get cancelled. **(How stuff works ENTERTAINMENT)**

Controversies over ratings

TAM claims that all the details of who is watching what and where are provided up to date. But there are some channel owners who are not agreeing with this statement. They strongly feel that the Nielsen Co. had fudged viewership data in India. These criticisms had got some strength when NDTV filed a case in Supreme Court of the State of New York that the Nielsen Co. had fudged viewership data in India. (**Vidhi Choudhary, 2013**)

Many channel owners like NDTV had expressed their dissatisfaction over the TAM rating and were happy that at least some one had taken up this issue, but the appeal made by NDTV was dismissed by the New York court as baseless. (**Brindaalakshmi K2013**) Not only had satellite channels, but also the government owned channel Doordharshan raised its voice against the ratings of TAM India. This argument had become stronger once all the media owners felt that there were some manipulations in the ratings.

Reasons for these Controversies

Newspapers have a fixed mechanism of identifying the circulation, which is done by Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC) in a very simple way, whereas TV channels have to depend on survey method to collect their data for ratings. The statistical sampling techniques are the main reason for all these controversies. To provide those weekend ratings, every minute, TAM monitors the viewer's choice on Television. For this weekend result, the owners have to experiment with many things in order to grab the attention of the viewers, otherwise the remote control is always there, ready to help the viewer move on to the next channel. In this competitive world TV ratings have become very crucial to decide the future of the TV channel owners and employees.

Cable TV penetration in India:

The TAM Annual Universe Update - 2012 indicates that India has over 148 million households (out of 231 million) with TVs, of which over 126 million have access to CATV or Satellite TV, including 42 million households which are digital subscribers. In Urban India, 88 per cent of all households have a TV and over 70 per cent of all households have access to satellite, cable or DTH services. Households with TVs have been growing between 8 to 10 per cent, while growth in satellite/cable homes exceeded 9 per cent and DTH subscribers grew 63 per cent. CATV households could be higher because of unaccounted for or informal/unregistered cable networks that aren't taken into consideration during mainstream surveys. India now has over 500 TV channels covering all the main languages spoken in the nation. Digicable Networks (India), Hathway Cable and Data Com, InusInd Media and Communications (In Cable), and DEN Networks are some of the notable cable service providers in India. (**Centre for Internet and society CIS**)

As it was mentioned earlier, ratings are calculated on the basis of survey. The statistics of cable network indicate that in India, there are 12 crore cable connections, out of which only 10,000 houses are considered for the ratings, which means out of 12,000 houses only one house is taken into account for ratings calculations. And then these results are attributed to the population of those 12,000 households. So this makes it clear that a 120crore population's choice is actually the choice of only 40,000 households and that is generalised to the whole population and declared as ratings. (**Telugutv.info**)

Another controversy that is going around ratings is that the media channel owners have an idea of the households from where the ratings are collected. Television Rating Point (TRP) is a tool provided to judge which programmes are viewed the most. This gives us an index of the choice of the people and also the popularity of a particular channel. For calculation purpose, a device is attached to the TV set in a few thousand viewers' houses for judging purpose. These numbers are treated as sample from the overall TV owners in different geographical and demographic sectors. The device is called as People's Meter. It records the time and the programme that a viewer watches on a particular day. Then, the average is taken for a 30-day period which gives the viewership status for a particular channel. **(Sunday Times, 2003)**

The national TV ratings largely rely on these meters. To ensure reasonably accurate results, the company claims that it uses audits and quality checks and regularly compares the ratings it gets from different samples and measurement methods.

Nielsen's ratings can only tell how many of them are watching which programme, but that doesn't mean they all like what they are watching. This then is a million dollar question, if someone is watching a programme, does it mean it is their favorite show? But as per these ratings are concerned, watching means liking. Like this so many controversies have developed around Nielsen ratings and even the government had decided to intervene in this regard.

Role of BARC

Under so many controversies like the sample size not being sufficient and all of the areas not being included in the survey, TAM India continued to give its ratings, but on the other side these have become the good sources for the cable operators to earn good amount from media channel owners. As TAM organizers have to convince the families before they fix the people's meter in their homes for which they even present them with gifts some times. In spite of proper assurance from TAM organizers, still these families discuss about the Peoples meters that are fixed to their TV sets. After identifying the TAM rated families, these operators charge carriage fee from owners and that is how they get benefit out of it. Interestingly cable operators would be waiting to know which house hold has the TAM meters, because they could charge carriage fees from the channels. The channel owners will give them the highest priority, because through them they would know the choice of their viewers and can design the programmes accordingly—as their job gets simplified because for them it is enough if the people who have TAM meters are satisfied, just in order to get good TRPS and revenue through advertisements with the ratings eventually measured.

Due to the increasing pressure over this issue from every angle, the government had appointed a committee to look into the controversies. And the committee has come up with the following suggestions. They are:

1. Within two years, the sample size should go up to 15,000
2. By third year it should go up to 30,000. Apart from these, the committee also said that this increase of sample needs more amount for maintenance of these meters which has to be supported by the Television Industry
3. It also suggested to give ratings for every 15 days rather than every week.

These suggestions which are given by the ratings commission have put TAM into more problems as the government asked the Nielsen Company to follow the commission's suggestions, which are practically difficult for TAM. Other side, Broadcasters push for an independent audience measurement system to fit into the emerging digital media world in order to capture audiences across all digital platforms as the audiences fragment and ad revenues slow down; to do this the Indian Broadcasting Foundation (IBF), the Indian Society of Advertisers (ISA) and Advertising Agencies Association of India (AAAI) had formed a nationwide audience research joint body, Broadcast Audience Research Council (BARC). In fact, BARC is an old story that started almost six years ago. Since then there has been considerable debate in various forums, extending even to the Parliament, about the TV audience measurement system, referred to in popular parlance as TRP system. A number of committees were formed, a key recommendation of the Mitra Committee was the establishment of BARC representing the interests of all key stakeholders.

BARC has been formulated on the lines of BARB (Broadcasters' Audience Research Board) of UK. Just like BARB, BARC will also not conduct audience measurement directly, but commission independent specialist research vendors.

The primary objective of BARC is to conduct and commission market research using appropriate research methodologies, to provide accurate, up-to-date and relevant findings relating to broadcast audiences, including TV ratings. According to Goenka and the other broadcasters there is nothing wrong in the data provided by TAM, but it is inadequate (**Anusha Subramanian, 2012.**)

Conclusion:

The ratings collected by the TAM are not only deciding the future of the media owners, they are even deciding the future of citizens of India. In this ratings war, to grab the attention of the viewers many media channels are putting aside the real journalistic ethics and values, as a result of which, today we witness many meaningless shows on television. A common man in the name of entertainment has become a scapegoat of meaningless shows on TV. First of all the TAM rating sample is not adequate and second, the over excitement of the media owners has led to many twists and turns in the story of ratings.

Let us hope that the formation of BARC, the quality and scope of TV audience research in the country will get upgraded, the findings will be more robust and financials more transparent. Currently, according to the broadcasters the major challenge will be to cover all the broadcasting modes in the research - terrestrial, cable & satellite, DTH, analogue and digital platforms, developing and new platforms. As BARC has been formulated by the industry itself for the purpose of achieving some goals like engaging in extensive industry consultations with stakeholders, specialist research consultants, existing and potential measurement service providers, to identify the key concerns and requirements with regards to audience measurement, let us hope it achieves what it had aimed for and expect that the new digital change will really bring some meaning to the content of the contemporary television programming.

References:

1. Business Standard (2010) 23.77 mn DTH subscribers by June 2010: Trai. Available online at http://www.business-standard.com/article/technology/23-77-mn-dth-subscribers-by-june-2010-trai-110100500228_1.html
2. How stuff works ENTERTAINMENT: How do television ratings work? Available online at: <http://entertainment.howstuffworks.com/question433.htm>
3. Vidhi Choudhary, (2013)Nielsen case: NDTV files plea against complaint dismissal. Available online at <http://www.livemint.com/Companies/X9nQnbnAfoTPP6Us6Z2KuL/Nielsen-case-NDTV-files-plea-against-complaint-dismissal.html> (Live Mint 6th September 2015)
4. Brindaalakshmi K(2013)Medianama,New York Court Dismisses NDTV's Lawsuit Against Nielsen; Timeline. Available online at: <http://www.medianama.com/2013/03/223-new-york-court-ndtv-nielsen/>
5. Centre for Internet and Society, Cable Television. Also available online at: <http://cis-india.org/telecom/resources/cable-tv>
6. The Times of India, Sunday Times, (2003):What is TRP and how it is calculated? Available online at: <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/sunday-times/What-is-TRP-and-how-it-is-calculated/articleshow/11816.cms>
7. Anusha Subramanian, (2012)BARC comes back to life. Available online at:<http://www.businesstoday.in/current/broadcast-audience-research-council-comes-back-to-life/story/23244.html>
8. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_television_stations_in_India
9. www.telugutv.info