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ABSTRACT

Collection of detailed data on normative overall patterns of television viewer behavior has been an ongoing effort of the Broadcasters' Audience Research Board (BARB) in the United Kingdom. While their measurement system--self-completion viewing diaries in conjunction with electronic meters recording television set use--may register that an audience is "viewing" a particular program, it does not consider the attentional factors that operate during television viewing, i.e., how behavior varies under different conditions of viewing and for different genre and production styles. The Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) has begun a program of research that is designed to chart the "natural history" of television use in the United Kingdom. The first stage resulted in the validation of BARB's techniques of data collection. A pilot study of television viewing in the second stage was then conducted using nine selected households. This stage of the study involved the installation of special video/recording equipment to record all activity during television viewing (Household Observation and Monitoring Equipment or HOME) in order to assess the new monitoring equipment and generate testable hypotheses about viewing behavior in realistic settings. A number of hypotheses were generated, and the researchers feel that the ability of this technique to show television as it is can have a formative effect on the thinking and designs of those researchers who sustain and use existing large scale assessment methods, since presence alone is not an adequate measure. (10 references) (CGD)

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'The Viewer Viewed.'

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THE VIEWER VIEWED: A FRESH LOOK AT THE TELEVISION AUDIENCE

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Measuring Audiences

British research into television audiences is both abundant and scarce. Research is abundant in the sense that commercially-oriented continuous research, co-ordinated by BARB (see note 1), produces large amounts of highly detailed data about normative overall patterns of viewer behaviour. Much time, money and effort is devoted to the task of coping with this mass of data which forms the basis of the present commercial televsion structure in the UK. BARB ratings also constitute a vital yardstick for the BBC's assessment of its own performance compared to that of ITV and Channel 4. These data are produced, and designed to be produced, for very specific and limited goals; to characterise programme audiences in terms of a small set of demographic classifications (age, sex, class, area) and to provide reliable estimates of audience sizes for every programme shown in the UK. The primary aim is to sell audiences to advertisers, while secondary aims are to inform programme-makers about their viewers, and to obtain general measures of programme appreciation - again for the benefit of programme-makers and schedulers.

The concentration of finite research resources into these areas consequently leads to a scarcity of alternative approaches to the act of television viewing. BARB's audience measurement system was designed to produce reliable estimates of audience size, or, more precisely, audience presence - an individual member of the BARB panel is counted as part of the audience all the time he or she is physically present in a room with a television set which is switched on to a broadcast channel. As a direct corollary, all viewing must be accorded the same 'value', and all programmes must be presumed to viewed in the same style regardless of content.

There are good reasons for believing that this model of the process of viewing is inadequate for any purpose beyond that of simple gross audience measurement. If viewers' preferences are sought - either through quantitative surveys or through qualitative research - a clear and consistent picture emerges. Most people say that they have strong and personal preferences about what they view and what they do not view. While different individuals, often reflecting wider age, sex and class influences, show different tastes all share the same theme of the viewer determining, or aiming towards determining, his or her own programme selection from a limited menu. (Taylor & Mullan, 1986; Svennevig & Wynberg, 1986)

On the other hand, extended analysis of BARB ratings data allows for an entirely different conclusion; audience size for a given programme, and patterns of behaviour over time, can largely be predicted from knowledge of previous programmes' audience, the channel/s concerned, and time of day. According to this view the concept of a 'selective' audience is superfluous, uneccessary for explanation of audience behaviour (e.g. Goodhardt et al. 1975) Most people watch most programmes (that is, importantly, they are recorded as being present) in marked contrast to what they claim to do.

Constraints on Viewing

One solution to this seemingly irreconcilable difference between approaches, adopted by the 'harder' side of the audience research world, is largely to ignore viewers' claims and judge by actions alone. If the aim of research is to sell advertising airtime on a per capita viewing basis, then this (just) suffices. However, if the aim is to go beyond a descriptive level of analysis and to attempt to understand the process of viewing from the viewers' points of view then viewers' opinions have to be given due weight.

For most people television viewing is not a simple matter of a 'free market' system of individual choice, for fairly obvious reasons. First there are limited programme alternatives available at each viewing occasion - four channels plus the rapidly-spreading fifth alternative of video. Secondly there are time constraints in that other activities, duties and needs have to be

accommodated, impinging on or directly competing with television's share of free time. Thirdly, each potential viewer (other than in one-person households) has a role in influencing each other's viewing and behaviour - depending on the particular status of each viewer within the household (Morley 1986).

One result of the interplay of these factors is inevitable: on some occasions each individual viewer will be present for some programmes which he or she would not view under ideal circumstances of free choice. Realisation of each viewer's ideal can fluctuate from fulfilment to utter disappointment. What is known, though, is that people do continue to watch in some fashion even if the content is less than perfect - television is an attraction in its own right. What is not known is how viewing behaviour varies (if at all) under the different conditions of viewing, and for different genre and production styles.

From anecdotal and qualitative evidence it is clear that there are - or at least viewers believe there are - attentional factors operating during normal television viewing. This is apparent from self-observation as well, in that few people would claim that watching, say, Panorama is anything like the same experience, behaviour or level of involvement as watching Donald Duck. Curiously, there is little study of attentional factors in viewing in the real world. 'Big' research (e.g. BARB, Neilsen) pays little or no regard to this issue, while academic research tends largely to concentrate upon attentional factors within the context of specific programme types, typically in news programming, and frequently in experimental laboratory conditions. Given that television viewing in Britain is probably the largest single leisure activity for most of the population in terms of time spent in front of or close to a television set, there is very little reliable evidence on the basic 'ecology' of television use. We know remarkably little about how people view different programmes, what the typical forms of response to different programme types are, how other demands on time are accommodated within the overall framework of television availability, and how television and social life co-exist.

Some limited-scale pieces of research attempting to analyse the basic viewing process do exist. Some involve participant observation, with observers joining households for a period of time (e.g Silverstone 1985). Others involve depth interviews and analysis of the resulting interview protocols (Morley 1986). Both these techniques can be criticised for their intrusiveness in that it is likely that the presence of an observer, no matter how well trained, must remain a significant feature of the otherwise normal viewing environment. There have also been attempts at direct recording of behaviour without an actual observer present, using film or video techniques. Early attempts were limited by the technology available, often requiring the equivalent of an outside broadcast vehicle parked directly outside the participating households (Bechtel, Achepohl and Akers, 1972). Other workers used time-lapse photography of people viewing at home (Allen, 1985), and with developments in technology, time-lapse video recording (Field and Collins, 1985; Anderson et al., 1985). However, in all of these studies the techniques were used for specific reserach questions, mainly on childrens' attention to programming. Despite the existence of the techniques, no real light has been shed on what it is that goes on in television households - over 20 million in the case of Britain alone.

The Use of a Newer Technique: H.O.M.E

Recently, the IBA have begun a programme of research using in-home observation via video which aims to chart the 'natural history' of television use in the UK. This began with a project commissioned by the IBA (Collett and Lamb, 1986) with the specific aim of validating the technique then in use (1984) by BARB to generate its audience size estimates - self-completion viewing diaries in conjunction with electronic meters recording TV set use. Following this successful study, it became clear that the technique was appropriate for the more general study of viewing behaviour itself, and the IBA developed its own equipment for the next stage of research. The basic technique is straightforward. A household watches a television set as normal, only it is mounted in a cabinet which also contains a video camera, microphone and a video recorder which records the scene in the room and any sounds in the room. A second video recorder records the television picture and soundtrack.

For each viewing occasion, this results in a full record of what went on in front of the TV set while it was switched on (the camera etc. only functions when the set is on), together with a full record of what was seen, and when channels were changed, at what points during programmes and adverts activity began and ended.

To date, the equipment (christened H.O.M.E - Household Observation and Monitoring Equpiment) has only been used in a purely qualitative sense. A small sample of households was recruited in North London during February to April 1986, and HOME placed for a period of between three to six days in each in turn. Nine households in all were used. All households were recruited by a professional market research firm (The Research Business) to a quota. The quota controls ensured that the families selected were typical television users, had an existing remote control television (HOME is remotely controlled), had at least one child aged under ten years of age, and were not atypically biased towards any particular televison channel. Also, all families recruited were in social grades C1 and C2 - lower middle and skilled working class respectively - corresponding to the two largest social groups in the population in general.

Some H.O.M.E. Truths.

The aim of this pilot exercise was to assess the equipment and to generate testable hypotheses about viewing behaviour in naturalistic settings.

Using a small and unrepresentative sample is not designed to produce representative findings of the British viewing population as a whole - the exercise is more like a group discussion of a depth interview. These qualitative techniques are most suited to the process of generating hypotheses, getting a 'feel' for the overall richness of the area of research, and speculating about the possible scope of behaviours which might exist in the viewing population at large.

Accordingly, the pilot study has thrown up a series of speculative hypotheses about the practice of television viewing. Some will most likely turn out to be unsubstantiated, some trivial or extremely rare, others will require modification and restatement. But we do feel that here is a start on the necessary road to mapping out the patterns and complexities of the ways in which people relate to the box in the corner.

Hypotheses about people's uses of television:

1. 'Pure' viewing in the sense of uninterrupted attention to the television screen is extremely rare. Most people do something else while watching, or fail to watch the whole of a programme. Viewing takes place within a melée of other activity, sometimes highly disruptive of attention, sometimes less so.

2. Different individuals view the same programmes with differing degrees of attention. Members of the same household may watch a programme together while exibiting different behaviour. Different households may watch a programme differently from another household watching the same programme.

3. Individual viewers show varying styles of viewing depending on the viewing environment and on the content and type of programme being viewed. The same individual can have a wide repertoire of viewing styles, from indifference to complete absorption.

4. Viewing can be active or passive. In active viewing, the viewer shows interaction with programme content - talking to the set, or about the programme content, laughing, attemting to answer quiz show questions, crying, in many ways treating the set as another household member. In passive viewing, the viewer sits or slumps in front of the set, unmoved and unmoving, showing no sign of any form of interaction. Both styles may be adopted by the same individual according to programme content.

These are broad generalisations. In greater detail:

5. Despite the widespread tendency of people in the presence of the television set ('viewers' as defined by BARB) to be doing other things at the same time, they also monitor programme content. Thus attention can vary according to content, with other activity ceasing temporarily.

6. Individuals' interests and knowledge influence viewing behaviour. When, say, a news item of particular salience appears in an otherwise unattended bulletin, attention is focussed on that item and competing activity ceases. When a quiz show contestant makes an error of fact the viewer may verbally correct it.

7. Viewers are sophisticated in their knowledge of production techniques, accurately judging when programmes are ending, or a break is imminent, and react to the various cues that something is 'about to happen' e.g. music, shot changes, suspenseful build-ups.

8. Commercial breaks, end-of-programme credits, continuity announcements are frequently used as 'time out' from viewing. People relax, stretch, increase the amount of competing activity and use these short bursts of free time to attend to other matters outside the television room.

9. While television is not consistently attended to, most individuals remain in proximity to it, even when engaged in seemingly incompatible activities.

10. Zapping - switching channels - is common, and takes two main forms. First there is avoidance of specific material e.g. adverts, trails, certain programmes (depending on tastes). Second, there is seemingly random zapping, which can occur at any time and may be sustained over time - this 'shopping behaviour' seems to be both an attempt to find something suitable to watch and also to be a mild stimulant in its own right. (In the 9 households, one individual achieved a total of 34 channel changes in 31 minutes, while holding a conversation throughout.)

What does clearly and immediately emerge from the hours of tape collected from the small sample of families is the central linkage between the ways in which people use televsion - from wallpaper in the background to undivided centre of attention - and the particular nature of what is being seen or heard. This is the key missing link between what BARB ratings tell us and what viewers themselves tell us; if presence is the sole measure of audience behaviour, as in BARB, then most people do indeed watch most things. If attention and involvement are the measures, then people are also, as they claim, more selective in their use of television than BARB can admit.

It must be said that the HOME technique, like any one research method has its own particular drawbacks. While it is not intrusive in the sense that participant observation is, it must be assumed that having the device in your home and knowing that you are 'being watched' is intrusive upon privacy. Participants interviewed during and after placements acknowledged this, saying that they took care to be properly dressed or not to be over-intimate in front of the set. However, they also felt that their pattern of viewing was not affected. Certainly there is very little evidence from the actual tapes to suggest that people were in any way behaving abnormally or acting up to the camera - apart from the occasional small child. (Even in these cases, the children rapidly tired of sticking their tongues out at a totally unresponsive box!)

The H.O.M.E. of the Future

There are two pressing needs for further research using HOME. Most important is the need for more systematic validation of the technique, to ensure that results are not merely a reflection of the intrusiveness of the device. Next is the need to place HOME in a more representative sample of households, encompassing different age groups, social grades and family structures. It can also be argued that there are particular groups, such as the single elderly who are largely television-dependent, to be considered a priority.

Techniques such as HOME can never supplant the more mechanistic BARB-style audience measurement stystems. Analysis of HOME tapes is time-consuming, requiring content analysis following comprehensive coding frames - together with the pitfalls that content analysis invariably falls prey to, such as inter-coder differences and ambiguous material. However, the mere existence of the technique, and its ability to show television as it is, can have a formative effect on the thinking and designs of those who sustain and use existing large-scale assessment methods. At least, HOME forces media producers and owners towards the realisation that those people out there, the viewers, behave just like themselves when it comes to watching television. At most, it can show that presence alone is and will always remain a basically flawed measure of the ways that people spend significant slices of their lives.

Note 1. BARB (The Broadcasters' Audience Research Board) is a body jointly owned by the BBC, ITCA (Independent Television Contractors Association - a body representing the ITV companies) and two advertising industry bodies (IPA, ISBA). BARB is responsible for the collection of audience size data via the research company AGB (Audits of Great Britain). The AGB/BARB system involves a panel of 3,000 homes throughout the UK which have electronic meters attached to their TV sets. Each set also has a 'push-button diary' whereby each household member is required to push his or her button on a special handset to signal that they have entered or are leaving the room where the TV set is. Data from the set meter (when set on, which channel selected) and the 'diary' are married together to give audience estimates for the UK, and for each ITV and BBC region. BARB ratings are the sole audience size standard used in the UK.
BARB is also responsible for the collection of audience appreciation data via the BBC's Broadcasting Research Department. The BBC/BARB system involves a panel of around 3000 individuals throughout the UK who each week fill in a viewing diary, rating each programme seen on any channel on a simple scale. These data are transformed into a 0-100 Appreciation Index for each programme transmitted (subject to at least 25 panellists having rated a programme).

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