

Delivering Television Audiences to the Advertisers? Impressions from the Living Room

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The commercial transactions between the television and advertising industries are predicated on television viewing data provided by ratings research. Recent overseas research, however, suggests that ratings provide an incomplete, if not inaccurate, picture of television audiences. This paper, using findings from video-taped observations of the living room while the television set screened, further illustrates this by focusing on audience activity during commercial breaks. The latter are avoided with a regular consistency thus raising the question whether television delivers audiences to the advertisers.

Keywords: television, advertising effectiveness, peplemeter, audience research, zipping, zapping, ratings

Introduction

At the corporate tables of the television industry, the audience - as represented in the huge market research output to date - has always been of intrinsic commercial interest. After all, the ratings, now obtained by the almost universal PeopleMeter, determine the cash-flow of television networks, with the advertising dollar matched to the number of people a television programme is able to attract.

However, recent advances in television audience research suggest that ratings research is severely flawed (Morley 1990; Ang 1991). The commercial drive to 'know' the audience and to deliver it to the advertisers is based on a very one-dimensional conception of television viewing which equates presence with watching. As will be demonstrated through preliminary findings of a recent New Zealand qualitative study, television viewing is hardly to be labelled as an activity in itself, but is more often than not combined with a host of domestic activities. Within the domestic context of television viewing, attention levels to commercials appear to suffer greatly to the point that the commercial breaks tend to be invariably ignored. This raises the question of whether television delivers audiences to the advertisers which is after all the economic foundation of television broadcasting.

This paper will start with an analysis of audience research practice in New Zealand which indicates the centrality of the ratings discourse. The final section of the paper will introduce some findings from the social world of actual audiences (Ang 1991) which were obtained through video-taped observations of the living room combined with family interviews.

Television Audience Research in New Zealand

The study of television audiences has a rather weak tradition in New Zealand. The past and present situation in audience research could be characterised as having been limited to the so-called 'head-count' approach. Mainly used for programme-rating purposes, this research has gathered quantitative data for commercial reasons. This research has taken on the role of providing the 'official statistics' on audience viewing patterns through a data collection process which uses the formula of who is watching which programme at what particular time.

These ratings, whether obtained through viewers' diaries (until April 1990) or the PeopleMeter, are the currency of the television business. They enable a price tag to be attached to commercial slots and provide the basis on which programming decisions can be made by the network executives.

In their 1986 report, *Broadcasting and Related Telecommunications in New Zealand*, the Royal Commission of Inquiry (1986) acknowledged the general commercial importance of the 'head-count' for advertisers, which was then generated by the Audience Research Unit of the Broadcasting Corporation of New Zealand (BCNZ) and the research group AGB:McNair. However, the Commission (1986) also noted the importance of "in-depth understanding of people's likes and dislikes in programming" (p.430). Furthermore, the Commission (1986) recommended that

"More in-depth socially based research could aid considerably the process of defining New Zealand audiences' tastes. On the basis of such information more use could well be made of pilot programmes to test the reactions of audiences as well as of executives to previously unexplored avenues of programming" (pp430-431).

With the Royal Commission of Inquiry being generally sympathetic to an increase in research endeavours other than ratings research, it is somewhat ironic that the BCNZ disbanded its Audience Research Unit during 1987 and passed on this responsibility to AGB:McNair. Audience research in New Zealand has thus become indistinguishable from market research.

This particular practice of audience research in New Zealand (as well as elsewhere) reflects, in Jensen's (1987) words, the social climate in which quantitative audience research is located, as well as the ways in which the role and influence of broadcasting in contemporary society is perceived:

"The outpouring of commercial marketing research and political communication studies points out that data about the behavioral consequences of communication are commercially and politically useful information" (p21).

However, it is the assumption of this being the case rather than the evidence provided by quantitative audience ratings research which makes this type of research such an attractive option for the television networks and advertisers alike. Ratings enable the television industry to translate the relatively elusive activity of watching television into calculable units on which further commercial exchanges can be made (Morley 1990, p6).

For its part, the television industry has restricted its response to criticisms of audience measurement with an increasingly frantic search for a "technical fix" (Morley 1990, p5). The recent introduction of the PeopleMeter in New Zealand is an excellent example of this response. In New Zealand, the PeopleMeter was hailed by the industry as an answer to the "growing complexity of the television medium and the audience viewing environment" (AGB:McNair, not dated, p2). A local commentator (Macdonald 1990), referred to it as the "pseudo-science of demographics and ratings" (p86). However, aside from this potentially critical judgement, Macdonald's article lapses into an almost curious fascination with this new research technology, a brief infatuation which was also characteristic of public discussion in the New Zealand media.

Overseas, the PeopleMeter has been received with considerably more scepticism even among market researchers, whose reservations are not too far removed from those voiced by other critics:" The figures received from TV-meters are taken as a pretext for viewing behaviours" (Monten 1989, p182). This Swedish commentator foresees considerable difficulties for advertisers who rely too much on PeopleMeter research data for making their marketing decisions. More crucially, ratings research is methodologically flawed in that it reduces television viewing to the "observable behaviour of having the set on [which] is further assumed to be a simple act, having, in principle, the same meaning and salience for everybody" (Morley 1990, p6).

The amount of resources being expended by commercial (and public service) television institutions to forever 'desperately seek the audience'; to deliver the audience, as it were, in nicely packaged demographic and psychographic segments to advertisers, is the also focus of Ang's (1991) comprehensive critique of the ratings discourse. Ang (1991) extends Morley's observation by pointing out that "the audience so desperately sought does not exist, at least not in the unified and controllable mode in which it is generally envisioned" (p ix-x). Having made this point, she prefers to substitute ratings research with studies which increase our knowledge about the "social world of actual audiences".

Even though we presently live in a television-saturated world with television shaping our everyday practices and experiences, the existing knowledge about audiences leaves much to be desired. The remainder of this paper will explore a relatively uncharted terrain in audience research, namely the everyday domestic consumption of television with specific reference to audience activity during the commercial breaks.

Impressions from the Living Room

The fieldwork research, on which the findings reported here are based, combined recorded observations of family viewing contexts with post-observational family interviews, modelled on Collett and Lamb (1985) and Morley (1986). It consisted of monitoring families in a provincial New Zealand city for seven consecutive days using a custom-made cabinet which contained a 21" television set, a low-light camcorder and several video cassette recorders. This equipment provided a video-recording of the persons present in the room whenever the television set was switched on. The video-taped recording provided not only a picture of the family viewing context but also a small insert showing the programme actually being screened at the time. In total, eight families participated, rendering approximately 275 hours of video-taped recordings. The recordings were followed up with post-observational interviews to further explore whether the "moments of television" (Fiske 1989) or 'observed idiosyncrasies' corresponded to the generally perceived patterns of viewing within each family.

Television viewing - the outstanding example of contemporary media consumption - is an everyday activity. Within this context, 'watching television' is part and parcel of everyday routine. The viewing habits displayed during the commercial breaks need to be considered within this mundaneness of family television viewing as the following examples will show. These excerpts, following the chronology of the viewing day, give us some impressions of the living room when the television screens. However, when considered overall they are quite typical of the kind of audience activity during the 'ad' breaks of the families that participated in this study.

Breakfast Television with the Browns - a Single Parent Family of Three

A typical viewing day in this family starts with Sylvia turning on the television at around 7:15am. Usually sitting on the couch in her pyjamas, she watches TV2's Ox Tales, a daily breakfast cartoon show. During the programme, but mainly during the commercial breaks, she leaves the room on several occasions either to fetch breakfast or to get dressed. She returns to the room resuming her place on the couch and watches the breakfast cartoons (now it concerns Defenders of the Universe) while grooming her hair. Her sister, Ann, briefly enters the room and has a quick glance at the set and collects her school bag before leaving the room again. Their mother has not got out of bed yet. For both girls, and for Sylvia in particular, early morning television provides a background for such activities as getting ready for school, the timing of which is monitored by both of them through the clock showing on the screen. Independent of parental intervention, the set is turned off by one of the girls at around 8am.

Television at Lunch with the Dawsons - A Family of Four

It is usually at midday when the television is turned on for the first time by Joanne who tunes into TV3's Oprah Winfrey Show while having her lunch. Seated in the right corner chair, she attentively but quietly watches this programme, occasionally sipping from her cup of coffee. Throughout this programme, she leaves the room when the commercials appear. On such instances she is out of the room for three or four minutes, taking with her the cup and plate and returning with a magazine which she starts to read while waiting for the Oprah Winfrey Show to come on again. She resumes watching the programme although her eyes wander to the magazine which she has on her lap. During another commercial break, the reading of the magazine gains prominence and is carried on for several minutes even though the programme has appeared on screen once more. When the Oprah Winfrey Show concludes, Joanne stands up and walks to the set to turn it off.

In both examples, it would be difficult to generally characterise 'watching television' as a prolonged, sustained effort requiring full attention. It is perhaps more useful to argue that television viewing oscillates between it being a primary and secondary activity. However, the picture emerges that the commercial breaks become a signal to leave the room or, alternatively, trigger other activity such as reading.

Afternoon Television with the Grays - A Household of Five

At 3:15pm, having returned home from school with a friend, Stuart turns on the set which screens TV3's Another World. Both boys leave the room almost immediately and are out of the room for some time. When they return to the room with a drink and a sandwich, they sit down on the couch to watch Thomas the Tank Engine which has already started. At the suggestion of his friend, Stuart switches to TV2's Wowser. They only stay with this programme for a couple of minutes and then Stuart switches back to TV3 just before Duck Tales starts. During a programme trailer, featuring The Greatest American Hero, the two briefly discuss the merits of that programme before they leave the room again when the commercials appear. While Duck Tales screens the room remains vacant for about ten minutes until Stuart and his friend return with more food. As they eat, Stuart puts on a video featuring skate boarding where the commercial breaks have been edited out. He then explains to his friend the finer details of the spectacular action, occasionally rewinding the tape and

showing the action in slow motion. As both watch the video and talk about the skate boarding, Stuart's mother enters the room saying she is going out. When the video finishes, Stuart briefly switches back to Duck Tales, but when his friend walks out of the room, he turns the set off.

About half an hour later, Stuart returns to the room and turns on the set which screens TV3's Police Academy cartoon show. He initially watches this programme attentively from one of the bean bags, but during the remainder of the programme he is in and out of the room. He leaves the room when the commercial breaks come on, but usually stays away longer than the break and thus misses considerable segments of Police Academy. While Stuart is away, his elder sister, Emily, makes a brief appearance but she returns a few minutes later for a longer viewing spell. Through the VCR she watches an earlier recorded episode of TV3's Home and Away while she sits on the couch. She attentively watches her favourite soap opera, using the remote control to 'fast-forward' during the commercial breaks. Meanwhile, Stuart enters the room and sits down on a bean bag and plays with the kitten that the family recently obtained. He pays little attention to either Emily or the recorded programme. As the tape finishes, Emily rewinds it and proceeds to use the remote control to pre-set the recording of this day's episode of Home and Away which will screen at 5:30pm. Meanwhile, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles has started on TV3 and this is watched attentively by Stuart. His mother, having arrived home again, comes into the room and while she plays with the kitten she briefly chats to Stuart. At this time, Mary, Stuart's oldest sister, makes her first appearance of the day in the television room yet almost immediately leaves again together with her mother. During the next commercial break, Stuart switches to TV2's 3:45 Live but returns to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles which he watches until its conclusion.

This particular example of children watching television after they have arrived home from school undermines the somewhat stereotypical depiction which sees them as predominantly 'passive' consumers of television. While the television set screened in most families with children for a considerable amount of time during the period between 3pm and 6pm, this is combined with such activities as doing homework and play, resulting in the observation that the television programmes screening may be ignored for considerable blocks. Commercial breaks tend to be avoided by switching channels also known as 'zapping', leaving the room or paying more attention to homework or play. As is the case in this excerpt, we also see the avoidance of commercials on pre-recorded programmes either by 'zipping', that is fast-forwarding through the commercial breaks, or by editing the commercial breaks out of the recorded programme.

Television at Dinner Time with the Allens - A Family of Four with a Boarder

Dinner taken in front of the television brings the whole household together. It is customary for this family to switch to TV1's One Network News starting at 6pm, followed by Holmes and Sale of the Century. During these programmes there is a lively interaction between the members present and the programme being watched. Television in this setting initiates discussion, which is directly programme-related but there is also talk about things that have occurred during the day. Verbal interaction is mainly between, John, the father and his oldest son, Andrew, who appear to be 'intellectual allies', sharing a similar kind of humour as they comment on the programmes. The comments of the youngest child, Eric, are either ignored or dismissed by them, but occasionally find a sympathetic ear from his mother, Alice, who may move to sit next to him on the floor. Carol; a student who boards with this family, sometimes

joins in the discussion/ comments initiated by the father and his oldest son. These interactions tend to be paced by what screens on the set with commercial breaks being used to carry away dinner plates and for the dessert to be brought in by either the father or the mother. On week nights, the set is turned off at around 7:30pm, usually by the father, and interestingly before the prize-giving of the Sale of the Century which is otherwise attentively watched with those present competing for the right answers.

Evening Television with the Elliots - A Family of Two, So-called 'Emptynesters'

Between 7:30pm and 8:00pm, Oscar turns the set back on. With television being predominantly used for the purpose of relaxation, the next two hours are characterised by a relatively concentrated viewing mode on Oscar's part, even though this may at times be combined with such activities as spinning and knitting. The latter activities, however, gain more significance during the commercial breaks which Oscar purposely avoids. With the Listener guiding his evening's viewing schedule, Oscar typically watches programmes screening on TV1.

Because of her hearing impairment, Ellen, Oscar's spouse, finds it difficult to enjoy television in the way Oscar does. Apart from 'police series', she has similar programme tastes to her husband but finds it difficult to sustain television viewing for a long period as it takes too much concentration and effort. Oscar plays an important role in communicating bits of programming she might have missed. However, there are occasions that he himself is so engrossed in his viewing that he fails to notice Ellen's questions. Similarly, when Ellen attempts to initiate a discussion, Oscar takes quite a bit of prodding, something which leads to frustration on Ellen's part. In such instances she returns to reading the newspaper and regularly leaves the room. The interaction changes when the ads come on. Using the remote control Oscar will normally turn the sound down and resume his knitting or spinning. During this time he will also tend to seek eye contact with Ellen and initiate conversation by asking "What did you say...?", thus referring to a question asked by Ellen during the programme.

These last two examples demonstrate very clearly that conversation and attention levels are determined largely by the sequencing of programme segments and commercial breaks. While the programmes are watched fairly attentively, the breaks are used for talk and doing other things. The start of the commercial breaks often acts as a trigger for a change in conversation and attention levels.

Concluding Remarks

In presenting selected case study narratives of extracts of the family viewing day, this paper concentrated on how family audiences go about avoiding commercial breaks. The everyday, mundane experience of television viewing - in which television predominantly features as a background resource - exhibits, among other things, that these family audiences almost routinely ignore television advertising. This finding highlights the predicament of television advertising which, apart from the fact that television audiences increasingly articulate their unfavourable dispositions towards advertising (with the result that the advertising and television industries are facing a major public relations problem), may also not be so effective as is generally assumed. Findings of a similar kind are also implicit in Hoek and Gendall's

(1991) study which polled a sample of New Zealanders on several television advertising-related matters.

The video-taped observations of family viewing show that television programmes are not always attentively consumed by family members. 'Watching television' can either be a primary or secondary activity, which is somewhat different from the discussions in the literature which places television consumption on the active-passive viewing continuum (see, for instance, Root 1986, Chapter 2). The depiction of television as 'moving wallpaper' - in other words, television as a background resource from which viewers tune in and tune out - is a particularly apt one when evaluating the viewing habits of the eight families that took part in this study. However, there is a distinct pattern which sees viewers tuning out as soon as the commercial breaks come on.

It is, of course, tempting to denounce television advertising as being ineffective and wasteful at a time when it is under critical scrutiny by New Zealand television audiences. Be that as it may, in the United Kingdom the cat has been put among the pigeons by Newspaper Publishers Association which placed a full-page advertisement in *The Guardian* (8 November, 1991) with the telling headline "Some people are being conned by TV commercials. The people who pay for them." Somewhat belatedly, the research findings of Peter Collett (who also placed an in-home observation cabinet in family dwellings) are triumphantly mentioned in the advertisement: "...Dr.Collett observed that some people who stop watching television during the commercials pick up a newspaper". It seems that in the competition for the advertising dollar, which is likely to become especially heated in times of recession, a debate about the effectiveness of television advertising is underway. The findings presented in this study may add to that debate in New Zealand.

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