

The Behaviour of Television Audiences During Commercial Breaks

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This paper reviews research on the proportion of television audiences who actually watch advertisements, and presents the findings of three studies carried out in the Department of Marketing at Massey University. In two studies, telephone interviews were carried out during commercial breaks. These suggested that just over 60% of the television audience was likely to watch any given advertisement. The third study used face-to-face interviews, also carried out during commercial breaks, and found the audience for advertisements to be only 53% of the programme audience. Furthermore, commercials shown between programmes in this third study were watched by significantly fewer people than commercials shown during programmes.

Keywords: television audience, advertising, peplemeter, effectiveness, post exposure interviews, viewing behaviour

Introduction

The size of audience for advertisements shown on television is a matter of vital concern both to television companies and to advertisers. A recent qualitative study (Zwaga 1992), which suggested that the audiences for television programmes largely ignore the advertisements, provoked considerable interest from the media and a strongly defensive reaction from the television industry (McLeod 1992; O'Neill 1993).

Zwaga's work was part of a sociological study of the way that interactions between family members are influenced by their television viewing. Eight families participated in the study, each agreeing to have their normal television set replaced for a seven-day period by a device containing a video camera and recorder, as well as a normal television set. During the seven days the camera recorded the actions of family members for the whole time the television was turned on.

In total, about 275 hours of viewing were taped. The tapes must have included at least 30 hours of advertising, during which over 3,500 advertisements would have been shown. It is clear therefore that the research obtained a substantial sample of viewing behaviour, although Zwaga appears not to have attempted any quantitative estimate of the proportion of audiences viewing the advertisements. His qualitative descriptions of typical audience behaviour do, however, indicate that for much of the time little attention was paid to the commercials.

A variety of methods have been developed over the years to measure the size of television audiences. Until 1984, the method used commercially in the United Kingdom was a combination of set-meters and papers diaries (Jacobs 1983). This was replaced by "people-meters" which are operated by viewers pressing buttons to record when they start and stop viewing (Cox 1985). People-meters are also now used in the United States, and in New Zealand.

People-meters, if panel members cooperated fully, would not only measure the size of programme audiences; they would also show the number of viewers remaining to watch

advertisements during commercial breaks. They cannot of course provide any measure of the extent to which those present attend to the advertisements.

Several alternative techniques have been used to estimate the extent to which television audiences actually watch advertisements. Nuttall (1962) tested day-after recall. Allen (1965) used time-lapse cameras to photograph the behaviour of television audiences in selected households. Steiner (1966) enlisted students as "observers" within the selected households to observe the behaviour of other members. Wolfe, Brown, Thompson, and Greenberg (1966) used a combination of post-exposure interviews and in-home observers, and Twyman (1969) used both diaries and telephone interviews which coincided with commercial breaks. Bunn (1982) used the increase in electricity consumption during breaks to estimate the extent to which audiences did other things than view television at these times. Collett (1986) developed a combination of video camera and recorder, which he called a "C-box". All these studies agree in finding that a substantial proportion of programme audiences do not watch advertisements.

A substantial study, using post-exposure interviews (Anon 1992), was carried out by a major market research firm on behalf of the Association of New Zealand Advertisers (ANZA). Over 2,500 telephone interviews were carried out. Each started within 15 minutes after the end of a commercial break, and respondents were asked about their behaviour during the preceding break.

The results confirmed Zwaga's qualitative impressions. Nearly half the respondents reported having been out of the room for at least part of the break, and fewer than 1 in 10 said they had watched the advertisements.

What is important for advertisers, however, is not the proportion of audience watching part of a break, but the proportion who will see any given advertisement shown during the break. This information could be obtained with great accuracy by quantitative analysis of data of the type obtained by Zwaga, but it is not clear at present whether it would be economic to use this method on a substantial sample of households. The only other accurate method is that of simultaneous interviewing, which is most economically done by telephone.

The purpose of this paper is to report the findings of three New Zealand studies that have employed this technique to study television audience behaviour during commercial breaks. Although these studies were conducted some years ago, they illustrate the application of the techniques used, and provide benchmark data for future studies and for evaluating the findings of Zwaga (1992).

Method

Two studies employing simultaneous telephone interviews were carried out in the Department of Marketing at Massey University in 1985 and 1986. In both studies, households were contacted by telephone during a commercial break and the individuals who answered the telephone were asked what they were doing when the phone rang.

In the first study (Willis, Wattie, Walker, Wong & Yeow 1985), 290 viewing households were contacted. The second study (Hall & Esslemont 1987) involved a sample of 163 individuals from 98 households. In both studies, interviewing was conducted in Palmerston North, during evening viewing hours (between 6pm and 10pm).

The method of simultaneous telephone interviewing gives accurate estimates of the behaviour of respondents, who are usually able to report accurately what they were doing at the moment the telephone rang. Unfortunately, viewers who continue to watch the advertisements are less likely to answer the phone than those who have, for example, left the room to do household chores. Estimates obtained from this method are therefore subject to bias.

To avoid this bias, respondents in the first study (Willis et al 1985) were also asked about the viewing behaviour of others in the household. This estimate of course depends on the report of the person answering the telephone and may therefore not be accurate.

In the second study, Hall & Esslemont (1987) used a similar technique, but with a slight variation, designed to avoid this source of inaccuracy. An initial interview was carried out with the person who answered the telephone. The interview was then continued by selecting a second respondent from the other television watchers, if any, using the next birthday technique.

The third study (McLeay 1987) employed simultaneous face-to-face interviews. This method was developed in order to eliminate the bias resulting from differences between those answering the telephone and other viewers. The interviewer waited in a car outside a preselected house watching a portable television set until the start of a commercial break. The interviewer then noted the time, started a stop watch, and proceeded to the house and knocked on the door. All those watching television in the house were interviewed and asked what they were doing at the moment they heard the knock on the door.

A total of 317 dwellings, stratified by capital value, were selected randomly from the Palmerston North rating roll for this study. If there was no reply, or if no one in the house was watching television, the house next on the list was chosen. If the occupants of the house were watching television, but not viewing the channel the interviewer had selected, demographic data were collected, the interview terminated, and the house next on the list incorporated in the sample.

Results

The first study, (Willis et al 1985) found that only 38% of the 290 respondents who had been watching television had actually been viewing when the phone rang (see Table 1).

Of the other 574 viewers, 73% were watching when the phone rang. Overall, 62% of the television viewers had been watching the advertisements.

In the second study (Hall & Esslemont 1987), 55% of the 98 first respondents, and 68% of the 65 second respondents, were watching the commercials when the phone rang (see Table 2). The 65 second respondents were a sample of the 133 individuals who had been viewing in addition to the first respondents. After weighting to take account of this, it was estimated that 63% of programme viewers had been watching the advertisements at the moment the telephone rang.

Table 1. Proportion of respondents watching television advertisements when contacted (Willis et al 1985)

	Respondent		Others		All	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Watching	109	38	422	73	531	62
Not Watching	181	62	152	27	333	38
Total	290	100	574	100	864	100

It can be seen that both studies produced similar estimates, with under two thirds of the audience for a programme likely to be watching the screen during the showing of any given advertisement.

Table 2. Proportion of respondents watching television advertisements when contacted (Hall & Esslemont 1987)

	1st Respondent		2 nd Respondent		All (weighted)
	n	%	n	%	%
Watching	54	55	44	68	63
Not Watching	44	45	21	32	37
Total	98	100	65	100	100

The results of the third study (McLeay 1987), involving the use of simultaneous face-to-face interviews, are presented in Table 3. The data suggest that only about half of the viewers of a given programme are viewing advertisements at any given time during a commercial break. Put another way, the audience for a given commercial is likely to be only about half the audience for the programme during which it is shown.

Table 3. Proportion of viewers watching television advertisements when contacted (McLeay 1987)

	n	%
Watching advertisements	144	53
In the same room, but not watching	77	28
In another room	50	19
Total	271	100

Timing of the Commercial Break

At the time the research was carried out, buyers of television advertising were much concerned with whether or not the proportion of people viewing advertisements is affected by the placement of the advertisement. That is, whether the size of the audience viewing advertisements is affected by whether an advertisement is placed in the breaks during a programme, or in the breaks between programmes. In McLeay's own interviews a record was kept of whether the break was within or between programmes. The results are shown in Table 4, where it is apparent that the commercials shown between the programmes were watched by fewer people than commercials shown during programmes. This difference was significant at the 1% level.

Table 4. Advertisement viewing behaviour by timing of the commercial break

	Between Programmes		During Programmes		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Watching commercial	15	35	76	59	91	53
Not watching commercial	27	64	53	41	80	47
Total	42	100	129	100	171	100

Note. $X^2 = 6.8$, d.f. = 1, $p < .01$, Phi = .2

Discussion

The three studies described put the audience for advertisements at between one half and two thirds of the programme audience. Though the studies were carried out over the period 1985 to 1987, there is nothing to suggest that the viewing proportion is any higher today. In fact, the difference between the 1985 figure of 62% and the 1987 estimate of 53% is significant at the 5% level. Both covered residential households in Palmerston North, and interviewing was spread over the evening viewing hours in both studies. The most obvious explanation of the difference is thus that the proportion of audiences viewing the advertisements had declined. There is of course no evidence as to whether the decline has continued, but the recent research by Zwaga and the ANZA does indicate that the proportion remains well below 100%.

There are implications in these studies both for advertisers and for further research. First, in making media decisions, advertisers would be prudent to assume that the audience for advertisements is approximately half the audience for the surrounding programme. Second, further research is required either to establish the appropriate correction factors to be applied to people meter audiences or to develop a method directly measuring the audiences for advertisements.

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