

## Book review:

# Television Audiences Across the World

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According to the publisher's website, this book claims "to be the first to explore the composition of television ratings in a cross-cultural, comparative manner".<sup>1</sup> As a result the editors of this collection of essays, Jérôme Bourdon and Cécile Méadel, set out not only to describe the vast number of approaches of audience measurement across the globe but to derive common and devious traits through the "social study of sciences, and (...) actor network theory, especially one of its branches: the sociology of quantification" (p. 2). Their goal is to bring together a collection of 14 essays to capture and interpret how audiences are perceived regarding their composition as well as their purpose for various actors

<sup>1</sup> Palgrave Macmillan (2014) <http://www.palgrave.com/page/detail/television-audiences-across-the-world-j%C3%A9r%C3%B4me-bourdon/?K=9781137345097>, accessed Nov 7, 2014.

and the ensuing approaches to measurement over geographic scope as well as time.

In their introduction the editors introduce the history of audience measurement and the devised instruments before covering corresponding criticism that evolved almost simultaneously. This serves to set the stage for the contributions to their collection to be linked along the perspectives of timeline, geography, applied instruments, dominant scientific notions or cultural and political environments. The authors conclude that, surprisingly, ratings have become the primary model to represent the television-watching public in all these often very different contexts. The editors hence intend to explore why the "peoplemeter" has emerged as the dominant approach for the assessment of content popularity in the post-modern world.

## Television Audiences Across the World: Deconstructing the Ratings Machine

Edited by Jérôme Bourdon and Cécile Méadel

Palgrave Macmillan, 2014; 274 pages:

ISBN: 978-1-137-34509-7 (hardcover)



Three perspectives are applied that also organize the book. Part 1 “Inventing Measurement” covers the history of measurement for the cases of Britain, Canada, France and Germany with their distinct approaches to measurement instruments and policies. Stefan Schwarzkopf analyses the development of British television audience measurement systems to demonstrate how the competition of different systems may have controversial results. He concludes that debates over the “best” system often inherently reflect conflicts about underlying policy models (public/private) or research philosophies. Marc Balnaves compares the British model propagated by the Broadcaster’s Audience Research Board (BARB) to the Nielsen approach applied in the USA regarding the way in which they reach consensus on samples, methodology, etc., to react to changes in the media system. His findings suggest that BARB is in a stronger position as struggles over this system are not directed at replacement – a danger Nielsen faces – but rather at an advanced level of transparency to the public. Philip Savage and Alexandre Sévigny develop an “audience massage model” to capture audience rhetoric, frames and structures and their impact on audience research. Through the application of their model to four cases, the authors find that the traditional metrics do not adequately reflect collective

public interests, in particular those around community and identity creation which become much more relevant through social media. The editors contribute the French perspective with a highly-controlled, monopolistic-commercial system that despite extensive discussions enjoyed a relatively high degree of acceptance. Susanne Vollberg closes the first part with her account of the development of the German system that currently faces challenges of incorporating technological changes and the on-going convergence of traditional media.

The second part of the book “Appropriating Audience Figures” encompasses various concepts of what constitutes an audience in a certain geographic or national context (the cases here are India, Brazil, Italy, Australia and Russia) and how differences in perception affect designs of audience measurement. Santanu Chakrabarti opens the second part with his analysis of the extensive mediation processes necessary between the various actors to agree on socio-technical conventions for audience measurement in India. While relating the opinions of the different proponents, he demonstrates that the Indian system encounters the same challenges as the European and US systems, but also that internal conflicts among broadcasters or ratings agencies add to the conflicts. Brazil is presented as a “peculiar” (p. 132) case for TV audi-

ence measurement by Esther Hamburger, Heloisa Buarque de Almeida and Tirza Aidar. Covering the period from 1970 to 1997 they explore the reasons behind discrimination against low-income parts of the population and the over-valuation of the female audience. Massimo Scaglioni introduces the case of the audience measurement agency in Italy being fined for abusing its dominant position, and the ensuing public debate. Marc Balnaves uses Australia, an early adopter of Anglo-Saxon audience measurement traditions as well as a technologically advanced country, as a case to explore (relative) independence and transparency as the on-going challenges of audience measurement for legacy broadcast media, as well as those emerging with the proliferation of media and the resulting fragmentation of the audiences. Sergey Davydov and Elena Johansson conclude the second part with an analysis of the Russian system that has to incorporate a huge variety of populations and cultures as well as navigate difficult political and economic arenas.

Part 3, “Confronting Changes”, the final part of the book, deals with the effects of changing commercial logics (Ireland), new legal settings (USA), emerging technologies (Belgium) and developing behavioural aspects on audience measurement. Ann-Marie Murray presents a case study of Ire-

land's public service broadcaster to investigate the relationship between scheduling practices and audience measurement in order to retain and gain audience share and commercial revenue. Philip M. Napoli analyses how multi-stakeholder disputes surrounding the introduction of audience measurement systems in the US reflect on-going debates over communications principles of competition and diversity. In their chapter Tom Evens and Katrien Berte explore how audience measurement via set-top-boxes could provide much better information on time-shifting and mobile viewing. However, their findings for the Belgian case suggest that these improvements may not necessarily be welcomed by the proponents of the traditional measurement systems, but need the support of the whole ecosystem of actors. In the collection's final essay Jakob Bjur argues that the social sciences have not been exploiting the full inherent potential of audience measurement data and proposes a data thickening process to reveal more details of audience behaviour.

The book is an impressive collection of chapters which together provide a wide perspective of perspectives on audiences - and to that degree the book is truly unique - that captures the systems of audience measurement ultimately based on ratings of some kind as well as the scope of ensuing challenges to audience measurement. Another quality is that the authors and the case studies are from so many different countries, especially including non-Western countries, which in the cases of Brazil, India and Russia in themselves already represent numerous populations and cultures. They also cover extensive time-spans by recounting the histories of audience measurement systems over several decades, including political and economic debates. This rich array of perspectives avoids the narrowness of position often encountered in books on media phenomena and provides the reader with extensive insight into the full scope of audience measurement issues.

Unfortunately, the richness of perspectives is also the book's major weakness. Contrary to their

claim to explain why the "peoplemeter" has become the dominant TV audience measurement system, the readers have to derive their own conclusions because the chapters - aside from brief references to each other (e.g. see chapter x in this book) - do not enter into a deeper dialogue on the mutual topics. The collection would therefore truly benefit from a conclusion in which the editors discuss the chapters in reference to the structure proposed in the introduction in order to answer their central question.

That said, the authors give more nuanced arguments as compared with many other books and the chapters are excellent contributions to the field. New technological developments, cross media innovations and the changing roles of the audience will drive the debate on the "best" system of audience measurement and the ways to capture the growing complexity of the media world. This book is certainly a contribution to strengthening the foundation of the field and allowing for much more advanced discussions in the future.