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Audience Research In Australia

By

Grant Noble
Introduction

I must confess to remaining somewhat confused as to my brief for this paper. On the one hand I am told that I am to address research concerning the television audience in Australia. On the other hand the AMIC brief specifies the flow of material for television and video in the Asian-Pacific. While these two areas are very disparate a number of overlapping points can be raised and discussed.

However I feel I should start by pointing out that television audience research is well developed and defined in Australia. As in most so called 'developed' countries, extensive audience research is conducted for the commercial television companies and advertisers by rating agencies. Although until relatively
recently such ratings were not controversial. AGB McNair Anderson conducted such ratings by the 'diary' method for the three Australian television networks. However, as of last this month (March, 1990), McNair have lost the ratings contract to the so-called 'people metre' systems which are to run by

I should add that these two competing systems do not give identical results. The people metres, whereby audience members record their presence in front of the television by typing in an identification number, seem to indicate relative to the 'diary' system that

a) the audience at off-peak times (i.e. not from 6 to 10 pm in the evenings) is larger
than previously thought.

b) The government paid for channel 9, the Australian Broadcasting Commission, attracts a larger audience than previously estimated (previous estimates were around 15% of the available audience).

c) The dominance enjoyed by channel 9, now owned by Bond Media, is not quiet as complete as previously estimated.

Several other differences are apparent between the 'people meter' and 'diary' rating systems. However these need not concern us here except to point out that the 'diary' system was supposed to be relatively infallible. The current discrepancy between the two systems indicates that no one audience rating
system is infallible. Thus much about what we have learnt from ratings systems must nowadays be treated with some discretion.

I must also add that the past three to four years have seen very considerable turmoil in the Australian commercial television industry. In the past three years each of the three commercial networks was sold to new owners. Since then virtually every one of the new owners has been declared bankrupt. And it is now fair to say that commercial television in Australia is now almost exclusively owned by the banks who lent the new owners the money to purchase the networks at prices which the market now estimates were far too high.
A very brief history of these transactions may be informative. Parker sold the 9 network to Alan Bond for 2 billion dollars. Bond media now still owns channel 9, but Bond's financial problems have prompted Parker to rebid for the 9 network for somewhat less than 1 billion dollars. The Fairfax organisation sold the 7 network to Skase. Skase's company, Quintex, has since been declared bankrupt. Skase's bankers are currently looking for potential purchasers of the 7 network. Channel 10 was purchased from Murdoch by a property developer Lowry. 10 was always the least watched commercial channel in Australia. Lowry has now sold the management of channel 10 to Cossers. He even lent Cossers the money.
to acquire a controlling 10% interest in channel 10. In short the commercial television industry in Australia is in considerable turmoil and likely to remain so. However these differences have not affected the audience a great deal — except that companies now spend less on programming than in the past. Even this, however, has not changed the range of programs available for viewing — except for a marked decline in Australian productions which will only become evident to the viewers in the next twelve months. For example one of Coles's first acts at Channel 10 was to successfully negotiate for a reduction in the price paid for imported American production. Prior to this the three commercial channels
in Australia competed with each other for such productions. The end result was that Australian commercial TV companies were paying considerably more than foreign TV companies for American imports. It also remains the case that Australian TV companies have huge stocks of imported American programs which as yet have still not been to air.

Complicating this picture even further have been various changes in government policies on communication. These are too numerous to fully list here but a number of points of summary can, and should, be made.

1. The Broadcasting Act dates from 1942. Numerous amendments have been made, but
as may be imagined, the Act cannot really cope with the technological changes evident in the past half century. Nevertheless the Broadcasting Act was considerably 'tinkered' with just prior to the sales of the commercial television stations in Australia. Until that time TV stations were essentially regional in nature - that is they serviced specific geographic markets like the cities of Sydney and Melbourne. Various stations in those cities had entered into agreements to share some programs and the same station number for identification.

The Broadcasting Act was then amended to firstly a) prohibit extensive cross-ownership of print and electronic media and b) to permit any one company
to reach 60% of the population of Australia. Such changes introduced the rush by entrepreneurs to purchase stations across the nation since they thought they could then establish national networks.

Equally important as far as how TV programs are concerned, such changes resulted in far greater uniformity of program purchases and more uniformity across stations in different geographic areas.

I live in rural Australia. In cities there are three commercial channels, the government paid for ABC and the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) which caters for minority ethnic audiences. The relative audience share of these channels according to several 'diary' ratings were
roughly channel 9 35%, channel 7 25%, channel 10 20% (all commercial), ABC 15%, and SBS around 2%. However in country areas of Australia only two channels are available, and where I live are still available the ABC 30% and a local commercial channel 70%. A new policy for country TV was introduced when national changes were made. Aggregation meant in theory that country residents would have the same choice as in cities. However while aggregation has been introduced in some areas, for example around Canberra the capital city, in northern NSW we are still waiting. Various local stations have in fact challenged aggregation legislation in the High Court. The end.
result of these changes was a rush to purchase country television stations which were previously locally owned. The purchasers affiliated themselves with various national networks. In so doing some of them breached the 60% audience reach— which prompted yet more calls for changes in legislation. But where we now only have basically channel 7 product. In fact our choice of TV programs has become more restricted than before. Worse still in terms of flow the local channel can no longer purchase TV programs from any suppliers—but is locked into a network system.

It is therefore no surprise to learn that from 1987 the amount of time
that viewers spend watching television has actually been declining. In Sydney the commercial TV audience has declined by about 3%, but in Melbourne where many 'local' channels were absorbed into national networks the decline has been around 10%. This is the first time such a trend has been observed in Australia.

Moreover, alternative means of delivery have not really been considered. Noble & Noble (1986) surveyed the population in northern NSW to see whether they preferred 'aggregation' or the option of a supplementary channel. Under the latter scheme the 'local' channel would have remained in local ownership but would have transmitted two channels rather than...
Audiences voted around 30% and 40% respectively - but their views were largely ignored. Broadcasting in Australia is therefore currently an oligopoly providing audiences with less diversity of restricted programs. The flow is by and large from local production companies associated with national networks from one centralized overseas supplier, mainly from the USA and the UK. Only the SBS provides TV programs from outside such a 'mainstream', but their audience is largely restricted to very small numbers in large cities.
One of the many reasons for the previously noted in the decline in the audience for commercial television includes the immense popularity of video in Australia. Television programs broadcast to the public are regulated by the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal (ABC) to ensure amongst many things, that around 40% of content is Australian made, and that levels of sex and violence do not offend public taste. Such controls, which is frequently challenged in the courts which add to the picture of endless confusion, are one reason for the decline in audience sizes.

The federal government periodically, but regularly, reviews the question of
of the portrayals of violence on television. Such reviews are usually prompted by massacres like the one in Toodyco Street, Melbourne. I participated in the most recent such review. The companies were asked to what degree they screened their programs before broadcast, and what if any changes were made to content in order not to offend the public. The companies answers made it plain firstly that they received few complaints about TV violence (more complaints were received about bad language), and that their screening processes were extremely haphazard. Since nearly all are attempting to reduce costs, it is not surprising that only very few staff were involved in such processes.
However, one unexpected result of these most recent enquiries is that currently to somewhat more coherently enforce the time zones when various types of programs can be shown. Programs exclusively for 6-13-year-olds must be shown between 4 and 5 pm on weekdays. Programs for a general audience (rated G) must be shown from 5 pm to 7:30 pm. From 7:30 to 8:30 pm programs are screened with P6R ratings, parental guidance recommended. From 8:30 pm programs for adults (A) or adult only (AO) may be screened. Clearly parents are expected to monitor their children's viewing for P6R classifications and times, however it transpired in the
The evidence presented by companies to the
AB7 committee that they simply had
not promoted these guidelines and that
less than 30% of the potential audience
was aware of this system, L in fact
commented that it was surely ironic
that companies in the promotion business
had failed in this regard. The final
consequence of these deliberations is
that British comedy shows, previously
the exclusive preserve of the ABC, are
now re-shown between 7.30 and
8.30pm. In fact many of these programs
such as Open All Hours, were
previously broadcast by the ABC. Since
many in the audience simply do not watch
the ABC, this latter practice means that the
flow of imported material is now on a second run but is attracting a new and unfamiliar audience.

Australians, on average, watch TV for 2½ hours per day. However as noted above viewing figures in Australia are now, for the first time since the introduction of television, showing some decline.

**Video**

Television was in 98% of Australia's 5,041,000 households in 1985 (Moran, Badham & Mcnicol, 1988). In 1981, 97% of Australian households had at least one television set, and at least 82.5% of households had at least one colour television set. Video, however, has proved very
Popular in Australia where there is no pay or cable television. Moran et al report that videocassette recorder (VCRs) were first imported in bulk from Japan to Australia in 1980 when 28,439 domestic machines were imported. In 1980 around 1% of households had access to VCR. That proportion has steadily increased since that time. Around 10% of households had a VCR in 1983, and that proportion rose to around 20% by 1984, and to 30% by 1985. In 1985 Moran et al report 658,148 VCRs were imported into Australia. In October 1985 Moran et al report that 37.1% of households had access to videocassette. At that time Moran et al report that the
market appeared near to saturation. They report that VCR sales had dropped from a high of around 700,000 in 1984 and seemed likely to bottom out around 300,000 by about 1988 when the penetration rate was thought to be predicted to be around 30%.

While sales may have slowed since then penetration has continued and has passed the 50% of households mark. As in other developed countries, VCRs are most common in households with children under 16 years (Cooper, Gunter and Levy, 1988, for comparable experience in the U.K.). In 1988 the ABC news reported a national VCR ownership rate of 58% of 70 household. Moran et al report some regional variations
with the greatest proportion of VCR ownership in South Australia, and Rest of the capital city with most VCRs. They therefore are more VCRs in also report that regional or country Australia. This should not surprise given the lack of choice of broadcast television. In fact Noble & Noble (1986) found that two-thirds of TV households in the northern NSW region served by Television New England had access to VCRs. These appear to be the most recent figures available. As with the rest of the world VHS systems are more popular than Beta. In 1984 the respective proportions were VHS 67% and Beta 32%, but by 1984 the proportions were 83% and 16% respectively.
Moran et al provide some useful, if dated figures relating to video software. They report that there 2,242 retail outlets for pre-recorded software in Australia. This figure excludes companies who shop who providevideotape and sale in addition to other activities. The 2,242 retail outlets are therefore exclusively concerned with videotape hire and sales. These retail outlets are more highly concentrated in metropolitan regions and more numerous per head of population in the largest states of Western Australia and Queensland. However much less is known about the video market than about the television audience. Moran et al
report that 95% of sales and hires are of entertainment films of which the major proportions in descending order are comedy, action and adventure, family, adult, horror and X-rated (where available). As elsewhere in the world it appears that mature vcr owners, those who have had a vcr for a year or more, tend to only rent the latest movie releases. Younger ones who have owned vcrs for shorter periods tend to rent more vcrs including both new releases and movies from back catalogues. Even these figures however are approximate and tell us very little about patterns of consumption. Such figures, moreover, hide the fact that in Australia, as elsewhere, time-shift
Regarding is the principal uses of the VCR where TV programs are recorded for either repeat viewing, or when it was not possible to watch the program when put to air. An ex-student of mine became the Video-Ezy franchisee in the town where I live, Armidale population 22,000. He reported that 1,500 videos were often hired in a single weekend in Armidale. Roughly speaking, that represents that around one in six of 9,000 households hires one video per weekend in Armidale. More probably, however, such figures probably represent the fact that about 3,000 households hire around three videotapes per weekend.
Software Agencies

Moran et al report that the video distribution industry in Australia is run by nine major companies and around 23 independents. The majors are associated (for the main part with overseas companies, mainly American. CIC-Taft have around 17-20% of the market, CEC 15-17%, Roadshow Home Video 9-14%, Warner 9-14%, RCA/Columbia Hoyts 9-14%, Thorn-Emi 7-10%, CBS/Fox 7-10%, Syme (Australian) 4-7% and Sundowner (Australian) 3-4%. The 23 independents in around 85% (when Moran et al compiled these figures as far as can be judged) had somewhere between 15-25% of the market which Moran estimates at
estimated at 200 - 250 million dollars in 1985. As elsewhere in the
world piracy was rampant in Australia
and most probably still is in spite of
legislation designed to curtail it.
Moreover the banning of X-rated movies
in many states, which then accounted
to around 20% of the market, has
further curtailed the video software market.

Since 1985 the trend in Australia
has been toward away from a diversity
of video tape outlets towards more
concentrated centralized and franchised
distributors like Video Ezy. I am pleased
to report that my student headed heed of
my advice and sold out of Video Ezy
some two years ago. As the video market
VCR market achieves maturity, the market for rental will decline in absolute overall terms - especially as large retailers begin to sell videocassettes at more competitive prices. It probably remains the case that the majority of video material distributed in Australia comes from the USA. Moran et al estimates that U.S. provides around 62% of the U.K. around 17%. Australian productions accounted for around 4% of all titles distributed.

As with the TV industry, but more so, imports, especially American, tend to dominate both markets, the video and TV markets.
The Audience for Video and TV

This paper has so far concentrated on describing the markets for television and video in Australia. In that respect at least I have attempted to address the question of how. As elsewhere in the world the flow is from overseas, especially from the U.S.A., into Australia. But in 1989-90 the same of the most popular TV shows in the U.K. are in fact Australian like Home and Away and Neighbours. In other words the flow is not entirely one way—especially as far as TV programs are concerned.

However the fact remains that audience studies remain relatively underdeveloped in the video domain.
and maybe overdeveloped in the semiotic arena in the TV domain in Australia. Communication schools in Australia tend to concentrate on semiotic analysis which often ignore audience views and opinions.

What seems required are the types of study outlined by Tracey in *Alvarado's (1988) Video World-Wide* book. Tracey (1988) maintains that much of the debate about cultural imperialism is to equate the fact of its presence within a culture with the fact of it's influence within that culture. This seems self-evidently true. It therefore follows that, as Tracey argues, there should be no more research conducted on the
flow physical flow of TV and video product into other cultures. Future work should therefore include examination of the sociological meaning of such flows of cultural products. It should also address the ways the audience for such products. Semioticians are keen to theorize about such issues but only often from their own perspective. In this context it is often difficult to find semioticians who agree one with the other.

Tracey reasons in all research on television, and I would add also on video, there is an overwhelming need to employ both quantitative and qualitative methods. The former methods are
necessary for examination of finely what is watched and secondly to relate viewing patterns to demographic and other characteristics. But the qualitative phase is also necessary to understand how the audience both understands and interprets what they have seen. Such research, as in the Katz and Liebes study of audience responses to *Dallas* in Israel, reveal that culturally impenetrable products are often interpreted within the confines of the viewer's cultures. Often in many cases the content is completely reinterpreted in such instances to fit within the understandings of that culture even if this means misunderstanding.
The plot as conceived and written by its creators. Such research of necessity needs to be done by local researchers rather than travelling experts. I also entirely agree with Tracey when he reasons that communications researchers need to produce more empirically, sociologically and anthropologically based analyses, and I would add psychological, as well, and spend less time on the preparation of grand theory and the exercise of social science ideology. Since I have been engaged in precisely such research for twenty years, but with the child audience for television, I could not agree more. I shall report on some of this type of research after reviewing initially the ratings procedures.
The Ratings in Australia

In case some might think concern with 'ratings' is misplaced, many in fact do. However, when it is remembered that Moran et al report the total revenue for film and video production in Australia for cinema and television in the financial year ending June 1986 was $410 million. Of this nearly half, $200 million was spent on TV commercials. The placement of such expensive product is entirely contingent on rating outcomes.

To put such figures in perspective only $66 million was spent on TV series, $50 million on documentaries, $47 million on feature films and $47 million on
on TV features. Thus the greatest part of Australian production enterprise, Australian product for Australian consumers with absolutely no overtones of cultural imperialism, is paid for by advertisers who are completely dependent on ratings systems for TV programs.

A Brief Overview of the Diary Rating Systems

I recently was successful in tendering to the Federal Dept. of Transport and Communications for content analyses of driving and alcohol in TV's most popular programs for 13-16 year-olds, 16-25 year-olds and 25 years plus age groups. These age groups were specified in the tender specifications and were not of...
my choice. The tender also specified that McAdair Anderson 'diary' ratings be used to select these groups' favourite TV shows. We duly paid some 600 $ to McAdair for their 'diary' ratings for the month of November, 1989.

I have always distrusted 'diary' rating systems. Moreover, as previously noticed the people meters system has yielded some very different results than from the diaries. Since both companies claim that their sampling procedures restrict error to a maximum of around 5% of the audience, yet some discrepancies between the two systems were more of the order of 20%. Clearly such results discrepancies in results
indicate major flaws in these systems. Why should this be.

On close analysis ABB McNair sample only around 440 households in Sydney and Melbourne for each weekly report. ABB: McNair Anderson, reprinted 1989, Understanding Television Ratings, Sydney, Australia, page 41. They maintain that such a sample represents about 1 in 2,500 households. However they do not specify if 440 households are used in both Sydney and Melbourne or whether this represents a combined figure. Nor is this figure clarified in a second McNair publication "A User's Guide to Television Surveys" (undated), Sydney, Australia. McNair claim that their sample ratio of 1 in 2,500
is a far higher ratio than is achieved in any comparable overseas market. Moreover they claim that in a year diaries are collected from over 7,000 households in each city. That figure is even more confusing since it represents a weekly average of around 140 households—
even though I concede ratings are not, but this latter figure suggests that only 220 households are sampled in both Sydney and Melbourne run for even 30 weeks in a year.

However the real problems commence when their memoir attempt to justify their sample in terms of sampling theory (p. 43). The memoir booklet has a hypothetical questioner ask the very reasonable question “But are so few diaries enough?”. The reply on page 43 asks the questioner to imagine a bathtub filled with 100,000 red beads, 70%
red and 30% green. If 1000 were pulled out you would