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Keynote Speech

By

Hugh Leonard
There used to be an idea that audience research was really nothing more than a head count. The object of the exercise was to find out how many people were listening or watching at a particular time. This idea still persists, of course, in certain commercial situations, where you have what is called the “ratings game”.

It is audience research, that can’t be denied, but its audience research in its most rudimentary and fundamental form.

What we’re talking about today and what you’re going to be talking about for the next week is a very different kettle of fish. Audience research as it has evolved is now a highly scientific and very complex art. Like any other art or science, it is fraught with pitfalls for the uninitiated or the unwary. Like any other science or art it must be studied and practised before it can be put to use. It has to be learnt and having been learnt it must be relearnt from time to time to keep its practitioners in tune with new developments.

So that’s why workshops like this one are so useful. They bring together people with the same problems and the same aspirations so that they can exchange their experiences and their ideas to the benefit of all those taking part. So I congratulate AMIC and Deutche Welle for their initiative in organising this workshop which will undoubtedly be of immense benefit to all of you taking part in it.

One of the ironies of audience research is that the
broadcasting organisations with the greatest need for it are those with the least chance of achieving it, because they are the ones suffering most badly from a lack of resources, both human and financial.

I know from personal experience as the former head of a broadcasting service in a small developing country how very difficult it is for professional broadcasters in countries like that to convince their governments, or whoever else it is who controls the purse-strings, of the necessity, the absolute imperative need, for audience research.

It is often impossible to convince these policy-makers that it's just as important to carry out audience research as it is to buy a new transmitter or a new tape recorder.

And the big problem is that when you find yourself in the unenviable position of having to make that kind of choice -- between new equipment and audience research -- it's only too easy to see things from the point of view of the policy-maker, even though professionally you know it's wrong to see it that way.

After all, your radio service can survive and carry on broadcasting without audience research, but it can't do so without a transmitter. What you broadcast on that transmitter may not be the best product to serve the real needs of your audience, mind you. But when it comes to a choice between running a programme without knowing what your audience really needs and wants and knowing those needs but not being able to run a programme at all, it's not really a choice, is it?
Sure I'm talking about an extreme situation, but unfortunately it's one that really does exist in some of the smallest and poorest countries in the Asia-Pacific region.

So what's the answer, then? The answer really is for the broadcaster not to be put in the position of having to make that kind of choice. The answer is for due recognition to be given to all aspects of the broadcasting process, including audience research, and for the appropriate amounts of funding to be made available to the professionals for each.

Some of you attending this workshop are in the happy and fortunate position of having won, or inherited, the necessary understanding and recognition of the value of audience research by your policy-makers, but others are not, so they perhaps have something of a selling job to do in their own countries.

However, they will not always be successful in this because the resources will just not be available, so funds will have to be found from other sources. It's always been my opinion that the foundations and other funding agencies could be a lot more generous in making money available for this purpose. They seem to have a curious reluctance to provide assistance in this field, despite their generosity in so many related areas. They tend to argue that audience research is one of the things any broadcasting service should do as part of its normal ongoing operations and so the broadcaster should provide finance for it as part of its normal budgeting. In theory that's very true, but in practice unfortunately it doesn't work that way.
The foundations are only too willing to provide large sums of money for audience research training courses, seminars and workshops like this one. But all of that is just a waste in the case of the small organisations which have no ongoing audience research operations and have no hope of starting any. They are placed in a difficult position of being offered fellowships for training courses which they don't really need or want. They are reluctant to turn these offers down because it's unwise to look a gift horse in the mouth and anyway, they argue, something useful might emerge from it.

So they end up with a nice little corps of training audience research personnel, who cannot be employed in that field of endeavour because no jobs exist for them. Their expertise is wasted. In the words of the old song, they're "all dressed up with nowhere to go". The result is frustration. So I say again that the agencies with money to spend on broadcasting development should look seriously at providing assistance in this important area on a continuing basis.

But whatever way you look at it and whether you have some money to spend on it or not, audience research is an expensive activity and one in which very careful planning is needed so that you don't waste the limited resources you have available.

Field work is especially expensive and so it's necessary to go on looking for ways to make it less so.

One way is to work with other organisations that have similar interests, so the efforts and results can be pooled. For instance, you might work with a university
or other academic institution conducting communication research. If you can establish a good relationship with such an organisation it can pay real dividends in terms of collaboration.

Also, don't overlook the possibility of collaborating with other media organisations at the local level. In many places there's real potential for working with newspapers, for instance. Although your organisation might be in competition with the local newspapers in terms of news coverage and in some cases for advertising revenue, it's worth talking with them about the possibility of some joint efforts in terms of audience research. After all, it's in the interests of both the broadcasters and the publishers to know what the public reaction is to the media in general and the different arms of it in particular.

I've mentioned the need for careful planning to conserve your resources. It's also necessary to plan audience research carefully in terms of working methods, in order to avoid ending up with misleading and quite useless information. Human nature being what it is, people tend to give you responses to questions which can mislead and delude the researcher unless he's very careful.

For instance, people tend to answer questions in the way they think you want them to. In other words, they give answers that they think you want to hear, to please the questioner or to show that they are being very helpful and cooperative.

A greater danger is that people answer questions in a way that will tend to enhance their image in your eyes. For instance, they will tell you that they always listen to news programmes, because they imagine...
that will make them appear to be educated and well-informed people. Whereas in actual fact they may never hear a news programme or even read a newspaper.

So, whatever method is used to carry out your research field-work, it has got to have built-in safeguards, checks and balances to ensure that the information you get is absolutely authentic and dependable. That's an area which I'm sure you will be exploring in the course of your discussions throughout this week.

Of course, collecting the information is only one aspect of audience research. It's a waste of time and money and effort if the information is not put to good use, the use that it's intended to be put to. For that to happen it has to be compiled in the most useful form, and there has to be an established system for using it.

In some organisations there is too much separation between the researchers and the planners who could make the best possible use of the information the researchers have compiled for them. The audience research unit or department sometimes tends to operate in too much of a compartment, so that the people working in it begin to think that their work is an end in itself.

It is therefore essential that there be constant and continuous contact between audience research and the departments which make the most use of the information gathered and produced. There has to be a two-way feedback between, say, the researchers and the programme planners, to ensure that the information they are given is what they need and in the form that they need it. An atmosphere must be created in which they will feel free to ask for changes or slightly different
methods as and when they need them. And the audience research unit must be geared up to respond to these requests as far as is possible, because broadcasting is a constantly-changing business and anyone who is not prepared to accept that should perhaps look for another job. What might have been right for audience research last year may be all wrong next year, so it's vital that those working in it be flexible people who are not locked into rigid styles and working methods which they can't, or won't, change.

In broadcasting we must never lose sight of the ultimate and only object of all our efforts, which is to put programmes on the air. Every other thing that we do is aimed at achieving that end. That is, after all, why we are in operation. Many people and many departments make contributions to that ultimate object but the programme is the end result. Audience research is one of the many tools which are used to do that and to ensure that the end product is constantly and continuously improved.

As the excellent overview paper for this workshop has so aptly pointed out, the information from audience research provides a solid base for sound decision-making at all stages of programme development. It is therefore an essential tool for the overall development of any broadcasting service.

The challenge that faces you as practitioners of audience research is to make sure that the best possible use is made of the resources made available for audience research and that the results of your efforts is what the decision-makers need.

The initiative provided by AMIC and Deutche Welle in holding this workshop is a recognition of this challenge. I'm sure the workshop will be of benefit
not only to you as participants but will also to the organisations you represent. If you make the most of the opportunity you are being given you will go back home better equipped to contribute, not only to improved audience research but to the overall development of your broadcasting system.

I wish you fruitful and useful discussions, a pleasant stay in Singapore and I look forward to seeing the report on your workshop when it's over.