

## THE EVOLUTION OF ATTENTIVENESS MEASURES

From the very beginning it was recognized that set usage did not necessarily imply viewing, and advertisers were concerned that Nielsen's meterized rating measurements might overstate the true size of their television audiences. One of the earliest attempts to explore this issue was underwritten by Procter & Gamble, which commissioned the A.C. Nielsen Company to make what eventually amounted to more than 45,000 telephone calls between noon and 11:00pm in nine large cities during November 1952. Nielsen's interviewers determined if a television set was in use when the phone rang and asked respondents whether anyone was watching. The results were reassuring: 95% of the 11,000 homes with a set tuned in reported one or more "viewers"; 4% stated that the TV was on, but was just being "listened to"; only 1% of the sets in use had neither "viewers" nor "listeners."

The Nielsen/P&G study demonstrated to almost everyone's satisfaction that set usage was usually accompanied by viewing, and this seemed to put the matter to rest. Skeptics pointed out that the average receiver had two or three people in attendance when it was on, so the fact that one or more of these were claimed to be viewing did not necessarily mean they all were. But such criticism fell on deaf ears. With television riding an unprecedented crest of public enthusiasm and sponsor interest, the advertising industry was concerned with the more practical task of counting the medium's audience, not evaluating it. At this point, the tube's overwhelming impact upon its viewers was taken for granted.

Although their findings went largely unheeded, independent investigators probed the viewing phenomenon throughout the 1950s. Studies conducted by college professors using student interviewers noted a surprising degree of claimed inattention among daytime TV audiences and, to a lesser extent, among primetime viewers. From time to time, industry-supported sources supplied corroborative data. In 1955 and 1956 the American Research Bureau (now Arbitron) conducted a massive telephone coincidental study to check the validity of its rating system's household diary technique. Approximately 60,000 phone calls were made between 8:00am and 8:00pm in eight large cities to compare claimed viewing rates obtained in this manner with levels recorded by parallel sets of diary-keepers. Following Nielsen's research design, persons who reported a set in use at the time the phone rang were asked if anyone in the room was "watching," "just listening," or whether the set was "unattended." The results raised eyebrows, for in this study nearly 10% of all set usage was devoid of "viewers." This was more than twice the ratio Nielsen had reported four years earlier.

Although the television industry preferred to ignore such findings, advertiser attitudes were changing. By the early-1960s national product marketers had abandoned their former roles as program developers and sponsors. As they distanced themselves from creative involvement with the shows that aired their commercials, advertisers became more objective in their time buying practices and, increasingly, the value of the audiences the networks were selling came into question. The primary focus centered on demographics and whether certain shows

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reached more desirable consumer segments than others based on the age, geographic and socioeconomic profiles of their viewers. Some investigations went even further, exploring the degree to which a program's content or format generated casual or highly involved audiences. The implications were obvious: if certain shows captured the interest of their viewers to a greater extent than others, didn't this imply that their audiences were more likely to be exposed to the advertiser's commercial?

During this time, analysts who pondered such questions had uncovered a wealth of research bearing on the attentiveness issue. A growing number of advertisers were employing telephone recall studies to evaluate the impact of their sales messages, and these investigations were producing intriguing by-products. In order to ascertain whether respondents had been "exposed" to the commercials, interviewers described specific scenes or events in the telecasts that occurred immediately adjacent to the advertisements, and asked whether the viewer remembered seeing those portions of the program. The results were revealing. Aggregating the findings from hundreds of such surveys, researchers at Batten, Barton, Durstine & Osborn, Inc. (BBDO) noted that 25–30% of the viewers of an average half-hour telecast did not recall seeing a specific segment of the show when a brief synopsis of its storyline was read to them over the telephone less than two hours after the event. Memory lapses explained part of this "audience loss," but much of it was attributed to late tune in, dial switching and, more importantly, to leaving the room or lack of interest. Clearly, viewers were far from universally attentive, even though they claimed to have "watched" the programs.

BBDO's findings were replicated by numerous telephone recall studies, all using essentially similar procedures. Meanwhile, new evidence kept accumulating. Dr. Charles L. Allen, Director of the School of Journalism at Oklahoma State University, conducted four separate studies between 1961 and 1963 in which viewers were photographed as they watched television. All told, 95 households containing 358 residents were recruited for these experiments. Special camera devices (DynaScopes) were installed on their television sets, with wide-angle lenses covering virtually the whole room where people might be watching. The contraptions were rigged to take pictures every fifteen seconds whenever the set was on, while a mirror was located off to one side, facing the receiver. In this manner, the photographs automatically captured the reflected mirror-image, showing what was on the TV screen when they were snapped.

The method was not without problems. At first, many homes refused to take the cameras, but Dr. Allen's staff learned how to allay their suspicions, offering financial inducements and promises that the findings would be held in the strictest confidence. Consequently, in the final wave, seven out of ten homes contacted were willing to cooperate. Although they functioned unobtrusively and children paid no attention to them, Dr. Allen reported that adults "peered intently" at the DynaScopes for about 15 minutes, but subsequently ignored them; after the first day or so most of the families who participated in the experiment seemed to behave normally.

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Ultimately, Dr. Allen and his colleagues assembled 1.5 million photographs from their DynaScopes and, as expected, the pictures revealed a great deal of incidental activity while the sets were on. To quote Dr. Allen's report in the March 1965 issue of the **Journal of Advertising Research** ("Photographing the TV Audience"):

Family members do not watch TV continuously, even though they may be in the regular viewing area. Children eat, drink, dress and undress, play, fight, and do other things while in front of the set. They sometimes view a program intently (particularly children's programs), but their patterns of viewing are irregular and show frequent interruptions.

As for adults, Dr. Allen noted: "Adults eat, drink, sleep, play, argue, fight and occasionally make love in front of the TV set. Sometimes these activities are coextensive with viewing."

When the huge mass of pictures was sorted out and analyzed, it was discovered that only 60% of the average home's set usage involved one or more fully attentive viewers (eyes fixed directly on the set); 21% of the time those present in the room were looking away from the screen, or engaged in distracting activities, while 19% of the picture sequences found no one present at all. Confirming a distinction that was already apparent in other surveys, the proportion of set usage with someone actually watching was only 48% in the mornings, but rose to 52% in the afternoons and 65% after 6:00pm. In other words, nighttime television programs attracted a more attentive audience than daytime fare.

Another study employed a more surreptitious method to observe viewer behavior. In the spring of 1964, Television Advertising Representatives Inc. (TVAR), a time-selling organization for the Westinghouse TV stations, commissioned Eugene Gilbert & Co. to recruit teenagers who would spy on the behavior of adults while they watched television in the natural setting of their homes. The youngsters were given special recording tables, with provisions to make minute by minute entries as they observed their parents' viewing behavior. If questioned, they would pretend that the records were worksheets for school projects or part of their homework.

TVAR's "spy" study netted 307 usable records, describing the way 606 adults watched television on a single evening. The resulting tallies were remarkably consistent with Dr. Allen's DynaScope findings. During an average primetime set usage minute, 62% of the adult viewers were doing nothing else but looking at the set; of the remainder, 16% were watching but also engaged in some other activity, 4% were fully distracted, while 18% had absented themselves totally from the room. TVAR's "Observing" study also produced some intriguing differentiation between program types. Although the fully attentive ratio for all programs was 62%, the corresponding levels for movies, variety shows and situation comedies were 80%, 71% and 57%, respectively. This was a statistically meaningful disparity, indicating that program content was a major determinant of viewer involvement. Unfortunately, the survey's sample base was too small to permit a deeper analysis of this particularly significant finding.

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Since it was obvious that time of day, showtype and individual program variables could not be explored without larger and more projectable databases, the media research director of a large New York advertising agency approached the Simmons organization with an idea that might produce such information. In 1962, Simmons had begun an ongoing series of magazine audience surveys with a national probability sample of approximately 18,000 respondents. A few years later, the company inaugurated an annual viewer diary survey involving about 6,000 adults drawn from its main sample base; each respondent kept a personal record of his or her viewing for two consecutive weekly periods. The new proposal called for the addition of an attentiveness measure to the Simmons diaries. The original booklets had been formatted with individual pages for each day of the week and separate horizontal rows for each quarter-hour; individual columns allowed respondents to indicate the name of the show and the channel tuned to whenever they watched. For the fall 1966 study, three additional columns were provided; the first signified that the viewer was “paying full attention,” the second that s/he was “paying only some attention,” and the third that s/he was “out of the room” during most of the period, but still regarded him- or herself as “viewing.” The respondent was asked to place an “X” in the box that best described his or her state of attention whenever s/he recorded any personal exposure to television.

The designer of this study was fully aware that diary-keepers could not be counted on to log all inattentive moments, or every absence from the room; some would follow instructions as faithfully as possible, but others would not, or could not do so. Instead, the hope was that viewers would describe their reactions to the programs they watched in a consistent and directionally meaningful fashion, in which case the Simmons sample would be large enough to permit an analysis on a scale that had not been possible before. The results of the 1966 study fully justified these expectations. Diary-keepers had no trouble using the three-point scale, varying their answers markedly from program to program, and even within programs. Although the fully attentive ratios were probably overstated, while the out-of-the-room levels were presumably understated, the relationships were directly in line with the findings noted in earlier studies. Simmons reported that 65–70% of its adult diary-keepers were fully attentive during an average quarter-hour viewing period, while 25% were partially attentive and 5% were absent from the room. The variations in fully attentive viewing ranged from lows of only 40–50% for some programs to highs of 80–90% for others; moreover, systematic differences were evident between certain demographic segments, especially at different times of day.

The Simmons studies continued through the 1970s, 1980s and into the 1990s, providing a wealth of indicators about viewer involvement and the ability of certain programs to captivate their audiences or lull them into relatively low states of attention. Mediamark Research, Inc. (MRI) also initiated attentiveness measurements and Simmons switched from the diary method to a viewer recall technique (“How attentive were you the last time you saw this show?”) after 1995. Some of these findings are summarized later in this chapter, as well as a number of new studies on this aspect of TV viewing.

