Measuring Viewership: Misleading TRP phenomenon

The idea of measuring viewership was mooted by advertisers to facilitate advertising outlays. Neither the scope nor the methodology used to measure TRP indicates programme preferences or even actual watching of programmes. The methodology of viewership measurement should depend on the kind of contents and the genre. For example, the one designed to cater to advertising agencies cannot be expected to provide insights for programme viewership or programme preference. The methodology cannot be expected to be relevant to know the viewership of news channels, more specifically news bulletins. Yet, we have been using the same methodology to assess viewership of news channels. This is even more misleading. The dubiousness is even more as the number of 24-hour news channels is proliferating. For example, how it could be explained that a channel classified as a news channel despite its preoccupation with “non-news” content is shown having high TRPs for a week or two (as if it is to enable the channel to advertise itself as “India’s highest viewed” channel).

“Rating viewership” of television is a disastrous thing that ever happened in India with continued consequences. It has been playing a villainous role. In fact, it has been an amazing story of winning India in a much smarter way with the help of a simple idea compared to the efforts put in by the East India Company that took more than three hundred years ago to capture India. More than a decade ago, I described this phenomenon as a “TRP trap” and “hijacking of Indian television”. What is it all about? Why did I say so?

Of course, no technology can be stopped from penetrating into societies irrespective of its political and economic basis. But television was introduced (1964) into India with certain expectation that it would become an “instrument” and a “facilitator” to
refurbish India as a State, deepen democracy, motivate its people, even empower them and enable good governance. The television “flood gates” were not opened in one go, rather it was done in phases – experimentation (1964-72), establishment (1973 -1992) and growth (1992 – 2012) to realize and explore the potential of this new mass media. Yet, no insights or learnings of that early thinking, experimentation and establishment years of TV have gone into moulding the media in the later years.

Later on, what started as a small idea ended up making big difference and changing the very course of television in India, i. e., the “rating of viewership” instead of measuring what actually is being viewed or the impact of such viewing. It was like losing the forest for the sake of wood…..; this is what rating of viewership in vogue is all about. So, it’s important to understand how it became a factor and a cause and effect phenomenon?

With the increase in the number of television Kendras (of Doordarshan in Delhi first, then Mumbai and other Metros and State capitals), they also started increasing programme hours from three to six hours and then 24 hours, which the advertisers celebrated. They wanted to speed up that process to scale up advertising budgets. The advertisers and advertising agencies wanted some basis for justifying budget outlays on this new visual medium in the country – as to how much and where to allocate. The basis initially was the number of TV sets sold in the market. With Doordarshan starting a commercial wing to “market time slots’ and then taking to sponsored programmes, Bombay advertising agencies themselves had come up with figures as to how many would be watching (based on households with TV sets) the film songs first and then serials, such as *Humlog, Mahabharat* and so on. Soon, it was realized that a TV set was attracting a number of people, hence it’s “potential for advertising” should be on that basis. To support that view, they first needed figures and that is how the idea of “number of viewers” came. And, with the increasing number of channels and
diversification of programme genre, time specific and programme wise viewership was sought because of variation in the number of viewers from one to another programme. To start with, for a short period, they tried to use first the “recall” and then the “diary method” for estimating viewers. Very soon, with the Government policy of opening the flood gates with 100 per cent FDI into services, like advertising and marketing research, foreign research agencies were looking for entry or expansion of their business in India. Consequently, the number of “brands”, particularly multinational corporates being advertised on television increased to 500 (from less than 100) by 1995, and advertising on “matching” programmes with high viewership was sought. That is when the foreign advertising agencies and market research agencies imported this “meter” to try out on the Indian scene. This involved keeping track of time during which a TV set was on and who in the family was watching.

The idea of quantifying viewership was to cater to the needs of advertising, and facilitate media planners in particular. It was not used to determine programme preferences of viewers or to decide content priorities of channels. Soon, advertisers wanted to know when or during which programme their commercials would have more viewers. With sponsored categories of programmes and out sourcing of programmes (serials) increasing and becoming a business opportunity, viewership qualification has become a differentiator. It means that the “popularity of programme” in terms of number of viewers at that time became an indirect yardstick. With the proliferation of channels and programme chunks by different genre, the idea of viewership of programmes was thought about by advertisers as a surrogate indicator. As outsourcing of programmes by channels increased, the need for time wise and programme wise breakup of viewership acquired more relevance as a guide to place advertisements and to have differentiated advertisement tariff.
By then it was obvious that channels cannot sustain and survive without maximization of advertising revenue. It was also clear that they cannot achieve that without having contents, which help in attracting more and more people and advertisers. Simultaneously, media planning became a specialized function and sponsoring programmes became a preferred option. In this process, quantitative information on viewership became critical and an ongoing requirement of advertising planners from once a quarter (13 weeks) to once a month and then to once a week.

Initially, the Media Research (MR) service functioned from out of advertising agencies. Later, rating service was promoted by advertising agencies and for that, they pressed in service market research agencies to serve the common interests. But as rating became a sought after service, it became a subsidiary service of a MNC, MR firm; then there was an impression of it becoming an “independent” service; and finally, a separate corporate entity.

Some specific questions that arise about TRP include: (1) Rating service is not an independent function, rather it came into being as a supportive service to serve the interests of advertising first and foremost and of channels in that process. (2) Rating service had not come into being from a perspective of programmes of channels. (3) More pertinently, there was no perspective of views and their concerns or interests. (4) There is no transparency in the entire exercise of rating. There is certain conflict of interest is all over to the extent of doubting the very objectivity of the outcome. (5) The way the findings are used with claims by individual channels and even content producers. These ratings were used more and more seriously than the advertising community themselves for serving those interests for which the service came into being in the first instance. (6) The question of methodology involving sampling, size of sample and selection and validation procedures of their representative character - all have
questionable relevance and doubtful basis. (7) Neither the civil society nor any of the Governmental agencies took serious view or review of any of the aspects of TRP service. Even when the rating service had slowly, but steadily reduced the stature of Doordarshan (as if in a motivated way), the public service broadcaster of the country – the Government did not bother, as if such a decline of DD was obvious. It was only at the end of 2010 that the Government reluctantly undertook a review or TRP system.

A glaring example of conflict of interest came to my notice in Hyderabad (2002) where the CE of a TV channel narrated how TAM had given his channel a prescription for getting higher rating points as a part of consultation that TAM was providing. So, apart from conducting rating, TAM offered advisory and research services to channels and producers in the name of one or other subsidiary or sister organizations.

Nearly 25 years after TRP has taken roots, to the extent of becoming the currency of the industry, the Government appointed a Committee (2010) to review the rating mechanism and suggest correctives. The Committee, in turn, talked only to channels and came up with a formulation related more to sample size of rating system rather than taking a larger review and taking the concerns of viewers also into account.

Starting in 1993 first........in Bombay with 250 meters, the viewership measurement experiment added 200 meters in Delhi in 1995 and by 1998, the four metro cities (Bombay, Delhi, Calcutta and Madras) had in all 250 meters (all were used meters imported from South Africa). However, when the proliferation of channels started in 1998, more meters were installed (about 2500 in all) in the metro cities and between 2003–2005, some more meters were added including a few in Class I cities. But the “findings” of those meters were presented and projected as if they were “national” and as if they reflect or are representative of the national scene.
In the first ten years, the number of “monitoring meters” increased to 4000, all confined to metros and Class 1 cities. But by then, between 1998–2003, the meter based viewership made news in the news media as descriptive of the national scene, although by then, television had spread more into rural India. With competition between channels, including between 24–hour news channels, these findings have driven news towards trivialization and there are also certain shift in the very paradigm of media. That is how TRP took roots and became a criteria and the very basis for programme priorities. A nation of critics otherwise, and despite more than 70 Universities claiming (today more than 150) to have journalism/communication faculties, there was no criticism of meter based viewership measurement and its regular coverage in the news media as if it was the final word on viewership. As more channels got added in regional languages, channels started claiming viewership for their respective programmes as TAM started giving TRP for individual programmes language–wise, even though the sample size was increased only marginally to be able to reflect viewership with any reliability for those language channels.

I recall that a very “popular programme” Rajini, sponsored by Mudra Ad Agency, which was making news for creating consumer awareness and preaching consumer activism, was not getting reflected in the TAM reports. Sitting in A. G. Krishnamurthy (CEO of Mudra) room in Ahmadabad, I and AGK wondered why that was the case. That was the first time I (in 1988) wondered and started analyzing the phenomenon. Then, I realized that the much talked about serial, Rajini, was not in consonance with marketing interests of advertisers. Even more curiously, no other similar serial was ever produced by other channels, which are, otherwise, quick to take to (copy) popular programmes. That was how my article questioning the TRPs appeared in the Asian Age, 12 September 2001 and websites. It was the first one to question the very basis of TRPs and the irrelevance of this methodology.
Two market research agencies took to viewership measurement service – IMRB’s INTAM and Neilson’s TAM. They were also the ones, who were conducting the two readership surveys at that time. They gave the impression of providing competing service. But, soon they ended up merging into one service, as they were giving conflicting viewership ratings, sometimes casting doubt on the credibility of TRPs. They both came together and formed a separate company for viewership measurement to give the impression that it is an independent body, which conducts the measurement, when in fact, the service is owned by two market research agencies, which are part and parcel of foreign controlled advertising conglomerates. As a result of this linkage, TAM was able to acquire a grip on channels, as they, in turn, have to depend on their advertising support. The more the channels dependence on commercials, the more their vulnerability to TAM’s rating points (TRPs). It is this close association and linkage that made TRPs a benchmark. In this process, there were allegations of channels/producers “guaranteeing viewership rating points” to advertisers beforehand! How is it possible? What does that mean? In that process, there were also allegations with details in the news media on how the number of sample households in the panel was fudged to acquire a representative character and how the identity of sample households was manipulated to inflate the viewership points for various rounds. These revelations added to the “channel war” accusing each other for constantly getting higher rating points continuously or by turn! This coverage in media of TRP sample led to the Research Agency adopting a “diplomatic stand” of appeasing whoever questioned its figures (of course, among the big ones), and its representative character. For example, Zee refused to take to TAM service at one point or other for a while until one of their serial was given higher TRPs. But that was more by way of bargain tactics to shackle the continued grip of Star TV’s TRPs. That was how its “big TV” became “big” by getting TRP back up. Eventually, the issue was sorted out or should we say ended with both the broadcasters coming to an understanding (on marketing).
In 1993, realizing the inadequacy of TRP system and the kind of restraint it was causing to Indian creativity and concerns of the Indian TV, CMS, in collaboration with ECIL, Hyderabad, developed a rugged “people meter” similar to the one that was used by TAM, but could be indigenously produced and, more importantly, which could withstand rural situations and certain power fluctuations. This meter was demonstrated in Delhi and Bangalore (reported in India Today, 31 March 1993 with photograph) until now (2011, Delhi), TAM’s meter is neither shown publicly anywhere, nor do most of those, who refer to the meter, have ever seen it). I went out of the way to sensitize the Director General of Doordarshan (Basu, a bureaucrat) what that meter meant to Indian TV, particularly to Doordarshan in reflecting its reach in rural areas and across all socio-economic classes. Instead of encouraging, Basu did his best to scuttle my Indian initiative of an alternative model, which includes rural India (he was already negotiating a deal with Star TV to join them as their head. That was not known to me at that time). He asked me to “go to Mumbai’s advertising agencies and get their approval before DD could consider” the idea of an alternative to TAM’s TRP System. I tried to sensitize the then Secretary of I&B Ministry, Bhaskar Gosh about Basu’s insensitivity and also the Minister (KP Singh Deo). But, by then, through push and pulls, the advertising lobby and media were successful in preventing my initiative as already evident. In desperation, CMS gave up the idea after having incurred considerable expenditure.

In 2007, CMS took another initiative to bring together the two agencies (TAM and aMap) on one platform along with a cross section of concerned professionals to debate the issues involved in viewership measurement. Never before had any of these agencies made such a presentation (Even for this, they did not bring the meter to demonstrate).
While TAM is a foreign advertising and MR agency, aMap is a technology driven company started by a former ad agency person of India. That should explain why aMap, despite having marginally bigger sample, better spread and on-line viewership measurement, could not penetrate into TAM clientele. In the month of August 2011, there was a rumor that TAM succeeded in cornering (?) aMap to close down its India operations.

**People meter**

At the outset, the meter used by TAM initially indicated only whether the TV set was “on” or “off”. The “volunteer TV household” was expected to push the button on when the TV set was switched on and also push it off when switching off the TV. One cannot have an idea or even assume from such act that switching on and off was done promptly every time the TV was switched on or off. It is not possible to know everything about real viewership from such a measurement. Since the data about the volunteer TV household was already available, it was presumed that they were watching the programme of the channel. It was with such mechanistic features that have nothing to do with any aspect of actual watching, that “viewership measurement” was formulated, popularized and made the very basis for the future of TV in India.

In mid 1990s the agency claimed that it has shifted to a “people meter” instead of the earlier one, for a more “specific” viewership data. The people meter (also imported and reconditioned) was an improvement in that it had more (up to nine) on and off push buttons – one for each member of the household (and two buttons for “visitors”). In this “people meter”, which is what continues to be used to date, each member is assigned a number on the meter (husband -1, wife – 2, child 1-3, child 2 – 4, and the like) to push as and when he/she starts viewing the TV and push off the button when not viewing. That
was how TAM started giving TRPs by age group. Obviously, this system requires “motivated” participation (for that gifts or money is being paid) for agreeing in the first instance to install the “meter” connected to the TV (which one if there is more than one TV in that household?) and then willing to push the button on and off each time and every day whatever that time is (in minutes initially of 15 minutes duration and later on to one minute duration). It assumes that every member in the household is equally motivated to participate in such a push-pull exercise every time, regularly and promptly – each time each family member comes in front of a TV set.

It was with such a clumsy, unreliable and motivated arrangement, that viewership measurement by way of rating points was made out as the yardstick of the industry. Then, there are two other aspects - one of course is related to sample size and representative character of those sample households. The second is what per cent of sample (households as well as individuals in the household) actually do the push on and off every time when watching the TV and as regularly that they are able to give an estimate of viewing duration for everybody. Another question is how do they compensate for errors arising out of TV sets not having electricity, out of order TV sets, forgetting about switching on or off or/and doing it at leisure or irregularly. Nothing is known about these aspects of TRPs. Then there is another aspect, that is the way the channels use/or quote TRP figures to (falsely) present viewership of their channel as “number one” for the week or among a certain age group or in a selected market area.

Weekly or Monthly Reporting

The perils of viewership ratings have not been formally questioned by any of the Government or professional agencies until 2011. In fact, there was no effort to correct any aspect of TRP practices – until 2010 when I&B Ministry appointed a (pro-industry)
Committee and it came out with the easiest and inane suggestion for enlarging sample size, and ignoring more critical aspects of the methodology. Against that background, News Broadcasters Association (NBA) came out with an advice to channels that viewership ratings should be brought out monthly instead of weekly (or even daily) as practiced currently. In fact, on-line availability of such ratings even in the case of news channel was considered as an advantage and it was preferred until 2011 when NBA had advised TAM Media Research Pvt. Ltd., which has been doing TRPs, to bring out the reports on a monthly basis from October 2011 (instead of weekly reports) in the case of news channels in English and Hindi. This is because NBA’s member–channels are mostly in English and Hindi. But, TAM was reluctant to bring out monthly reports and wanted the sponsoring advertising agencies to give such an advice in writing.

The rationale for NBA’s advice was what the author has been raising for more than a decade. TRP system has been promoting one-upmanship between channels to the extent of driving them to gossip, hype and instant popularity to the extent of affecting quality, relevance and credibility of news broadcasts. While advertisers and ad agencies were naturally in support of TRPs, as it was invented by them and for their advantage, not all programme people are in its favour. Some sensitive executives from different channels, in fact, realized the fallacy of TRPs and the trap they were under. While one of the agency (aMap), which came into market with the USP of “on-line” and “over night’ ratings, had closed its shop in time before being asked by NBA; the other agency (TAM) obviously will resist it with the support of majority of “subscribing clients” and is even likely to come up with a “new service” of “also a monthly” report as an option (in addition to the weekly). The very concept of TRP is based on the notion of cut throat competition and is used as an instrument of advertising. Quality or utility of programmes, whether entertainment or news, is not its concern, if at all, it is the secondary concern.
Notwithstanding internal bickering, NBA should be appreciated first for correctly diagnosing “cut throat competition” being pushed by “Wednesday favour” and, secondly, for asking the concerned agency to bring out the report monthly (instead of weekly), in the case of news and business channels, for at least two years to start with. This is a much needed key proactive initiative of NBA. The other advices of NBA were on reporting poll campaign and terrorist attacks. They were more in response to requests from outside.

TAM data has been under criticism off and on without the criticism gaining support. In fact, some channels have debunked TRPs at one time or other (depending on their own score for that week). This is not the first time that TRPs are questioned. Earlier, a decade ago, it was questioned when addresses of its panel of sample households with meter were leaked and second time was when CMS challenged the two viewership rating agencies (TAM and aMap) for a presentation before a group of independent experts at India International Centre, New Delhi (2007) which they did with reluctance.

Running after eyeballs even for a week is what all channels, including news channels do somehow. These TRP scores, in turn, are used both for wooing advertisers and also for popularity race among viewing public. That is how we have a situation where a couple of channels advertise themselves as the “most viewed” or “No. 1” channel for one or other week – as if that is what either by turn or all of them could claim.

Therefore, Advertising Agency Association, Indian Broadcasting Foundation and Indian Society of Advertisers should come out of their shells and help NBA in its initiative to restore the credibility of news and business channels. This NBA initiative should make stakeholders of television channels to rethink about TRPs and come out with many more
initiatives on their own to reposition the channels. This, however, does not mean that with bringing out the TRPs monthly, instead of weekly, the perils or adverse implications of TRP are gone. There are other equally critical issues related to TRP that too need to be addressed and corrected. These pertain to the methodology, analysis and presentation of the findings, the way the findings are used and the very transparency in the entire process of viewership measurement.

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