

THE TV TR(A)P

By DR N. BHASKARA RAO



The revelations made by CNBC on a possible "rating fudge" is significant since the priorities of Indian television are set by Television Rating Points (TRPs). "Stunned", "shocked" and "damaging" are some of the reactions of television channels. TRPs have always had a sacrosanct air about them a reason why the exposé acquires the proportions of a "scam". But it is a wonder that despite the TRP-trap television in India has been under for some years, the intricacies were not brought out for public attention much earlier. Considering the consequences, the revelations should be viewed as a wake-up call for the industry.

This is not the first time that allegations of TRP manipulations have been made. This time, however, the vulnerability of the system being followed has been substantiated in such a way that larger public attention is guaranteed. TRPs were being taken for granted as a universal yardstick by media buyers, broadcasters, media, media users and by development planners at the highest levels in the country. Advertising agencies and advertisers have been doing their campaign planning and have been apportioning television spend amounting to some Rs 4000 crores primarily based on such weekly ratings. And, newspapers were busy hyping the "rating claims" by channels and content producers.

And yet there has hardly been any analysis in the media about what these TRPs are all about and at whose instance they are being compiled, the kind of methodology being used and with what reliability, and as to their very relevance in the context of the changing media scene and unique viewing situation in different households.

That these ratings are only projections and for only a select few cities and based on a small sample of "representative" television households was not convincingly explained. The pattern of selecting television channels, viewing programmes, timings, etc, are measured with the help of a "peoples meter" installed in those selected few television households. The general impression often given is that these ratings are national and represent all television owning households in the country. This is not fully correct. At best one would dare to say that they are indicative of the viewership in metro and major cities. Neither of the two rating services covers rural India. In fact, they cover only half of urban India. Starting with four metros about five years ago, the ratings today cover 29 cities with some states or languages being covered by only one city.

The "peoples-meter" being used was developed for relatively homogenised societies and cultures such as Canada, the United States or South Africa and in fact, these meters were initially imported from these countries, mostly used ones. The buttons on such a meter in each sampled television household are expected to be pushed by each viewer as per his

or her viewership. That is each viewer in the household is expected to be an "active" one to push the on-off button each time something on television is being watched.

The sample size of television households covered with the "peoples-meter" started with 400 and has now gone to 3454 in the case of TAM and 4405 in the case of INTAM. The sample size in case of some cities is around 120 and in the case of Mumbai it has been maximum — today it is around 600. In these sampled panel households every member is expected to maintain strict confidentiality and use the on-off button of the meter without any inducement, or any pressure and each member is expected to use only the button assigned for her or him and do so each time of viewing during a 24-hour period and every day as long as the house is a member of the panel. Each such sampled household is expected to represent several thousands of television households or cable and satellite television households.

Any aberration in operating the on-off button, or any passivity in the process of any one member in the household will vitiate the projected ratings one way or other. If a few households in the "panel" of sample could be induced with incentives as is being done, the outcome is nothing but a manipulated one. The actual representative weightage of a household in a

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particular socio-economic category is another issue.

The spread of television to every nook and corner of the country and of regional language channels, has changed the scope and the extent of viewing. And yet the rating service is not extended to rural and small towns, despite 60 per cent of the television sets being there. Also, since nearly 60 per cent of television sets are old black and white ones, the reliability or accuracy of the sensing devices of the "peoples-meter" is doubtful in capturing the viewership. Then, of course, the fact that the spread of channels is not uniform across different regions of the country. All this brings out the inadequacy of the rating methodology presently being followed.

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As a result channels having more viewership in rural India or among certain sections are disadvantaged in the ratings. That is, ratings based on urban viewership are deciding the programmes and programme schedules of television channels, including that of Doordarshan. The phenomenon of television being used as a decoration like a wallpaper in some households where on-off is not always related to actual viewing, or extent of viewing, is yet another issue.

The contents of "peoples-meters" are projected by desegregating the figures into several socio-economic-demographic classifications converted into a matrix of some 64 cells is another contentious issue in terms of accuracy levels. That is how competing channels often end up using these ratings to their own advantages picking up from out of these several variables. This is further complicated by the fact that there are two rating services in the market sometimes widely differing from each other although both use similar methodology and cater to same interests.

Both these services, TAM and INTAM, each charging anywhere between Rs 500,000 to Rs 50,00,00 as annual subscription (depending on the turnover of the subscriber), are driven by the interests of advertising. Since advertising is primarily based on perpetuating and pampering consumerism, a rating service too caters to such interests. That is

preferences and priorities of television channels and their programmes, their time schedules and formats, commercial tariff, etc., are all moderated by and based on these ratings. The two agencies are now engaged to merge rating services and perpetuate the tyranny of ratings on Indian television. It is unfortunate that, not realising all this, Doordarshan got into this trap and lost its direction and priorities when it supported TRPs despite this author's efforts otherwise a few years ago.

Such ratings do serve in giving a "logic" for media planners to justify their large dispensations the total of which works out to some Rs 8000 crores annually. Hence the need for a certain transparency in the methodology and some independent monitoring and validation procedures. The routine replacement of a 10 per cent sample over a year is too little to ensure reliability of rating or to cope with passivity and casualties in sampled television households week after week.

Since ratings are now "guaranteed" weeks before to lure advertising, it obviously implies that these ratings are a matter of survival for advertising agencies, content producers and to channels themselves. The kind of competition among them is such that it will intensify and lure them further. Obviously, organisations like the Indian Broadcasting Foundation (IBF) should take initiatives to bring in some discipline. Self-discipline any day is far better. The task of validation of ratings should not be left to users alone. In my opinion no one having any interest, direct or indirect, in advertising or in the media business, be entrusted with such a task. They should however be associated with the exercise.

The architecture of "peoples-meter" and its practicality, once the scope is extended beyond cities is yet another issue that needs to be looked into. So that we have the art of technology involving imaging and intelligent processing which allows the direct measurement of actual eye contact and reduces the chances of tampering.

Despite such meter-based ratings how much do we know about the "impact" of television on any part of the country or any section of society? For example, on children? On a rough estimate the money involved between the two agencies, bringing out TAM and INTAM, is not less than Rs 100 crores yearly. Recalling my own experience of bringing out the first ever National Readership Survey (NRS) report and the fourth one, I know the kind of resistance and pressures one faces in revealing facts not palatable to subscribers who are under constant threat from each other. What an effort for scratching the surface! Or shall we say for hijacking the priorities of television and its very character?

■ DR N. BHASKARA RAO is the chairman of Centre for Media Studies, New Delhi