



From the *ARANet* On-Line Library
of Public Radio Research

A Refresher Course Worth Auditing
A Review of Ratings Analysis:
Theory and Practice

by David Giovannoni
(3 pages)

Originally published as:

Giovannoni, David. "Radio Intelligence: A Refresher Course Worth Auditing. A Review of *Ratings Analysis: Theory and Practice*." Current, Vol. 10, No. 15, August 5, 1991.



aranet.com

Copyright © 1991
Corporation for Public Broadcasting
Copyright © 1999
David Giovannoni, Audience Research Analysis
All rights reserved

A REFRESHER COURSE WORTH AUDITING

A REVIEW OF *RATINGS ANALYSIS: THEORY AND PRACTICE*

by David Giovannoni

This book was written with two groups of people in mind. First, it is intended for anyone who needs more than a superficial understanding of audience ratings data... The second group...includes those who are not compelled to use ratings data, but who nevertheless should.
— from *Ratings Analysis: Theory and Practice*

Synopsis of the Course: A review of syndicated broadcast audience research, or “ratings.” An overview of the ratings industry, including history, economics, methods, products, applications, and analytical techniques.

Prerequisites: A professional need to apply the findings of at least one syndicated research service. A personal desire to see the big picture.

Who Should Attend: Practitioners who seek to advance their professional skills and who regret skipping classes the first time.

Public radio managers and programmers who inform their decisions with syndicated audience data are quite familiar with the unique tools available from the Radio Research Consortium (RRC) and other sources. Through the years we have become relatively adept at applying these tools to public radio’s often peculiar management and programming situations.

These tools — created *by* public broadcasters *for* public broadcasters — are anomalous in that the radio listening information on which they are based is produced on behalf of commercial broadcasters for completely different purposes.

This makes us sub-specialists in a highly specialized field. Specialization is necessary in an increasingly complex enterprise such as public broadcasting. But as we develop

greater mastery over our small territories, we risk slipping into parochial mind sets, ignoring the environment that shapes what we do and why we do it.

Most of us can use a refresher course in something as basic as audience ratings. The refresher course reviewed here is James Webster’s and Lawrence Lichty’s newest book, *Ratings Analysis: Theory and Practice*. This is nothing less than a comprehensive survey of America’s radio and television “ratings” (audience measurement) industries — their history, their current state, the types of information that they gather and report, and the many (often surprising) uses for their products.

This review puts our activities into context and explains a great deal. Do Arbitron’s and Birch’s standard reports seem arcane or only

marginally applicable for your uses? Does Birch's recall method or Arbitron's diary strike you as a less-than-accurate measure of radio use? Why has public radio had to create its own set of reports? *Ratings Analysis* provides the historical and the economic factors responsible for shaping and maintaining the landscape of the industry in which we occupy such a small corner. Like the saying says, to understand one's self, one must understand not only the world, but one's place in it.

Surveying the Terrain

Three themes unify *Ratings Analysis*'s survey of the ratings field. First is the fact that ratings are produced by commercial entities for commercial entities, and as such they reflect a balance between reliability and expense.

It works like this. Radio's syndicated audience research services (The Arbitron Company, Birch Radio, and Statistical Research Inc.) gather and produce radio listening information to be sold to commercial broadcasters. Commercial broadcasters use this information to demonstrate the quantity and qualities of their listeners to advertisers. The information must be reliable enough to place a certain degree of confidence in — literally billions of dollars change hands each year based on these numbers. But reliability costs money. Larger sample sizes, tighter statistical controls, more accurate methods, and all of the things that yield more reliable results can get quite expensive. For the ratings to remain affordable, there must be industry-accepted trade-offs.

These trade-offs (and the fact that these data are not gathered with us in mind) can lead to less-than-reliable or even misleading infor-

mation. By knowing the data and where they come from, the public radio programmer, manager, or policy-maker will avoid potentially catastrophic decisions based on flawed information.

Trade-offs are an inherent part of syndicated research. Although ratings may seem expensive, public broadcasters actually tap into them quite inexpensively; ours is a secondary market for others' data. By accepting this information as it comes, public radio inexpensively gains a relatively reliable bank of intelligence for programming, underwriting, management, and policy-making purposes.

Which leads to the book's second theme: Even with its shortcomings, syndicated media usage information can answer many more questions than its suppliers intended it to. The authors explicitly set out to heighten the awareness that the information exists, and to encourage people whom it can help to put questions to it.

For instance, some academics and policy-makers tend to shun commercial ratings. Unfortunately, many see only the commercial excavation and forget (or don't realize) that the tunnel leads to a gold mine.

Fortunately, this hasn't been a problem in public radio for a long time now. It's been more than 15 years since CPB's and NPR's pioneering efforts to mine the gold in commercial ratings for public radio. Professor Lichty played a central role in these efforts, and Tom Church and the LeRoys continue their work begun at CPB for public radio and television stations.

Ratings Analysis does not address public radio's efforts, but it does address other major applications of syndicated audience

data. By bringing their non-commercial experiences to the reading, public broadcasters will see their specialized work placed into a much larger context. It certainly renewed my appreciation for what many of us are now taking for granted.

The book's third theme is that ratings methods and services continue to evolve in response to the rapidly changing mass media environment. The authors correctly suggest that their "Ratings Research Business" chapter will not only help us understand the industry's present condition, but also help us better anticipate its future.

Will ratings reports become more or less frequent? Will they become more or less reliable? Will they become more or less expensive? Will they become more or less useful to public broadcasters? Readers of *Ratings Analysis* will be well-equipped to come to their own conclusions.

Specifics

As previously stated, knowing when not to trust data is as important as knowing when it can be counted on. The manager or programmer concerned about data reliability will find in *Ratings Analysis* a thorough overview of where the data come from and how research techniques affect the final product.

For advanced users, the "Ratings Research Methods" chapter is required reading (along with the "Ratings Research Business" chapter, previously cited). In these chapters technical issues are readably addressed:

sampling types (systematic random, multi-stage cluster, stratified, cross-sectional, longitudinal); sources of error (sampling and non-response); measurement issues (reliability, validity, definitional issues); measurement techniques (coincidental, recall, diary, personal, telephone).

Experienced users of syndicated services will find many familiar tables in the "Ratings Research Products" chapter. And the "Analytical Techniques" section shows how the ubiquitous audience research statistics (cume and average audience, rating and share, etc.) and their associated concepts evolved, why they remain important, and how they are used today across a number of applications.

Ratings Analysis is a textbook designed to introduce college students (and reintroduce practitioners) to the theory and practice of a complex industry. It is not a book that you will use to bring members of your community advisory board up to speed. The public radio professional who relies on syndicated audience data to inform his or her decisions will find *Ratings Analysis* to be an excellent source book to be read today and referred to tomorrow.

Ratings Analysis: Theory and Practice, by James G. Webster and Lawrence W. Lichty, is published by Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

David Giovannoni heads Audience Research Analysis, an independent firm specializing in radio audience research. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting funded this report. Opinions expressed in it are the author's and do not necessarily reflect opinions or policies of the corporation.