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*Rating the Audience* explores the history of audience ratings measurement, predominantly in the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia, from the introduction of Archibald Crossley’s telephone survey-based broadcast ratings in 1929, through self-reporting methods using media diaries, to technologies such as online measurement and SanCom’s facial recognition system, which promise to remove the error associated with the human element.

But the book provides more than a retrospective on audience measurement techniques. In exploring the history of ratings methodology, the authors raise issues crucial to discussion of today’s media landscape, where the accuracy of audience measurement is under challenge from new technology, changing attitudes to privacy and research participation, and an increasingly fragmented audience. Advertisers are turning to the burgeoning online and social media sectors to connect directly with target audiences, side-stepping the traditional advertising vehicles – the press, radio and television – and threatening the viability of traditional media. Add technologies that allow illegal viewing of content, and the difficulty of measuring and analysing audience engagement is clear.

One key issue discussed is that of ratings reliability. Crossley’s telephone surveys for radio advertiser organisation the Cooperative Analysis of Broadcasting Inc (CAB) were skewed by the under-representation among telephone subscribers of those from low socio-economic groups and regional areas. Manipulation and distortion of survey data remain important issues, given that multi-million dollar advertising budgets are at stake.

As Fairfax chief executive Greg Hywood said in the 2011 A.N. Smith lecture at Melbourne University, media companies have moved from selling classified
advertising to selling an audience. Radio and television programming and print content – both online and in hard copy – create an audience for advertising, and the ability to measure that audience accurately is crucial.

Balnaves, O’Regan and Goldsmith include analysis of the accuracy and usability of ratings data from the viewpoints of stakeholders, including advertisers, media companies, media critics and the audience, given that audience analysis affects both advertising expenditure and content production, with accurate surveys potentially delivering programming that better suits audience needs.

The book examines sampling techniques, auditing of results, stakeholder acceptance of new methodologies, and the relationship between audience measurement and market research. It explores the public’s changing attitudes to privacy and research participation, recognising the dichotomy between audience demand for privacy protection and advertisers’ push for access to detailed information on audience demographics made possible by new technology.

In examining the issue of audience fragmentation under the impact of new technology such as smart phones and tablets, the authors highlight the effects on both audience analysis and the viability of media organisations. They also discuss the cost of ratings surveys, citing researcher Gale Metzger’s finding that the media traditionally have borne at least 80 per cent of survey costs, with print media often paying close to 100 per cent.

The book, with its extensive bibliography, offers a comprehensive contribution to scholarly analysis of ratings methodology at a time when the future of traditional media giants is under threat.

– Jan Harkin, Communication and Creative Arts, Deakin University