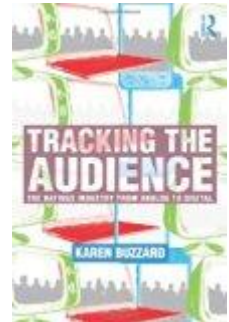**Karen Buzzard.** *Tracking the Audience: The Ratings Industry from Analog to Digital.* New York: Routledge, 2012. x + 174 pp. $39.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8058-5852-5.

Reviewed by Bill Huntzicker (St. Cloud State University)

Searching for a Currency for Buying and Selling Audiences

Numbers--ratings and demographics--provided a currency for generations of radio and television producers to buy and sell audiences. Although the data have always been imprecise to say the least, they did provide a basis for audience measurement and advertising sales. Karen Buzzard in *Tracking the Audience: The Ratings Industry from Analog to Digital* reviews the history of ratings from early radio through the various efforts to expand ratings to reliably measure an increasingly fragmented audience in a multimedia environment and, for once, actually measure the effectiveness of commercials.

Spoiler alert: the problems have still not been solved. "In 2009, Nielsen began measuring Internet usage in its national TV ratings panels 'to build a foundation for the inclusion of on-line viewing in our TV currency,'" Buzzard writes near the end of the book. "A host of potential set-top box data and two vying Internet ratings competitors offered a variety of types of ratings, but none had assumed the currency mantle" (p. 160).

Buzzard opens her book with a definition of the word "currency" and she uses the word in every chapter title. The media marketplace requires ratings data, or currency, that both buyers and sellers agree to use. Currency also refers to the method in use at a particular time by the ratings services and the use of ratings as a means to buy or sell their products.

Buzzard's book reviews the search for a viable ratings currency through the evolution of radio, television, cable, and the Internet. The search is complicated in the digital era by on-demand viewing, VCRs, DVRs, cell phones, and other media that allow viewers to avoid commercials--the reason for the ratings in the first place. The first paragraph of chapter 1 also gets right into her topic by introducing the radio ratings business founded by the Cooperative Analysis of Broadcasting (CAB) in 1929, C. E. Hooper in 1934, and A. C. Nielsen in

1942. Early radio, like the Internet, was a medium in search of a business model, she reports, and the ratings business helped to supply it. She presents the business since then as an alphabet soup of corporate innovations, measurement methodologies and technologies, and corporate startups and failures, as well as lawsuits. Through it all, Nielsen emerges as a victor, even over companies with whom it had made cooperative or partnership arrangements.

New technologies should allow more reliable measures of whether people actually view commercials--a measure that cannot be determined by traditional methods. The technology allows cable companies to measure actual usage rather than relying on samples from populations through surveys, Nielsen boxes, and diaries. Although such methods avoid problems created when viewers have to take an action, such as signing in on a set-top box, the new technologies cannot tell whether the cable box is on while the television set is actually off, for example. And the need for audience measures of mobile media, like cell phones and laptops, further complicates the challenge, Buzzard reports.

Buzzard's book is divided into two major sections: analog and digital. Within the first section, she traces the search for currency in network radio, local radio and television, and network television. In the digital section, she follows the search through local television audiences, local radio audiences, and Internet audiences. She concludes with the best part of the book: a final chapter exploring current experiments in measuring the effectiveness of commercials and the size of audiences.

A challenge of Buzzard's book is its own currency--in the sense of being up to date. Although she has updated them, four of the seven chapters appeared in academic journals or other books between 1999 and 2003. She covers a moving target with a stationary medium, so she necessarily provides a snapshot of a moment in an evolving

system. Because the chapters appeared separately in other publications, the book could have been strengthened by a common narrative, a timeline, and/or more cross-references among the chapters. For instance, the same lawsuit against Nielsen over antitrust issues is mentioned in the chapters on radio, television, and cable. The author could have been more explicit in pointing out when the issues overlapped among the different media involved in the same legal issues involving ratings. She follows the economics and corporate histories in each of the different media sections, rather than in-depth analyses of the different methods and technologies. Sometimes entrepreneurs start companies based on their innovations and each company rates a brief analysis. She could also have provided a more comprehensive index or a glossary of acronyms that are provided for the names of methodologies, technologies, and corporations. The "search inside" feature at Amazon.com was helpful in some searches where the index was not.

Today's technology allows more comprehensive data, Buzzard reports, from digital set-top boxes that provide second-by-second ratings and information about more obscure niche channels. Some companies have also experimented with various methods of measuring DVR, online, and out-of-home use. Buzzard points out that the ratings industry relied on social science survey methods that evolved about the same time. Such polling was famously introduced by the contrast between George Gallup and the *Literary Digest* magazine in their forecast of the 1936 election. Using a smaller, more representative sample of fifty thousand, Gallup accurately predicted Franklin Roosevelt's victory over Alf Landon. The magazine, however, used a sample of ten million to predict a Landon victory; the difference, of course, was the source of its sample from its own subscribers, automobile owners, and telephone users--all of whom leaned toward the Republican Party.

With new technologies that allow cable systems to collect real-time data on viewing and usage, rather than mere samples, they may in fact be creating new skewed results based on their subscribers. The numbers collected are huge, but the sheer size may be as misleading as an accurate measure as the *Literary Digest* sample in 1936. The implications await Buzzard's next update on the ratings game.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
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