Audience measurement and the next frontier

By Joseph Williams

It's 2016, and TV and streaming video professionals are still begging for a way to accurately track viewers.

"It's unifying a currency around what viewership looks like," Todd Steinman, partner at media agency Maxus, said when asked what he wants to see change in the industry this year. "I work with broadcast companies, and the Nielsen view versus all these other aggregated views really need to come into one overall standard."

His comments came during a Feb. 9 panel at Digital Entertainment World in Los Angeles, and he was not alone in his sentiment. Each panelist agreed that this was at the top of the industry's to-do list.

It's true that some agencies and startups are beginning to address the measurement problem from different angles. Companies like Samba TV and projects like the BBC's Canvas approach the problem head on by offering a range of metrics for different platforms and digital channels. Even smart TV-makers like Samsung and Vizio are starting to deliver viewership data.

As Jennifer Prince, director of entertainment at Twitter Inc., pointed out, "data is the new creative."

Sure, parsing and delivering data is more important than ever, but just adding data is not the ultimate solution. Rather, a standard way to integrate that data into an agreed upon currency, something to replace what Nielsen Holdings's ratings have delivered over the years, is what the industry really needs, panelists agreed.

Steinman seemed almost exasperated as he pointed out the trend. Consumers have "certainly shifted a lot of their time and attention away from broadcast TV," he said, and they have been doing so for many years now, yet traditional ratings, limited linear tune-in views, are what determines the success or failure of a network and its advertising.

Meanwhile, some firms, like Samba, are diving deeper and deeper into the numbers and the implications. Audience and user measurement organizations are beginning to assess the emotional responses to certain content, which could yield important information on the power of an engagement or likelihood of a conversion.

For Ira Rubenstein, senior vice president at PBS Digital, this is the next frontier to be conquered in 2016.

"Intent and intent to purchase is kind of the next really big step," he said.

This kind of view makes the Nielsen measurement system look quaint. It is not enough to count eyeballs, but the measurement tools of the future will categorize those eyeballs based on what the brains behind them are thinking. A viewer who is 3x more likely than average to buy a product is worth roughly the same as three average viewers, the logic goes.

Prince at Twitter said the industry needs "some form of currency that's cross-platform, cross-screen, some kind of standardization in general, and also just thinking about the value of a view and what really matters, because I think it's different for everyone. ... That's what keeps us up at night."

Surely, taking a more textured and nuanced approach to viewership data will not only benefit broadcasters, but it can also be applied across media no matter how valuable a single view is for a company or platform. However, unwinding the entrenched business model of Nielsen ratings and advertising is not a simple task. But for companies that do not depend on that business model, interesting work is being done.

PBS, for example. Rubenstein noted that the public service is based on donations — more than 50% funded by individual donations at the station level — so advertisers, and thus traditional ratings, are not as important for him.

Rather, his team must determine where they are best reaching those potential donors, how best to get their attention and how best to convert a casual viewer into a donor. It is a different science than traditional television — it becomes both the network and the advertiser at once.

The dynamic with social and mobile media is working well, he said. PBS put all seven nights of Ken Burns' documentary "The Roosevelts" up on its digital channel before the actual broadcast, which only drove higher ratings at the broadcast level, leading to Burns' most-viewed documentary since "The Civil War."

For a recent episode of "Frontline," PBS cut together a video that gave a very short overview of the episode to be posted on Facebook Inc.'s platform. It was just a short promotional piece with text. There was sound, but the viewer did not need it, so it was a truly mobile short. Rubenstein said the network saw "a ton of engagement" with the short and it transferred directly into higher ratings and more views.

Right now, Rubenstein and his colleagues are experimenting and drawing conclusions in the absence of a standard, formalized approach to measuring these dynamics. The industry needs a way to track all of these variables and understand what exactly creates conversions and drives engagement, he said.
"What are the assets and what are the units and what are the creative elements that are going to get that user to actually move on [a product]," he said, "not just becoming slightly aware of it, but purchasing, transacting, acting."