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Review

Mark Balnaves and Tom O'Regan with Ben Goldsmith, *Rating the Audience: The Business of Media*, London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011. ISBN: 978-1-84966-341-0. 272pp.

The back cover of this book features an endorsement from a professor of film studies stating that its contents 'requires one to seriously re-examine everything that one thinks one knows about this crucial aspect of the shaping of media cultures'. This certainly seems to be a fair assessment to me. *Rating the Audience* encourages the reader to consider ratings providers as 'knowledge brokers' on whom the currency of media depends. The authors argue that ratings should be understood as conventions more than measures; conventions which cannot be imposed and must be acceptable to a range of parties: media providers and advertisers, but also governments and the public. In order to maintain these conventions ratings must do something fairly astonishing: convincingly claim to capture all audience activity.

The book is a historical study of the construction and use of ratings in the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom, charting the trajectory of ratings technology and conventions in these contexts. It draws on archives of ratings providers and interviews with key industry figures as evidence of 'the *actual intentions* of people involved in decisions and the organizational constraints within which they worked' (p. 246, original emphasis). In theorising audience-ratings conventions and their impact, the authors set out the established and socially accepted way of representing audiences in markets and politics in all its complexity, for the benefit of those who don't usually get to look inside this 'black box'. This is important information for those who study media cultures because ratings are a decision tool integral to: the buying and selling of audiences and concomitant shareholder value of media properties; broadcast planning and scheduling; content commissioning, continuation and cancellation; development of media technologies; and PSB accountability.

Although the authors are writing from within the academic study of media and culture they explicitly distance their work from these analytical traditions and theoretical perspectives. Central to their position is the forceful assertion that ratings are a worthwhile topic of study. They feel that dismissing the ratings as a hegemonic tool obscures both the value and limits of the ratings convention for the parties involved and the critical vocabulary employed by these parties. Apart from passing reference to Adorno and Ang there is little reference to media scholarship in this book. Instead the focus is on figures the authors refer to as 'ratings intellectuals' who 'were creators of methodology as well as users of the methodology, fierce critics and often business people with vested interests in the very markets they studied' (p. 72). The most outrageous example mentioned in the book is Rex Sparger, one time investigator of the US Congressional committee on ratings, who was sued by Nielsen for stealing trade secrets and attempting to rig ratings for a show, a matter settled out of court. The book highlights Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Leo Bogart as key thinkers and methodologists, arguing that they were social researchers working commercially but concerned with the democratic application of research instruments and acutely aware of the limitations of data. The authors argue that scepticism and uncertainty on the part of ratings intellectuals doesn't undercut ratings, but asserts the kinds of truth claims that can be legitimately made.

The two standout chapters for me, by dint of my research interests and perspective, come at the end of the book and focus on the Audience and the Critics. These offer probing arguments from a perspective that is more analytically distanced from the ratings convention than what comes before. The book contends that the role of audiences as party to rating conventions shouldn't be underestimated: 'Audiences shape the ratings convention in two ways: how they use media requires companies continually to update their understandings of how audiences are using media; and they set limits as to what can be measured and how it can be measured' (p. 198). At the same time, however, it is clear that categorisations are imposed by the industry to construct 'normal' audience members based on statistical data. Exposure is the audience metric that has emerged to support industry bargaining because it produces a single number, although this number is not in fact simple to arrive at. The book indicates that audience engagement (actions and discourses over time) is increasingly something that the industry wants to capture, but also that the industry views engagement in terms of measurable response rather than cultural significance. This is not to say that academic and industry approaches are completely divergent; the industry's concept of the 'unknowable audience', who domesticate and use media in unexpected ways, is analogous to Staiger's (2000) 'perverse spectators'.

The book offers a number of arguments for the value of the ratings convention. It is pointed out that ratings are syndicated research (i.e. available to multiple organisations with competing interests), carried out by third-parties structurally separate from media providers and advertisers, and complemented by qualitative and customised research. Furthermore, because any discrepancies undermine confidence in the ratings, which can and have been called to account publically, there are checks and balances inherent in the system. Another strength of the ratings convention, the authors claim, is its respectfulness of the audience due to the limited intrusiveness of collecting data from a small sample whose participation is in the public interest. Having said this, the authors also note pressures on the ratings convention in the contemporary moment, including the emergence of alternative measurement platforms, such as the harvesting of data from set top boxes, which generate 'ratings-like information' about smaller, niche audiences in a fragmented media landscape. They warn that such methods are detrimental because audiences are resistant to collection of intimate and extensive personal data; using such data results in declines in participation from audiences who feel exploited and under surveillance.

There are weakness in the rating conventions that are only implicit in the book, and implications that remain unexplored. The authors frequently refer to the dual identity of ratings as representing both the public and the market. The public identity of the ratings is, however, questionable. In his Preface to the book, Jonathan D. Levy, Deputy Chief Economist of the US Federal Communications Commission, contends that the interests of the market can give rise to broadcast programming that maximises profit rather than best meets audience preferences. According to Bourdon and Méadel (2011) the democratic role of viewer-citizens is a paradox because panel members aren't supposed to self-consciously express an opinion through their data but to neutrally represent others through unaffected behaviour. While this book recognises that ratings are a proxy for a media company's profit/loss, and that companies consequently want ratings to represent the best case, it doesn't follow this point to its logical conclusion: a drop in ratings is a problem for the industry regardless of whether the figure is a more accurate measurement (Milavsky 1992). And a key principle of the book, that discrepancies between different ratings are crucial for improvement of ratings methodologies, seems incompatible with the increasing monopoly of ratings provision, which the authors attribute to industry demands for bigger audience panels, frequent and timely results, and large-scale technology investment. That said, the book acknowledges that industry debates about ratings are increasingly intra-mural and, as such, provides an important account of the complexities of industry mechanisms that can be easier to criticise than get inside.

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Biographical Note:

Sarah Martindale is a Research Fellow at the University of Nottingham. Working as part of Horizon Digital Economy Research (EP/G065802/1) she has contributed to interdisciplinary projects examining the impact of technology innovations on television production and consumption. She is currently engaged, with investigators from four other UK universities, in Charting the Digital Lifespan, a two year Research Councils UK Digital Economy Theme project (EP/L00383X/1) studying digital interactions at key transition points in the human lifespan.

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