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Time to grow up, Indian media

Can an industry that's about keeping others honest expect to thrive when it can't be honest about itself?

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Magazine publishers plan their own readership survey," says a recent front page article in this paper. Frustrated with the results of the IRS (Indian readership survey that has repeatedly shown magazine readership declining despite growing circulation) and the hibernation of NRS (national readership survey—awaiting a revision in format for two years now), magazine owners have reacted predictably. But their reaction stems from a more deep-rooted issue that plagues the Indian media industry.

For some years now, media owners have displayed an unhealthy disrespect for industry standards. The phenomenal growth of the industry in recent times masks the damaging long-term effects of such an attitude. By constantly debating the numbers, questioning methodology, starting new surveys and audits instead of fixing the existing ones, we are only perpetuating the belief that the numbers are suspect. This holds the industry back.


Jayachandran Nanu / Mint

In India, the media industry depends almost entirely on advertising. Subscription revenues are probably the lowest in the world. As readers and viewers, we hardly pay for content. Newspapers sell for Rs1-4, mainline magazines sell for Rs10-15, and cable/DTH bills are typically Rs200 a month. The low subscription prices drive huge numbers. Now that you and I are spoilt for choice, we demand more and better, which media owners happily dish out. But it is advertisers who pay for this extravagance. Given the comparatively low subscription prices, they subsidize Indian consumers of media far more than their counterparts around the world.

So, at the very least they deserve the same independent and reliable data on circulation, readership, viewership and listenership to support their decision-making. Yet, we choose to show them smoke and mirrors. There are well-established practices for this.

First, simply fudge the numbers. It is quite common to manipulate print orders, newsprint records and dealer invoices to prove higher newspaper or magazine circulation numbers to ABC (Audit Bureau of Circulation —ironically, a publishing-cum-advertising-owned cross-industry body) auditors.

Second, bend the rules—distribute suburban copies from a metro location to claim higher numbers in the latter, force school editions on children in return for freebies to principals and count them in the total, bundle two publications together or break one into weekday and weekend editions to get around the discounting limits, question the auditors' numbers and conveniently put the public declaration of your numbers on indefinite hold when you get a whiff of the fact that your rival may have nosed ahead in the last survey, etc. There is also "invitation pricing", making your paper cheaper than its resale value, resulting in runaway numbers with huge demand from the *raddi* (waste paper) market. Third, break the rules—surreptitiously pass on unpermitted discounts to your distributors, figure out where TAM (television audience measurement—an independent sizing of TV viewership) people-metered homes are and pay people to watch your channel 24x7, or even bribe the surveyors (IRS was held up last year when this was discovered).

Media firms abroad compete on content and positioning, not by questioning or fudging numbers

Fourth, choose not to participate in the industry sponsored audit or research. A large number of publications drop in and out of ABC at their convenience! Some of the leading ones do not participate at all, yet claim to be No. 1 in something or the other. Fifth, question the methodology—NRS and IRS have both been challenged, as has RAM (radio audience measurement) albeit less so. TAM and aMap (audience measurement and analytics), a rival overnight TV audience measurement system, are subjects of great debate and Trai (Telecom Regulatory Authority of India, responsible for broadcasting as well) m regulating TV rating agencies.

Sixth, if you are an influential member of the cross-industry body involved in the surveys or audit, have the rules changed to suit yourself. And, seventh, of course, start yet another survey. There would be more, but you get the picture.

It was about time we grew up. The world over, methodologies and agencies for generating data on circulation, readership, viewership and listenership are well established. Granted, these need to be adapted to India and our existing methods need revision. How hard can it be, given that all current surveys and audits are either independent or cross-industry-supported?

The radio industry seems to have successfully converged on RAMafter toying with rival ILT (Indian listenership track). Once there is similar agreement for newspapers, magazines and TV, everyone, particularly the industry leaders, must stick to the chosen standards and practices. Advertisers should shun media that won't. Violators and "rule benders" should be blacklisted. Such mockery of established practices or widespread mistrust of "numbers" can't be seen in other countries—ABC and Nielsen numbers are sacrosanct. Media firms are competitive and mean—but they compete on content and positioning, not by questioning or fudging numbers!

Increasingly, advertisers are demanding better returns on their investments. The Internet has spoilt them with targeting and low CPMs (cost per thousand impressions). They are questioning the smoke and mirrors. Moreover, how can an industry that is about keeping others honest expect to thrive and grow when it can’t be honest about itself?

We have bigger challenges. Our industry associations have become hotbeds of politics. Our regulator needs to appreciate that unlike telephony, cable and DTH bills also pay for content, and allowing them to grow will improve the quality of our TV channels. The government is threatening to regulate content and get involved in ratings as well. The best and the brightest in this country do not see media as a worthwhile career. Let’s fight these wars. Time to move on and show the way!

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