Television Audience Assessment

Lloyd N. Morrisett, President

The John and Mary R. Markle Foundation
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THE MARKLE FOUNDATION

The John and Mary R. Markle Foundation was established in 1927 "to promote the advancement and diffusion of knowledge. . .and the general good of mankind." It was given a broad charter that permits a great deal of freedom in choosing which particular issues and problems to address. Since the Foundation's inception, its directors have chosen to focus on one area at any given time, believing that foundation funds could be put to greatest use by concentrating on a specific topic for a sustained period.

Initially, the Foundation worked in the field of social welfare. Then, in 1936, the Foundation began a program to support research in medicine that continued for more than thirty years. A major component of the program in medicine was the Foundation's support to individuals planning careers in academic medicine. This program was ended in 1969, when the Foundation began its current program in mass communications and information technology.

The current program focuses on the following areas: the potential of communications and information technologies to enhance political participation; the benefits of communications and information technologies for an aging population; an analysis of public policy issues in communications; the educational and entertainment use and value of computer software in the home; and developments in electronic publishing. This report describes the Foundation's work during the past two years.

As of October 30, 1987, the Markle Foundation's assets were approximately $85.5 million. The foundation, which has a staff of 12 and an office in New York City, makes grants totalling approximately $4 million per year.

PROGRAM DIRECTIONS

The purpose of the Foundation's program is the improvement of all media including services growing out of new technologies for the processing and transfer of information. The media have an increasingly important role to play in modern society. They provide education and information, shaping attitudes and opportunities as they influence our views of ourselves and the world.

A bewildering variety of new communication and information services are being introduced and planned. Television, film, radio, print and the telephone are becoming inseparably linked with computers.

The Markle Foundation's current program is focused on the following areas: the potential of communications and information technologies to enhance political participation; the benefits of communications and information technologies for an aging population; the educational and entertainment use and value of computer software in the home; and analysis of issues of public policy and public interest in the communications field. The Foundation has a general interest in all aspects of the media and related services and plans to support a wide range of efforts to improve them.

PROPOSALS

The Foundation does not have an application form for submitting a proposal. An informal letter outlining a project will permit an early judgement about the possibility of support. The following information should be included in this initial inquiry: the purpose for which aid is sought, resources needed, personnel involved, and a description of methods to be used in completing the project. Grants are made at the meeting of the Board of Directors in November, March, and June.

APPROPRIATIONS

During the fiscal year July 1, 1986 through June 30, 1987 the Markle Foundation received 415 written requests for funds. The Directors of the Foundation awarded 35 grants totalling \$2,551,418 for the program in mass communications. Major grants are described in this section. All grants are listed in the Appropriations section beginning on page 46.

TELEVISION AUDIENCE ASSESSMENT*

The [present] rating system—by encouraging imitation rather than innovation, by overemphasizing "the numbers" at the expense of quality and by encouraging bland programming to the lowest common denominator—may be the single major obstacle to better quality programming.
—Former FCC Commissioner Margita White.

Last summer, some months before the 1987-88 television season debuted, two intriguing news stories about how network programming decisions were being made caught our attention here at the Markle Foundation.

The first dealt with the ratings. It said the three major broadcast networks were in a state of high anxiety over the A. C. Nielsen Company's plans to switch to a totally electronic "people" meter rating system in the fall. Preliminary data had shown that Nielsen's newest black box was likely to generate higher audience numbers for programs appealing to younger, more urban viewers, and could possibly hurt the standings of such big prime time money-makers as CBS's *Dallas* and NBC's *Cosby Show.*

The networks were worried, the article noted, that doubts about the validity of the people meter figures would affect commercial sales, which are keyed to the ratings. Yet even as they protested mightily, the networks were moving swiftly to adapt their prime time schedules to the perceived biases of the system. Younger-skewing shows, such as ABC's *Max Headroom*, CBS's *Cagney and Lacey*, and NBC's *Crime Story*, were returned to the air despite relatively poor ratings the previous season. Pilots for shows that appealed to older or more rural audiences were simply shunted aside. The moral of the story was clear: The ratings might be misleading, or wrong, but they were still king.

The second news item had a different focus. It was about people, not numbers—people who felt strongly enough about television viewing to join letter-writing campaigns to save their favorite shows from being canceled by the networks. "Once upon a time viewers just sat

** I wish to thank Mel Friedman for his help in preparing this essay.*

quietly and watched," a network executive observed. "Now they write. They write a lot."

According to the article, such grass-roots efforts to mobilize support for endangered programs have become increasingly common in recent years, and have actually been credited with rescuing several series from the chopping block, including the acclaimed *Hill Street Blues*, *St. Elsewhere* and *Cagney and Lacey*. Yet paradoxically, the article said, the very proliferation of these populist campaigns against the ratings could spell their doom. As one producer whose series, now a hit, was revived by public protest noted, "The more common these crusades become, the sooner they will kill the effect. A mere 50,000 letters isn't as impressive anymore."

At the Markle Foundation, we read these two news reports with a sense of déjà vu. What struck us was how little had changed in the dynamics of network programming and in the buying and selling of advertising time over the past 10 years. The march of technology, as exemplified by the advent of the people meter, has not altered the fundamental fact that television remains congenitally blind to the needs, interests and program preferences of millions of viewers. The network programming executive who once said "Ratings *are* the measure of the quality of programs" was cynically presuming all television viewing was the same—that sets turned on meant viewers in the room, that viewers in the room meant people watching, and that people watching meant consumers involved with the programming and exposed to its imbedded commercial messages.

We know these assumptions are mistaken. The landmark work of Television Audience Assessment, established and funded by the Markle Foundation, proved conclusively that viewers react in different ways to television programs, and that their likes and dislikes have a direct and measurable impact upon their impressions of commercials. The system of "qualitative" ratings which TAA developed and tried—unsuccessfully—to market on a national scale, held hope of revolutionizing the way commercial time was bought and sold. First and foremost, it gave advertisers a unique tool for planning for programs whose authentic audience delivery could not be assayed by Nielsen.

Charles Green of the Thomas J. Lipton Co. grasped TAA's significance. Its ratings, he said, "could fundamentally raise our level of communication with the audience we desire. It could redirect us from simply large audiences to selected audiences that may be more receptive to our message." As a public interest dividend, it was hoped that TAA's numbers would help some shows with small but loyal followings attract sufficient commercial support to gain breathing time to build up their audiences.

Although TAA ceased commercial operations in April 1986, it continues to exist as an inactive company held by the Foundation. We have taken this extraordinary step because we believe that the need for qualitative television ratings remains undiminished; consequently, we remain optimistic that TAA may one day be reborn. With that in mind, we have dedicated this section of our annual report to an in-depth look at the aims and accomplishments of this remarkable Markle Foundation project.

Not-for-profit TAA

[TAA is] raising one of the central questions of the video age: whether a new rating system might generate higher-quality programs.
—The Christian Science Monitor.

The Markle Foundation has been concerned with the quality and diversity of television programming ever since 1969, when the Foundation began examining the impact of our system of mass communications upon society. The question we asked ourselves was: How could a relatively tiny organization such as ours manage to influence the programming decisions of a multibillion dollar industry historically dominated by implacable numbers? The ratings system was an iron hinge around which the entire industry swung, determining program development, program scheduling and commercial pricing.

It occurred to us very quickly that if the Foundation could develop an alternative, methodologically sound rating system that took viewer satisfaction or intensity of interest into account, we might be able to make an enduring contribution to the quality of television programming. What was unclear, however, was whether there was a demand within the industry for a more sophisticated method of measuring audiences, and—assuming that there was—what such a system might look like.

Back in 1978, when these unformed ideas and hunches started to crystallize, the undertaking seemed feasible, if a trifle hubristic. It was an opportune moment. The status quo in broadcasting was crumbling due to growing competitive pressures from cable television, VCRs, and other new video delivery systems. As the three major networks' share of viewing declined and commercial prices rose, leading national advertisers began demanding new solutions to the worsening "underdelivery" problem, which taxed the reach and effectiveness of their TV ad campaigns. In the heated debate over the meaning of the shortfall, Nielsen and Arbitron came under heavy fire for failing to adequately track this critical hemorrhaging of upscale viewing households. Advertisers were on the lookout for better ways of pinpointing who really watched what, when, and how.

Also, after looking at the ratings systems in other countries, we knew it was possible to integrate qualitative program measures with conventional data on audience size and demographics. French television is regularly graded on the basis of an *index de qualité* that asks viewers to indicate, among other things, whether they feel a particular program is "enriching" or "interesting." This audience report card is then used by the government-owned broadcasting system to help it decide which and what types of programs to fund. In Great Britain, both the BBC and independent commercial television stations are required, by Charter and act of Parliament respectively, to poll the needs and interests of British viewers. The BBC conducts weekly mail surveys from which "Reaction Indices" are developed; the Independent Broadcasting Authority generates continuous "Appreciation Indices." Here in North America, the Canadian Broadcasting Commission distributes viewing diaries and mail questionnaires from which it composes an "Index of Enjoyment."

Published studies on foreign qualitative ratings also proved encouraging. They suggested there was no necessary correlation between the size of a viewing audience and viewer satisfaction. We recognized, however, that these findings represented just a point of departure: They constituted essential, but not sufficient evidence that we were pursuing something the TV industry ultimately might accept as a useful—and, above all, indispensable—adjunct to Nielsen. Realistically speaking, in the United States, viewers' attitudes toward programming acquired significance only to the extent that they were surrogates for other tendencies—program loyalty, program attentiveness, commercial exposure, and buying intent. To achieve our public interest goals, we first had to uncover those links.

So in 1978 the Foundation formally launched a project to discover whether it was possible to define and design a qualitative ratings system responsive to the economic imperatives of American commercial television. As part of our initial fact-finding activities, we commissioned two background reports from Carolyn E. Setlow, then executive vice president of the Louis Harris & Associates polling organization, and sponsored a pan-industry conference on qualitative measurement.

Setlow's reports and discussions with industry leaders convinced us that interest in a new form of program ratings was high, but that for our system to succeed, it would have to withstand rigorous methodological scrutiny as well as overcome the deep economic conservatism of the broadcasting and advertising communities. Advertisers mistrusted the notion of qualitative measurement because they didn't believe people would disclose their true program preferences. They also doubted a correlation could be made between program impact and viewer receptivity to commercial messages.

Finally, like broadcasters, they had adopted the Nielsen numbers as the lingua franca of the television marketplace; it would only complicate matters if they suddenly had to translate an alien vocabulary of qualitative indicators into the familiar and easy language of gross rating points and costs-per-thousand. For their part, the networks and their local affiliates expressed misgivings about qualitative measurement because they feared it might be used by advertisers to drive down the price of commercial time. Since broadcasters were winning under the current system, why change?

Most previous forays into the field of audience attitudinal research had failed to address—let alone achieve—what the Foundation took as its primary goal: promoting program diversity on television. In some cases, the research was suspect because it betrayed sample biases or other methodological flaws. In others, the studies were proprietary and therefore not nationally syndicated, leaving broadcasters and advertisers under no pressure to take them into account. And in virtually all studies and operating systems, researchers did not examine the relationship between viewer involvement and actual behavior, such as planning ahead to watch, repeat viewing, commercial exposure and recall. As a result, the implications of qualitative ratings for economic decision-making were not self-evident.

By contrast, the Foundation's project was guided by the assumption that a full-fledged qualitative rating service had to produce timely, ongoing and universally available numbers that were methodologically unassailable and could differentiate programs by appeal or effect. It had to resemble Nielsen and yet function as a foil to Nielsen. It had to become so insinuated in the thinking and practices of the industry that the release of its data, too, would have fateful implications for the longevity of programs. In the long run, the service had to be self-supporting through syndication fees.

Mindful of the daring nature of what we were proposing, we envisioned, going in, three possible determinants of final success: 1) that our research would produce a salable commodity that could be marketed by a company set up under Foundation auspices; 2) that an outside company might buy or adopt our methodology and apply it in a manner consistent with Foundation objectives; or 3) that neither the first nor the second outcome could be realized, but that the ideas and approaches we developed would influence the way advertisers and broadcasters evaluated programs.

Once we decided that the project was worthwhile and had voted to fund its first year of operation with $100,000, we knew we had to have someone with special characteristics to lead it—someone with energy and organizational skills, a person with entrepreneurial abilities and a comprehensive knowledge of the television industry. We found that person in Dr. Elizabeth Roberts, formerly president and director of the human sexual development project of Population Education, Inc.

The Foundation had first become aware of Roberts' work when she served as director of the children's television unit of the Federal Communications Commission under Chairman Dean Birch in the early 1970s. Our paths crossed again when the Markle Foundation helped fund a series of PEI-organized workshops in Hollywood about the portrayal of sex on TV. In the spring of 1980, Roberts agreed to direct the Foundation's project on qualitative ratings, which, in October, was separately incorporated as a nonprofit venture under the name Television Audience Assessment. Roberts assumed the title of president; a five-member (subsequently expanded) board of directors was appointed; and the Foundation voted to give TAA a preliminary start-up grant of $100,000, to which the Ford Foundation contributed an additional $35,000.

TAA's mandate was twofold: to design a sophisticated, methodologically sound and commercially relevant system of TV ratings based on viewers' responses to programs; and to provide television executives with an economic incentive to offer programming responsive to the needs and interests of diverse audiences.

Between 1980 and 1985, the Foundation spent more than $2.5 million on the breakthrough research and development work that formed the basis of what was to become TAA's model ratings system. Under Liz Roberts's stewardship, TAA published study after impeccably executed study that, in her words, slowly "turned around the debate on the importance and utility of qualitative ratings in a country dominated by commercial television."

Gradually a new and myth-debunking portrait of the television audience emerged: A 1981 telephone-coincidental survey of 1,600 prime-time viewers in Springfield, Ill., age 12 years and older, identified two key indices of program involvement: "program appreciation," a measure of overall satisfaction and enjoyment; and "program impact," a measure of the degree of emotional and intellectual stimulation a program affords. The study found that the higher a show's impact, the greater the likelihood a viewer would plan ahead to watch it. Satisfied viewers tended to be attentive viewers who were less likely to leave the room during commercial breaks.

To test and validate these measures, TAA conducted a follow-up "protypical ratings" study among 3,000 adults in New Britain, Conn., and Kansas City, Mo., in the spring of 1982. For two weeks, participants drawn from both cable and non-cable households entered their reactions to programs they watched between 6 p.m. and midnight in specially designed Television Viewing Monitors (TVMs). To be credited, all TVM diaries had to be completed and mailed back daily; those postmarked later than 48 hours after viewing were disqualified. Data so collected were double-checked by telephone interviews. All told, information was compiled on more than 1,200 cable and broadcast television programs, 327 of which attracted enough viewers to be statistically significant for rating purposes. The analyzed findings were published in four pivotal TAA reports: *The Audience Rates Television*, *The Multichannel Environment*, *Methodology Report*, and *Appeal and Impact: A Program Ratings Book*.

The data confirmed that TAA's trial measures—Program Appeal and Program Impact—were stable, reliable predictors of viewing behavior. The Program Appeal Index provided a sound gauge of whether viewers would make advance plans to watch a program and remain loyal to it in the future. The Program Impact Index was an especially sensitive litmus of viewer involvement or distraction, and correlated strongly with exposure to commercials.

The variation in the impact scores of programs such as *A Woman Called Golda* and *Cousteau Odyssey* on the one hand, which rated highly, and *Three's Company* and *CHiPs* on the other, which did not, clearly suggested that people wanted more from television than mere video placebos or white noise. In fact, TAA demonstrated that the most meaningful expressions of a program's impact could be reduced to two disarmingly simple statements: "I learned something from this program," and "This program touched my feelings." When viewers were dissatisfied with what they were watching, they tended to leave the room, switch channels, perform other activities at the same time or become easily distracted.

The watershed in TAA's research program came in 1983, when a special laboratory study set up in Kansas City, Mo., involving a sample of 470 women, age 18 to 49, proved a definite link between program involvement and favorable attitudes toward commercial messages. According to the findings, reported in *Program Impact and Program Appeal: Qualitative Ratings and Commercial Effectiveness*, the higher a program's impact score the higher the probability viewers will regard its commercials as memorable, likable and credible. It was the connection we had been looking for but were uncertain we would find. It was the hook we needed to sell our idea to the advertising community and, through it, to broadcasters and programmers.

TAA's findings received wide publicity, and slowly but surely the industry took notice. James Spaeth, a high-level group manager for General Foods, typified the excitement. "Television Audience Assessment," he said, "has conducted some of the most careful and comprehensive research I've ever seen concerning the relationship between the attitudes and behaviors of television viewers. I believe the insights promised by their research could improve the way television decisions are made. This would be of great value to advertisers."

In retrospect, the high quality of TAA's methodology may have been the company's single greatest strength. Conceived as a hybrid organization—part altruistic think tank, part commercially oriented operation—TAA needed the compelling logic of its research to overcome advertiser suspicions of its socially conscious motives. As Liz Roberts confided in a memorandum to the Foundation in 1985, "In the early years, we were frequently dismissed as do-gooders with an axe to grind; as a result we were not taken seriously. At the same time, our not-for-profit status allowed us freedom from commercial, financial and time constraints; this enabled us to undertake quality research and to distribute the findings on a nonproprietary basis."

Perhaps if a commercial company, not a private nonprofit Foundation, developed TAA, it would have ended up just another proprietary research instrument. Nevertheless, as Roberts correctly observed, the "ambiguity between TAA's social goals and its commercial goals" was the source of many unresolved problems that haunted the venture.

That became apparent as early as 1983. The TAA Board felt the company had largely fulfilled its objectives as a nonprofit entity. It had created two program measures and a methodology that held up well under scrutiny. Widespread press coverage of TAA's findings had given the project a sense of momentum, and the industry was wondering—rightly so: What next? A consensus was forming among board members that the prototype rating system had gone far enough along in the development stage and was now ready to face the ultimate acid test: acceptability in the marketplace.

Apart from these sobering considerations, TAA was suddenly presented with a succession crisis. Liz Roberts, citing health reasons, asked to be relieved of her full-time duties as TAA president. Thus precisely at the moment TAA began planning for its metamorphosis into a for-profit enterprise, it also had to recruit new leadership. Unquestionably, TAA was hampered in this search by its nonprofit status and its lack of a well-articulated business strategy. The company lost a year to 18 months trying to find a replacement for Roberts. TAA found it was hard to attract the caliber of person it needed.

"If we got somebody out of the commercial world," Roberts recalls, "they wanted guarantees we couldn't make—long-term profits." "Candidates from the nonprofit world," she adds, "generally didn't have the industry-wide credibility or the marketing acumen essential to TAA's successful commercial conversion."

Because of these handicaps, TAA was repeatedly put in the position of having to request short-term funding from the Markle Foundation, often on a quarterly basis. The situation also led directly to TAA's premature attempt to enter the marketplace without a national test period, and before all the financial and marketing spadework had been completed. "In many ways," Roberts wrote in her memo, "Television Audience Assessment may have sold the concept of the necessity for information that supplements traditional ratings of audience size more successfully than it has managed to sell its own qualitative ratings system."

For-Profit TAA

Instead of relying on [NBC's Brandon] Tartikoff's "good judgment" to save high-quality but low-rated shows such as Hill Street Blues *or* St. Elsewhere, *viewers could use TAA to send him the message that*

they want such shows to stay on the schedule (and, by extension, that they're willing to reward the sponsors who make such shows possible).
—The Philadelphia News.

In the spring of 1985, as the funding cycle for nonprofit TAA drew to a close, Rolf M. Wulfsberg and Steven A. Holt were named to head the management team of a newly constituted for-profit TAA. Wulfsberg, who became president and chief executive officer of the company, had been president and chief statistician of Chilton Research Services and International Communications Research, where he had worked with TAA on the development of its qualitative ratings methodology. Recognized as one of the leading statisticians in the U.S., Wulfsberg also had considerable sales experience. Holt, formerly research director and general manager of the nonprofit TAA, was appointed executive vice president of its commercial successor. The Foundation voted the newborn corporation a program-related investment of $560,000 to cover a six-month start-up period, and stipulated that TAA had to secure an additional $500,000 from other investment sources, en route to weaning itself of Markle funding.

The goal of the company, as stated in the four-year business plan submitted by Wulfsberg and Holt, was to establish a nationally syndicated qualitative ratings service that would become "incorporated into the process by which advertising time is bought and sold, thereby stimulating advertiser support of more diversified programming."

At the heart of the plan was TAA's proposed syndicated research program, which included:

- A National Daytime Ratings Sweep late in the fall of 1985 that would be based on Television Viewing Monitors and would yield Program Impact and Program Appeal scores from a national sample of 3,000 persons watching programs between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m., over a five-day period. The sweep would also generate a Commercial Exposure Index that would be related to the PI and PA ratings.
- A National Evening Ratings Sweep in January or February 1986 among 7,000 respondents, who would be asked to fill out TVMs over a 14-day period. The study would rate programs aired between 6 p.m. and midnight, including national news and syndicated shows.
- Two waves of data collection in 1986-87: a daytime sweep in the fall of 1986, with an increase in sample size to 5,000, and an evening sweep in the spring of 1987.
- Future publication of reach and frequency studies (e.g., estimates of the actual size of the audience delivered during commercial breaks) and audience flow analyses.

Wulfsberg and Holt indicated that TAA's initial marketing efforts would be concentrated on the nation's top 150 advertisers, who were being hurt the most by audience fragmentation and the rising costs of commercial production and advertising time. Wulfsberg and Holt also announced that TAA had received commitments of intent to subscribe—at a cost of approximately $40,000 per charter subscription—from four such giants: Campbell Soup, Anheuser-Busch, Ralston-Purina and Polaroid. According to their projections, TAA was likely to sign up at least 14 national advertisers during the first 14 months of operation and to turn a profit by the 1987-88 TV season.

Excluding the Markle Foundation's seed money of $500,000, TAA said it needed to attract capital investments totaling about $2 million. By October 1985, however, TAA continued to be mired in money woes. Although it had met or exceeded many of its inaugural goals, for-profit TAA had failed to raise the $500,000 in investments requested by the Foundation as a condition of its grant six months earlier.

"The company will run out of cash this month," a Foundation internal document said, "and as a practical matter, the Markle Foundation is the only possible source of additional funds at this time." The document went on to caution, "If TAA is to survive, an additional source of investment capital must be identified by January 1."

What was going wrong? Paraphrasing Dickens, while it may have been the best of times for championing a bold new idea in ratings, it was also the worst of times for launching a new ratings service. Although Nielsen and Arbitron did not generate the same kind of audience data as TAA's, the people meter systems both of them were testing were capturing a good deal of attention in the industry. In addition, competition from other qualitative measurement services, such as Audience Statistics Institute, R. H. Bruskin, Peter D. Hart Associates, Marketing Evaluations Inc. ("TvQ") and R.D. Percy and Co. ("Voxbox"), ensured that TAA would be pitching for a shrinking piece of advertisers' syndicated research budgets.

Rolf Wulfsberg, who is now director of market research at Abt Associates in Cambridge, Mass., remembers, "People said there was too much going on, and I'm going to wait until the dust settles before I decide where to put my money."

Kathleen J. Bryar, TAA's former marketing manager and now an associate of Wulfsberg at Abt: "When for-profit TAA took off, we were selling it in the summer time, and unfortunately, most of these clients had already allocated their budgets for the following year. It was hard for them to find the extra $35,000." TAA needed at least 12 to 18 months of start-up capital, she maintains. "The biggest thing hurting TAA was that we just had six months."

Another blow of fate, Wulfsberg says, was what he terms the "mergermania" going on among advertisers at the time. "Time and again we had people who were very interested in us but were totally handcuffed because they were unable to make any decisions because of pending mergers."

Wulfsberg also admits that TAA probably didn't do the best job of selling itself to ad agencies. "Initially we went to the advertisers and disregarded the agencies because we knew they weren't going to buy up front. But we soon learned that most of the companies called their agencies for advice anyway. So we had to work with them. We made presentations to them; they were cordial on the outside, but we really never got much support from them. Our system would have complicated their lives."

Agencies objected, for example, that TAA did not intend to issue studies with sufficient frequency to produce information they could act upon. Yet the TAA data showed that while the Nielsen numbers for a show may fluctuate from week to week, the attitudes viewers have toward it do not. "It would have been insanity," Wulfsberg says, "to have monthly or—heaven forbid!—overnight [qualitative] ratings."

Another frequently heard complaint was that TAA's service would almost certainly drive up the price of high-impact/high-appeal programming, but wouldn't necessarily lower the cost of high-Nielsen but low-TAA rated shows. "Probably the most legitimate complaint," comments Wulfsberg, "is that if everybody shares this information, the equilibrium would find itself again and there would be no savings. And theoretically that's true: There would be a revaluing of programs. But that was the objective of the Markle Foundation from the first day. The networks weren't going to lose with the system. But I disagree that they were going to win even more."

Advertisers could have adopted any one of three approaches in applying TAA data to media buying. They could have multiplied a program's TAA numbers by its Nielsen numbers to get a third figure that would represent its all-round ranking. A second method, favored by Ralston-Purina, involved using the TAA ratings as a separate source of information. In that situation, the TAA scores would serve as a tie-breaker between equivalently rated Nielsen programs, or the Nielsen numbers would be used to tip the balance between similarly rated TAA programs.

Less well appreciated was the third "sleeper" strategy: TAA as an outright replacement for Nielsen. As Liz Roberts comments, "We had better audience size numbers than Nielsen did.

We didn't have people meter numbers, but we had much larger samples. We could demonstrate that our audience size numbers were more reliable than Nielsen's. And we had person data, not just household data."

In November 1985, TAA held its scheduled Daytime Ratings Sweep, funded by yet another emergency program-related grant of $500,000 from the Foundation. But both time and money were running out, and it was looking increasingly likely that the upcoming Evening Ratings Sweep would have to be canceled. Wulfsberger and Holt redoubled their efforts to get advertisers and investors to support the project. Indeed, one month later Holt wrote the Foundation excitedly that he had nailed down $215,000 in contracts from Polaroid, Campbell Soup, Ralston-Purina and the Public Broadcasting Service, and had been given $67,500 in verbal commitments from General Foods and Lipton Soup.

Attempts to attract venture capitalists, however, proved futile. The investment community was mesmerized by technology; it was the year of the people meter. "Because we didn't have a black box," says Wulfsberger with a trace of bitterness, "we couldn't get anybody to help us."

The rest followed inevitably. The Evening Sweeps were canceled; advertisers' money was returned; and TAA closed shop on April 18, 1986.

The Future

While PBS wasn't the only TAA client disappointed at their suspension of operations, we may have been the saddest. We had been waiting a long time for their services to become available. . . . Now, following the company's suspension, we are floundering in search of a replacement. Nothing similar is presently available, so it's clear we must either develop something new—reinventing the wheel—or wait until TAA is revived. . . .
—letter from John W. Fuller, director of research, PBS, May 15, 1986.

Of the three possible "successful" outcomes originally posited for the Markle Foundation's project on qualitative ratings, we can say this much for now. It is true TAA failed to make the transition to an autonomous, commercially viable, qualitative rating service. It is also true it failed to be acquired by some other company interested in developing its enormous potential. Yet, TAA remains legally alive and its spirit has not entirely passed from the scene. Its ideas and impressive body of research continue to have an impact upon the industry. The Foundation has even heard—though it cannot verify this—that some of TAA's techniques and approaches have been picked up by the internal research departments of major television organizations.

Incremental victories are not as heady as the across-the-board transformations Markle had hoped to precipitate 10 years ago, but neither are they insignificant. Liz Roberts agrees: "Whether TAA will do what I, at least, cared about—affecting the economic models of the system in such a way that you affect programming diversity—is unlikely. But you may get some use of qualitative ratings and qualitative numbers to justify some advertisers going into some kinds of shows they might not do otherwise."

In fact, the Foundation is happy to report that PBS has kept TAA's flame alive. Following TAA's termination of operations, PBS wrote the Foundation and asked for permission to perform a TAA-type survey of its prime-time programming. We said yes, and arranged for Rolf Wulfsberg and Kathy Bryar of Abt Associates to do the research. The survey, which measured attitudes toward network and independent television programming as well as public television fare, was conducted between April 30 and May 13, 1987. All programs were rated according to six qualitative criteria, including Program Appeal and Program Impact. The results, published July 15, 1987, were striking. In the broadest sample of 138 ratable programs:

- PBS swept nine of the top 10 programs

(ABC's *Disney Sunday Movie* was seventh), ranked according to Program Appeal, beating NBC's *Our House* (11th) and *Cosby Show* (12th).

- *Shoah, Frontline, Nova* and *Wild, Wild World of Animals,* all PBS or PTV programs, captured the top five rankings for Program Impact. Indeed, only two non-public broadcasting programs, ABC's *20/20* and NBC's *Highway to Heaven,* made it into the top 15.
- On "Planning Ahead," public broadcasting programs rated less well, with only *Wall Street Week* (ranked sixth) and *McNeil Lehrer News Hour* (11th) making it into the top 15.
- However, respondents rated *Shoah* and *Frontline: "A Matter of the Mind"* the two most moving ("touched my feelings") programs they had viewed during the survey period. Four other programs aired by public television stations also were among the top 10.
- Finally, PBS or PTV programs clinched the top 10 rankings (and 14 of the top 15) in program educational value. ("I learned something" from watching.)

"I hoped," comments John Fuller, director of research for PBS, "that if we went ahead and conducted one more prime time survey and widely distributed the results—which I will do—that maybe it will revive interest [in TAA] among various corporations who may want to conduct such a survey."

The Foundation has set three criteria for any would-be acquirer of TAA: 1) the company must give assurances that the integrity of TAA's approach will be maintained and that the resulting approach will be certified as reliable and valid. 2) The company must have qualified personnel in place to carry out the activity. 3) The company must have enough financial support to assure that the system will be given a reasonable trial—of at least 12 to 18 months.

"Someone ought to give it a good try and run at it again, quite frankly," says Roberts. "That's the way you change something."

We agree.

Lloyd N. Morrisett

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