



Lesson Plan

Television Broadcast Ratings

Overview

This lesson introduces students to the theory behind television ratings and encourages them to explore the commercial pressures driving the medium. By learning about the relationships between programming, advertising and the ensuing rating wars, students will understand that television is, above all, a vehicle to sell advertisements.

Level: Grades 7-10

About the Author

adapted from activities in *Meet the Media* by Jack Livesley, Barrie McMahon, John Pungente S.J. and Robin Quin, and from *Rating Prime Time Television*, by Claire Davey

Through a series of activities, students learn about television ratings, the "Sweeps", prime-time programming, and a letter-writing activity where students voice their opinions about television programming.

Outcomes

Students will:

- become critically aware of the commercial nature of television, including programming and the demographics of ratings systems
- understand the effects of commercial programming on the nature and quality of television products
- experience creative license by devising and pitching their own ideas for a potential prime time TV series
- exercise writing skills and advocacy techniques by writing letters to television stations and networks

Preparation and Materials

Photocopy and distribute the handouts:

For the introduction to television ratings:

- *What are Television Ratings?*
- *Nielsen Media Top CBC/CTV Programs* (educational handout)
- *Nielsen Media Top Toronto/Hamilton Programs* (educational handout)

For Activity One:

- *The "Sweeps"* (educational handout)

For Activity Two:

- *The Requirements of Programming* (educational handout)

For Activity Three:

- *Voice Your Opinions* (educational handout)

Procedure

What are Television Ratings?

Photocopy and distribute the handout *What are Television Ratings?*

- Discuss television ratings and how they affect advertising, and consequently programming.

Photocopy and distribute Nielsen Media Top CBC/CTV Programs and *Nielsen Media Top Toronto/Hamilton Programs*.

The CBC/CTV chart contains national statistics. The Toronto/Hamilton chart reflects local programming. (Teachers who wish to see whether local ratings for their areas are available should visit the American and Canadian Nielsen Media Research Web sites.)

Using these indexes, ask students the following questions:

- Which time slot has the largest number of people watching?
- Judging by the programs that are listed, who, demographically, is most likely to be watching at this time? Nationally? In Toronto/Hamilton?
- What similarities and differences are there between the top programs listed nationally, and the top local programs for Toronto/Hamilton?
- Which network features the highest number of top-rated programs, nationally and locally?
- What kind of advertisers do you think would pay for time during the highest-rated slots?
- Are the programs from a particular time slot similar or different? What patterns can you find?
- Based on these indexes, pick the best time slot for the following products:
 - cleaning and laundry products
 - breakfast foods
 - cars
 - dog food
 - beer
 - gardening supplies
 - junk food (i.e. soft drinks and chips)
 - fast foods (i.e. McDonalds)

Activities

Activity One: The "Sweeps"

This activity should be used during the television industry's "Sweeps" month (March and November in Canada, and November, February and May in the U.S.).

- Photocopy and distribute *The "Sweeps"* student handout.

Discuss the theory behind the "Sweeps" phenomena. Ask students:

- Do you think this is an accurate measurement of ratings?
- Why do you think the TV networks choose specific months and not others, to hold "Sweeps"?
- Using the TV guide, ask students to keep a log book through "Sweeps" month, listing the different ways networks try to boost their ratings during this crucial time.
- Types of "hying" and "stunting" to look for include:
 - broadcast movie premiers
 - mini-features series or documentaries on local and national newscasts
 - re-broadcasts of highly-rated special programs
 - made-for-TV movies with high profile starts

Using the Canadian Nielsen Media Research Web site, have students monitor the ratings for a selection of prime time shows, before, during and after "Sweeps" month.

Activity Two: Primed for Prime Time

This activity is to be completed in groups of three. It comprises both a written and oral component.

Before beginning, review *The Requirements of Programming* handout with students for definitions of programming terms and strategies.

The Scenario

You are producers at a major television network that has just completed a season of big-budget flops. If you don't come up with a hit prime-time series, the network will lose advertising revenue and go bankrupt. You must therefore devise a pilot (introductory episode) for a series that you feel will be a sure-fire hit.

Pretending that the *Toronto/Hamilton* index reflects your local area, use these ratings as the basis for your decisions. You want to study this index to see which types of programs and which time slots get the highest ratings.

You have the standard budget of about one million dollars.

- Write up a proposal for the series, including the following information:
 - name of series
 - running time
 - type of program (sitcom, drama, game show, talk show etc.)
 - setting
 - target core-audience or demographic group
 - names of the central characters and potential actors to portray them (if applicable)
 - day and time the series will air
 - which shows will run before, after and opposite it (consult the TV Guide)
 - which products might be advertised during commercial breaks

- which programming strategies (bridging, blundering, hammocking, etc.) will be used to ensure higher ratings
- Write a short synopsis (less than a page in length) of your pilot, outlining what it is about and what you intend to have happen in the opening episode.
- Prepare a five-minute verbal pitch of your proposed series to present to the network's board of directors (the teacher and your peers).
- Remember: the future of your network is at stake. The series must be a hit. Consider what types of shows are currently popular and what shows you like to watch, but do not hesitate to be as creative and imaginative as possible. Sometimes the strangest ideas have generated a hit series, for example: *Third Rock from the Sun*, *The X-Files*, *Survivor* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

Activity Three: Voice Your Opinion

- Photocopy and distribute the handout *Voice Your Opinions*.
- Talk with students about the effectiveness of viewer feedback. Explain that it's not ratings alone, which drives decisions determining what programs stay on the air and what ones are pulled.
- Many shows have been saved or granted reprieves through letter-writing viewers, including "*Cagney and Lacey*," "*The Tick*," "*Roswell*" and "*24*".
- Sometimes however, a highly acclaimed show is pulled because the ratings are so low that it costs more to produce than the producer can make back in advertising revenues. That was the case in 1995, when ABC canceled "*My So-called Life*," despite receiving thousands of letters of support from fans.
- Using the suggestions from *Voice Your Opinions*, have students write a letter of complaint if a show they enjoy is being canceled. (Teachers can find a list of programs that are currently threatened, on the "*Save That Show*" Web site.)
- Conversely, they can write letters of support for shows that they like and want to make sure don't get canceled in the future. (To find addresses for various networks, conduct an online search for the network Web site.)

Evaluation

- "Sweeps" logs
- Program proposals
- Letter to network

Recommended reading, viewing, surfing

- *Nielsen Media Canada*
www.nielsenmedia.ca/
- *Neilsen Media United States*
www.nielsenmedia.com/
- *Save That Show*
www.savethatshow.com/

What Are Television Ratings?

Companies that advertise on television need to know how many viewers they are getting for the money they are spending on air-time. In order to accomplish this, viewers are surveyed and the survey results are called ratings. Ratings make or break a television show. No matter how critically acclaimed a program may be, if it doesn't have high enough ratings, it won't be able to draw enough advertisers to make it worth producing.

Ratings are also used to determine how much networks can charge for commercial time. Advertising prices are measured in "cost per thousand TV viewers" or the CPM. Networks will look at the ratings and the demographics of their viewers (their age, sex, and where they live) to determine a program's CPM. If the CPM is four dollars per minute, and rating surveys show an audience of two million viewers, the cost for a 60 second commercial is eight thousand dollars. Commercial time for highly-rated series, such as *Friends*, can cost upwards of a million dollars per minute, and one-time-only extravaganzas like the *Super Bowl* can bring in over one million dollars for a 30-second spot.

Let's Make a Deal!

The interesting thing about CPMs is that television advertising is sold long before a new show appears on the air. When they are creating new programming, network executives arrive at a cost for advertising by estimating the expected viewing audience based on the day and time slot, and the past performance of similar programs. (For example, a half hour sitcom at 9 pm that follows a highly popular show is likely to attract a good audience.) If a show gets more viewers than expected, this is a bonus for advertisers, who have paid for fewer viewers. If a show doesn't live up to expectations and doesn't attract the estimated viewing audience, then network executives would have to provide free advertising to make up for their loss.

Nielsen Media Research tracks ratings in Canada and in the U.S. "Nielsen Families" are chosen at random and asked to volunteer their time free of charge. About 50 per cent of those approached agree to participate – some for up to five years. (In Canada, there are over 11.7 million television households, compared to over 97 million television households in the United States.)

In Canada, the Bureau of Broadcast Measurement (BBM) does the "Sweeps" ratings – surveys which "sweep" the country from coast to coast during the months of November and March to measure the numbers of viewers in local markets. Nielsen tracks the country during the rest of the year. The BBM surveys 80,000 viewers in 42 different markets during the "Sweeps," by asking families to record their television viewing in a diary. Nielsen, which estimates national averages by monitoring the viewing habits of 6,150 Canadians, uses two types of electronic devices to track viewing. Nielsen installs meters on TV sets, VCRs and cable boxes to automatically track when the TV sets are on and what channel is being watched. This data is sent to the Nielsen central computers via modem every day, and is made available to broadcasters and advertisers within 36 hours. Nielsen also uses "People Meters" that are attached to the TV set meter. Family members are assigned their own buttons,

which are pushed when they are watching a show. This enables broadcasters to know the average age of the viewers of a particular program.

Nielsen Media Research: Top CBC/CTV Network Programs

For the Week of March 25 - March 31, 2002

Rank	Program Name	Days	Station Count	Network	Duration	Audience at any given minute
1	E.R.	Tues 10:00pm	15	CTV	60	2,424,000
2	C.S.I.	Tues 9:00pm	17	CTV	60	2,228,000
3	Trudeau/ Part 1	Sun 8:00pm	34	CBC Full	120	2,012,000
4	Law and Order	Wed. 10:00pm	17	CTV	60	1,735,000
5	The West Wing	Wed. 9:00pm	15	CTV	60	1,528,000
6	CTV Evening News	MTWTF 6:00pm	17	CTV	60	1,324,000
7	Law and Order: CI	Sun 9:00pm	15	CTV	60	1,284,000
8	Law and Order: SVU	Sun 10:00pm	15	CTV	60	1,249,000
9	Law and Order: SVU	Fri 10:00pm	17	CTV	60	1,214,000
10	Hockey Night in Canada	Sat 7:00pm	34	CBC Full	189	1,157,000
11	Wheel of Fortune	MTWTF 7:00pm	15	CTV	30	1,079,000
12	CTV Monday Movie: Thomas Crown Affair	Mon 9:00pm	15	CTV	150	1,074,000
13	Jeopardy	MTWTF 7:30pm	15	CTV	30	1,044,000
14	That 80's Show	Wed 8:00pm	15	CTV	30	1,023,000

15	CBC News: Sunday Report	Sun 10:00pm	34	CBC Full	60	1, 013, 000
16	Royal Canadian Air Farce	Fri 9:00pm	34	CBC Full	30	949, 000
17	Hockey Night in Canada	Sat 10:09pm	34	CBC Full	175	899, 000
18	CTV National News	Daily 11:00pm	21	CTV	27	883, 000
19	Watching Ellie	Tues 8:30pm	17	CTV	30	849, 000
20	The Court/ Premier	Tues 10:00pm	17	CTV	60	834, 000

Source: Nielsen Media Research Canada
<http://www.nielsenmedia.ca/>

Student Handout #3

Nielsen Media Research: Top Toronto/Hamilton Programs

For the Week of March 25 - March 31, 2002

Rank	Program Name	Days	Network	Duration	Share of Local Audience (%)
1	Survivor 4 Marquesas	Tues 8:00 pm	Global	60	14.5
2	ER	Tues 10:00 pm	CTV	60	12.2
3	Trudeau	Sun 8:00 pm	CBC Full	120	10.5
4	C.S.I.	Tues 9:00 pm	CTV	60	9.8
5	Law and Order	Wed. 10:00 pm	CTV	60	9.2
6	The West Wing	Wed 9:00 pm	CTV	60	8.6
7	Friends	Tues 7:30 pm	Global	30	7.1
8	Simpsons	Sun 8:00 pm	Global	30	6.8
9	Law and Order: SVU	Sun 10:00 pm	CTV	60	6.5
10	Fear Factor	Mon 8:00 pm	CH	60	6.4
10	Wheel of Fortune	MTWF 7:00 pm	CTV	30	6.4
12	24	Tues 9:00 pm	CH	60	6.2
13	CTV Evening News	MTWTF 6:00 pm	CTV	60	6.0
14	Will and Grace	Tues 9:00 pm	Global	30	5.9
15	20/20	Fri 10:00 pm	Global	60	5.8
16	JAG	Tues 8:00 pm	CH	60	5.7
16	Jeopardy	MTWTF 7:30 pm	CTV	30	5.7
16	Law and Order: SVU	Fri 10:00 pm	CTV	60	5.7
19	Law and Order: CI	Sat 9:00 pm	CTV	60	5.6
20	Everybody Loves Raymond	Mon 9:00 pm	Global	30	5.5

Source: Nielsen Media Research Canada at <http://www.nielsenmedia.ca/>

The Sweeps

"Sweeps" are television surveys which "sweep" North America four times a year – March and November in Canada, November, February and May in the U.S. "Sweeps" measure the number of viewers in local markets. These ratings are then used by local television stations and national networks to set advertising revenues.

When viewers tune in, the networks cash in. In the fall of 1996, the top-rated NBC sitcom *Seinfeld* became the first regularly-scheduled series to hit the one-million-dollar-per-minute-of-commercial-time mark. The average cost for a 30-second commercial during the 2002 *Super Bowl* was 1.9 million (U.S.).

It's easy to spot when sweeps mania is upon us. Suddenly famous movie stars pop up on your favorite sitcom, blockbuster theatrical movies have their television premiere, made-for-TV movies feature sensational themes and old-fashioned, lowest-common-denominator fare dominates prime time.

This sudden eruption of flashy content is known within the industry as "hying" or "stunting". Because of the prohibitive cost, sweeps stunting is essentially an American phenomena. While Canadian broadcasters do more promotions and special news reports, and avoid repeats during their "Sweeps" months, the expensive flash comes from the American networks.

The Canadian industry benefits from the huge American hype because Canadian stations show U.S. programs in prime time, often in simulcast with the originating U.S. network. But the difference in timing between the four U.S. and two Canadian sweeps periods causes some headaches for the Canadian television industry. Although Canadian stations draw viewers during the U.S. Sweeps, the spring Sweeps in Canada is the time when the U.S. networks traditionally pull regular series off the air and test new pilots.

The Bureau of Broadcast Measurement (BBM) is the Canadian company which measures ratings during the Sweeps, while Nielsen Media Research tracks viewers throughout the rest of the year.

The Requirements of Programming

In television lingo, *programming* refers to the type of programs shown and their placement in the schedule. Schedules are made up to please and attract as many viewers as possible. Each network uses a variety of strategies to secure a maximum audience. Before beginning activities to help them understand ratings and the way in which networks schedule their programs, students should be familiar with the following terms:

audience flow

The carry-over of an audience from one program to another on the same channel

block programming

The running of similar shows to hold the same audience as long as possible

blunting

A scheduling ruse designed to prevent a large audience from tuning into a competing network program by offering a similar program

bridge

A form of blunting whereby, for example, a network will schedule a big mini-series at 8:00 p.m. to offset a big movie due to start at 9:00 on another network

counterprogramming

Tackling a highly-rated program on another network by scheduling a completely different program to deliver a different kind of audience

hammock

The time period between two successful programs, where a new show can be introduced and guaranteed a sizable audience

prime time

The time when there are more people watching television than at any other time of the day, that is, from 8:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. on Mondays to Saturdays and from 7:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. on Sundays

rating

The percentage of all homes with televisions that are tuned to a given program. Each rating point represents approximately 763,000 homes or almost two million people. Each rating point also represents about ten million dollars in advertising revenue each year.

share

The percentage of all television sets in use that are tuned to a given program.

Voice Your Opinions

It's important to speak out in support of shows which you would like to see remain on the air. Producers, broadcasters and advertisers want consumer feedback and a letter or fax carries a lot of weight.

When voicing your opinion it is important to contact:

1. the television network or station which is responsible for broadcasting the show you wish to comment on
2. the advertisers who are running their ads during the TV program in question

How to Write an Effective Comment Letter

- 1) Write as soon as possible – The information will be fresh in your mind and you will be taking advantage of the energy from your initial reaction. Encourage friends and family to write also.
- 2) Be original – Form letters and petitions have their place, but personal letters carry more weight.
- 3) Be legible and be brief – Write about one issue on one page.
- 4) Be polite but firm – Anger and criticism do not win friends.
- 5) Be specific and organized – Clearly identify the issue. State your "key" points. Indicate the action you want taken.
- 6) Write persuasively – Think of your letter as a negotiation in which you are trying to sway the reader to be open to your point of view. Ultimately, you want the reader to respect your view and take action.
- 7) Remind the recipient of what's at stake – You, your family and friends are an important market that the advertiser or broadcaster wants to reach. If you intend to switch channel allegiances, say so in your letter.
- 8) Ask for an answer – Inquire about their views and the action they intend to take.
- 9) Suggest alternatives – If you can think of an alternative that you would find acceptable, describe it. Media producers appreciate positive and specific suggestions.
- 10) End with a strong statement that cannot be outright rejected.
- 11) Direct your letter to the appropriate contact.
- 12) Include your name, address and postal code.

These tips were drawn from MediaWatch's *13 Steps to an Effective Comment Letter* and Canadians for Decency's *How to Write a Letter*.