

Want to Understand the Evolution of TV Ad Measurement? Mark May 20 on Your Calendar

ARTICLE |

Paul Verna

That's the date the International Bureau of Weights and Measures has designated as the transition to a new definition of the kilogram. Since 1889, the kilo has been benchmarked against a platinum alloy cylinder stored in a suburb of Paris. But starting on May 20, that unit of mass will be defined in terms of the Planck constant, which relates the energy in one photon of electromagnetic radiation to the frequency of that radiation.

What does the kilogram have to do with TV ad measurement? It illustrates the need to update old standards to reflect new technologies and user behaviors, as noted by Kavita Vazirani, executive vice president of insights and measurement, in a December 5, 2018 post laying out why NBCU wants to set a new measurement standard for TV.

"In our business, once we've developed a metric, we tend to stick to it, no matter what. But that inflexibility makes it difficult to future-proof the industry," Vazirani wrote. "With increased fragmentation and evolving consumer viewing habits, it's clear that we have to move beyond C3 and the 'view' alone. These measures don't count all impressions, and they don't begin to connect the impact of media to

consumers, consumers to brands and brands to business outcomes.”

NBCU’s proposed new measurement standards aim to reflect the fragmented ways in which viewers watch content—on TV, smartphones, tablets, desktops/laptops or connected TVs. In order for NBCU to be able to transact using new measurement, others in the industry need to get on board, no easy lift considering cross measurement solutions have been debated for more than a decade.

Linda Yaccarino, chairman of advertising sales and consumer partnerships at NBCUniversal, knows NBCU’s plans to transition from Nielsen ratings to a more holistic, omnichannel audience view still faces several challenges.

“Quite frankly, measurement can’t get to a new realm until it at least catches up with consumer behavior, and it is far from being there,” Yaccarino said. “Nielsen is trying very hard to get there, and they’ve been a great partner of ours on our multi-screen measurement [methodology] CFlight. The challenge is that the ability to move to audience- or impression-based currency, and transaction is outside of our reach. And I use that kind of pun intended, because unduplicated reach analysis as verified by a third-party source does not exist today.”

In the absence of an industry-accepted standard, NBCU and other networks have crafted their own custom solutions to target, serve and measure ads. NBCU unveiled CFlight in April 18 as a cross-platform ad metric. More recently, FreeWheel, the digital ad serving company owned by NBCU parent Comcast, **announced** it was extending its digital ad-decision capabilities to traditional TV inventory.

“What we’re most excited about is the long-term implications for both publishers and advertisers, and what it means to the ultimate vision of a unified video strategy across all screens,” said Dave Clark, general manager at FreeWheel, when announcing the initiative.

Agencies and measurement firms are also competing to deliver detailed video and TV analytics to their ad clients. Even social media platforms and streaming services typically gather enough data to affect ad decisions, though they’re often unwilling to share that data outside their walled gardens. This market fragmentation is here to stay.

“A single-source measurement company is unlikely to be the dominant

metric for the industry,” Yaccarino said. “Brands have too many specific [key performance indicators] that they need to reach. The consumer has moved on. Consumer omnichannel behavior is not changing; it’s not going back. So it’s illogical to imagine that there will continue to only be a single source of that verified measurement.”

A third-party standard is unlikely to emerge in a world where the only constant is change—and Planck.