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10 The Critics

The whole business of audience measurement has to do with knowing the unknowable. The problem of modernity does not apply to previous societies where it is not necessary to know what a sovereign but dispersed and anonymous population thinks, either for political reasons or for campaigning commercial reasons. There has been since the last 200 or 300 years an increasing statisticalization, if that's the word, of the general population of modern societies in order to try and understand what it is that they know, what it is that they would like, and how they would behave. J. Hartley (Hartley 1992a)

Rather, as commodities themselves, the ratings were constructed in response to market pressures, including competition and monopolization as well as continuities and discontinuities in demand. The ratings producer was no scientist motivated by curiosity, but rather a company seeking its self-interest through the profitable manipulation of demand. E.R. Meehan (Meehan 1990: 201)

In Chapter 9, the authors introduced the audience as one of the most important parties to the audience-ratings convention. The audience is frequently missed as a party because it is often seen as a passive, not active, member of the ratings process (at least from outside the convention). We also saw that advertisers and marketers have been quick to recognize that online sites have the potential to deliver rich data about audiences and, indeed, are using aggressive methods to harvest those data. These 'intimate publics' online have reacted to harvesting, and audience research has come under real fire for being more like a surveillance tool than a democratic, non-intrusive, non-threatening form of research (Andrejevic 2002; Andrejevic 2003; Andrejevic 2005; Andrejevic 2006).

Hartley and Meehan's criticism that (i) audiences are 'unknowable', (ii) that statistical knowledge about them is a fiction, and (iii) that the motivations for their measurement are primarily commercial and a function of modern capitalist markets have all been made by industry actors including advertising strategists, sometimes many years previously. At the same time criticism of audience ratings as having negative effects as a force that leads media content to a common denominator is itself part of the promotions and strategy of different media providers such as HBO, which promotes its separation from this world under the slogan of being

‘not television’ while simultaneously using ratings data to build audiences! At the same time criticisms of the ratings as an adjunct to surveillance of modern society, intruding into people’s privacy, are matched by proponents of ratings surveys that stress informed consent and the importance of the audience member as a respected respondent and informant, and often denounce new media audience development strategies that diminish the audience member and compromise the integrity of audience research.

While Hartley and Meehan might have provided a generation of media studies students with a criticism of the ratings, their criticism is only a small component of a now extensive critical vocabulary surrounding the ratings. In this chapter the authors provide an overview of the arguments of the critics of the ratings through the eyes of one of the most famous ratings intellectuals, Leo Bogart.

The Broader Context

Every opinion survey assumes that everyone can have an opinion; in other words, that producing an opinion is something available to all. At the risk of offending a naively democratic sentiment, I would contest this first premise. Secondly: it is assumed that all opinions are of equal value. I think it can be shown that this is untrue and that the accumulation of opinions do not all have the same strength leads to the production of meaningless artefacts. The third implicit postulate is this: putting the same question to everyone assumed that there is a consensus on what the problems are, in other words that there is agreement on the questions that are worth asking. These three postulates, it seems to me, entail a whole series of distortions that are found even when all the conditions of methodological rigour are fulfilled in collecting and analysing the data. Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1993: 149)

Pierre Bourdieu is saying that the methodology of public opinion research does not capture audience or public preferences. Public opinion research and audience ratings research are mirrors of each other in this regard. Bourdieu would no doubt have the same criticism of audience ratings; that summing the exposure of individuals to thousands of television or radio sets hides real differences in opinion or preference. Images of audiences – perceptions of what the audience or public *is* and what it *wants* – are in the heads of individual media professionals, whether television scriptwriters or journalists or programme selectors. Audience images are also in the strategies of organizations (Ettema and Whitney 1994: 9). Audiences in media organizations only have influence if they are recognized as being real and

reflecting real preferences and choices by individuals. These institutionally effective audiences include *measured audiences* that are generated by research, sold by media channels and bought by advertisers; *specialized* or *segmented audiences* whose particular interests are anticipated – or created – and then met by content producers; and *hypothesized audiences* whose interest, convenience and necessity are, presumably, protected by regulators (Ettema and Whitney 1994: 5–6).

Bourdieu, in his reflection on public opinion research, appears to be talking primarily about snapshot research where individual and discrete surveys are undertaken on particular topics – not longitudinal surveys or indeed the more complex combination of methods deployed by those like Paul Lazarsfeld. Napoli (Napoli 2011) would probably disagree with Bourdieu on the argument that modern public opinion surveys do not measure what they say they measure. However, he would certainly argue that for the academic audience researcher that ratings data are not an adequate representation of audience media exposure. Napoli says that ratings analysis should be defined in terms of the source and purpose of the data being analysed. On this view, ratings analysis is defined as ‘the analysis of the data, whatever its orientation, used by media industry stakeholders to assess performance and success in the audience marketplace’ (Napoli 2011: 171). We are in an evolutionary stages where alternative criteria for monetization of audience have emerged, including recall, engagement and appreciation.

It would be reductive to propose a model that simply said that all measurement techniques do not yield genuine preferences of audiences. Napoli’s idea of evolution (Napoli 2011) is instructive here as is Bourdon and Méadel’s argument that measurements cannot be thought of independently of the audience:

A complicated set of socio-technical conventions has to be agreed upon, which can change according to relations of the partners in the industry (public/private, big/small, advertisers/broadcasters ...), the different stages in television history, the technology available and developed at those different stages. The audience can never be considered independently of the instruments used to ‘measure’ it. (Bourdon and Méadel 2011: 9)

We have to be careful therefore not to make category errors in terms of where criticisms of audience ratings come from. Sometimes the criticisms will come from within the key stakeholders of the ratings, sometimes more broadly in society on how ratings are used and monopoly status, and from academic concerns of power and surveillance. The following typologies provide an insight into those criticisms.

The day-to-day operation of audience ratings attracts criticism from those who are directly involved in them, as media buyers, broadcasters, advertisers or as audiences expecting representation within the ratings itself. These criticisms are

about the mechanics of audience ratings and focus on data collection (accuracy, representativeness, responsiveness, size of sample, questions of response rates). The ratings provider itself is often criticized over its power or its lack of oversight, separate from data collection issues. Academic criticism can cover all these areas, but most often you will find criticism under the following broad categories:

Criticisms from stakeholders

- from rival providers about the adequacy of the data collection method itself;
- from advertisers and media buyers on accuracy;
- from broadcasters sometimes representing minority constituencies and markets concerned about the makeup of the panel;
- from social advocacy groups concerned about inclusion of marginal groups;
- from politicians and non-governmental organizations on non-polling of rural constituencies.

Criticisms of ratings provider

- unresponsive monopoly provider;
- 'law unto itself';
- no check or audit (or weakly developed checks and audits);
- slow to innovate.

Criticisms from ratings provider

- many ratings users apply ratings beyond their design (without recognizing statistical tolerances and limits);
- ratings users often suffer from 'Ratingitis' – Archibald Crossley's term to describe an over-reliance on ratings;
- media buyers are often not educated in depth on the methodology and statistics of ratings.

Academic criticism

- audience ratings as surveillance;
- watching as a form of labour;

- ratings as a discursive construct that precludes actual social audiences (invented audiences, imagined collectivity);
- abstracted empiricism (contrived, artefactual, artificial endeavour, technicist);
- cultural democracy (ratings not the best way of expressing preferences in any description of culture and cultural needs).

Audience ratings are an enormously complex social structure and it is rare to see a comprehensive critique of ratings, inside and out. However, Leo Bogart is one of those rare figures that cross boundaries.

The Bogart Persona

For more than thirty years Leo Bogart was a trenchant and very public critic of the ratings as a technique of audience measurement and how they were being used by advertisers, advertising agencies, media planners and buyers, and the radio and television industries. Perhaps because his criticisms were always part of larger discussions, his sustained engagement with the ratings and the telling criticisms he made of its practice and uptake have not had close attention. Bogart had a wide-ranging agenda. He wrote about advertising strategy, the uses to be made of and possibilities for social and marketing research, the trajectories of the television industry and of commercial culture more generally, and developments in social and marketing research to which he contributed in no small measure. Bogart's criticisms mix practical experience and the theoretical knowledge of a methodologist, and are closely linked to who and what he was as an industry player and a virtuoso public commentator.

Bogart's insider reproach to the broadcast ratings is one of the field's most sustained and informed criticism of its shape and trajectory. Bogart devoted significant sections of a number of his books to a discussion of the ratings starting in the 1950s and extending right through to the mid-2000s. These criticisms document and criticize the transformation of the ratings and market research over the period to become the pre-eminent media research instrument in the United States and beyond. They cover the period in the United States when ratings provision was a contestable market and there were a number of rival ratings providers. They chart the beginning and maturing of auditing regimes for ratings provision out of the Congressional hearings, beginning in the late 1950s and moving into the 1960s, given pre-eminence through the quiz scandal. They cover the contemporary moment where ratings sit alongside an ensemble of other proprietary syndicated information sources increasingly constituting the horizon line of action for media planners and buyers, advertisers and media outlets.

While Bogart's criticisms provide one reason for scholarly attention, another is provided by the very thing which make his contributions difficult to assimilate to contemporary communication and media studies perspectives – the very public place from which he spoke. He was both a public intellectual and critic *and* an industry insider. As a social and marketing research methodologist he was responsible for major innovations in syndicated research. He was an important figure in a wide variety of research industry forums including the World Association for Public Opinion Research (WAPOR) and the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR). He was an AAPOR president, honoured with the association's highest award, and was closely linked with the association over his professional life. He may have been a trenchant critic but he contributed in no small measure to the very shape of the institutions and research enterprises that he criticized.

His criticisms therefore form an integral part of the *internal* intellectual and institutional history of the ratings and applied social research. He explicitly used his corporate and institutional location to prosecute a case for particular kinds of applied social research and particular approaches to this research. He did this in AAPOR meetings, in his publishing of books and articles of appeal to both specialist and non-specialist readers alike, and in his journal articles in specialist publications. He explicitly used his reputation as one of the foremost social and applied commercial research practitioners of his day to prosecute his case for the appropriate use of, disposition towards and flexible relation to social research. This combination of critical and practical attention made for a potent combination of ideas and public presentation. His criticisms were made with a combination of great intellect and rhetorical power. This speaking position is an important part of his story and provides his criticism of the ratings and ratings provision with contextual force. This combination of elements suggests that a close attention to the historical persona of Bogart as a ratings intellectual, critic and advocate for applied social research may provide a prism through which we can grasp aspects of a broader institutional history, including its transformation as an intellectual and professional field over Bogart's active professional life.

Bogart is perhaps best known today for the work of his later years – *Over the Edge* (Bogart 2005), *Commercial Culture* (Bogart 2000a) and *Finding Out – Personal Adventures in Social Research* (Bogart 2003). In this work he made very public criticism of the growing importance of media planning and buying, he was critical of the consolidation of applied social research into a handful of companies, he was appalled by the downsizing of television networks' research divisions and their increasing reliance upon syndicated data such as ratings in decision-making, he abhorred their increasing reliance upon 'mechanical' research tools such as peplemeters and retail information derived from scanning technology and

associated computing programs, and he argued for the baleful influence computers were having on the understanding of individual motivation and behaviour.

These trenchant criticisms when combined with his important earlier work on the social impact of television (Bogart 1958; Bogart 1972a), newspaper readership in the wake of television, opinion polling (Bogart 1972b) and advertising strategy (Bogart 1967; Bogart 1986a) not only provide us with a useful compendium of critical discussion of larger developments over the period but also, and more importantly for our purposes, point to larger institutional changes and changes in the kinds of practical knowledge, techniques and self-understandings of those practising, buying and using ratings research. These changes and realignments – changes which increasingly placed Bogart on the outside of an industry in which he had been an insider for so much of his professional life – can be usefully put into relief by a dual attention to both his ideas and thinking, and to the changing industry, institutional and intellectual formations within which this thought was exercised, valued and criticized.

Bogart's persona of an applied social researcher committed to innovations in social research method and practice across a wide variety of research areas is still alive today. But he himself recognized that the changes he was observing – larger corporate, institutional and research practice changes – were marking different configurations of research information and its application, and privileging the exercise of certain kinds of research knowledge over others. These new configurations were making the kind of thing he did, the positions he spoke from and the mix of institutional positions from which he spoke less in the mainstream than they once had been. It had become increasingly unlikely that his successors would have such a command of the territory or ability to exercise such a very public persona at the intersection of public debate, mediating the spaces among social research, marketing, advertisers, agencies and the like. As he himself recognized, research and researchers had become more specialized, and with this specialization and the growing routinization of the uses to be made of research outputs there was less space for mediating these knowledges. Bogart's successors could not and would not command the field in quite the same way as he once had.

By attending to what it means to be a ratings and social research methods intellectual – and the form and character of the comportments attendant to this role – we are able to investigate not simply an evidently extraordinary individual's career but also the kinds of mix of thought and action and self-presentation available to ratings intellectuals as they act and promulgate to inform and refine ratings instruments and industry uptake alike. The attention we are paying here to Bogart's persona is part of a larger attention we are paying to the history of the ratings, including the ratings as a form of intellectual, industrial and governmental thought.

To describe and do some justice to the knowledge work of these people the authors have called them ratings intellectuals. That designation helps us recognize the standing of these people as thinkers and methodologists dealing with – and thinking with – data and their limitations, and then communicating these limitations and possibilities to users and clients of the research. Bogart and his ilk brought their professional expertise to bear as advisors. They commonly produced information and data which was not always understood by those who used it and acted on its behalf. Bogart was also a methodologist responsible for innovations in syndicated research. He wanted to have discussions about methodology. Bogart was also a sceptic. And this sceptical persona was important to the role he played as enlightened critic and commentator on marketing, audience and broader trends in social research. Individuals such as Bogart need to be distinguished from those who use ratings and other forms of applied social research to construct a broadcast schedule, to analyse the reach and trajectory of a programme over a season and seasons, to identify appropriate ‘slots’ for broadcast messages and to report on the respective shares of broadcast networks.

Objections to Ratings

The authors are drawn to the idea of a persona as a means of thinking about this larger constellation of contextual issues around people like Bogart who were more than survey technicians but were also ratings intellectuals. While there is a variety of ways of thinking about persona as a kind of role-playing derived from the work of Erving Goffman and Marcel Mauss, which centre the triadic relation among inner self, role and society, our interest is in the uptake of persona ‘as a manifestation and representative of an office’ (Condren 2006: 66). For Condren, Hunter and Gaukroger, writing about the history of early modern philosophy and following R.G. Collingwood, they argue that in order ‘to understand the answers philosophers have given, it is necessary to reveal the contingent and variable nature of their problems, even if history here is really the medium in which such problems are resolved’ (Condren, Hunter and Gaukroger 2006: 3). For these writers this implied a shift of focus from ‘philosophical problems to the institutional contexts in which they are delimited, and from the subject of consciousness to the persona of the philosopher that is cultivated in such contexts’ (Condren *et al.* 2006: 7) The idea of an ‘office’ as in a ‘public office’ provides a way of exploring what in a former time we might have called a ‘speaking position’, which in being institutionally sanctioned was important to the carriage of the role. For Condren to be representative of an office means to be ‘an embodiment of a moral economy’ in the sense that a office entails ‘a whole sphere of responsibilities, rights of action for their fulfilment,

necessary attributes, skills and specific virtues, highlighted by concomitant vices and failures' (Condren 2006: 66).

These remarks suggest that we might usefully regard Bogart's writing and activism on behalf of himself and his profession as being informed by a sense of a sphere of responsibility to the profession, the industry, and to a larger public and social good. We can look to the kinds of actions that he took and deemed appropriate to take. We can look to the specific skills that were important to this exercise and ethical ways of acting and thinking that he advocated and practised. And we can open up an investigation of 'the vices and failures' of the professions he spoke to – how were these elaborated and denounced. Bogart provides a rich field for such inquiry. On the last matter alone there is Bogart's high-profile denouncement of both the concept of the spiral of silence and its proponent, Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann, for her Nazi propagandist past as providing one way of thinking about this. But such a larger inquiry must wait until another time. What we are interested in here is Bogart's specific criticism of the ratings and the institutional contexts in which these criticisms came alive.

Bogart's reproach came out of a particular standpoint and set of attentions in which the ratings and other syndicated data were fundamentally and primarily forms of social research. He sought often to make two related points: first, that the numbers that made up research always bore a particular relation to a social world made of individuals actions and activities; and, second, that research was a force in its own right and not 'just a means by which the media are attuned to the changing sentiments of the audience'. Both had specific practical and ethical entailments. As he put it in *Finding Out*:

The seemingly abstract numbers are aggregated from many individual human consumption decisions and trace the commercial communications that affect them. Human actions, even at the trivial level of consumer choice, reflect values, beliefs, and judgements shaped by a dense web of social influences. Social science is dedicated to the systematic study of those influences, and its theory and insights are indispensable for the interpretation of data that represent what people do, think or say. (Bogart 2003: 281)

Ratings research was fundamentally social sciences research. This was so no matter how the ratings were put together or the diverse uses that surveys – and specifically ratings knowledge – could be put to by programme-makers, advertisers, media planners and buyers, public service broadcasters, free-to-air commercial stations and regulators. For Bogart the recognition of audience research as 'essentially a humanistic social science' (Bogart 2000a: 131) was important because it brought front of mind the relation between the aggregated

numbers and the people, broader social arrangements, motivations and values these numbers always imperfectly addressed. It was therefore important for research and researchers that the 'human contact of the researcher with unique individuals' (Bogart 2000a: 284) not be diminished. For Bogart there was no incompatibility between qualitative and quantitative research as 'applied research' if both embodied a 'philosophy that research involves the human contact of the researcher with unique individuals'. What was important in this research whether undertaken through in depth interviews or through surveys was that it 'respect' the research subject's 'individuality' and that researchers listen 'carefully to what they say'. This, Bogart argued was 'the first step to finding out what they believe and why they do what they do' (Bogart 2000a: 284).

By foregrounding applied social research as a respectful encounter between the researcher and the researched he argued that it was possible to continue to have 'front of mind' the diverse social influences, actions, values and beliefs of respondents when one used survey research and the data tables it generated. This allowed users of research to always recognize the intrinsic limitations of all kinds of research including ratings when they handled research outputs and data. This was also a recognition that enabled the user of research such as the ratings to see that research only addressed this complex social environment in certain limited respects. He argued that this recognition was something of which sight could be lost as research instruments became more technological and mediated and less based on interviews, multi-faceted conversation and dialogue between the researcher and the researched. Here there was a risk that the numbers analysed by users of research became further removed and their data became disembodied 'from the original expression of human voices' (Bogart 2000a) – from their mixed circumstances of production, people's actual experience of media consumption and their diverse purposes and life ways. When the ratings were misrecognized in this way and the element of human contact removed, understanding and knowledge was the inevitable casualty and the research analyst was becoming little more than a 'collector and processor of data' (Bogart 2000a: 131). The other point that Bogart was making here was that research was so important that it required the close care and attention of all parts of the media spectrum and it needed to be recognized as an activity in its own right with its own priorities and its own integrity.

Bogart had three different related grounds for being concerned that this was not happening:

- 1 First – and this was a concern that he had throughout his life – how users of research took up and therefore understood the research enterprise, its opportunities and its limitations. This was never a critique of research

in the service of advertising decisions. Rather it was a critique based on the importance of research in providing 'a basic rationale for advertising decisions' and we might add here programming decisions. His criticism was that the users of this research 'commonly used [it] in disregard of its limitations, which deserve close scrutiny' (Bogart 2000a: 122). This criticism turned on the users of research not only choosing to remain ignorant of the nature and character of this research but the providers of this research – the ratings companies – aided and abetted this ignorance through their own practices which, at worst, pandered to this ignorance. The actions of the users of research made the research more than 'just a means by which media are attuned to the changing sentiments of the audience' but a 'powerful force in its own right' (Bogart 2000a: 126).

- 2 He was concerned about the contraction in the range and variety of research undertaken and utilised by those organizations – media companies and advertising agencies – which used audience research to make decisions. This meant that customized commercial research and a ready-to-hand research capability were no longer providing a counterbalance: whether to the data collected from syndicated data sources such as the ratings, or by providing an analytical competence in research methodologies to adequately understand the ratings as one among a number of forms of research. He saw this development as supported by how the media industry players had responded to changes in the buying and selling of advertising time, particularly on television, with the norm for advertising to be 'scattered around among programs' (Bogart 2000a: 105).
- 3 His third ground for concern was related to the changing circumstances in which the research was undertaken – by 'research analysts' in research firms, advertising agencies or in media companies – which was supporting both this contraction in the variety and range of research being undertaken and the related diminishing of the role, identity, and status of the research analyst. There were two distinct thrusts to this criticism. The first was organizational: a new generation of managers in all these organizations in the wake of media, advertiser and agency consolidation into fewer larger companies had come to see the research enterprise in a different and lesser light. It was a business input. This had the result of taking research 'out of the hands of the researchers'. He saw this as having a significant impact upon the conduct and orientation towards the research enterprise. It amounted to a deprofessionalization of the research enterprise.

Let us now deal with each of these criticisms in turn.

Bogart was all too aware of the gap – even gulf – separating the ‘researcher’ and the user of that research in the media industries. This was another version of the gap between expert and lay knowledge – except in this case the lay-knowledge workers were making significant corporate and even governmental decisions on the basis of the research (or rather on the basis of their limited understanding of the research and its intellectual bases). It was a gap his own work sought to bridge but it was also a gap that is the subject of much of his criticisms and deliberations. The gap partly turned on mistakes in uptake – the styles and character of the uptake – of research. It was as much about the sorts of things people did with this research and how this looped back to feed into the presentation and even frequency of the research itself.

Central to his criticism of the ratings and its uptake was the approach users took to the ‘Audience Concept’ itself. There was a basic misunderstanding of the kind and character of concepts developed in survey research which led users to endow the ‘audience’ with significance and reality it did not possess (something Ian Hacking takes up in his work *Taming Chance*) (Hacking 1990). So Bogart begins by calling into question its very validity as a concept. While noting that ‘measurement of media audiences has absorbed vast effort and expense’ (Bogart 1986a: 273) and that it is ‘an indispensable component in every advertising plan,’ there were ‘reasons to be wary of the concept’. He outlines five problems with the concept. Upon closer inspection each turns less on problems with the underlying research method than upon the uptake of the research method and the inflated value given to the ‘outputs’ of these methods without attending to their inherent limitations by users of the data.

- 1 The first objection is that the word *audience* ‘means something quite different from its original meaning and has been applied for quite different reasons to the consumers of broadcasting and print’ (Bogart 1986a: 273). Bogart sees the construct of the audience in particular research methods being confused with ‘real viewers and readers and listeners’ and wants to insist that the reasons behind the development of measures of the audience in different media lead to differently organized kinds of information about audiences that make them not as commensurable as users would like. This was at heart a misunderstanding of the audience construct as an artefact of research for the purposes of research. It was a limited concept that was being generalized.
- 2 The second criticism was that ‘audience measurements represent far-from-certain estimates that are in no sense comparable among media’.

Where the industry uptake suggests certainty in the figures and in the data Bogart wants to insist upon their uncertainty. The ratings results are never as certain as they appear to be and presented as being. Furthermore where the uptake suggests comparability Bogart wants to insist upon a modicum of incommensurability. Using data generated from different research instruments created unacknowledged problems for those seeking comparability across media.

- 3 A third objection was that 'audience data are intangibles and abstractions but are often dealt with by marketers as though they corresponded to real 'things' or physical objects'. This is a criticism that the users of the ratings outputs are dealing with the necessary 'intangibles' and 'abstractions' of any survey research in a way that makes him uncomfortable. There is a tendency observed in the first three objections to endow the audience with a reality and thereness it does not possess.
- 4 His fourth objection was that 'the preoccupation with audience size has led to erroneous decisions in the management of media content'. In this criticism those managing media content are not seeing the wood for the trees. They are concerned about the wrong things. They mistake size for value. They develop encouraged by reading of ratings data a 'conventional wisdom' about audiences. So awareness of how 'audience numbers vary between men and women and among various age and income groups' created stereotypical strategies for 'delivering' these different publics: 'college-educated men, with Sunday afternoon football games; high-school-educated women, with daytime talk shows'. The problem was not that these stereotypes were totally inaccurate but that they led to 'simplifications'. Here the obsession with audience size dovetailed with a dependency upon statistics which demonstrated misunderstanding of them.
- 5 His fifth objection was that 'the energy devoted to audience measurement has deflected concern from more useful research into the communication process'. This is criticism that a preoccupation with ratings data gets in the way of other kinds of research that might more usefully address the problems those making media decisions face. Much of his concern here is that the near exclusive attention paid to the ratings precludes – almost rules out of court – other kinds of research and research endeavour.

These objections all turned to a greater or lesser extent on the stances taken towards both surveys and statistics and the certainties they provided. The excessive and misplaced reliance upon statistics was brought about by a lack of understanding

of what they could and could not tell the researcher. Bogart's criticism of statistics did not stem from any deep-seated animus towards them or conviction as to the intrinsic superiority of qualitative research. Rather his criticisms were always part of larger attentions to the research enterprise, its conduct and its proper integrity. It is therefore more a case of his insisting on their proper recognition and working with surveys and statistics. His was an educational insistence upon what can and cannot be said with them. A lot of Bogart's attention turned therefore on what we might call the proper orientation towards statistics. Bogart wanted, in the face of tendencies by users to invest them with especial significance, to insist that statistics is the science of uncertainty. In this his work bears some resemblance to books like *Statspotting* (Best 2008), which are designed in the language of the layperson to explain in a readily explicable way key misuses of statistical concepts and also to insist, where circumstances might otherwise push towards certainty, in recognizing the very uncertainty and the very tolerances in the research.

Setting Limits to Statistics

Bogart was in the business of setting limits to statistics. Some of what he wrote about ratings should be seen as nothing more or less than the 'statecraft' of statistics: letting people know what the discipline should be; emphasizing uncertainty where there was a tendency to impute certainty. Cultural studies people encountering this discussion of uncertainty seem to think that this is undercutting claims of ratings' truth. But this is not so: it was more asserting the kinds of truth claims that can be legitimately made. In his book *Strategy in Advertising*, Bogart says that the most interesting 'revelation' to come out of the Congressional hearings of the late 1950s and early 1960s on the ratings was 'the ratings services' major point of vulnerability: their stance of certainty' (Bogart 1986a: 297). As you saw in Chapter 4, 'The Audit', the hearings – drawing as they did upon the whizz-kid survey methodologists of the day – 'suggested that the illusion of exact accuracy was necessary to the ratings industry in order to heighten the confidence of their clients in the validity of the data they sell'. For Bogart this was partly an effect of presentation which created a sense of 'monolithic self-assurance' as 'the statistical uncertainties of survey data were transformed into beautiful, solid, clean-looking bar charts'. This illusion of exactness was further sustained 'by the practice of reporting audience ratings down to the decimal point, even when the sampling tolerances ranged over several percentage points'. If this criticism could be still held as ratings providers being hostage to demands of their client-users to report down to two decimal points and ignore the warnings of their providers, the next criticism was something else. For Bogart the illusion of certainty was further 'reinforced by keeping as a closely

guarded secret the elaborate weighting procedures used to translate interviews into published projections of audience size.’ This was a criticism that ratings providers were keeping closed to attention an important part of the black box of the ratings itself: a part which needed, he would contend, closer scrutiny because this move from data to projected audience was perhaps the most, not least, problematic step in the whole proceedings.

This was part of his wider criticism of Nielsen as the pre-eminent ratings provider. For Bogart the Nielsen company’s origins in store auditing had created not only a path dependency within the company itself, disposing its agents to particular kinds of presentation of uncertain data as ‘solid’, but also in dispositions towards audience measurement as ‘mechanical registration’, which were arguably inappropriate. As Bogart put it:

Such practices were derived from the traditions of store auditing, a field in which the A.C. Nielsen Company first established its mark. When measurements are made of the actual movement of goods across the shelf in a store, the figures must be presented in a way that approximates the reality of goods shipped, stocked, inventoried, and sold. The figures have to look ‘hard’. But this way of looking at the figures as ‘hard’ unfortunately has been carried over into the realm of survey research on audience behaviour. (Bogart 1986a: 297)

Bogart’s criticism of the ratings turned on the reliance of the industry on a particular kind of research measure: regularly repeated, panel-based, longitudinal research constructed on ‘scientific’ principles of random sampling. But Bogart’s reproach was not about its intrinsic unreliability. It was that it was being made to seem much more reliable than it was in reality. A number of times over a 30-year period he would tell the story of the wildly differing audience estimates from three differing ratings providers: ‘radio station WAKY in Louisville at one time had a Nielsen share of 5, a Pulse share of 29, and a Hooper share of 42’ (Bogart 2000a: 135). His prescription, after this telling, would always be the same. It was important to pay regard to these figures but not too much regard. It was important to rely on other kinds of information. This criticism of a systematic lack of methodological attention on the part of users took two forms. First there was a chronic lack of attention by users to what were seen as ‘trivial technical matters’ of methodology; second, there was the lack of institution-building attention to methodology – the auditing function had not been extended to the systemic comparison and evaluation of alternative research methodologies – existing and new.

Over his career Bogart saw significant problems stemming from users’ chronic lack of attention to the details of the research instrument itself – the ‘seemingly trivial technical matters’. He claimed that ‘most of the people who deal with media

research statistics' were 'not analysing them'. Rather they were 'quoting them, either to sell advertising or to justify their purchases of advertising to their clients or employers' (Bogart 1986a: 286). Thus:

Users of the numbers don't want to be bothered by what they regard as trivial technical matters, and so, for a quarter of a century, since the beginning of regular syndicated research, they have been sweeping the details under the rug. (Bogart 1986a: 286)

This lack of attention was leading to the 'routine acceptance of error' by users. They lacked the 'first hand feel for the fragility of survey data' that they would have had if they were alive to the technical matters. So it was quite typical when programme schedulers or advertising buyers compared one ratings report to the next that changes which might 'be the results of human mistakes and random probability' would become 'the subject of endless preoccupation and concern'. This made 'meaningless' and 'chance differences between percentages based on tiny subsamples' the basis for 'allocating millions of dollars of advertising investments' (Bogart 1986a: 286).

The problem then stemmed from how users worked with and understood ratings. Users were and remain typically impatient with 'statistical niceties'. For advertising and media people 'research methodology' was 'a big complicated bore' (Bogart 1986a: 296). Users were a major force behind presenting data in a way which rendered this research data in 'simple commonsense terms'. Even 'the elemental principles of sampling continue to remain a mystery to many intelligent laymen'. But this tolerance of 'inflated numbers' was not only due to the clients but the complicity of the ratings providers themselves: 'the tolerance of inflated numbers may in at least some cases coincide with self-interest and an unwillingness to rock the rather large boat' (Bogart 1986a: 296). The second criticism of a lack of an authoritative forum for the comparative evaluation of research methodologies was a significant institutional failure. A notable feature of the post-Congressional hearings landscape of the ratings was the institution of the Broadcast Rating Council in 1965 under the leadership of Hugh M. Beville – a figure of acknowledged standing within broadcasting research. Bogart was critical of this auditing regime – not because it was ineffective but because of how much more effective it could have been. He certainly acknowledged that the 1963 hearings had driven 'several minor ratings companies out of business by showing that they had merely produced reports without bothering to generate data first' (Bogart 1986a: 297).

However, he noted that the 'charges of interviewer cheating and improper or inadequate sampling' that got the headlines were easy to counter as the 'stock in trade' of the 'major ratings firms' was their 'integrity at the level of data collection

and processing'. What the Broadcast Rating Council had done, including as it did 'advertiser and agency representatives as well as broadcasters', was to employ 'outside auditing firms to monitor the field work and data processing of all the ratings services and investigate occasional charges of impropriety'. All well and good. But for Bogart this missed a critical dimension which should have followed: 'the council's assignment of assuring the quality of execution does not extend to the comparative evaluation of the methods used by the individual services it oversees' (Bogart 1986a: 297). For Bogart, the methodologist, this was an important limitation further ensconcing particular pathways. In the period leading up to the Congressional hearings important public discussion of the ratings was inhibited by the practice of ratings providers to approach their operations with so many 'black boxes' protected from scrutiny by the commercial, in-confidence world of trade secrets and business strategies. In the period after the Congressional hearings the next black box to open in the interests of innovation and change was the ongoing comparative evaluation of methods and methodologies for ratings and other survey research of use to the media industries. For Bogart the Broadcast Rating Council could have become more of a force for innovation and change.

In an era of ratings sweeps, data was selectively available sometimes weeks later than the period being covered by the survey. Over time ratings sweeps not only became more regular but became available closer and closer to the time on which they reported. In a later era of fewer ratings sweeps available to decision-makers, there was some respite from the ratings. There would always be data and sets of expectations related to obtaining data from research customized to the particular problem at hand. In such circumstances the ratings data could become one more input and would, Bogart thought, be seen in a larger perspective. But with the move towards the more timely provision of ratings data and the rise of single-source ratings providers squeezing out competitors, there was no longer the ballast provided by alternative data source. There was not the evidence of differing results to provide for the opportunity of a conversation about the data, the methodologies being used to obtain the data and the like.

Problems with Increases in Scale

For Bogart the increase in the scale, regularity and timeliness of ratings data over the years was a decidedly mixed blessing. The increase in regularity implied a corresponding increase in scale and therefore budgets required to deliver the service. As the cost of the service went up for clients – whether advertising agencies or media companies or media planning and buying companies – there was a corresponding greater reliance upon it and a squeeze was put on the

budgets available for other kinds of research. And as ratings data became more simultaneous, daily and repeatable, other customized research conducted on a different scale could look immediately dated. Buying-in the data from proprietary data sources had become more common and the researcher had become the research analyst. With this came a further lock in terms of the variety and kinds of research undertaken. Bogart thought that the bureaucrats who had increasingly taken over organizations in the media industry, from research companies to advertisers, from media planning and buying companies to media companies, in trying to operate 'scientifically' had 'become dependent on marketing statistics' (Bogart 2000a: 122).

The combination of cost and timeliness locked in the media system further into the ratings, with a greater reliance on its data and analysis. At the same time the arrival of ratings datasets made available on computer, instead of the paper-based ratings books, put the priority on their manipulation and not on seeing behind the database to the underlying survey data. With diverse research inputs into decision-making being reduced, the quality of media company, advertising agency and advertiser decision-making was declining as a consequence. The contraction in research budgets and size of research departments when coupled with the fashion against one's own customized research – a recommendation by now ensconced in market and strategy textbooks – ensured that there was the loss on the part of those making the decisions and analysing the research of a first-hand experience in research. There was no longer the opportunity to be able to develop in-depth understanding and to make competent, informed decisions. There was not the same scope for discussion generated by either different ratings results from different providers or different research results pointing in different directions about methodology. This meant users and research analysts alike were not able to develop the careful understandings of the limitations and possibilities of different research enterprises, particularly ratings research. Significantly, this was reducing the sources for innovation in applied social research and was locking the media industry further into ratings and associated syndicated data sources. We would now identify this as a particular sort of path dependency in ratings research which was making it increasingly difficult for alternative kinds of information, collected in different ways, to take root. Furthermore computing was making it much worse.

If Bogart naturally objected to the ratings being increasingly used as a substitute for research activities commissioned and overseen by agencies, media companies and media and planning agencies. His objection was that this removed the users of research from the experience of doing research and therefore appreciating the limitations and possibilities of such research. This absence removed a routine component of the armoury of the researcher in apprehending research. He worried

that people not doing their own research, organized and constructed to address the specific issues that their business raised, would disempower decisions and decision-making. First, it would not equip them to understand the research provided by others, including the ratings, or to understand the limits – what could be said and what could not be said with the numbers. He also felt that there was no substitute for customized research – and therefore for doing your own research.

Impersonal Secondary Data

A related criticism was the trend towards the collection of what Bogart called impersonal secondary data. In this category he put ratings technology such as the peplemeter. His criticism of the trend towards what he called the ‘collection of impersonal secondary data’ was a two-fold criticism. First, there was the problem associated with the loss of direct relation to people, and the second criticism turned on how this data was being understood:

Research energies and budgets today are largely preoccupied with the collection of impersonal secondary data on markets and audiences. They rely increasingly on mechanical indicators, like scanner data and television tuning and Internet log-in records, rather than on direct reports obtained in interviews. Does this activity come under the heading of applied social research, in the spirit of my adolescent observations on the persuasive powers of Father Divine? It does, in a sense, because the seemingly abstract numbers are aggregated from many individual human consumption decisions and trace the commercial communications that affect them. (Bogart 2003: 281)

Changes in the political economy of broadcasting had encouraged this orientation. The rising costs of producing television shows had made it impractical for sponsors ‘to maintain an exclusive identification with a show’ (Bogart 2000a: 104). In the programme-sponsorship era advertisers had been concerned ‘with their [programmes] qualitative aspects’ as what was important to them was ‘the rub-off from the excitement, good feeling, affection, or other sentiments evoked in the audience’. This made the numbers ‘secondary’. But in television era dominated by advertising spots and their buying and selling a new ‘ratings-dependent philosophy of media-buying put a premium on diversifying audiences’. Advertisers sought now to ‘maximise their reach’, spreading their commercials to ‘different kinds of programs at different hours of the day’ (Bogart 2000a: 104). For Bogart this meant that ‘the purchase of commercial time had to be reduced to bureaucratic efficiency, with reliance on cost formulas, survey data of often dubious validity, computers, and armies of underpaid clerks’ (Bogart 2000a: 105).

Changes in the political economy of research provision had likewise changed the equation. The demands for regularity and timeliness positively encouraged the development of single ratings providers. And it did so because the costs of providing this research had risen in tandem with expectations. Bogart was critical of the move towards single providers of research in particular areas. In this he would be left behind. But his thinking that it was necessary to have more than one research agency tilling the same ground had important resonance among his peers. He saw two or more entities as 'keeping each other honest' and as a source of innovation. Two different results ensured discussion and debate about methodology. Discrepancies in this context were not so much evidence of a flaw or a disadvantage compromising the standing of research – they were advantageous because it ensured that users of such numbers became more methodology-minded and therefore research-minded. It made them interested in how the numbers were constructed.

Bogart saw computers as having a particularly negative impact upon research. He acknowledged that this was counter-intuitive. The problem was that 'computer technology' demanded 'a constant input of fresh data, which become steadily less reliable and available from fewer sources' (Bogart 2000a: 122). His criticism here was that the presentation of ratings and other data in database form 'further disembodied' the research 'from the real phenomena they purport to represent':

Universal access to computers and the opportunity to play off different types of numbers against each other should greatly enrich the amount of information available to decision makers. Instead databases are ever further disembodied from the real phenomena they purport to represent. Just as in the programmed trading of securities on Wall Street, formula programs for market planning or media buying take one number from Group A and one from Group B and put them together. The result is Gospel. (Bogart 2000a)

Bogart's criticism of the computer was not only related to a sense of the researcher-user and the researched being further removed from each other. It was also related to the adoption of routines and practices that relied more on habit and practice than logic or intent. If computer programs – database interfaces – stopped the user appreciating the nature of the underlying data and what it represented, a related criticism was the computer program was stopping the user from seeing the reality of consumption behind the figures. They were not stepping through to the data to see its complexity and its uncertainties. Instead, they were treating the numbers as 'gospel'.

The ready availability of computer-packaged statistical programs has facilitated complex analyses, but it has also spurred the disembodiment of data from the original expression of human voices. This tendency is heightened by the almost universally used procedure of weighting and adjusting results from flawed telephone or internet samples to make them conform to population characteristics known from the Census – itself an imperfect product. (Bogart 2000a)

Bogart's criticism here is that what was happening in the media research industry was a kind of 'epistemic drift', a phrase used by Fuller to describe approaches that change from ones of pushing back the frontiers of knowledge to ones that are likely to serve some socially desirable ends (Fuller 2002: xxi). The socially desirable ends here were the maintenance through tinkering of both survey research instruments and practices, and a resistance towards new practices and organization. As Fuller notes, the term 'epistemic drift' had been developed by Elzinga to highlight potential perversions of the research agenda that result from the existence of a state monopoly on research funding. The 'perversion' of the research agenda here, it could be argued, was the monopoly in research provision by particular companies such as Nielsen. However, for Fuller the legacy of epistemic drift was subtler, namely, the tendency for measures of *reliability* to be used as surrogates for measures of *validity* in the evaluation of knowledge claims. In other words, while scientists are officially concerned with whether their theories get closer to their target realities, they nevertheless measure success in terms of the regularity with which they can achieve more limited goals that are said to 'model' the target realities. And this is a point that Bogart would have appreciated.

Deprofessionalization of Media Research

Bogart concludes, overall, that the ratings are part and parcel of the deprofessionalization of media research. This is ironic given Arthur C. Nielsen's push for professionalization. The consequence of these moves was to take the 'analysis of information' in politics and business alike out of the hands of the researchers. In the stead of a media research professional straddling the different components of the information and analysis continuum there was a complex division of labour such that:

In 2002 scanner data are typically scrutinized by brand managers, audience data by media planners, political data by campaign consultants. These are not (necessarily) stupid people; some have taken a course or two in market research or statistics; all have absorbed social science terms and phrases that

have passed into the common vocabulary of journalism. But their attention is typically confined within a narrow utilitarian spectrum. (Bogart 2003: 281)

This 'utilitarian' perspective meant that the inter-relation of these parts was no longer so possible. The data and their use had become increasingly one-dimensional and they had become so because of a narrowing of attention in research and research instruments brought on by particular cultures of management and corporate decision-making. This had seen an inflated attention being given to the ratings, which had been accompanied by a lack of attention to methodological and survey limitations of the ratings as a form of applied social research. Another, parallel, casualty of this narrowing of the research enterprise was in the narrowing of qualitative research, which had brought about analogous systematic misuses of qualitative research. Indeed, Bogart saw in the abuses of qualitative research a similar corporate logic. The 'counterpoise,' as he put it, of the 'abstraction and dehumanisation of survey findings' was the 'explosion of research using collective interviews with small groups of people'. No longer was this qualitative research interested in the 'why of opinion and tastes' but, rather, was interested in the 'what'. But such an attention, Bogart thought, only make sense 'if the findings are truly representative of the larger population' (Bogart 2000a: 283).

Writing about opinion polls in 1972, he could opine that, 'most survey research is devoted to the study of trivia; it is the study of minor preferences in the marketplace and in the media' (Bogart 1972b: 197). He went on to say that 'to a very large extent it is not a study of opinion at all but of purchasing and product usage'. This clear-minded view of a field with which he was so closely connected bears some comparison with the larger orientation towards and attitude to research embodied in the career trajectory of Paul Lazarsfeld and his collaborators. For Lazarsfeld the social research methodology was what was important, along with developing concepts for such research and getting someone to pay for it – it was not the actual research being undertaken that was as important as the prototype testing, the proof of concept being undertaken. Bogart shared this outlook. He certainly saw applied social research as a means of developing social research instruments which could become a means of solving and illuminating problems on a wider scale and canvas than mapping consumer decisions and preferences. He clearly believed that much of what was done in the space of marketing research was both narrow and limited, and on a broader scale and in the broader social context it might not amount to much.

Bogart's reproach to the ratings was, in a significant sense, a concern at the loss of office, of the standing and integrity of the applied social research intellectual. It was fundamentally a concern about the loss of a persona that went with it. This loss of room to move was tied into the narrowing of larger attentions to the research

enterprise, its conduct and its proper integrity. Therefore, it is not surprising that his criticism of the ratings was accompanied by a parallel attention to what he perceived to be similar kinds of systematic misuses of qualitative research. Unlike some of the academic media researchers who followed him, Bogart's criticisms were not the 1980s criticism of 'positivism' that characterized some British sociology debates, leading notably to Catherine Marsh's defence of the survey as a social research tool (Marsh 1982). Neither was it a criticism of the general deployment of numbers. Anyone who has read Bogart's study of the press and its public (Bogart 1989) could not see his views in this light. His scepticism was not of a general kind related to the survey form and general deployment of numbers. It was a scepticism born from within numbers. Bogart's criticism of the ratings was part of a broader critique. As we have observed this was not a critique of research in the service of advertising decisions but rather a critique that, given that research 'provides the basic rationale for advertising decisions', this research and the forms it took, including but not limited to the ratings, were 'commonly used in disregard of its limitations, which deserve close scrutiny' (Bogart 2000a: 122). The disputes Bogart entered into become disputes over what is applied social research and what it is to be an applied social researcher. We could see these as 'protracted border conflict' over the scope of the field and the duties of researchers (Condren *et al.* 2006: 8). These disputes and arguments are best understood as 'formed by the moral *habitus* of overlapping institutional environments' (Condren *et al.* 2006: 8). Bogart saw himself fundamentally as a social researcher working in the commercial field. He was not, as increasingly became the case, a specific researcher working in a component of marketing and survey research.

Bogart was, the authors would argue, the last of the ratings intellectuals to be recognized as both an insider and outsider at once. Who replaced Bogart? The internal criticism of the ratings and ratings provision has remained but it is now an intra-mural rather than public conversation. It was increasingly undertaken in less public and more rarefied zones. While much of the work undertaken for CONTAM and by Gale Metzger from the late 1960s through to the early 1990s was available, these were technical reports written for a readership of methodologist specialists in market research firms, media companies and the ratings agencies themselves. They were forensic audits performed by a research methodologist auditor. Overall, these were not for a general readership.

Summary

There is a certain consistency to Bogart's criticism. His task was to be constructive. But this was not constructive in the sense of constructive for academic and generalist criticism but in an operational sense for those who used and abused

the ratings as a longitudinally based panel-survey instrument. He provided in his criticism of the ratings, just as he had in his discussion of public-opinion polling, ‘lessons’ in how people in the industry were expected to use and read them. While there is a way of reading his criticisms to suggest that he had lost faith with the audience concept and in the numbers it provided, really that is mistaken. His was a plea for a more informed use of statistics and survey data; and a more open interrogation and discussion of what such longitudinally derived panel data was good for and what it was not good for. Judged from a holistic perspective, Bogart’s fundamental reproach turned on too much being made of ratings data in some respects and not enough in other respects.

If audience ratings data are simply an ideological tool of capitalist masters in order to maintain hegemonic control over society, then the authors’ analysis and Leo Bogart’s analysis are empty and not worthwhile. However, Bogart provides an important insight into how the audience-ratings convention can fracture. In Chapters 5 and 8, we saw clear evidence that more and more computational tools are coming on to the market that claim to have the answer to predictive advantage in the world of audience research. Little is said on the foundations from which the data for these tools are collected, only that the results work. This is not to say that these packages are bogus, but it is a sign that the ratings provider in advanced industrial societies has lost part of its coordination role. The knowledge of the expert critic at the same time has become isolated as part of intra-mural debates within the industry rather than as *boundary spanners* influencing methodology and practice simultaneously. Art Nielsen is an excellent example of this – he could be competitive salesman, methodologist, engineer and critic at the same time. Metzger was a beneficiary of Nielsen’s push for professionalism within media research.

Bogart’s critiques are a bellwether for the future of the audience-ratings convention. They provide the answer to the current crisis in ratings. The ratings, as the authors have argued throughout this book, have a dual identity. This dual identity is lost at a cost.