



Confessions of a Nielsen family

It's not easy deciding the
fate of TV shows, but
someone's got to do it

BY "THE NIELSENS"

DIGITAL VISION

When the doorbell rang one evening about two years ago we had no idea that we were about to be recruited into one of America's most secret societies, as hush-hush as the CIA or the federal witness-protection program. Yes, ours is a Nielsen household.

No one is supposed to know that we're among 540 metered homes in the New York television viewing area with metal or plastic boxes the size of kitchen sponges attached to our television, satellite receiver, VCR, and DVD player. The electronic eavesdroppers on our video system are connected to a cereal-box-sized computer that dials a toll-free number in Florida at night while we're asleep and delivers information about when our TV was on that day, what channels we watched via satellite, whether we recorded shows for later viewing, or if we watched a movie from a disk instead.

NIELSENS BY DEFAULT

The information is compiled with similar data from other covert residences to provide the Nielsen "overnight" ratings, which can cause television executives heartburn and their programs to be canceled or renewed. Knowing that our fingers on the remote help determine what's on TV gives us a comforting sense of having some say in a world over which we otherwise have no control.

That's why when the soft-spoken man at the door said he was from Nielsen Media Research and that we could be-

come a sampled household, we practically dragged him inside. It turned out we weren't his first choice. As a matter of fact, once a city block is chosen at random and a household picked to represent a particular demographic — say, a married couple, no children, with cable — in New York just 37% of the initially targeted homes actually become Nielsen households. Nobody in the apartment house next to us would open their door, so we got to join this exclusive club.

Incidentally, we're only part of the TV ratings sample. In some homes, Nielsen installs "people meters," with buttons for each family member to press indicating who's in front of the set (they train children as young as 2 to punch in if they're watching). In addition, several months a year Nielsen sends out paper diaries for other households to fill out as they watch a week's worth of programs; these usually coincide with "sweeps" periods when national viewing trends are measured and billions of dollars in TV advertising costs are set. For their part, the diary keepers get *bubkes* — from \$2 to \$10.

With nothing to do but watch, households like ours with passive meters get paid a token amount, about \$1 a month per device monitored. In addition, we re-

ceived a dozen Dunkin' Donuts the day our recruiter and his crew showed up to install the meters, a lengthy process that included opening up some of our gear and soldering connections inside, then making sure everything worked properly (in case our television or other components go on the blink for some other reason, Nielsen pays half our repair costs).

With so little hush money involved, why don't we just blab to everyone that we're TV trendsetters? We once made the mistake of telling an otherwise mature and sophisticated couple we know that we're a Nielsen household. Their immediate reaction was: "You have to watch 'Buffy The Vampire Slayer' so it won't get canceled." We haven't told anyone since.

Statistically, our opinions represent those of roughly 13,660 New York families, but with 7,376,330 TV households included in the metropolitan area, we represent a

very tiny slice of the ratings pie. We found this out the hard way, after we could no longer stand a local news correspondent with the irritating habit of mugging for the camera and being an idiot. We decided to switch channels every time she would start one of her segments and switch back after she was done. We figured that a sudden drop of thousands of virtual viewers whenever she showed

her face would make the television station take notice and fire her. No such luck. She's stayed on the air and we've had to stop watching the newscast entirely. So much for our dreams of power.

FIVE YEARS AND YOU'RE OUT

It's fun to speculate on how the TV ratings could be manipulated by finding and influencing Nielsen households. Danny DeVito made his directing debut in 1984 with a hilarious made-for-cable movie based on this premise, called "The Ratings Game." It turns out that years ago a producer married to Carol Channing managed to track down some of the Nielsen families and used a clever strategy to boost the ratings of his wife's television special without breaking any laws.

We have our own quibbles about how the ratings are tracked. For instance, small-screen TVs are not monitored; with one of us habitually watching late-night shows and movies on a 3-inch screen, a notable portion of our viewing goes unmeasured.

Still, we want to remain counted. (We also vote in every election, though we back about as many unsuccessful candidates as we watch unpopular shows.) And when we do lose our meters (we can remain a Nielsen household for a maximum of five years, but beginning this year, all passive meters in the New York area will be phased out in favor of push-button people meters), we'll look back on this as perhaps the only time when our tastes had some impact, however small, on Americans' daily lives.

Even without the doughnuts, it's been worth it. ♦

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