

Book Review:

Wyatt, Justin. *Creating the Viewer: Market Research and the Evolving Media Ecosystem* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2024)

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Nestled in an often-overlooked domain that is closely adjacent to, but not entirely part of, the media industries rests the subject of Justin Wyatt's new book, *Creating the Viewer: Market Research and the Evolving Media Ecosystem*. Television market research is a tool that helps shape media content and a key component in how media industries construct and approach the audience, but one that receives little attention in academic circles (or, truthfully, industrial ones). Drawing on many years of first-hand experience in market research, Wyatt aims to correct that oversight by focusing attention on the methods, limitations, and impact that market research has on the content that makes it to screen and how industrial elements think of the viewers for whom it is intended.

Part methods manual and part analysis of the impact (and assumptions) embedded in entertainment market research, Wyatt begins Part I of the book with an efficient consideration of the challenges of pinning down the idea of a "television viewer" in an era of industrial consolidation and market fragmentation. He also situates market research within this context, briefly outlining the players, process, and potential challenges of filtering media through the necessary structures of quantitative and qualitative research. Wyatt (rightfully) points out that, instead of being brought in as a partner for development or decision-making, market testing is often the fair-weather friend of the media industries: trotted out by executives when it matches their "gut" or held up by content creators who point to positive testing like a guarantee, but ignored or vilified by all when it fails to fit their larger narrative.

In Part II, Wyatt delves into some of the tests that characterize television market research, supplementing the theoretical background that situates this work within an academic context with specific (sometimes hypothetical) case studies and appendices of representative research tools. He first takes on what is perhaps the most common type of TV market research, content testing for pilots and series maintenance, where respondents are asked to offer feedback on new and ongoing series for networks to make programming decisions

or for producers to consider correctives in order to expand their audience. In the following chapter, the author considers brand alignment by way of brand tracker studies that evaluate how respondents' feelings about a media property—in this case, a basic cable network—help establish and maintain its identity. This chapter also considers the brand of showrunner-auteur Ryan Murphy, a detour that effectively establishes a branded throughline in the promotion of Murphy's work but does stray from the focus on well-trodden market research practices. One of Wyatt's most spot-on observations, that "the data is more important for locating vulnerabilities within the show rather than predicting success," (51) is slightly glossed over in these chapters, but his case studies (including the ill-conceived *Caveman* TV show) are effective at illustrating how testing can raise issues producers might have been previously blind to but are not a magic wand that can fix content that is lacking.

Next, the book tackles two less-common types of entertainment market research: talent testing and ideation via qualitative "super-groups." In the former, Wyatt explores talent testing in news/information programming and considers the limitations of the kinds of deep, parasocial bonds these types of tests are designed to highlight in the current landscape of personality journalism. The final chapter of this section is on ideation and content co-creation, in which Wyatt outlines extensive focus groups that are populated by respondents who are professionals in their fields—and possibly not even TV watchers—who collaboratively brainstorm television concepts, thus making the market research the starting point for fresh approaches to concept creation, rather than a final step in the production of content. This kind of market research offers a bit more latitude to respondents to formulate responses that might be beyond producers' intended scope, but Wyatt points out, rightfully so, that this research is still taking place in a top-down system and "ultimately, the power to create new content is in the sole discretion of the media client" (187).

In Part III, Wyatt addresses the impact of TV market testing. He first accounts for the methodological flaws that are possible in this kind of research, from either human manipulation, however unintentional, or structural limitations. Qualitative approaches, for example, can be influenced by moderator performance and by how the information is distilled and synthesized in a debrief, while quantitative studies are subject to influence by how they sample and survey respondents. This chapter on limitations specifically addresses the consequences that demographic classification (by gender, race, and sexuality) and self-reported data, which are standard practice, can have on how we think of television audiences, and leads to Wyatt's final chapter, in which he contends with how academic characterizations of the TV viewer have shifted and places the strategies of market testing among them. Wyatt argues that a shift to ethnographic methods in market research is one way to encompass the way television viewing has evolved that accounts for the shortcomings of both traditional market testing and newer algorithmic data collection methods.

Despite the comprehensive scope of the book, there are some areas not covered in great detail. For example, important and common types of market research are addressed only briefly or not at all, such as marketing tests, franchise health studies, and promo testing. In addition, this work is largely focused on the type of market testing that characterized the late-network and early post-network eras and only delves in the final chapters into the testing that has become increasingly necessary in a time where television production is heavily

influenced by streaming practices, such as binge testing and foreign market testing. There are considerable changes that have come to entertainment market research since tech-based, streaming-first portals (Netflix, Amazon, and Apple) have embraced market testing more of their television products, changes that have only happened in the last few years and that have themselves been influenced by global shake-ups like the pandemic and industry obstacles like the 2023 Writers Guild of America and Screen Actors Guild strikes. These shifts do mean that the constructs—and what industrial players do with them—of television audiences that are at the core of market testing are likewise being reimagined for the current industry landscape and are an important consideration. However, Wyatt is dealing with research that is nearly all proprietary; thus, one way to get around this is to make use of older case studies that are no longer protected, which can have the consequence of introducing examples that are more representative of past industrial practices than current television. Furthermore, this is the first and only book-length analysis on the topic, and it cannot be everything at once. This is a strong overview of a niche field, but there is simply more work to be done.

As someone with an academic background who currently works in television market research, I am pleased to see this topic finally being included in analyses of media industries. While it is undeniably a small corner of the vast enterprise of making contemporary media, market research is one in which networks and producers actively grapple with the response of the viewer. By highlighting the practical utility and very real limitations for market research in the television industry, Wyatt effectively outlines how testing constructs and perpetuates industrial ideas of TV viewership. It is a useful approach, and one previously under-explored, that can provide concrete illustrations of media industries' feedback loop between production and viewing experience.

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