When *Television and its Audience* was published in 1988, it addressed some pretty entrenched assumptions among broadcasters, advertisers and regulators. The book, by London Business School’s Patrick Barwise and Andrew Ehrenberg, challenged the belief that TV channels and programmes attracted very loyal audiences. It also took on the idea that the audience was strongly ‘segmented’ by programme types – with one audience for soaps and another for crime series, an audience for game shows and an audience for highbrow culture. More generally, their analysis of audience data suggested that most television viewing was at a rather low level of involvement.

“We were able to show that even the most successful programmes weren’t anything like as potent in terms of audience loyalty as the broadcasters liked to think,” says Barwise. “People had always assumed that television was almost a ‘lean forward’ medium, that people really cared deeply about the programmes. But it turned out that engagement was – and remains – much lower than people thought.”

**The myth of audience segmentation**

For example, broadcasters had assumed that high-profile, critically acclaimed and heavily promoted drama serials attracted devoted audiences – in effect a consumer ‘segment’ that could be defined and either sold to advertisers at a premium price, or used to justify public subsidy of non-commercial channels.

Drawing on twenty years’ analysis of US and UK viewing data, Barwise, Ehrenberg and their associates showed that, in reality, audiences were pretty fickle. ITV’s acclaimed mid-1980s blockbuster series *The Jewel in the Crown*, for example, was seen at least once by an impressive 23 million UK adults. Yet very few of those viewers – just 2% – actually watched all 14 episodes. Only 25% saw more than half the series. At the other extreme, as many as 30% saw only one episode.

**Channel hoppers**

What’s more, this relative lack of engagement extended beyond individual programmes. Barwise and Ehrenberg showed that viewers were much more promiscuous than previously believed, switching from channel to channel and from genre to genre quite freely.

“Even now, many people are reluctant to accept these findings, although recent research on viewing in the USA, UK and Australia has shown that the underlying patterns still haven’t changed,” says Barwise. “One reason is that the results seem to go against common sense. Instinctively one feels that the audience overlap between, say, *Panorama* and *Coronation Street* should be minimal. But the data say otherwise.”

**Changing the terms of debate**

Industry professionals may have been reluctant to believe it but the research has had some significant impacts on the way the television industry is run. One very clear effect can still be seen today in the way most drama series begin each episode after the first with a brief summary of what’s gone before, to take account of the many viewers who haven’t seen previous episodes.

And there were deeper consequences. Commercial broadcasters had previously assumed that it should be possible to ‘segment’ television audiences by channel or programme type, in the way that readers of print media are segmented, with clear differences in age, sex, wealth, education and social status, depending on the type of content. This assumption was also overturned.

**Our valued viewers**

“In the print world it’s easy to identify a premium audience,” explains Barwise. “For example, to advertisers a *Financial Times* reader is worth roughly six times as much as a *Sun* reader. The TV audience is also segmented, but much more weakly. Try as you might, you can’t come up with a channel that efficiently delivers the *Financial Times* audience. It’s nothing to do with programming – it’s the nature of the medium.”

The research also impacted UK government policy. In 1979, Barwise and Ehrenberg correctly predicted that commercial airtime on the proposed Channel 4 would be able to attract only a slightly higher price per thousand viewers than ITV. This helped the planners get their sums right and launch the new channel successfully in 1982.

Again, when the Government set up the 1985-6 Peacock Committee enquiry into the funding of the BBC, Barwise and Ehrenberg were able to show that the BBC wouldn’t be able to deliver to advertisers a new premium audience unreachable by ITV and Channel 4, and that BBC advertising revenue would mostly come from these existing commercial broadcasters rather than bringing in more money. These findings contributed to the Committee’s decision to recommend against advertising on the BBC – which remains the case nearly 30 years later.
A message from the land of the brand

Barwise and Ehrenberg’s television research was partly based on earlier work on how consumers buy brands. They showed that media consumption could be analysed using methods similar to those Ehrenberg had developed for researching the repeat-buying of frequently bought consumer products (see Impact 1970: Ehrenberg). Ehrenberg had already helped establish that consumers are less brand-loyal than had been assumed, despite huge corporate expenditure on brand development and advertising, with the implication that, to consumers, product categories matter much more than individual brands.

“...In the case of television, what we were able to show is that the category is mainly television itself rather than any particular programme type,” says Barwise. “Although programme makers may not have welcomed this, in fact they should take comfort because part of what we’re saying is: don’t let the marketing people take over too much. Just go out and create great programmes.”

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The late Professor Andrew Ehrenberg was Director of the Centre for Marketing and Communication at London Business School from 1970 to 1993.