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Do 47 Million Viewers Make An Audience?

A new audience measurement system in the U.S. could change the way foreign-language TV stations are perceived by the advertising community. Global Advertising Strategies (GAS), a New York-based consulting firm that acts as a liaison between advertisers and ethnic television stations, is developing a way to bring the Nielsen Television Ratings system to the ethnics' unrated programs.

According to a recent study by GAS, roughly 200 foreign-language channels operate in the U.S. — channels like India's TV Asia, Channel 1 Russia and Italy's RAI International (now RAI Italia) — and they represent virtually every ethnic group found in America. However, though niche programming has experienced a boom in the past few years, many U.S. advertisers are still reluctant to jump on the foreign-language bandwagon. "Advertisers don't consider some ethnic channels because their audiences, taken individually, do not pull in enough viewers to even be rated," said Max Smetannikov, vice president of GAS.

Smetannikov attributes the recent increase of ethnic channels to globalization and improvements in technology. Plus, said Smetannikov, "immigrants are no longer expected to assimilate. They are more inclined to cling to their homelands."

In addition to cable and satellite platforms, ethnic programming is popping up on terrestrial TV. Stations like Washington D.C.-based MHz cater to the international crowd with content from all over the globe. MHz's main channel, for example, buys and broadcasts content from stations like France 24, Nigerian Television, and Russia Today. With nine affiliates in both urban and rural areas, MHz reaches about 14 percent of the population.

In recent years, the growth of foreign-language TV in the U.S. has also been encouraged by an organization called the Ethnic Broadcasters of America (EBA). The non-profit organization was founded in 2003 by Elie Kawkabani, president of L.A.-based Reach Media, which offers, among other things, Arabic programming packages by subscription. The EBA is dedicated to advancing foreign-language channels and programmers broadcasting via satellite and cable. Kawkabani said his goal was "to create a forum by which [foreign-language channels] can pool their resources," to attract mainstream corporate advertisers.

In 2000, the U.S. Census Board reported that 47 million people in the U.S. speak a language other than English at home, and that the purchasing power of these individuals will only increase. They predict that Hispanic buying power will reach \$1 trillion a year by 2011.

However, the absence of a ratings system remains a deterrent for advertisers, and about 95 percent of ethnic channels are financed by subscription.

Among its many flaws, Nielsen fails to take into account what millions of non-English speakers are watching. GAS plans to rectify the problem with what it calls the Multi-Cultural Multi-Platform Programmer Platform. The system would not gather ratings from individual stations, as in the Nielsen system, but rather aggregate channels together by ethnicity and count them as one entity. This way, advertisers could find out which time slots and programs are most popular among Spanish speakers, for example, and insert Spanish-language ads accordingly. The plan would bring advertising to foreign-language TV, which could prove to be a multi-million dollar industry.