

A VIEW FROM THE CHAIR

BARB Chairman Nigel Sharrocks is interviewed by media journalist and commentator, Kate Bulkley.

For its entire 34-year history, data from the Broadcasters' Audience Research Board has been considered the gold standard for the television and advertising industries when it comes to TV viewing numbers.

But the organisation that's at the heart of the UK's £7 billion TV programme and advertising business is now at its most significant crossroads, with companies born in the digital world producing their own sets of figures, with samples much greater than those traditionally used by the research industry.

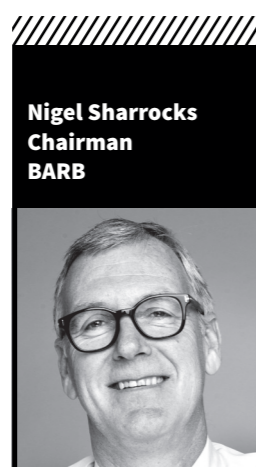
Indeed, the relentless march of Google and Twitter and Facebook has piqued the interest of the advertising establishment and planted what some have characterised as a time bomb under traditional TV ratings providers.

Add to that the continuing fragmentation of audience viewing to include devices that are not the traditional telly in the corner of the lounge, and you have a heady mix.

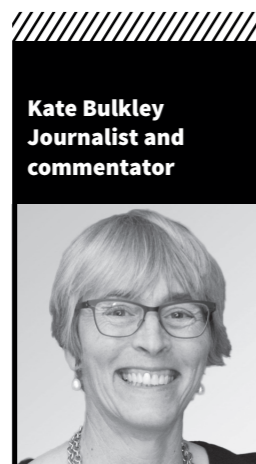
Into this scenario has stepped BARB's chairman, the 58-year-old giant of the media business Nigel Sharrocks who joined BARB 18 months ago.

Having run the film division for Warner Bros Pictures UK (he worked on the release of the first three films in the staggeringly successful Harry Potter franchise) and been a senior executive in the advertising industry for more than 20 years, including CEO of Aegis Media until May 2013, Sharrocks has the industry contacts and the gravitas to help make sure that BARB doesn't become irrelevant in this fast-changing media world.

"There are some huge decisions that need to



Nigel Sharrocks
Chairman
BARB



Kate Bulkley
Journalist and
commentator

be made and we need the engagement of very senior people in the industry in order to make that happen, and that's where I can help," explains Sharrocks. "BARB has been a sort of black box that people could rely on and that's fine but to set the course for the future people need to know much more than that."

Through Project Dovetail BARB had already begun working out how to add new devices and how to track new viewing behaviours even before Sharrocks joined, but it's clear that he is keen to ramp up the speed of the changes that will fuse the best of both worlds – take the quality of the BARB data and blend it with larger audience data sets to create a new hybrid measurement system.

"Dovetail is taking a lot of different techniques to answer a lot of the questions coming from advertisers, broadcasters and brands," says Sharrocks. "There are a lot of questions about how much viewing is coming through on-demand viewing from online players. Particularly as the penetration of tablets increases, there are certain sub-groups of viewers, especially younger viewers, who are spending a significant amount of time viewing video on mobile devices," he notes. These devices have traditionally not been tracked by BARB.

Sharrocks calls himself a pragmatist and certainly the changes that BARB is looking to make in how it takes its traditional audience panel of 5,100 homes into the connected, on-demand and mobile viewing world must be done carefully.

"I don't underestimate how difficult this is going to be," says Sharrocks. "I liken it to an American expression: how do we change all four wheels on the car while continuing to do 70 miles per hour in the outside lane? That's the kind of challenge we're looking at."

He also recognises that smaller channels

can often feel underrepresented by BARB and is keen to make this a priority as well. Pretty quickly thereafter we find ourselves talking about Sky, which polls 500,000 of its set-top boxes daily to gather very targeted information.

Sharrocks strongly believes that adding this kind of return path data is one of the keys to the future of BARB, though he admits talks with both Sky, Virgin Media and other platform operators are at the early stages. "We could potentially fuse return path data with the BARB panel to give an effective sample size of up to 100,000, which could be really transformational for BARB," he explains. "It's not just about the panel. It's about a hybrid future."

Given how fast the media world is changing Sharrocks is concerned with speed: he wants BARB to rollout the Dovetail data to its stakeholders in a more timely fashion, even if that means the data are still in "beta" i.e. not part of the reporting cycles that BARB customers are used to. Viewing on PCs has been tracked on the panel since late 2012, while tablets were added last August. Sharrocks would like first data sets released in the next few months.

Obviously there are technical complexities involved in assessing these new data and lining them up with BARB's traditional panel, but Sharrocks clearly does not like to hear too much about any mitigating circumstances that may be holding things up. Research companies who work with BARB have not, in his opinion, been innovative enough, something that he is keen to put the spotlight on later this year when BARB's current research contract goes up for tender; a new contract is scheduled to begin in 2019.

Sharrocks was one of the first CEOs in the advertising business to create a structure where the new digital business and the

legacy businesses both reported into the same person, allowing them to both run the businesses in an optimal manner and at the same time share lessons across the two. He believes that BARB needs to be able to "move at the speed of the fastest rather than the speed of the slowest" of its stakeholders and suppliers. Creating a new BARB underpinned with a hybrid data set is what will make it fit for the future.

Sharrocks also defends BARB against what he calls easy barbs from the big digital players who look at BARB as old-fashioned and out of touch. "Yes, it is more challenging to get the data we're looking for and yes it is taking a bit longer, but I think the big digital players realise that their challenges are a lot bigger than they first thought. The digital players jump from what is device-based data and refer to it as audiences but it isn't," says Sharrocks. "Advertisers aren't interested in just knowing that the set is on, they want to know who's sitting on the sofa."

Sharrocks believes that BARB needs to both continue to embrace innovation and yet keep what it does best front and centre. It's about moving the gold standard that BARB continues to provide today into a hybrid data future without throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

US-born Kate Bulkley is a journalist based in the UK with over 30 years' experience covering media and technology.

DOVETAIL BRINGS TOGETHER MANY TECHNIQUES TO ANSWER OUR CUSTOMERS' QUESTIONS – WE HAVE TO REMEMBER THAT ADVERTISERS WANT TO KNOW WHO'S SITTING ON THE SOFA, NOT JUST THAT THE SET IS ON