For generations, a single standard has existed for measuring the vast home audience of couch potatoes and transacting television ads that today total $70 billion a year.

But as millions of viewers peel away from their TVs and migrate among flat screen, online and mobile video, it's clear the simple Nielsen rating system is not going to be enough.

Indeed, the quest for a “single-source” rating -- media’s “Holy Grail,” as NBC Universal's president of research and media development Alan Wurtzel calls it -- is swiftly gaining steam, including a major industry initiative jointly announced earlier this week by three top advertising trade groups.

Without such a standard authoritative measure, say content and advertising executives, the media and marketing world will remain handicapped in buying and selling ads, pricing media and programming video against the multiplatform audience.

“It is time for the industry leaders to develop a ‘currency’ that is widely and consistently accepted and adopted,” said Bob Liodice, CEO of Association of National Advertisers, one of the groups.

Generally, the media ecosystem now operates as often as not on guesswork or has few options beyond relying on a less-than-perfect rounded picture “fused” from disparate tracking data on individual platforms.

The explosive platform now is the Internet. Last year, a monthly average of 179 million Americans watched video online, according to media tracker ComScore. In December alone, online viewing sessions rose 13 percent to 5.8 billion as Americans on average American spent more than 14 hours in front of a record 201 streamed videos.

The audience for just one streaming service, Hulu, racked up almost 30,000 minutes of video
viewing in last year’s fourth quarter compared with less than 20,000 minutes combined for the top five broadcast network, Comscore reported.

Advertisers long to know with far more precision the total reach of a campaign, whether an ad was seen repeatedly by the same person or not across a proliferation of platforms, from the flat-screen TV and desktop PC to the laptop and game console to the smartphone and tablet.

Media companies, meanwhile, are craving for a single authoritative count of total unduplicated multiplatform audiences, too. “If you can measure three-screen audiences, you can evaluate and sell them” to advertisers, NBCU's Wurtzel told TheWrap.

To serve consumers better, content giants also want to confidently grasp the interplay among platforms.

“We make all of this content for consumers, and know it is being consumed on these platforms, but we have little visibility into precisely whose doing what,” Colleen Fahey Rush, chief researcher for Viacom’s MTV Networks, told TheWrap.

Adds Peter Seymour, strategy and research executive vice president of Walt Disney Co.’s Disney Media Networks: "I think there’s a lot of work to be done in that space.”

Dubbed “Making Measurement Make Sense,” the initiative announced last week by the Interactive Advertising Bureau, the Association of National Advertisers and the American Association of Advertising Agencies is aimed at giving birth to a standard.

The multiplatform-ratings status quo is “cacophony of competing and contradictory measurement systems,” the trio of groups stated.

While online media has myriad metrics, for example, none “serve as currency across the ecosystem,” said CEO Liodice of ANA.

The organizations, which claim to represent the “entire value chain in marketing and advertising,” hired management consultant Bain & Company and strategic advisory firm MediaLink to support the initiative.

Additionally, in early February, two initiatives -- both aimed at establishing proof that a cross-platform rating is a doable concept -- were launched by the Coalition for Innovative Media Measurement.


To conduct its latest intiatives, CIMM hired Arbitron of radio-audience tracking fame and ComScore, the online tracker, both of which are leveraging their respective expertise and methodologies to expand into multiplatform measures.

“By the end of 2011, the industry will have a good idea of what approach is best for multi-screen measurement,” says Jane Clarke, CIMM’s managing director.
So far, however the velocity of change and proliferation of platforms have posed big hurdles for the measurement industry, which along with the media and marketing industries recognized the need for consistent metrics some time ago. “It’s unrealistic for people think we are going to perfect three-screen [TV, online and mobile video] measures overnight,” says researcher Wurtzel of NBCUniversal.

Technical and social challenges abound.

No one knows conclusively whether panels actually can be recruited to do, in some cases, the more burdensome activities required of them for multiplatform tracking, including downloading monitoring software to smartphones and uploading data. People who don’t mind sharing information about their TV-watching habits are more apt to balk at allowing trackers to snoop on their internet activities, one researcher suggests.

Not surprisingly, Nielsen is the foremost audience tracker now pursuing a multi-platform solution. But there’s a growing list of contenders targeting the space as a growth segment, each employing a varying mix of methodologies, measurement technology and actual video viewers. “One thing we found -- there are tons of firms,” says analyst Heather Way of market researcher Park Associates.

Late last year, the firm analyzed some 22 companies that track digital video audiences to determine which are best positioned “to provide an industry-recognized, cross-platform digital video audience metric standard.”

In addition to Nielsen, Park Associates concluded, the top five included Kantar Media, Tivo, Arbitron and Rentrak.

With its multiplatform product, “extended screen,” Nielsen measures across TV and online and expects to release the first data by April, Matt O’Grady, executive vice president, audience measurement, told TheWrap.

But Nielsen already has missed deadlines, including one in February. O’Grady acknowledged “lots of curve balls” in staying abreast of the technology and viewing patterns. “No one has it completely figured out,” he said.

Some television executives already are griping that “extended screen” will only measure a video that’s the exact mirror image across platforms. But no TV network would run an episode of a show online with the same number of ads, these executive said.

Not that media companies are waiting for the measurement industry to come up with a full-proof integrated measure. NBCU’s NBC and Disney’s ESPN, for example, have used major sporting events as laboratories to out multi-platform measurement, taking advantage on-scene audiences swollen with avid sports fans.

At the World Cup last year, ESPN launched ESPN XP to field test media usage and advertising across TV, radio, the Internet, mobile and print. It “represents a major step forward in our commitment to further advance our knowledge about multi-media use, and the total and incremental impact it has on our clients’ media campaigns,” Artie Bulgrin, senior vice president of research and analytics for the sports programming giant, said at the time.
Meanwhile, at the Vancouver Winter Olympics, NBC measured video audiences across television, Internet and mobile. As a result of the trial, said Wurtzel, NBC concluded that “people are embracing and adopting multiplatform video at a speed far faster than anticipated.”

But the measuring system was deemed too expensive to be introduced widely.

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