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The fourth method of ratings data collection people meters was started in the mid-1980s by A. C. Nielsen to attempt to improve the accuracy of ratings information and to obtain "single-source data" whereby research companies collect television ratings data demographic data and even household member purchasing behavior at the same time. Traditional television meters indicate only whether the television set is on or off and the channel to which the set is tuned; there are no data about who is watching. Such information must be obtained by pooling TV meter data with information from households in the diary samples. People meters attempt to simplify this data collection task by requiring each person in the household as well as all visitors to push a specific button on a mechanical unit that records the viewing. Each person in the home is assigned a button on the meter. The meter instantaneously records information about how many people in the household are watching and the identity of each viewer. The data from each night's viewing are collected via computer. This specific information is valuable for advertisers and their agencies who now can more accurately target their advertising messages.

Nielsen is convinced that using people meters is the way to obtain accurate television ratings information. The company's interest in people meters was spawned in 1987 when Audits of Great Britain AGB introduced the meters to the United States. AGB pulled out of the U. S. people meter service in 1988 however leaving only Nielsen to develop a universally accepted system of single-source data collection. In 1991 when Arbitron was involved in television ratings it tried to expand the concept of single-source data with a system called Scan America. The plan was to collect purchasing data and network television viewing information from the same household. Scan America was unsuccessful and was discontinued in late 1992. In theory people meters are quite simple When a person begins or stops watching television he or she pushes a button to document the behavior. The button may be located on a hand-held device or enclosed in a small box mounted on top of the television set. However theory and reality are often misaligned. In late 1989 a survey funded by ABC CBS and NBC found that people meters "turned off" participants especially with children's programming on Saturday mornings. Additional criticisms about low television viewing numbers produced by the people meters continue in the mid-1990s. The major problem with people meters is that participants tire of pushing buttons to record when they watch television and children cannot be depended upon to push the proper buttons when they turn on the set. The reality is that television ratings produced by people meters are lower than those produced by meters and diaries. Broadcasters and advertisers are concerned. Broadcasters claim the data underestimate actual viewing; advertisers claim the data are probably correct and they are paying too much money CPM for their commercials. ……

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