Technology is overwhelming the old ways of measuring the audience for news. In 2006 the push to find new metrics gained significant momentum.

The pressure is coming from two directions. Advertisers, worried about having to split their budgets among an expanding list of platforms, want more precise information about exactly who is consuming what. And in certain media, the content producers feel the old yardsticks are undercounting their numbers.

In television, watching shows on DVRs, Web sites, and YouTube is making conventional TV ratings only part of the equation. Advertisers also want to know whether people are fast-forwarding through the commercials. Nielsen, the primary company for counting television viewers, is working on something called “Anytime Anywhere Media Measurement” that will track viewership of TV commercials, fuse TV and Internet viewing and, within five years, eliminate paper diaries that require people to write down their viewing habits.

In newspapers, worried publishers want to make more of three key ideas they think are missed by the old notion of circulation, the number of newspapers sold each day. That metric, they argue, fails to recognize how many different people actually read a paper, how much time they spend with it, and the number of people who read the paper online. Their goal is some measurement that will capture total audience.

Magazines may be headed toward something similar, led by Time, which wants to sell itself as a combination of print and online.
And online, the situation may be even more muddled. What is a page view? What is a visit? The way pages are built and the measuring system employed often yield different results. And new delivery systems, such as e-mail alerts, RSS, podcasting and more, can go uncounted in the current ways of measuring. The more successful a site is in making its content mobile, the more it may drive down “traffic” to the site itself.

The effects of that may already be showing. The number of people who go “online” for news or anything else has now stabilized, confirming something we first saw last year. In all, about 92 million people now go online for news, according to one leading survey.¹

How is it possible that the online audience has already reached a plateau, even as high-speed connections are spreading? The spread of new mobile digital equipment may be part of the answer. The concept of going online itself may now be too limited.

And online is the best that it gets. In 2006, by the traditional yardsticks, the audience numbers dropped for more media than we have seen before. Even public radio, which had seen its audience explode over the last decade, appears to have flattened out. The audience for alternative weekly newspapers, recently a growth area, now appears to be contracting.

One big change was cable. Fox began to see its audience decline in 2006, enough despite gains at MSNBC to produce an overall slide for the industry. The mean average audience for cable news dropped roughly 12% in prime time and 11% in daytime.

At newspapers, despite hopes that the year might be better, 2006 saw daily circulation drop by almost 3% and Sunday almost 4%, about as bad as the year before. The 50 biggest papers in the country continued to suffer more than that by about another percentage point.

Over the last three years, the losses total 6.3 percent daily and 8 percent Sunday.

Readership, the new preferred number, while it looked better, was also falling, down 1.7% in 2006.

The audience for magazines over all was flat, but magazines to some degree can buy circulation through discounts. The more telling factor was that Time decided to reduce the circulation it guarantees to advertisers.

In network news, a year of change on the air made little difference with audiences. Despite new anchors, millions in promotion, press attention and more, network evening news lost another million viewers, roughly the same number it has lost in each of the last 25 years. As a percentage, of course, the number is growing.
Morning news also fell, for the second year running, by 500,000 viewers (to 13.6 million) putting the audience at the lowest point of the decade.

Local news, meanwhile, registered even more rapid audience declines — a disappointment after earlier numbers had suggested the losses had stabilized. We found ratings and share numbers dropping year to year in every period of the year and in every daypart, in some cases by double digits. The use of new digital people meters may have something to do with it, but that hardly explains it all.

The ethnic press is still a growth area, but some analysts now see it as cresting. For the first time, the number of native-born Hispanics in the U.S. was higher than the number of immigrants. Still, in 2005, the latest year with data available, Spanish-language newspaper circulation — not just dailies but all papers — continued to grow substantially, up 900,000, to 17.6 million.

The audience for radio, meanwhile, remains stable, with more than 90% of people listening at least some each week. But logic suggests that the landscape there is changing, too, in the amount of time spent listening if not the total number of listeners. In traditional radio, news/talk/information remains the most popular category, but news is probably a small part of that.

While alternative listening devices are proliferating, news is only a small part of that universe as well. Only 8% of MP3 owners listen to news podcasts, 6% of cell phone owners get news on their phones, and 18.5% of owners of personal digital assistant devices get news from their PDA’s. One technology dismissed earlier, Internet radio, seems to be now gaining some force.

**Footnotes**

1. And nearly a third of them, or roughly 29 million people, now regularly get news online.