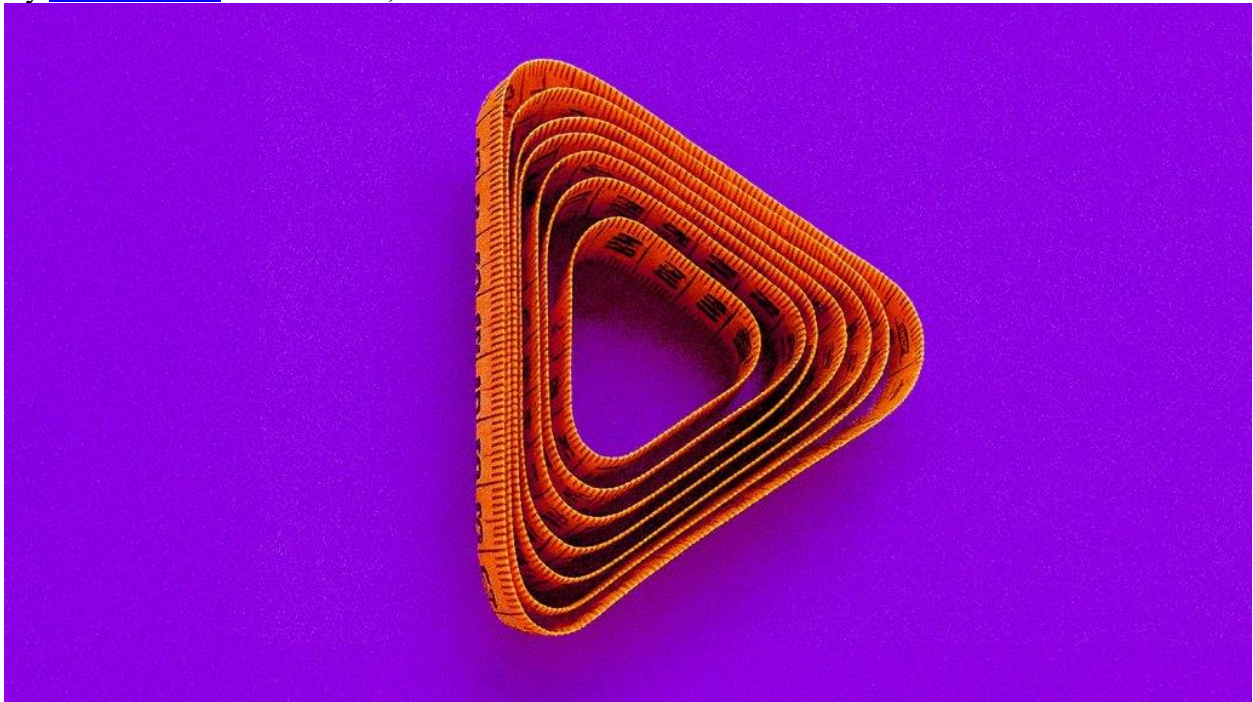


## Future of TV Briefing: WTF is the DASH TV universe study at the center of the latest Nielsen drama?

By [Tim Peterson](#) • March 25, 2026 •



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This Future of TV Briefing covers the latest in streaming and TV for Digiday+ members and is distributed over email every Wednesday at 10 a.m. ET. [More from the series →](#)

This week's Future of TV Briefing looks at what is the TV universe study at the center of the recent drama surrounding Nielsen's The Gauge TV viewership report.

- Measuring the universe
- Meta's creator courtship, Disney's runaway "Bachelorette" and more

# Measuring the universe

What's with all the [hubbub over Nielsen's delayed The Gauge TV viewership report](#) for February, right?

Well, it goes beyond the simple fact that last month was a major month for traditional TV – and especially NBCUniversal – between the Super Bowl, Winter Olympics and NBA All-Star Game. There was also a major shift in the methodology undergirding Nielsen's numbers. And that has everything to do with something called a TV universe study, the Advertising Research Foundation's DASH universe study, to be exact.

## WTF is a TV universe study?

Think of it as like the U.S. Census but for TV audiences. It's a survey of actual individuals to gauge how many people in the U.S. watch TV in some form – traditional TV through set-top boxes or over-the-air signals or streaming pay-TV services, streaming services, etc. – and then how that overall TV audience breaks down into various segments, such as by demographics.

## What's the point of a TV universe study?

To establish baseline numbers for other forms of measurement to be projected against. For example, Nielsen uses a sample of tens of thousands of U.S. households – among other data sources – to measure TV and streaming viewership. It then projects that measurement sample against the full U.S. TV-watching population. The TV universe study is that U.S. TV-watching population.

“Universe studies are sort of the unsung heroes of the measurement world, but also the sort of the baseline understanding for the rest,” said Jim Meyer, general manager of ARF's DASH.

## OK, and the TV universe study in question is the DASH study?

Correct.

## And what's so special about DASH?

Well, for one thing, it's [accredited by the Media Rating Council](#), the industry's official measurement arbiter. That accreditation came in January 2026, and later that month Nielsen [adopted DASH](#) as the universe study for the basis of its measurements. Nielsen made that move after MRC [raised questions to Nielsen in September 2025](#) about the reliability of Nielsen's numbers – which were a [big point of frustration during last year's upfront negotiations](#) – and called for Nielsen to start using an independent universe estimate.

## Universe *estimate*?

Yeah... Similar to how the U.S. Census is ultimately an estimate because not everyone fills out their Census forms, the DASH universe study is an estimate [based on twice-a-year surveys](#)

[conducted by polling firm NORC from the University of Chicago](#), which ARF has enlisted to perform the study. NORC has roughly 100 people in the field to conduct the surveys, in addition to 80 phone interviews and 25 researchers, analysts, statisticians and operations employees, Meyer said.

“In ’25, we had a little over 9,000 online surveys, 1,500 face-to-face [surveys]. There’s a small group of people, typically 300 every year, that prefer to do it on the phone; some of them don’t have internet; they tend to be much older,” said Paul Donato, chief research officer at ARF.

### **What’s the information collected in these surveys?**

Demographic-based information, like age, spoken language, country of origin. But also TV- and streaming-related information.

“We have every TV set, its location, its brand, whether it’s smart, how it’s connected, also any connected devices to which you could also get video, such as game consoles, video players and streaming devices. We know every mobile device in the house: who owns it, with whom is it shared, what is it used for? What the internet connectivity in the household is for streaming TV? We have a very broad set of the major [ad-supported and subscription-based streaming services] by tiers and also [free, ad-supported streaming TV services]. We also measure subscriptions. We have how you get live TV, including casting from devices,” Donato said.

### **What does this have to do with Nielsen’s delayed Gauge report?**

Well, the delayed report is for February, the first full month after Nielsen implemented DASH’s universe estimate. And what happened was that DASH estimated more people are watching traditional TV than Nielsen had been previously measuring. Which has meant that Nielsen’s measurement of traditional TV viewership needed to be adjusted to reflect that audience expansion and, in turn, [lower streaming’s viewership share](#).

### **Wait, more people are watching traditional TV?**

Not necessarily. It’s that the number of people who are watching traditional TV were effectively being undercounted by Nielsen. So the implementation of DASH’s universe estimate has corrected the count. A Nielsen spokesperson said this has resulted in a short-term lift for traditional TV viewership, but that streaming viewership is still expected to grow in the long term.

### **OK, so a one-time fix and Nielsen’s TV and streaming measurements will be solid from here on out?**

Sure, sure...

## **What we’ve heard**

“It’s just maintaining at this point.”

—Agency exec on the expected “flexibility” conversation during this year’s upfront negotiations

## Numbers to know

**\$3,000:** How much Meta will pay each month to some creators who join its Creator Fast Track program to post Facebook Reels.

**\$296 million:** How much money California has awarded in tax credits for 16 TV shows produced in the state.

**7%:** Percentage of Starz employees that the company has laid off after spinning off from Lionsgate last year.

**62%:** Average occupancy for LA soundstages in the first half of 2025, down from 63% in 2024.

## What we’ve covered

### **A year after Unilever, the ad-funded creator economy is still catching up to its own ambition:**

- Last year Unilever CEO Fernando Fernández declared plans to dedicate 50% of the company’s media budget to creators.
- But many brands lack the systems, workflows and tools to make influencers a core pillar of their marketing.

*Read more about the creator economy [here](#).*

### **Joint signings highlight growing convergence between creator and Hollywood agencies:**

- Creator agency Reign Maker Group and Hollywood talent agency Paradigm announced a series of joint signings, underscoring how representation models are evolving as agencies seek to diversify both their talent rosters and revenue streams.
- RMG and Paradigm’s partnerships mark a shift toward building diverse portfolios that attract varying revenue models, for a more resilient creator-focused business that isn’t reliant on ad revenue or brand partnerships.

*Read more about creator and Hollywood agency convergence [here](#).*

### **The real winners of March Madness? Brands that move fast on NIL deals:**

- Companies across sectors, from footwear to personal care, are racing to sign college basketball players and feature them in marketing materials as the NCAA tournament gets underway.
- By taking advantage of this hype, brands get an opportunity to drive engagement, awareness and conversion, especially among the coveted cohort of Gen Z.

Read more about March Madness NIL deals [here](#).

### **Brands turn niche news creators into a new earned media engine:**

- Brands like Tropicana’s Naked Smoothie, NASCAR and even AI tech companies are looking to news-driven creators to play a larger role in their traditional earned media strategy.
- Where creators offer engagement and awareness, traditional press means credibility, marketers say.

Read more about niche news creators as earned media [here](#).

### **For Parker Thatch, video is more than just a social media strategy:**

- Livestreaming is more than just a social media strategy for the husband-and-wife team behind the eight-figure luxury handbag and accessories brand Parker Thatch.
- But there are strong business benefits for the direct-to-consumer brand, too, with sales peaking as much as 50% during streams.

Read more about Parker Thatch’s livestreaming strategy [here](#).

## **What we’re reading**

### **[Meta’s latest creator recruitment push:](#)**

Meta is offering guaranteed monthly payments of up to \$3,000 to lure creators from TikTok and YouTube — who may or may not remember Facebook’s and Instagram’s creator monetization track records — to post Reels on Facebook through its new Creator Fast Track program, according to CNBC.

### **[Disney’s runaway “Bachelorette”:](#)**

ABC’s decision to pull the new season of “The Bachelorette” could cost the network tens of millions of dollars in production, promotion and lost ad revenue, according to The Wall Street Journal.

### **[Tubi’s TikTok creator content incubator:](#)**

The FOX-owned free, ad-supported streamer launched a “Creatorverse Incubator” with TikTok to support creators in producing original shows, according to TechCrunch.

### **[LinkedIn’s CTV ad deal:](#)**

LinkedIn will let The Trade Desk’s advertisers use its user data to target ads on CTV, according to Business Insider.

**Toyota's 'Baywatch' sponsorship deal:**

Fox has signed Toyota for a season-long sponsorship of its new "Baywatch" series, with the Tacoma serving as the lifeguards' official vehicle, according to Variety.