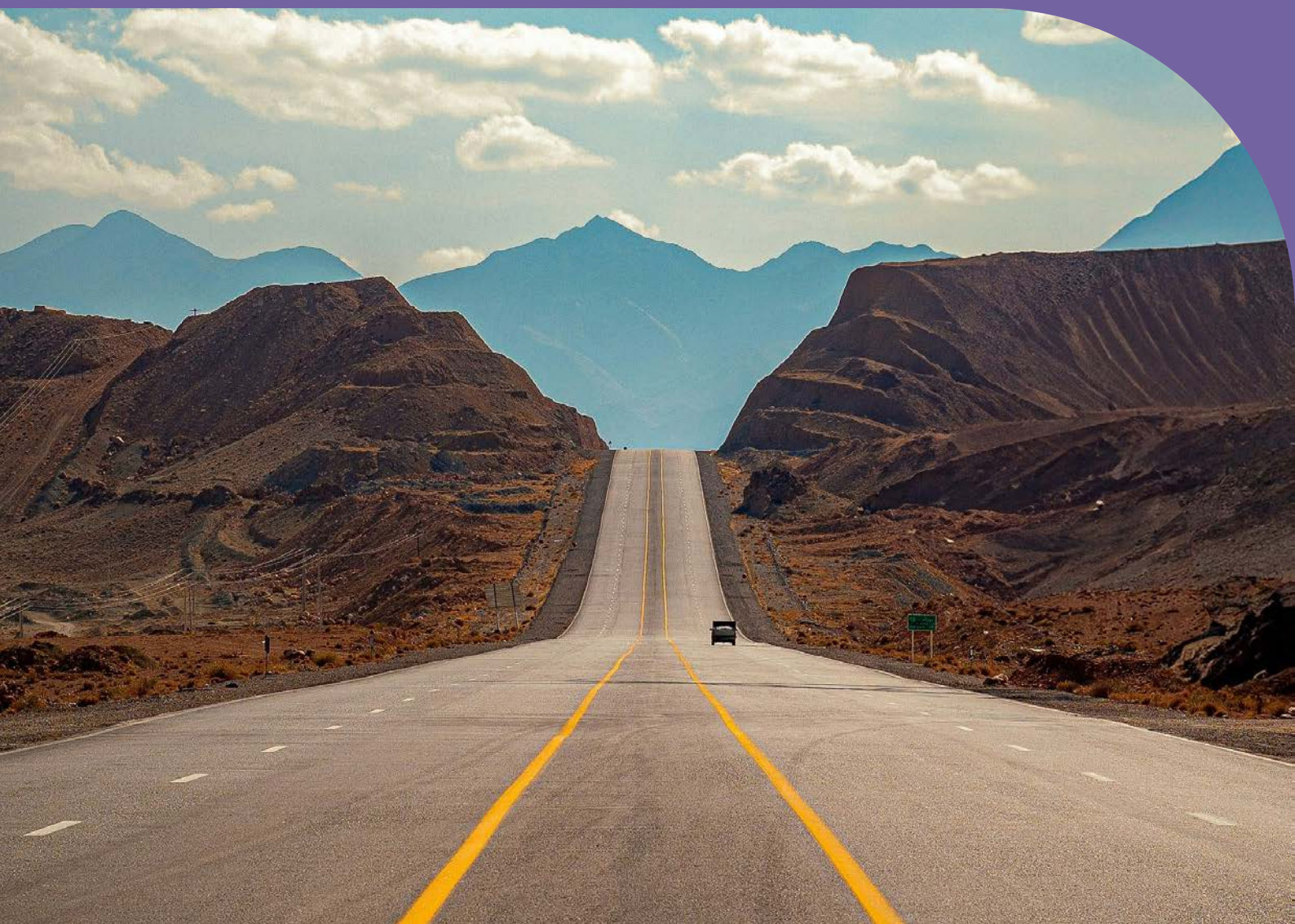


Executive Summary

Measuring What Advertising Changes:

Attribution, Incrementality and the
Future of Outcomes Measurement

September 2026



About CIMM

The Coalition for Innovative Media Measurement (CIMM) is a non-partisan, pan-industry organization focused on improving media measurement, currency, data collaboration and the use of emerging metrics. CIMM brings together advertisers, agencies, media owners, platforms, technology companies and measurement providers to support research, testing, dialogue and the development of practical industry approaches to shared measurement challenges.

This paper was authored by Jon Watts, Managing Director of CIMM.

Research Objectives and Approach

CIMM Working Papers examine emerging measurement issues, synthesize evidence and identify questions and potential areas for further industry work. They are discussion documents and do not necessarily represent final CIMM positions. These papers are intended to provide context, develop perspectives, catalyze debate and identify questions for further consideration during our program. They do not necessarily represent a final CIMM position; rather, they are designed to inform discussion and help lay the groundwork for future CIMM research and industry workstreams.

CIMM identified attribution and outcomes measurement as one of its three principal strategic priorities for 2026. Television and video have already developed substantial capabilities to connect advertising with consumer and business outcomes, and those capabilities are becoming increasingly important to measurement, optimization and commercial decision-making. This Working Paper considers what is required for the next stage of that development. It examines two connected challenges for the U.S. television and video marketplace: how to strengthen the evidentiary basis of attribution and outcomes claims, and how to make credible outcome signals easier to interpret and use across a fragmented, multi-seller marketplace. It reviews what current systems measure, what their outputs can support, how outcomes are becoming embedded in media execution and commercial practice, and where targeted cross-industry work could improve transparency, experimental practice and marketplace interoperability.

The objective is to provide a practical roadmap for strengthening the marketplace's existing capabilities, not to prescribe a single methodology, provider or commercial model.

Scope, Method and Evidentiary Status

This paper is an analytical and industry-policy Working Paper examining attribution, incrementality and outcomes measurement in the U.S. television and video marketplace. It is not an accreditation assessment of any individual measurement service, a legal opinion, or an empirical estimate of market-wide advertising effectiveness.

The analysis draws on published academic and industry research, measurement standards and guidance, publicly available information about current market practices and capabilities, CIMM research and industry activity, and consultation and review with practitioners and subject-matter experts. Its primary focus is U.S. television and video, while drawing selectively on evidence from digital advertising, experimentation, marketing-mix modeling and other adjacent fields where they illuminate the underlying measurement questions.

The paper distinguishes between observed facts, published evidence, analytical interpretation and proposals for future industry work. The priorities identified in Chapter 11 are areas for consideration and further investigation; they do not represent agreed industry commitments or imply endorsement by organizations or individuals consulted during the development of the paper. Throughout, the strength and granularity of any conclusion should be understood as bounded by the underlying data, methodology, assumptions and research design.

Acknowledgements

This paper represents the independent analysis and synthesis of the author. It has benefited substantially from discussions with CIMA members and other participants across the advertising, television, measurement, data and technology ecosystem, as well as from detailed review and feedback from experts in advertising effectiveness, attribution, experimentation and causal measurement.

The author is grateful to everyone who contributed perspectives, challenged assumptions, reviewed drafts and helped strengthen the analysis. Participation in these discussions or reviews should not be interpreted as endorsement of every conclusion or proposal contained in the paper.

Special thanks are due to Rick Bruner, CEO of Central Control, for his feedback, ideas and support.

All errors, judgments and interpretations remain the responsibility of the author.

A note on this extract

This document is a limited extract from CIMM's full 155 page *Measuring What Advertising Changes* report, highlighting some of the key findings from the study. In this deliverable, we present just the Key Takeaways, recommended industry priorities, and Executive Summary, extracted from the full report.

The full report is deliberately a substantial Working Paper, intended both as an industry analysis and as a detailed reference resource, containing more secondary research, interpretative analysis, and a full discussion of trends in outcomes measurement as outlined in its table of contents, summarized below.

Chapter 1: Foundational principles: what attribution can – and cannot – tell us

Chapter 2: What exactly are we measuring and what are we inferring?

Chapter 3: How consumer journeys shape the attribution challenge

Chapter 4: Putting it all together – the measurement confidence gap

Chapter 5: The U.S. marketplace today – abundant signals, uneven proof

Chapter 6: Addressable TV and CTV: a measurement revolution – or a fragmentation problem?

Chapter 7: From attribution to incrementality – building credible causal evidence

Chapter 8: Beyond the next transaction – measuring brand and long-term effects

Chapter 9: From measurement systems to measurement intelligence

Chapter 10: From outcomes capability to marketplace scale

Chapter 11: Priorities for practical cross-industry work on TV attribution and outcomes measurement

Conclusion: From connection to confidence

The full version of this report is available to members of CIMM and can be found on our website.

Key Takeaways

Television and video have developed sophisticated capabilities for connecting advertising with consumer and business outcomes. The next stage is not simply to generate more outcomes data, but to strengthen what that evidence can establish and make credible outcome signals easier to interpret and use across the marketplace.

- 1 Connection is not causation.** Linking an advertising exposure with a subsequent search, visit, purchase or other outcome establishes an observed relationship. Attribution can assign credit for that outcome. Establishing incrementality requires a credible estimate of what would otherwise have happened.
- 2 More data and greater granularity do not automatically produce stronger causal evidence.** Better identity resolution, richer consumer-path data and more detailed reporting can improve observability and operational usefulness without eliminating selection effects, prior purchase propensity, missing influences or other sources of bias.
- 3 The observed consumer journey is not necessarily the causal journey.** Consumers bring existing preferences, intentions and purchasing histories to advertising, while price, availability, recommendations, competitor activity, previous brand experience and creative execution can all affect outcomes. Even a rich sequence of touchpoints may therefore provide only part of the explanation.
- 4 No single methodology provides the complete answer.** Attribution, randomized and quasi-experiments, MMM, brand research and customer evidence illuminate different dimensions of effectiveness. They should inform and test one another, while evidence with stronger causal identification should carry greater weight for causal claims.
- 5 AI can strengthen the measurement system, but it cannot eliminate the identification problem.** AI can integrate evidence, interrogate assumptions, identify inconsistencies and accelerate learning. It cannot manufacture the missing counterfactual or turn association into causation through greater computation alone.
- 6 TV's next opportunity is to combine stronger evidence with greater marketplace usability.** The ecosystem already possesses extensive outcomes capabilities. Greater consistency in definitions, disclosures, experimental practice, data interfaces and cross-seller workflows could make those capabilities easier to use at scale without requiring a single methodology, provider or commercial model. A federated marketplace offers a more practical direction than a universal outcomes system or guarantee.

An Industry Roadmap: Three Priorities for Practical Cross-Industry Work

The paper identifies three connected opportunities to strengthen television and video outcomes measurement: improving the clarity of outcomes claims, strengthening a particularly important form of causal experimentation, and reducing unnecessary friction in using credible outcome signals across sellers.

An industry roadmap for TV and video outcomes measurement

Priority	What it is intended to achieve	Practical output
1. Establish common definitions and disclosure requirements for outcomes measurement	Make material outcomes claims easier to understand and compare by specifying what was measured, what was inferred, the data and population involved, the methodology and counterfactual supporting any causal claim, and the relevant assumptions, uncertainty and granularity.	A common outcomes-measurement disclosure framework , including an Incrementality Claim Specification , designed for use in briefs, RFPs, contracts, methodology documentation and reporting.
2. Develop and validate common practice guidelines for geographic randomized experiments in television and video	Establish clearer expectations for commissioning, designing, executing, analyzing and interpreting geo-RCTs, while building directly on existing MRC, ARF, IAB, academic and practitioner guidance.	A practical Geo-RCT Practice Framework , supported by common commissioning, design, power-analysis, treatment-integrity and reporting templates and tested against real TV and video experiments.
3. Assess how to make the television outcomes marketplace more consistent, scalable and interoperable	Identify where common or compatible definitions, interfaces, disclosures and workflows would materially reduce friction when advertisers use outcomes capabilities across multiple sellers, without imposing methodological or commercial uniformity.	A stage-gated feasibility assessment and multi-seller testing program identifying where interoperability creates demonstrable value and whether new standards, shared interfaces or other industry coordination are warranted.

Executive Summary

Television and video have developed a sophisticated ecosystem for measuring what happens after advertising is delivered. Exposure can now be connected with an extraordinary range of consumer and commercial outcomes, and those signals increasingly influence planning, optimization and commercial arrangements. The next challenge is to establish more consistently what those connections mean – including when they support a claim about what advertising actually caused.

Exposure can now be connected with searches, visits, leads, subscriptions, purchases, retention and other forms of business value at a scale that would have been difficult to imagine a decade ago. Household-, device- and account-level data can be linked with advertiser first-party data, digital behavior and retailer transactions. Addressable television, connected television and streaming provide richer exposure records and new opportunities for experimentation. Data clean rooms allow datasets controlled by different organizations to contribute to common analyses. Outcome signals increasingly feed directly into targeting, bidding, optimization and, in parts of the market, commercial guarantees.

Together, these developments have expanded the range and operational use of television and video outcomes measurement.

As outcomes evidence becomes more consequential to budget allocation, optimization, guarantees and media buying, two questions become more important: whether the evidence can establish what advertising changed, and whether credible outcome signals can be used consistently across a fragmented, multi-seller marketplace.

That tension is already visible in the market. In iSpot's 2026 survey of agency and advertiser executives, more than 45% identified business outcomes as the most critical factor in buying and negotiating media, even as 47% described measuring those outcomes across linear and streaming television as a significant challenge¹.

Major integrated platforms such as Amazon and Google can combine media delivery, identity, first-party signals, conversion data, measurement and optimization within closely connected environments. This can reduce data fragmentation and shorten the path from measurement to action, but it does not automatically strengthen causal identification or provide a complete view of behavior and outcomes beyond the platform. The strength of any measurement claim still depends on its data, measurement boundary, comparison strategy, research design and counterfactual.

The wider TV and video ecosystem has developed through a more distributed structure, involving multiple publishers, platforms, identity systems, data providers and measurement approaches. Its opportunity is to improve consistency and interoperability across those systems while preserving their different strengths, commercial models and methodological approaches. Existing industry initiatives, including the MRC's 2022 Outcomes and Data Quality Standards, provide important methodological foundations for this work, although implementation, disclosure and adoption remain uneven.

But the ability to connect advertising exposure with a subsequent outcome does not necessarily establish how advertising contributed to that outcome.

The paper starts from a central proposition: The observed path to transaction is not necessarily the consumer's complete journey, and the complete journey does not necessarily reveal the full causal process.

Consumers bring existing preferences, previous purchasing, category needs and varying degrees of purchase intent to the advertising they receive. Targeting can concentrate advertising among consumers already likely to respond.

¹ Source: iSpot, *The Short List: Key Takeaways from iSpot's 2026 Video Ad Strategy Survey* (May 2026).

Media consumption, demographics, geography and market conditions can influence both advertising exposure and purchasing. Important advertising and non-advertising influences may remain outside the observable data. Advertising effects can also accumulate across exposures, interact across channels and develop over periods extending well beyond the immediate transaction.

Advertising exposure is also not a homogeneous treatment. Different creative executions can produce materially different levels of attention, emotional response, memory, brand association and behavioral response. Where creative varies across audiences, publishers, platforms or campaign conditions, observed differences in outcomes may reflect differences in what was shown as well as differences in who was reached or where the advertising appeared. Credible outcomes measurement needs to identify material variation in creative alongside variation in audience, media and exposure.

Connection establishes what was observed. Attribution assigns credit for an observed outcome. Incrementality asks what changed because the advertising occurred. These are different claims, and they require different evidence. Better identity resolution can strengthen confidence that exposure and outcome records belong together; it does not, by itself, establish causality. More granular attribution can improve operational insight without necessarily producing equally granular causal knowledge.

Two connected questions follow. First, what do the available data and methodologies allow the market to conclude about what advertising changed, with what degree of confidence and at what level of granularity? Second, what common definitions, disclosures, experimental practices and interfaces could make credible outcome signals easier to interpret and use across the fragmented U.S. television and video marketplace?

The core measurement problem

The central measurement problem remains the counterfactual: what would have happened if the advertising had not occurred?

Exposure is rarely random. Consumers who see advertising may differ from those who do not in prior purchasing, brand preference, category need, media behavior or predicted likelihood to buy, while targeting can concentrate advertising among consumers already expected to respond. Richer consumer-path data can improve understanding of the observed sequence without necessarily distinguishing pre-existing demand from advertising response or capturing all of the influences that produced the outcome.

Different methodologies address different parts of this problem. Attribution can provide granular evidence about observable pathways; randomized experiments can provide stronger causal evidence about defined interventions; quasi-experiments can extend causal inference where randomization is unavailable; MMM can provide broader cross-channel and longer-term context; and brand, customer and retailer evidence can capture effects outside immediate transactions. The objective is not one definitive attribution number, but a connected evidence system in which the scope and strength of each conclusion remain visible.

Where the ecosystem stands today

Against this framework, the contemporary U.S. attribution and outcomes ecosystem is technically sophisticated but uneven in the evidentiary strength of the claims it can support.

The market is becoming far more capable of connecting television and video delivery with identities and commercial outcomes; analyzing advertiser, publisher and retailer data together; conducting experiments in some platform, addressable, streaming and geographic environments; and incorporating outcome signals directly into optimization. Modern MMM, Bayesian approaches and experiment-informed attribution create further opportunities to connect previously separate forms of evidence.

The resulting challenge is no longer simply one of data availability. It is one of evidentiary confidence. The resulting measurement-confidence gap arises when the industry's capacity to generate detailed outcomes data exceeds its capacity to support equally detailed causal conclusions.

A system may report performance by publisher, audience, household, placement or impression even when credible causal evidence exists only at the campaign, channel or market level. Greater granularity can be operationally valuable, but it should not be mistaken for greater causal confidence.

The common language of "outcomes" can further obscure these distinctions. A website visit is an outcome. A purchase is an outcome. So are attributed and incremental purchases – but they do not represent the same kind of evidence. "Outcome" describes what is being measured; it does not, by itself, establish what can be inferred about advertising's contribution to it.

The industry is highly capable of generating and connecting outcome signals, but less consistent in defining what those signals establish, distinguishing attribution from incrementality, communicating uncertainty and matching reported granularity to the strength of the supporting evidence.

The principal challenge is not simply to create more measurement. It is to make the measurement already available more transparent, interpretable and appropriately matched to the decisions it is intended to inform.

Where outcomes measurement is heading

The analysis points to two related challenges for the next stage of outcomes measurement.

The first is **evidentiary**: how to combine attribution, experiments, MMM, brand research and customer evidence without claiming greater causal confidence or granularity than those methods support.

The second is **operational**: how to make credible outcome signals easier to activate, measure, optimize and compare across a television marketplace distributed among multiple sellers, identity systems, measurement providers and data environments.

A connected evidence system combines methods according to the questions and levels of inference they can support. Randomized experiments should provide the strongest anchors for causal claims where they can be validly implemented; quasi-experiments can extend causal inference where randomization is unavailable; observational attribution can provide speed, scale and granularity; MMM can provide broader cross-channel, business and longer-term context; and brand and customer evidence can capture effects that are not visible in immediate transactions. Their outputs can inform, test and constrain one another without being treated as causally equivalent.

This implies a practical hierarchy of evidence for causal claims. Where validly implemented, randomized evidence should generally carry the greatest weight in determining whether advertising caused an incremental change. Credible quasi-experimental designs can extend causal inference where randomization is unavailable, subject to stronger identification assumptions. Observational attribution and predictive models can provide valuable evidence about pathways, associations, heterogeneity and likely response, but they should not acquire causal status simply because they are granular, sophisticated or accurate at prediction. Methodological pluralism should not imply methodological equivalence.

AI can accelerate this learning system by helping to integrate evidence, interrogate assumptions, identify inconsistencies and support model criticism and hypothesis generation. It does not change the underlying requirements of causal inference: more data or computation cannot create an unobserved counterfactual or turn association into causation. The objective is a coherent portfolio of evidence in which the scope, assumptions and uncertainty of different estimates remain visible and stronger causal evidence is given greater weight for causal claims.

On the operational side, television already supports substantial outcomes measurement, optimization and, in parts of the market, outcome guarantees. The unresolved question is how efficiently those capabilities operate when advertisers buy across multiple sellers.

An advertiser may currently need to reconnect first-party data, reconcile different outcome and exposure definitions, interpret different identity and attribution approaches, normalize reporting and establish separate mechanisms for using outcome signals in optimization. Individual systems can function effectively while the collective workflow remains costly and fragmented.

This creates two related requirements:

Infrastructure interoperability concerns whether advertiser data, exposure records, outcome signals and reports can move efficiently across sellers.

Measurement interoperability concerns whether the resulting outputs are sufficiently transparent and comparable for advertisers to understand what each result means. Technical connectivity does not automatically create measurement equivalence.

The objective is to provide sufficient consistency in selected definitions, interfaces, disclosures and workflows to make credible outcomes capabilities easier to use across television while preserving legitimate competition and differentiation.

That distinction also places an important limit on what marketplace scale should be expected to mean. A universal television outcomes guarantee – under which an advertiser could buy one guaranteed business result seamlessly across the full linear, streaming and CTV ecosystem – would require far more than common data connectivity. Participating sellers would need sufficiently compatible definitions of the outcome and exposure, identity and matching arrangements, measurement populations, attribution rules, evidentiary standards, reporting, contractual responsibility and remedies. Where an incremental outcome was guaranteed, the parties would also need a credible basis for establishing the counterfactual. Those requirements make a single pan-industry guarantee considerably more demanding than an interoperable outcomes marketplace.

A more practical model is federated. Participating sellers could use common or compatible infrastructure to receive advertiser outcome signals, connect those signals with exposure data and produce measurement that is easier for advertisers to interpret and use across the market. Individual companies would still retain their own inventory, pricing, identity approaches, technology, measurement partners and commercial models. Where it makes commercial sense, groups of sellers could also develop joint or comparable outcome-based offerings without requiring the whole market to adopt one model.

Such an approach could support a package-level guarantee without implying that the separate causal contribution of every publisher or impression within the package has been identified.

A practical industry roadmap

The analysis points to three opportunities for practical cross-industry work: establishing common definitions and disclosure requirements for outcomes measurement; developing and validating common practice guidelines for geographic randomized experiments in television and video; and assessing the minimum interoperability required to make credible outcome signals easier to use across multiple television sellers.

These priorities deliberately address different layers of the problem. The first improves the meaning and interpretability of outcomes claims; the second strengthens practice around an important source of causal evidence; and the third addresses the operational friction created by a fragmented marketplace. None requires a single measurement methodology, provider, identity system or commercial model. Together, they offer a practical roadmap for strengthening and connecting capabilities that television and video have already built.

The opportunity is to support the development of a more mature, integrated marketplace, one that provides stronger evidence about what advertising really changed, combined with greater consistency in how credible outcome signals can be understood and used across the marketplace.

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