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5.7 The effects of candour in respondent instructions on overclaiming of magazine readership

INTRODUCTION

Review of the literature on the accuracy of readership claims reveals two general classes of error: (1) failure to claim readership when, indeed, it had occurred and (2) claims of readership when readership did not take place. For convenience, the first kind of error will be called *underclaiming* and the second is *overclaiming*.

We hypothesize that these errors are not deliberate, that respondents do try to give honest answers. But, we reasoned, for the most part, respondents are not told the purpose of the interview and are not warned about errors in claiming readership. If they were told, we hypothesized, they would make a greater effort and, hence, reduce both kinds of errors. As a consequence, we conducted a study in which endeavoured to test the hypothesis for overclaiming.*

DESIGN

Two experimental groups were used, one of which was subject to 'Candour' and one of which was subject to 'Non-Candour' instructions. Within each group, half of the respondents were asked about a short list of magazines and half about a long list.

CANDOUR:
1. The respondents were told why the study is important:

    gives ratings to magazines similar to audience ratings of TV shows
    guides editors to create more interesting issues
    provides readers with more interesting stories and photographs
    provides more interesting advertising
2. The respondents were shown a card with definitions of what is meant by 'reading or looking into':

    reading all or just a page or two
    leafing through
    glancing at a page or two
    looking at the table of contents

and what is *not* meant:
    seeing just the cover
    reading or looking at other issues
3. Respondents were given some reasons why people underclaim and were asked to volunteer additional reasons
4. Respondents were given some reasons why people overclaim and were asked to volunteer additional reasons.

NON-CANDOUR
Respondents were given a standard 'editorial interest' or 'through the book' interview.

SHORT LIST
Respondents were give logo cards for eight magazines in the screening phase. They were shown specific issues for those titles on which they passed the screen.

LONG LIST
Respondents were given logo cards for eighty magazines in the screening phase. They were shown specific issues for only those of the eight on the short list for which they passed the screen.

The eight test publications included pre-publication issues (prior to regular delivery) of *Time* and *Newsweek* (both weeklies) and 'aged' copies of *Family Circle, Reader's Digest, Woman's Day, People, Sports Illustrated,* and *Good Housekeeping.*

Sample sizes
Personal interviews were conducted between June 1 and June 23, 1981:

	Male	Female	Total
Candour	257	261	518
Non-Candour	256	259	515
Total	513	520	1033

RESULTS

Claimed readership of the specific issue shown to the respondents is shown in **Table 1.**

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TABLE 1
Claimed readership

	Candour	Non Candour	Long List	Short List
Base	561	578	577	562
	%	%	%	%
Time	15	8	12	12
Newsweek	11	6	10	7
Family Circle	16	12	14	13
Good Housekeeping	16	12	14	13
People	21	13	17	17
Reader's Digest	24	15	20	19
Sports Illustrated	12	9	11	10
Woman's Day	14	8	9	12
Average	16	10	13	13

Note first that *all* of the claims for *Time* and *Newsweek* are overclaims. Since these issues were not yet in circulation, no one could have seen them. Also note that the claims for each of those two magazines, under the conditions of Candour were almost *double* the 'normal' or Non-Candour conditions. Also, claims for those magazines which could have been seen were, on average, 60% higher under the Candour condition.

With respect to the length of the list in which the test issues are embedded, on average there was no difference. However, for individual titles there did seem to be differences. Note for example, that while the (false) claims of readership for *Time* seem to have been unaffected by the length of the list, *Newsweek*'s false claims were affected substantially.

These levels of overclaiming are undoubtedly much too high. On an *a posteriori* basis, some of these overclaiming respondents would have been correct. For example, someone who reads every issue would have seen the test issue. Thus, these claims should be weighted to reflect regularity of reading. In the questionnaire, after 'readership' was determined,a frequency question was asked for each of the eight magazines. The weightings derived therefrom are shown in **Table 2.**

We recognize that these weights are, at best, crude, and that there is the possibility that they should be different for each magazine. However, in lieu of any other alternatives, they were applied.

TABLE 2
Weightings used

Frequency of readings	Weight
0 of last 4	1.00
1 of last 4	.75
2 of last 4	.50
3 of last 4	.25
4 of last 4	0

Table 3 shows the weighted overclaiming.

TABLE 3
Weighted overclaiming

	Candour	Non-Candour
Time	4%	2%
Newsweek	2%	2%

Note that Candour seems to affect *Time* but not *Newsweek* on a weighted basis.

CONCLUSIONS

In general, Candour seemed to increase the frequency of reading claims. For six of the magazines, we do not know whether the increased frequency was an increase in overclaiming or a reduction in underclaiming. For the two pre-publication weeklies, unweighted claims almost doubled for both magazines, and this is clearly overclaiming. After weighting, one magazine showed no effect of Candour, and one showed a doubling of claims.

(It should be noted that although 2% is a relatively small number, 2% overclaiming by non-readers is, for these magazines, 15% or more of the readership levels published by the two measurement services.)

The weight of evidence in this study suggests that overclaiming does exist — to an appreciable degree — and that Candour in instructing respondents may well increase it.