Bouke Walstra
Weekbladpers b.v.
Amsterdam, The Netherlands

5.8 A new method for the NOP survey — some analyses

INTRODUCTION

The latest edition of the National Readership Survey in the Netherlands (the NOP '82 survey) differs from its predecessors in several important respects. A full description of the changes can be found in Ellis van Bentum's contribution to this symposium *(1)*.

One thing that did not change was the survey's objective: that of getting reliable readership figures to allow meaningful comparisons to be made between the various press media. The only reason for the changes in method was the need for a better survey instrument. Criticism of the old method — in which no changes had been made for about ten years — had been growing for some time. It was felt that it favoured some media at the cost of others.

A NOP technical committee (the TOEKNOP committee) carried out some experiments with a view to improving the survey instrument. Attention to this subject was paid at New Orleans *(2)*. The present paper reports on the TOEKNOP committee's attempts to evaluate the method used in NOP '82.

For the sake of clarity I shall first give a brief outline of developments since the previous survey:

1980: Intensive interviews were carried out using 4 different questionnaires to establish Average Issue Readership (laboratory test). Result: the method, which was subsequently chosen for NOP '82 seemed to be the best.

1981: Persistent disagreement on method, in particular preferences for and dislike of the panel method; this was in fact rather a reflection of a difference of interest between the representatives of the daily press and most publishers of periodicals. Result: the dailies dropped out of the NOP.

Autumn 1981: Most publishers of periodicals want new readership figures quickly.

February 1982: A stability test was rapidly carried out to see how the new questionnaire compared with the old one in field use. Result: the alternative method was adopted on the strength of previously established criteria.

April 1982: Field work for NOP '82 begins

September 1982: The all-time-high results are published without any further explanation, leading to attacks and counterattacks in the press.

late 1982: A new media survey is announced — the Mediascanner *(3)*.

Before giving the results of our analyses I would like to point out the main differences in method between NOP '82 and the surveys of previous years.

(1) The reading question: "when last read or looked at" instead of "reads or sometimes looks at" followed by "has read or looked at during last issue period".

(2) Complete rotation of titles instead of fixed order (monthlies — weeklies — dailies).

(3) Better interviewer instructions and better questionnaire aids.

(4) Procedure giving more active involvement of the respondent.

(5) Field work in one wave (Spring) instead of 4 waves (all seasons).

ANALYSES OF NOP '82

Circulation check

The circulation check is the main method of checking the validity of readership survey results. Funds were initially made available for this check, but for various reasons the committee did not succeed in carrying it out. It was impossible to make a direct check of the readers describing themselves as subscribers, as the market reseach firms which had worked on the NOP '82 refused at first to release the addresses of respondents for this purpose (until it was too late to compare the addresses with subscriber lists which were getting out of date); the fee they asked for carrying out the test themselves made the cost prohibitive if applied to more than one or two journals.

An indirect check of subscriber figures and average counter sales figures was obstructed as some publishers were unwilling to provide sales figures for the relevant period.

These analyses have therefore not yet been carried out.

It should be noted that there can be no absolute check on circulation for NOP purposes, as only the *readers* of a journal are asked how they obtained it.

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TABLE 1
Categories of the recency question

13. Never
12. Longer than 1 year ago
11. 7 months — 1 year ago
10. 4 months — ½ year ago
9. 2-3 months ago
8. 5-7 weeks ago
7. 15 days — 1 month ago
6. 8 days — 2 weeks ago
5. 1 week ago
4. 5-6 days ago
3. 3-4 days ago
2. The day before yesterday
1. Yesterday

(Examples of the resultant distortion can be found in **Table 2,** where we see, for instance, that a specifically women's interest journal like KNIP has about 4 times as many subscribers as in the otherwise equivalent head-of household sample).

The telescoping effect

After allowing for changes in circulation, Average Issue Readership calculated over all journals in NOP '82 had gone up by about 50%. One theory to explain this is that the new questionnaire tempts many readers to rate their last reading of a publication as more recent than it was in fact. This telescoping effect is dealt with in the contribution to this symposium by Joop van Vliet and Costa Tchaoussoglou, so I shall not expand on it here *(4)*.

The Allensbach effect

A fault in the planning of NOP '82 is that no allowance has been made for what is known as the 'Allensbach effect' *(5)*. Surveys carried out by the Institut für Demoskopie of that town indicate that a reading question with many qualifying categories (these are categories belonging to the period on the basis of which readership is defined), as opposed to non-qualifying categories, gives higher readership results than a reading question with comparatively few qualifying categories. In these terms NOP '82 has five categories falling within the issue period of a weekly, against eight categories falling outside of this period (see **Table 1**). NOP '79 had one qualifying against two non-qualifying categories. And in NOP '79 the ratio of qualifying to non-qualifying categories was constant (1:2); while in NOP '82 the ratio varies for monthlies, weeklies and dailies.

The table below gives these ratios per type of journal, and shows NOP '82 readership expressed as an index of NOP '79 readership and *corrected for changes in circulation since 1979.* (Each index is the average of the sum of indexes of the separate journals; all journals are thus weighted equally).

	TOTAL READERSHIP			AVERAGE ISSUE READERSHIP		
	qualifying against non-qualifying categories		index 1982 (1979 = 100)	qualifying against non-qualifying categories		index 1982 (1979 = 100)
	NOP '79	NOP '82		NOP '79	NOP '82	
monthlies	1:1	11:2	171	1:2	7:6	167
weeklies	1:1	9:4	147	1:2	5:8	141
dailies	1:1	6:7	122	1:2	1:12	115

This table shows that the Allensbach effect does indeed influence results; both total readership and average issue readership figures are relatively high for journals with a more favourable proportion of qualifying to non-qualifying categories. But the Allensbach effect cannot be the only reason for the large readership increase in NOP '82 compared with NOP '79. For if we compare the index numbers for average issue readership for each type of journal separately, there is very little difference, while the proportion of qualifying to non-qualifying categories vary widely. We must however also allow for the fact that other factors (such as telescoping) have probably contributed to the comparatively large increase in average issue readership. (We suspect that the Allensbach effect in fact derives to a considerable extent from the telescoping effect). It would at any rate be sensible to keep to the same ratio of qualifying to non-qualifying categories for the various types of journal in subsequent surveys.

The definition of reader question categories

The point — in time — at which the various reader question categories coincide is not quite clear. The 'gaps' between the various categories can be seen in **Table 1.** It is impossible to predict, for instance, whether a respondent who has read a journal more than 3 months but less than 4 months ago will put himself in

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category 9 or category 10. There is room for improvement in the definitions of the reading question categories in this respect.

Another disadvantage, I believe, is the abrupt transition from short to much longer periods of time. Category 4, for example, consists of 2 days, category 5 consists of 1 day, and category 6 suddenly has 6 days. The transition should be more gradual. As well as this, the 'rounded off' heading 'one week ago' in category 5 probably gets preferential treatment from respondents, being more easily grasped than '5 or 6 days ago' or '8 days to 2 weeks ago', the adjacent categories. On this point, too, the reading question could be improved.

The 'contractor effect' and the reading definition

In a recent experiment by one of the Dutch market research firms (Centrum), using two different random samples, it was shown that only very slightly different results were obtained whether one used the old ('79) or the new ('82) NOP questionnaire. And in the preliminary stability test for NOP '82, the old and the new method gave results which differed less than the NOP '79 and NOP '82 results differed. So it would seem that the higher readership figures of NOP '82 are partly due to other factors than the wording of the questions. One of the causes, of course, is not only that other market research firms were employed to do the field work, but in particular that the field work was more intensively supervised, the interviewers given better instructions, the lay-out of the questionnaire improved, and better questionnaire aids provided. All of these factors were given more thorough attention in NOP '82 than in previous NOP surveys. The instructions to interviewers, which were also given verbally in all cases, were also undoubtedly better than in the Centrum survey (omnibus service) and the stability test.

In this sense one would expect the higher readership result of NOP '82 to be a truer reflection of reality than the results of the other surveys. But the questionable point is whether the registration of large numbers of casual readers (in which NOP '82 seems to have excelled) is a useful contribution to media planning. And strongly fluctuating groups of casual readers will also cause relatively large swings in readership figures between one survey and the other, which is of no particular service to the credibility of such investigations.

The above comments are by no means intended to suggest that it would be better to abandon the various improvements made in NOP '82 on these points over the previous surveys. (Another change which should be noted is the emphasis in NOP '82 on a more active role being asked of the respondent — one hopes this means they will give more thought to their answers).

On the contrary, these improvements, which probably give a more accurate reader count, show us rather that we are using too broad a definition of readers (or lookers). The filters at work in previous surveys have apparently excluded the all too incidental and perfunctory readers. I believe we should look for the solution in a narrower definition of reading.

Reading intensity and copy source: comparisons with NOP '79

In the period following the publication of NOP '82, casual readers in particular were found to have increased greatly in number. The copy source and the reading intensity results have been changed accordingly (see **Table 2**). The tables indicate that:

(a) large mutations in copy sources occur mainly in categories other than 'by subscription' and 'over-the-counter sales'

(b) large mutations in reading intensity occur mainly in categories other than 'read almost entirely'

These findings support the argument above for narrowing the definition of reading in future readership surveys.

Readers per copy: some comparisons

Table 3 gives average issue readership divided by paid circulation for those journals included in both NOP '79 and NOP '82 for which reasonably reliable circulation figures were available. These 'readers per copy' figures for 1982 were then expressed as an index of the 'readers per copy' for 1979. This gives us the mutation in readership corrected to allow for changes in circulation.

Average issue readership increased by 50% right along the line (the figure was arrived at by adding up the index numbers and dividing by the number of journals; in other words, all journals were weighted equally). We noted above the monthlies had the largest rises in readership, and dailies the smallest, and also suggested possible reasons for this.

Various other differences can be pointed out.

CHANGES IN READERSHIP OF JOURNALS WITH RISING/FALLING CIRCULATION

Table 3 shows that journals with a smaller circulation than in 1979 have a greater increase in readership than

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TABLE 2
Housewives

			Source of copy (last time read)					*Reading intensity (last time read)*					
		A.I.R x 1.000	*reading map*	*sub-script*	*single copy*	*other*	*D.K.*	*almost all of it*	*most of it*	*about half*	*small part*	*(almost) nothing*	*D.K.*
Knip	1982	863	3	163	309	380	8	415	198	93	105	46	6
	1979	714	5	220	277	193	19	400	135	71	79	30	
Nieuwe Revu	1982	917	508	69	101	236	3	231	186	201	185	101	13
	1979	671	331	55	106	147	32	197	160	118	137	59	
Panorama	1982	1.186	525	115	160	378	8	308	271	244	239	113	11
	1979	924	363	136	161	223	42	291	235	156	173	69	
Kampioen	1981	1.243	7	1.114	17	100	6	171	257	252	356	200	6
	1979	965	3	738	12	163	48	195	167	166	252	184	
Libelle	1982	1.983	442	524	296	712	10	953	507	272	168	78	5
	1979	1.680	341	572	226	515	26	876	424	187	161	33	
Margriet	1982	2.003	530	523	228	714	8	895	529	290	198	81	9
	1979	1.778	420	596	195	538	29	908	446	225	168	32	
Story	1982	1.600	499	199	291	605	6	678	375	230	203	104	9
	1979	1.189	376	238	202	344	29	566	256	163	155	50	
Privé	1982	1.661	444	144	413	656	4	658	366	265	247	112	13
	1979	859	240	86	226	278	28	367	183	132	127	49	
AVRO-Bode/	1982	1.028	7	740	99	177	5	349	289	155	132	10	3
Televizier	1979	814	6	661	85	38	24	304	248	137	87	37	
TROS-Kompas	1982	861	3	627	93	135	4	302	205	143	130	75	6
	1979	749	3	617	86	26	17	298	197	121	103	30	
De Telegraaf	1982	724	1	449	150	119	5	275	226	116	74	30	4
	1979	592	1	328	154	95	14	225	171	106	74	17	
Regional	1982	2.285	2	2.235	105	229	14	871	836	512	264	80	23
Dagblad	1979	2.541	6	2.236	78	148	73	1.099	791	394	208	49	

Source: NOP

(continued)

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TABLE 2 (cont.)
Heads of household

			Source of copy (last time read)					Reading intensity (last time read)					
		A.I.R x 1.000	*reading map*	*sub-script*	*single copy*	*other*	*D.K.*	*almost all of it*	*most of it*	*about half*	*small part*	*(almost) nothing*	*D.K.*
Knip	1982	217		43	73	99	2	66	32	26	39	52	2
	1979	153		43	61	38	10	66	18	15	19	35	
Nieuwe Revu	1982	1.039	532	65	110	331	2	268	217	250	208	91	5
	1979	768	348	61	130	199	29	246	199	134	143	46	
Panorama	1982	1.314	545	128	160	472	9	335	307	286	278	100	7
	1979	1.084	379	166	186	307	46	374	289	188	188	46	
Kampioen	1982	1.470	2	1.278	10	172	7	227	373	340	347	172	11
	1979	1.265	8	969	16	233	39	371	321	221	255	97	
Libelle	1982	1.242	286	377	163	411	5	249	213	217	380	178	6
	1979	954	185	354	141	261	14	238	162	134	287	132	
Margriet	1982	1.242	370	331	137	399	5	251	209	223	366	187	7
	1979	1.016	237	352	134	271	21	247	165	152	305	148	
Story	1982	1.247	412	181	225	426	3	309	228	204	334	162	9
	1979	892	290	159	172	245	25	277	185	146	193	92	
Privé	1982	1.318	370	107	322	514	5	310	211	233	380	176	10
	1979	647	182	70	178	204	14	189	135	111	143	69	
AVRO-Bode/	1982	1.013	14	698	118	180	4	281	293	178	167	89	5
Televizier	1979	832	7	659	84	51	30	289	260	135	111	37	
TROS-Kompas	1982	867	2	636	93	132	3	244	236	147	142	93	5
	1979	733	7	590	86	30	21	249	206	118	121	40	
De Telegraaf	1982	873	1	432	175	263	2	298	300	163	81	26	5
	1979	765	1	367	163	207	25	322	224	115	83	20	
Regional	1982	2.629	1	2.263	91	260	14	1.164	850	351	183	65	16
Dagblad	1979	2.672	9	2.337	75	177	73	1.373	811	324	140	24	

Source: NOP

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TABLE 3
Indices of readers per copy

	Monthlies	*Weeklies*	*Dailies*
ALL JOURNALS	167 (100)	141 (100)	115 (100)
Paid circulation:			
has fallen	175 (105)	152 (108)	123 (107)
has remained stable	172 (103)	136 (96)	113 (98)
has risen	140 (84)	133 (94)	114 (99)
Paid circulation:			
less than 75,000	163 (98)	156 (111)	*
between 75,000 and 250,000	171 (102)	150 (106)	132 (115)
250,000 or more	166 (99)	133 (94)	109 (95)

* non-existent

journals whose circulation was greater than in 1979. This holds good for monthlies, weeklies and dailies, although it shows most strongly for monthlies. It is a tendency one also can expect, assuming that people who cancel a subscription or stop buying a journal do not necessarily stop reading it (in other words, journals with a falling circulation get more readers per copy). Inversely, if a journal's circulation rises, this does not necessarily mean that every extra new copy sold brings in a new reader or new readers; for second readers can become paying readers*. If this phenomenon does actually occur, we should be able to confirm this by comparing the results of NOP '79 with those of NOP '77. The figures below do indeed indicate that this is the case.

	index AIR 1982 (1979 = 100)	*index AIR 1979 (1977 = 100)*
ALL JOURNALS	100	100
circulation has fallen	112	107
circulation has remained stable	97	100
circulation has risen	87	96

The index numbers have been recalculated for ease of comparison (all journals = 100)

Now if many journals had falling circulation and few a rising circulation in the period between 1979 and 1982 compared with the period 1977 — 1979, then the above phenomenon could possibly be one reason for the large increase in readership. This is indeed to some extent the case: in the period 1977 — 1979 there were 10 journals with a falling circulation and 17 with a rising circulation, while in the period 1979 — 1982 the figures were 23 and 13 respectively. Nevertheless this can only explain readership growth to a very small extent, for readership of the journals whose circulation dropped between 1977 and 1979 rose by an average of 8%, while readership figures for the journals whose circulation dropped between 1979 and 1982 increased by as much as 68% (see **Table 3**).

READERSHIP CHANGES IN SMALL AS OPPOSED TO LARGE JOURNALS

Table 3 also shows that readership of journals with a small paid circulation (less than 75,000) increased more than that of journals with a large circulation (more than 250,000). This is an interesting phenomenon which has also been noted by Norwegian media researchers after interviewing methods in the Norwegian readership survey had been changed for the better *(6)*. The Norwegians had also introduced better questionnaire aids and more active involvement of the respondent. It is assumed that when comparatively simple aids are used, as in NOP '79 and earlier, respondents tend to forget the smaller journals. This fact — if correct — is an argument in favour of retaining this element of the new NOP approach. It should be noted that the relationship 'small circulation = relatively large readership increase in NOP '82 compared with NOP '79' does not apply in the case of monthlies.

AIR/K1 — comparisons

One of the criteria of internal consistency on which the stability test results were evaluated at the time was a measure of the difference between the average issue readership value which could be calculated from the reading frequency figures (the K1 value) and the readership within the last issue period (AIR). The method with the smallest average difference between AIR and K1 for the various types of media was to be preferred. Application of this criteria indicated the choice of the D-method, which was used in NOP '82. We have now also compared these factors for NOP '82 as against NOP '79 (see **Table 4**).

We can see from the table that in NOP '82 AIR and

**I am aware that there is also an inverse effect, but shall not discuss this further here as it seems to have little influence.*

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TABLE 4
Difference between AIR and K1

NOP '82 vs NOP '79 (% of all respondents)

	AIR — K1	
	NOP '82	*NOP '79*
11 General monthlies	+1.1	−0.5
3 Hobby magazines (monthlies)	+0.2	−0.7
4 Dressmaking/needlecraft (monthlies)	+1.6	0.0
7 Special interest magazines (M/W)	−0.4	−0.8
5 Family magazines (weeklies)	−0.4	−1.6
6 Women's weeklies	−0.5	−2.5
7 Radio/TV guides (weeklies)	0.0	−0.3
6 Opinion weeklies	−1.1	−1.0
7 Daily newspapers	−3.2	−1.5

− + = AIR K1

K1 are closer to conformity with each other for some journals (hobby, special interest, family, women's and RTV journals). For other types of journal on the other hand (general monthlies, dressmaking and needlecraft journals, youth journals and daily newspapers) the difference between AIR and K1 has become greater. Roughly speaking the AIR/K1 ratio is more favourable in NOP '82 than in NOP '79 for weeklies, but less favourable for most monthlies and for dailies. The number of significant differences between AIR and K1 values in NOP '82 is even slightly greater than in NOP '79. This result does not conform with the results of the stability test. This is probably due to the greater number of casual readers registered in NOP '82 — for reasons already mentioned — than were revealed when the same questions were used in the stability test. It is likely that some readers mistakenly placed themselves in the last issue period.

The table below shows the differences between AIR and K1 for NOP '82 and NOP '79 alongside those registered in the stability test using the same question methods.

	Old method		*New method*	
AIR minus K1 (means in %)	*NOP '79*	*Stability test '81*	*Stability test '81*	*NOP '82*
monthlies	0.5	1.2	0.8	1.1
weeklies	1.2	1.9	1.2	0.7
dailies	1.5	1.3	1.4	3.2

The table shows clearly what has happened. In NOP '79 the average differences between AIR and K1 is smaller than in the stability test; in NOP '82 it is greater than in the stability test. We have already pointed out the probable reason for this.

Average issue readership per reading frequency class.

Figures 1 *to* **5** show the relationship between AIR and the reading frequency in greater detail than occurs in the AIR/K1 comparisons.

For the general monthlies we find both in NOP '82 and NOP '79 an overestimate of the number of readers within the issue period for the lower frequency classes and an underestimate for the higher frequency classess. We find this phenomenon occuring with all monthlies; with some to a greater extent than others. Underestimation for the greater frequency classes occurs for all journals, including the weeklies and dailies. This should not really be referred to as underestimation of average issue readership. A more likely explanation is that frequent readers know quite well whether they have read the journal in question in the last issue period, but tend to overestimate their reading frequency. In the lower frequency classes, on the other hand, the average issue readership has probably indeed been overestimated. Casual readers estimate their most recent moment of reading closer than it really was (telescoping); but they will make reasonably good estimates of the number of issues read out of the last 12, since they do not read the journal habitually and have to stop and think for a moment before answering.

We see the same thing with most weeklies, but with one difference: that the AIR level is lower, right along the line, than for the monthlies, and that the difference in comparison with NOP '79 is smaller — as also shown by the AIR/K1 comparisons. The journals of opinion are approximately at the level of NOP '79; the national dailies are even below this level. We can conclude from all this, at the least, that the variance in results is differently distributed over the various media types in NOP '82 than it was in NOP '79.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

(1) The most clearly demonstrable fault in NOP '82 is that journals with different issue periods were not treated alike, because of:

(a) differences in the number of "qualifying" and "non-qualifying" categories in the reading question, and

(b) lack of consistency and lack of clarity in the

borderlines between the categories in the reading question.
(2) Better supervision of field work, better questionnaire aids and more active involvement of the respondents led to a maximum number of readers being found by NOP '82. This had the disadvantage that these large numbers, particularly of casual readers, will probably lead to a relatively large number of inexplicable readership fluctuations between one survey and the other.
(3) A considerable amount of telescoping took place, with monthlies probably even more than with weeklies.

Recommendations

(1) The relationship between the number of qualifying and the number of non-qualifying categories should be constant for the various types of journal.

The answer categories in the reading question should link up more exactly with each other and should be better worded.
(2) From the point of view of stability of the results preference should be given to a survey aimed at counting the more frequent readers (and preferably readers who do more than take a cursory look at a journal).

An equally important element in addition to this is the improvement in method — supervision of field work, questionnaire aids, active involvement of respondents — used in NOP '82, which has the specific effect of preventing smaller journals being forgotten by the respondents.
(3) The only solution to the problem of telescoping is to make the recognition period as short as possible, asking the reading behaviour of the previous day or the last 24 hours, for instance. If one also tries to make the respondent more aware of the period of time over which he is asked to report (landmarks!), then the multiplication of the readership figure for monthlies and weeklies to give an average issue readership need not give rise to large errors in estimates. The question on reading behaviour for the previous day, or the last 24 hours, has the additional advantage that one can also ask whether the respondent was then reading the journal for the first time, which means that replicated reading is excluded.
(4) In future readership surveys it would be advisable to establish *the reading of an average issue* and not, as at present, *the reading in an average issue period.*
(5) It would be a big step in the right direction if media researchers were to agree that the best survey method is the one which makes the best possible job of reproducing paid circulation levels right along the line (for monthly, weekly and daily journals).

ONE CONCLUDING REMARK ON MEDIA PLANNING

Media planning practice in the Netherlands has not made any progress in the last decade, having confined itself to working with Average Issue Readership only. Readership figures are treated as if they were absolute; and thinking — not to put too fine a point on it — seems to be taboo.

The higher readership figures of the last survey have fortunately got the mental processes moving again, and people are at last prepared to take other available variables (like reading frequency, intensity of reading, and copy source) into account. But in spite of the fact that there was a great deal of press criticism when the NOP '82 results became known, the majority of users still work with the NOP material as if nothing new had happened.

I believe it is high time to direct our efforts primarily towards pushing up the standards of media planning.

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FIGURE 1
Readers within last issue period per frequency class

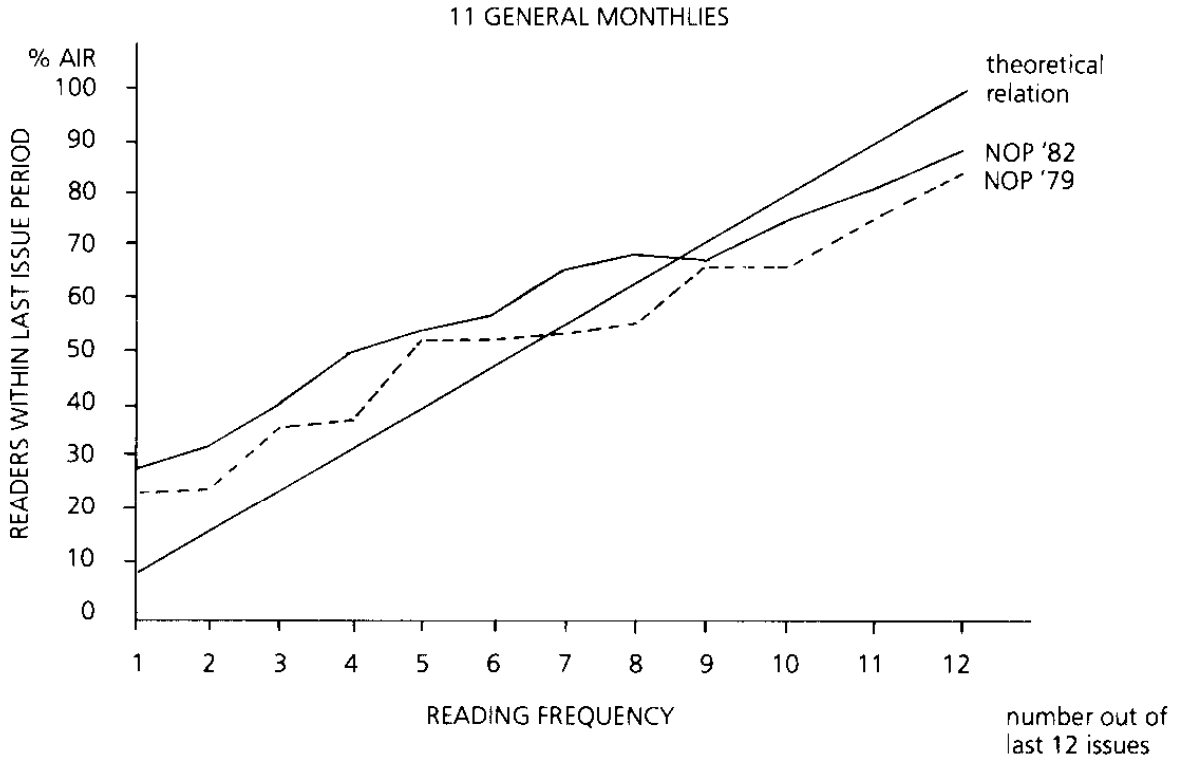

FIGURE 2
Readers within last issue period per frequency class

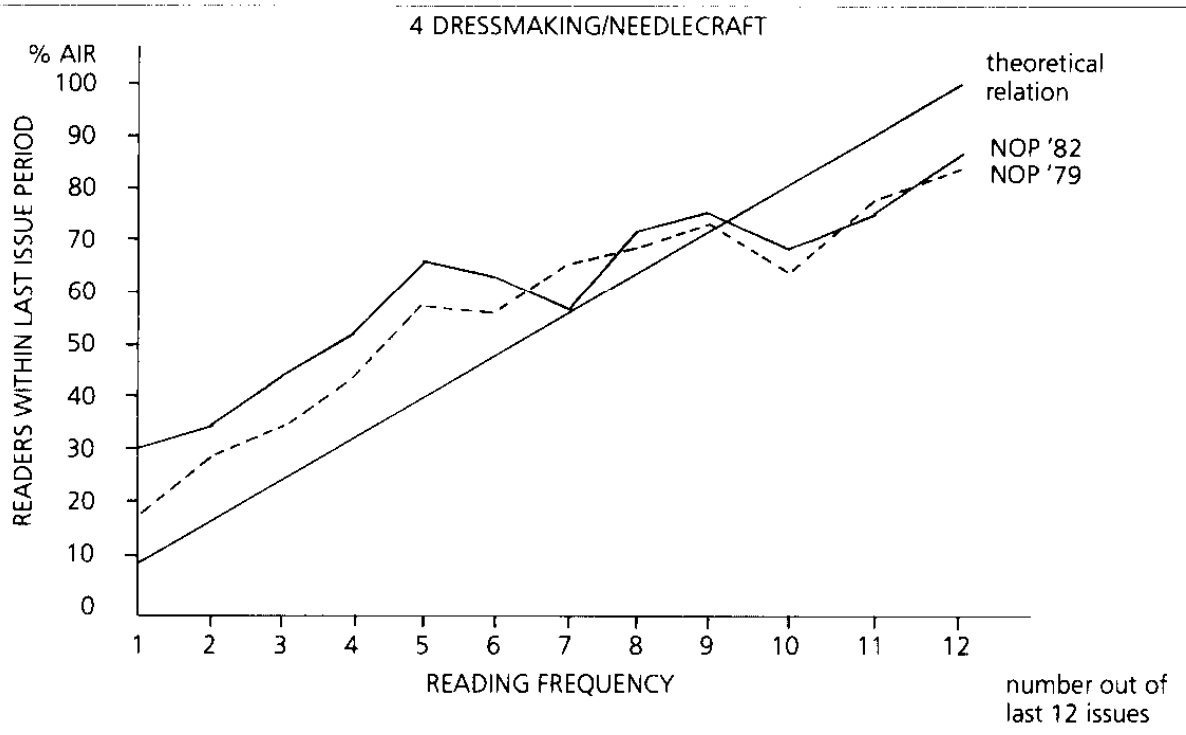

FIGURE 3
Readers within last issue period per frequency class

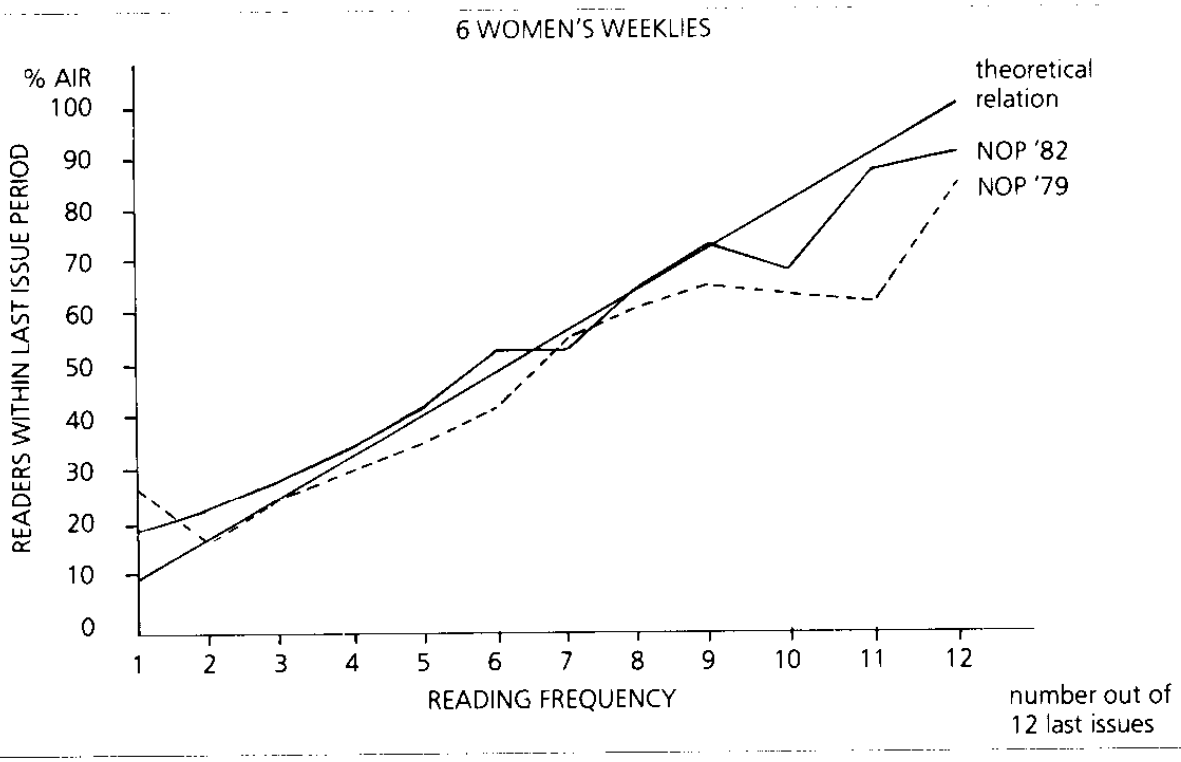

FIGURE 4
Readers within last issue period per frequency class

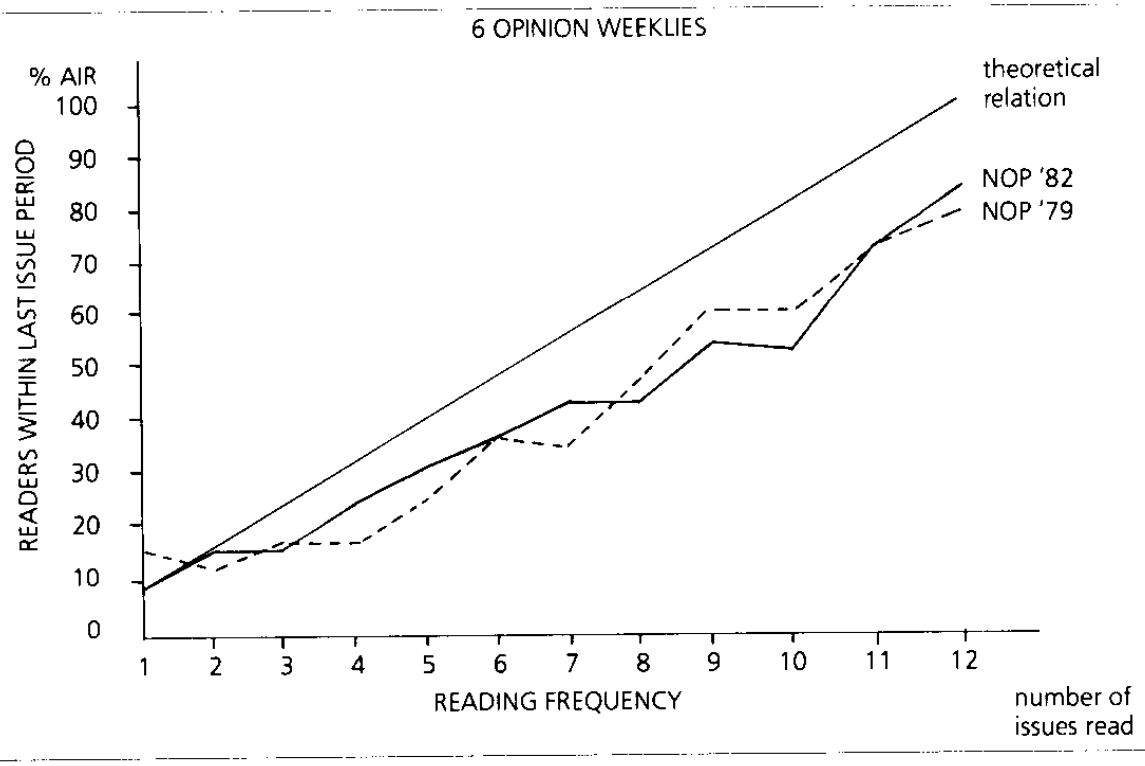

FIGURE 5
Readers within last issue period per frequency class