

7.1 What to do about reading quality?

Readership itself, as we all know, is difficult enough to pin down. As soon as one passes beyond this to reading quality, one quickly gets lost in a bewildering array of ideas. We could identify and measure all or any of the following:

- (a) place of reading
- (b) number of days or occasion of reading
- (c) time spent reading per occasion
- (d) number of pages looked at per reading occasion
- (e) reader commitment or involvement
- (f) source of copy read (primary or secondary reading)
- (g) age of copy read
- (h) impact of advertisement: in different positions; in different sizes; in different colours; in different editorial contexts
- (i) editorial interest

This may not be a complete list: all were referred to in New Orleans Session 5 papers (9) and the discussion following. What should be done about this confusion of possibilities? As this year's programme puts it: "what other measures (ie beyond readership) should be taken to discriminate further between publications to meet the needs of the advertiser?"

DO WE NEED ANYTHING BEYOND READERSHIP?

One possible point of view is that the disagreement about how to measure basic readership is still so wide, and the different methods in use lead to such different results, that the readership problem must and should occupy all our attention; these further questions about reading quality are too remote from where we stand now, they are for later on when we have solved the basic problem, they are only icing on the cake which we have not yet learnt how to make properly. This is a plausible view, especially since researching readership is so expensive, but I would argue against it for the following reasons:

(a) there is evidence that at least some of these features differ seriously between publications and therefore affect the transition from delivery of the medium to delivery of the message, *whatever* the readership measurement is; their effect on the opportunity of exposure to advertisement is additional to, not cancelled out by, any disagreement over readership. Whether or

not we ever do (or should) solve the readership question, there remains a real problem which will not go away, and we lose nothing by dealing with it now;

(b) some of these features, especially the number of times an issue is read, have a direct bearing on the readership measurement itself (at least, on the problem of replicated readership in the recent reading model if not cancelled out by 'parallel' readership), and need to be understood if only for that reason.

(c) there is evidence that the *number* of opportunities (not merely the fact that there is an opportunity) may be related to response: in particular, that a frequency of two or three or more may be better than just one (3). It would be odd to apply this to successive issues and not to repeated showings of the same issue. If anticipated frequency becomes a criterion in media planning in addition to coverage, then cumulation of opportunities to see within issues can be as important for the media planner as cumulation of readership across issues (1).

DENOTATION AND CONNOTATION

The first thing necessary is to sort out this confusing array of possible measures and ideas. And the first distinction one has to make is between those features which are characteristic of the way a publication is handled and read, *irrespective* of content, and those which *depend upon* differences in content. The first set can be seen as simply extending and qualifying reading and thus leading to a fuller definition of opportunity to see whatever may be on a page; the second set refers to the way a reader relates to, uses, or is engrossed by whatever is on a page and is thus dependent, not measurable except in relation to *specific* items on the page. The first set *denotes* an opportunity to see; the second *connotes* the *value* of that opportunity. The various ideas I listed earlier might be schematised into this division like this:

DENOTATION OF OTS

Number of days/
occasions of reading
Number of pages seen
per occasion

CONNOTATION OF OTS

Time spent reading
Reader involvement
Impact of advertisements
Editorial Interest

7.1 What to do about reading quality?

Place of reading, age and source of copy fit into the scheme only secondarily, as characteristics which may co-vary with and help to explain or predict the others.

This broad distinction is certainly not new and in a sense it is obvious, although people may differ in precisely what to put on either side of the divide or the importance of the various measures. Cornish and Brown (2), for example, are clear that measures of communication *effectiveness* involve the particular advertisements or whatever is being communicated and that a general measure is therefore not practical. On the denotative side of the divide they regard page traffic or spread traffic as the main criterion and other items (including reading dates or occasions) as merely subsidiary predictors of it; based on the Reader Categorisation Study (6), they conclude that spread traffic variation is too limited to be worth measuring. I would disagree that spread traffic is the best criterion of opportunity to see, rather than reading occasions, and I would put some things on the 'right' that they put on the 'left' (such as attitudes to publications), but I agree about the basic distinction.

Failure to make the distinction clearly led to some confusion, I believe, in New Orleans Session 5. In the Editor's introduction to this section in the published papers it is said that "the main problem that arises in this area is the technical difficulty of distinguishing between the contribution to advertisement exposure made by the medium and that made by the design and size of the advertisement or the product". But that is only a problem if one mixes up opportunity to see with advertising effect and tries to move too quickly to the latter, without realising that they are distinct classes of problem requiring different treatment. In the discussion at the end of the session, Michael Brown objected to the fact that so many of the papers had dealt with measures of advertising effectiveness rather than the quantification of contact opportunities; to him, these were "something quite separate". A number of speakers took issue with him and argued that it was indeed relevant to discuss impact, and the reasons were interesting: it was not so much that they disagreed with the distinction Michael Brown was making (indeed the dependence of Starch scores, reading and noting and other impact measures on advertisement content was readily admitted), but rather that no measure would succeed in catching the attention of the advertisers *unless* it were related to demonstrating advertising success in some way; in other words, unless results are presented in terms of effectiveness, they simply will not be used.

It is of course quite true that the media planner's objective is to get the best results in terms of effectiveness. But, operationally, it is difficult to see how

it is possible to progress without a clear distinction between the *measurement* of opportunities to see and the assignment of a value to them. The level at which the opportunities are defined can then be decided by relevance to one's theory of value; eg, if one exposure is enough, you stop at coverage (or readership), but if two or three exposures are better than one, the top layer of numbers of OTS within readership may be needed.

I suggest that it is reasonable to argue as follows:

(i) Denotative measures to establish opportunities to see for publications (over and above readership) can be considered as enhancements of readership measurements and are therefore properly part of the context of readership research and a proper subject for a symposium about readership. The question of which features are worth measuring, and how they should be measured (whether as part of a readership survey or separately) are proper subjects for discussion in this gathering.

(ii) Connotative measures which depend even partly on the specific context of a communication, important though they are, distinct from readership research; they do not relate to defining and measuring the basic currency for the media trade, but rather to establishing its value in a particular context. This remains true even if it is possible (as it may be) to establish norms for various responses averaged over different products or subjects, advertisements and publications, and it applies to questions such as whether large size spreads are more effective than small size, or centre pages than end pages, or colour than mono. It remains true that whatever norms may be established for these, and granting that they may be useful knowledge for evaluating publications for specific purposes, they are not context free and cannot be part of the standard readership or delivery measurement.

DENOTATIVE, MEDIA FACTORS: OPPORTUNITIES-TO-SEE

Readership measures are different from all other media in one important respect: they are not specific as to time. Broadcast measures establish that a person was present at the time when a specific commercial was being transmitted; thus he had one and only one opportunity to see or hear it (whether or not he took advantage of the opportunity). The same applies for static media such as posters; if it can be established that at a certain time an individual was present at a place from which the medium was in sight, then at that time, on that occasion, he had the opportunity to see it, whether taken or not. But readership, uniquely, establishes only that someone looked at an issue; he could have looked at it once or

7.1 What to do about reading quality?

many times. Also, readership as such does not establish whether each page was equally likely to have been looked at. These points apply whatever readership measure is used (RR or TTB). Furthermore, with average issue readership, it is not established whether one issue or more than one is looked at; even if the model "works" in the sense that replicated and parallel cancel out, there is still no distinction between one issue or many issues read in a publication period.

Are these points important? Do these extensions of the OTS concept matter? Only if they discriminate between publications. If the multiplier were constant across all publications, there would be no value in having it, and no value in moving beyond the present accepted definition of OTS as: one reader reading any (average) issue during its publication period with full probability equals one opportunity to see.

There is plenty of evidence, beyond what common sense would tell one, that publications do differ in these respects. At New Orleans, Michele Beudert quoted studies which showed that different groups of readers (eg men v. women, primary v. pass along, in-home v out of home) not only varied in profile between magazines, but also in the number of days on which an issue was read, the length of time spent reading it, and the number of pages opened. Dieter Müller presented evidence from a detailed qualitative panel study which showed that: **(a)** magazines differed in the number of times they were picked up and looked at; **(b)** they differed in the ways that they were flicked through and therefore in the probability of a particular page being seen; and proposed a reader-involvement scale which would encapsulate these differences. Liliana Denon quoted analysis of ISPI data for number of reading days (still incomplete because it does not cover repeated readings within a day), and again showed substantial differences between publication types.

Apart from the New Orleans papers, John Parfitt (4), in some recent experimental panel research for JICNARS, has shown indicative evidence that types of publication differ in the number of times an issue is picked up. For example, women's weeklies recorded in a period were more likely to be non-current issues than was the case with other publications; general weeklies (not women's weeklies, but of course including the programme magazines) were especially likely to have had current issues read several times. Differences were also found in time spent reading and proportion read. There is nothing definitive about this small scale study, but the findings seem to support such other evidence as we have.

Parfitt's findings about differing numbers of reading occasions bear upon the question of model bias and suggest that weeklies are much more prone to an excess of replicated over parallel readership than other

publications. This agrees with Pym Cornish's findings from the London Experiment, reported at the ESOMAR seminar in Stockholm, 1982 (5); he concluded that AIR for weeklies was overstated by at least a fifth relative to AIR for monthlies by the standard measurement technique.

This is perhaps enough evidence to quote (no doubt there is plenty more) to show that reading occasions differ in number between publications, and that it would be of value to find some way of correcting readership estimates so that OTS can incorporate the average number of times an issue is read.

Page traffic is less clear cut. Although Müller found some differences in his experiment, they do not seem as great as for issue exposure. Michele Beudert also concluded that page openings vary much less between types of reader and between magazine types than reading occasions; they all seem to average about 90%, which is not very far removed from the finding of the British Reader Categorisation Study (6) and the consequent fairly general belief that, as Michael Ryan put it "broadly speaking, most readers of most titles on the National Readership Survey were exposed to most pages".

These pieces of evidence seem to be enough to point to the following conclusions;

(1) The number of times an issue is read is an important parameter; it would provide a better estimate of relative OTS between publications and we need to know about it to correct for model bias with the RR technique (for publications which may be read repeatedly but irregularly). We have begun to know something about effective frequency (that two or three exposures are worth more than one alone) (3), and repeated reading of the same issue is as important a way of generating extra exposures as is reading of several issues, if one accepts the 'effective frequency' case.

(2) With an AIR measurement, the same importance attaches to knowing how many different issues (current or previous) are looked at in an issue period, at least for those publications which have repeated and irregular patterns of readership.

(3) It is not clear that page traffic is relevant to relative OTS estimates between publications. However, this is an area it would be good to know more about. Some publications have enormous numbers of pages (eg some US newspapers) and it seems *a priori* unlikely that they provide the same opportunity as publications with many fewer pages for any one page to be seen at a reading. Dawn Mitchell wondered whether classified advertising in "great chunks" at the end of a publication like the *Economist* had an equal chance of being seen. We know very little about the ways different groups within an audience deal with different publications in their choice.

7.1 What to do about reading quality?

of which parts of an issue to look at: their circumstances, objectives and strategy. This area of ignorance was the focus for SCPR in their submission to the present JICNARS working party project (4). It is possible that if it were studied in depth we would be able to advise an advertiser that an advertisement placed in a particular section of a certain publication would be more or less likely to be actually seen (not noted but available to be seen) by a certain target audience.

(4) Time spent reading I would classify as a connotative measure, not relevant to OTS. It differentiates between people in terms of their interest or involvement, but implies nothing about the number of pages opened to view, or the likelihood that anything on any of those pages will be perceived.

Possible measures to improve OTS

ISSUE READINGS

It seems clear that this is a worthwhile addition to readership for estimating opportunities for exposure; it also seems clear that post hoc claims are unlikely to be accurate enough. This must be a case for a diary. It would be necessary to record each time each issue was picked up, what issue it was, and which was the first time that issue had been looked at. No respondent would ever remember all that after the event.

It does not follow that this measure could only be taken if the main readership measurement were a diary. Nor need it be taken continuously. The main readership measurement has to produce trends in the basic currency. What we would be looking for here is description or expansion of what the readership 'unit' means for different population groups; it could be a separate exercise bolted on and revised every few years to provide scores or weighting factors to apply to publication/demographic groups. It is unlikely that broad habits of reading certain types of publication change enough to make continuous trend measurement necessary. All we want is to establish a scoring system which will tell us that an average issue readership of X% translates, for a particular group and publication, into X times Y opportunities to see, because an issue is seen on average Y times. There is no need to overload the readership survey itself.

PAGE TRAFFIC

At the first level, this has been tried and found wanting. It is a case for exploration because we do not know enough about how people move about between pages in specific publications. It is probably commercially low priority, as the Reader Categorisation Study concluded. However, it ought to be done sometime, especially for the benefit of any publication which may be under

attack for having too many pages or 'great chunks of classified advertising' etc. It would need observation (not just claimed behaviour) of how people go about 'looking at' or 'flicking through'; the DEMOS method of waiting room and concealed eye camera would perhaps have a place.

CONNOTATIVE, CONTENT FACTORS: COMMUNICATION EFFECTIVENESS

The argument so far is that one should distinguish conceptually between denotative measures of opportunities to see and the connotative ascription of values to these opportunities, and that only the former have a place in a readership research system, whether as part of a standard trend measurement or, more likely, as a periodic special study to establish behaviour-related publication weights.

This of course does not mean that communication effectiveness should not be studied. On the contrary, it is not studied nearly enough. And it is as sensible for publication owners to undertake such studies, in order to establish selling points for themselves in particular contexts, as it is for advertisers or agencies to help to evaluate publications for their brands. In the absence of experimental evidence, these values will be formed by judgement or experience, which *may* be wrong.

In this audience, just two points seem worth making about studying effectiveness, whether in a specific context only or normatively. One is that we still know very little indeed about how perception is translated into a response. The second is that, in contrast to a readership or OTS measurement (which monitors the occurrence of a defined currency unit), communication effectiveness demands *experimental* methods.

The first point is relevant to measures which are still very popular, like recall. We cannot really say that recall of an advertisement bears any relationship to effectiveness; or that readers who claimed to have read something on a page were more likely to spot an advertisement on the same page. Herbert Krugman has argued persuasively (7) that measures based on recall or claimed perception considerably underestimate true exposure, and that 'quick or faint perceptions, even unremembered, do their job in most cases'. Peripheral vision, what is seen glancingly out of the corner of the eye, may affect one if one is disposed to be affected by that message; conversely, we all know from experience that it is quite possible to stare at something in full focus and yet not to 'see' it because it is not what one is programmed to see (as in GK Chesterton's story of 'The Invisible Man'). I suggest that recall measures are only valuable for crude comparisons between publications or within publication variables like position or colour, if one

7.1 What to do about reading quality?

is willing to make some bold assumption about what they represent; if we are really trying to get at effectiveness, awareness or attitudinal or behavioural change must be the criterion.

Because of this point, it is proper to be sceptical about all measures of OTS value unless they have been tested against these criteria of effectiveness. This includes those which were listed at the beginning of this paper, such as time spent reading, reader involvement, editorial interest, whether reading is primary or secondary, regular or casual. There is quite simply no reason to assume *a priori* that any of these findings have any bearing on the propensity of a given advertisement to be noted or taken in, and common sense is no guide. A demonstration by a publisher that a particular target audience reads his paper with exceptional thoroughness *cannot, on its own*, be taken as implying that advertising in the publication is likely to be more effective. And exactly the same applies to publication features such as full page v. half page, colour v. mono etc. Experimental testing against criteria relevant to the thing being advertised is essential (even if several such tests can be put together to derive *generalisations* about a publication or publication feature).

On the second point, experimentation is the right way to proceed simply because we are always dealing with interacting variables whose effects cannot be disentangled unless there are proper controls to isolate what is under test. Such experiments do not need representative or very big samples, merely intelligent design. Sadly few papers have been published on this subject, indicating presumably how seldom it is done. Caffyn, in 1969 (8), reported on three experimental studies to investigate *inter-media* differences (TV versus radio, TV versus press); two involved advertising, the third, other content material. These experiments were able to reveal that the different media environments could and did affect response, and how imaginative use of a medium could, in specific cases, greatly improve reception of the message. A really successful communication could be shown by such experiments to

be, at least in part, related to the fact that that particular advertiser had understood the strengths of his medium and had designed something which made use of them. There is of course no reason why studies such as these should not be done within a medium, between publications, as well as between media.

No doubt it is the advertisers who are most likely to want to sponsor such studies on behalf of their own messages, rather than publishers who may wish their media to appear good for all purposes. But publishers would strengthen their marketing case if they were able to produce evidence of how the context their publication can provide may condition the impact of a particular sort of message. The subject-area may be strictly outside our remit as a conference discussing industry measures of the readership and/or OTS currency, but there is no harm in urging its importance.

REFERENCES

- 1 Cornish, Pym and Brown, Michael (1980). *Readership measurement reviewed*. Dec. Appendix B
- 2 Ibid. Appendix A
- 3 Naples MJ (1979). *Effective Frequency*, Association of National Advertisers Inc.
- 4 Submissions to the 1982. JICNARS methodological development study. Quoted by permission of the authors and JICNARS.
- 5 Cornish, Pym (1982). *The London Experiment — an alternative recent reading method with partial validation*. ESOMAR seminar, Stockholm, April.
- 6 *The Reader Categorisation Study*. JICNARS 1978.
- 7 Krugman, Herbert E (1977). *Memory without recall, exposure without perception*, *Journal of Advertising Research* 17/4 Aug.
- 8 Caffyn. JM (1969). *Experimental intermedia studies*. Market Research Society conference.
- 9 Henry, Harry (ed) (1982). *Readership Research: theory and practice: Proceedings of the first International Symposium*. New Orleans 1981 Sigmalex, London.