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ANALYSING THE EFFECTS OF CHANGING METHODOLOGIES IN AUSTRALIA

BACKGROUND

The validity of a readership survey methodology is rarely tested by a change in the publication frequency of a major title. This is the ultimate test for a readership methodology in terms of measuring the true relativities between titles of varying publication frequencies. Such a change occurred in Australia in 1983 when *The Australian Women's Weekly* changed publication frequency from weekly to monthly.

Interest in the reliability of the methodology was heightened by the fact that the readership survey conducted by The Roy Morgan Research Centre, the most widely used survey in Australia, used a different methodology for monthly and weekly titles. Monthlies were measured via a cover recognition method while a recency method, 'read any issue in the last 7 days' was used for weekly titles.

How then did the Morgan survey rate in this test? Well, as Table 1 shows, the increase in circulation was not matched by a comparable increase in readership. It should be noted that *The Australian Women's Weekly* retained the same title including the word 'weekly' when it became a monthly magazine.

TABLE 1
The Australian Women's Weekly
readership and circulation

	As a weekly (Apr '82- Sept '82)	As a monthly (Apr '83- Sept '83)	Dif- fer- ence %
Circulation (ABC Audit)	880,000	1,235,000	+40
Morgan Readership (All people 16yrs & over)	3,013,000	3,527,000	+17

For a 40% gain in circulation after the change to monthly publication in January 1983, *The Australian Women's Weekly* readership increased by only 17%. The trend in readers per copy is shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2
The Australian Women's Weekly
readers per copy

March 1982	3.60
September 1982	3.42
<i>Change in publication frequency</i>	
March 1983	2.63
September 1983	2.86

Morgan readership (16 years and over) and Audit Bureau of Circulation audited circulation based on six-monthly periods except for March 1983 which is based on a January-March period.

This drop in readers per copy (RPC) obviously brought into question the true readership relativity between all weekly and monthly titles. Table 3 shows the differences in RPC which existed between weekly and monthly titles.

The largest circulating monthly titles had a significantly lower RPC than the largest circulating weekly titles. It was in the interest of all involved to determine the true relativity in readership which should exist between weekly and monthly titles.

At this stage very little experimentation had taken place in Australia for more than a decade. The Symposia held in New Orleans and Montreal had shown the wealth of experimental data available overseas. It became obvious that up-to-date diagnostic data was necessary before an attempt could be made to resolve the issue.

TABLE 3
Readers per copy 1982

	<i>Morgan</i> <i>(Sept '82)</i>
<i>Largest circulating weekly magazines</i>	
Australian Women's Weekly	3.42
TV Week	3.06
New Idea	3.01
Woman's Day	3.35
<i>Largest circulating monthly magazines</i>	
Reader's Digest	2.73
Family Circle	2.45

Morgan readership 16 years and over and ABC audited circulation for six- or 12-monthly periods ending September 1982.

PILOT SURVEY

The Australian Magazine Publishers Association sought submissions from all interested parties before deciding to commission Frank Small & Associates to conduct a pilot survey on magazine readership. The major aim of the study was to gain a better understanding of the readership process. Also tested was a 'first-time reading' methodology.

The survey was based on a sample of 1,752 respondents using two call-backs with interviewing spread by week and by day of week throughout the 30 days of November 1983. The study included a wealth of data, but only the major findings are presented here. A copy of the report is available from the Australian Magazine Publishers Association.

Source of copy

The source of copy of the magazine read provided the most useful data in comparing the readership relativities between weekly and monthly titles. Given a limited number of people per household, the extent of out of the home reading would need to be very

different for weekly and monthly titles to yield a difference in RPC. A high RPC could only be obtained if a large proportion of copies read were obtained outside the home.

Table 4 shows the distribution of the source of copy for weeklies as compared with monthlies.

TABLE 4
Source of copy read and implied readers per copy

	<i>Total weeklies</i> <i>%</i>	<i>Total monthlies</i> <i>%</i>
<i>Issues possessed by household and purchased by:</i>		
Respondent	47	43
Other family member	29	22
Not family	6	6
<i>Issues picked up:</i>		
At another home	5	9
At waiting-room	6	7
At newsagent only	2	5
Elsewhere	5	8
Totals	100	100
Implied RPC	2.1	2.3

By using 'purchased by respondent' copies as an estimate of circulation, an implied readers per copy can be calculated. It should be noted that this statistic produced an inflated estimate of circulation. It can be seen that the implied readers per copy shows little difference between monthly and weekly titles, with monthlies having a slightly higher RPC.

The source of copy data was then re-analysed using the method to calculate theoretical RPC presented by Wally Langschmidt in his Montreal paper (1983). This deduced readers per copy was based on the following maximum readers per copy:

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(i) The adult household size for copies purchased by someone in the household - this was 2.3 in the survey. This assumes everyone in the household reads the magazine.

(ii) Two times the adult household size for copies obtained from a friend - ie 2×2.3 or 4.6. This assumes that everyone in two households reads the magazine.

(iii) Twenty-six copies obtained from elsewhere, eg public places, etc. While this figure was based on South African data it was felt to be a realistic maximum for Australian conditions and the theoretical nature of the exercise. Given the relatively small proportion of copies picked up in a public place the deduced readers per copy is quite insensitive to variations in this figure, eg if 50 was used instead of 26 for these copies then total deduced RPC would not alter.

The deduced readers per copy was used to indicate the difference in RPC one should expect between weekly and monthly titles and to give a rough indication of what the true readers per copy should be. The conclusion was thus drawn that monthly titles should have only a marginally higher readers per copy than weeklies.

It was comforting to know that the distribution of source of copy from the Pilot Survey produced similar results to those found by Wally Langschmidt in South Africa (Montreal Proceedings 1983).

First-time reading

One of the original objectives of the Pilot Survey was to test a first-time reading methodology. The survey produced the RPC based on the first time reading questions shown in Table 7. As the survey was based on first-time reading in the last seven days the readership estimate for monthlies was arrived at by multiplying the unrepliated claims for monthlies by four.

TABLE 5
Deduced readers per copy

	Total week- lies %	Total month- lies %	Theore- tical readers per copy
Copy bought by someone in household	76	65	2.3
Copy obtained from other person or read in another household	11	15	4.6
Copy picked up at a public place	$\frac{13}{100}$	$\frac{20}{100}$	26.0
Deduced RPC	2.8	3.1	

TABLE 6
Distribution of source of copy

	Australian data		South African data
	Week- lies %	Month- lies %	%
Copy bought by someone in household	76	65	67
Copy obtained from other person or read in another household	11	15	16
Copy picked up at a public place	$\frac{13}{100}$	$\frac{20}{100}$	$\frac{17}{100}$

TABLE 7
Readers per copy based on
first-time reading

Weeklies	3.1
Monthlies	5.9

This relativity was obviously not in line with that produced by the analysis of the source of copy data.

Table 8 presents a re-analysis of the data which showed that first-time reading by buyers was reported to occur almost evenly across the month. On the other hand, known circulation data show that a large proportion of the purchase of a monthly occurs in its first week. Given that most buyers would first read their magazine soon after purchase we must conclude that the following data could not be correct.

TABLE 8
Claims of first-time reading and
purchase by on sale week (monthly
women's, men's and homemaker magazines)

	%
On-sale week	28
Week 2	28
Week 3	27
Week 4	17
Total purchase claims	100

Obviously many respondents in this survey were incorrectly including their replicated reading as first-time reading. As a result of this, the first-time reading methodology did not provide the expected relativities in readership measurement between monthly and weekly titles. The first-time reading methodology was thus rejected as an overall technique. Morgan also later found in their own experimental surveys that using a first-time reading

methodology for monthly titles resulted in an inflated RPC.

The results of the Pilot Survey had established the relativity in readership one should expect between monthly and weekly magazines. This relativity was not produced by the recency technique nor by a recency technique based on first-time reading.

MORGAN EXPERIMENTS

At the same time The Roy Morgan Research Centre were conducting their own experiments. Included in their work was first-time reading measurement for weekly titles. Weekly magazine readership was measured by:

- (1) Showing people a list of weekly magazines and asking if they had read or looked into any of them in the last seven days
- (2) Those who said 'yes' were asked which magazine
- (3) For each read or looked into in the last seven days, people were asked:
 - (a) how many different issues of that magazine had been read or looked into in the last seven days, and
 - (b) for each issue, whether it had been read for the *first time* in the last seven days, or *also* read or looked into *before* seven days ago.

The results of these experiments disclosed a considerable replication in excess of parallel reading for nearly all weekly magazines. These results were contrary to those found in experimentation conducted by Morgan in the early seventies. In that experimentation Morgan found that for weekly magazines, similar readership figures were obtained by using:

- (1) The 'Recent Reading' question with a printed list of titles, instead of show cards, or
- (2) showing *reduced* black-and-white front covers of six- or seven-week old

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specific issues, *three* on one sheet, or

(3) Through-the-Book with complete six- or seven-week old specific issues.

These earlier experiments suggested that replicated reading was balanced by parallel reading. This was definitely no longer the case. Morgan suggested that this change had taken place due to the gradual improvement in weekly magazines with better printing and binding and their becoming generally more like monthlies.

The first-time reading experiments had established that a significant component of excess replication over parallel reading was included in the measurement of weekly titles. For monthly titles, however, by the use of a front cover recognition method an attempt was being made to eliminate replicated reading while allowing for parallel reading. Thus the composite method was favouring weekly titles.

In order to restore the relativity between the readership levels of weekly and monthly titles an attempt had to be made to eliminate replicated reading and to include parallel reading for *both weekly and monthly magazines*. It was thus proposed that a first-time reading methodology be employed for weeklies together with the front cover recognition method for monthlies. The evidence available strongly suggested that this would provide the expected relativities between the readership of weeklies and monthlies and do so at an acceptable level of RPC.

The industry accepted this proposal and an interim survey based on the revised methodology was released in the middle of 1984. Table 9 shows the RPC obtained from the first full survey based on the revised methodology compared with that of the last survey conducted on the previous methodology. The three largest weekly and three largest monthly magazines are presented.

As expected the revised methodology

reduced the RPC of the weekly magazines to a level less than that of the monthly magazines. The relative difference in RPC between weekly and monthly magazines was now in line with the relativity produced by the source of copy data obtained in the Australian Magazine Publishers Association's Pilot Survey.

Table 10 compares the average RPC obtained for the three largest weeklies and three largest monthlies based on both the old and new Morgan methodologies with the deduced RPC calculated for the Pilot Survey. The McNair figures are presented to give an indication of the levels of RPC obtained by the recency methodology in Australia.

Clearly the revised Morgan survey comes closest in terms of both relativities

TABLE 9
Comparison of Morgan readership results

	<i>Readers per copy</i>	
	<i>Previous methodology</i>	<i>Revised methodology</i>
	<i>Apr-Sept '83</i>	<i>Apr-Sep '84</i>
<i>Three largest weekly magazines</i>		
New Idea	3.23	2.60
TV Week	3.21	2.30
Woman's Day	4.15	2.55
Average	3.53	2.48
<i>Three largest monthly magazines</i>		
Australian		
Women's Weekly	2.86	2.82
Reader's Digest	3.07	3.05
Family Circle	2.57	2.60
Average	2.83	2.82

Based on Morgan readership all people 16 years and over and corresponding ABC audited circulation.

TABLE 10
Readers per copy comparison

	Average RPC three largest weekly magazines	Average RPC three largest monthly magazines	Dif. %
Deduced RPC			
AMPA pilot survey*	2.7	2.9	+ 7
Previous Morgan (Apr-Sept 1983)	3.5	2.8	-20
Revised Morgan (Apr-Sept 1984)	2.5	2.8	+12
McNair Recency Method (Feb-Aug 1984)	4.2	4.9	+17

Source: Readership based on 16 years and over. Circulation based on corresponding ABC audit period.

* Australian Magazine Publishers Association Pilot Survey of Magazine Readership, Final Report Sept. 1984.

and the level of RPC to the deduced RPC from the Pilot Survey.

CONCLUSION

The mixed methodology may not be theoretically pure and is not beyond criticism. It does, however, produce an acceptable relativity in readership between weekly and monthly titles at a realistic level of RPC.

If a survey produces an inflated RPC then it is too unrealistic to expect that the inflation would treat all

publications fairly.

It is unlikely that 'true' readership will ever be measured. For every known readership methodology I am sure that someone in the audience would know of a result or an experiment which would cast doubt as to its accuracy.

Readership surveys, however, will continue to be used and we must always remember the use made of readership surveys. One of its major uses is as a selling and buying tool in selecting one publication in preference to another. For this reason then it is crucial that a survey measures the relative readership of competing titles fairly.

It would be foolish of me to suggest that the change in methodology has overcome all the problems in readership surveys in Australia. Many problems of course still exist and new problems will probably arise. For this reason continuous experimentation is a necessity and improvements must be introduced as they are validated.

In Australia we are currently continuing with experimentation which I hope will lead to further improvements being introduced. I believe we can thank the Readership Symposia for helping this to come about.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The late Roy Morgan, for his contribution to this paper.

REFERENCE

Langschmidt, Wally (1983) 'The effect of age of issue and origin of copy on readership results' (Montreal Proceedings, p 293).