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A SECOND STUDY INTO THE NATURE OF READING EVENTS WHICH DO AND DO NOT GET REPORTED

INTRODUCTION

This paper is concerned with the second JICNARS study into the nature of the reading events which do and do not get reported during the course of the JICNARS readership interview. The first study was reported by Pym Cornish at the Salzburg Symposium in 1985 under the title 'Second thoughts on validation'.

The first study covered Sunday newspapers and their colour supplements and the main conclusion drawn was that while the AIR measure gives a good approximation to the 'true' number of readers of these publications the total includes overclaims by regular readers, who tend to read more intensively, and underclaims by occasional readers, who tend to read less intensively. This is fortunate, however, since the direction of these errors means that schedule analyses based on the survey results take into account an element of advertisement exposure probabilities. They can thus be said to be better schedules than would be the case if the basic readership estimates did not include these balancing errors.

It is not often that we can thank weaknesses in a research technique for actually improving the value of the results we produce.

The second JICNARS study, described in this paper, covered four magazines, selected as being thought likely to be increasingly difficult to research. We found that the method we were using did not work at all for one title, and nor did it work for the older half of the issues for a second title we were researching. As will be seen, this result is of very considerable methodological interest. However, it was judged that the method worked satisfactorily for the other

issues researched and for these issues the direction of the errors was the same as for the first study.

SECOND STUDY

The basic research approach used for this work was to take advantage of the on-going NRS survey to ask a limited number of additional questions at the end of the standard interview for a limited period of time and covering the readership of specific issues of a few publications. Everyone, irrespective of their responses during the main interview, was asked whether or not they had read the specific issues being researched and, if so, whose copy, where, when, and how much. Put simply, this method can be looked upon as seeking understanding by making comparisons between Recent-Reading (RR) and Through-the-Book (TTB) approaches.

As explained, the first research covered a number of Sunday newspapers and their colour supplements, these publications being deliberately chosen because they presented the fewest research problems: for them it was known that virtually all reading took place within two or three days of publication and the readership levels were high so that the sample sizes would be adequately large.

When planning to extend the approach to other categories of magazines we were aware of four major difficulties:

– the first reading of many long-life magazines, which are mainly monthlies, can take place many months after publication. This means that

if a young issue is researched a number of readers who first come to a publication late in its issue life will be missed, while if an old issue is used a number of early readers will have forgotten the event.

– Secondly, much of the content of some publications is not of a very topical nature, while others maintain a uniform appearance and style from issue to issue. This means that there can be a significant level of confusion either between issues or publications.

– Thirdly, it was known that many of these publications are widely available in public places (such as doctor's waiting rooms or hairdressers), and will thus attract a considerable level of reading by those who will see the publication only occasionally. This is important because it was known from the first study that such reading was liable to be under-reported.

– Finally, the readership levels for many publications of this type are low, so consequently any experimental work has to be carried out on large samples.

In the light of these difficulties, the second study was designed with the following objectives:

(1) To apply the methodology developed for the first study, with marginal improvements, to an important publication group for which problems of long life do not arise. This was the programme magazine group, made up of the *Radio Times* and *TV Times*. It can be assumed that these publications accumulate little additional first reading later than ten days after publication, when their period of currency expires, while since they are rarely found in public places, this complication is not important either. We were confident that the technique could be successfully applied to this group.

(2) To evaluate the technique for another very important group of weekly publications, the women's weeklies. The publication chosen was *Woman's Own*, the title with the highest readership level. This group can be regarded as intermediate in the problems it raises between the programme magazines and the long life titles. On the one hand the quality of production suggests that their effective life will be shorter than that of many monthly publications, but on the other hand they are known to be widely available in public places and their editorial content could give rise to confusion between issues and titles.

(3) To investigate the problems of working with a long life magazine. The title chosen was *Reader's Digest*, since it has by far the highest readership of any appropriate title, it is known to be widely available in public places and, while it is not likely to suffer from much title confusion, it was felt that there could be considerable confusion between issues.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The second study was undertaken during the month of September 1987 as a supplement to the 2,256 standard NRS interviews conducted during that month. Each NRS interviewer carried a set of three specific issues for the research, made up of either a single issue of the *Radio Times* and two issues of *Woman's Own*, or a single issue of the *TV Times* and two issues of *Reader's Digest*.

The specific issues of the programme magazines were always two publication intervals old at the start of the five consecutive working days allowed to complete an interviewer's work assignment (averaging 24 names). The specific issues of the other magazines were aged either two and five or three and seven publication intervals old. The issues for *Woman's Own* were updated every week, whereas for *Reader's Digest* the same issues were used throughout the interviewing period.

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The NRS interview was completed in the normal way for all respondents. Respondents were then asked to examine the cover and contents page of the three specific issues, irrespective of whether or not they had claimed any readership of these titles. The following additional questions were then asked for each specific issue that had been previously read or looked at:-

- way in which the respondent came by the copy
- date issue was first and last read or looked at
- where seen, listing all places
- the number of days read or looked at
- length of time reading or looking at, in total
- proportion of pages read or looked at, using a six point picture scale
- proportion of a randomly selected sample of spreads at least glanced at, even if it was only to decide that there was nothing of interest there. It is known that this form of questioning is necessary to avoid underclaiming by respondents who often fail to claim spreads looked into and rejected for lack of interest.

At the end of the interview it was also necessary to re-ask the standard NRS frequency question, in order to ensure that frequency of reading information was available for all specific issue readers, irrespective of their responses during the standard NRS interview.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

This section is concerned with the results obtained for those specific issues for which the research appeared to work satisfactorily. That is, the two programme magazines and the two and three week old issues of *Woman's Own*.

The methodological aspects of the work, and the reasons for rejecting the results for the older issues of *Woman's Own* and all issues of *Reader's Digest*, are discussed in the next section.

Throughout the analyses the results for the two programme magazines, the *Radio Times* and *TV Times*, are combined, since the NRS estimates for the two titles are very similar and the objective of the study was to increase our understanding of reading behaviour and measurement for a publication group.

Comparison of AIR and SIR by reading frequency

Table 1 compares the incidence of AIR claims, made in response to the standard NRS questions, with SIR claims, that is the responses to the questions relating to the specific issues. In this table the allocation to frequency groups is based on the responses to the main interview frequency questions, thus showing the number of respondents who said they had not read in the past year, but yet, when faced with a specific issue, made a reading claim.

It will be appreciated that an exact agreement between the two claims should not be expected, because the specific issues will have normally been seen before the time period to which the AIR claims relate, but it is to be expected that the relationship between the two claims should be consistent by frequency group.

As will be seen from the table, this is not the case. For both the programme magazines and *Woman's Own* the AIR claims are considerably in excess of the SIR levels for the most regular readers (Almost Always), while for the programme magazines the same is true for the Quite Often readers.

On the basis that it is reasonable to assume that the specific issue questions for the issues

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Table 1

Comparisons between average and specific issue claims

| | Total | Almost always | Quite often | Only occ | Not in past year |
|-----------------------------------|-------|------------------|----------------|-------------|---------------------|
| PROGRAMME MAGAZINES | | | | | |
| Sample base | 2,256 | 366 | 96 | 530 | 1,264 |
| | % | % | % | % | % |
| AIR, average issue readers | 19 | 96 | 42 | 6 | - |
| SIR, specific issue readers | 16 | 78 | 25 | 6 | 2 |
| WOMAN'S OWN (YOUNG ISSUES) | | | | | |
| Sample base | 1,079 | 109 | 65 | 194 | 711 |
| | % | % | % | % | % |
| AIR, average issue readers | 12 | 82 | 45 | 11 | - |
| SIR, specific issue readers | 15 | 61 | 43 | 20 | 4 |

covered by this section provide an acceptable yardstick, these results mean that the AIR levels for regular readers are subject to a considerable amount of over-claiming.

The levels for the less frequent readers (Only Occasionally) for the programme magazines are identical, but for the less frequent readers for *Woman's Own* the opposite tendency can be seen. The proportion making a specific issue claim is considerably greater than the AIR level. Similarly, for both the programme magazines and *Woman's Own* there is a small proportion who, though they originally said they had not read in the past year (NPY), went on to make an SIR claim. Though small, this error becomes significant because of the high proportions of the total population who fall into the NPY group (56% and 66% respectively).

Thus we can see that there is a tendency for infrequent readers for *Woman's Own*, and, to a lesser extent, for the programme magazines, to underclaim.

It can also be seen from this table that the net effect of these errors is that the AIR estimates for the programme magazines overstate the 'true' readership by 12%, on the assumption that there is negligible first time reading of two or more week old issues of these publications, while the readership of *Woman's Own* is understated by at least 20%.

This contrasting result is largely a consequence of the atypical reading behaviour for programme magazines: for most publications it can be expected that the results will be more in line with the *Woman's Own* findings.

– Programme magazines have a high proportion of regular readers, with only a few people reading occasionally. While there is a normal tendency for some of these occasional readers to underclaim, there are not enough of them to counterbalance the overclaims arising from the regular readers.

– Programme magazines are normally read on a high proportion of days during the currency of the issue, which can be looked upon as nine to ten days, since each issue is published a few days before the period to which the programme details relate. This means that if a respondent has actually missed an issue there will be a two to three day period during which a reading claim would be correctly made, but it would nevertheless result in an over-estimate (replicated reading error).

The relevant considerations which more normally apply, and are typified by the *Woman's Own* results, are as follows:

– there is a higher incidence of occasional reading and of failing to pass the initial RPY filter.

– the number and span of reading days is lower, with the consequence that replicated reading is less significant.

– that type of parallel reading (that is, reading when two or more issues are read within an issue period of each other) which gives rise to under-estimation is more important. Again this is because the under-estimation arises in the case of occasional readers only. Parallel reading by regular readers (as will often happen for next week's and this week's issues of a programme magazine) does not give rise to any under-estimation because the reader qualifies in any event.

These points are worth stressing. The diametrically opposite results in total shown in Table 1 do not come about because the memory of respondents works differently between the

programme magazines and *Woman's Own*. They stem from the very different patterns of reading behaviour.

Source of copy and place of reading

The data in Table 2 show that most programme magazine reading events are accounted for by regular readers who see copies which are either delivered to their homes or bought by themselves or other members of their household. Such events, described as primary reading, accounted for 77% of all the claimed SIR reading. From the table it will also be seen that there is a close relationship between the level of primary reading and frequency of reading, with 89% of Almost Always readers being primary readers against only 26% of those reading only occasionally.

As is to be expected there is little reading of copies of programme magazines which are passed-in to a home, but well over half (67%) of the reading of those who read Quite Often or Only Occasionally takes place outside the home. A further analysis, not shown in the table, confirms that it is readership outside the home which is mainly under-reported by the NRS questions, and it is also such informants who fail to claim readership in the last year at the initial filter question.

For *Woman's Own* the table shows that 44% of all SIR claims were made by primary readers, of whom half claim to have bought the copy personally. Unlike the programme magazines there is a fair amount of reading of copies passed into the home, especially among the less frequent readers, while out-of-home reading, which may be of own or other people copies, is even more significant. It should also be noted that not all primary readers ever read at home. Again it was found that it was mainly out-of-home reading which was underreported and which was missed because the respondents failed to make a claim to have read in the past year.

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Table 2 Source of copy and place of reading for specific issues

| Frequency * | Total | Almost always | Quite often | Only occ |
|---|-------|------------------|----------------|-------------|
| PROGRAMME MAGAZINES | | | | |
| Sample base | 369 | 292 | 30 | 47 |
| | % | % | % | % |
| Delivered home | 18 | 21 | 7 | 2 |
| Bought by respondent | 36 | 42 | 17 | 13 |
| Bought by other household member | 23 | 25 | 20 | 11 |
| Total primary readers | 77 | 89 | 43 | 26 |
| At home reading of passed- in copies | 1 | 1 | 3 | 2 |
| Reading-in other homes | 18 | 11 | 37 | 49 |
| -at work | 4 | 3 | 13 | 8 |
| -5 specified public places ** | - | - | - | - |
| -newsagents | 2 | 1 | - | 13 |
| -elsewhere | 3 | 2 | 4 | 6 |
| Gross reading places | 105 | 106 | 100 | 104 |
| WOMAN'S OWN | | | | |
| Sample base | 160 | 67 | 30 | 63 |
| | % | % | % | % |
| Delivered home | 4 | 9 | - | - |
| Bought by respondent | 23 | 33 | 30 | 9 |
| Bought by other household member | 17 | 19 | 10 | 18 |
| Total primary readers | 44 | 61 | 40 | 27 |
| At home reading of passed- in copies | 19 | 12 | 27 | 22 |
| Reading-in other homes | 16 | 10 | 13 | 22 |
| -at work | 15 | 19 | 10 | 13 |
| -5 specified public places | 9 | 6 | 10 | 13 |
| -newsagents | 6 | - | 7 | 11 |
| -elsewhere | 1 | 1 | - | 5 |
| Gross reading places | 110 | 109 | 107 | 113 |

* Based, for NPY readers, on second frequency question.

** Waiting room, hospital, hotel, hairdresser or library

Time spent reading and reading intensity

For the sake of brevity this information is not presented in any detail in this paper, although it is all given in the JICNARS document. Three measures, intended as possible indicators of the likelihood of exposure to an advertisement, were taken. These measures were:

- reading time, expressed in minutes
- a picture scale, intended to represent in diagram form the proportion of pages of the publication which had been seen.
- spread traffic, taken by checking a rotating sample of spreads in the specific issues checked.

In essence these measures showed that while reading frequency was broadly correlated with all of them, the relationships between spread traffic, on the one hand, and reading time and the picture scale on the other, were not very close. For example, the correlation between the spread traffic and picture scale results was only 0.32 over all informants. This is understandable, since the scales are clearly measuring different aspects of reading behaviour, but it clearly means that there is no simple answer to the demand to include within a survey such as the NRS an indicator of the probability of advertisement exposure for an individual respondent. Though the JICNARS survey was not designed to probe this area it could well be that time, as a simple, crude but practical measure, interlaced with reading frequency, will be found to offer sufficient accuracy to justify moving in this direction.

EVALUATION OF METHODOLOGY

The main problem when using specific issue recognition as a method of magazine reader-

ship research for most titles is to determine the age of the issue to be checked; if it is too young it will not have had time to accumulate its full readership, whereas if it is too old reading which took place early in the life of the issue will have been forgotten. In the current research it was hoped that by checking a quite recent and older issue with the same person it would be possible to model the total reading of a composite issue over the whole of its life. In this section it is demonstrated that this approach was only partially successful for *Woman's Own*, while for *Reader's Digest* it must be regarded as a failure.

In making these comparisons it has to be assumed, as it has been assumed throughout this research, that the SIR claims, notwithstanding the problems of correctly deciding whether or not an issue has been read, do under some circumstances, have an acceptable level of validity. If this assumption is rejected, the whole research approach collapses, with the implication that it is not possible to seek to improve our understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of different readership research methods, since no target yardstick can be created. In which case we would be left with the statement that a readership estimate is the answer obtained to a particular question; nothing more and nothing less.

Woman's Own

Table 3 shows a comparison for *Woman's Own* between the AIR and SIR results for the two and three week old issues and five and seven week old issues combined together. This comparison has already been shown in Table 1 for the younger issues and comments made about the fact that the SIR level is higher than the AIR one. The new data in this table show that the SIR level for the older issues is actually lower than that for the younger ones, a result which is unlikely in practice since normally readerships can be expected to grow with the age of the issue, although in theory it could be due to significant differences in circulation levels or in

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the editorial appeal of different issues – or, of course, sampling variation (Table 3).

Given our knowledge of the publication concerned and the fact that the circulations of the older issues were marginally below average since they were published in August at the time of the peak holiday season, it is not possible to reach any firm conclusion about the value of the results for these issues. Because of this uncertainty it was concluded that they should be disregarded.

Table 3

**Comparison between AIR and SIR levels for
*Woman's Own***

| Issue age in weeks | 2 and 3 | 5 and 7 |
|-------------------------|---------|---------|
| Sample base | 1,079 | |
| NRS September AIR level | 12.3% | |
| | % | % |
| SIR level | 14.8 | 13.5 |
| SIR/AIR | 120 | 110 |

Reader's Digest

Table 4 shows the same comparison for *Reader's Digest* between AIR and SIR results by the age of the issue.

It will be seen that for all issues the number of SIR claims was very much less than the number of AIR claims made by the same person. For the youngest specific issue the SIR claims were 66% of the AIR level, while for the older issues the ratio declined to an average of 53%. It should also be noted that seasonal variations are unlikely to be an important factor since it was the July issue which showed the highest SIR result.

The discrepancy between the AIR and SIR levels is so marked that either the standard NRS level is far too high or the SIR level far too low. What is the evidence ?

(1) Using subjective judgement it is inconceivable that the readership of *Reader's Digest* should not grow over time, yet the results in Table 4 show, on average, a decline. This must cast considerable doubt on the accuracy of the SIR levels.

Table 4

Comparison between AIR and SIR levels for *Reader's Digest*

| Issue age in weeks | 9-14 | 13-18 | 21-26 | 29-34 |
|--|------|-------|-------|-------|
| Sample base | 620 | 561 | 620 | 561 |
| | % | % | % | % |
| NRS September AIR level (for sub-samples) | 13.5 | 15.9 | 13.5 | 15.9 |
| SIR level | 8.9 | 8.2 | 7.1 | 8.6 |
| SIR/AIR | 66 | 52 | 53 | 54 |

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(2) The percentages of respondents claiming to have read the four specific issues of *Reader's Digest* being researched in the five listed public places (see footnote to Table 2) averaged 0.4%, with no increase by issue age. This result may be compared with the findings of a quite separate JICNARS study (1988) which led to an estimate that the reading level of any issue of *Reader's Digest* in the same five public places was between 2.3% and 2.7%. Even allowing for the difference which must exist between the reading level for an average and specific issue of the publication these results suggest that the SIR pick-up of public place reading must be a very considerable under-estimate.

(3) Although it is to be expected that the increase in readership with the age of the issue will be greater for public place reading, some increase with age for reading in the respondent's own home is also to be expected.

However, the results do not show this pattern (Table 5).

Evidently loss of memory problems affect reading at home in the same way as public place reading.

(4) The profile of reading claims by the month of first reading should age with the age of the issue to reflect the inward flow of new readers. However, this does not happen (Table 6).

Hence the conclusion is inescapable. The results of this work on *Reader's Digest* are consistent only with the hypothesis that as the issues age there is a very considerable failure to recall reading events that have actually taken place. Hence it was decided that no further use should be made of the results for this publication.

Table 5

| Issue age in weeks | 9-14 | 13-18 | 21-26 | 29-34 |
|--|------|-------|-------|-------|
| Reading percentages for respondents own home | 7.4 | 6.6 | 5.5 | 6.1 |

Table 6

| Issue age in weeks | 9-14 | 13-18 | 21-26 | 29-34 |
|-----------------------|------|-------|-------|-------|
| | % | % | % | % |
| Month when first read | | | | |
| first | 65 | 63 | 68 | 67 |
| second | 20 | 15 | 11 | 13 |
| third or later | 3 | 5 | 3 | 6 |
| not known | 11 | 17 | 18 | 14 |
| Average age in months | 1.3 | 1.3 | 1.2 | 1.3 |

This finding has very clear methodological implications. While it is true that because of its rather uniform appearance and the nature of its contents *Reader's Digest* might be a particularly difficult long-life publication to research, these results do not give any encouragement to the belief that a specific issue approach can ever be used satisfactorily as a way of measuring or validating the readership of long life magazines.

References

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