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A NEW FULL THROUGH-THE-BOOK STUDY

In the United States, for almost ten years, two syndicated services providing estimates of magazine audiences have co-existed, Mediamark Research Inc. (MRI) using a Recent Reading (RR) technique and Simmons Market Research Bureau (SMRB) using a Through-the-Book (TTB) technique.

Both services administer a 'screening' procedure by the sorting of logo cards to establish which magazines may have been read or looked into in the past six months; then they diverge. MRI establishes recency of reading by further sorting of the screened-in titles; SMRB establishes recognition of 'aged' test issues which are stripped down to nine editorial items.

MRI measures some 200 magazines in this way; SMRB now measures some 120. The use of stripped rather than full test issues is obviously necessary so as to restrict the interview to a reasonable length and to yield a manageable and transportable 'kit'.

There are systematic differences between the results produced by the two services: most notably, MRI levels for monthly magazines are generally higher than the SMRB levels.

As one would expect, each service has suggested reasons for these differences. SMRB has suggested that the MRI results are inflated due to 'telescoping', ie claiming to have read within the most recent publication-interval when the last reading event was in fact longer ago. This position has been presented by Dr Valentine Appel, formerly at SMRB, at all three previous Symposia.

MRI has pointed out that the use of stripped rather than full test issues might lead to understatement by SMRB; and also that for monthly

magazines, there may be two kinds of losses related to the test issue age (10-12 weeks after the on-sale date) – some late readers, members of the eventual total audience who have not read it yet, and some early readers, who no longer recognise it.

To attempt to provide hard evidence on these points, MRI has conducted two studies comparing Recent Reading levels with *full* Through-the-Book levels. The full TTB procedure was made possible by conducting the interviews in central locations which eliminated, of course, the need to have a transportable kit.

The results of the first study were reported by me at the Salzburg Symposium. Both weeklies and monthlies were studied. Fieldwork was conducted in a single wave, in May 1985. The effects of issue ageing were established by rotating test issues of different dates so that weeklies were studied when they were two, four, six, eight and ten weeks old, and monthlies when they were one, two, three, four, and five months old.

The results for weeklies indicated that RR and TTB levels were in agreement, and that they accumulated essentially all their eventual audiences in two weeks.

For monthlies, the TTB levels increased with increasing age up to about four months, but did not reach the RR levels.

Discussion of this study caused us to consider several points:

(1) It would have been interesting to have studied monthly issues even older than five months.

(2) Larger sample sizes were evidently necessary for conclusive findings.

(3) In the case of monthlies especially, there may have been true issue-to-issue variation eg the January issues may *in fact* have had smaller audiences in the aggregate than the February issues – so the test did not strictly speaking provide a measure of audience accumulation.

THE 1987 STUDY

We therefore decided to repeat the study on slightly different lines. Monthlies only were studied. It was decided to take issues published in just *one* month – March 1987 – and to take full TTB measurements *each* month thereafter, for as many months as necessary until the audience levels stabilised. In the event, this led to us conducting six waves of fieldwork; each month from March to August, 1987, in the third week of each month so that the issues were studied when they were exactly one, two, three, four, five and six months old on the average.

The March 1987 issues of 85 monthly and tri-weekly magazines, being those studied by both MRI and SMRB, were prepared for TTB measurement. The TTB measurement was, as in the previous study, *full* TTB measurement with *all* editorial items in the test issues being exposed to the respondent. Spreads consisting only of advertisements or of continuation matter were stapled together, but all other spreads were shown. The RR measurement was identical with the standard Mediamark Research Inc measurement procedure.

In this study, respondents were subjected to *both* RR *and* TTB measurement. While theoretically it cannot be denied that there was some risk of contamination, the measurements are literally not the same – one could recognise the test issue without having read any issue in the most recent publication interval, or vice versa.

As in the previous study, the order of presentation of the RR and TTB questions was rotated, with RR first in half the interviews and TTB first in the other half. The order of printing publications in the questionnaire was also rotated, so there were four versions of the questionnaire.

Interviewing was carried out in five shopping mall interviewing centres. Separate matched samples of 100 adults were interviewed for each of the six waves.

COMPARING THE TTB AND RR LEVELS

As in the previous study, all comparisons started with 'read/screen ratios'. This quite simply is the ratio of the number of people who qualify as actual readers, of the test issue for TTB, or of any issue in the most recent issue interval for RR, to those screening in so that if, say, 100 people screened in and 50 of those read, the read/screen ratio would be .500.

A major reason for using read/screen ratios in the present study was to standardise the samples interviewed for each wave in terms of overall levels of magazine reading.

Although the samples were matched on certain demographic variables by setting quotas, they obviously could not be matched directly on reading levels, and this standardisation was therefore necessary. To avoid contamination by seasonal trends, a 12-month screen was substituted for the usual 6-month screen, so that the interview began by establishing which of the magazines might have been read or looked into by the respondent in the last 12 months, by having the respondent sort the logo cards on an appropriate sort board.

On average, respondents screened-in 14.3 magazines; so the average base for the read/screen

ratios – both RR and TTB – was 1,430 for each month.

Careful thought was given to the selection of the appropriate RR 'baseline' against which the TTB results could be compared. What was selected was the level established in the *March* fieldwork. The issue-interval concerned in this case is approximately the 30 days following the on-sale dates of the March issues being studied.

It seems highly probable that most of the (first time) reading of the March issues would take place within 30 days after their publication, and that conversely most of the reading of magazines in the 30 days before the March 17-24 fieldwork would be of the March issues. This, therefore, would be the most appropriate baseline. In the event, this was substantiated by the study findings.

RESULTS

The principal result of the study is shown in the table below. This gives indices for the TTB audience measurement, ie those who said they were 'sure' they had seen the test issue before, compared with the March RR level (selected for reasons just given as the baseline) as 100:

	TTB/RR index (RR = 100)
March	62
April	78
May	84
June	91
July	90
August	95

So, after some 30 days the TTB level was approximately 60% of the RR baseline; it rose in

April, May and June, and stabilised in the three months June-August at approximately 90-95% of the RR baseline.

This suggests that issues of monthly magazines take at least four months to achieve essentially all their eventual total audience: the number of people who read or look into them at any time after they are published.

Following the practice of past TTB studies, the levels reported count *only* those who are *sure* they have seen. However, one response which is allowed is 'may have seen'.

Only a very small proportion, in fact 0.5%, of those screening in said they 'may have seen' when the test issues were one month old: however, this rose to a peak of 14% at four months old, but then fell away again, to only 3% at six months old.

This is a most interesting but somewhat puzzling result. The rise was expected – it was found in the 1985 study. The subsequent fall was not expected.

It could perhaps be rationalised on the following grounds. The true increases in the total audience of a monthly after two or three months, ie people seeing the issue for the first time, largely come from those who are more casual, especially out-of-home, readers. The memory traces for such readers are weak and, therefore, if interviewed shortly afterwards they tend to respond 'may have seen'. However, if interviewed after more time has elapsed, the memory traces have by that time disappeared and they respond 'sure have not seen'.

This is entirely conjectural, and should only be taken completely seriously in the event that the present finding – an increase in the level of 'may have seen' followed by a decline – is reproduced. However, it is clear, and was expected,

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that there is a substantial increase in the numbers of those who are uncertain after the first month of the issues' lives.

In the expectation that this would occur, a question had been added to the questionnaire as a 'tie breaker' for the 'may have seen's'. This was as follows:

"If you had to decide, would you say this is the first time you happened to see this particular issue, or that you *did* read or look into it before? Please review this copy again if you need to, so you can be sure whether or not you have seen it before".

Adding the positive 'did see' responses to the original 'sure seen' responses, the indices against the RR baseline become the following:

	TTB*/RR index (RR = 100)
March	62
April	83
May	89
June	109
July	97
August	100

* 'sure seen' plus 'did see' tie breaker

Interesting, these levels increase to a peak of 109, and then decline, as some previous TTB studies conducted over successive months of issue ageing have found.

OTHER FINDINGS

The study was designed to present results as aggregates for all monthly magazines. The samples were large enough for this purpose, but

were obviously not large enough for individual magazines to be broken out.

However, some limited tabulations by type of magazine were possible. For the sake of simplicity, TTB and RR levels for the *March* fieldwork only are shown. At this point the TTB test issues were one month old.

The TTB/RR indices, shown below, provide an indication of how much of the audiences of the march issues had been accumulated after one month:

	TTB/RR indices: March fieldwork (RR = 100)
Circulation:	
Large (2.5 + million)	60
Small	63
Audiences:	
Dual	55
Male (60% +)	70
Female (60% +)	60

The difference between monthlies with large and with small circulations was not significant.

It is clear however that male-oriented monthlies build up their audiences the most rapidly, followed by female-oriented monthlies, with the dual audience monthlies being the slowest to accumulate their audiences. These differences persisted through all six waves of fieldwork.

Inspection of detailed magazine types indicated that the relatively rapid build up of audience for male-oriented monthlies was accounted for by sport, science, and men's magazines (*Playboy* and *Penthouse*).

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Similar tabulations were also carried out for place of reading, to throw light on which elements of the audience accumulate the most rapidly.

The results were as follows:

	TTB/RR indices: March fieldwork (RR = 100)
In own home	61
Someone else's home	48
Place of work	46
Doctor's/dentist's office	44
Beauty/barber shop	42
Library/club/school	(120)
Business reception room	(18)
While traveling	(14)
Store/news-stand	95
Somewhere else	(86)

In the above table, parentheses indicate indices where the RR read/screen ratio was less than .020, and which are therefore less reliable.

It is clear that all or almost all of the reading of monthly magazines in libraries, clubs and schools and at stores or news-stands, is reading of current issues. Since the issues available at

stores or news-stands are current issues in almost every case, the latter result is obvious.

Some 60% of in-home reading is of current issues. In other people's homes, at work, doctors and dentists' offices, and beauty and barber shops, only some 40-50% of monthly magazines read are current issues.

Though the bases are small, it is suggested that only small minorities of monthly magazines read in business reception rooms or while traveling are current issues.

Implications

Taking the two studies together, it seems that the results of *full* Through-the-Book measurement and of Recent Reading measurement in terms of audience levels are generally consistent.

The 1985 study showed that weeklies build up essentially all their audiences in two weeks. TTB, provided it is conducted with *full* issues, and RR, are equally acceptable measurement techniques for weeklies.

The 1985 study suggested, and to our mind the 1987 study demonstrates conclusively, that TTB – even with full issues – cannot be thought of as an acceptable technique for measuring the audiences of monthly magazines. Their audiences take at least four months to accumulate. However, at that age, substantial numbers of respondents will be uncertain whether they have seen the test issues before or not.