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RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN CIRCULATION, COPY LIFE MEASURED READERS, AND READING EVENTS

INTRODUCTION

Like other major readership surveys, the British NRS reports widely varying numbers of readers-per-copy for different magazines. For all magazines, gross readership divided by gross circulation gives an average of 4.2 readers-per-copy. But there are 25 magazines on the survey for which estimates of more than ten readers-per-copy are consistently reported from year to year, with the maximum reaching 20 readers-per-copy. Such high figures are sometimes said to be unbelievable; it is felt that they must result from some failure in the measurement technique rather than reflecting actual behaviour.

In order to shed further light on the phenomenon of high readers-per-copy JICNARS has recently undertaken two studies of the subject (1988). They did not set out to validate the estimates obtained by the standard survey. Their objective was the more limited one of establishing how high numbers of readers-per-copy can occur and hence whether the levels found are plausible and realistic, not whether they are precisely accurate.

The first study was concerned with a single kind of reading event, which is an obvious source of variation in readers-per-copy. This is readership in five selected public places: doctors' and dentists' waiting-rooms, hospitals, hotels, hairdressers and public libraries. For a period of six months the standard NRS survey carried additional questions on the incidence of magazine reading in visits to these places, in the four weeks before the interview.

The second study investigated, on a small scale only, the reading claims made on the standard

NRS survey for four examples of high reader-per-copy magazines. Its objective was to establish the actual behaviour that led to readership claims being made in these cases.

The first study showed not only that reading in the five selected public places explains why certain magazines accumulate high numbers of readers-per-copy but also that such events are likely to be under-reported by the standard measurement technique. The second study indicates that other patterns of reading behaviour can replace public place reading as the main explanation of high reader-per-copy estimates.

The conclusion is drawn that the variation in numbers of readers-per-copy reported by the standard measurement technique are realistic. The paper ends by considering the general implications of these studies for readership measurement, for the interpretation of findings obtained by the standard technique, and in explaining why variations in numbers of readers-per-copy occur.

PUBLIC PLACE READING STUDY

At the end of the standard interview all NRS informants for a period of six months from October 1986 to March 1987 were asked how many times they had visited each of five types of public place and when their last visit occurred within the previous four weeks. Informants also gave details of their most recent visit to one systematically selected type of place, stating the names and number of copies of any magazines read on that occasion.

Table 1 shows the gross number of visits claimed in the past four weeks to each of the

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Table 1

Visits and magazine reading in five public places

	Gross visits %	Visits with reading %	Copies read per visit no	Gross copies read %
Doctors', dentists' surgeries	48.6	18.4	1.71	31.5
Hospitals and clinics	32.3	10.0	1.97	19.8
Hotels	14.0	2.3	1.81	4.2
Hairdressers	39.9	14.5	1.82	26.3
Public libraries	46.4	5.9	1.89	11.2
Total (gross)	181.6	51.1	1.82	92.9

Base: 14,515 unweighted adults aged 15 or more

five named public places, expressed as percentages of all adults. It also shows the gross number of visits at which reading of any magazines was claimed, the mean number of copies read per visit and hence the gross number of copies of all magazines read in a period of four weeks.

The incidence of visits in the past four weeks projects to the order of a thousand million visits per year to all five places for all adults, or about 24 visits per adult per year. These visits generate the order of 500 million reading events, or about one public place reading event per adult per month. Table 2 shows the distribution of the most recent claimed visit to each selected public place, together with the gross number of visits claimed in the last four weeks.

One in every 24 of all claimed visits in the past four weeks took place 'yesterday'. Since the expected total number of visits in four weeks

should be between 26 and 28 times the number of 'yesterday' visits, this finding suggests that the gross number of visits per four weeks is somewhat underestimated: telescoping does not appear to be a problem.

In Table 3 the total number of reading events claimed in the selected public places is re-expressed in terms of public place average issue readers and readers-per-copy for those magazines which are included in the NRS media list. This is done by dividing the gross number of claims for each category by the number of publication intervals in four weeks, ie, by four for weekly magazines, to obtain public place AIR. Claims are further divided by the gross circulation of all magazines in each category to obtain public place readers-per-copy (RPC).

The table compares public place AIR and RPC with total AIR and RPC obtained from the standard National Readership Survey report

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Table 2

Time since most recent visit

	Yesterday %	Within past 7 days %	Within past 4 weeks %	Gross visits %
Doctors', dentists surgeries	2.5	13.7	32.4	48.6
Hospitals and clinics	1.5	7.4	15.9	32.3
Hotels	0.5	3.3	7.1	14.0
Hairdressers	1.5	11.5	28.5	39.9
Public libraries	1.5	11.9	19.9	46.4
Total (gross)	7.5	47.8	103.8	181.6

Base: 14,515 unweighted adults aged 15 or more

Table 3

Public place readership and total NRS readership

	Public place reading		NRS 1986/7	
	Gross AIR in public places m	RPC in public places no	Total gross AIR no	Total gross RPC no
Sunday & programme magazines	0.4	0.02	49.1	2.8
Other weeklies & fortnightlies	4.4	0.42	42.5	4.0
Monthlies & bi-monthlies	16.5	1.43	77.1	6.7
Sunday & programme magazines	0.4	0.02	49.1	2.8
High (200,000+) circulation	8.0	0.60	54.4	4.1
Low (200,000-) circulation	12.9	1.36	65.2	6.9
General magazines	5.8	0.21	108.5	4.0
Women's magazines	15.5	1.17	60.2	4.5
All magazines	21.3	0.53	168.7	4.2

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for 1986/7 for the same groups of publications. The table shows that Sunday newspaper colour supplements and programme magazines generated low levels of public place reading. It accounts for more than a tenth of all readers-per-copy for other weeklies and fortnightlies and for more than a fifth of all readers-per-copy of monthlies and bi-monthlies. Public place reading is also much more important for the average small circulation magazine than for magazines with circulations exceeding 200,000 copies.

More detailed analysis shows that reading in the five selected public places is very variable by title. Claims ranging from four to ten public place readers-per-copy occur for fashion, hair-styling and home interest women's magazines and for a number of general interest magazines with high cover prices and limited circulation. There is generally little reading of special interest and lower priced magazines in public places.

Comparisons can also be made between the magazines claimed to have been read in visits to the selected public places on the day before the interview and 'Yesterday' readership claims made for the same titles in answer to the standard readership questions. The findings are given in Table 4.

It can be seen that the standard recency questions generated a 'Yesterday' claim in little more than one-third of the cases where the informant went on to say that he or she had read or looked at a given title on the day before the interview. In nearly a fifth of all cases the named publication was not claimed to have been read in the past year.

These findings demonstrate that the standard recent reading questions do not succeed

Table 4

Yesterday public place and standard readership claims

Weighted claims to have read specific NRS titles on the day before interview in public places	2,150,000
	%
Claims matched with a 'Yesterday' NRS claim	36
Claims matched with a less recent NRS claim	45
Claims matched with a 'not past year' NRS claim	19

Base: 651 reading events

in picking up a substantial proportion of even the most recent reading events that occur in public places. Overall, at least one third and possibly as many as half of the reading events claimed to have occurred in the selected public places did not generate a corresponding AIR claim in the standard interview with the same informant.

It is reasonable to assume that other types of occasional reading event outside the home will also tend to be underreported by the standard readership measures.

STUDY OF HIGH READER-PER-COPY MAGAZINES

The second study followed up average issue readership claims for four magazines which obtained an average of 15 readers-per-copy on the NRS for 1986/7. NRS informants claiming AIR for these publications were telephoned shortly after the original interview to explore in detail

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Table 5**Behaviour corresponding to standard AIR claims**

Number of AIR claims investigated		85
Title confusion overclaims	(a)	5
Time based overclaims	(b)	5
Replicated overclaims	(c)	10
Confirmed reading claims		65
Additional reading by parallel readers	(d)	4

(a) Title confusion. In four of these five cases it was established that the magazine first read during the publication interval was another NRS title with similar contents or title. It is likely that a similar number of compensating underclaims would be found among the claims for other titles. In the fifth case the claim related to a partwork, which is thus a true overclaim.

(b) Time based overclaims. These are cases where it could not be established that an issue of the claimed title had definitely been read in the past four weeks. It will be appreciated that for monthlies the actual publication interval is a calendar month, so this condition is strict.

(c) Replicated overclaims. Replicated claims are those where the title in question had been read in the past four weeks but where the copy or copies had already been read more than four weeks ago.

(d) Additional parallel reading. Conversely, three informants had read two or three copies for the first time during the publication interval rather than one. These copies therefore contribute to the total number of eligible reading events.

the behaviour corresponding with each claim. A total of 85 qualitative interviews were completed. The main findings are shown in Table 5.

Table 6**Source of copy for confirmed reading events**

Source of copy	Readers-per-copy:
11 Bought personally	1.9
7 Bought by other household member	1.2
18 Primary readers	3.1
8 Pass-on copies	1.4
15 Read in other people's houses	2.6
11 read at work	2.1
4 read in 5 selected public places	0.7
13 read in newsagents	2.3
51 secondary readers	9.0
69 confirmed reading events	12.1

The 85 AIR claims therefore generated a total of 69 eligible reading events, which would become 73 events if the correction for title confusion described at (a) is applied. Table 6 shows how these 69 events, which are equivalent to 12.1 readers-per-copy of the test publications, break down by source of copy and place of reading.

The true number of personally purchased copies must, of course, average 1.0 readers-per-copy. The reported number of 1.9 personal purchasers may be explained by the fact that it is easy for personal purchase to be double claimed, for example where a husband pays for a copy mainly intended for his wife. The total of

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Table 7**Place of reading for confirmed reading events**

Publications:	A	B	C	D
Confirmed events	18	18	15	18
	%	%	%	%
Home, household copies	22	17	27	33
Home, pass-on copies	11	11	-	22
	33	28	27	55
Other people's homes	17	50	7	11
At work	28	5	33	6
5 selected public places	-	-	-	22
newsagents	22	17	33	6
	67	72	73	45

3.1 primary household readers-per-copy is not unrealistic.

Table 7 shows the places of reading for each of the four test publications with respect to all confirmed reading events.

While the bases are very small, the table demonstrates that the test publications accumulated their readers in different ways. Only one of the four publications was read in public places. A second was read mainly in other people's homes, while for the other two publications reading at work and at newsagents were important sources of readers.

In addition to the 12.1 confirmed reading events per copy we may allow 0.7 events for compensating title confusion underclaims. Furthermore, it has been shown by the Public Place Reading Study that reading events which actually occur in the five public places studied are substantially underreported. Hence it is a

reasonable assumption that at least the equivalent of three further reading events per copy failed to generate average issue reading claims, raising the total number of reading events per copy to more than the fifteen reported by the standard NRS measure.

For this group of magazines, each generating exceptionally high numbers of readers-per-copy, over four-fifths of NRS AIR claims corresponded to actual first time reading events in the publication interval. The remaining fifth of NRS AIR claims, which do not correspond to actual first time reading events by claimants, are likely to be fewer in number than the real events which take place but are underreported by those reading occasionally and outside the home or because of title confusion.

CONCLUSIONS

(1) These studies demonstrate that the cases of average issue readership-per-copy investigated are broadly realistic, in the sense that the actual number of first time contacts with issues in the publication interval is of the same magnitude as the measured average issue readership estimate.

(2) They show that high numbers of contacts per copy can arise in different ways, of which reading in public places is one. Public place reading contacts are substantially underreported by the standard measurement technique, suggesting that other kinds of occasional contact will also be underreported. On this assumption, the moderate number of overclaims which undoubtedly occur for high reader-per-copy magazines will be fully offset by underclaims.

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(3) The under-reporting of public place reading contacts by the standard measurement method also applies to 'yesterday' reading events on a substantial scale.

This finding suggests that even very recent reading events need to be prompted, not only by title, but also by reading circumstances, if they are to be fully reported.

(4) More generally, the studies suggest that the following conditions should be met if a magazine is to generate high numbers of readers-per-copy:

(i) a long active life, which may come from some combination of a long publication interval, high physical quality and contents that do not rapidly lose their interest;

(ii) limited circulation, often stemming from a high cover price, so that the number of potential readers is a large multiple of the number of copies distributed;

(iii) suitability for certain niches, such as public places and work places, which generate large volumes of traffic.

(5) While primary readership is evidently a linear function of circulation, some types of secondary readership, including reading in newsagents, at work places and in public places, do not depend on the total number of copies but on whether distribution is achieved in a limited number of places generating high traffic volumes. Hence high average numbers of readers-per-copy can be achieved by magazines with long lives, long publication intervals and low circulations, but not by those with the opposite characteristics.

References

JICNARS (1988). A study of high reader-per-copy magazines.