Clark Schiller
Time Incorporated
New York, USA

2.6 A study of overclaiming readership using a recent reading technique

BACKGROUND

None of the techniques that researchers employ today as the means of determining whether or not a given person is a member of a magazine's average issue audience has been validated. Research that has been done in the area of validation strongly suggests that these techniques are encumbered with response errors. The findings from these studies further indicate that response errors differentially affect different magazines.

It is doubtful that any technique that solely relies on respondent testimony concerning past behaviour will be free of response errors. However, it is the responsibility of researchers to develop measurement techniques which minimise response errors and at the same time execute and publish methodological research, for each medium being studied, on response errors so that data users can take this phenomenon into account when making audience estimates.

The ability to reconstruct an event in a person's life is related to the importance with which the person holds the event and the interval between when the event occurred and the attempt at reconstruction. For example, it is easier to recreate the events which happened on your last birthday than it is to recall happenings that occurred two days prior to your last birthday, or for that matter, eight birthdays ago.

People in their attempt to reconstruct some experience in their life are subject to two kinds of errors:
(a) forgetting . . . in the case of forgetting, the stimuli with which they have been presented are insufficient to recall the event. It is generally agreed that as the amount of stimuli or quality of the stimuli increases, so does the ability to recall the event. This type of error is termed understatement.
(b) perceive that an event took place when it never happened . . . here, again the stimuli are not sufficient to recreate that the event *did not take place*. For example, most people even after recognising that they misplaced an item in their home, would give sworn testimony that they know it was put back in its original place. This type of error is termed overstatement.

Understatement, while important and certainly deserves the attention of researchers, appears to be less critical than overstatement.

Consider the following hypothetical model.

Magazine X has, in truth, an audience of 2,000,000 readers. 1,000,000 of these readers are classified in-home and the balance out-of-home.

A methodological study is done establishing underclaiming among true in-home readers at 10% and a 50% rate of forgetting is found among out-of-home readers. Also, among the 150,000,000 true non-readers, 1% claim to be readers (**Table 1**).

TABLE 1

	Forgetting rate	
	%	Number
In-home (1,000,000)	10	100,000
Out-of-home (1,000,000)	50	500,000
Total forgetting	30	600,000
	Overclaiming rate	
	%	Number
True non-readers (150,000,000)	1	1,500,000

A survey is then taken and it estimates Magazine X to have an audience of 2,900,000.

The audience of 2,900,000 contains a net error distortion of 900,000 or 45% and a gross distortion of 105%. The net error affects the size of the total audience, whereas the gross error relates to the demographic make-up or composition of the audience.

CURRENT STUDY

Purpose
The major purpose of this research was to determine whether the phenomenon of overstatement of readership exists when a recent reading technique is employed to measure audience. In addition, other purposes of the study were to provide clues as to the magnitude of overstatement and to hopefully gain some insights about the possible explanation of why the level of overstatement varies between titles.

Questioning procedure
The recent reading method used in this study was virtually

identical to the procedure currently practised by a syndicated research service in the United States, MRI. In essence, a respondent is given a deck of approximately 160 cards. Each card 3" × 4" in size, contains, in black and white, the logo of a magazine. The respondent is first instructed to sort the cards in three piles, which he places on a board, according to whether in the last six months he is definitely sure he has read the magazine, not sure, or definitely sure he has not read the magazine. This is the 'screening question'. The interviewer, after recording the definitely sure read and not sure magazine then asks for each of the magazines in these categories a frequency of reading question . . . how many out of four issues the respondent usually reads. This is then followed by the readership question which is asked separately by publishing frequency: "Did you happen to read any of these publications in the last (publication interval), that is, any copy in the days since (specific date), not including today?" The respondent again sorts the cards into the same three piles as above but this time based on behaviour during the publishing interval (last 7 days, 14 days, and so on).

Magazines studied

Altogether, this study covered approximately 160 magazines. To measure overclaiming, 22 fictitious, regional, foreign, or now defunct magazines were substituted for actual publications within the framework of the approximately 160 magazines studied. Since reading of fictitious magazines could not have occurred, any claim of reading must be counted as overclaiming. For the fictitious magazines, logos were created from scratch and for the defunct magazines actual logos, where available, were used. Classification of a fictitious publication as a weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly magazine was done primarily on the basis of whether or not the title suggested immediacy of information. Publications whose title suggested immediacy were considered to be weeklies. The names of the fictitious (defunct) magazines are shown in **Table 2**.

Data collection procedures

Altogether, 510 interviews were conducted, 264 among adult men and 246 with adult women. All interviewing was done in two shopping malls located on Long Island, New York, utilising the face-to-face interview procedure. All interviewers were personally trained in study procedures. Practice interviews were conducted and evaluated as part of the training operation. At no time was the real purpose of the study revealed nor were the interviewers told the name of the company sponsoring the study. An independent research firm, Beta Research, Syosset, New York, was responsible for the execution of fieldwork and the tabulation of the data.

Study limitations

This method of measuring overstatement is probably a minimum estimate of this phenomenon since it does not

TABLE 2

Weekly	Bi-weekly	Monthly
Business Market	Country Life	Autocare
Newsevents	Look*	Colliers*
Popular Sports	View	Family
This Week*		Garden News
Women's Weekly		Good Nutrition
		Homecare
		Liberty*
		Literary Digest*
		Modern Homemaker
		Popular Gardening
		Successful Business
		Sunset**
		Women's Own

* *Defunct.*
** *West Coast distribution only.*

take into account the prestige a magazine can have and hence a desire to claim readership because that is 'the thing to do'. Nor does this measure contain confusion as to when the issue was read, that is, whether it was actually read outside the publishing frequency (for example, longer than seven days ago for a weekly) and the respondent thinks that the reading occurred within the publishing interval. Reading outside the period and reporting having read during the period is commonly referred to as 'telescoping'. It also recognised that this measure does not take into consideration that some of the people overclaiming readership would in fact be readers if the fictitious magazine actually existed.

STUDY FINDINGS

The study findings are shown in **Tables 3–6**.

While the survey's sample design was not a probability type, **Tables 7** and **8** show results for individual titles which are projected to a universe of 153,000,000 adults, of which 72,500,000 are male and the balance female. The purpose of this projection is strictly to give an understanding of the magnitude of overstatement in terms of population counts.

TABLE 3
Yes, surely read in last six months

	Readership range		
	All respondents %	Male %	Female %
Publishing interval of fictitious publications			
Weekly	0.6–7.5	0.4–10.2	0–5.7
Bi-weekly	0.6–11.6	0–11.7	1.2–11.4
Monthly	0.8–3.3	0.4–4.9	0.4–3.3

TABLE 5
Yes, surely read during publishing interval

	Readership range		
	All respondents %	Male %	Female %
Publishing interval of fictitious publications			
Weekly	0.2–2.0	0–3.4	0–1.6
Bi-weekly	0.2–4.3	0–3.8	0–4.9
Monthly	0.2–1.2	0–2.7	0–1.2

TABLE 4
Claimed frequency of reading

	All respondents who reported yes, sure read in last six months %
Usually read average fictitious magazine	
Nil of four issues	5.5
one out of four issues	45.8
two out of four issues	20.9
three out of four issues	7.5
four out of four issues	20.2

TABLE 6
Yes, surely read during publishing interval

	Readership range		
	All respondents %	Male %	Female %
Publishing interval of fictious publications			
Weekly	0.8	1.0	0.7
Bi-weekly	1.6	1.5	1.8
Monthly	0.7	0.8	0.7

TABLE 7
Readership of fictitious magazines according to sex

	All respondents		Male		Female	
	Rating %	('000)	Rating %	('000)	Rating %	('000)
Weekly publications						
Business Market	0.2	290	0.4	290	0	0
Newsevents	1.6	2340	1.9	1380	1.2	960
Popular Sports	2.0	2780	3.4	2460	0.4	320
This Week	0.2	290	0.4	290	0	0
Today's Celebrities	0.4	640	0	0	0.8	640
Women's Weekly	0.8	1290	0	0	1.6	1290
Bi-weekly publications						
Country Life	0.4	580	0.8	580	0	0
Look	4.3	6690	3.8	2750	4.9	3940
View	0.2	320	0	0	0.4	320

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TABLE 8
Readership of fictitious magazines according to sex

	All respondents		Male		Female	
	Rating %	('000)	Rating %	('000)	Rating %	('000)
Monthly publications						
Autocare	1.4	1960	2.7	1960	0	0
Colliers	1.0	1410	1.5	1090	0.4	320
Family	0.6	960	0	0	1.2	960
Garden News	0.4	610	0.4	290	0.4	320
Good Nutrition	1.2	1760	1.1	800	1.2	960
Home Care	0.8	1120	1.1	800	0.4	320
Liberty	0.2	320	0	0	0.4	320
Literary Digest	0.8	1220	0.8	580	0.8	640
Modern Homemaker	0.4	640	0	0	0.8	640
Popular Gardening	0.8	1120	1.1	800	0.4	320
Successful Business	0.8	1120	1.1	800	0.4	320
Sunset	0.8	1250	0.4	290	1.2	960
Women's Own	0.4	640	0	0	0.8	640

CONCLUSIONS

For sure, the recent reading method used in this study leads to overstatement of audience.

The range of overclaiming strongly indicates the phenomenon is not a random event, and it does not appear to be a constant factor.

It appears that the name of the publication contributes to the level of overclaiming. Furthermore, since the overclaiming of *Look* is the highest in the survey, it would appear that the 'level of familiarity' of the name is related to the level of overstatement.

Since 'telescoping' (actual reading outside the publishing interval and then claiming read within the period) is not an issue in this study, the expectation was that the mean difference in overclaiming levels between weeklies and monthlies would be negligible . . . and such was the case in this study.