

9.3

THE EFFECT OF ANSWER CATEGORIES ON AVERAGE ISSUE SCORES

In the German National Readership Survey – integrated in the National Media Survey MA – we have described the readership of an average issue (AIR) with three main questions in our ‘standard’ model since 1970:

(1) When did you read at least one issue of a particular publication?

Three answer categories:

- within the last 12 issue periods
- 12 to 24 issue periods ago
- longer ago.

(2) How many of the last 12 issues did you read?

Seven answer categories: a 12-point scale in seven stages – 1 and 12 separately, the other numbers in pairs: 2-3, 4-5, 6-7, 8-9, 10-11.

(3) When did you read the last issue?

Four answer categories:

- within the last issue period
- 1-2 periods ago
- 2-3 periods ago
- longer ago.

In the second half of 1986 four big magazine publishing houses presented a variation to this

standard press model (ST). It was called ‘F’ for ‘future’. But this solution was not immediately accepted by our association, AG.MA. It was decided that further experiments should be done in 1987 and this paper is concerned with these activities.

THE APPROACH

Three alternative questionnaire models have been developed:

- VF – meaning ‘very future’
- DS – standing for ‘dual system’
- GG – the first letters of the two authors Gerloff and Geiger.

In VF and GG we tried to combine together the two time-interval questions – only one question, and one timescale. The main difference between these two was that VF divided the last issue period on the scale into two halves. In this version the interviewee was presented with two ‘right’ answer categories, which led him to the qualification ‘reader within the last period’. The GG model (and also ST) offered only one possibility for this claim. We will therefore concentrate more on VF.

The DS version was very different from all the other models:

(1) The old standard formula ‘when last this publication’ was replaced by the new one ‘which of these publications’ in the last 12 and in the last issue periods.

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Chart 1

Standard (since 1970) two scales	Very Future one scale	Dual System two scales
-	within the last half issue period	-
Within the last issue period	1/2 - 1 issue period ago	Within the last issue period
1 - 2 issue periods ago	-	-
2 - 3 issue periods ago	1 - 3 issue periods ago	-
Longer ago	-	Longer ago
Within the last 12 issue periods	3 - 12 issue periods ago	Within the last 12 issue periods
12 - 24 issue periods ago	12 - 24 issue periods ago	-
Longer ago	Longer ago	Longer ago
7 categories	6 categories	4 categories

(2) The answer categories have been formulated in alternatives:

- within the last 12 issue periods/longer ago
- within the last issue period/longer ago.

The three versions are summarised in Chart 1 (the 12 point-scale has been the same) in all variations.

THE RESULTS

First of all the number of periodicals filtered by the 7, 6 and 4 categories of our questionnaire procedure for press media is important (Table 1).

Comparison between VF and DS (Table 2) shows there are a lot of remarkable differences

- between 40 and 90 index points.

But you cannot group publications only by the length of their publication interval. Particularly in Germany it is very interesting to distinguish between publications with higher or lower reading-circle and public place circulations - and consequently with more or fewer occasional readers (Table 3).

Statement 1: Version DS (Dual System) seems to be able to catch and collect more occasional readers. Regular readers are hardly affected by different questionnaire procedures.

The next step is the comparison of the two figures for the readership of an average issue:

- read in the last issue period and
- read how many out of the 12 issues in the last 12 publication intervals.

Table 1**Average number of magazine titles claimed**

	ST	VF	DS
Number of informants	826	830	853
All publications:			
Known about	52.4	49.6	44.6
Had in hand	22.3	21.3	22.3
Read in the last 12 issue periods	9.7	11.0	9.6
Read in the last (1) issue period	4.1	4.7	5.0
Monthlies:			
Read in the last 12 issue periods	3.8	4.1	3.6
Read in the last (1) issue period	1.5	1.8	1.8
Fortnightlies:			
Read in the last 12 issue periods	1.1	1.3	1.1
Read in the last (1) issue period	0.3	0.4	0.5
Weeklies:			
Read in the last 12 issue periods	4.9	5.6	4.8
Read in the last (1) issue period	2.2	2.5	2.7

Differences of 0.1 between the sum of m., f., w. and the figure of all publications are rounding errors.

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Table 2

Comparison between VF and DS: gross coverage

ST = index 100	Read in the last 12 issue periods		Read in the last (1) issue period	
	ST = Index = 100		ST = Index = 100	
	VF	DS	VF	DS
Number of informants	830	853	830	853
ALL PUBLICATIONS	113	99	116	122
Monthlies	108	96	118	114
Fortnightlies	117	104	131	167
Weeklies	116	100	112	121
Programme magazines	113	103	111	113
General weekly magazines	121	94	141	134
Women's magazines:				
Weeklies	121	103	107	137
Fortnightlies	122	107	142	187
Monthlies	114	103	143	143
Newspapers:				
Subscription	104	99	104	98
Popular	105	105	100	105

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Table 3**Gross coverage**

	Read in the last 12 issue periods ST = Index = 100		Read in the last (1) issue period ST = Index = 100	
	VF	DS	VF	DS
Number of informants	830	853	830	853
More than 49% of the total circulation is delivered to subscribers	98	111	107	105
More than 9% of the total circulation is delivered to reading-circles	118	100	138	148
More than 27% occasional readers	115	99	134	145
More than 59% very regular readers	110	97	106	107

Table 4

Theoretical and empirical shares of the readership in the last issue period in each reading frequency category (= 100)

Frequency categories	1	2-3	4-5	6-7	8-9	10-11	12
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Theoretical contact probability	8.3	20.8	37.5	54.2	70.8	87.5	100.0
Empirical shares found all publications							
ST	12.8	12.3	21.7	36.4	51.8	66.0	96.3
VF	16.3	16.9	32.2	45.0	57.8	85.5	97.8
DS	13.2	21.6	43.9	56.5	75.3	81.0	98.7

- at one extreme, category 1 is overclaimed in all three versions. At the other extreme 12 is underclaimed in all three versions

- the figures for ST and VF are lower in the other categories than would be expected, but the figures for DS are generally higher than the theoretical probabilities.

Table 5

The subjective certainty about the answers concerning reading frequency and last reading of magazines

Reading frequency: average of all publications readership of at least 1 out of 12 last issues

I am absolutely sure that my answer was correct	Total %	1 %	2-3 %	4-5 %	6-7 %	8-9 %	10-11 %	12 %
Version:								
ST	46.0	35.2	26.8	29.2	35.4	48.4	51.3	81.0
VF	44.3	34.3	25.2	28.7	32.7	41.7	52.9	85.9
DS	46.4	35.2	24.2	27.4	35.5	30.0	56.0	84.6
Average	45.6	34.9	25.4	28.4	34.5	40.0	53.4	83.8

The consequence

The values for readers in the last issue period (Table 4) are lower in ST and VF than the comparable values coming out of the frequency question, the so-called K1 (from German 'Kumulation'). This result is not surprising. In Germany since the late sixties we have been familiar with K1 values higher than the 'heart of the matter'. It is certainly astonishing, and at first sight not easy to interpret, that the DS-model produces lower K1 values.

Statement 2: From the point of view of K1 we cannot decide without more studies which of the three versions ST, VF or DS is the most satisfactory or how the results of DS came off.

Recalling the answers

In the second part of the interview the respondent was again asked about his reading behaviour, mainly to bring out how sure he or she has been when he/she answered in the main interview about his/her last reading event with a particular publication. The answers – given

as a reaction to a kind of 'Belsonisation' – are subjective. They are 'ideas' about the interview situation some minutes before and about the procedure of recall and recognition. But the results are very interesting (Table 5).

It is evident that the different versions are not able to produce different degrees of certainty in the minds of the respondents. The certainty about answers concerning frequency depends on the frequency of the events asked for. The more often or the more seldom something happens, the more a person feels sure about estimating how often it happened in the past. And if events are not very seldom or often, the interviewee is not very sure how often it happened. The decision might have been yes or no; may be, may not be. The lowest certainty we find is in the answer categories 2-3 and 4-5.

Statement 3: Numerical scales to measure reading frequencies are not objective instruments. The given answers are subjective impressions or images about the reading behaviour of the respondent. You can calculate from these figures the K1, and you will get another approach to the readership of an average issue.

Table 6

Subjective certainty about the answers concerning the last reading event of magazines

Recent reading	I am absolutely sure that my answer about my recent reading was correct			
	All publications %	Monthlies %	Fortnightlies %	Weeklies %
VERSION VF				
Within the last half issue period	74.6	66.7	72.1	80.0
1/2 – 1 issue period ago	44.0	31.3	47.5	53.8
1 – 3 issue periods ago	24.7	24.2	20.7	26.0
3 – 12 issue periods ago	23.6	27.2	23.0	20.7

But the investigation problems are nearly the same as those with the questions about recent reading.

We find almost the same situation with the reading frequency question as with the recent reading question. Instead of 'how often' we have to say 'when last'. If the reading event has been very recent – in the last publication interval – the respondents are very sure that their answer has been correct. And the longer ago it was the more uncertain they are about the correctness of their answer. And in addition the certainty depends not only on the given publication intervals on the scale, but also and more on the real time week, fortnight, month, year. People are more sure to have read within the last week than within the last month. Here we can probably see the 'images' of time spaces and of human memory. The further away the event, the worse the recollection must be.

The differences in the subjective certainty between the answers given for the first and the second half-issue period are impressive: a de-

crease between 53 (monthlies) and 33 (weeklies) index points (Table 6). And beyond the issue period nearly 75% of all answers were given with more or less uncertainty.

The other versions also show enormous differences between the certainty of answers given for the first most recent publication interval and the following issue periods. The percentages also differ between the groups of magazines with the same publication intervals: monthly, fortnightly and weekly (Table 7).

Statement 4: The variations in certainty between time categories are bigger than between questionnaire versions. And we learn again: readership research problems arise in two dimensions of time:

- the frequency of potential reading events in time depending on the publication intervals of magazines

- the recency of actual reading events in time depending on the interest of readers in magazines.

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Table 7

Recent reading

	All publications %	Monthlies %	Fortnightlies %	Weeklies %
VERSION ST				
Within the last issue period	60.5	47.1	54.7	70.6
1 – 2 issue periods ago	25.4	19.0	26.2	30.9
2 – 3 issue periods ago	18.8	23.5	11.1	17.6
Longer ago	19.2	24.6	13.2	15.9
VERSION DS				
Within the last issue period	59.0	48.3	50.6	67.3
Longer ago	20.6	22.2	18.7	19.8

We have almost no problems with daily publications, which are read daily. We have a lot or all of our problems with monthly special-interest magazines with few subscribers and buyers and many, many, occasional readers.

“The answer to the question, which readership research method would be ‘better’ depends

finally on the view taken by the media planner of the occasional reader.” (Dr Ernst Braunschweig 1962!)

More than 25 years later we have almost no information about the contact quality of readers with different reading frequencies. We have only images about occasional and regular readers – no knowledge!