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LIFTING THE VEIL ON READERS PER COPY

LECTURE ON THE OCCASION OF THE INTERNATIONAL READERSHIP SYMPOSIUM IN HONGKONG,
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The first part of this lecture is concerned with the fact that magazine titles are individuals, and this determines their individual destinies. Of course, not all copies of a title meet with the same destiny, but on the whole, it can be said that one destiny is more likely for one title, and another destiny more probable for another title.

I cannot give a complete picture of all the various destinies, but I can provide a few by way of example. And for this purpose I have chosen a fictitious world, a world with which we are all familiar. I have undertaken a journey to 'Duckburg' and observed the inhabitants and their reading habits.

First of all there is the magazine 'AGATHA', a women's magazine with topics for all women.



AGATHA appears fortnightly and Daisy buys this title every two weeks on the way to her office.





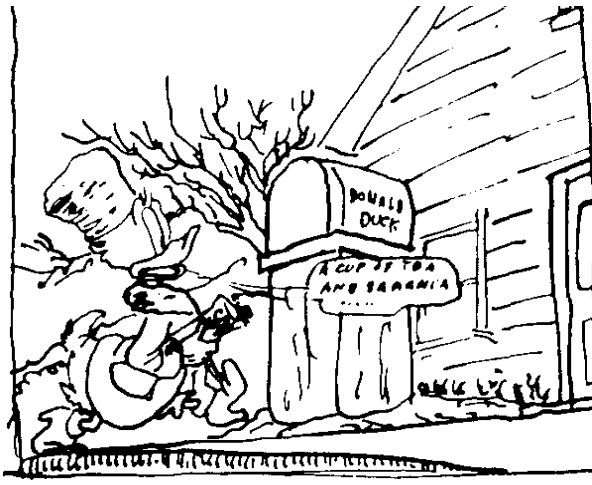
As this magazine is of interest to all women, all Daisy's colleagues read it. They all leaf through it, some read an article in their coffee or tea break or when the boss is not looking.



AGATHA, however, has a rival; this is the magazine SAMANTA. SAMANTA also appears fortnightly and appeals to all women.



SAMANTA, however, has a speciality: SAMANTA offers a cookery supplement for the reader to collect. And Daisy has found that whenever she takes SAMANTA to the office, she risks losing her copy and, with it, a sequel to her cookery collection. Daisy, therefore, buys SAMANTA on her way home.



She takes SAMANTA home with her. Donald is not interested in it and neither is Dagobert.



What can we learn from this?

AGATHA has a much better chance of attracting a greater number of readers per copy than SAMANTA.

Both titles are equally popular, have the same publication frequency, have roughly the same circulation and do not differ significantly in content. Yet, in one detail they differ; the cookery collection in SAMANTA:



It is this detail that provokes a certain type of behaviour on the part of the buyer and perhaps also the subscriber. AGATHA is passed on willingly; SAMANTA is not.

Let us turn to another title: QUEENS. Daisy and her colleagues are not at all interested in QUEENS. Aunt Ducky, however, is fascinated.



Aunt Ducky retires for a pleasurable perusal of QUEENS. QUEENS is a weekly magazine that reports on Royalty, stars and celebrities and does not cost much.



Aunt Ducky reads this title intensively every Monday, the day on which QUEENS appears. After Aunt Ducky has read QUEENS, she throws it away. Only occasionally does she discuss the contents of QUEENS with Grandma Duck.



What do we learn from this?

From the start, QUEENS has only a small chance of attracting a large number of readers. The contents, the design and the price of QUEENS is geared to a specific section of the population that is interested in gossip and scandal, a section of the population that thrives on the fate of others and reads this material in order to escape from reality. Added to this, is the fact, that certain titles in this genre hold greater credibility for their readers than others. This means certain titles will draw a high concentration of readers, which hinders rather than promotes the passing on of issues.

We have quite a different case with two other types of magazine; both types work according to the principal: 'he who provides everything, provides something for everybody.'

Let's call the first type 'FAMILY', a magazine that appeals to every member of the family, providing true life stories, picture stories for children, puzzles, fiction, a little cookery, beauty and fashion, articles on the economy, household budgeting and saving, a little gossip and scandal.



As FAMILY has such a variety of topics, it is read by the entire family, and even passed on. In Germany, however, this type of magazine is rarely passed on, as it is the traditional TV and Radio Guide, dealing predominantly with TV and Radio programmes.

But you are no doubt familiar with this type of magazine. Without the TV programme contents it had a wide circulation in Germany 30 years ago as the forerunner of the Yellow Press. It is recognisable in parts of the modern version.

OF ALL represents a similar type of magazine. OF ALL covers many topics, again, something for everybody and is mostly distributed through subscription.



Dr. Ax subscribes to OF ALL and reads the magazine himself first. After enjoying it he leaves the copy in his waiting room.



There the copies pile up and are read by the patients until they are called.



Like everybody else, the little wolf has a long wait one day and reads six copies of OF ALL one after the other.

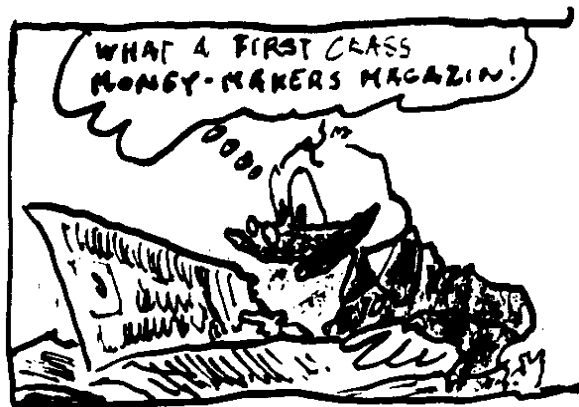
This is of no significance to Dr. Ax, but it is to the Media researchers.

From the point of view of content, both magazines FAMILY and OF ALL have the same chance of reaching a large number of readers. While, however, FAMILY has a rather limited life expectancy, - I won't go into the particulars of German TV Guides here - , OF ALL is only limited by wear and tear. Potential readers of this magazine have the opportunity of reading or leafing through several copies in one day. The little wolf does this repeatedly, and in doing so contradicts one of the most important principles of readership research, namely that reader per publication interval is equal to reader per issue.

Yet another reader contravenes this principle - who else but miserly Uncle Dagobert!

Uncle Dagobert reads BIX, a monthly magazine. BIX has so much reading material that it keeps one occupied a much longer time.

And especially miserly characters, like Uncle Dagobert, can take perhaps three months to read a copy of BIX.



BIX, however, is a magazine for people with money - it includes tips on how to increase one's money. To gain maximum access to this target group and at the same time make a profit takes time.

The principle that reader per publication interval is equal to reader per issue does not apply to Uncle Dagobert either.

Uncle Dagobert stretches his reading of the same issue over several publication intervals and, furthermore, we are not talking about every single issue here; he only buys every fourth. As I have mentioned, it contradicts our theory, but this and the case of the little wolf is the reality - and not only in Duckburg which we are about to leave.

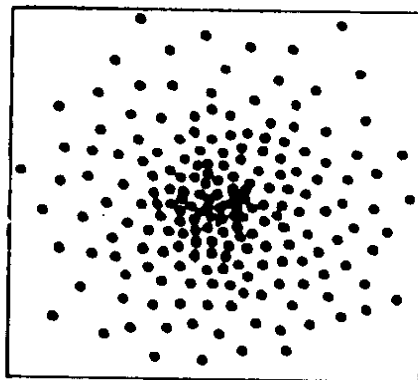
One thing we have learned is that the consumers of Duckburg select their media according to their needs - this is not just typical of Duckburg. Through their individuality, magazines have the possibility of attracting more or fewer readers. This brings me to the second part of my lecture where I want to examine the characteristics of the readers for each individual title. This point, which lends itself so nicely to examples, is easily forgotten in practical research.

The question I should like to consider is whether we have any chance of depicting reality, when our simple methods do not take into consideration the individuality of the different titles.

In our examples we have learned that there are a number of influential characteristics that determine the size of readership.

This is the reality - a reality that we cannot grasp if we continue to concentrate on the effectiveness of our methods and results and do not accept the diversity of reality.

We must try to imagine individual reality as clusters of balls within the shape of a star.



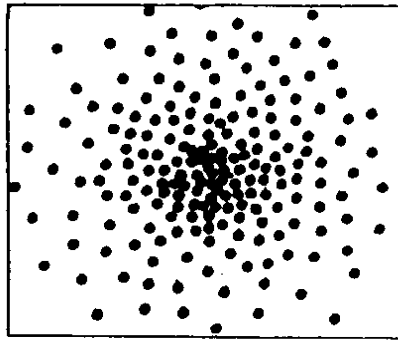
In the centre are the regular consumers. Towards the periphery, they become less and less frequent. This picture can be applied to any medium, magazine or newspaper, TV or radio. For every media contact unit, it can be said that there are regular loyal consumers, less regular, occasional, very occasional, rare and very rare consumers. Or to put it another way, contact with the medium is either consciously sought by the consumer, whatever the motive, or it is made when the opportunity arises, whether frequently or seldom.

But just as each medium has influential characteristics that produce more or fewer recipients, the recipients themselves have influential characteristics which can be divided into three groups.

To the first group belong characteristics such as attention, identification patterns, level of knowledge, anticipation, intelligence, attitude, habits, behaviour patterns.

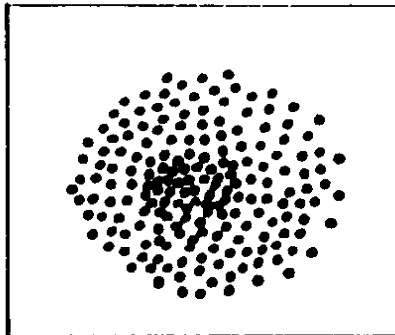
In the second group we find organic and social needs, values, prestige, emotions, moods and in the third group such characteristics as sex, age, education, family, social contacts.

This whole network of influential characteristics within the media and the recipients determines whether our 'star cluster' looks like this:



(few regular readers, but many occasional readers, that is to say, genuine readers who had the opportunity to read)

or whether our 'star cluster' looks like this:



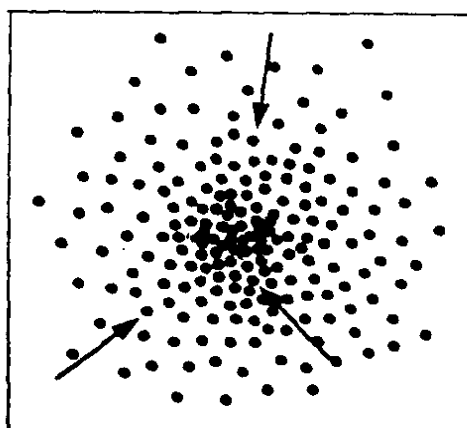
(many regular readers, but very few fringe readers.).

The question that arises is: are we in fact in a position to reproduce this 'reality' by methods of empirical social research even if it is only, as with a photograph, for a fraction of a moment?

We must also consider the influential effect of the communication process that takes place between interviewer and interviewee. We are not talking here about the contact between media and consumer, but about the contact between two people and all factors that influence this. We can apply the same consumer related characteristics that I have already mentioned to both the interviewer and interviewee. As in every interhuman communication process, the interview is influenced by factors such as mutual like and dislike, similarity and dissimilarity of wavelength.

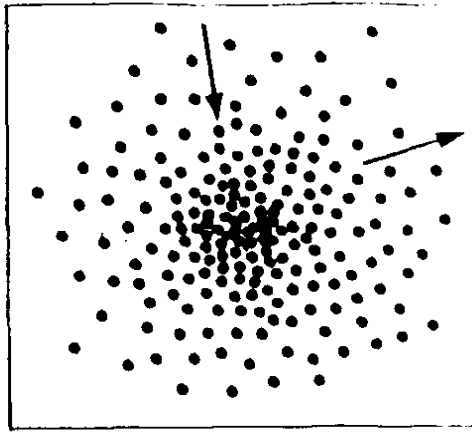
To these we can add the interview situation, the time of day, the survey topic, the question phrasing, interest in the survey topic, the length of the questionnaire, the amount and type of question material.

Of particular significance for the depiction of our star cluster are the survey subject, level of interest in the survey topic, the memory and intelligence of both interview partners. Whether or not every interviewee can be categorised and categorised correctly in each star cluster or medium does not depend on our methods alone.



For example, wherever an arrow indicates, a star or recipient can be found, although none appeared in the survey - either because the title was not perceived during reading or the reading was forgotten, or, a third reason, the title was mistaken for another. As a rule, it is the message that is important and not the source.

Of course, the interviewee might withhold information from the interviewer, if, for example, the interviewee finds the image of the title somewhat dubious. Furthermore the reproduction of the position can be inaccurate. One recipient overestimates the regularity of his reading habits, another underestimates it, and a third and fourth misjudge the timing by either too much or too little.



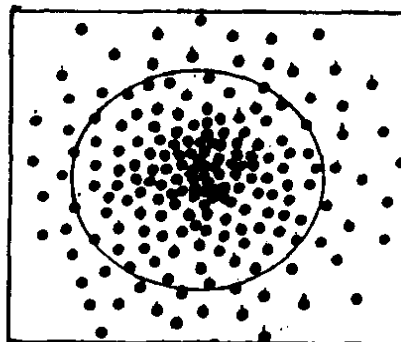
And finally, stars can appear in our depiction that do not exist in reality. This occurs when the interviewee's subjective perception of his behaviour is not true to reality - either the behaviour never took place, or only seldom, or there was a need to impress the interviewer.

These are factors that have very little or nothing to do with the methods we use; they are either objective or based in the imagination of the interviewee. What we do with our methods is twofold:

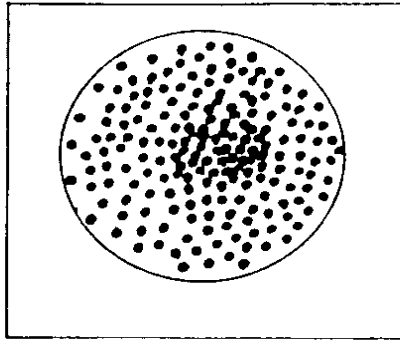
firstly, we make a fundamental decision as to how restricted our methods should be. On the one hand, we do not want to present non-readers as readers,, and on the other, we do not want to exclude any real readers.

We are aware that restrictive methods and strict question phrasing can lead to a lower level of results. We also know, however, that soft question phrasing can raise the level.

Our aim must be to ensure that we do not use one method



to the disadvantage of the other.



Our problem is that we think we know reality, when in fact we perceive only a part of it.

I would have liked to finish by telling you the story of the old man and the horse that dates from the time of the Chinese philosopher Laotze, but I fear I would exceed the time.

However, I will leave you with this thought: The old man is able to demonstrate time and time again that we humans only see a part of the truth and form our judgements accordingly; good or bad can only be judged within the context of the whole truth.

We have to be content with this. We have to ensure with our methods we do not conceal, suppress or negate the true number of readers.



At the same time, however, we must not allow ourselves to conjure up readers that do not exist.