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MINIS AND GROUPIES: PUTTING MINI-MASTHEADS ONTO GROUPED TITLE CARDS

1. SYNOPSIS

When the UK's JICNARS National Readership Survey (NRS) introduced the grouped title method of prompt aids in 1984 (under the name EML), it used typescript on the cards listing the publications. The advantages of grouping relevant publications together on the same card outweighed the disadvantage of abandoning mastheads - which had been used since 1956 in the form of one large masthead per card.

When the grouped title method had been seen to be fully settled in, attention returned to mastheads. The main problem was felt to be that when placing six or so mastheads together, some will dominate others and cause bias. The solution that was developed was to place each masthead within a frame of standard size, representing a folded newspaper or the top of a slightly open magazine. The mastheads inside the frames were then scaled so that on judgement all mastheads had equal visual strength.

This paper concentrates on describing the experimental research that was conducted to test whether grouped title cards bearing mini-mastheads led to more accurate claiming and reduced title confusion, compared with the standard grouped title cards bearing only typescript. The mini-mastheads passed the test with flying colours.

Mini-mastheads are now in a second stage of testing. This is a split run on the 'live' NRS itself. Mini-mastheads have been used for half the NRS sample from July 1990. Initial results, comparing NRS data for interviews using mini-mastheads with interviews using only typescript, are encouraging. The final data leading to a decision to move the whole survey to mini-mastheads, or not, is not yet available at the time of writing, but I hope to be able to present figures at the Symposium in February.

2. BACKGROUND

Typescript-only grouped title cards

For nearly 30 years until 1984 the JICNARS National Readership Survey (NRS) in the UK had used masthead cards as prompt aids. Each card measured 6.5 inches by 4.75 inches and presented the masthead of one publication. It also showed the reading frequency scale and stated the title's publishing interval (see Figure 1).

In 1984 the NRS changed to a grouped title technique, generally known as the Extended Media List or EML method because the prime motivator had been the need to cover more publications. On the current standard NRS, titles are presented to informants on cards, with six publications per card (see Figures 2 and 3). The publications have been shown with their names in typescript only - no mastheads.

There are a number of advantages in showing several publications simultaneously, provided they are grouped into appropriate groupings. One is that by having an initial sort through the cards it is easier for informants to quickly reduce a list of say 280 publications to a list of say 50 relevant ones, by rejecting complete cards containing no publication they have read in the past year. Thus the number of titles covered by the survey can be increased compared with the number that is practical when using one card per title. Another important advantage is that title confusion is reduced. By putting the most confusable titles together on the same card, respondents are helped to recognise that there is a potential problem of confusion, and to resolve which of the confusable titles they have read, if any.

JICNARS's adoption of the grouped title technique has been very successful, though there were grumbles from a few publishers that the loss of mastheads had made their particular publication harder for respondents to recognise, with a resulting fall in its readership figures.

Desire for mastheads on grouped title cards

In 1987 the Development Technical Study Group of JICNARS, which I chaired, gave renewed thought to the possibility of introducing mastheads to the grouped title technique. This was given fresh impetus by the increase in the number of publications whose mastheads were highly stylised single or double characters, such as Q, 19, and W, which do not lend themselves well to typescript representation. It was also thought that mastheads would help unravel some of the limited remaining title confusion over

publications with commonly-used words like 'Woman' or 'Country' in them.

Because of the way the grouped title cards are handled in the NRS interview, there was a case for preferring typescript names of publications on one side of the card and mastheads on the other. At the beginning of the readership questions, informants are handed the full pack of 46 or more grouped title cards and asked to say which cards contained any publication which they had read or looked at in the past year. At this stage the need is to communicate the nature of the group of titles on each card with the maximum ease and speed. Typescript is a quick and easy method of conveying a large amount of information, and speeds up the selection of those cards containing at least one title read in the past year - a stage at which choosing between publications on the same card is not relevant.

Once the informant has identified those cards with at least one publication read in the past year, this diminished pack of cards - on average only 8 or 9 cards per respondent - is tackled again. At this second stage the requirement is to discriminate as accurately as possible between publications (rather than between cards). This is where the most powerful prompt for individual titles is relevant, and where mastheads have their greatest attraction.

The problem with showing several mastheads side by side on the same card or piece of paper is that certain styles of masthead tend to dominate other styles. Thick chunky bold lettering stands out more than thin wispy characters, for example. We were aware of the Danish Disc experiment (1) which found that grouping mastheads together could be a source of bias and concluded that "some mastheads provide a good prompt and others a bad one... it is therefore most fair to use common typography when several titles are shown together, so that the good ones will not steal anything from the bad ones."

The solution to this difficulty, we felt, was to place the mastheads within frames of a common size, and judgementally adjust the size of each masthead so it had equal visual weight to all the others. The frames themselves were designed to be a diagrammatic representation of a folded newspaper or a slightly open magazine.

We did not wish to increase the size of the grouped title cards, which at 6.5 inches by 4.75 inches are convenient for respondents and interviewers to handle. Our view was confirmed by a small-scale test of a size larger than this but smaller than A4, which was strongly resisted by interviewers. This meant that the mastheads had to be reduced far more than those of the pre-1984 days, and the new mastheads were christened mini-mastheads. Figure 4 illustrates the mini-masthead side of one of the new cards.

We now needed to test the mini-masthead idea to see if it performed in practice as well as we hoped.

3. EXPERIMENTAL RESEARCH

We envisaged two stages of test. The first was relatively small-scale work to see if the results were encouraging. If they were, we would propose a split run test on the NRS itself, where readership data derived from the mini-masthead method could be compared with data using the established typescript-only method - with the advantage that these comparisons could be made on large samples capable of measuring small differences, and under real NRS field conditions which could not be simulated accurately in any other way.

Research Services Ltd, the NRS contractor, was commissioned to conduct the experimental research.

Method: hall tests

The object was to use small-scale experimental work in order to test whether mini-mastheads increase the accuracy of readership estimates compared with typescript. For this it is necessary to develop a method which exaggerates or 'hot houses' the incidence of errors. (This also means that the experiment cannot be used as a source of information on the validity of the standard NRS methodology.)

The method we devised was to invite informants into a waiting room where they could look through publications of their choice from among 31 current issues of newspapers and magazines which were laid out on tables. A researcher in the waiting room observed and noted which issues were selected by each informant. After a while each informant went into a different room and was taken through a special version of the NRS interview, in the course of which he or she identified which publications had been read in the waiting room.

There were two versions of the interview, one using the standard typescript-only grouped title cards, the other using mini-mastheads on the second side of the grouped title cards. Balanced quotas of each type of interview were maintained. By comparing the results from each type of interview with what the informant actually read as recorded by the observer in the waiting room, it was possible to assess which method was the more accurate.

The publications used in the experiment were oriented towards 'problem' publications where title confusion was thought to be a significant factor.

This method was tested in a pre-pilot study, then in a pilot study, and finally used in the main survey. The main survey interviewed 380 informants in two locations, in southern and northern England, during August 1988. 190 informants used the standard typescript-only cards, and the same number used mini-masthead cards. There were four days of interviewing at each location.

Results

(a) Title selection.

First, informants went through the initial sorting of cards to select those cards containing any title which had been looked at in the waiting room; for this stage the two versions of the grouped title cards were identical, for both used typescript on side 1 of the cards. Respondents then turned over the grouped title cards they had selected and began to identify which particular publications on those cards had been looked at. This is the stage at which the benefit, if any, of the mini-mastheads could begin to work.

The results showed that the mini-masthead method yielded higher proportions of correct claims and lower levels of underclaims, as Table 1 indicates. 74.7% of publications observed to have been read were correctly claimed when mini-mastheads were the prompt, compared with 66.5% when typescript was used. (On the real NRS the level of correct claims is much higher; in this experiment we were hot-housing a casual read and concentrating on problem/confusable titles.)

Table 1
Titles claimed

	Mini-masthead sample	Typescript sample
No. of informants	190	190
Titles observed to be read*	663	680
Titles correctly identified	74.7 %	66.5 %
Titles underclaimed	25.3 %	33.5 %
Titles overclaimed	39.3 %	36.1 %

**On cards correctly selected on the initial sort*

It was also noted that for both types of prompt the smaller the number of titles looked at, the more accurate the claiming in the subsequent interview.

(b) Title selection by publication category.

The results in Table 1 can be broken down according to the type of publication concerned. In Table 2 publications have been divided into national daily and Sunday newspapers; women's weekly and monthly magazines; motoring magazines; and home and country interest magazines.

It is seen that for each category of magazine, mini-mastheads lead to more accurate claiming. The difference is marginal in the case of national newspapers, which present the least difficult identification puzzle and receive the most accurate claiming of all. But for the three magazine categories mini-mastheads accomplish a distinct improvement, especially for women's and home & country magazines.

3) Title selection by demographics.

An analysis of the accuracy of claims by different demographic categories showed that in all subgroups - by sex, age, and social grade - mini-mastheads achieved an improvement over typescript in correct selection of publications read in the waiting room.

4) Within-card title confusion.

There will be some cases where an informant actually read one publication but in the subsequent interview claimed instead a related title on the same card. This can be called 'within-in card title confusion'. We expected that mini-mastheads would reduce this phenomenon, because the more powerful aid of the illustration should help overcome some of the informants' uncertainty.

And so it proved. In mini-masthead interviews this form of title confusion was only about two-thirds of the level found in the typescript interviews.

5) Incidence of confusion within women's magazines.

An intricate analysis of title confusion between women's magazines, according to whether they had the word 'Woman' in their title, whether they were on the same grouped title card or not, and whether both of the magazines were displayed in the waiting room or not, reinforced the value of mini-mastheads.

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Table 2
Titles claimed, by publication type

	Mini-masthead sample	Typescript sample
No. of informants	190	190
1. National newspapers		
Titles observed to be read*	219	245
Titles correctly identified	82 %	81 %
Titles underclaimed	18 %	19 %
Titles overclaimed	34 %	23 %
2. Women's magazines		
Titles observed to be read*	214	196
Titles correctly identified	76 %	64 %
Titles underclaimed	24 %	36 %
Titles overclaimed	32 %	39 %
3. Motoring magazines		
Titles observed to be read*	115	97
Titles correctly identified	66 %	60 %
Titles underclaimed	34 %	40 %
Titles overclaimed	44 %	47 %
4. Home & country interests magazines		
Titles observed to be read*	115	142
Titles correctly identified	68 %	49 %
Titles underclaimed	32 %	51 %
Titles overclaimed	59 %	47 %

*On cards correctly selected on the initial sort

Within pairs where both magazines had 'Woman' in their name, mini-mastheads reduced title confusion by about a third.

Within pairs where neither magazine had 'Woman' in the name, mini-mastheads reduced title confusion by about 60%.

There was little title confusion when one of the pair had 'Woman' in the name and the other did not, regardless of whether mini-mastheads or typescript were used.

When both of the women's magazines were on the same grouped title card, mini-mastheads reduced title confusion by about 45% on average. When the two magazines were on different cards, mini-mastheads did not help. The worst cases of title confusion on the NRS itself are between publications on the same card, since the most confusable titles are deliberately put onto the same card in order to help unravel the confusion. Consequently mini-mastheads' ability to reduce within-card confusion should be very valuable.

Lastly, when both of a pair of women's magazines were displayed in the waiting room, mini-mastheads reduced title confusion by about 45% on average, but when one of the titles had not been displayed, mini-mastheads did not help (and in any case the title confusion was at a much lower level).

Conclusion

The Development Technical Study Group felt that mini-mastheads had passed this test with flying colours. On this evidence - small-scale and hot-housed as it was - the technique could reduce title confusion substantially in the very circumstances where confusion was at its worst. (A full report on the experimental research has been published by JICNARS (2).)

What was needed next was a test on a large scale in the actual conditions of a real NRS interview.

4. SPLIT RUN ON THE 'LIVE' NRS

Mini-mastheads were introduced to the NRS in a split run experiment from July 1990. Half the sample are shown mini-mastheads on the second side of the grouped title cards, while the other half of the NRS sample are shown the standard card with typescript on both sides.

The principal objective of the test is to check that mini-mastheads do not produce on the readership data any unwanted effects that had not emerged in the hall test work. For instance, are the gross average issue readerships for each publication group the same for both halves of the sample? Is there anything to disturb our confidence that we had overcome the risk of strong or weak mini-mastheads?

A first examination of the data, based on the first two months' fieldwork, looked encouraging. A decision whether or not to convert the whole survey to mini-mastheads will be taken when a few more months' data are available. At the time of writing this paper the further data are not yet available, and no decision has yet been taken, but I hope that in Hong Kong at the Symposium itself I will be able to show some of the relevant figures.

5. USE OF NRS-STYLE MINI-MASTHEADS IN OTHER SURVEYS

To my knowledge, two other surveys in the UK have used NRS-style mini-mastheads after learning from the hall test experiment described above. One was the 1990 Businessman Readership Survey commissioned by the BMRC, and conducted by Research Services Ltd who of course carried out the experimental hall tests. The use of mini-mastheads was in large part at the demand of some of the magazine sponsors of the survey, who felt on common-sense grounds that recognition of their respective publications would be enhanced if the mastheads could be seen. The BMRC survey had no controlled experimentation built into it to assess the success or otherwise of the use of mini-mastheads, but it can be reported that no difficulties were knowingly encountered, and the BMRC Committee is confident that it was a sound move.

The other survey was a postal one - the 1990 Banner Computer Readership Survey. A postal survey is perhaps the ultimate form of the grouped title method since all publications must be on display at once. Many other postal surveys have used mastheads, of course, but this was the first to use the NRS style of mini-masthead, presented within a frame representing the outline of the top of a folded newspaper or a slightly open magazine. The use of frames helps to prevent strong mastheads from dominating weak ones, but at the cost of taking up far more questionnaire space. The previous year's Banner survey had just used typescript names as prompts, and the readership questions fitted onto two facing pages of the questionnaire. The 1990 survey, using framed mini-mastheads for the same number of publications, required six pages for the readership questions instead of two, making an 8-page total questionnaire instead of a 4-pager as in 1989.

Would this extra paging harm the response rate? The view was taken that the more attractive, illustrated, well-spaced airy appearance of the questionnaire pages would offset the disadvantage of greater length, and the actual response rate endorsed that view. From a response rate of 42% among data processing managers in 1989, after two mailings, the comparable subsample in 1990 (the universe has been widened) yielded a response rate of 46% after two mailings. After the third and final mailing, the 1990 response rate rose to 56%.

So the use of framed mini-mastheads in a postal survey was associated with a slight increase in response, together with a probable improvement in accuracy of identification of publications read, and a reduction in title confusion. Added to this, the sponsoring publishers felt happier that their titles were receiving the fairest practical chance that all their readers would be credited to them.

References

- (1) Sigurd Bennike, 'The Danish Discs', World Readership Research Symposium, New Orleans, 1981.
- (2) Pym Cornish, 'Mini-mastheads on Extended Media List cards', published by JICNARS in September 1989, price £15.

FIGURE 1
PRE-1984 SINGLE-MASTHEAD CARD
(Actual size: 6.5 inches x 4.75 inches)

O	PUBLISHED EVERY MONTH	Living Including Practical Living	O	IN THE LAST SIX MONTHS I HAVE READ OR LOOKED AT THIS NUMBER OF SEPARATE ISSUES					
				6	5	4	3	2	1

FIGURE 2
FRONT OF GROUPED TITLE CARD
(Actual size: 6.5 inches x 4.75 inches)

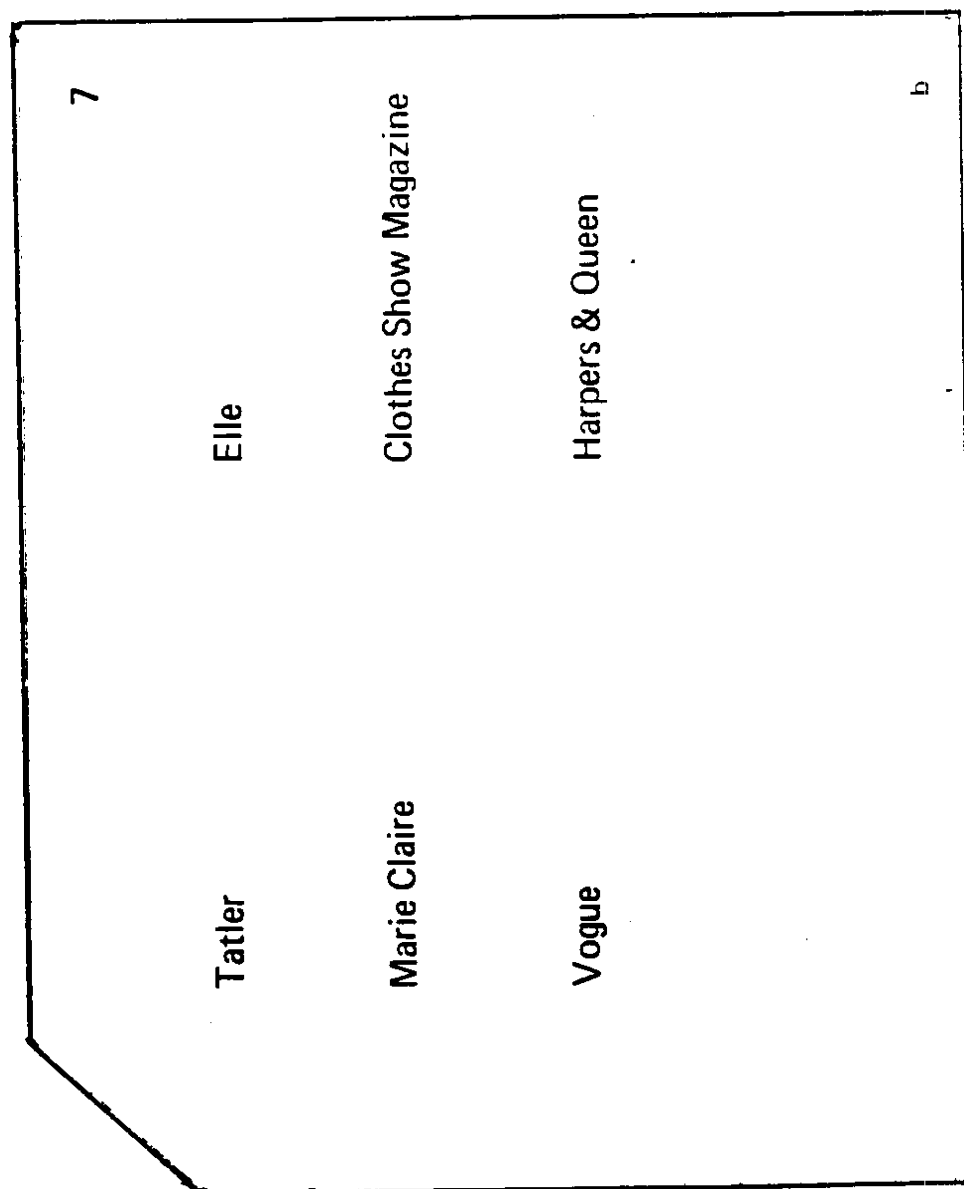


FIGURE 3

BACK OF GROUPEE TITLE CARD: TYPESCRIPT VERSION

(Actual size: 6.5 inches x 4.75 inches)

DAILY NEWSPAPERS
AND COLOUR MAGAZINES

Telegraph Magazine

The Daily Telegraph

Daily Star

Today

The Independent

The Independent Magazine

ALMOST ALWAYS

At least 3 issues out of 4

QUITE OFTEN

At least 1 issue out of 4

ONLY OCCASIONALLY

Less than 1 issue out of 4

NOT IN THE PAST YEAR

0/2b

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FIGURE 4

BACK OF GROUPED TITLE CARD: MINI-MASTHEAD VERSION

(Actual size: 6.5 inches x 4.75 inches)

<div> <div>The Daily Telegraph</div> <div>Mon - Sat</div> </div>	<div> <div><small>DAILY</small> STAR</div> <div>Mon - Sat</div> </div>	<div> <div>THE INDEPENDENT</div> <div>Mon - Sat</div> </div>
<div> <div>Telegraph (Magazine)</div> <div>Saturday</div> </div>	<div> <div>Today</div> <div>Mon - Sat</div> </div>	<div> <div>THE INDEPENDENT MAGAZINE</div> <div>Saturday</div> </div>
<div>ALMOST ALWAYS</div> <div>At least 3 issues out of 4</div>	<div>QUITE OFTEN</div> <div>At least 1 issue out of 4</div>	<div>ONLY OCCASIONALLY</div> <div>Less than 1 issue out of 4</div>
<div>NOT IN THE PAST YEAR</div> <div>0/2a</div>		