

R.P.C. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN BLACK AND WHITE POPULATIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA

Sue Scott, IBIS & MRA Media Services South Africa

Abstract

A description of some of the background against which black readership takes place, is followed by a discussion of the differences between the readership claims of black and other readers. Print titles intended for the black population have more readers per copy than titles generally. Two analyses have shown high correlations between a title's rpc, and the proportion of its readers who are black. Possible reasons for the observed differences are discussed. The purpose of a 1991 qualitative study was to obtain a better understanding of the passage of a title through a black household, the comprehension of readership research terminology and other related matters. The design and the results of the study are discussed.

Introduction

'First reading within issue period' was introduced as the method to be used in AMPS for the estimation of Average Issue Readership (AIR) in AMPS 87/88. The experiment and analyses which resulted in that decision, also brought renewed attention to bear on puzzling aspects of the data. Some of the strange-looking figures, appeared to be related to the claimed readership of black respondents. In each of a series of experiments aimed at possible revisions to the readership section of the AMPS questionnaire which were conducted between 1989 and 1992, the unusual figures reappeared. Their occurrence prompted a number of hypotheses, special analyses and, in 1991, an experiment aimed at obtaining better understanding of the background.

The AMPS data are collected during face-to-face, in home interviews. All interviews are conducted in the home language of the respondent, usually by an interviewer of the same racial origin. This approach necessitates the availability of the questionnaire, not only in the two official languages Afrikaans and English, but in at least seven local African languages. Most black interviewers are fluent in more than one African language in addition, usually, to Afrikaans and/or English. Incidentally, most black South Africans except in rural, tribal areas, must count amongst the most multi-lingual people anywhere, frequently having a sufficient mastery of four or more languages. The seven major African languages fall into two main families within each of which the similarities do aid understanding to some degree.

As one would expect, there are a number of magazines and newspapers which have as their main or only target audience, the black sector of the population. These titles are written in one of the African languages, and in English. Most titles which are written in Afrikaans and English and which are not specifically intended for black consumption, have a measurable component of black readers which ranges from minute to massive. There is only a negligible volume of reading Afrikaans newspapers by the black sector. At least one English-language newspaper which pays particular attention to horse racing, racing tips, and soccer, all of which are subjects of high interest in the urban black community, claims that there are very marked circulation increases on those weekdays when the racing tips are published.

When black readership over a span of years is considered, the effects of sharply rising levels of literacy, average level of education, and comparative level of income need to be borne in mind; also that blacks still predominate in the lowest income groups. Black households are larger than others. The average number of adults in a black household is 3.2, compared to 2.8 in other households (AMPS 92).

In common with the practice in other countries, the general policy of publishers is to collect unsold copies from retail distributors, who are credited with the number unsold. The unsold copies are usually pulped. These transactions are taken into account in compiling the circulation data for the Audit Bureau of Circulations (ABC), a voluntary industry body which verifies circulation claims. The ABC data form the basis for the calculation of all readers per copy (rpc) figures. It is worth drawing attention to the fact that circulation data cannot be linked to demographic sub-groups, with the result that readers per copy figures which are derived from circulation, always (in South Africa) refer to the total estimated readership of a title. AMPS research is usually limited to adults, sixteen years and over.

Against this necessarily cursory background, black readership claims may be considered in more detail.

How do black reading claims differ from those of other groups?

The first survey report for which 'first reading within issue period' had been used as the method to estimate AIR, AMPS 87/88, produced an average rpc for all the titles for which readership estimates and circulation figures were available, of 4.67 readers per copy. Out of 72 such titles, seven had double digit readers per copy figures. They were titles in the group "Black Magazines", which contains only these seven titles.

Similar indications that black readers generated high readers per copy figures had been observed earlier, and the trend was to be confirmed repeatedly between 1988 and 1992.

In 1992 when the average rpc for all titles was 4.88, there were three titles with rpc's of 10 and over - all black magazines; the average rpc for black magazines was 10.82.

Prompted by the very obvious differences between the rpc's of black magazines and other titles, many analyses of AMPS data from various years were done.

The findings of these analyses can be summarised as follows.

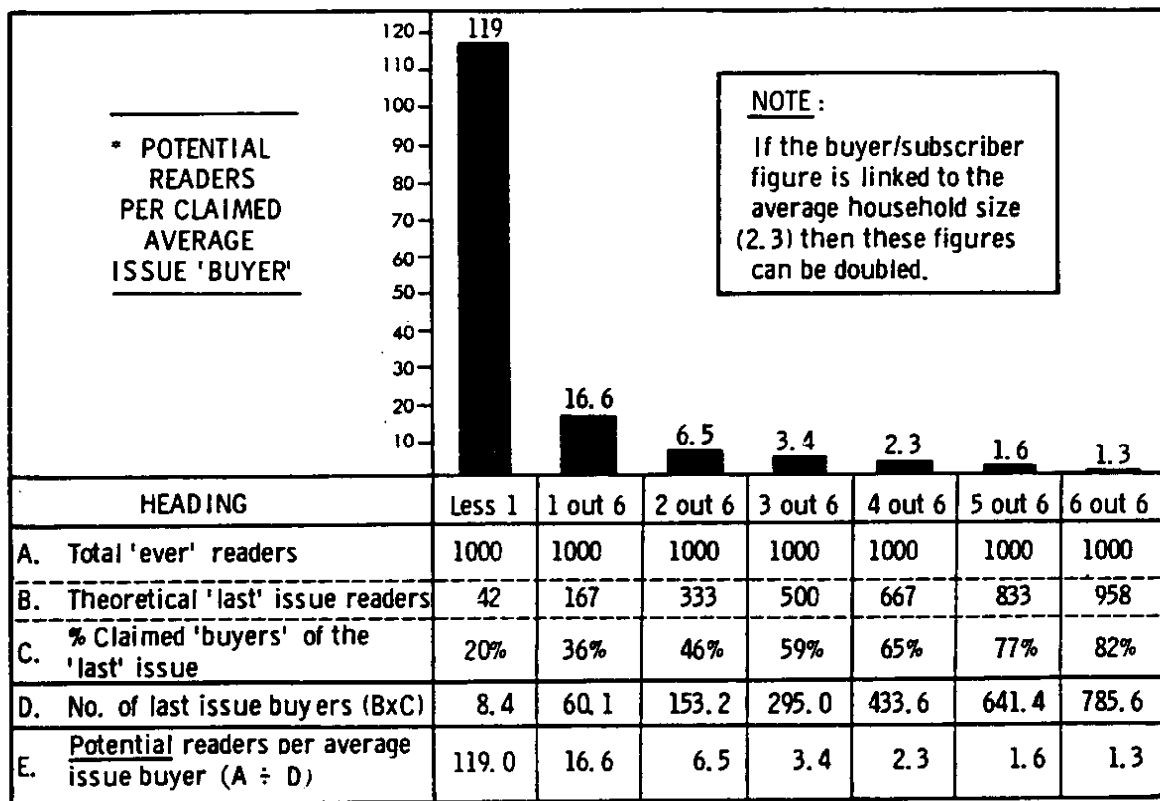
Titles whose readership is made up of both blacks and others, find that black readers account for disproportionately large sections of their less regular readers, as measured by a lower claimed frequency of reading.

The black readership tends to take place with older copies. This finding extends to daily newspapers, where it is by no means uncommon for the newspaper which is read, to be several days old.

The 1986 experiment whose results led to the decision to use first reading to estimate readership, showed that of respondents who claimed to have read a daily newspaper 'yesterday', only 37% of the blacks against 71% of other respondents, had read the current copy. That infrequent readers have the potential to inflate rpc's is illustrated dramatically in Table 1, which is taken from Dr Wally Langschmidt's book, 'Reliability of Response in Readership Research', p.137, published by the South African Advertising Research Foundation in 1978.

Table 1

INDICATION OF RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FREQUENCY OF READING AND THE NUMBER OF READERS PER COPY



Obviously, not all black readers are infrequent readers; neither are all infrequent readers, blacks. To gain a little more insight, we used data from the AMPS 89/90 survey, and circulation figures which related to the period of the fieldwork for that survey. We calculated the correlation between the readers per copy of a title, and the proportion of its readers who were blacks. The following are some of the results.

English daily newspapers (Afrikaans dailies have an insignificant black readership): The correlation between the rpc and the proportion of readers who were blacks, was +0.756, which for 14 titles is significant at the 1% level of confidence.

For weekly newspapers, the correlation was +0.327: a weak and statistically not significant relationship.

For magazines, three coefficients were calculated, with the following results:

All magazines : a correlation of +0.834.
 Black magazines : a correlation of +0.872.
 Non-black magazines : a correlation of +0.818.

The first and last of these coefficients are significant at the 1% level of confidence, which verges on certainty. The coefficient for black magazines is marginally not significant at the 5% level, because of the small number of titles.

When the AMPS 91 data became available, similar calculations were done. This time, the calculations were weighted by the number of readers of a title, to give more importance to large publications with many readers. The following correlations between rpc's and the proportion of a title's readers who were black, were obtained:

Daily newspapers	+0.82
Weekly newspapers	+0.77
Magazines	+0.96
All titles	+0.78.

By now there was no doubt that a relationship existed between a title's rpc and its proportion of black readers.

Possible reasons for high rpc's generated by black readers

A good deal of speculation took place about the reasons for high black rpc's. In addition to differences which were obvious from the survey data, such as less regular readership, other possible reasons which were put forward were:

A cultural tendency to provide answers of a type which the respondent thought the interviewer would want.

A lack of understanding of the questions and the terminology.

Status claiming: trying to impress the interviewer with the number or type of titles which were claimed.

A greater degree of pass-along readership, with copies originating from the work place which could be either industrial or domestic, and pass-along between family and friends.

Informal distribution systems of a nature which would not be picked up in official ABC circulation figures. Some AMPS interviewers had been told of new, non-current copies arriving for sale in rural areas, which could indicate that copies which the publisher thought were being pulped, were being distributed by informal distributors. This practice would inflate readers per copy figures.

The I = We phenomenon. This was the name given to a tendency which had been picked up in earlier research, whereby a person felt justified in claiming to have bought a copy if it had entered his household by being purchased or acquired in another way, by any member of the household.

The series of experiments between 1987 and 1990 had shown conclusively that the changes in methodology which had been experimented with, had resulted in changes in data levels which differed between black and other respondents. In general it was clear that there were factors in the experimental situations which stimulated greater increases in readership claims by blacks than by others. The reasons for these differences were unknown.

Most of the hypotheses indicated possible reasons for at least part of the higher black rpc's. They all served to make it clear that there was an urgent need to obtain a better understanding of readership in black households. Therefore, a systematic series of experiments under the generic title of 'Readership research fine tuning', was expanded in 1991 to include a qualitative study of readership in black homes.

The 1991 qualitative study of black readership

The fieldwork for the 1991 qualitative study took place in October 1991. Four groups of respondents, twenty in each group, were randomly selected. Interviewing took place in the language of choice of the respondent by means of in home, face to face interviews, and in private as far as possible, although in the later stages of the interview when publications had to be found, other family members sometimes helped.

There were indications that the problems with measuring black readership were more severe in rural areas. Consequently, the four groups of respondents were selected as follows.:

- Women in Soweto (urban area) aged 16 and over
- Men in Soweto aged 16 and over
- Women in deep rural (isolated) areas, aged 16 and over
- Men in deep rural areas, aged 16 and over

The study was aimed at aiding understanding of at least some of the reasons why high proportions of black readers resulted in high readers per copy figures. There was no intention that the study should provide quantitative data.

In the interview, respondents were first subjected to the current AMPS interview up to the end of the readership section, and the demographic section. Then the respondent's understanding of the terms used in the readership section was probed. The purchase or acquisition history of the most recent copy of each publication which the respondent claimed to have read, and its physical progress through the household was probed. Lastly, the presence in the household of titles not claimed as read by the respondent, was probed; if found, the reasons why they were not claimed were asked about.

A number of respondents did not have a clear understanding of some of the terminology. Amongst the questions which result in AIR estimates, the greatest problem was found in the concept of first reading within the publication period. The frequency question, and the concepts 'issue' and 'copy' also created difficulties. In respect of the term 'copy', the greatest difficulty lay, not with the concept as such, but with finding alternative words to describe it.

The vast majority of claimed titles could not be produced; the reason given was that they had been returned to the original owners or, more usually, that they had been passed on to other friends or relatives. There were sufficient claims that publications had been read by others before the respondent saw them and of publications being passed on to others outside the household, to indicate substantial pass along readership, while the age of available copies, particularly of magazines, indicated that reading frequently took place when the copy was no longer current. At least half the magazines which could be produced, showed reading of non-current copies.

Newspapers were less likely to be passed on, but up to a third were also read by other people not considered to be part of the household. Within the household, newspapers were used for a variety of household purposes such as lighting fires. Few of the copies which were produced were current issues.

Parts of newspapers frequently enter black homes because local stores use newspapers to wrap purchases.

Eleven of the forty rural respondents claim that household members working in the cities bring publications when they come on week-end visits. Some few respondents reported that others known to them (but not they themselves) resold their magazines once they had read them. This practice was also ascribed to one of the interviewers during a briefing session, to his consternation.

Discussion

The 1991 study indicated a problem with the comprehension of the 'first reading within issue period' question. From 1993, first reading will be probed by first determining reading days.

Other problems of comprehension indicate the need for even greater emphasis than in the past, on interviewers ensuring that respondents clearly understand what is being asked of them.

In addition to the effect of larger households on average among blacks, there is substantial evidence that pass-along readership is prevalent. There is also some evidence of distribution practices on an unknown scale, which could result in valid own or household buying claims of publications which would not be part of the ABC circulation figures, and which would be a partial explanation of high readers per copy figures.

We deduce that at least part of the higher rpc figures found among blacks, represents reality. The tendency for some considerable part of black magazine readership to be based on non-current copies, has been confirmed.

The study has been useful in expanding our understanding of readership in black households. It has not fully explained all the aspects of their readership which have puzzled us.

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