

## 3.1 The effects of changing the filter

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### INTRODUCTION

This paper concerns the comparison between audience levels found in the 1975 and 1976 ISPI (the Italian magazine readership survey), in connection with the elimination of a general filter question.

First I summarise the changes that were introduced, and explain the background that led to the changes before going on to show the data and the conclusions that were drawn.

### THE CHANGES INTRODUCED

#### ISPI 1975

Interviewer hands respondent *all* the mastheads individual cards (weeklies and monthlies, mixed together).

Informant is asked to look at the cards, one by one, and place on one side those of magazines he has '*Seen sometimes in the past or at least heard of*'.

Interviewer hands informant the cards of the *weeklies* selected, and asks informant to go through them again, one by one, and state "*Which of these weeklies you have read or leafed through, at home or elsewhere, at least once in the last three months.*"

(The monthly cards selected will be processed at the beginning of part 2.)

#### ISPI 1976

Interviewer hands respondent *only* the cards for *weeklies* (the cards of monthlies will be handed only in the second part of the interview).

Informant is asked to look at *all* the cards, one by one, and to state *at once* "*Which, if any, of these weeklies you have read or leafed through, at home or elsewhere, at least once in the last three months.*"

(Compared to 1975, the initial screening about magazines "at least heard of" has been eliminated.)

In both cases, there followed the frequency question (12-point scale) and the recency question (read in the last publication interval).

### THE FACTORS THAT LED TO THE CHANGE

#### ISPI 1975

##### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

This approach had been introduced six years earlier. There

was a worry that the informant might look superficially at so many mastheads, with the risk of 'overlooking' some card. Later, for comparability reasons, the 'heard of' screening was not eliminated, although there was a feeling that it might be at fault.

(For instance, after having noted in the 1972/73 survey that there were differences between results of 'new' and 'old' interviewers, the screening was suspected of being one of the factors causing the typical 'need of long running-in' for the interviewer.)

##### REACTIONS OF INTERVIEWERS

Interviewers often pointed out problems in the initial question since the concepts 'seen at least some time in the past' and 'heard of' left the informant uncertain (due to their excessive broadness or generosity) and a bit puzzled because the concepts were distant from his/her more customary and expected concepts, that is something referring to *reading or reading habits*.

##### POSSIBLE EFFECTS OF THE EXISTENCE OF THE SCREENING

(a) informant is *forced* not to overlook any publication (even if read only occasionally) because he is obliged to identify also periodicals he barely knows: there is a *positive* effect on the accuracy of the information; an *inflationary* effect on the level of audiences.

(b) respondent, due to the extreme broadness of the question, perceives *right from the beginning of the interview* the idea of having a wide margin of discretion in his answers and bland commitment as far as precision: *negative* effect on accuracy, *neutral* or *inflationary* on audience levels.

#### ISPI 1976

##### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The radical change of method (proposed for the 1976 survey because of *other* considerations), seemed to offer the best opportunity for eliminating the 'heard of' screening.

In 1973 a similar screening had been adopted also for the ISEGI (newspaper readership survey).

In the 1975 ISEGI survey the screening was eliminated with no serious consequences and this encouraged leaving it out also in the 1976 ISPI survey.

##### REACTION OF INTERVIEWERS

During the pilot and the briefings of the 1976 survey

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interviewers, accustomed to the 1975 approach for some years, noted that the new formulation was more concrete and more easily adhered to by the respondent, because it dealt directly with the concept (a basic one in the subsequent interview) of readership *in the last period*, without going through the too broad and deviant preliminary concept of 'general awareness' of the publications.

### POSSIBLE EFFECTS OF THE ELIMINATION OF THE SCREENING

(a) informant may *overlook* some publications he does not *read* but has *leafed through* only occasionally and passively (eg found somewhere or shown to him by chance, only once): negative effect on accuracy of information; *deflationary* effect on audiences.

(b) respondent perceives, *right from the beginning of the interview*, the idea of having to focus his memory on a defined period of time, excluding the earlier period; and of being committed to a certain level of precision: *positive* effect on accuracy, *neutral* or *deflationary* on audience levels.

### COMPARISON OF AUDIENCES

Compared with previous surveys a sizeable deflation of audiences is shown in the 1976 results, in line with the objectives pursued in adopting the new questionnaire.

The average differences for the various definitions of readers were as **Table 1** (Spring wave 1975 and Winter wave 1975-76).

The Research Agency and the Publishers' Technical Committee agreed that the explanation for the decrease in the audience levels in such a short time and of such a remarkable extent especially for the longer term definition of reader was to be attributed to the methodological changes in the questionnaire.

The main cause of the deflation of audiences was the suppression of question 1.1 of the previous questionnaire, that is the initial screening of publications 'seen in the past or heard of'.

### BALANCE OF EFFECTS

On the accuracy of information, both positive and negative effects are present in both alternatives (ie the 1975 and the 1976 versions of the questionnaire).

Regarding audience levels, inflationary effects prevail in the 1975 survey, deflationary effects in the 1976 survey. These effects, however, tend to become minimal or to be offset, when getting to more restrictive definitions of readership (last period reading); even if a

TABLE 1

	Weeklies	Monthlies
Readers in last three months (12 issues):		
high frequency	-22%	-32%
middle frequency	-24%	-33%
low frequency	-34%	-37%
All readers in last three (of 12 months)	-28%	-35%
Readers in last publication interval	-15%	-21%

certain 'residual effect' can be assumed.

The differences in audience levels between ISPI 1975 and 1976 were definitely smaller when going from the broader definitions of reading to the narrower ones, according to the following pattern:

- (a) readers with low reading frequency (highest differences).
- (b) readers with medium reading frequency.
- (c) readers with high reading frequency.
- (d) 'last period' readers (smallest differences).

It was apparent there existed a 'belt' of very *marginal* magazine reading events, due to the combination of varying degrees of occasional reading, with varying degrees of: unsolicited or casual reading, and/or distance in time of reading event; low repetitivity of place of reading; low motivation to read.

Such marginal reading events tended to be overlooked with the 1976 formulation, whilst they were collected more easily, although imperfectly and even overestimated, with the previous formula.

It was concluded that the loss of 'very marginal readers' occurred with decreasing probability for more recent reading events and for higher frequency of reading.

### CONCLUSION

The Technical Committee noted that some magazines were more affected than others by the new formulation, particularly those which had previously shown a higher proportion of occasional readers and a high number of readers per copy, which was often being challenged by advertisers. This had been in fact the problem that had led to the switch to a new questionnaire.

It was felt that individual magazine losses in relative positions were a secondary consideration compared to the increase in credibility of the entire survey, which had been the ultimate purpose of the change.