

# THE MEASUREMENT OF THE READERSHIP OF SECTIONS OF UK NATIONAL NEWSPAPERS: ONE POSSIBLE SOLUTION

Hilary Birt, RSL Media

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## Introduction

Newspaper sections readership measurement has probably been the most hotly debated issue in the UK advertising community over recent years. In this paper I will be describing the background to the "problem", discussing some of the key issues and outlining some possible solutions. In particular, I will describe a method developed and piloted by RSL in 1994.

## Background

The technical and management revolution of the eighties led to two major changes in UK national newspapers. Most newspapers formerly had fixed structures of one or two newsprint sections, printed in black and white only. Colour magazines printed on art paper were usually distributed with Sundays and in some cases with Saturday issues of dailies. The constraints have now gone. The number and format of sections can be varied and colour is now universally available. Saturday issues now resemble Sundays, rather than the weekday issues of the same titles.

The established convention of readership research in the UK has been to treat all national newspapers (with colour magazines) as if they consisted only of (a) the colour magazine, and (b) all other sections including the main section. Dailies have been treated as six-day titles until recently. The latest change has been to add AIR and frequency questions for Saturday issues. Five-day AIR is not measured directly but is modelled from six-day and Saturday AIR.

Users of readership data are now calling for more information. The ideal would be to treat each section of every paper published on each day of the week as if it were a separate publication with its own AIR and frequency estimates. Standard schedule analysis procedures could then be applied to each of these units. But each week two or three hundred such units are published for national newspapers; the full data could only, even in theory, be collected at great expense and at the sacrifice of other information which is probably more valuable. In practice, for some types of section, it would be impossible to collect the data at all.

Users who have considered the problems recognise these points. What they are really looking for is data from the main industry surveys that can be used to plan campaigns in the more important sections of Sundays, Saturday issues and any weekday issues, plus limited data on special sections published regularly each week on a single weekday. But the data should be limited to what can be collected cost-effectively, without sacrificing other information; it is not necessary to have the complete 'ideal' data-set described above.

## Issues

There are a number of key issues which must be carefully considered in the search for a workable solution to the sections "problem".

Firstly, it is clearly important to clarify the **data requirements**. Whilst there are hundreds of newspaper sections published each week, there are many which can be immediately eliminated from our considerations as it would not be possible to collect separate data and/or that data would have little value: these include children's supplements (the target audience not being represented on the survey); sections without display advertising (for which there would be no demand for data); occasional sections (for which there would be little value given inadequate sample sizes); sections which are the same on each day of the week (specific days' measurement would not be necessary, rather a single measure for all weekdays); randomly varying sections by day of week (where there would be no value in having separate daily measures); and finally, new sections (which should not be measured until a suitable time period has elapsed to allow the titles to become established).

Eliminating the above, we can conclude that separate measures are typically required for the following:

#### Sunday Newspapers

- complete issue (i.e. "any part of" a given title)
- front page section
- business section
- colour 'review' section
- colour magazine

#### Saturday Newspapers

- complete issue
- front page section
- business section
- colour 'review' section
- colour magazine

#### Weekday Newspapers

- complete daily issues )
- front page section ) - (all on a five day basis)
- business and/or other second section )

Secondly the **recognition method** requires careful consideration. Given unlimited resources, there is no doubt that the best way of measuring exposure to any given section of a specific issue is to take the respondent through a copy of that specific issue. But this is prohibitively expensive. The practical option is to develop substitute stimuli. Complete or stripped issues would be used to validate the results obtained in experimental studies.

There are several potential substitutes for using the actual copy to prompt issue recognition. Each has its advantages and disadvantages:

- Firstly, it would be possible to use simply the name of the section. Whilst this would undoubtedly be the most simple option, we do not believe it to be a workable one given the variable nature of the titling of the individual sections: some sections have fixed and descriptive names, some have non-descriptive names, some have numbers, some have no separate name at all. Using only the name to prompt recognition is not, therefore, likely to be adequate.
- An alternative could be to use standard descriptions. However, whilst some sections can be well defined by a short description e.g., Sports Section, others, such as many magazine sections, have no fixed subject matter. We would again, therefore, discount this option.
- It could be possible to prompt recognition of the section by stating the topic or topics covered by the section. However, whilst some sections can be defined in terms of the topics covered and, if a section includes several topics, a claim to have read any of them in a specific issue could be taken as a claim to have read that section, some sections, including many magazine sections, cover no fixed topics in all issues. We would again discount this option for this reason.
- A final option would be to use title mastheads to prompt recognition of the section. Whilst this is likely to be a viable option we must still bear in mind that some sections simply repeat the main newspaper masthead and have no strong individual branding or consistent features.

Thirdly, given that the form of the **audience measurement question** determines the currency for buying and selling space in the UK press, and that any change to the currency could have significant repercussions in the industry, consideration must be given to the precise nature of the question.

The standard method of Average Issue Readership measurement for all titles on the UK NRS uses the recent reading model. For both newspapers and magazines the question is whether the respondent has read or looked at any issue of the title in a period equal to the publication interval. Given that different days' issues of newspapers carry different sections, for example Tuesday's issue of the Guardian carries the Education section, it is clearly important that questions on such sections relate to specific days' issues of a particular newspaper.

This leads us to the conclusion that data collection could be greatly simplified if all recency questions for newspapers were asked in the "specific issue" form. Whilst initial reactions may be that this represents a major departure from the current measure, this would not in fact be such a big change given that the bulk of newspaper reading takes place on the day of issue. Furthermore, the very limited amount of "deferred" reading, that is reading after the day of issue, could be covered by the following wording:

*"Have you or do you expect to read or look at Monday's issue of ...."*

Questions about the readership of relevant sections would then be asked only of informants making claims for the specific issue concerned.

Asking newspaper readership questions in the specific issue form as opposed to the average issue form has several key advantages:

Firstly with a specific issue measure, we no longer have to explain to respondents the concept of average issue reading: communicating to respondents that we want them to take account of any issue of, for example, The Daily Telegraph that they may have read yesterday, regardless of the copy date, can be quite cumbersome. In contrast with a measure based on specific issues, respondents can focus in on the actual copy published on that day which is, arguably, a more logical and respondent-friendly form of questioning.

Secondly with specific issue readership, we no longer have to identify the time of last reading if it was longer ago than yesterday: the process of interviewer probing to ascertain the correct recency code, yet without undue prompting, can be difficult and also time-consuming.

It has been suggested that sections readership questions should simply be added on to the current NRS, thus maintaining the average issue readership currency. However, this would mean switching back and forwards between the concepts of average issue reading for the "parent" newspapers and specific issue readership for the sections questions. This could be potentially confusing for the respondent and also difficult for the interviewer to administer. With specific issue readership as a single measure, there would be no such confusion.

A final benefit of specific issue readership would be that this method automatically yields six-day, five-day and Saturday recency claims: the direct measurement by day of week means that no modelling would be required.

Another important consideration is the need to generate a **representative sample** on which the sections readership measurement is based: whilst many would welcome even a small-scale or "qualitative" measure of sections readership (in the absence of anything else), we do not believe this to be a viable route given the weight which will be placed on these data as audience measurements. Sections readership data will be a new currency in the advertising business, and it is crucial that the currency is a reliable one based on robust and representative samples.

Furthermore the **sample size** must be adequate, not only to allow statistical comparisons to be made, but also for analysis by sub-groups. We do not, therefore believe the small-scale "cheap and cheerful" options to be viable long-term solutions.

### **Possible Solutions**

So, having considered the issues involved, what are the possible solutions to the "problem" of sections readership measurement?

Firstly what do we do currently on the NRS? We measure readership of the colour magazine supplements, which were there before the sections "exploded", but no other individual sections. And in 1991 when the demand for sections measurement started to take hold, a question on topics usually looked at in newspapers was added to the survey. This question was added when the sections market was still in its early development and when it was realised that direct measurement of sections on the NRS would be very difficult indeed. The idea was that claims to read a particular topic in newspapers would be a reasonable guide to the likelihood of reading a section which would contain editorial covering this topic. (The question initially dealt with newspapers only, magazines were added later.)

The current 1995 form of this question is shown below.

<p>Q. Here is a list of topics often included in newspapers and magazines. As I read out each topic, please tell me whether you usually look at this topic in newspapers, magazines, both or neither.</p>	
<p>I usually look at this topic when reading or looking at:</p>	
1	Newspapers
2	Magazines
3	Both
4	Neither
<p>UK/British news          European news and other foreign news          Sport          Cars/motoring          Food and drink/cooking          TV programmes          People, personalities and celebrities          Arts/books/music/theatre/entertainment listings          Film and video          Personal finance/investment          Business/company news          Travel and holidays          Property/houses for sale</p>	<p>Education          Home ideas/furnishings, DIY          Gardening          Science/technology/computing          Medical/health and fitness          Fashion and clothes          Beauty and personal appearance          Relationships/emotional issues          Baby/childcare/parenting          Jobs/appointments          The environment          Women's pages generally</p>

However, evidence from other studies conducted outside the NRS<sup>1</sup> showed that this so-called NRS topic interest question is unlikely to serve as a good proxy for sections readership. There is nevertheless value in this question for users of the NRS: it is used as an additional targeting tool by planners and buyers rather than as a sections readership measure.

What are the other options in terms of measurement of sections readership?

One option would be to conduct a separate, ongoing parallel survey to the NRS sampled by random methods and using page recognition methods for sections measurement. The pros of this method would be the large sample size, representative sampling method and the most fail-safe recognition method. However this represents a very costly option and, at the end of the day, fusion with the NRS might not prove adequate.

Another option would be to sub-sample informants from the current NRS and conduct a page recognition study of, say, one or two newspapers per informant at the end of the current interview. 200 informants per title per annum could be a reasonable target. The advantages of this method would be that the NRS interview would only be minimally affected, it is a representative sampling method, and again, the best recognition method could be employed. However, against this option would be the small sample sizes by title.

A third option would be to re-interview NRS informants in a face-to-face interview at a later date. However in spite of the good sample basis, the sample reliability would be affected by response fall-off and, as in the first option of the parallel survey, this would be a very expensive route as it would be a separate operation from the main NRS.

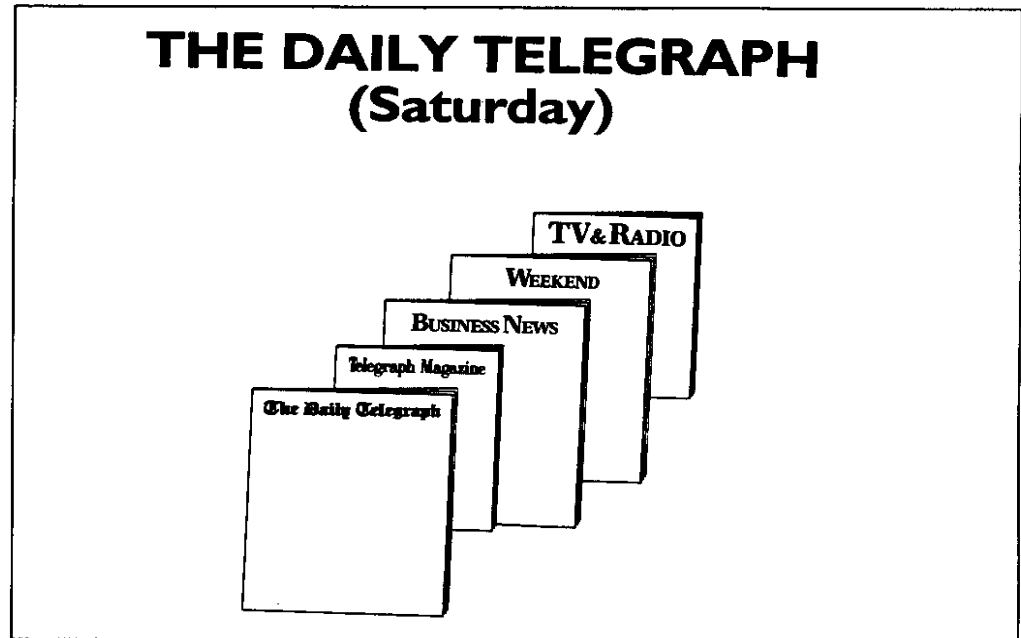
Which brings me to an alternative approach: this was the approach conceived by RSL with a view to addressing the dual problem of sections readership measurement and Saturday versus weekday issue readership measurement for dailies - at the time the current weekday modelling process was not yet in place. We, therefore, looked for an acceptable direct measure as an alternative to modelling. The main features of this approach were:

Firstly there would be a single new measure for all elements of national newspapers and their sections: Specific Issue Readership (SIR) replacing Average Issue Readership (the method for measurement of magazines readership was to remain unchanged.)

<sup>1</sup> For example: "Weekend - Weekday Readership Research".

Respondents would be filtered on readership of "any part or section of" a given title, with an additional question on whether they "expect to read or look at any part or section of" the title to pick up the small amount of deferred reading.

The sections readership question (incorporating the colour magazine supplements currently included in the main media list) would be asked about after the SIR and frequency questions for the parent paper, using a card representing the mastheads of the different sections of a given title. The masthead stimulus is, possibly, the best alternative to actual issue recognition.



### Pilot

RSL piloted this new approach in April 1994. The pilot comprised 153 interviews using the NRS sampling and interviewing technique but adapted to incorporate the sections readership questions.

From the point of view of field feasibility, the pilot proved successful with the average interview length only two minutes longer than the standard NRS. Furthermore, the new method was not perceived by interviewers as being too dramatic a change from the current survey.

So what did the sections results look like? Within the limitations of the small sample size, the data do look plausible. Table 1 below shows the results for the Saturday issue of The Daily Telegraph which comprises five distinct sections. 11.8% claimed to read "any part of" the overall newspaper and this formed the base for the subsequent sections readership questions, the results of which are shown here. The first column on the table shows the levels of people claiming already to have read each section. The middle column indicates the level of people expecting to read the section: as may be seen, the amount of deferred reading is fairly small but still contributing to the overall SIR score. Adding together the percentages of "have read" and "expect to read" to give a total SIR score, we can see that whilst the Main Section, the Magazine and Weekend were claimed by over 10% of the sample, the Business News section was a much more minority read at 5.9%, as we might expect. It is also worth observing that the scores for the main section and the magazine were very close to the score for reading "any part of" the newspaper.

Section	Have %	Expect To %	Total %
1 Main	11.1	-	11.1
2 Telegraph Magazine	11.1	-	11.1
3 Business News	5.2	0.7	5.9
4 Weekend	9.8	0.7	10.5
5 TV & Radio	9.2	-	9.2

(Base: 153)

Similarly the results for the Sunday Times detailed in Table 2 show a considerable difference in levels of reading between the Main Section and the Magazine, and the lowest read sections: Sport, Business and Personal Finance. The justification for the additional question "expect to read" is borne out in this table with 1.3% extra claims for the News Review and Personal Finance sections. In the case of the Sunday Times, the "any part of" score was 13.7%, considerably higher than the scores for any of the individual sections. This would suggest that the more sections there are, the more selective the reading of the different sections with readership, in consequence, more spread across the different sections of the newspaper. These results certainly demonstrate the importance of developing a workable and industry accepted measure for section readership.

Section	Have %	Expect To %	Total %
1 Main	10.5	.07	11.2
2 Sport	5.9	-	5.9
3 News Review	7.2	1.3	8.4
4 Business	5.2	0.7	5.9
5 Style & Travel	9.2	-	9.2
6 The Culture	9.2	0.7	9.9
7 The Magazine	11.8	-	11.8
8 Personal Finance	4.6	1.3	5.9

(Base: 153)

## Conclusion

The method presented in this paper as a possible solution to the sections measurement "problem" would need to be fully validated before it were added to the NRS. Whilst the readership results look plausible (and those who have called loudest for sections measurement may feel vindicated), the major concern with this method is the fact that it represents a change in currency for newspapers from Average Issue Readership (AIR) to Specific Issue Readership (SIR). At the time of writing a decision on how to measure the readership of newspaper sections on the NRS has not yet been reached, and discussions continue regarding other possible solutions.

All solutions have their advantages and drawbacks. Nevertheless, the RSL proposal offers a possible practical solution to the complex problems of sections readership measurement without materially affecting either the interview length or the survey costs. We hope that the pilot work may, at least, have contributed to the development of a measure for sections readership which is both technically feasible and acceptable to the industry.