

"BACK TO BEFORE YESTERDAY?"

Wim van der Noort, Inter/View
Costa Tchaoussoglou, SUMMO

Introduction

At the symposium in San Francisco (1993) Costa Tchaoussoglou set out the problems that have been encountered since the FRY-method was introduced in the Dutch National Readership Survey (Summoscanner).

The main problems are: calculated reading probabilities above 1 and the necessity to group titles together. Grouping is necessary in order to get sufficient numbers of FRY (respondents who have read a particular magazine yesterday for the first time).

His proposal, titled 'Uniform fixed probabilities' was approved by the Technical Subcommittee of Summo at the end of 1993, on condition that the 'fixed' probabilities were to be calibrated periodically by FRY-measures.

At the same time however, Summo was confronted with a steady decline in the readership levels of the Summoscanner. Since this decline did not seem in line with circulation figures, a thorough investigation was started to find out what the cause of this could be.

The paper of Wim van der Noort 'The Importance of being constant' describes the analyses and the test that finally led to the conclusion, that a gradual but substantial increase in the length of the questionnaire has affected the readership figures.

Divide et impera

The obvious solution would be to shorten the questionnaire and skip all questions irrelevant for the measurement of readership. However, these questions, for instance on television viewing and radio listening, were regarded very useful by the members of Summo. Therefore a kind of Solomonian judgement was passed: the sample of the Summoscanner should be split in two parts: a 'Readership Scanner' (n=12,000) and a 'MultiScanner' (n=24,000).

The 'Readership Scanner' is intended solely to produce reliable readership figures ('currency') and will be kept as constant as possible. Given the sample size and the problems we have already, the FRY-method can no longer be maintained and shall be substituted by Recent Reading.

The 'Multi Scanner' remains similar to the current Summoscanner, the exception being that there is no longer a direct measurement of AIR in the questionnaire. Reading probabilities, per frequency, stem from the 'Readership Scanner' which will be 'injected' and afterwards the resulting readership figures are calibrated.

Before making such a historical change, several questions had to be answered:

- * Is a recency-question 'when read last time' with 4 precoded answers feasible in a telephone interview?
- * Is 'injection' of reading probabilities in the 'Multi Scanner' well-founded?
- * What readership levels can be expected?

During two weeks a test with the 'Readership Scanner' was carried out parallel to the current Summoscanner. The average duration of the interview turned out to be 15 minutes, as compared to 25 minutes for the Summoscanner.

The actual wording of the recency question (for magazines that had passed the 'ever read-filter') was:

"Can you tell me when you have read ... for the last time, not counting today?"

for weeklies: "Was it yesterday, less than 1 week ago, 1 to 2 weeks ago or longer ago?"

for monthlies: "Was it yesterday, less than 1 month ago, 1 to 2 months ago or longer ago?"

For daily newspapers the questions on readership remained unchanged.

Main results

- * The tested recency question with 4 possible answers was no problem for the respondents, contrary to earlier findings with an open question

Table 1. Total Readership (GRP)

	SummoScanner %	Recency Experiment %	Index
National Dailies	190	186	98
Regional Dailies	113	115	102
RTV-Guides	140	141	101
Women's Weeklies	227	233	103
Other Weeklies	359	374	104
Monthlies 1.	328	310	95
Monthlies 2.	288	277	96

- * From table 1 it can be seen that there is no significant difference for total readership (titles passing the 'ever read filter') between the Summoscanner (n=1,227) and the 'Readership Scanner' (n=1,202)

Table 2. Reading Frequency (AIR based on constant probabilities)

	SummoScanner %	Recency Experiment %	Index
National Dailies	51	50	98
Regional Dailies	54	58	107
RTV-Guides	90	92	102
Women's Weeklies	91	109	120
Other Weeklies	109	128	117
Monthlies 1.	103	101	98
Monthlies 2.	137	138	101

- * Reading frequency scores are significantly different for weeklies (see table 2)

Table 3. AIR: Fry versus Recency

	FRY %	Recency %	Index
National Dailies	51	50	98
Regional Dailies	54	57	106
RTV-Guides	90	87	97
Women's Weeklies	91	108	119
Other Weeklies	109	140	128
Monthlies 1.	103	111	108
Monthlies 2.	137	141	103

- * Average Issue Readership is significantly different for weeklies (see table 3)
- * As far as reading probabilities can be calculated (sample size), they seem more homogenous with regard to groups of titles than the current probabilities
- * Injection of reading probabilities and calibration may be questionable if total readership and/or reading frequency differ substantially between 'Readership Scanner' and 'Multi Scanner'

This led the Technical Subcommittee to argue against the split, while it would again necessitate to 'manipulate' the original data of the 'Multi Scanner'. Furthermore it was considered already inefficient. The alternative would be to ask the recency questions directly in the 'Multi Scanner' and try somehow to reduce the length of the questionnaire.

"It seems to me that clarity of thought should be accompanied by clarity of technique." Piet Mondriaan

The test still left some questions unanswered.

1. Were the differences in reading frequency caused by the different preceding questions i.e. 'yesterday' versus 'last time'?
2. Would the readership figures decrease again if the length of the questionnaire would increase?

During 4 weeks a second experiment was performed in the current Summoscanner. In this experiment the sample was split in two parts, one with the FRY-questions and the other one with the Recency-questions.

Results of the second Recency experiment

Table 4. Total Readership (GRP)

	Summoscanner %	Recency Experiment %	Index
National Dailies	196	202	103
Regional Dailies	119	123	103
RTV-Guides	151	150	100
Women's Weeklies	246	247	101
Other Weeklies	395	385	97
Monthlies 1.	370	357	97
Monthlies 2.	302	293	97

- * For total readership there is no significant difference between the Summoscanner and the Recency Experiment, similar to the first test (see table 1 and table 4)

Table 5. Reading Frequency (AIR based on constant probabilities)

	Summoscanner %	Recency Experiment %	Index
National Dailies	47	51	109
Regional Dailies	55	59	109
RTV-Guides	88	94	106
Women's Weeklies	100	113	113
Other Weeklies	122	132	109
Monthlies 1.	102	113	111
Monthlies 2.	136	145	107

* For all groups the reading frequency in the Recency Experiment is significantly higher (see table 5)

Table 6. AIR: Fry (Summoscanner) versus Recency

	FRY %	Recency %	Index
National Dailies	47	51	109
Regional Dailies	55	57	104
RTV-Guides	88	90	102
Women's Weeklies	100	105	105
Other Weeklies	122	126	103
Monthlies 1.	102	128	125
Monthlies 2.	136	144	106

* AIR for national dailies and monthlies 1. in particular is significantly higher in the Recency Experiment (see table 6)

Discussion

The fact that in both experiments the levels of total readership are similar in the two independent samples, is in line with our expectations.

We have a strong feeling that the higher reading frequency scores in the Recency Experiments stem indeed from the different preceding questions in the interview, i.e. '(first) read yesterday' and 'when read last time'.

The difference in AIR-levels for the national dailies may be caused by the constant probabilities used in the Summoscanner, while in the Recency Experiment AIR is measured directly.

The difference for monthlies 1. is more difficult to understand. On the one hand it reflects the difference between FRY (the way it is implemented in the Summoscanner) and Recency, but on the other hand there could be also a sampling effect. This would mean that the difference in reading frequency (see table 5.) is partly a true difference, not caused solely by different preceding questions.

The comparisons of AIR-levels generated by FRY and Recency respectively are by no means intended to demonstrate the superiority of either technique. But they can facilitate the transition from one method to the other.

The weaknesses of Recency (telescoping and replicated reading) have given an impetus to the development of FRY. But the way FRY has to be implemented in a media study, like the Summoscanner, is necessarily far away from Dick Lysaker's 'Gold Standard'. After 10 years we still must conclude that we never mastered the problems, that confronted us.

FRY has been the trademark of SUMMO since the foundation in 1985. Therefore the decision to go 'back' to Recency will not be an easy one. Nevertheless we think the is time ripe for a change. Let us hope that our arguments will proof to be valid.

"The true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truth" Bruce Nauman

References

Costa Tchaoussoglou (San Francisco, 1993) 'Future perfect: uniform fixed probabilities?'

Wim van der Noort, Costa Tchaoussoglou (Berlin, 1995) 'The Importance of being constant'

