

4.3 Frequency scales in Germany

I am here reporting briefly some of the experiments we have carried out in Germany concerning frequency scales.

The first readership survey of our organisation AG.LA (Arbeitsgemeinschaft Leseranlyse) – the organisation dealing with media audiences, now renamed AG.MA (Arbeitsgemeinschaft Media-Analyse) in Germany in 1954, included questions to find out maximum readership and to estimate reading frequency by means of a verbal scale.

The succeeding readership survey in 1956 did not include those questions. It took almost ten years to get people interested again in the problems of reading frequency. The discussion began when Lester Frankel described his ideas and findings on reading frequency at the IMF congress in Hamburg in 1963.

In Germany, the first experiments in this field were carried out without the help of AG.LA. So far as I know, the two first surveys were published in 1964. The institute handling this was Informarkt, commissioned by Henri Nannen Verlag. They applied a 13-point frequency scale to eight magazines. DIVO carried out the other experiment and they applied a 6-point frequency scale.

In Spring 1965 six publishing companies commissioned a survey from Schaefer Market Research. This survey used 12-point scales for monthlies and 13-point scales for weeklies and fortnightlies. Dailies weren't included. Since that time AG.LA has also conducted several experiments. They too tried a different scale, a 10-point one, and compared their results with those of a readership panel. The analysis of this AG.LA resulted in a working system with a 12-point scale which has been used since 1967.

At that time it turned out that the respondents couldn't give any definite answer on this 13-point scale, even though a quarter of a year has 13 weeks. Apart from this, they found out that respondents got confused by the change of the scale – 12 points for monthlies and 13 points for weeklies and fortnightlies. And although the Germans have been used to the decimal system for the last 150 years the respondents could not handle 10-point scales properly. Since the calendar does not operate on the decimal system we use the 12-point scale for print media in AG.LA/AG.MA.

However, the problem of the 12-point scale is that the readership per issue calculated from the scale differs from the results which you get from questions about the recency of reading. This means that the difference is a systematic one, which can be described as follows. Firstly, the more regular the readership is, the better the data correspond. Secondly, the longer the frequency of the

publication, the better the data correspond. There is, however, one exception to the second rule. There are almost no differences in the results for daily newspapers. They are read regularly, because they are subscribed in most cases. Today the frequency indications are used only as auxiliary means for calculating the probabilities. We could use *non-calendable* verbal scales as well.

In 1969/70 Infratest, one of the largest market research companies in Germany experimented with a verbal frequency scale. The Infratest researchers tried to develop a different model of readership named IMMA – Infratest Media Marketing Analysis. One of the modules of this model was the verbal frequency scale including the following items:

- (a) each or almost each issue.
- (b) frequently.
- (c) sometimes.
- (d) almost never.
- (e) never.

At that time we discovered that verbal scales involve two semantic problems in the German language. I think similar semantic problems exist in other languages, too, and therefore I want to deal with them in more detail.

On the one hand the terms describing the frequency are not very clear and are, in addition, subject to personal interpretation. Some people consider certain things as very frequently and others as very seldom. On the other hand the adjectives of time exist, as a rule, with their opposites. It is extremely difficult to develop a scale in degrees from such opposite terms. Owing to the fact that we did not then have enough experience in the field of calculating probabilities of reading, the application of verbal frequency scales was given up. Incidentally the IMMA was not a market success.

Allensbach, another research institute took into account that the frequency scales do not allow exact calculation of the readership of an average issue. They apply a mixed verbal-numeric scale:

- (a) do you read regularly (that means all 12 issues)?
- (b) do you read very frequently, possibly not all 12 issues?
- (c) do you read rather often?
- (d) do you read from time to time?
- (e) do you read only very seldom – one or two issues at the most?
- (f) do you read or look into less than one issue?
- (g) do you never read or look at an issue?

The results of this scale can never be calculated for an average issue, which means that the results are estimates only.

AG.MA has similar ideas about that. We try to define

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a reduced numeric scale for print media.

1 issue/2–3 issues/4–5 issues
6/7 issues/8–9 issues/10–11 issues

In the electronic media section of the questionnaire we are now testing a pure verbal scale. But the results of this experiment are not yet available, though they will be published in due course.