EQUAL MEASURES: WHY NATIONAL NEWSPAPERS SHOULD BE MEASURED LIKE MAGAZINES

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Synopsis

National newspaper and magazine audience estimates should be produced using the same questioning procedure. Current methods employed by Simmons Market Research Bureau and MediaMark Research Inc. seriously disadvantage the national newspapers, which are now measured using a totally different technique from the one used for magazines.

Background

At the 1995 Berlin Symposium, the results of a study* were presented which had been cosponsored by *The Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today,* two national daily newspapers published in the United States. The study contrasted the audience estimates produced using a six month screen, commonly used in the U.S. for magazines, with those produced using a seven day screen as recommended in the Advertising Research Foundation's (ARF) Newspaper Research Guidelines. The study's conclusion was that the use of a seven day screen produces lower recent reading (yesterday) audience estimates than does a six month screen.

Based on this study and supported by other research, the ARF issued a written statement clarifying its Guidelines, and making clear that they were intended for use with ***"... newspaper only studies but not multi-media studies such as those that also ask about magazines."***

The MRI Initiative

MediaMark Research Inc. (MRI), no longer feeling constrained by the ARF Guidelines, and believing that their use of a six month screen for magazines and a seven day screen for national newspapers was unfairly disadvantaging the national newspapers, made the decision to measure *The Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* in the same way that they measure magazines in Wave #34 of its *Survey of the American Consumer.*

In an attempt to level the competitive playing field, MRI instituted the following changes in regards to national newspaper measurement:

- Two additional cards were added to the publication logo deck.
- The screening interval was changed from seven days to six months.
- Those screening in were directly asked whether they had read *The Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* "yesterday". (Previously, yesterday readership had to be volunteered in response to a *"when last read"* question in order for the respondent to be classified as a reader.)

When the results of these changes were tabulated, MRI discovered that *The Wall Street Journal's* and *USA Today's* "yesterday reading" coverage estimates had increased dramatically. According to Wave #34, *The Wall Street Journal's* readers-per-copy had increased to 4.8, and *USA Today's* had increased to 7.2.

Exhibit #1
MRI Wave #33 vs. #34

	Wave #33	Wave #34	% Change
Screen-In Levels			
The Wall Street Journal	3.3%	13.2%	+300%
USA Today	6.0%	27.3%	+355%
Read Yesterday			
The Wall Street Journal	1.7%	4.7%	+176%
USA Today	2.3%	7.6%	+230%
Readers-Per-Copy			
The Wall Street Journal	1.7	4.8	+182%
USA Today	2.1	7.2	+243%

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* Appel, Valentine and Michael G. Stien, "Newspaper Screening Intervals: Six Months vs. Seven Days." *Proceedings of the Seventh Worldwide Readership Research Symposium, Berlin, 1995, pp 89-94.*

Because these readers-per-copy estimates were outside of historical parameters for national newspapers, MRI elected not to publish their results and announced that in subsequent waves of the survey they would revert back to their original procedure.

The MRI-Sponsored Telephone Study

When MRI became aware of what was happening in Wave #34, they initiated a telephone study to assess the effects of the change in screening interval, and the change from unaided to direct questioning of "yesterday readership" on *The Wall Street Journal's* and *USA Today's* coverage estimates.

Three matched samples of approximately 300 respondents each, living in upper income counties within the top 10 Designated Market Areas (DMA's), were interviewed using the following questioning procedures:

Sample #1
A seven day screen and an unaided "yesterday reading" question

Sample #2
A six month screen and the same unaided "yesterday reading" question

Sample #3
A six month screen and a direct "yesterday reading" question

Exhibit #2 compares the screen-in levels and "yesterday reading" percentages for the first two groups when a seven day screen was employed versus a six month screen. Because the overall sample was purposely selected to maximize the number of *Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* readers, the screen-in levels were expectedly higher than those previously reported in Wave #34. The six month screen-in levels were more than double the seven day levels, and *The Wall Street Journal's* "read yesterday" coverage percentage increased by approximately one-half (from 8.4% to 12.7%). But there was absolutely no difference for *USA Today*. The change in screening interval from seven days to six months does not appear to have been sufficient to account for the approximate tripling of the MRI Wave #34 audience estimates for the national newspapers.

Exhibit #2
MRI Telephone Study
Seven Day vs. Six Month Screen

	Seven Day %	Six Month %	Difference +/- %
Screen-In Levels			
The Wall Street Journal	16.8	38.3	+128
USA Today	15.9	46.8	+194
Unaided Yesterday			
The Wall Street Journal	8.4	12.7	+51
USA Today	5.8	5.8	+/- 0

Base: 7 day/309, 6 month/308
Note: P<.05/one tailed test for "Unaided Yesterday", P<.001 for "Screen-In Levels"

Nor does the change from unaided to direct questioning of yesterday reading appear to have been the cause. Exhibit #3 compares the "yesterday reading" percentages obtained when the question was asked unaided and "yesterday reading" had to be volunteered, versus when the question was asked directly. For *The Wall Street Journal*, the "yesterday reading" coverage percentage was virtually the same for the two samples. For *USA Today*, the two percentage point difference from 5.8% to 7.8% was not statistically significant. In short, MRI's telephone study suggested that other factors must have been involved.

Exhibit #3
MRI Telephone Study
Unaided vs. Direct Yesterday Reading

	Unaided %	Direct %	Difference +/- %
Yesterday Reads			
The Wall Street Journal	12.7	12.6	-8
USA Today	5.8	7.8	+34

Base: Unaided/308, Direct/309
Note: Both samples based on a six month screen

The Simmons Experiment

MRI's principal competitor in the U.S. is the Simmons Market Research Bureau (SMRB). To further explore the consequences of measuring national newspapers like magazines, the national newspapers - now joined by *The New York Times* - approached Simmons to study the matter further. Simmons recommended a controlled experiment involving two matched samples of approximately 500 respondents each who were personally interviewed in A strata (upper income) sampling clusters. The control group was interviewed using the standard Simmons questionnaire which already employed the six month screen. The test group, on the other hand, was interviewed with the three national newspaper titles - *The Wall Street Journal, USA Today,* and *The New York Times* - added to the publication logo deck, which also uses the six month screen and was now administered before the traditional newspaper portion of the interview. The reason for this change in sequence was to eliminate the possibility that any observed test/control group difference for the national newspapers might be attributable to some kind of order effect.

Exhibit #4 illustrates that the results of the Simmons experiment essentially replicated the MRI Wave #34 experience. Whether current methods have traditionally overestimated or underestimated audience numbers is a technical issue that is yet to be resolved, but the implication of the Simmons experiment is clear - that the national newspapers are at a distinct disadvantage when measured using current techniques.

Exhibit #4
Results of the Simmons Experiment

	Control Group %	Test Group %	Difference +/- %
Screen-In Levels			
The Wall Street Journal	17.4	28.4	+63
USA Today	24.8	32.6	+31
The New York Times	13.6	20.6	+51
Read Yesterday			
The Wall Street Journal	8.6	12.0	+40
USA Today	4.4	8.0	+82
The New York Times	4.2	6.5	+54

Base: Control/455, Test/475

Implications and Recommendations

The Technical Issues

When the national newspapers' logos are made part of the 200+ title logo deck, along with the screen for past six month readership used for other national publications, the recent reading audience estimates for the national newspapers increase dramatically.

Although the mechanism which causes this remains unclear, the use of a six month screen or the direct "yesterday reading" question do not totally account for the substantial differences in audience estimates. The audience increases must have been caused by some other variables involving the administration of the logo deck which are yet to be identified. Obviously, additional methodological study is required. The possible implications of the audience estimates which MRI generated last year, and which were confirmed by the Simmons experiment, are disturbing indeed for print audience measurement in general. They suggest that the national newspapers are at a distinct disadvantage when current MRI and Simmons methods are employed. The findings also raise questions about the validity of current magazine measurement practices. In other words, if current measurement practices produce unreasonably high audience estimates for national newspapers, what reason do we have for accepting them for magazines?

The two major syndicated services, however, continue to measure magazines and national newspapers quite differently. The reason usually given by those in favor of this practice has been that the national newspapers warrant different measures because they are daily publications. For syndicated magazine audience measurement, however, publishing frequency is not what determines the method that is employed. In the case of magazines, weeklies, biweeklies, monthlies, and bimothlies are all measured the same way.

So, should different screening intervals (or no screen at all) be employed for titles with different publishing cycles? Using current measurement techniques, have historical magazine audience numbers been consistently overstated? Have historical national newspaper audience estimates been consistently understated? These are obviously legitimate research questions that require further study and analysis, but a number of facts that have direct and immediate business implications are now clear.

The Business Issues

Syndicated total audience research continues to be the currency whereby print media are evaluated and print advertising decisions are made, and the three national newspapers in the U.S. do not conveniently fit into one of the two traditional print categories measured by syndicated research - magazines or local newspapers.

They are certainly not local newspapers. Distributed nationally, they compete directly with magazines for national advertising revenue. And although publishing frequency of the national newspapers differs from that of magazines, publishing frequency is obviously not what currently determines the method for syndicated magazine audience research. In addition, when national newspapers are measured like magazines, they produce dramatically higher audience estimates. A fact that was first brought to light in MRI's Wave #34 and then confirmed again by the Simmons experiment.

Why then, do syndicated research companies continue to use one method for magazines and another, more limiting, method for the national newspapers? Their response that the national newspaper numbers generated using an identical technique appear too high does not seem to be a valid reason. Are readers-per-copy estimates of 4.8 for *The Wall Street Journal* or 7.2 for *USA Today* any less credible than MRI's Spring '97 estimate of 20 readers-per-copy for *Popular Hot Rodding,* or 13.4 for *Soap Opera Weekly?* Or, Simmons' Spring '97 estimate of 11.2 readers-per-copy for *Guns & Ammo,* or 24.7 for *Handguns* magazine?

The Challenge

The national newspapers' challenge to the syndicated research community is quite simple. Until the technical research issues regarding the validity of audience estimates for all classes of publications are resolved, syndicators should level the competitive playing field by producing audience estimates for all national publications the same way - using equal measures.