

THE MEASUREMENT OF NEWSPAPER SECTIONS READERSHIP ON THE UK NRS

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Summary

At the symposium in Berlin in 1995 Roger Beeson of NRS Ltd and I talked about the increasing demand for a readership measurement of newspaper sections in the UK. Demand was driven by the fact that they represented a significant proportion of newspaper advertising revenue. We explored possible measurement options: on or off survey, page recognition or mastheads - but all seemed to have their drawbacks.

As the ideal data set of readership measurement of all sections within the NRS looked virtually unattainable, the brief was reduced to finding a way of measuring only those sections which were the biggest revenue generators: the colour magazines and the colour, tabloid format 'review' sections.

Over the course of 1995-6 a method for measuring newspaper sections readership within the NRS interview was developed and tested qualitatively. An on-survey split sample test has been running since July 1996 and although at the time of writing no data have yet been published, we remain confident that we have found a viable solution to the problem of measuring the readership of newspaper sections.

Background

In 1987 the Sunday Times newspaper comprised four parts: main newspaper, colour magazine, review and leisure section. At the time of writing the Sunday Times boasts 11 separate sections: in addition to the main section are Business, News Review, Travel, Money, Appointments, Sport, Style, Books, Culture and the Sunday Times Magazine. Whilst this may be an extreme case it is, nevertheless, indicative of the massive explosion of newspaper sections since the late 80s.

The readership measures already reported on the NRS are five and six day (daily) newspaper readership, a separate Saturday readership measure, Sunday newspaper readership and readership of newspaper colour magazines. Newspaper colour magazines are included on the normal cards as titles in their own right, indicative of the early days of their introduction when they were often the only separate sections and thus, in theory, more recognisable.

The brief to find a way of measuring the review sections, in addition to the newspaper colour magazines, within the NRS interview raised a number of important issues:

- First the readership currency for the parent newspapers and the consumer magazines must be preserved.
- Second developing a method to measure review sections as well as colour magazines would inevitably mean a change in the measurement method for the colour magazines already measured on the survey.
- Third the degree to which respondents could recognise and distinguish between sections was queried.
- And finally any impact on interview length had to be carefully considered.

Research Solution

The research solution, developed by RSL in conjunction with NRS Ltd, incorporated the newspaper sections measurement questions into the existing NRS interview framework, but after the main readership questions for newspapers and consumer magazines had been completed for all titles. It used read past year of the parent newspaper as the filter for the sections questions, and showcards depicting the supplements mastheads as the prompt.

Development Work

Two stages of qualitative development work were conducted.

The objective of the first stage of research, conducted in November/December 1995, was firstly to explore respondent recognition and understanding of newspaper sections in the context of the newspaper package as a whole, and secondly to observe respondents' understanding of the proposed new questions.

Stage 1 comprised 26 interviews with a shortened CAPI interview conducted by an NRS interviewer followed by a respondent debrief conducted by a research executive.

The findings were fairly positive with an observed satisfactory interview flow and only a small increase in the overall interview length. However, observation of the variety of ways in which respondents described and discussed sections heightened our awareness of the importance of the wording used to introduce the sections questions and the showcards used: often a range of generic words and phrases such as “sections”, “parts”, “bits and pieces”, “supplements”, “magazines”, “inserts” were used to describe sections; sometimes the sections were described in terms of their subject matter, for example, sport, business, cars, television programmes; and in just a few cases, and usually this was for more general lifestyle magazine sections, the actual section names were used such as You, Vision and Yes!.

On the basis of the findings of Stage 1, the method was refined and then re-tested in Stage 2 of the research programme which was conducted in April/May 1996. Whilst still small scale with just 48 interviews, this time the full CAPI interview (including the sections questions) was used with the objective of assessing the field feasibility of the new questions.

The Filter

The research method used read past year claims of the parent newspaper as the filter for the sections questions. It was important, therefore, to ensure that readership of any of the individual parts of a newspaper were filtered in by the parent newspaper claim.

With this in mind, in the Stage 1 research, we amended the question wording for both newspapers and magazines to include the phrase ‘any part of’:

e.g. *“Have you read or looked at any part of the Sunday Times in the last 12 months?”*

In the Stage 1 interviews, whilst this filter was observed to be adequate in most cases, there were some instances of failure to claim the parent newspaper when a section had been seen in isolation from the newspaper and was, as a result, not associated with it. This seemed to happen particularly with out of home reading such as in a doctor’s waiting room. The direct consequence of this would be that the respondent would not be filtered through to the relevant sections questions and there would be a degree of underclaiming of the readership of these sections (although the degree could not be quantified on the basis of this small-scale testing).

Additionally, the phrase “any part of” was rather clumsy and lost impact through being repeated over and over again for all titles. It was also observed to be not sufficiently specific in relation to newspaper sections.

On the basis of these findings, one of the key refinements for Stage 2 was the replacement of the phrase “any part of” in the actual readership questions with a much more explanatory and newspaper sections specific preamble prior to the questions:

“It doesn’t matter how much or how little you have read.

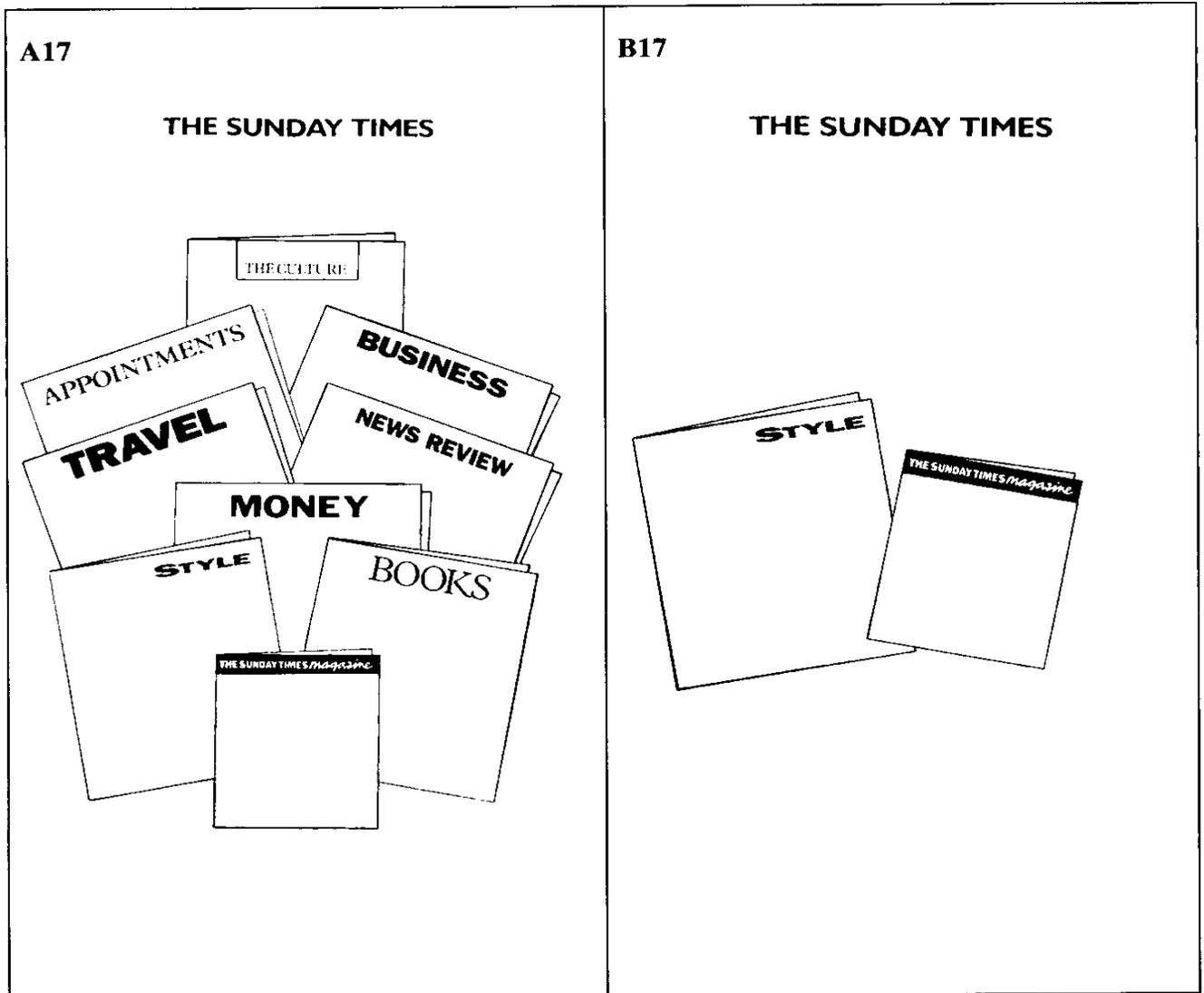
Any part of a magazine or newspaper counts.

For newspapers, it counts even if you have read or looked at only one of the different parts which come with a newspaper.”

Whilst we still could not be sure that this preamble would filter in all reading of newspaper sections, it was observed as being a much stronger indicator to the respondent to think of all of the component parts of a newspaper.

The Showcards

Given that the requirement was to measure only the selected colour magazine and review sections, there was debate as to whether all or only the selected sections should be incorporated on the showcards. It was agreed to test alternative versions of the showcards in the Stage 1 interviews. These were the two showcard versions use in Stage 1 for the Sunday Times.



It became clear from the Stage 1 interviews that representing all sections on the showcards was essential: it allowed people to sort out which sections they had read thus reducing title confusion; it was perceived as being more comprehensive and a better representation of the newspaper; and, very importantly, it avoided the irritation caused by the 'reduced' showcards when 'favourite' sections were omitted.

Whilst overall the showcard method was judged to be an effective tool to prompt recognition of newspaper sections, there were a number of important refinements to be made for Stage 2: the main newspaper was added to emphasise the origins of the sections; and the relative look and feel of the sections were communicated by the technique of text lines for newsprint sections and image representation for sections with pictures.

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THE SUNDAY TIMES



The Measurement Questions

Several issues remained before a full scale quantitative test could be mounted, relating to the actual sections measurement questions:

- Firstly, should questions be asked of all sections on the showcard even though only data for the selected magazine and review sections would be published?

Our view was that respondents should be asked all sections on a card but recognised that this could add substantially to the interview length. It was, therefore, decided to ask read past year of all sections and the subsequent recency question only of the selected sections.

- And, secondly, how to estimate reading probabilities in the absence of a frequency question.?

Our view was that it was not feasible to ask respondents a frequency question for individual sections: it would be regarded as a strange and also confusing question as, from respondents' point of view, readership of sections was generally linked to the parent newspaper.

This issue was further complicated by the fact that a frequency measure, based on respondents' claims, existed for the colour magazines already measured on the survey.

However, as the provision of probabilities would clearly be a prerequisite, our solution was to develop estimation procedures of the probabilities of reading for newspaper sections through segmentation analysis.

Split Sample Test

From July 1996 the sections questions have been run on half the NRS sample to test the effect on the main newspapers' readership as well as for the sections. Results are monitored on a monthly basis and we have observed a small number of anomalies. The sections data have not yet been published, but the main newspaper data of the control and the test halves of the sample have been combined for publication.

In May 1997 we moved into a second phase of the split sample test with some further refinements incorporated into the method with a view to ironing out the observed anomalies:

- The full set of NRS card order, card layout and title prompt order rotations was used in both halves of the sample (previously not all rotations had been catered for in each of the two halves).
- The grouped title card layout for the parent newspapers (which already differed in excluding the newspaper colour magazines) was changed on the basis of judgment as to more appropriate positionings.
- And the way in which sections were introduced in the interview script was amended (a) to clarify the origins of the section if not clear in the section name, and (b) to be as equitable as possible across the different sections.

Conclusions

We have come a long way since 1995 in developing a workable method to measure the readership of newspaper sections. The NRS research solution is a practical, efficient and economic means of generating data on the most important newspaper sections (and indeed the method is sufficiently flexible to be able to incorporate further sections in the future as required).

Preserving the NRS currency remains the paramount concern of the industry and it is important that all parties, technical and commercial, are satisfied with the data before embarking on publication - hence the extended and enhanced split sample test. However, we remain confident that we have found a viable solution to the problem of measuring the readership of newspaper sections.

