

# INCONSISTENT READERSHIP CLAIMS - A BRITISH CASE STUDY

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## Synopsis

In this paper, the readership results of the NRS newspaper supplements obtained by a new method, are presented. The new method, while overall satisfactory, produced unexpected inconsistencies between the supplements and their parents. Possible factors explaining these inconsistencies are discussed.

## Introduction

Since July 1998, after two years of split-sample testing, the British National Readership Survey (NRS) has included a new method for providing data for newspaper supplements. Prior to that date, eleven supplements of newspapers - the traditional colour magazines - were measured as distinct publications within the framework of the NRS' grouped-titles method. The names and logos of these colour magazines appeared alongside their parent papers on the two sides of the so-called EML cards, and they were always asked about straight after any questions about their respective parent papers.

The new method differs substantially from the old. It was designed to solve the following problem: how was it possible to enlarge the list of the eleven existing supplements on the survey by another ten or so as part of the main interview, without compromise regarding the quality of the resulting estimates and without unduly lengthening the interview? Adding the additional supplements to the standard EML cards in the same way as the existing colour magazines, was out of the question. This would have changed the existing EML cards so dramatically that with certainty, judging from experience, the readership results of the parent papers themselves would have been unacceptably altered. At the same time, the confusion issue between those newspaper supplements which it was agreed should be measured on the survey and those which were available to readers but were not to be measured, would not have been addressed.

The newspaper supplements which it was agreed should be measured were the traditional colour magazines and the more recently launched review sections of both Sunday newspapers and the Saturday editions of daily newspapers. The extensive development work and the solution we found were described at the Vancouver Symposium of 1997.<sup>1</sup> With the new method, the logos and stylised colour outlines of all physically separate sections (not in-issue sections) of Sunday newspapers and Saturday editions of daily newspapers are depicted on showcards, grouped together on one card per newspaper.

Filtered on read-past-year claims of the parent papers collected at the standard readership part of the NRS interview, questions relating to the supplements are asked in a separate part of the interview, after the standard readership questions are completed for all regular newspapers and magazines, and before the non-readership part of the interview commences. With this solution, two important changes to the standard procedures were necessary. One was the removal of colour magazines from the standard EML cards, away from the proximity of the parent papers, thus changing both the compositional arrangement of the remaining titles on the affected EML cards and the immediacy of dealing with supplements and their parents in the questioning procedure. The other was the inclusion of the phrase "reading or looking at any part of a publication counts" in the definition of readership of a parent paper. This change was designed to make it logically possible to claim the parent paper at the read-past-year filter question when only a supplement had been read by the informant in the past year. Otherwise, such a reading event would not be measured by the new procedure, which depends on a positive claim for the parent at the read-past-year question.

It should be noted that for a supplement of a Saturday edition of a daily newspaper, the read-past-year question used as the filter is the question relating to the daily newspaper in total, not the separately asked read-past-year question relating to the Saturday edition, in order to use the widest possible filter.

For all supplements depicted on the showcards, read-past-year questions are asked, but for only certain selected supplements - namely those it was agreed should be measured - are the average-issue-readership questions asked (and their results published).

The changes between the old and the new methods of measuring supplements on the NRS and the structure of the new questions may be summarised as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> Hilary Birt: The Measurement of Newspaper Sections Readership on the UK NRS. Vancouver 1997 Session Papers.

**The Methods**

<u>Old (before July 1998)</u>	<u>New (since July 1998)</u>
11 supplements as part of standard EML cards for newspapers (next to newspapers).	20+ supplements as part of sections showcards with other sections, in separate part of interview, i.e. after all newspapers and all magazines have been dealt with.
Supplements and parent newspapers defined as different publications.	Parent newspapers defined by “including any part”.
	RPY of parent paper acts as filter for supplements questions.

**The New Method’s Structure of Questions - Example: The Times**

<u>Standard Part of Interview</u>	<u>RPY</u>	<u>AIR</u>	<u>Frequency</u>
The Times (including any part)	√	√	√
Saturday issues of the Times (including any part)	√	√	√
<u>Sections Part of the Interview :</u>			
<u>The Times on Saturdays</u>			
the main newspaper	√		
The Times Magazine	√	√	
The Times Weekend	√		
Vision	√		
Metro	√		

(Note: probabilities for supplements are obtained through segmentation analysis)

The split-sample test results of the new method of providing data for newspaper supplements were judged on whether they “made sense” and whether they were commercially viable. There was no validity testing. A major consideration was that the average-issue-readership results of the parent newspapers (and their relationships to each other) were not changed by the new EML card compositions resulting from the removal of the colour magazines. In fact, it was this consideration which prolonged the July 1996-June 1998 test to its two years duration, following a change to the card compositions and other refinements in May 1997, as described by Hilary Birt in her Vancouver paper. Since July 1998, data provided by the new procedures are available to all subscribers based on the total sample of the NRS.

**Overall Results**

Given the above stated problem, the new method is a fairly successful solution. It produces overall average-issue-readership results for supplements which “make sense”. The effect on length of interview of asking about many more supplements than before, in a separate part of the interview, is only marginal (with an extra 1.3 minutes on average per interview). And importantly, the average-issue-readership results of the parent newspapers have not been materially affected. The new supplements’ results compared with the old results may be seen from the following table, which shows the relationships of the overall numbers of average-issue-readership claims for the supplements to the overall numbers of average-issue-readership claims for the respective parents, for the periods immediately before, and immediately after the split-sample test period:

**Indices - Supplement AIR to  
Parent Paper AIR  
*Parent Paper = 100\****

	<u>NRS</u> <u>January-June</u> <u>1996</u>	<u>NRS</u> <u>July-December</u> <u>1998</u>
<b>Dailies' Supplements</b>		
The Daily Telegraph <i>Magazine</i>	95	91
The Guardian <i>Weekend</i>	-	93
The Independent <i>Magazine</i>	95	92
The Times <i>Magazine</i>	-	85
The Express Saturday <i>Magazine</i>	-	88
Daily Mail <i>Weekend</i>	-	96
The Mirror <i>The Look</i>	-	84
<b>Sundays' Supplements</b>		
Independent on Sunday <i>Review</i>	-	75
The Observer <i>Life</i>	90	80
The Sunday Telegraph <i>Magazine</i>	-	85
The Sunday Times <i>Style</i>	-	69
The Sunday Times <i>Culture</i>	-	70
The Sunday Times <i>Magazine</i>	-	84
The Mail on Sunday <i>Night &amp; Day</i>	-	78
The Mail on Sunday <i>You</i>	96	88
The Express on Sunday <i>Magazine</i>	95	93
News of the World <i>Sunday</i>	98	92
Sunday People <i>Magazine</i>	97	91
Sunday Mirror <i>Personal</i>	96	86
The Sunday Post <i>Magazine</i>	109	82

\* *In case of the dailies' supplements, the parent papers' Saturday issues equal 100.*

As may be seen, the indices of the new method (July-December 1998 in the above table) tend to be fractionally lower than those of the old method, for those supplements which were measured before. This was to be expected. With the old method, they were the only supplements shown, next to their parents, and not shown to informants next to other supplements of the same paper, as with the new method.

We believe that the old method encouraged overclaims for these supplements, for the above reason. The new method was expected to establish a realistic, or at least credible, relationship between the various supplements of a newspaper. Because the results of only one supplement per newspaper are being published (except in the cases of The Sunday Times and the Mail on Sunday), we are not able to demonstrate this point for the majority of cases.

However, both possible title confusion between supplements and title confusion between parent papers and supplements, are bound to affect the supplement readership results of the new method as well as the old, though probably in different ways, to different degrees and with different consequences.

### **Unexpected inconsistencies**

As mentioned above, the judgement about the new method of measuring newspaper supplements on the NRS concentrated on two questions: whether the average-issue-readerships of the parents remained unchanged, and whether the resulting average-issue-readerships of the to be published supplements were credible (and commercially viable). Both questions were answered positively. However, while the overall levels were found to be acceptable, once the data were available for use by subscribers, unexpected inconsistencies were discovered. These concerned the internal consistencies of the data between parent readerships and supplement readerships. It was discovered that high proportions of supplement readers "within the issue period" (the average-issue-readers) were not also readers of the parent "within the issue period". As the parent readership definition includes the new phrase "any part of the publication counts", a claim to have seen a supplement "in the past seven days" must, logically, be accompanied by a claim to have seen the newspaper "in the past seven days". Actually, however, the proportion of claims to have seen a supplement "in the past seven days" which were not accompanied by claims to have seen the newspaper "in the past seven days", were substantially increased with the new method (when they should be logically zero) compared with the old method for which such consistency was, logically, not required.

It should be noted that with the new method, such consistency is *in practice* only required in relation to the read-past-year claims. The read-past-year claims for the parent newspapers act as filters for the supplements read-past-year questions. All other readership questions are in practice independent of each other, once the parent past-year-filter is passed, that is the extended recency questions for parents and supplements and, in the case of dailies, additional recency and frequency questions for Saturday issues. They are independent of each other, dependent only on the all embracing RPY.

The extent of the apparent inconsistencies in average-issue-readership claims with the new method may be seen from the following tables:

**AIR of Supplement but not  
AIR of Saturday Issue**  
*Supplement AIR = 100%*

	<u>NRS</u> <u>Jan-Jun 1996</u> %	<u>NRS</u> <u>July-Dec 1998</u> %
	<u>Dailies' Supplements</u>	
The Daily Telegraph <i>Magazine</i>	6.9	16.1
The Guardian <i>Weekend</i>	-	17.1
The Independent <i>Magazine</i>	9.4	28.8
The Times <i>Magazine</i>	-	20.5
The Express Saturday <i>Magazine</i>	-	12.9
Daily Mail <i>Weekend</i>	-	13.3
The Mirror <i>The Look</i>	-	10.9

**AIR of supplement but not  
AIR of Sunday Paper**  
*Supplement AIR = 100%*

	<u>NRS</u> <u>Jan-June 1996</u> %	<u>NRS</u> <u>July-Dec 1998</u> %
	<u>Sundays' Supplements</u>	
Independent on Sunday <i>Review</i>	-	18.8
The Observer <i>Life</i>	-	16.2
The Sunday Telegraph <i>Magazine</i>	-	14.8
The Sunday Times <i>Style</i>	-	10.7
The Sunday Times <i>Culture</i>	-	9.5
The Sunday Times <i>Magazine</i>	2.0	10.6
The Mail on Sunday <i>Night &amp; Day</i>	-	9.6
The Mail on Sunday <i>You</i>	2.8	10.1
The Express on Sunday <i>Magazine</i>	2.5	13.1
News of the World <i>Sunday</i>	2.0	7.2
Sunday People <i>Magazine</i>	2.9	8.4
Sunday Mirror <i>Personal</i>	1.7	12.4
The Sunday Post <i>Magazine</i>	17.1	14.8

As may be seen, excluding The Sunday Post Magazine which is a monthly and not a weekly like its parent, instead of an average of around 3% of supplement readers not also reading the parent newspapers within the publication interval, as before, we now observe this figure to be about four times higher with an average of about 12%, when we had hoped it would be lower than before, and logically be zero.

### **Possible Causes for Apparent Inconsistencies**

We may list the possible causes for the observed inconsistencies and comment on each of them in turn. Of course, we do not know for sure the exact causes; and if several are acting combined, we do not know their relative contributions. What follows are hypotheses.

#### **a) No perfect correlation between imprecise readership estimates for parent newspapers and imprecise readership estimates for supplements**

What we are thinking of is the fact that each of our average-issue-readership estimates contains certain proportions of over- and underclaims for a variety of reasons, including name confusion, habit confusion, question interpretation confusion, status claiming, memory confusion and some degree of model bias (replicated and parallel reading). Our working assumption is that over- and underclaims tend to compensate for each other in the aggregate, and the resulting readership estimates arising out of all individuals in a sample are deemed to be “correct” according to our model of Recent Reading.

This will be the case for the parent newspapers and for their supplements too. Both their AIR estimates are separately “correct”. However, when we cross-analyse them, using in effect an individual-by-individual analysis, we find that an AIR claim for a supplement made by a certain individual is not matched by an AIR claim for the parent paper, because a claim by a given individual, which may be either a correct claim, or an underclaim or an overclaim, for the *one* was met with a different claim for the *other*, and vice versa. Thus the correlation is not perfect.

#### **b) Non-compliance with “including any part” of the new newspaper readership definition**

A possible explanation is the following. Many actual average issue readers of the supplement *only* do not claim average issue readership of the parent paper, misunderstanding the instruction to claim readership of the newspaper “including any part”. They *do* claim readership of the supplement. Hence the discrepancy.

If this were a major explanation, we would need to declare that the present readership estimates for the parent papers were massively underestimated. The “solus” readerships of the supplements would need to be added. But if we would add such supplement readership to the existing parent paper estimates, say to the degree as indicated by the observed inconsistencies, the resulting estimates for the parents would lose credibility. For example, it would mean that the estimated readership of, say, the Daily Telegraph would be increased from its present 2.4 million to 2.8 million readers, of which 390,000 readers (14%) would only see a supplement. However, it is a possibility which we cannot discount, namely that some part of the observed inconsistencies are explained by non-compliance with the new readership definition for newspapers.

#### **c) Position of supplements questions in the interview**

Position of readership questions in the interview is certainly an important factor. We moved the supplement titles away from the standard EML cards and deal with them in a separate part of the interview, after all newspapers and regular magazines have been dealt with. By doing this we removed the desired proximity between parent newspapers and their supplements in visual and oral prompting. While this proximity is established again in the visual and oral prompts of the supplements showcards, by including the “main newspaper” as one of the sections, this does not help the fact that the standard newspaper questions are not close to the supplements questions. This may have led to confusion and less likelihood of respondents linking the two together in the ‘logic’ of their responses; and hence the observed inconsistencies.

This hypothesis is supported by a rotation analysis. It may be remembered that the NRS order of asking is rotated: the forward order is Daily Newspapers - Magazines - Sunday Newspapers - Supplements, and the reverse order is Sunday Newspapers - Magazines - Daily Newspapers - Supplements. Thus we can analyse the observed inconsistencies of the supplements when they are positioned relatively far away from, or relatively near, their respective daily or Sunday parents in the interview.

We found that the levels of inconsistencies decreased by about 20% on average, when the supplements were positioned relatively near to their parents compared with when they were positioned relatively far away. However, even in the “near” position, the observed inconsistencies are still many times higher than the (accepted) inconsistencies of the old method.

#### **d) Inadequate visual stimuli**

We must concede that the visual stimuli we use may not be fully adequate to the task we ask of them for all informants equally and for all situations. While we hope to have found a reasonable solution of abstracting the appearances of supplement logos and covers into our recognition aids, we recognise that confusion is endemic and that it may be possible to develop better prompts.

However, with regards to the observed inconsistencies, these could possibly be reduced by better prompt aids, but we doubt that the existing prompts are the main factor which explain them.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, we may see that all above four hypotheses are possibly contributory factors for the observed inconsistencies in reading claims between parent newspapers and their supplements. The first is unspecific and in effect sums up the other factors - namely that we cannot expect a perfect correlation, or logic consistency, between two readership measures taken independently from each other: even within the same interview with the same informant, we have taken two independent readership measures, one for the newspaper and one for the supplement, the overall filter question of read-past-year for the parent and the new readership definition of a newspaper (“including any part”) notwithstanding.

A greater understanding of how readership questions work will also lead to an understanding of their limitations. In this case, the limitations of the supplements questions have become apparent when the results were analysed in specific detail by the users of the data, for specific purposes. This in turn led to the realisation amongst NRS newspaper clients that the measurement of sections readership in the current form will need to change again. How it will be done in the future remains to be seen.