RPC, BUYING HABITS AND THE TIME FACTOR IN MEDIA PLANNING

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This paper takes place at the crossroads of two topics we very often dealt with in these Worldwide Readership Research Symposia:

- Readers per copy (RPC) in Barcelona (1988), Wally Langsmit, «*Why our RPC figures are too high*» and, above all, Guy Consterdine who listed in San Francisco the 20 reasons why Circulation and audience figures may change *(«What determines RPC patterns for UK magazines*?»). Maybe I will put a 21st one. Of course I should mention too the Florence papers from M. Brown («*The dependence of recent reading» estimates on question structure: a cognitive analysis*», or M. Skrapitis (*The relationship between changes in circulation and changes in readership*).

- How long lasts the reading of magazines and especially the consequences on media schedules; for example, Neil Shepherd Smith spoke in Barcelona about *«Taking into account the time factor*» and, more recently, two papers in Florence presenting a new approach of this old question: Mediaxis («*Magazines deserve time*») and MRI (*Magazine audience accumulation…*».

Prisma Presse publishes 16 magazines, of which 9 have their audience measured by the french audience survey, AEPM. And these magazines have very different RPC figures (Table 1):

Table 1 Prisma Presse Magazines RPC			
	AEPM 1998	OJD 1998	RPC
Thousands	a	b	a/b
Monthlies			
Ca M'intéresse	3 551	244	14,6
Geo	5 075	424	12,0
Capital	3 123	418	7,5
Prima	4 676	1 031	4,5
Weeklies			
Gala	2 380	255	9,3
VSD	1 978	235	8,4
Voici	4 079	576	7,1
Femme Actuelle	8 855	1 684	5,3
Télé Loisirs	7 128	1 711	4,2

We can notice that weeklies may have higher RPC numbers than monthlies; and that some magazines dealing with current affairs have higher RPC than others which present more timeless subjects:

- *Gala* and *Voici* are people magazines while *Femme Actuelle* is a general/practical women weekly;
- *Capital* is an economic monthly when *Prima* is a general/practical women monthly.

In France, like elsewhere, RPC figures are overestimated. As Descartes wrote in *Le discours de la méthode*, we have to «separate the problem into as many solvable problems as possible».
The AEPM questionnaire asks each reader how he got the last copy he read:
- he, or some one else in the household, is a subscriber of the magazine
- he, or some one else in the household bought the copy at the news stand
- other means.

Let us put aside the «other means» readers; since they count for between 40 and 60% of total readership of any magazine (but TV programs) they cannot be considered as responsible for the great differences in RPC.

The French ABC (OJD) gives separately average numbers of copies sold by subscription and sold in the news stands. If we consider the RPC numbers for subscribers on one hand and for buyers on the other hand (Table 2), we can notice that:

Table 2 Buyers and Suscribers RPC						
	Buyers readers	News stands	**Buyers RPC**	Subscribers	Subscription	**Subscribers**
		OJD		Readers	OJD	**RPC**
Thousands	a	b	a/b	c	d	c/d
Monthlies						
Ca M'intéresse	1 339	137	**9,8**	329	103	**3,2**
Geo	1 730	152	**11,4**	933	266	**3,5**
Capital	1 547	324	**4,8**	253	91	**2,8**
Prima	2 303	851	**2,7**	405	176	**2,3**
Weeklies						
Gala	955	249	**3,8**			
VSD	949	213	**4,5**			
Voici	1 988	558	**3,6**			
Femme Actuelle	4 703	1 415	**3,3**	787	268	**2,9**
Télé Loisirs	4 412	1 426	**3,1**	903	280	**3,2**

-        for most of the magazines, figures are very different for subscribers and for news stand buyers;
-        the RPC number for subscribers is ranged between 2.3 and 3.5, corresponding approximately to the number of people (15 and over) living in the households.

Dividing the buyers 'RPC by the subscribers 'RPC, we obtain what I will call the «RPC factor» (Table 3). Figures for *VSD, Gala* and *Voici* which have very few subscribers are estimated after the number of 15 and over in the household.
Looking at this «RPC factor», the following question is tempting:
-        Why are news stands buyers more likely to lie – and often a downright lie - than subscribers of the same magazine?

Table 3 " RPC Factor"			
	Buyers RPC	**Subscribers**	**RPC**
		RPC	**Factor**
	a	b	a/b
Monthlies			
Ca M'intéresse	9,8	3,2	**3,1**
Geo	11,4	3,5	**3,2**
Capital	4,8	2,8	**1,7**
Prima	2,7	2,3	**1,2**
Weeklies			
*Gala**	3,8	2,6	***1,5***
*VSD**	4,5	2,6	***1,7***
*Voici**	3,6	2,6	***1,4***
Femme Actuelle	3,3	2,9	**1,1**
Télé Loisirs	3,1	3,2	**1,0**

We all know very well that the wording of the audience questionnaire is: «when did you read for the last time a copy, <u>even a former one</u>, of the magazine XX». And a lot of papers at our symposium dealt with that question.

We also know that reading habits are very high (almost 100%) for subscribers, and very different for buyers. Moreover, lower the reading habits of buyers, higher the RPC.

As a research manager in a magazine company, I spent lot of hours observing and listening to readers of our magazines who said, during focus groups: «I buy a new copy of this magazine only when I am finished with the last copy I bought»; and this can last two, three or more periods.

We should get a more precise and quantified glance at that phenomenon by asking questions not about reading habits (we know them very well through the AEPM) but about buying habits.

By a chance, Prisma Presse conducted such a survey in February and March 99, with samples of 500 buyers for weeklies and 300 for monthlies. The interviews took place, just after having bought the copy, in a representative sample of news stands, during a significant period

One important aim of the questionnaire was to know their buying habits, with two questions:
- How often do they buy the magazine?, using the same frequency scale than the reading habits of AEPM.
- Did they buy the 3 previous issues, whose covers were shown at the moment.
For those of you fond of methodological issues, and for the fans of Simmons methodology, I must admit that the results were very closed, with slightly higher figures for the second question.

Since there is almost no difference, we shall keep on with results for the frequency (AEPM) questions (Table 4):

Table 4		Buying habits				
Monthlies		*Ca*				
	Geo	*M'intéresse*	*Prima*	*Capital*	*Weight*	
sample size	*272*	*188*	*316*	*340*		
Every month	12	25	52	46	*6*	
6 to 10 times a year	17	19	14	19	*3*	
3 to 4 times a year	31	27	18	21	*2*	
Once or twice a year	26	10	4	6	*1*	
Less often	7	8	4	2	-	
First time	7	11	8	6	-	
Total	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0		
Average number/6	**2,0**	**2,6**	**3,9**	**3,7**		
Weeklies	*Femme*	*Télé*				
	Actuelle	*Loisirs*	*Voici*	*Gala*	*VSD*	*Weight*
sample size	*504*	*505*	*503*	*504*	*501*	
Every week	52	88	48	35	37	*6*
Twice or 3 times a month	15	5	14	17	16	*3*
Once a month	11	1	13	12	14	*2*
5 to 6 times a year	11	1	12	13	14	*1*
Less often	9	2	9	14	12	-
First time	2	3	4	9	7	-
Total	100	100	100	100	100	
Average number/6	**3,8**	**5,5**	**3,6**	**2,9**	**3,1**	

The wording of the question is a «verbal» scale and is consequently different for weeklies and monthlies. I translated it by a «weight», which will allow us to calculate the average number of issues actually bought out of the last six.

Let us go on assuming that buyers continue to read the copy they bought until they finish reading it, and buy a new one only after that moment. I know that I may seem a bit daring; but I think it is not impossible to consider that people who buy again a magazine are more or less satisfied with the content of the previous issue.

They are irregular buyers, but not abandonists: if you throw in the dustbin a prepared meal of which you have eaten only a little part, you will never buy it again. It is our job to read a lot of magazines, and it is difficult for us, as for Media Agencies and Advertisers, to remember what we did before we entered this beautiful job. But, for ordinary people, if they read only a part of a magazine, they will not buy it again. And I will prove it, but later.

Out of six issues bought, it is easy to estimate the number of periods a magazine will remain and be read in the household (Table 5). I call it «Replication factor», assuming that the copy will generate new AIR as long as it will be kept at home.

Table 5	Replication Factor		
	Number of issues		Replication
	received by	bought by	Factor
	subscribers	buyers	
Monthlies	a	b	**a/b**
Geo	6,0	2,0	**3,0**
Ca M'intéresse	6,0	2,6	**2,3**
Capital	6,0	3,7	**1,6**
Prima	6,0	3,9	**1,5**
Weeklies			
Télé Loisirs	6,0	5,5	**1,1**
Femme Actuelle	6,0	3,8	**1,6**
Voici	6,0	3,6	**1,7**
VSD	6,0	3,1	**1,9**
Gala	6,0	2,9	**2,1**

You will not be surprised in considering that «RPC Factors» and «Replication Factors» are quite close:

Table 6	RPC and Replication			
	Number of issues		Replication	RPC
	received by	bought by	Factor	Factor
	subscribers	buyers		
Monthlies	a	b	**a/b**	
Geo	6,0	2,0	**3,0**	**3,2**
Ca M'interesse	6,0	2,6	**2,3**	**3,1**
Capital	6,0	3,7	**1,6**	**1,7**
Prima	6,0	3,9	**1,5**	**1,2**
Weeklies				
Télé Loisirs	6,0	5,5	**1,1**	**1,0**
Femme Actuelle	6,0	3,8	**1,6**	**1,1**
Voici	6,0	3,6	**1,7**	**1,5**
VSD	6,0	3,1	**1,9**	**1,7**
Gala	6,0	2,9	**2,1**	**1,4**

Is this observation relevant? When we calculate the RPC for subscribers, we know that they receive each issue, and they are supposed to read it, entirely, before they receive the next one (anyway, it does not matter for the calculation).
For news stands buyers, audience surveys do not count the number of buyers, but the number of reading periods for the buyers.

If we accept this demonstration, we can deduce four consequences:
- 1) a 21st reason why circulation and audience figures may change in different ways: when people need more time to read the magazine, they buy it less often, the circulation falls, neither the number of period of reading, nor the audience; and conversely, when readers have more eagerness for a title, they finish their reading more quickly, and they buy a new issue more often; the circulation grows, but not the number of readers.
- 2) and here we find the second path on the crossroads I evoked at the beginning: the build -up of magazine audience.
In the everyday life, we know that all the OTS of a specific issue are not delivered at the end of the publication interval, but we forget it, mainly when we see advertisers seeking after fast efficiency. But we remember it when Advertisers say that Magazines are not efficient. It is difficult indeed to demonstrate magazine efficiency, compared with television for example; studies where magazines are mailed to panelists are much more conclusive than those based upon audience questions.

3) as I said, we have at least a clue that news stand buyers read their magazines as thoroughly as subscribers: since AEPM study indicates the magazines having been read the previous day, we can calculate the number of days of reading, which is very different amongst buyers and subscribers (Table 7).

Table 7 Number of reading days during 1 period		
	Subscribers	Buyers
Prima	8,3	5,5
Capital	7,2	4,9
Geo	8,2	3,9
Ca M'intéresse	8,2	3
Télé Loisirs	5,7	4,7
Femme Actuelle	3,6	2,8
AEPM 1998		

But if we multiply the number of days per period by the number of periods (Replication Factor), we find very close numbers of reading days for subscribers and for news stand buyers.

Table 8 Total Number of reading days				
	Buyers			Suscribers
	AEPM	Replication F	per issue	AEPM
	a	b	a x b	
Prima	5,5	1,54	8,5	8,3
Capital	4,9	1,62	7,9	7,2
Geo	3,9	3	11,7	8,2
Ca M'intéresse	3	2,31	6,9	8,2
			0,0	
Télé Loisirs	4,7	1,11	5,2	5,7
Femme Actuelle	2,8	1,58	4,4	3,6
AEPM 1998				

4): as we have heard in Florence from MRI and Mediaxis, it is a real challenge to build surveys in order to count the number of periods of reading. And media planners will probably have to wait for a long time.

Fortunately, we may, perhaps, help them in the work of dispatching OTS in the time: our survey shows (Table 9) that reading habits and buying habits are approximately the same (1):

Table 9			Buying and reading habits (of buyers)							
Monthlies			Ca							
%	Geo		M'interesse		Prima		Capital			
	Buyers	AEPM	Buyers	AEPM	Buyers	AEPM	Buyers	AEPM		
Every month	12	24	25	27,5	52	52	46	40,5		
6 to 10 times a year	17	33	19	31	14	27	19	31,5		
3 to 4 times a year	31	29	27	25	18	15,5	21	19,5		
Once or twice a year	26	10	10	10,5	4	3,5	6	7		
Less often	7	4	8	5,5	4	2	2	1,5		
First time	7		11		8		6			
Total	100,0	100	100	99,5	100	100	100	100		
Average number/6	2,0	3,0	2,6	3,1	3,9	4,2	3,7	3,7		

Table 9			Buying and reading habits (of buyers)							
Weeklies	**Femme**		**Télé**							
%	**Actuelle**		**Loisirs**		**Voici**		**Gala**		**VSD**	
	Buyers	AEPM	Buyers	AEPM	Buyers	AEPM	Buyers	AEPM	Buyers	AEPM
Every week	52	61,5	88	81,5	48	60	35	44,5	37	43
2 or 3 times a month	15	19	5	8,5	14	19	17	25	16	23,5
Once a month	11	11,5	1	6,5	13	13	12	18	14	16,5
5 to 6 times a year	11	6	1	2,6	12	6	13	9	14	12,5
Less often	9	2	2	1	9	2	14	3,5	12	4,5
First time	2		3		4		9		7	
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Average number/6	**3,8**	**4,5**	**5,5**	**5,3**	**3,6**	**4,4**	**2,9**	**3,8**	**3,1**	**3,7**

I acknowledge that figures could be closer. But, as far as we have no specific surveys about buying habits, it is not unworthy to calculate the spreading of OTS based on reading habits. Probably not a very precise device, but certainly more realistic than to suppose that all the GRP will be delivered before the following issue is on sale. What we frequently do nowadays. « But this is an other tale…».

I am aware that this paper deals only with ten – very different but only ten - magazines, and in only one country. It is limited compared with the number of people attending this Symposium. But I am sure that some of you are in possession of datas about their magazines buying habits. It could be of some interest to see if they agree – or not – with this paper.

(1) That maybe is an opportunity to remember that interviewees do not answer the questions we ask them but the questions they think we should ask: they do not tell us how often they read a magazine, but how often they get hold of it, to read it as a long time as they need.