

HOW DO PEOPLE READ NEWSPAPERS?

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Introduction

The idea of defining the audience of particular parts of a newspaper – not a newspaper taken as a whole – still remains a vital issue. In the case of daily newspapers this idea is particularly often put forward because daily newspapers are highly diverse and it is clear that their particular parts are addressed at different readers. In taking up this issue – the perspective of an advertiser as well as a newspaper's publisher – as a provider of advertising space – seems to be most important. It is presently common to discuss the validity of AIR as a currency in establishing advertising price lists (see K. Arnaa R. Randrup 1997, T. Jansen, V. van den Berg 2001).

It was brilliantly illustrated by Ton Jansen and Vincent van den Berg in their presentation at 10th Symposium in Venice by providing the example of a couple who booked tickets for a concert in the first row for £350. It turned out, however, that the only available seats were in other rows (farther away from the orchestra) for which the same price had to be paid. The two music lovers were disappointed! Were they right? It depends on the acoustic parameters of the concert hall; if – in row number 29 – music is perceived and experienced in the same way as in row 1 – there should be no problem in fact. We would have similar situation in the case of the price for an advertisement estimated on the basis of AIR if it was obvious that the fact of placing advertisement in first or third section ensures that – each time – the same groups of readers are reached.

In the course of our symposia – much time has been already devoted to newspaper section readership research and we have had opportunities to listen to a number of presentations on various methodological and analytical approaches (see J. Higginbotham B. Cognac 1997, H. Birt 1997)

A way of reading a newspaper issue has also become an object of interest in Poland. It is worth mentioning here that in Poland – the idea of carrying out suitable research was not initiated by advertisers (which is usually the case) but by publishers. They were driven by both cognitive and commercial purposes. The former – cognitive purpose – concerns the knowledge that is useful for editors in creating the contents of a newspaper in order to make it as attractive as possible for readers. Commercial purpose is about contacts with advertisers and it concerns publishers' hopes for modernizing price lists – based not on particular pages' or sections' ranges (which are of course lower than for whole paper) but rather on relative results achieved by different advertisements of various parameters such as format, color, location.

In order to realize the above purposes we carried out page traffic research last year. It focused on three titles: a cross country daily coming out in a large number of issues and two regional dailies – enjoying leader positions on their respective markets. Methodology of the study was generally similar to that of the studies presented on conferences in Vancouver by F. Bonner P. van Niekerk S. Brennecke and in Florence by F. Bonner J. Faasse.

Methodology

It is worth noting that the above discussed studies were not the first research of this type that we have conducted. Our earlier experience came from studying dailies' supplements (method similar to the one described in presentation of Hilary Birst in Vancouver 1997) as well as from measurement of interest in thematic sections – we have singled out 30 topics and put them to systematic measurement as part of NRS study. However – we still did not have information about the flow of audience through subsequent pages and sections of the newspaper. We also carried out typical page traffic studies focusing on weeklies or monthlies. CAPI methodology as well as e-mail contact with interviewers created the possibility of up-dating the questionnaire on a daily basis – the necessary condition in page traffic measurement for dailies.

The above discussed studies were carried out in the second quarter of 2003 by means of CAPI technique and original newspaper issues dating from the day before the interview. One advantage of such approach is the possibility of evaluating the readership of each newspaper page and controlling even complex filters and transfer rules thanks to the use of a computer. Measurement carried out on the next day after the appearance of a newspaper issue minimizes forgetting effects.

The study of a cross country daily was carried out on the subsequent eight days – from Friday to Saturday of the next week thanks to which we were able to obtain data from two subsequent weekends when the newspaper comes out in a special – magazine issue. Territorially – the study encompassed two regions of Poland – different with regard to readership level and having separate mutations of the studied daily. The study sample consisted of 400 respondents and reflected the structure of readers with regard to age and sex.

The study of two local dailies was carried out on the sample of 500 respondents for each daily and lasted a whole week – from Monday to Sunday. It covered the whole region where the studied newspapers were appearing and the sample – like in the previous case – reflects the structure of readers with regard to basic demographic parameters.

On each day of the study the same number of interviews was carried out – therefore it seems proper to make comparisons of the results for issues from subsequent week days.

Like in Dutch studies (F. Bonner P. van Niekerk S. Brennecke 1997, F. Bonner J. Faasse 1999) we used the hierarchical scale in order to measure newspaper page readership although we did not concentrate on message understanding parameters:

- Completely not read
 - ♦ [Not looked through, only flicked through] - in the study of regional dailies – five point scale was used
- Only looked through
- Looked through and at least partly read
- Wholly or almost wholly read
-

In the case of a-few-page-sections – the result for the whole section was averaged out on the basis of all pages included in the section. This operation was carried out at the level of a specific newspaper issue (coming from a given day and given region) because issues vary among one another in section location and a number of pages in a section. To illustrate, the news section on Monday may consist of 5 pages from 2nd to 7th and on Tuesday from 2nd to 9th.

Due to a week – long cycle of the discussed studies realization we did not take into account weekly supplements as we would obtain information from too small number of respondents which would not entitle us to generalizations.

Range of results analysis

The results of the studies were analyzed on two basic dimensions:

- Audience flow within subsequent pages of a newspaper
- Audience flow within subsequent newspaper sections

We use the following indicators in our analyses:

- perceptibility ('open eyes before open page') – percentage of people who at least looked through any material on a page
- reading intensity – average value on a four (or five) point scale¹.

The first set of analyses verifies the hypothesis about a gradual fall of interest in a daily – from a sudden fall in its first part to a gradually smaller fall in its last pages. The second set of analyses lets us map the structure of interest in newspaper contents – its thematic sections. It is worth emphasizing that locating a given section in a newspaper is not constant – sometimes a particular section can be located a few pages back or on.

The above analyses were carried out both – on the whole sample as well as on singled target groups. In order to get possibly least complicated access to results – they are carried out by means of special software.

The study of the cross country title provided us also with information on perceptibility of advertising materials depending on a format and location on a page.

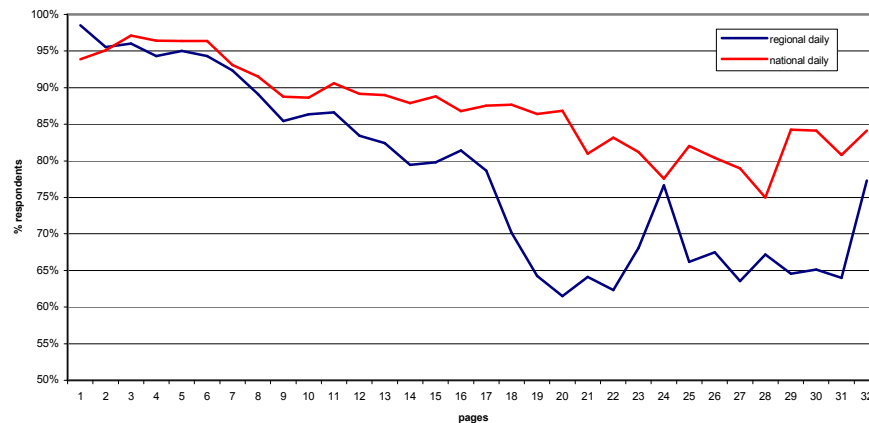
Reading of subsequent pages

Perceptibility ('Open eyes before open page')

Analyzing the reading of subsequent newspaper pages we could verify the hypothesis – confirmed in the majority of other studies – about a fall of perceptibility indicators. We can say that this hypothesis is also confirmed in studies carried out on Polish market – confirmation being much stronger in the case of a cross country daily. Graphs below show the perceptibility of subsequent pages in two studied dailies – cross country and regional.

¹ Completely not read (1) Not looked through, only flicked through (2, only in the study of regional dailies) Only looked through (3), Looked through and at least partly read (4) Wholly or almost wholly read (5).

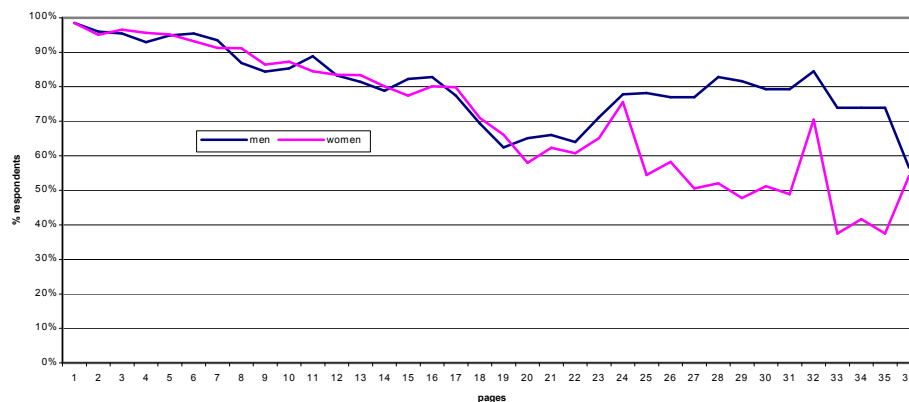
Graph 1.



The above graph draws our attention to a few „peaks” reflecting growths in readers’ interest (e.g., in the material on page 24 in a cross country daily). It is caused by the fact that – on some week days – the studied newspaper consists only of 24 pages and the last page is usually particularly attractive. That is why - data for pages starting from page 25 are based on a lower analysis basis.

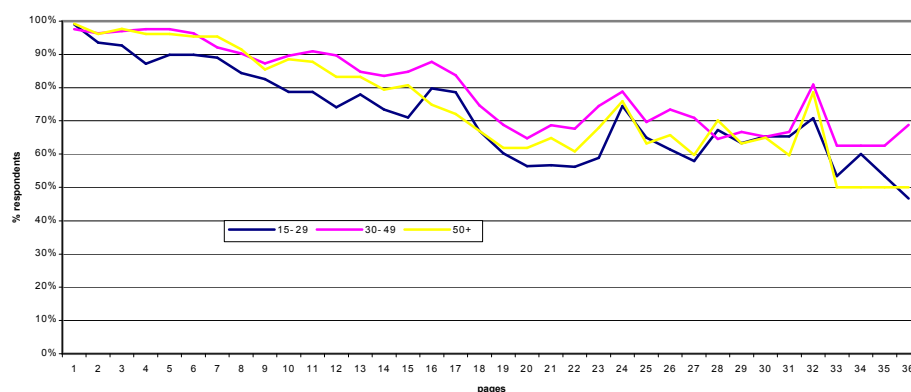
It is worth analyzing whether this general tendency is diverse in basic demographic groups. That is why the following graphs present – on the example of a cross country daily – the perceptibility of particular pages in women, men as well as in older and younger readers.

Graph 2



Looking at the above graph we can find out that female readers are mainly responsible for the fall of perceptibility. In men we can observe the effect of rebuilt reading in the last third of the newspaper.

Graph 3

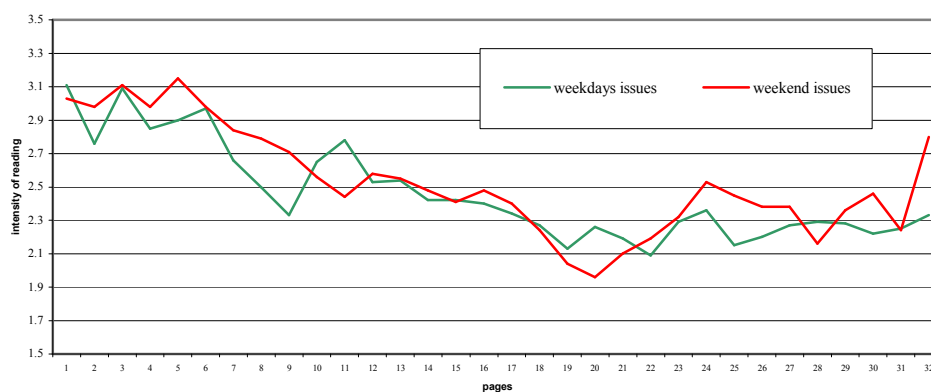


There is almost no difference between older and younger readers – which points to the fact that the observed profile of reading is not a „learned habit” acquired through years of contact with press but is rather a natural tendency in people of different age.

Intensity

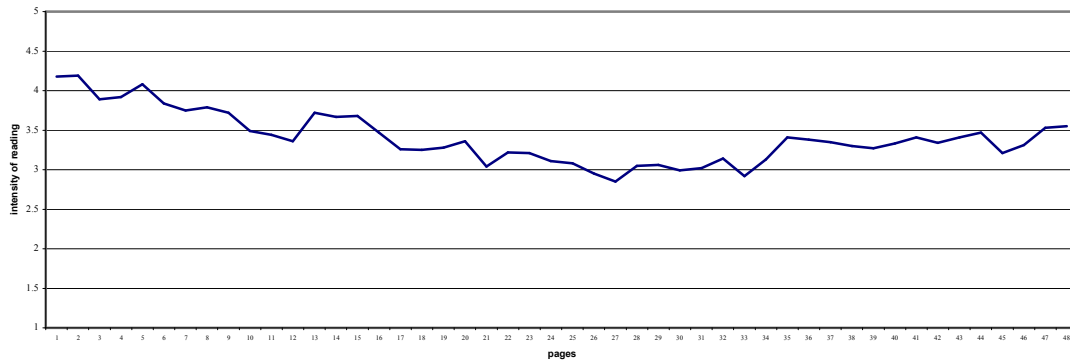
Apart from the main perceptibility indicator we have also obtained information about the intensity of reading subsequent pages – presented on the graphs below. The first of them – concerning the nationwide daily – differentiates between week day issues (from Monday to Thursday) and weekend issues. However – there are no statistically significant differences here.

Graph 4



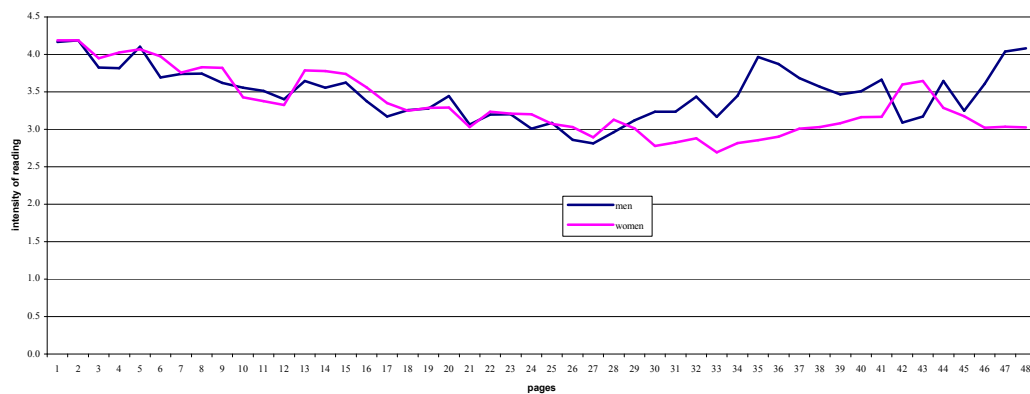
Next graph – containing data on regional daily – presents the intensity of reading particular pages measured on a five-point scale. Regardless of scale length – we have obtained similar results profiles.

Graph 5



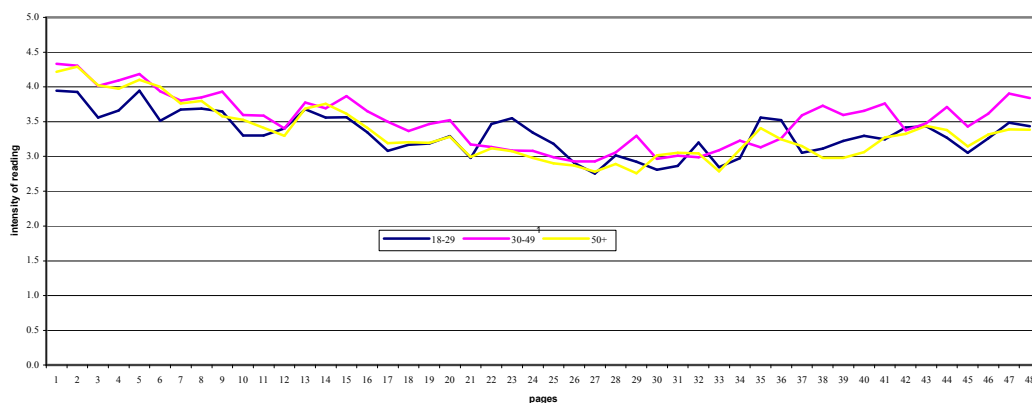
In the case of reading intensity we can observe somewhat different effect than in the case of perceptibility. First of all – the fall is not sharp, secondly – gradual rebuilding of the indicator value can be observed on last pages. It means that – although there are fewer readers of newspapers' last pages than first page readers – they, however, pay almost as much attention to reading material as in the beginning. Thus we can observe reduction in a number of readers but there is no fall in reading quality.

Graph 6

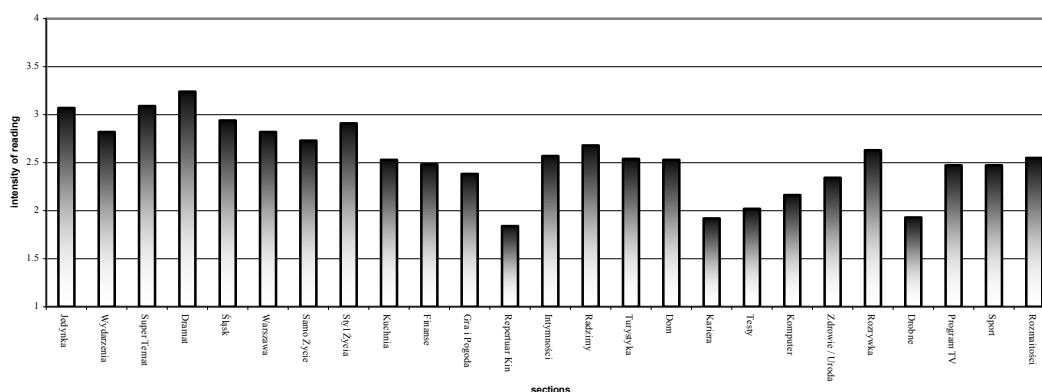


The final part of the newspaper is not only more often noticed (which can be seen on one of the previous graphs) but also more carefully read by men – probably due to sports, motor and announcement sections usually located on last pages. Some pages in the last third of the newspaper attracted the same amount of attention from men as those from the first pages of the daily.

Graph 7



Graph 10

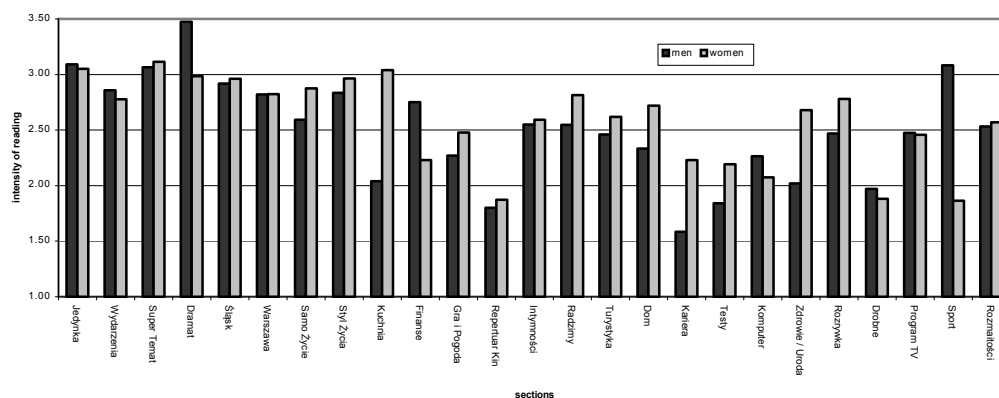


Again we have difference between the cross country newspaper and – more intensive read – regional one.

It can be seen – particularly when looking at the cross-country newspaper – that some sections are not read carefully. This is, e.g., the case with the section with small announcements. Nevertheless we cannot see a gradual fall of reading intensity of those sections which are placed in farther parts of the newspaper.

Thematic sections devoted to one selected topic (such as „Kitchen”, „Finance”, „Tourism”, „Home”, „Sport”) are read with lower interest – the average of 2,5 points. The reason is that such sections are addressed at people with specific interests. That is why, intuitively, reading of a section – more than reading of the subsequent newspaper pages – should show differences in target groups. This is illustrated by the following graph:

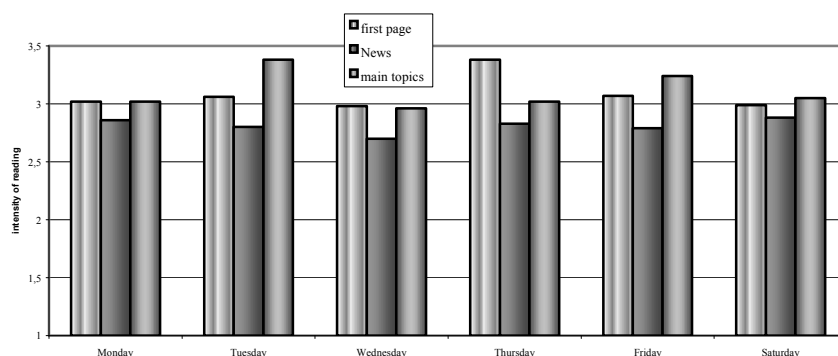
Graph 11



According to intuitions, women are more careful in reading cooking, counseling and health and beauty sections, while men are more interested in sport and finance. Although the location of thematic sections in a newspaper is not constant, they are always placed after the main sections such as News or Topic of the Day. Most thematic sections have female audience, only three of them are more often read by men. This should lead to the conclusion that part of a newspaper including thematic sections should evoke greater interest in women. However, as it was illustrated in previous graphs, we can observe the opposite tendency. The reason may be the “female” way of reading newspapers characterized by gradual loss of interest in subsequent pages even if they contain interesting material. Men seem to be more persistent readers and their persistence is rewarded by sports section – usually placed at the end of a newspaper.

Analyzing reading of regular newspaper’s sections we can observe the constancy of results – while the percentage of readers is – most probably – affected by particular events taking place in the studied period of time – the reading intensity remains at the same level.

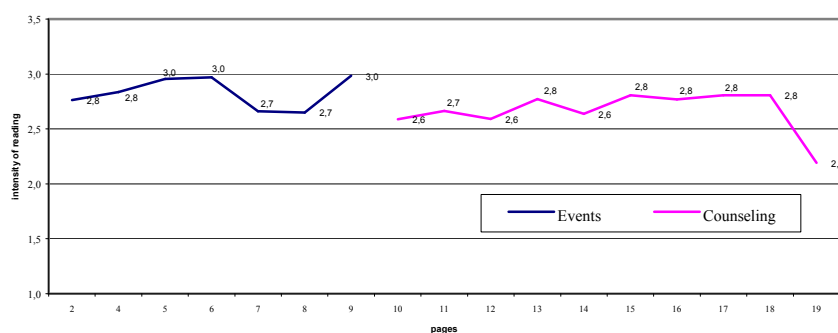
Graph 12



More attractive materials happen to be published on the first page (e.g., on Thursday) but this fact does not cause statistically significant differences in reading intensity.

As it has already been mentioned – thematic sections often consist of a few pages. It is worth observing how page reading looks like within a given section. To illustrate - we will look at two readily read sections from a cross country daily, namely: Events and Counseling.

Graph 13

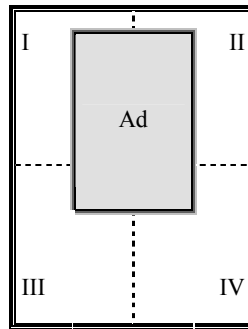


The analysis of material placed within one – multi-page section such as, e.g., Events or Counseling, shows that such material is read in homogeneous way – articles placed on first, middle and final pages of a given section are read with similar attention. This result is different from the one presented by Dutch researchers at symposium in 1997. The reason may be that the sections singled out in our study – although multi-page ones – did not include, however, clearly marked first page (from section logo) that could constitute its “cover”. Due to this fact – we did not observe the fall of interest that was characteristic for the newspaper taken as a whole. It can mean that clear marking of parts in a newspaper contributes to the increase of reading of the first pages of such section but has negative effect on further pages. Sections which are not clearly identified are read as a whole at a similar level (most probably lower than first pages of singled out sections).

Perceptibility of advertisements

Various characteristics of advertisements such as: format, location in a newspaper, location on a page were subjected to analysis. In order to define advertisement location we have used the number of a quarter in which the left top corner of an advertisement is fastened. Quarter numbering method was not dependent on whether the page was even or odd.

Drawing 1



The table below presents parameters of advertisements that enjoyed greatest perceptibility out of 400 advertisements analyzed in the whole study.

Table 1

	Page number	Advertisement format	Full colour	quarter
1.	2*	3x3	+	1
2.	7	4x4	+	1
3.	4	3x4	+	2
4.	12*	4x1	+	3
5.	7*	4x4	+	1
6.	7	4x4	+	1
7.	9*	4x4	+	1
8.	11	4x4	+	1
9.	9	3x2	-	3
10.	9	5x6	+	1
11.	11	4x4	+	1
12.	13	4x4	+	1
13.	2	4x4	+	1
14.	8	5x6	+	1
15.	9	5x6	+	1
16.	28	1x6	+	1
17.	36	4x4	+	1
18.	5	5x3	+	3
19.	12*	4x2	+	3
20.	5	3x3	+	4

What is interesting – out of 20 most often perceived advertisements there were only two full page ones (format 5x6) – the dominating ones were 4x4. Colorful materials were definitely prevalent. 1st quarter appeared to be the best location in terms of advertisement perceptibility – there was only one indication of IV quarter advertisement. Advertisements located on pages with more than one advertisement – were rarely noticed.

To contrast, looking at the parameters of the last ten advertisements we can notice the prevalence of small format black and white advertisements located in the neighborhood of other, similar materials.

Table 2

	Page number	Advertisement format	Full colour	quarter
1.	17*	2x1	-	3
2.	17*	3x1	-	3
3.	19*	5x1	-	1
4.	21*	5x1	-	1
5.	10*	4x2	-	3
6.	10*	1x2	-	4
7.	10*	2x1	-	3
8.	10*	3x1	-	3
9.	11*	1x1	+	3
10.	11*	1x1	-	3

Results seem to confirm the hypothesis that greater attention is drawn by advertisements placed in left top corner. Larger formats are noticed more often (3x3+) but rather not full page ones – which may be automatically left out by readers. Intensive color advertisements have higher perceptibility indicators than one or two color ones. The fact of placing an advertisement on even or odd page does not affect the perceptibility of an advertisement. There is also no absolute interdependence between the level of advertisement perception and its location at the beginning, middle or the end of a newspaper.

Advertisement neighborhood has been also analyzed (neighboring texts of particular subject matter or character). High level of perceptibility is enjoyed by advertisements placed on pages with “heterogeneous” material, e.g., consisting mostly of text. In such case – advertisement is a conspicuous element. It also appears that – in heterogeneous neighborhood – advertisement does not have to have considerable size in order to be noticed. High perceptibility is also enjoyed by advertisements thematically related to neighboring article’s subject matter – it concerns even small format materials.

Summary

The study’s purpose was to verify hypotheses made in other studies of this type and to evaluate how far the observed phenomena are universal – to what extent they are true for cross country and regional newspapers, whether reading tendencies can be explained by the basic demographic characteristics of respondents.

The hypothesis about the fall of reading newspaper’s subsequent pages has been confirmed. However, it is more strongly confirmed for a cross country newspaper than for a regional one. When we take into account subsequent sections of a newspaper, not its subsequent pages, we can see slightly lower reading intensity indicators for farther sections – this effect being again stronger for a cross country newspaper. In the case of both types of a newspaper – the fall of reading occurs statistically more often in women (both in perceptibility and intensity) and is not related to age.

We can therefore say that regional newspapers are read more thoroughly and intensive than cross country ones (and this is not function of their volume). The observed effect of a fall of indicators is not dependent on age but on respondents’ sex.

When analyzing advertisement perceptibility indicators we can observe the influence of such parameters as: format, color and location on a page. Location within a newspaper turned out to be less important (location on subsequent pages or on an even vs odd page).

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Sources of data

Research carried out by SMG/KRC A Millward Brown Company ordered by

- Media Express Sp. z o.o. – publisher of a cross country daily - „Super Express”.
- Oficyna Wydawnicza Wielkopolski Sp. z o.o. publisher of regional dailies „Gazeta Poznańska” and „Głos Wielkopolski”.