

HOW MANY PEOPLE WILL READ THAT? FUNCTIONAL LITERACY REGULATING READERSHIP BEHAVIOR

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Introduction

Stimulated by the Programme Chairman words in “Making more of what we have” we’ve decided to propose this paper about trends in readership with an unusual approach. The idea is to discuss readership behavior under the lights of literacy capabilities. At least in Latin America, reviewing the concept of “reader” would be useful to provide a better analysis and understanding of readership behavior and its trends.

To support this discussion we introduced the Brazilian results of a National Functional Literacy study as a reliable resource both to researchers and publishers on the analysis of readers’ profile, their interpretation abilities and, thereby, the reading demands of those individuals.

Those results were compared with TGI readership figures in order to offer a comprehensive vision of its practical applications through the relation between those results, the Brazilian readership figures and magazine’s profiles (editorial content, design) leading to interesting conclusions about performances and trends.

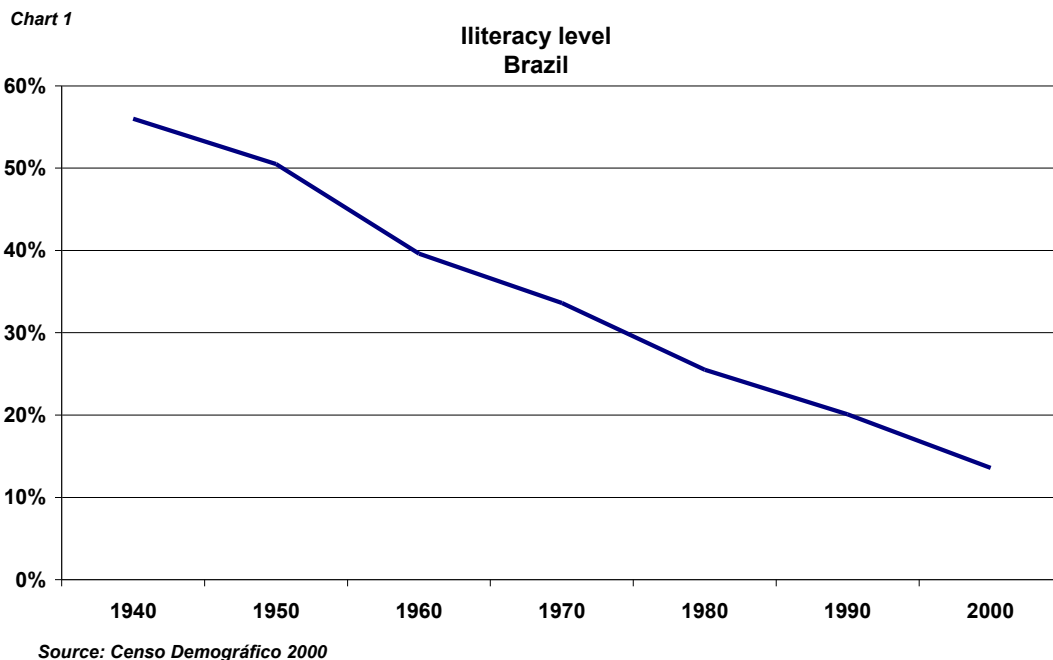
Those conclusions are relevant contributions to the industry, so being a new insight for publishers on understanding readers’ needs and capabilities and therefore improve significantly publishing decisions.

Functional Literacy in Brazil

Illiteracy was considered a “taboo” in the seventies in Brazil. Usually taken as a basic indicator of development it was shameful for the country to have high levels of illiteracy.

An aggressive plan to significantly reduce illiteracy levels was devised and implemented. Targeted at all ages, intended to teach reading and writing to kids, as well as to senior people.

The plan was successful. Illiteracy levels dropped dramatically in the country in the seventies and early eighties eventually showing the social commitment of the military government that was ruling the country at that time.



On the 1980 census, illiteracy levels had already dropped dramatically, confirming the “Brazilian miracle”, an economical boom that took place in the seventies.

Unfortunately, this rosy picture was hiding an important detail. The criterion used by the bureau of the census to consider someone as literate was simply: *“anyone that could read and write his/her own name”*

This simple criterion considered that someone who is literate is capable of signing a document with his or her own name, but is not necessarily capable of reading, not to say understanding, what is being signed.

Definitely, literacy levels based on this concept are not a good indicator of capacity to read and moreover to understand a simple text. Actually there are different levels of reading and understanding capacity, which are going to be detailed later in this paper, that are key references for the work of publishers, advertisers and researchers.

Just as TV ratings are measured against the universe of those that have a TV set (“able to watch”), which happens to be usually 99% of the population, readership should be measured against the universe of those that can read and understand its message, which happens not to be 99% of the population.

On this paper we will present a methodology for the estimation of readership ability. Although we don’t pretend to discuss its accuracy, leaving this matter for sociologists, anthropologist and psychologists, we will be discussing it from the researcher’s perspective or the measurement of readership according to different universe estimation.

National Functional Literacy Index - NFLI

The decade between 2003 and 2012 was declared by the United Nations as the Literacy Decade, widening the concept of literacy as not just the ability to read and write but to understand, communicate and learn.

NFLI is a project developed by two Brazilian non-governmental organizations: Ação Educativa and the Paulo Montenegro Institute¹. Its objective is to offer information regarding skills and practices of the Brazilian adult population, related to literacy and numeracy, so as to foment public debate and assist in formulating policies for education and culture. It is based on annual surveys held with representative sample groups of two thousand persons, representing Brazilian population aged 15 to 64.

Levels of illiteracy were traditionally measured by IBGE (Brazilian National Bureau of Census) as the *“ability to read and write his/her own name”* since late 19th century and showed a constant and significant reduction in the second half of last century.

Illiteracy among people 15 years old and over according to demographic census – Brazil (1920-2000)		
Year	Number of illiterates (in millions)	% of total population
1920	11.4	64.9
1940	13.2	55.9
1960	15.9	39.6
1980	18.7	25.5
2000	16.2	13.6
Source: Data from Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística organized by Ferraro, 2003		

¹ ***A note on corporate responsibility***

It’s clear to the Brazilian business community that governments alone will not be able to cope with the huge social challenges posed by developing economies. Therefore, Brazilian companies, of all sizes, are strongly investing in the creation of NGOs to foster and support social development at different levels.

IBOPE, as the leading market research company in Brazil, has founded and supports Instituto Paulo Montenegro, an NGO aimed at taking advantage of the group’s research skills to survey social related issues.

The concept of illiteracy has changed a lot over the past years. In 1958 UNESCO defined as illiterate an individual who was unable to read or write something simple. Twenty years later, it adopted the concept of a functional illiterate: a person who, even knowing how to read and write simple phrases, did not have the basic aptitudes to satisfy the demands of his daily needs nor to develop himself personally and professionally.

Following UNESCO recommendations, in the early 90s the Bureau of Census (IBGE) started tracking functional literacy defined as 4 years or more of functional schooling.

Figures were impressive, more than one fourth of Brazilian population was considered to be functionally illiterate.

Functional illiteracy (less than 4 years of schooling) among people 15 years old and over – Brazil (1992-2000)		
Year	Number of functional illiterates (in millions)	% of total population
1992	35.5	36.9
1997	34.5	32.0
1999	33.2	29.4
2000	33.0	27.3
Source: IBGE – Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística - PNAD 92, 97, 99 e 2001		

The concept chosen by the Bureau of Census can be challenged either qualitatively according to what is used in other countries (8 years or more) or qualitatively by the definition of reading.

The NFLI survey was created to address the qualitative aspects of literacy through a quantitative research methodology.

How the NFLI is done?

Based on a two stage probabilistic sampling, the interview takes approximately one hour with two questionnaires. The first one addresses social demographic information and attitudes towards reading. The second is based on the understanding of a Magazine specially created for this test, questions range from simple ones like “Where is the title of this magazine?” to other that requires the capacity to summarize a specific article.

Answers to this questionnaire will generate “points” that are compared against a scale developed by Brazilian NGOs with help and support from NGOs that have developed literacy studies in other countries.

The scale has four stages ranging from Illiteracy to level 3 that assumes full command of skills, necessary for reading and understanding a complex paper.

	Reading/writing	Mathematical Skills
Illiteracy	No command of skills measured.	No command of skills measured.
Literacy – Level 1 LOW	Finds simple information in one-phrase statements, an advertisement or a call on a magazine cover, for example.	Reads numbers that are used frequently: prices, telephone numbers. Has the ability to take note of a telephone number, read time on the clock, measure a length with a measuring tape, consult a calendar (on what day of the week is a certain date).
Literacy – Level 2 AVERAGE	Finds information in short and medium texts (a letter or news article, for example), even when some simple inferences are necessary. Registers simple information.	Reads natural numbers, independent of how large, capacity to read and compare decimal numbers that refer to prices, count money and make change. Solves situations involving usual operations of adding and subtracting or even multiplying, when not associated with the other operations.
Literacy – Level 3 HIGH	Finds more than one item of information in longer texts, compare information found in different texts, establish relations among information (cause/effect, general rule/case, opinion/source), staying with the textual information when contrary to common sense. Registers statements relating more than one information.	Can adopt and control a strategy for problem solving that demand a series of operations, for example, tasks involving proportional calculations, can calculate percentage of discount. Can interpret simple graphs and maps.

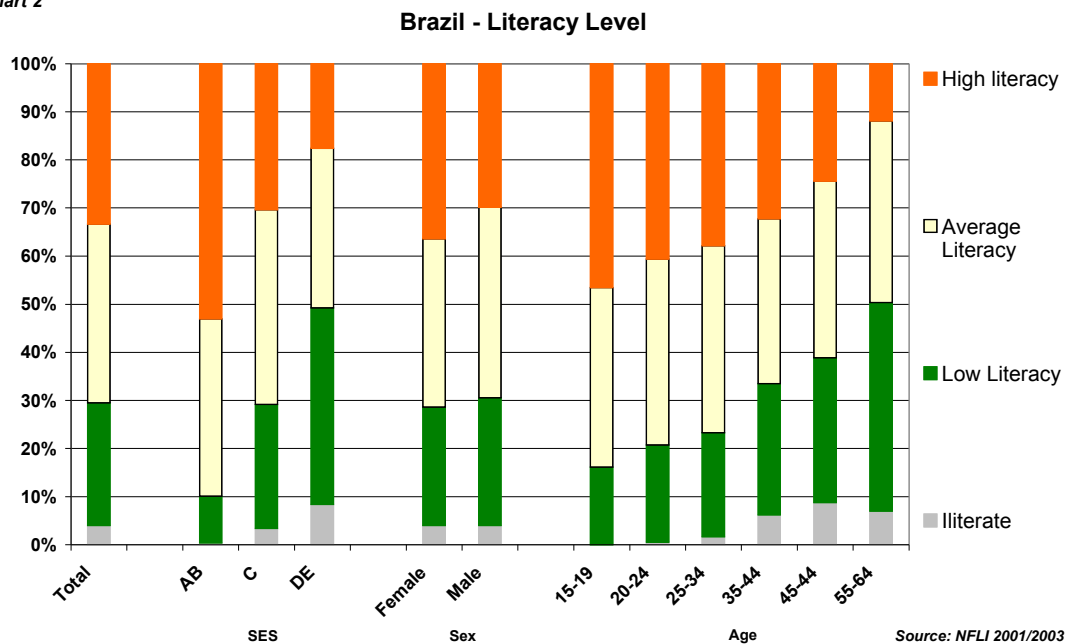
Summarizing literacy levels, the first one (low) ensures that the person has enough skills to take the right train on a station or chose the right brand of margarine on the supermarket, but not to read a magazine or newspaper. Level 2 (average) skills allow reading of simple text or messages, in special when supported by photographs. The highest level ensures full understanding of magazines, newspapers or books.

Literacy in Brazil

For the purpose of this paper we're considering literacy levels for the population 15 to 64 years on the 9 main metropolitan areas of Brazil as surveyed by NFLI 2001 and 2003 study (the 2005 edition wasn't available at the time this paper was written). Literacy levels for other areas (average and small towns) tend to be lower than the figures that will be analyzed on this paper.

Although only 4% of the urban population is illiterate, adding the low literate group will total 30% of the population with no or very limited reading skills, hardly able to read a magazine or newspaper. On the other hand, the high literate group is about 33% of the total population.

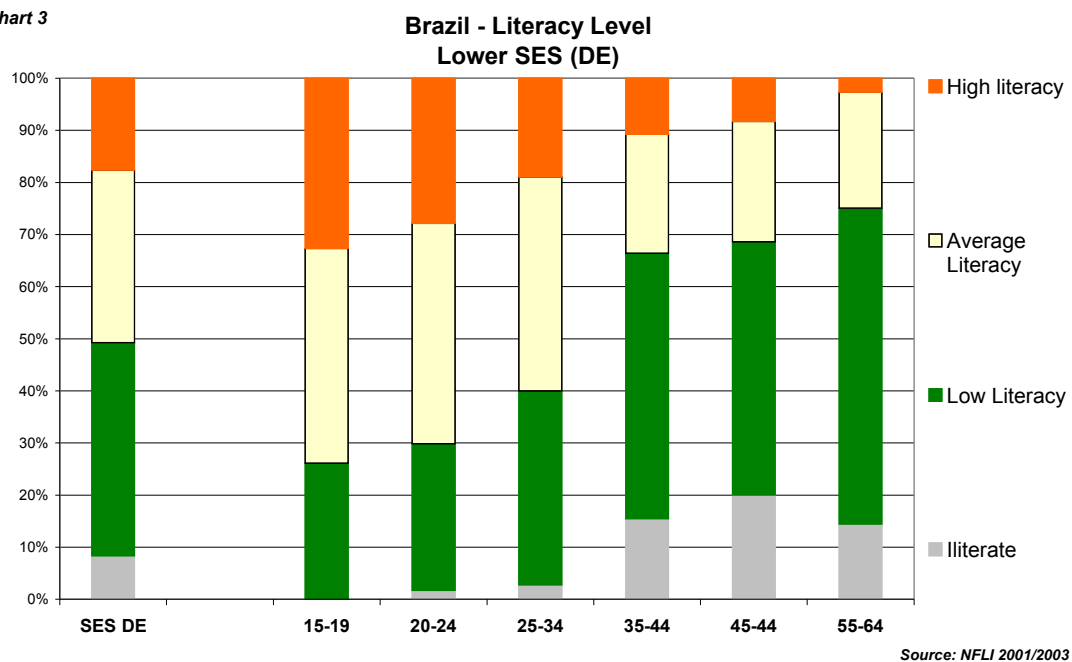
Chart 2



There are other variables highly related to literacy. SES (Social Economical Level) a common measure of buying potential in Latin America is highly related to literacy, where more than 50% of the higher SES is highly literate and almost 50% of the lower SES has very low of no writing or reading skills.

Illiteracy was almost eradicated for the younger generations, but it's still significant for the older, where 50% of the 55 to 64 years group has low to no writing or reading skills.

Chart 3



Good news is that even for the lower SES levels, literacy is higher for the younger generations in urban areas, indicating that overall literacy levels of the Brazilian population tend to significantly increase over the years.

Literacy and Readership

Our goal is to understand how literacy impacts readership and propose a different way to look at readership numbers.

Therefore the concept of what is the real universe of readers becomes a central focus of our discussion. It's important to point out that reading ability has different levels, as well as different magazines have their own specific reading complexity.

For instance, a weekly news magazine or a newspaper, heavily based on text, will require higher reading skills, possible the upper limit of the literacy levels. On the other hand, a weekly gossip magazine, heavily based on photos does not require the same skills and can be read by intermediate level people.

Hardly any magazine will be suited for the lower skilled population, in those cases it's more likely that the person will be able to flip through the pages of a magazine, looking at pictures but not reading it at all.

Therefore, when calculating the reach of a specific title, the appropriate universe should be considered:

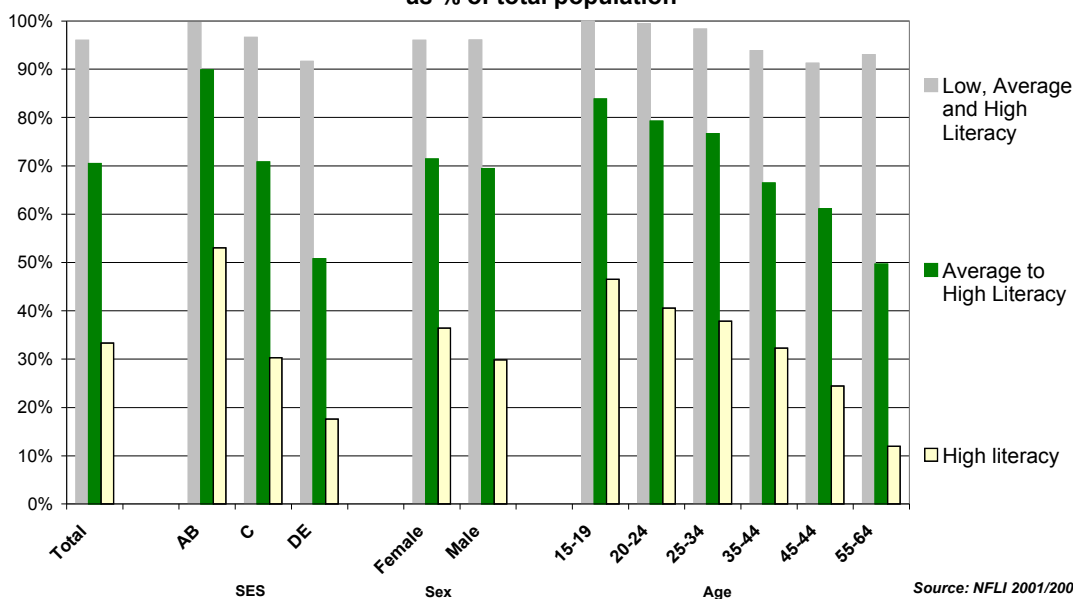
Regular text based titles like news magazines should take in to account the universe of the “high literacy” or level 3. This will ensure that the reader will be able to read and understand the magazines and its advertisements.

Picture based/Simple text magazines like popular gossip magazines and some “teens” ones are suited for an “average literacy” or level 2 audiences. It's important to say that “high literacy” or level 3 is also capable of reading these magazines and will be part of the “readers” universe.

Therefore reader's universes will vary according to the type of magazine being measured. A magazine aimed at high literacy levels will be measured against a 33% of the total universe. In other words, it has the potential to effectively reach not more than 33% of the total population.

Chart 4

**Brazil - Literacy Universes
as % of total population**



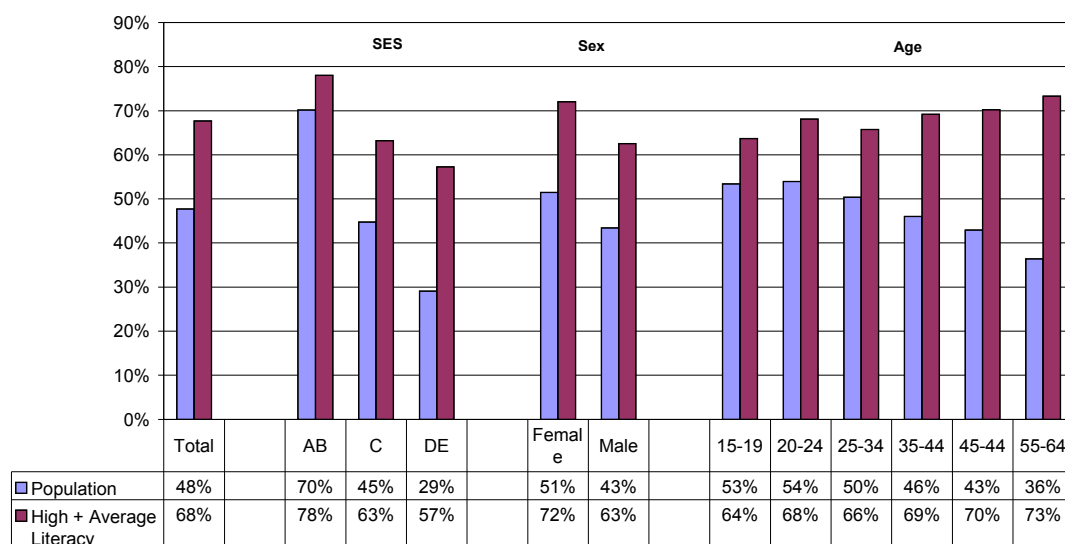
Source: NFLI 2001/2003

Literacy and readership: Reviewing Universes

In order to review traditional readership figures to literacy universes, we will be using Brazilian TGI's recent readers figures based on the 2004/2005 survey and 2001/2003 FLS (Functional Literacy Survey).

Chart 5

Magazine Readers - Total Reach (%) Population X High + Average Literacy



Source: NFLI 2001/2003 and Target Group Index Brazil 2004/2005

Total reach of magazine readers (RR) tops 48%, taking into account readers of all titles and based on the total population of the surveyed area, just how it's usually calculated.

Reviewing the concept of the universe of readers, reducing it to the universe of people with the minimum capabilities to read and understand the content of most magazines (High and Average Literacy Levels), we will find that the general reach of magazines will grow from 48% to 68%, or by more than 40%.

It's very interesting to note that some common concepts on the performance of magazines, as the importance of age and SEL on readership levels, can be reviewed. As a matter of fact, readership is lower for the lower SEL, but literacy plays a more important role on readership levels than the economic potential of these groups as conventionally assumed.

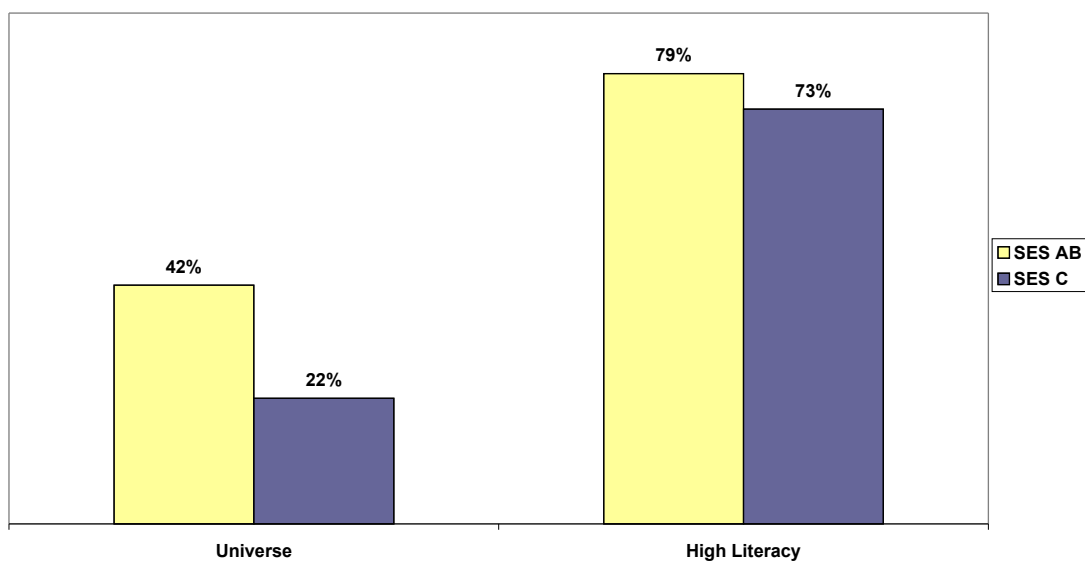
Readership according to age groups shows a different pattern than what is usually assumed. Based on total population, readership shows a strong reduction on older groups, but literacy plays an important role on these figures, as older groups have lower literacy levels. Therefore, readership tends to increase at older groups with same literacy levels, challenging conventional wisdom on how older groups behave towards readership.

Taking in to account that younger population has better reading skills than older ones, prospects for the publishing market are of a significant growth of the "readers market" over the next years, reinforcing the social and economical importance of improving readership skills throughout the population.

Literacy not only plays an important and challenging role on total readership but also on most of magazines genres. Usually titles or genres are targeted to a specific group (SEL, Age or Sex) and its reach calculated against the total population of the group. When we review the size of the population and target groups by the ones that can read these titles, often the picture changes dramatically, as we can see on the following examples:

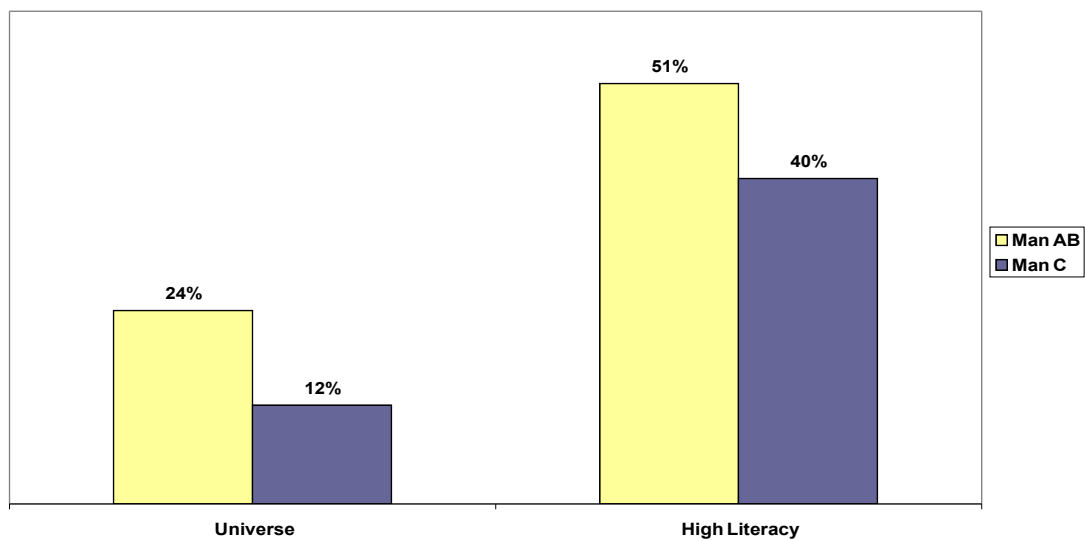
Weekly News, Male and Woman Magazines – Although readership of SEL C is much lower than SEL AB, when reviewed to literacy level 3 (High) universe readership ends up being much closer on those two groups.

Chart 6

Weekly News Magazines - Reach (%)

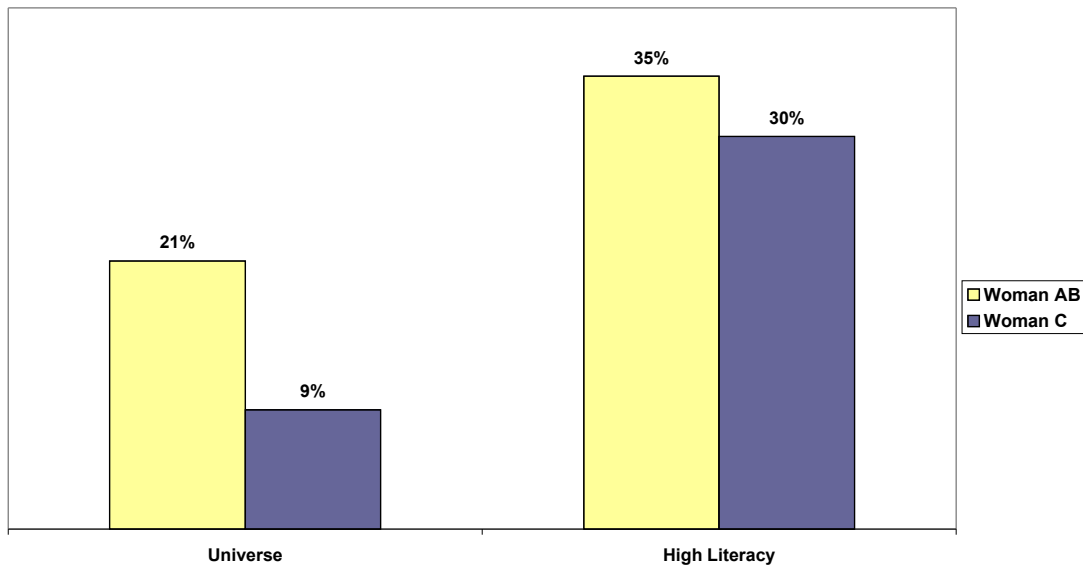
Source: NFLI 2001/2003 and Target Group Index Brazil 2004/2005

Chart 7

Male Magazines- Reach (%)

Source: NFLI 2001/2003 and Target Group Index Brazil 2004/2005

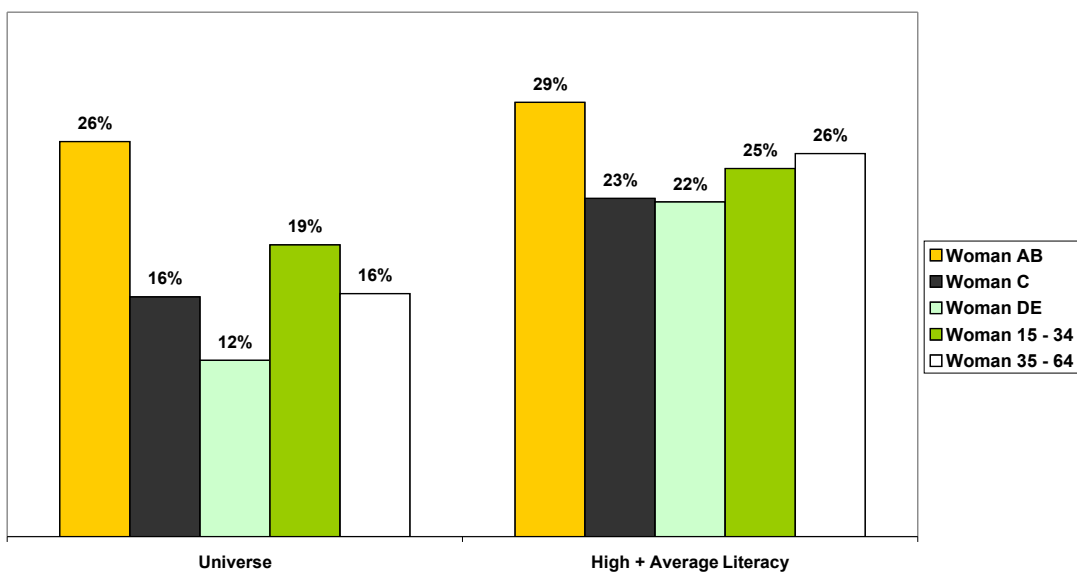
Chart 8

Woman Magazines - Reach (%)

Source: NFLI 2001/2003 and Target Group Index Brazil 2004/2005

Weekly Gossip Magazines – This Genre is targeted to levels 2 and 3 (Average and High). Although there are significant differences on readership levels of different targets, related to SEL or age, when reviewed to literacy 2 and 3, it levels out to very similar readership.

Chart 9

Weekly Gossip Magazines - Reach (%)

Source: NFLI 2001/2003 and Target Group Index Brazil 2004/2005

Conclusions: impact on publishing decisions and research opportunity

It is clear that readership behavior is conditioned by functional literacy. Clearly, this is quite observable where population has an average low educational level like Brazil and other developing countries. But it is also probably true for high developed places just with more sophisticated mechanisms.

Literacy should be considered one of the main drivers for readership.

Knowing details of the “literacy structure” of the population allows researchers and publishers to better understand and anticipate readership behaviors.

More than that it offers a unique opportunity to evaluate the “potential reach” of a magazine within its “niche” (combined with other specific factors) and gives valuable tips for formats and content in general.

The methodology used for the Brazilian Functional Literacy study was not developed for that purpose.

We believe that there is an opportunity for the research industry to implement specific studies to evaluate reading capabilities to complement the range of available decision tools for publishers as a path to improve marketing results.