

Robert J Schreiber
Sports Illustrated,
New York, USA

8.6 The way ahead – an American view

I suspect that the bulk of what I have to say should be entitled 'What *Should* Lie Ahead' rather than what does lie ahead. But, before I get to the future, let me touch on history, and on the present.

Today, in the US, and to a marked degree in other countries, media selection rests very heavily – too heavily – on measures of audience or readership efficiency. I cannot emphasise this fact too heavily. Were it not true, the numbers we produce might be 'good enough'. That some of the other attendees at this symposium also demonstrate anguish at the current state of affairs does demonstrate that you also live and die by the sword of efficiency – the cost-per-thousand readers. Those who are not employed by publishers or advertising agencies can hardly realise the degree to which our economic fortunes rest on this measure. I can only relate a too typical experience.

About a year ago, I was in Los Angeles and gave a lecture to the media department of a large advertising agency. At the conclusion, I deplored the way cost-per-thousand – CPM – dominated media decisions in many agencies. I recounted how another agency had decided to buy seven four-colour pages in *Sports Illustrated* because our CPM was \$21.24 and that of the competitor was \$21.45. And, I continued, another agency bought four such pages for another product – in the competitor's magazine – because its CPM was about 40 cents less than ours, on a \$45 base. The media director of the agency leapt to his feet and assured me that *his* agency uses its judgement, that it does look at editorial content, and so forth. He expressed disgust at the stories I told.

As I was leaving that agency, the media director stopped me and our sales representative. "Rosemary", he said to my associate, "would you step into my office for a moment". We followed him to his office. "Look", he said, "I have to tell you that you will not be on that schedule we talked about yesterday". She asked why. "Because", he answered "your cost per thousand is 70¢ too high". And this was in an agency with a good technical staff which warns against this sort of decision making.

Because this was *not* an atypical experience, we have the strongest need for accuracy.

So much for history. Let us talk about what has happened here at our meeting. First, I observe that there is no 'TTB method'. There are many. Second, there is no 'RR method'. There are many.

And, also, each version of each method seems to produce different audience levels for groups of magazines

and for individual titles. If in changing a filter, or a question response list, we can produce different levels by type of magazine or even by title, it is an inescapable conclusion that most of those results are in error.

Second, our two favourite methods, RR and TTB, have been savaged by the validity studies presented here. It is inescapable that both methods suffer when compared to the reality that they purport to measure. Both seem to suffer from inability to recapture exposure which did occur and from prompting claims of exposure which did not occur. In short, despite the protestations of some of those people who operate our national readership surveys, we cannot avoid the conclusion that the two methods upon which we rely just do not meet the accuracy requirements of those who use – and pay for – the data. And, I venture to add, the current grumbles we hear may well grow to shouts for the overthrow of the establishment, and calls for our heads!

Where we should go then, is in the direction of validity studies. We have talked about three kinds of validity studies: observation of reading, such as Lysaker described, interrogation of claimants and non-claimants, such as described by Bill Belson; and finally, panel data, as suggested by Coen de Koning. (Incidentally, these latter two methods are much less costly than observation, but, I suggest, should be compared with the observation method to test *their* validity).

We *must* do more experimental work testing new methods against these criteria. I am not suggesting that we implement and use these methods in our national surveys: I want to be perfectly clear – we should test our questioning methods, present and proposed, against one or more of these three representations of reality before we use them in our national surveys.

I urge and implore that we begin, immediately, programmes of testing. Some can be done by second interviews in our national surveys; some can be done with subsamples; and some may require special studies, even laboratory experimentation. We *must* do these things. No longer can we defend our current methods only with logical and rational arguments – the evidence is now public that both TTB and RR are so seriously flawed that users should suspect the data produced by our methods.

Consider just one item – the effect of order of presentation. Ted Whitley's presentation certainly would have upset most publishers I know, who would then demand preferred positions for *their* publications.

Finally, I suggest that although we call ourselves researchers, we spend most of our efforts not on research,

8.6 The way ahead – an American view

but on repetition measurements that shed little if any light on how we can measure better. We spend, collectively, a figure I estimate at \$15–\$20,000,000 per year – and probably less than 1% of that amount to improve our knowledge.

Where should we go from here? Validity studies – more and more and better and better ones. And I hope that when we meet again, our programme will consist largely of validity tests of our current systems, and more importantly, I hope we will have presentation of new methods – better ones – that have resulted from our validity testing.

A few comments on two other parts of our programme. We heard very interesting papers on primary vs secondary readers, reader involvement and so forth: very imaginative work. But I wonder how much reliance we can place on claims relating to provenance or reading intensity when we are quite suspicious of the readership claims of some proportion of the 'readers'. Perhaps these kinds of descriptors would be more discriminating if we could really measure readership as we currently attempt

to define it.

The disagreements among those private firms which tabulate and project our data were really good fun. As a former labourer in those rocky vineyards – and, I must say with lack of modesty, one of the first – I find that the differences were predictable. Indeed, if you tell me which service you'd like to favour, with a computer and a few hours I'll devise some realistic schedules which will depict *your* candidate as the winner! To all three, I would offer a piece of advice – hire a very good mathematical statistician to develop a multivariate beta distribution and use that, either in formula or simulation form, and I'll wager that you will have solved many of your problems.

Conclusion: we have learned that our foreign colleagues, whether they come from North America, the British Isles, Continental Europe, Asia or Africa, have really not solved our problems better than we have. We can all return home smug in the conviction that we are doing the best we can. But when the tumbrils carry us through the streets to the guillotine, let us remember that our 'best' *to date* is not really very good.