Harry Henry
Harry Henry Associates
London, UK

8.5 HOW ARE WE DOING?

It will probably have been noticed that nobody is attempting a summing up of this Symposium, which would in any case be a quite impossible task. I have to make a personal apology: I have been so concerned with the mechanics of editing the proceedings that I have not really been listening to what has been going on. So instead of commenting I want to draw attention to a topic which I think has not received sufficient attention at this Symposium or at either of its predecessors - the need to understand the components of short-term variation in readership data.

Readership data, after all, are basically used for the purposes of prediction - predicting the sort of audience which an advertisement will reach when it eventually appears, some time in the future. It will be remembered that at Montreal Agostini and Boisson read a very interesting paper in which they pointed out that the users of readership surveys are using last year's data to predict next year's events. It might really make much better sense, they suggested, to take the data for the previous several years, to draw a regression line through them, to project ahead, and to assume that that would be a more valid prediction than simply using the previous year's data by themselves.

So far as I am aware nobody has actually done much work along those lines in the readership field, though it should be easy enough to do. And I have not done it myself: I refer to it now because it raises a very interesting point in an area where we are, as I say, essentially concerned with prediction.

There are basically three ways in which new data in an existing series which we are using for the purposes of prediction can vary from an existing trend. Firstly, there can be straightforward errors in the data. Secondly, there can be sampling errors, which in our fields of interest are much the same. And, thirdly, the variation can be the consequence of a positive change in the trend of which that deviation from the existing trend is the first sign.

We have heard at this Symposium about the Austrian Rolling Media Analysis - and, of course, the British National Readership Survey is also a rolling total operation, producing data at quarterly intervals. The beauty of a rolling total is that it mitigates to some extent the effects of random data error, and certainly reduces sampling error. But as well as damping down those deviations from trend which simply reflect errors or quirks or random fluctuations, rolling totals may also delay recognition of changes in trend which are real and significant, and the question this leads me to ask is whether we know as much as we should about short-term variance in readership.

In considering changes in readership per copy, for example, we tend to look for error rather than for real change as the cause: it is generally assumed that they must be the consequences of error (or of the correction of error), and certainly publishers who suddenly find their readership figures reduced when their circulations have not changed tend to take this view. But the effect of what might be a very important component is largely neglected in what is still said about contractor effect with reference to what happened when in 1977 the British NRS was switched from one contractor to another and both the readership levels and the readerships per copy changed dramatically.

There were in fact two quite separate reasons for that. One was that, independently of the change in contractor, a new sampling frame was adopted which had a very considerable effect on certain types of publication. The second was the fact that in that particular year circulations changed

very dramatically indeed - and it really cannot be found surprising that if circulations change, as some of them did, by ten or fifteen per cent, readerships per copy do not stay the same. When these facts are looked at a lot of the so-called contractor effect which is still talked about disappears, but the point I am making is that this illustrates the extent to which we do not understand the components of short-term variation.

Does it matter? It matters in the light of the continuing demand for more up-to-date figures, because if you do not understand the limitations of up-to-date figures you are liable to take a short-term blip - for all that it reflects a short-term reality - as a prognosticator of long-term change, and in that case you are better off without knowing about it. This can be true even of medium-term change.

To know what happens if a particular newspaper is out of circulation for a couple of weeks, and what its readers are reading instead, is totally irrelevant when it has no effect on the long-term situation in respect of which advertising space is bought. It is said that a panel can describe what has happened: may be it can, but who cares? It is not helpful.

In demanding short-term data the media personnel of advertising agencies declare that they are perfectly capable of not misinterpreting such data. But in my experience, however capable they might technically be of not misinterpreting the data, misinterpret them they will, because they produce such an impressive talking-point in discussions with the client and can serve to demonstrate how up-to-the-minute the agency is.

There is a proverb in English - and I imagine in most other languages as well - that children should not be allowed to play with sharp tools on which they might cut themselves. The advertising agency desire to show its clients how clever it is by taking instant

decisions, even if they are wrong, is a very powerful motivator for it to demand the sharp tools on which to cut itself and its clients. That explains why it is that advertising agencies in particular - and indeed clients, from some of whom we have heard a word or two at this Symposium - tend to be attracted by the seductions of panels and the promise of rapid data from telephone interviewing. And marketing managements in advertising companies tend to be affected in the same way, and for very similar reasons - the sociology and the psychology of the internal structure of those companies.

On the other hand, as I pointed out in the introduction to the proceedings of the Montreal Symposium, we have to bear in mind what the data are for. At Montreal we had a rather larger proportion of advertising agencies present, the organisers having gone to some pains to get them there, but I do not think they made much of a contribution, what there was being principally a criticism of the research people for being concerned with the methodology of research, and general statements along the lines of 'Do not worry about all those details - just see that we get the right answers'. And here I would disagree with Gerhard Unholzer's view that we need more of them present. This is not to say that they are not important - but I will come back to that in a moment.

In Britain we have now the possibility of massive changes in the newspaper scene, for a variety of reasons: there are likely to be new newspapers, and changed newspapers, and new magazines, all of which will make considerable differences to the total scene. In my view, however, it is important that the need for rapid information about these as they emerge - which I do not dispute - should not be allowed to affect the long-term thinking on the production of readership data appropriate to the sort of prediction which efficient media-planning requires.

In general, of course (and here I come back to the point I touched on a moment ago) advertisers and their agencies are the people for whose ostensible benefit readership figures are produced. I say ostensible because in so far as he who pays the piper calls the tune, the benefit is most obviously felt by the publishers who in most cases fund most of the media research - as is certainly the case in the UK. But they can only be useful to the publisher if the advertiser and his agency find them useful. I suggest, therefore, that what we have to do - or, rather, what you have to do, since I am in the happy position of being outside the battle - is not to give them what they think they want, but to make them want what they ought to have.