

1.7 What happened when Australia's no.1 magazine changed from a weekly to a monthly?

In Australia there are two competitive readership research services — McNair Anderson and Morgan. One of the major differences between them is that while McNair Anderson use an average issue definition for all publications, Morgan uses specific issue for monthlies and average issue for weeklies.

A major test of the two approaches occurred when Australia's largest circulation magazine *The Australian Women's Weekly* changed from a weekly to a monthly. Its first issue as a monthly came out on January 1st, 1983 and it has since come out on the 1st day of each month.

Consider the following results from the two survey organizations and the circulation change, shown in **Table 1**.

The figures show that while the net paid circulation increased by 42%, readership among eg women increased by 24% according to McNair Anderson and by only 2% according to Morgan. The fact that Morgan is showing only a 2% increase in readership must be explained very largely in terms of his different

measurement method for weeklies and monthlies.

Either Morgan's readership levels for the *Weekly* were too high in 1982 or too low in 1983. However, his readership levels for the *Weekly* cannot have been too high in 1982 — if anything, they were almost certainly too low because his scores (as for other weekly publications) were lower than those from McNair Anderson even though both organizations use an average issue definition for weeklies. The reasons for the gap have been well documented elsewhere, one of the main reasons being that Morgan does not take sufficient account of out-of-home readership. This arises because he does not have systematic call-backs on not-at-homes on days other than the day of original interview. McNair Anderson have up to two call-backs on not-at-homes, because people who are frequently not at home are known to have higher readership levels of most publications (including the *Weekly*) than the stay-at-homes (on which see the separate paper on this subject by the same author, in Session 6)

TABLE 1
Australian Women's Weekly

| | <i>All People</i> | <i>Women</i> |
|--------------------------------|-------------------|--------------|
| Readership | 13+ | 13+ |
| | % | % |
| McNair Anderson | | |
| February-August 1982 | 35.1 | 47.4 |
| February-March 1983 | 44.9 | 59.0 |
| Increase | 27.9% | 24.5% |
| | <i>All People</i> | <i>Women</i> |
| | 14+ | 14+ |
| | % | % |
| Morgan | | |
| April-September 1982 | 28.5 | 40.9 |
| January-March 1983 | 30.3 | 41.9 |
| Increase | 6.3% | 2.4% |
| Net Paid Circulation | | |
| 6 months to September 30, 1982 | 880,000 | |
| 3 months to March 31, 1983 | 1,250,000 | |
| Increase | | 42.0% |

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Therefore, Morgan's 1983 readership levels for the *Weekly* are far too low. One reason for this is his inadequate account of out-of-home readership. But in order to find out further reasons, we must examine more closely his method of measuring monthlies (which the *Weekly* now is).

For a monthly, Morgan usually shows respondents a reduced black-and-white reproduction of an 11-weeks-old cover. For the *Weekly* (now a monthly), he showed respondents an actual colour cover of the January 1983 issue and asked his standard specific issue question for monthlies: 'Have you, yourself, read or looked into the January issue of the *Australian Women's Weekly* — either at home or away from home?' Results are shown in **Table 2**.

As an experiment, McNair Anderson have also been asking a very similar question while showing a black-and-white reproduction of the January 1983 cover: 'Have you personally read or looked into the January issue of the *Australian Women's Weekly* — it doesn't matter where?' These results are also shown in **Table 2**.

Again the McNair Anderson figures in this table are somewhat higher than Morgan's, mainly because McNair Anderson take greater account of genuine out-of-home readership. The gap would have been greater if Morgan had used his standard reduced black-and-white cover. (In an April 1982 paper, Morgan had said that the use of colour covers inflates answers. By using a colour cover for the *Weekly*, he has disadvantaged all other monthly publications, for which he has continued to use black-and-white covers.)

Morgan would normally have used in his report the figures in the bottom row of **Table 2**, that is, the figures for 11 weeks after publication. Instead, for reasons of

sample size, he chose to average the three sets of figures. Again, this is inconsistent compared with all other monthlies, for which he has continued to use 11-weeks-after-publication figures.

These figures imply that there is very little, if any, additional reading of the *Weekly* between 3 and 11 weeks after publication. But is this really so? I think not for the following reasons.

In March 1983, again as an experiment, McNair Anderson asked all people in the readership survey sample whether or not they had read or looked into the January, February and March issues of the *Weekly*. Results were as shown in **Table 3**.

People's recall in March of their reading of the March issue would have been more reliable than their recall of their reading of the January issue. Even taking into account that the *Weekly's* circulation increased between the January and March issue, the above figures clearly show that there is a 'memory loss' factor when one is asked to remember back 11 weeks. This 'memory loss' would undoubtedly be greater for some monthlies than for others, and would be especially great for those monthlies whose covers are very similar from month to month.

Therefore, the apparent lack of build-up or even decline in the *Weekly's* specific issue readership figures between 3 and 11 weeks after publication is not real and is almost certainly due to the fading of people's memories during this period and beyond.

The main reasons why McNair Anderson's average issue readership figures for a magazine like the *Weekly* (see **Table 1**) provide a more reliable estimate of the magazine's true readership than Morgan's specific issue measurement, are therefore: people's fading memories

TABLE 2
Specific issue readership of the *Australian Women's Weekly* of January 1983

| | McNair Anderson | | Morgan | |
|--|-----------------|-------|------------|-------|
| | All People | Women | All People | Women |
| | 13+ | 13+ | 14+ | 14+ |
| | % | % | % | % |
| January 1983 fieldwork (3-4 weeks after publication) | N/A | N/A | 29.9 | 40.5 |
| February 1983 fieldwork (6-7 weeks after publication) | 34.6 | 45.5 | 31.0 | 42.2 |
| March 1983 fieldwork (10-11 weeks after publication) | 33.0 | 43.9 | 30.4 | 43.1 |

N/A: not asked

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for periods of time up to 11 weeks after publication lead to understatement of true readership in the Morgan method; many new people read a monthly *after* 11 weeks after publication. These are not measured in the Morgan approach; genuine out-of-home reading is more correctly measured in the McNair Anderson

approach.

These reasons also explain why Morgan's readership of the *Weekly* as a monthly has shown hardly any increase compared with his readership of the *Weekly* as a weekly, even though the *Weekly's* net paid circulation has risen by 42%.

TABLE 3
Specific issue readership of the Australian Women's Weekly (March 1983 fieldwork)

| | <i>All People</i> 13+ % | <i>Women</i> 18+ % |
|---|-------------------------------|--------------------------|
| January 1983 issue (10-11 weeks after publication) | 33.0 | 43.4 |
| February 1983 issue (5-6 weeks after publication) | 35.5 | 45.8 |
| March 1983 issue (1-2 weeks after publication) | 39.5 | 47.9 |