

## 2.4 The formulation of readership survey objectives

### INTRODUCTION

This paper does not attempt to solve the problem of readership survey objectives, merely to discuss a number of aspects of it.

Most Western countries have had readership surveys for many years. Usually these surveys have grown from roots planted by one or two individuals several decades ago (and if modifications are made they are rarely sufficient to disturb the basic national mould).

The designs of these early surveys were governed by: **(a)** the existing framework of selling ie the circulation of an average issue; **(b)** what people thought it seemed reasonable to ask about.

There is little evidence that sets of objectives were formally hammered out before the surveys were designed. (That is not to say that none of the designers had any idea of how the results might turn out).

It seems fair to suggest that early practitioners would have found the discussion of framing objectives redundant or superfluous. They would tend to say 'we want to know what people read so we ask them — what could be clearer than that?'

Some chose 'reading' as the operative word, others 'looking at' or 'leafing through' (in a time period), and yet others whether anything was seen in one or more issues. All are perfectly 'reasonable' approaches, but all beg a number of questions.

In practice, in any particular country, one approach tended to become dominant by custom and thus be the criterion against which any new method and its results were appraised. It is worth asking whether this is still the situation and, if so, whether we should seek to change it, and how.

#### Formal statement of objectives

Historically three separate levels of objectives have tended to be interlocked: **(a)** The objectives of doing a survey — what decisions is it aiding and what types of data do we want? **(b)** The model objectives — what aspects of behaviour are we trying to represent? **(c)** The design objectives — how do we ask people about those aspects of behaviour?

#### The objectives of doing a readership survey(s) — decision-aiding objectives

Why are we doing a readership survey — what decisions are we trying to assist:

Comparison of publications with each other, and/or comparison of publications with other media?

Quantitative comparison of titles, and/or qualitative comparison of titles?

Comparison on a basis of potential exposure to advertisements, and/or comparison on a basis of actual exposure to advertisements?

A 'true' comparison, or a rough acceptable yardstick for bargaining?

In practice the predominant or only components in most readership surveys have been:

Comparison of publications with each other; Quantitative comparison; Comparison on basis of potential exposure.

Data on other media are quite often provided but not usually at an audience *estimation* level parallel to that provided for the publications covered. While it might be seen as superfluous to attempt audience estimation for other media when they have their own independent services, there is no logical reason why it should not be attempted. The fact that it usually is *not* represents a deliberate limiting of the objectives.

The typical readership survey makes no attempt to assess the qualitative characteristics of, or differences between, different publications either in terms of reader perception or reader reaction.

True, comparison is made in terms of class, sex and age profiles but this does not compare the *publications*, merely their audience composition.

Usually a very loose definition of potential exposure is estimated — the number of 'readers'. Attempts to measure page traffic or ad exposure are rare in continuous readership surveys.

It is, of course, because of other constraints that we do not attempt to aid decisions between media, qualitative comparison, or actual exposure. However, these are usually seen as dictated by the survey design constraints and the need to cover many publications.

There is no reason why we cannot re-assess our decision-aiding objectives. It is left to the reader to assess current surveys against the fourth pair of alternatives.

#### The model objectives (what aspects of behaviour are we trying to represent?)

In carrying out most surveys the objective is to produce a

## 2.4 The formulation of readership survey objectives

desk-top model or simulation of some aspect of the behaviour or attitudes of the population (or a section thereof). In the case of readership surveys the behaviour we are concerned with is the picking up and scrutiny of verbal and pictorial material printed on named sets of sheets of paper issued to the public at regular intervals.

Any survey of behaviour involves selecting only a small part (ideally the most relevant) out of the total behaviour and experience associated with the topic studied. Hopefully, this provides enough to produce a simplified model just as the parts touched caused the blind men to identify the elephant as snake, rope, tree-trunk, etc.

In the case of readership some of the components of the behaviour are: **(a)** Picking up, receiving, or buying the publication **(b)** Opening the publication **(c)** Spending time with the publication **(d)** Reading words and/or looking at pictures in the publication **(e)** Reacting to the material read or looked at **(f)** Remembering any of the material and/or the reaction thereto.

We have the choice of which type or level of behaviour we wish to represent. We also have to represent it within a framework of time or sequence. At least three possibilities exist here:

Frequency of the above relationships

Numbers of people having any relationship with an average issue

Numbers of people/relationships with an issue eg Gross Reading Days, Ad. exposures per issue

Historically the concentration has been upon the frequency of issue relationship, and the numbers having relationship with an average issue, and that relationship has been virtually any exposure to the content of the publication.

### The design objectives

For each type of behaviour which we might wish to model, a set of questions has to be devised and put to a sample of the public.

Traditionally these have been direct interrogative expressions of the behaviour to be modelled. We wish to know how many people read so we ask them what they (have) read and how often they do it.

This is the stage at which the researcher, not necessarily consciously, operationally structures the model objectives. We know that small variations in technique or wording produce different estimates of the numbers 'reading'. While some informants will classify themselves as 'readers' whatever the technique, others will do so (or not) according to particular techniques or wordings.

These differences in response are not usefully seen as correct or incorrect classification of the informant, but as representing different definitions of behaviour as perceived by the informant. Nevertheless, if one

question classifies a person as a reader and another does not then they represent different behavioural models.

If we knew what was understood in relation to various forms of questioning we could relate this to our model objectives and select the question(s) with best fit. However, there is no reason to suppose that any given set of questions could mean the same things to all people. The most we can hope to achieve is a reduction in the variance of interpretation.

The above is written on the assumption that the same standard questions are put to all informants. This is the accepted approach in quantitative survey research, be it readership surveys or public opinion polls. On the other hand, at the qualitative level it would be acknowledged that the process of classifying an informant's relationship with (or overall attitude towards) a brand, might involve many questions (eg semantic differentials for multi-variate analysis) or considerable discussion (as in a depth interview).

The prevailing design in readership surveys is to offer a single definition or description and then ask whether the informant qualifies. It is worth considering whether offering informants a range of descriptions and allowing them to choose one(s) which best accord with their experience and verbal usage might better net the group which a particular behaviour model seeks.

It could be argued that full Through The Book offers informants the chance to mentally discuss whether they had had a contact with the magazine, but modified TTB hardly qualifies since the critical stage is the first long-term filter.

While the writer has suggested that we should perhaps consider other units of exposure, the 'issue' is the generally accepted core unit of attempted measurement. Design objectives thus operate at at least three levels: the way in which the behaviour is described — reading, looking at, leafing through, etc.; the way the unit is defined — in terms of a time-period or copies; and the nature of the prompt-aids employed (especially at the critical first filter question).

Together the three interact to define for informants what they are being asked about and to set the behavioural model being studied.

Can the design objectives and results be assessed? This raises the thorny question of validation. Ultimate validation is surely an impossibility with an act such as reading which has no objective definition independent of the technique used to assess it. The most that can be hoped for is corroboration of one technique by another to an extent which the market judgmentally regards as satisfactory.

### The three levels of objectives

Three levels of objective have been distinguished:

## 2.4 The formulation of readership survey objectives

- 1 Decision-aiding objectives
- 2 Behavioural modelling objectives
- 3 Survey design objectives

It can be argued that one of the fundamental weaknesses of survey and market research is the unwillingness to recognize that there are different levels of objective and, for each level, a different probability that the objectives will be satisfactorily achieved.

For example, in political polling the decision-aiding objectives are clear — ‘tell us who will win the election (perhaps ‘and by how much’) so that we know whether we need to promote ourselves more’. The behaviour we wish to model is in this case even more difficult as it is future behaviour, but even if we question about voting the day after the poll we may not get the right answer, because of the problem of achieving the survey design objectives.

It would seem that all the survey and market research that is done for a reason other than the pure search for data in its own right would benefit from analysis in these terms.

In the case of readership research it may be argued that most of the dissatisfaction exhibits an unwillingness to sort out how much of the dissatisfaction stems from the objectives at any one level being inappropriate, and how much from the objectives at the three levels being *incompatible*.

Those who want to know how many people see an ad. in magazine A as against magazine B can never properly be satisfied with a behavioural model of picking up a magazine to look through it, nor by whether a particular skeletonized issue was recognized, nor by someone saying they had seen any issue of the title in the last month.

It has to be admitted that no-one has been able to come up with survey designs which convincingly satisfy many of the decision-aiding objectives which people aim for, or use as if they had been achieved.

It behoves the researcher to make it more clear that the behavioural model and decision-aiding objectives may have to be modified in the light of the design possibilities. They are, in practice, but we do not admit to it.

As said, it is the incompatibility of the objectives at the three levels which, unrecognized, lies at the root of much of the criticism of readership survey results by their users. Likewise on a broader canvas, public distrust of the findings of survey research in the areas of political and social issues may at least partly stem from unease at the relationship of the questions asked to the believed realities of behaviour and thought-processes.

Has the setting-up of a readership survey ever been preceded by sequential consideration of these different levels? Probably not. In practice, it is much more likely

that the distinction between the levels is not made and decisions at all three levels are operationally made simultaneously. Alternatively, the process may be seen as one where the nature of the objectives at the first and second levels is automatically predicated by the last, the survey design.

In deciding to measure readership in an issue period (in last week, in last month) one is assuming that differential levels of exposure between ‘readers’ within that time period are of no significance and that a relatively loose level of potential exposure is the relevant aid to decision-making. If one calls this exposure in an issue period ‘readership of an average issue’ model bias (replication and parallel readership) means that a further jump has been made in the setting of the model objectives though manifestly not satisfied by the design.

Likewise, measuring exposure to an issue (or even a run of issues) sets a similar loose level of potential exposure as the objective even though it should theoretically be immune to ‘model bias’.

Not all readership research has limited itself to estimation of exposure to the ‘average issue’ and attempts have been made to add to the model and decision objectives by further refinements such as page traffic, ad. noting etc. But these are usually applied as qualifiers to the basic ‘issue’ measure rather than being the main thrust of the survey design. The qualifying data will thus suffer from whatever faults are built in to the ‘issue’ measure.

### WHO SHOULD DECIDE THE OBJECTIVES?

Traditionally the three powers have been regarded as the advertisers, advertising agencies, and publishers, sometimes co-operating, sometimes not, in the setting-up and endorsement of various approaches to readership measurement. It could be thus argued that even if the three levels of objective are not overtly hammered out in the ideal sequence they are the people that set the operational objectives at all levels.

What are their orientations?

The **advertisers** are the people who ultimately pay all the bills and might be expected to concern themselves with the yield in advertising exposure that their money nets for them. But in practice (perhaps because of the limited nature of the media audience data available) the decisions between publications tend to be left to the advertising agency, and the advertiser is relatively disinterested in the nature and quality of the data upon which these decisions are based. In any case, the dominant frame of reference for the advertiser is the product, its competitive standing, distribution, etc.

## 2.4 The formulation of readership survey objectives

Advertising may even be seen as a regrettable necessity, and one where the content of the advertising is far more intriguing than the consideration of the nature and audiences of the competing contenders at anything more than a rough qualitative level of decision-making (eg big/small audience, right profile etc.) Given the precision (or lack of it) of readership measurement this stance could be argued to be quite reasonable.

The net result is that the advertiser is not likely to be overly concerned with whether the readership survey used to justify choices is the best possible readership survey. Such choices are likely to pale into insignificance alongside all the product and marketing decisions that have to be made.

**Advertising agencies** are inevitably primarily concerned with creating 'good' advertising, which will please them and their clients and, in some cases, produce favourable reactions when discussed beforehand with consumers (though this check seems to be taken more seriously in the case of TV advertising than with press advertising).

This is not to say that they do not concern themselves with the merits of advertising in different contending media and publications, nor with the overall effectiveness of the advertising. Agency media departments exist to assess the nature of audiences to different media vehicles and the relative costs of reaching them via various combinations. Their orientation is that of a purchasing department for raw materials. To make their assessment of the cost and quality of contending publications they do not really require more than one generally accepted yardstick. Indeed, more than one yardstick would complicate their task. On the whole therefore they will tend to be satisfied with one face-valid source of data, so long as it is not drastically challenged by another plausible source, and does not stretch credulity too far. Within limits the data will be acceptable provided the questions upon which they are based seem 'reasonable'.

The resources available to agency media departments tend to result in a limited opportunity for participation in, or contribution to, the framing or conduct of readership surveys. At worst, other sections of the agency will expect them to handle the available data and purchase effectively, not concern themselves with the refinement of audience measures or other 'academic' considerations.

**Publishers** could be expected to be the group most concerned with the results of audience surveys. One might expect that their main concern would be to have the highest possible figures for publications in general

and their own in particular. However, relative to circulations there is quite a range between one country and another in what are regarded as acceptable numbers of 'readers' per copy sold. Here it is relevant to refer to the decision-aiding level of objectives.

If the split of expenditure between media groups (Press, TV, Posters, etc.) is not based upon audience data for each group there will be low concern with the absolute size of audience for one medium versus another. The concern will be with the merits of slots at different times, one title versus another, or different sites. While this may be the current situation it is hard to say how much this is the result of conscious decisions to limit the decision-aiding objectives to within-media comparison, a belief that inter-media comparison is impossible, or the historic chance that different media audience surveys were developed at different times and with such different behavioural models.

Certainly the concern among agencies and publishers to compare press audiences with those for other media groups would appear to be low. Provided the relationship between circulation and readership is reasonably similar for like publications the data appear acceptable to publishers (and everyone else).

The dominant criteria of audience data among the three parties thus tend to be acceptability and plausibility. The potential conflict between the sellers and buyers (publishers and the agency/advertiser sides) does not really materialize. Each of the two sides is effectively looking for an independent arbiter acceptable to both.

It is into this vacuum that the **survey practitioner** steps.

However, while the researcher may be independent in the media-selling and buying context he is not independent of the orientation his own special experience imposes.

Most market researchers with any fire in their belly have the feeling that given a fair crack of the whip they will end up understanding their clients' markets better than the clients do. This may be an admirable motivation *provided* that they also remember that their view of the market is a model structured on the basis of the questions they choose to ask. The perception of *what is being studied* is channelled by the way the researcher has studied it. This is a problem with all survey research. It is a particular problem with readership and media audience research in general because there are no neat 'physical' definitions of exposure, equivalent, say, to the ostensibly clear-cut act of 'buying a car yesterday'.

So fundamental is the problem that in practice the vocabulary used to discuss the behaviour becomes an abstraction based on survey research eg the 'TVR'. In one sense this is justified since the only sure objectification of the behaviour being measured lies in the wording and

## 2.4 The formulation of readership survey objectives

technique by which responses are generated.

Again one is making the point that 'readership' is what readership surveys measure. This is not because the magic formula has yet to be found, it is because there is no magic formula to be found.

However, so long as the products of the surveys are seen as currency acceptable to all parties there is no problem.

Publications were probably the first medium for which anybody tried to assess the audience. The decision objectives were thus only the comparison of one publication with another, and in the simplest possible terms.

Since the existing basis of selling was the claimed sales of copies of each issue this was what the early survey practitioners attempted to deal with. In earlier years in Britain various organizations concerned themselves with readership measurement or estimation, and publishers who did not like other surveys' results would commission their own and publish the results if favourable.

In recent years there has been little of this sort of challenge to the National Readership Survey by publishers. There has been some challenge from agencies which want the basic issue audience further qualified. At the same time initiatives have been taken by some research agencies suggesting changing the questions or the data collection methods. Also in the US we have seen another researcher's challenge to the accepted approach — Recent Reading as a challenge to Through The Book. But in all these cases there has been no challenge to the existing objectives at the decision level.

The basic decision objectives, model objectives, and survey design objectives of all countries' readership surveys known to the writer thus stem from an era which pre-dates commercial television and radio. They are limited to within-medium decisions, to potential exposure to publication content, and the basic unit of the issue. Buying and selling practices are almost inextricably linked to these objectives and it would probably take a revolution to change them.

### THE REALITIES

So far this paper has attempted to discuss objectives at a theoretical level. But what are the realities?

In practice:

**1.....** a lot of people are asked a few questions about a lot of publications

The results are called 'readership'. In most countries there is tacit agreement that only one source of data is acceptable.

**2** On the basis of what the market will bear publishers

give the data financial weights as a basis for arriving at actual selling prices.

**3** The data are analysed at various levels of complexity to arrive at the best combinations to reach pre-defined target groups. This analysis is carried out by both buyers and sellers.

At stages 2 and 3 there is little interest in what the data truly represent. They are 'negotiating numbers' used as if in a gold standard economy, the only problem being that there is no Fort Knox.

This is the context in which any discussion of objectives takes place.

Where the attempt to lay down formal objectives has later been made it is thus usually in the context of ongoing practice. If specific and detailed they will tend to be a formalization of the extant operational practices.

At the other extreme they may be as broad as the British JICNARS objective '...to provide such information, acceptable to both publishers of print media and buyers of space, as will be most relevant to the assessment and efficient use of the medium'. This is the decision-aiding objective.

This definition and probably most other formally stated objectives, make no explicit reference to:

**1** the level or nature of publication contact deemed relevant to the business decisions to be assisted;  
**2** how the data should be or will be used in the buying and selling situation.

Whether or not there is a *formal* statement of the business, model, or design objectives the true objectives can only be established by consideration and interpretation of the survey design, to formulate the *operational* objectives.

### What do we want readership surveys to be?

Circulation data, if available, establish that a publication is marketed and taken up by the population. It is by no means proven that circulation numbers, judgementally weighted as to the audience to which a title is likely to appeal, would be a less efficient basis for the allocation of media expenditure than current readership surveys.

We have to acknowledge, however, that decades of hallowed practice place us in the situation where criteria more independent, objective and related to the audience than are circulation data are demanded by both buyers and sellers of space.

In practice therefore readership survey data for a publication **(a)** prove that it exists **(b)** describe its audience **(c)** put a measure on that audience — in that order of importance.

The first two of these tend to be taken for granted, and attention directed to the third.

The attention is ostensibly simply about whether the survey data are accurate. But underlying the demand for accuracy are at least two different components: **(a)** do

## 2.4 The formulation of readership survey objectives

the data represent an acceptably reliable trading currency? **(b)** are the data true?

While the data are accepted as a trading currency the concern with truth is low — they are assumed to be true.

### The balance of data needs

In most countries people have become accustomed to readership surveys which **(a)** cover a large number of titles (including many small ones); **(b)** are thus based on large samples; **(c)** enable readership to be broken down by the many different demographic characteristics which are recorded in the interview.

Thus for example in the British survey less than half the interview time is devoted to what people read.

Automatically, the range of readership data to be gathered in respect of each title becomes limited. That is to say the nature and range of reading data objectives tends to be limited to a couple of estimates — frequency and average issue readership. The situation would appear to be similar in most other countries. A hard-pressed media practitioner might well argue that this is all that is needed. The customary surveys provide a handy map of the *total* population's demographic and market characteristics upon which is super-imposed an interactive picture of the relationship between many publications and that total population, and in which the *exact* quality of that inter-action is of minor interest.

The survey practitioner of a scientific bent will find this unsatisfactory. He will be concerned with the truth of the identified relationship with the publication. He will see the media man as naive in his acceptance of the data and point out their many weaknesses. Unfortunately his record in providing alternatives which can be seen as true rather than different is not good. It can be argued that the angle of his criticism is based on the assumption that there is, in the spectrum of reading activities, a clear-cut behaviour or range of behaviours that can be measured unequivocally, and thus that he is equally naive.

### The consideration and re-appraisal of objectives

We have to be clear whether we are considering the full range of possible objectives or those which are feasible within the constraints and frame of reference to which we have become accustomed, ie single source/many titles/little data per title/standardized data all titles/heavy load of demographics/average issue readership, as compared with any given combination of the opposites of these requirements.

### Depth or breadth — number of titles

A survey can cover a few titles gathering data at many levels (like the classic Politz studies) or, at the other extreme cover many titles, simply classifying each

informant as 'in' or 'out' in respect of each title.

We have become accustomed to surveys which are broad and shallow (ie many titles and few data per title). It is not really clear how much this is due to formally asserted needs, to the desire for economy, or has just grown up that way.

Two consequences have been: **(a)** that whatever the type of definition of readership in a particular case, it has been standard for all titles; **(b)** that cross-analysis of titles has become standard practice. This was not originally common-place — titles were simply rank-ordered on a cost basis.

Notwithstanding what we are used to, it is worth asking whether the interests of advertisers and publishers alike are best served by these broad and shallow surveys.

Most surveys known to the writer which cover short lists of titles are ones concerned with highly specialist titles and audiences, eg the medical press.

Between national newspapers at one end of the spectrum and professional titles at the other, there are many titles of a semi-specialist nature in terms of their content or tone, eg home magazines, teenage magazines, etc.

Since all these 'oriented' titles are trying to obtain revenue from both specialist markets *and* from general markets they have largely been content to be measured alongside as many titles, general and 'oriented', as it was believed the informant could tolerate.

Have we been throwing the baby out with the bath water? Should we be considering our national efforts as surveys rather than a survey?

One could consider identifying people with contact with a wide mixed range of titles in the cheapest and simplest way, and then in subsequent surveys (or even the same interview) asking more detailed questions, about reading and attitudes, of those identified by the rough and ready question.

If the detail was gathered via separate surveys schedule analysis would be via the rough and ready data, possibly weighted by the more subtly determined data.

It should be made clear that the further detail required would be about reading behaviour and attitudes, not surrogate marginally relevant data such as how copies were obtained.

Which of these routes was taken would depend upon the trade-off of data about publications against data about the informant, other media, product purchase data, etc.

The anxiety about whether our data are valid largely stems from our own introspective knowledge of the wide variety of behaviours which are comprised under the catch-all phrase 'reading' and also the difficulty in identifying these activities in a correct title-specific way.

Thus the approach outlined above might well have a

## 2.4 The formulation of readership survey objectives

substantial bearing on the level of attention needing to be devoted to validation. That is to say learning more about our informant's relationship with a title would enable us to classify him as representing a more, or less, relevant contact. Looking at it another way, relevant calibration may be both a more useful and attainable goal than a theoretically objective 'validation' of a single type or level of contact with a publication.

### Ideal Measures

The ideal measure or correlate of publication performance (or any other medium) would be the sales, per pound spent, achieved by advertising in a medium, and in medium A as against medium B.

Except for a narrow range of advertisers, it is the distance of this ideal from achievable reality which results in the systems not being questioned and in our settling for surrogate goals. This distance is spelled out to remind ourselves of our location.

### TYPES OF SURROGATE GOALS

#### Surrogate goals — exposure

As shown they represent a roughly hierarchical list in descending order of closeness to the relevant act — exposure to the advertisement.

#### ADVERTISEMENT EXPOSURE

If our data were to be used retrospectively as the basis for fixing a rate per messages communicated, the measurement of *specific* ad-communications might appear attractive. However, the publisher would point out that the same space and paper is used by an ad which communicates to few as by one which communicates to many because it has a larger target market and/or better creative content. In any case, space is bought and sold in advance.

But this example may serve to underline why ad exposure averages have never become a popular basis of media trading.

#### PAGE TRAFFIC

Properly defined as having seen anything on the page (as distinct from the deduced net of those who were interested by something on the page) this is a good measure of potential exposure. However, it does not lend itself to multi-title coverage at acceptable costs, and has usually been employed as a publisher-initiated qualifier of separately generated average issue estimates.

#### READING DAYS

Again, this has usually been used as a basis for qualifying average issue estimates (eg the average 'reader' of X

reads it over 2.4 days). However, measured directly, conceptually it could provide a sound base-measure for costed comparison of publications at the one-issue level. This could be linked with periodic page traffic studies and questions on numbers of days read and issue-frequency to provide a comprehensive bank of data covering all relevant *exposure* criteria.

#### AVERAGE ISSUE READERSHIP

This, estimated directly, and coupled with frequency claims is the universal method. Two approaches are used, Recent Reading — prevalent in Europe — and Through The Book (or crudely simplified variants of the latter) — prevalent in North America.

Recent Reading as normally measured is subject to 'Model Bias' giving rise to non-balancing distorting claims — inflation due to replicated reading, and deflation due to parallel reading, plus a likely extension of the critical memory periods (in last month, in last week, etc.). It can be used to cover long lists of titles.

Through The Book, Proved readership, or Recognition suffers from biases which vary according to which simplification of it is employed. Originally dependent on the recognition of editorial content in a sequence of issues, in some examples it is dependent upon recognition of a specific issue, sometimes only a 'skeletonized' version of a single issue. Further bias can arise where issues are shown only to informants passing a time-period filter.

#### Surrogate goals — qualitative qualifiers

These have sometimes been employed as qualifiers applied to 'readers' identified via Recent Reading or Through The Book. Examples are:

#### ISSUE PROVENANCE (How copy obtained)

This approach is based on the belief that an advertisement seen in a publication which the reader particularly wanted (or bought themselves) will effect a more powerful communication than one seen in a publication not particularly sought out by the reader.

#### TIME SPENT READING THE ISSUE

The assumption here is that someone who looks at a publication briefly will have less contact with advertisements than someone reading over a long period of time. While some skimmers will look only at short items and ads, others will undoubtedly see fewer ads, so it is a somewhat crude form of classification.

#### LOYALTY/INVOLVEMENT

Classifying 'readers' according to their attachment to the publication makes similar assumptions to those relating to issue provenance.

## 2.4 The formulation of readership survey objectives

All these 'qualitative' qualifiers of 'readers' have a face-attraction until one considers how they might be used. All would involve the attachment of weights to different categories of reader. Should such weights be the same for all titles?

Is there likely to be agreement between buyer and seller on the values of the weights?

Demands for such data are most charitably regarded as representing unhappiness with the data generated by Recent Reading or Through The Book results.

### CONSIDERATION OF POSSIBLE OBJECTIVES

#### Minimal objectives of a readership survey

- a) That it should provide data for each of a list of publications
- b) That the survey should be free of sample bias
- c) That it should be free of title bias (individual titles or groups)

These are the minimal objectives and, on balance (a) and (b) appear to have been met in most countries.

The problem of title bias is largely dealt with at the design stage, and not evaluated after the event. That is to say, by treating all titles in the same way in the survey interview it is assumed that bias is avoided, or at least not deliberately introduced.

It is quite clear, however, that title bias does exist, due to a number of factors.

These include:

Between-title differences in title memorability

Between-person differences in memorability of a given title

Position of the title in the total sequence of titles (order effect/rotation effect)

Confusion of like-soundings titles

Confusion of like-subject titles

(Recent Reading) Differential replicated and parallel readership components according to level of secondary or irregular readership

(Through The Book) Differential representativeness of the skeletonized content shown

(Recent Reading) Different Time-periods for qualification as a 'reader' according to publication interval.

Notwithstanding our awareness (largely unqualified) of these biasing factors, most countries' surveys achieve credibility or at least acceptance.

#### Wider objectives of a readership survey

In addition to those stated above we might add:

d) That the relationship or contact with the publication as identified in the survey interview is of significance to the advertiser, and/or

e) That the data are true.

It is theoretically possible that the industry might be able to agree upon a type or level of exposure and that questions could be developed which would produce responses reasonably correspondent with that definition.

The question of the truth of data is too big for this paper and in any case is dealt with in other sessions.

### THE LIKELY FUTURE

We will go on attempting to directly measure the 'readership of an average issue'.

We will probably go on using the data on offer so long as they do not indicate deliberately introduced bias.

We will, at whatever level, attempt to discover ways of lessening title bias probably in a piecemeal way which may lessen bias for some titles and increase it for others.

We are unlikely to tackle the wider objectives.

### AN IDEAL FUTURE

STAGE 1. A more open discussion among the three interested parties (advertisers, agencies, publishers) of what the decision-aiding objectives should be. Their representatives would have to understand research.

STAGE 2. Having decided on a hierarchical set of decision-aiding objectives they could then bring in researchers as researchers to discuss the appropriate behaviour to attempt to model via any survey(s).

STAGE 3. Researchers would be commissioned to design techniques and questions geared to the behaviour to be modelled. This would involve interactive feedback until one arrived at a compromise between feasibility of modelling the behaviour we were interested in (can the design objectives satisfy the behaviour-modelling objectives?) and the decision-objectives.

We might end up with something very different from that to which we are accustomed. On the other hand, it might be very similar. If so, at least we would better understand what we were doing and why we could not have what we wanted, and the limitations of what we ended up doing.