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2.6 How a composite method has overcome telescoping, prestige and replication in readership research

SUMMARY

Experiments with the 'recent reading' question in Australia in 1970/72 (paying particular attention to telescoping and prestige) led to the use of lists of titles instead of mastheads for dailies and weeklies

With monthlies, however, replication exaggerated claimed readership when the 'recent reading' question was used with lists of titles. To eliminate replication, people were shown (and questioned on) reduced black-and-white front covers of 10-12 week old specific issues.

Resultant figures for 'readers per copy' for dailies, weeklies and monthlies were (and are) accepted by publishers, advertisers and advertising agents.

Thus, the Composite Method was born.

BEWARE OF PRESTIGE

In a paper on readership of print measurement I presented a year ago at an ESOMAR seminar in Stockholm, I said that when designing our questions for measuring readership, we gave particular attention to eliminating or minimising the ill-effects of elastic memories, replication and prestige.

For many years there has been much valuable discussion of both replication and elastic memories — often called telescoping. It seems, however, that prestige has been given less attention than warranted.

My Stockholm paper described the mechanics of our Australia-wide readership survey and listed our questions. This paper aims to promote discussion of the ill-effects of prestige in readership research. I ask expert psychologists to correct any errors in my reasoning.

BACKGROUND

In 1940, I spent five months at Dr. Gallup's American Institute of Public Opinion at Princeton, New Jersey, learning how to conduct a public opinion poll using quota sampling. After hearing Herb Hyman, Maurice Hansen and others at the joint AAPOR/WAPOR conference at Eaglesmere in 1948, I quickly changed to probability sampling in clusters of 10.

Since then, for 35 years my main interest has been the wording of questions in public opinion polls, in

market research, and since 1968, in readership surveys.

In 1941, soon after I returned to Australia, Ed Benson, then chief statistician of the American Gallup Poll, wrote to me with this warning: "Beware of prestige. Like marsh gas, prestige is difficult to detect. And also like marsh gas, if you don't detect prestige, it will kill you."

Ed Benson's awareness of prestige came from a long battle with what we called 'past preference inflation', meaning the habit of many people wrongly to claim to have voted for the winner. For example, before the 1948 American Presidential election, 14% of American voters wrongly claimed to have voted for President Roosevelt four years earlier, in 1944.

Ed's warning regarding prestige has always been foremost in my mind when drafting questions.

FREQUENCY

Our reading of the literature on readership research before 1968 persuaded us that we should not attempt to obtain acceptable figures for the frequency with which people read particular publications. We decided it would be easier, cheaper, more sensible and more accurate to use casualness factors (ie turnover) to calculate reach instead of frequency, (ie the number of people who read 1,2,3 or more copies of a particular publication in a given period).

It was sensible because casual readership is the reciprocal of regular readership. For example, if two similar magazines have similar circulations and similar average issue readership, but one is subscription with largely regular readers, while the other is newsstand, the second magazine will have a higher casualness factor, greater reach and, or course, lower frequency of reading.

Our readership and casualness factors are stored in our DEC 2020 computer. They are accessed by clients using the IMS program for schedules and optimisation.

RECENT READING

In the 1960's, when we first looked at the problems in readership research, our aim was to obtain acceptable figures for the readership of all publications by asking the recency questions, which are:

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- For dailies: Read or looked into a particular daily at least three times a week,
- For weekly newspapers and magazines: Read or looked into any issue in the last seven days,
- For monthly magazines: Read or looked into any issue in the last month.

During our experimental surveys we always considered how claimed readership of each of those three groups of publications — dailies, weeklies and monthlies — was likely to be affected by elastic memories, replication and prestige.

ELASTIC MEMORIES

In 1970, when we began drafting 'recent reading' questions, we already had had long experience in consumer surveys with the problem of elastic memories or telescoping. We also knew that we could lead people's memories backwards through time until at least the previous weekend. We decided, therefore, to interview on Saturday mornings (when most people are likely to be home) and to ask first about yesterday's dailies; then about dailies backwards for a week. That led people's memories to last weekend's weekly papers and weekly magazines; and finally to monthlies. We never considered using any other sequence.

PRESTIGE

Before discussing how prestige may affect 'claimed reading', we must recognise two related facts: (1) Inflated readership can come only from false claims by non-readers, and (2) The smaller the circulation, the bigger the pool of non-readers who may wrongly claim readership.

For example, just as 14% of Americans falsely claimed in 1948 to have voted for Roosevelt in 1944, let us assume that 10% of non-readers of all magazines wrongly claim readership. Then, if Magazine "A" has a large circulation, and is actually read by 60%, 10% of the other 40% would inflate its survey figure by 4% to 64%, an inflation of 7%. In comparison, if a similar Magazine "B" has a small circulation, and is actually read by only 20%, 10% of the other 80% would inflate its survey figures by 8% to 28%, an inflation of a mighty 40%.

We then asked ourselves whether the two facts listed above could be the reason why the recency questions seemed to exaggerate the readership of weeklies and monthlies, especially those with small circulations.

In market research, when asking about "brands known" or "brands bought", we always used lists, with

several variations of each list. This led us to consider whether the use of mastheads (instead of lists) in readership surveys actually encouraged exaggeration because of prestige. Experiments soon said "yes", at least for dailies and weeklies.

REPLICATION

The repeated reading of a particular issue of a publication beyond the period between issues is known as replication. To illustrate, consider this extreme case: If an issue of a monthly magazine is read for two months, a reader, when asked if he had read any issue in the last month, could truthfully say "yes" for almost three months. If all people did that (ie read every third issue of a monthly magazine for two months) the recent reading question would give that magazine 100% readership, although the true figure was only 33.3%.

Replication was not a problem with daily and weekly newspapers, because there is nothing staler than yesterday's news. It also seemed that weekly magazines were usually discarded as soon as another issue was bought.

Monthlies, however, were different, not only editorially but also because of the kind of paper used, the type used, the ink used, the binding and, of course, the price.

When we applied the 'recent reading' question to monthlies, we met the problem of replication.

SPECIFIC ISSUES

The problem of replicated readership of monthlies seemed insurmountable with the recent reading question. This forced us to consider a composite method, using recent reading (with lists) for dailies and weeklies, but 10-12 week old specific issues for monthlies, as used by Simmons in America.

We tried surveying several weekly magazines and several monthly magazines together:

- (1) Using the recency question with lists, all names being in the same type, as in market research,
- (2) Through-the-book using complete specific issues, and
- (3) Using reduced black-and-white front covers of specific issues, three to the sheet to reduce the ill-effect of prestige, as lists seemed to do.

With weeklies, all three methods gave much the same figures for readership; so we decided to continue using the recency question with lists for weekly magazines.

With monthlies, however, the recency question with a list gave much higher figures (probably because of

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replication) than either of the other methods. Reduced black-and-white front covers gave almost the same figures as complete issues; so for efficiency and economy we decided to use reduced black-and-white covers, three to the sheet. There seemed to be no need to use six to the sheet.

Media people, advertisers and advertising agents, who had suspected and rejected figures from recency-frequency, accepted our figures for readership of dailies, weeklies and monthlies, because the resultant figures for 'readers per copy' and 'reach' made sense.

Nothing learnt in the last 13 years suggests that any of our decisions were wrong.

INTROSPECTION AND RESEARCH

I was taught that decisions could be based on introspection (ie evaluating your own experiences) or on research (ie the study of other people's behaviour).

Like most businessmen, we used introspection to guide us when developing our Composite System of

measuring readership. We did only the minimum of research needed to assure us we were probably on the right track.

Users of our figures rarely question them. Nevertheless, occasionally we repeat some of our early experiments. Three are reported in my Stockholm paper. Publishing the results of these experiments is good publicity, and helps maintain our acceptance over a competing readership survey, which uses recency-frequency.

Researchers who adopt or adapt our Composite System (in place of, or in opposition to, recency-frequency) will, of course, have to do their own validating to obtain acceptance; but our experience suggests it will not be expensive.

There is a good case for co-operative surveys of TV viewing and radio listening. But I suggest that readership surveys should be conducted competitively by private enterprise, because there seems little prospect of universal acceptance of one system, be it recency-frequency, through-the-book with specific issues, or a composite system like ours.