

## 5.2

### THE 'SOURCING' METHOD: AN ALTERNATIVE METHOD OF MEASURING READERSHIP

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The measurement of sourcing events – ie, the various ways a publication gets into the hands of its readers – can form the basis of a method of estimating average issue readership. Because it distinguishes between subscription, over-the-counter purchasing and copy pass-on, it can be validated directly against circulation data. The method is outlined and the results of recent pilot testing in Australia are presented.

#### BACKGROUND

The single most important goal of readership measurement is to get the relativities between titles right. There always will be some under and overclaiming of readership, but if it can be ensured that such errors hold constant across titles, then there can be confidence in the validity of the data as the 'currency' in which print media advertising decisions are made.

Many people involved in media research in Australia have come to the view that both the Recency and Specific Issue approaches need to be improved upon. Most of us have doubts about the validity of at least some of the results yielded by both, and neither has a commendable track-record of reliability in this country. Hence in recent years there has been much interest in and support for the development of a better and more accountable method.

What is the major problem to be overcome? Some titles have very regular readers, while others may be read by an almost entirely different audience from one issue to the next. Higher turnover creates a larger pool of readers in the position to misclaim readership. So, if the

reading question tends to evoke biased responses, then the magnitude of error will vary across titles according to the level of reader-turnover (Walsh 1985).

When a person cannot recall exactly how long ago a reading event took place, the natural tendency is to telescope the recency of this with the result that readership is over-estimated. This is how Recency produces incredibly high readers-per-copy levels for high reader-turn-over magazines.

With the Specific Issue techniques (ie, TTB, and Cover/Index as used in Australia), when unsure about having read the issue shown in the course of the survey interview, respondents tend to make judgments based on the presumed *likelihood* of having done so. More often than not, this also results in overclaiming. So, the fundamental problem is common to both general approaches.

Of course, reading events and particular issues also will be forgotten. This is more likely to be a problem for publications that tend to attract chance reading: the magazines often found in waiting rooms, for example. For some titles it is possible that despite the overclaiming tendency described above, it can be sufficiently common for reading to be forgotten as to result in a net *under*-estimation of total readership.

By no means are these the only problems to be solved. Over the years, media researchers collectively have put a great deal of effort into fine-tuning their methods in order to improve the accuracy of results. The fundamental problem remains, however.

### **PRIMARY OBJECTIVE**

The simple idea and initial objective of our experimentation has been to find a way of counteracting the response bias described, knowing what we do about its dynamics. Is it possible to devise a remedy that has an equal but opposite influence?

Because the problem is due to differences between titles in the regularity with which they are read, the remedy must work more effectively when there is high reader-turnover than with the more regularly-read titles, in order to reflect the true relativities.

Another objective is of course to measure the absolute readership levels as accurately as possible, as this would seem a necessary precondition of reliability over time. However, validity as the basis of print media advertising decisions – ie, the accurate reflection of true relativities – is the more important goal.

### **JUDGMENTAL CRITERION**

How can it be judged whether any new development in readership research is producing more accurate results? An independent yardstick is needed, and it is difficult to see how anything could be more useful for this purpose than circulation data.

To be able to make use of this as the judgmental criterion, we need a way of estimating sales from readership. Clearly, the question asked to do this must correctly distinguish subscription and purchase from the other ways a publication may come into the hands of its readers – ie, how it is sourced.

If successful, then a comparison of the relativities between the sales estimated from the readership survey against those of the known circulations will reveal whether any new

method or fine tuning represents a move in the right direction.

Empirical evidence has given us confidence in using sourcing data for this purpose even though traditionally it has been found that sales estimates yielded by source-of-copy typically are way out of line with actual circulations. We first needed to determine whether this is due to problems with source-of-copy questions, or with the readership measures themselves.

An experiment was designed in which two interviews were conducted per household, so that source-of-copy claims could be compared where readership of the same title was given by both respondents. The hypothesis was that, if source-of-copy questions really are at fault, then the grossly inflated estimates previously obtained must be due to a tendency to claim purchase when, in fact, the issue was bought by another member of the respondent's household.

Interviews were carried out separately so that there could be no collaboration between the two respondents interviewed in the same household. The incidence of their both claiming to *personally* have purchased the same title was found to be quite negligible.

Moreover, their respective source-of-copy claims were entirely consistent in the majority of cases, and such inconsistencies as did arise were understandable and inconsequential. In general, respondents appeared more certain of how issues came into their hands than about the recency of their reading. On this basis it was decided to use sales estimates as the judgmental criterion.

### **CHOICE OF DIRECTION**

In seeking a better method of measuring readership, our major decision at the outset was whether the design path should in a general way

follow Recency, with a focus upon reading *events*, or whether instead we should adopt a Specific Issue approach.

Of course, both have certain strengths and advantages. But it seemed obvious that questionnaire flexibility would be essential in order to devise remedies to response bias. Also, we could see a possible way of counteracting bias in an approach resembling Recency, whereas with Specific Issue it is not as readily apparent that anything can be done to correct it.

If a sourcing question is to be asked to provide the judgmental criterion, then could the method itself be based upon questions about sourcing events rather than purely about readership? An added attraction of this alternative direction was the prospect of sourcing questions improving the recall of reading events that otherwise tend to be forgotten. Hence it was decided to develop an approach along the general lines of Recency, but based upon questions about how publications come into their readers' hands.

### MANAGEMENT OF RESPONSE BIAS

It was felt that in a Recency-like design, it would be essential to deal effectively with the problem of telescoping and replicated reading. Sourcing questions can automatically avoid the latter, but something else is needed to counteract telescoping.

The basic idea of the approach was to establish readership by a question about the recency with which any issue '*came into your hands*' that you happened to read or look through,' with a calendar being used rather than a recency scale.

It was anticipated that this would force more accurate responses, and that when the recency

of sourcing is not clearly recalled, a calendar would produce a central tendency effect of a strength varying in direct proportion to reader-turnover, so that differentials in the telescoping effect would tend to even out.

### THE PILOT SURVEY

Following an initial experiment which established that the basic principles of the research design do have the desired effects, we carried out the pilot survey described here. The main features of the method as it applies to magazines are outlined below.

#### Orientation questions

The definition of readership in terms that are straightforward enough for survey respondents, yet at the same time sufficiently comprehensive, has always been problematical. A solution to this is a series of orientation questions. Respondents were asked whether in the past four months .....

- any magazines came directly into your home either posted on subscription or by home-delivery order
- you personally went out and bought any magazines
- another household member brought home any magazines that you happened to read or look through
- friends or relatives passed on any magazines for you to read
- you picked up and read or looked through any magazines while in the homes of friends or relatives
- any magazines came into your hands at work

– you picked up and read or looked through any magazines while in hairdressing salons, doctors' waiting rooms, libraries, office reception areas, airline flights, or anywhere else.

As well as amounting to a comprehensive definition and improving the claiming of casual reading, these questions help to define the items on a show-card used for the source-coding of claims.

### **Filter question**

The magazines needing to be asked about were identified by means of a filter: which, if any, of the listed titles came into the respondent's hands in any way, anywhere, over the past four months? The stimulus was grouped title-cards.

### **Recency question**

Respondents were asked to think carefully about the most recent sourcing event, when an issue of (TITLE) came into your hands that you happened to read or look through and to date it using the calendar.

### **Sourcing mode and parallel sourcing questions**

The way in which that copy came into the respondent's hands was coded, and where the mode allows the possibility of more than one issue on the same sourcing day, this number was established.

### **Frequency question**

Finally, respondents were asked about their current frequency of sourcing that title – ie, how many out of the last four issues.

This set of questions was repeated for each title passing the filter, rotated within publication-cycle and in the sequence of weeklies, fortnightlies, monthlies and so on.

A hole in this method is where there is more than one sourcing day within the publication-cycle, since only the most recent is taken. However, our initial experiment was designed to measure this as well. It was found to contribute little to readership and to be sufficiently consistent across titles as to permit its omission in the interests of practicality.

### **Results**

The universe of this survey (N=929) is all people aged 14 years and older in Sydney. The door-to-door fieldwork spanned eight weeks from mid-July to mid-September 1988. It has not been possible to obtain highly accurate circulation data for either the area or the period covered by this pilot. Hence there is undoubtedly a certain amount of error in the estimates that have been provided by an independent party. Nevertheless, these remain usable as approximations of the relativities between titles, against which the survey estimates can be compared.

First, has the research design moderated the telescoping effect? In Australia, the extreme examples of Recency error have been in the monthly shelter and motoring titles, credited with over ten readers per copy. Since the Salzburg Symposium, Recency has been completely abandoned in this country, largely because of this credibility problem. Amongst the weeklies, the general interest titles were the most problematical, with seven readers-per-copy (Table 1).

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**Table 1****Readers-per-copy**

	Recency	Sourcing	Specific Issue*
Weekly women's	4	3	3
Monthly women's	5	4	3
Weekly general interest	7	4	3
Monthly home and garden	11	6	5
Monthly motoring	13	7	6

\* cover/index recognition

It can be seen from these results that, compared with Recency, Sourcing produces more reasonable readers-per-copy figures by reducing the bias favouring magazines with high reader-turnover. It yields readership estimates that generally are higher than those of the Specific Issue method used here, the major reason probably being the more complete reporting of casual pass-on.

The most comparable set of Specific Issue figures available come from the National Readership Survey for the year ending March 1988. This being a different survey period, and the question about the accuracy of the circulation estimates, are to be kept in mind

**Table 2****Indices**

	Circulation Est.		Readership Specific	
	Actual	Sourcing	Sourcing	Issue
All claims summed				
Weeklies/ fortnightlies	100	100	100	100
Monthlies/ bimonthlies	159	155	202	218

when considering the following comparisons (Table 2).

Overall, the Sourcing sales estimates for monthlies are slightly lower than the corresponding index of estimated actuals. Given the limited accuracy of the latter, we cannot conclude that there is a significant difference between the two. But assuming that the Sourcing estimates are in fact a little low for these titles, then the readership estimates with which they are associated also would be a little lower than they should be relative to weeklies and fortnightlies. Hence, the true readership relativity would fall somewhere between 202 (Sourcing) and 218 (Specific Issue), evidently at an index of around 207 (Table 3).

More significant differences emerge when figures are compared for titles grouped by type, wherein there is the most direct competition for advertising revenue.

The Sourcing estimates of the sales of the four monthly women's titles with the smallest circulations, are about right relative to the bigger women's titles. The readership relativity (23)

**Table 3****Indices**

	Circulation Est.		Readership Specific	
	Actual	Sourcing	Sourcing	Issue
<b>Women's</b>				
2 major weeklies	100	100	100	100
2 biggest monthlies	93	98	109	106
4 medium monthlies	63	51	74	76
4 small monthlies	20	18	23	34
<b>Monthlies</b>				
10 women's	100	100	100	100
7 home/gourmet	62	120	90	88
5 motoring	100	100	100	100
2 men's	53	25	35	26
8 other male interest	46	30	68	68

should be about 26. Hence, the Sourcing readership relativity (23) appears to be more accurate in this instance, with the Specific Issue figure being significantly higher at 34. This difference equates with readers-per-copy figures of four and five respectively.

The other significant difference between these two sets of readership relativities is for the men's titles (ie, *Penthouse* and *Playboy*) compared with other magazines of predominantly male interest. Sales are significantly underestimated in relative terms for the men's titles (at an index of 25 compared with an actual 53), and so, even allowing for the possibility that some survey respondents might be reluctant to admit to buying these magazines, the readership relativity should still be at least 35 as measured by Sourcing, and probably higher.

However, the Specific Issue relativity is only 26, suggesting that respondents also may be reluctant to admit to even reading these titles when confronted with their revealing covers.

The other readership indices for the Sourcing and Specific Issue methods are very similar, implying that their relativities are about equally accurate or, for certain groups of titles (eg, the shelter magazines), perhaps equally inaccurate.

On the basis of this limited pilot it is concluded that Sourcing is capable of producing readership estimates that are equally if not more valid than those of a Specific Issue method. Despite its general resemblance to Recency, the Sourcing method appears to be effective in counteracting the effect of telescoping so as to greatly reduce the extent to which estimates are biased in favour of titles with higher reader-turnover.

### Newspapers

Although this paper is concerned primarily with magazine readership, it is of interest also

**Table 4**

#### Indices

	Circulation Est.		Readership Current	
	Actual	Sourcing	Sourcing	NRS
<b>National dailies:</b>				
<b>Broadsheet</b>				
Mon-Fri	7	9	10	7
Sat	14	16	14	11
<b>Financial tabloid</b>				
	8	5*	13	9
<b>Metropolitan dailies:</b>				
<b>Broadsheet</b>				
Mon-Fri	52	53	60	58
Sat	83	70	78	80
<b>Morning tabloid</b>				
Mon-Fri	49	49	57	44
Sat	58	53	52	46
<b>Afternoon tabloid</b>				
	87	68	72	55
<b>Sunday tabloids:</b>				
<b>From broadsheet stable</b>				
	91	91	95	101
<b>From tabloid stable</b>				
	100	100	100	100

\* The circulation estimate for the financial tabloid does not account for sales to organisations rather than to individuals. However, the readership of office copies is included.

to consider the results yielded by Sourcing for newspapers. One major difference between this and other methods is the use of orientation questions as a preamble to determining newspaper readership over the past seven days. This appears to greatly improve the reporting of casual reading (Table 4).

It has long been felt that current methods under-estimate the readership of tabloids generally and of afternoon tabloids in particular. The morning broadsheet has been credited with 3.5 readers-per-copy compared with only two for the afternoon tabloid, whereas pass-on seems no less likely with the latter.

It can be seen that the circulation estimate given by our method for the afternoon tabloid is still

a good deal below the actual in relative terms (68 versus 87), yet the associated readership estimate (72) is much higher than that of the current national readership survey, which represents an index of only 55. Our readers-per-copy figure is 30% higher (2.6).

The circulation estimate for the morning tabloid (49) corresponds exactly with the actual – and it is to be noted that, unlike the magazine figures, these estimates of the actuals are known to be accurate – and the associated readership figure is again about 30% higher in relative terms than that yielded by the NRS.

The reason for these differences might most clearly be evident in the results for the financial daily. Our readership estimate is 50% higher than the NRS, and 63% of that paper's readership is due to out-of-home pass-on (ie, of office copies predominantly). The next highest such result was 33% for the national morning broadsheet (Monday to Friday) which also has a business profile.

Such a high level of casual pass-on would be likely to increase the non-reporting of reading, thus explaining why we obtained five readers-per-copy as compared with 3.3 from the NRS.

Finally, it is to be observed that the circulation relativities between the Sunday tabloids are accurately reflected. One of these comes from a tabloid stable, while the other is the Sunday

issue of the metropolitan morning broadsheet. The NRS credits the latter with a slightly higher readership even though its circulation is 9% lower. In contrast, the Sourcing results show that although the latter does have a slightly greater number of readers-per-copy, this is not sufficient to outweigh its shortfall in circulation.

### CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Sourcing has some advantages over the Specific Issue methods: it enables an extensive list of titles to be covered in a single interview; it measures a single variable (recency of sourcing) rather than being biased by the varying degrees to which covers and contents of different magazines can be identified accurately due to their sameness or uniqueness; it uses manageable stimuli; and it encourages more complete reporting of casual readership.

Its superiority to Recency is evident from its more reasonable readers-per-copy levels and the validity of its sales estimates relative to known circulations. It is felt that Sourcing shows more than sufficient promise to warrant further piloting on a larger national scale, and in other countries.

### References

Walsh, P (1985) Magazine Sourcing. Salzburg Proceedings.