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QUALITY OF READER INVOLVEMENT: REPORT ON RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

This paper describes a study currently in progress at Time Inc – a study that tries to come to a sharper understanding of reader involvement in magazines.

What do we mean by involvement? Do we mean attentiveness? Is involvement indicated by a close inspection of every issue that is published? Or could a reader be said to be involved if he or she read most issues very closely, but skips the occasional issue altogether either because of idiosyncratic circumstances or because of lack of interest in that particular issue? Is uniformity of issue-reading an indicator of involvement or of habit?

Perhaps involvement is a function of units of time. If so, involvement might best be captured by measuring the amount of time spent with an issue. This seems plausible until one considers the exogenous factors that might affect the amount of time spent with an issue – factors such as reading ability and speed, degree of eye strain, situation in which reading takes place, total amount of available leisure time, and so forth.

Or perhaps involvement is better indicated by affective indicators of the emotional rapport with the publication. If so, one might want to know how much the reader looks forward to the next issue of the magazine. Or one might want to know whether they begin reading the issue as soon as it arrives – as an indirect indicator of enthusiasm. Alternatively, one might consider global measures of satisfaction to be the best indicators of high levels of emotional involvement – a type of involvement that transcends the vicissitudes and variations of weekly time budgets.

To specify a level of reader involvement, ought one to consider involvement on an issue-by-issue basis? Or is involvement something that binds a reader to a magazine regardless of issue-to-issue variations? If so, how can it be distinguished from loyalty or blind habit? Or is even the single, specific issue too gross a unit for measures of involvement? Need one try to measure involvement on a story-by-story basis? Put another way, is the reader who is wildly enthusiastic about a single story – say, a cover story – more involved with that magazine than the reader who reads most of the issue but has no strong affective response to any article? If so, one might perversely find the most casual and least loyal readers – say the news-stand buyer who picks up a copy because of interest in a particular cover story – to be the most involved. Certainly titles that rely upon single copy sales rather than subscriptions would prefer this latter vision of involvement since the purposefulness of a single-copy purchase would, *de facto*, signal reader involvement. If involvement is best indicated by level of enthusiasm for specific stories, then aggregate, global measures of any sort are not likely to be useful at telling us how involved our readers are.

Moreover, this conception of involvement raises questions about whether one might not measure reader involvement most effectively by posing cognitive recall questions. It could be said that readers with more vivid memories of what they read in a magazine were more involved with that magazine. After all, rich recall of the reading experience would suggest that the communication process was fully consummated, that the ideas and information issued from the pens of writers and editors actually managed to enter the consciousness of the reader and lodge in his or her memory. If this sounds suspiciously like the 'magic bullet' paradigm that dominated much academic communications research through the first half

of this century, it is because it is. For this reason, one has good reason to doubt that reader involvement can be tapped by measures of cognitive recall. Memory is frail, and people often have great difficulty telling you where they got particular ideas or pieces of information. If we were to pin our hopes for a measure of reader involvement upon cognitive recall, the experience of volumes of academic communications research suggests that we might be sorely disappointed. At most, we might hope to find a usable indication of involvement when readers can make an unprompted recall of *any* specifics from an issue.

As should be clear from my musings on this subject, involvement is itself a rather amorphous and problematic construct. One might legitimately ask why I bother with it at all. After all, most advertisers are still more likely to require evidence of reach, frequency, CPM efficiency, demographic quality and environmental compatibility than evidence about any nebulous measure of involvement. Accordingly, most readership research concerns itself with other problems. Nevertheless, previous Symposia in New Orleans, Montreal and Salzburg have included at least theoretical discussion of a hypothetical 'affinity index' that, to some degree, purports to measure involvement. At Salzburg, Ursula Wangard and Rolf Speetzen reported research that built an 'affinity index' from attitude statements concerned with degree of loyalty, enthusiasm, and respect for a publication and tried to use this index to predict levels of ad noting in different magazines. However the combined index proved to be a poor predictor of level of attention paid to ads, and individual components of the index had to be discarded because they did not apply to magazines with widely divergent editorial contents. In the end, Wangard and Speetzen could only save two individual affinity statements from oblivion – "I usually read all the articles in this periodical" (a measure of thoroughness of reading), and "If necessary, I

would go to great trouble to obtain every issue of this magazine" (a measure of enthusiasm, habit, or perhaps mindless loyalty). These measures combined with measures of identification, exposure, advertising receptiveness and product interest or use to form their multi-attribute 'yardsticks of exposure quality' – an index that claimed to discriminate among different levels of advertising exposure quality. To my knowledge relatively little new work on affinity or involvement has come to light since the Salzburg Symposium.

My interest in the subject stems from somewhat different sources. Most of my research at Time Inc tries to understand and improve the fit between our magazines and their marketplaces. As such, it concerns itself with editorial issues and aspires to the prescriptive, rather than descriptively focusing on advertising issues. The populations studied are usually subscribers and news-stand buyers, rather than reader audiences. This research focus is both good and bad. It is bad in that it separates my research from the traditions of most of you at this Symposium. It is good in that it affords some unique opportunities to wrestle with the issue of involvement from a somewhat different perspective.

Research currently in progress at Time Inc is a case in point. A number of our subscriber surveys routinely ask such questions as:

– percent of average issue read

– time spent reading average issue

– number of last four issues read or looked at

– how much look forward to arrival of issue

– whether usually read issue on day it arrives

– whether would resist offer from competing magazine to subscribe at half the price paid for our magazine

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– renewal intention

– whether magazine is overpriced, priced about right or bargain.

When the research is on specific issues of magazines, we commonly take measures of:

– amount read of specific articles

– ratings of specific articles

– overall rating of issue

– satisfaction with issue

– 'grade' would give to issue

– amount read of cover story

– rating of cover story

– interest in cover story's topic

– whether got 'money's worth' from issue

– time spent with issue.

Though one would expect a high degree of correlation among all of these measures, in fact the issue-by-issue averages are not so perfectly correlated, as inspection of Table 1 will make clear.

As you can see, there is not a single week in which the index numbers lie consistently above or below 100, though Week 11 comes close to achieving this feat. In general, ratings of the overall issue and ratings of the cover story seem to be strongly associated. This suggests that cover stories are as important for subscriber satisfaction as they are for news-stand sales. A second observation is that levels of issue-

reading do not vary a lot, certainly not as much as does readership of cover stories.

Measures based on units of time appear to be problematic indicators. The hours that respondents report spending with each issue do not correspond very well to our weighted estimates of the amount of the issue read (estimates based on analysis of readership of individual article). Nor is there a very comforting correlation between self reported thoroughness of issue-reading and our article-based weighted estimates.

Evaluative measures are no more orderly. While one would expect a high correspondence between our three measures of affect (the article-based issue-rating indices, the cover-rating indices and the global evaluative measure of the 'grade' given to the issue), the actual correspondence is fairly weak.

Finally, none of these evaluative or involvement measures tracks closely with expressed renewal intention!

This result substantially echoes the issue-specific data presented in Salzburg by Lee Simpson from Maclean Hunter in Canada. Looking at just a few variables, he observed that issues which evidence high levels of interest might still have relatively low levels of pickup or might secure less of the reader's time – and vice versa. As we see in Table 2, when issue-specific data are collected on additional measures of enthusiasm, loyalty, satisfaction and readership, the correlations get even less satisfying.

At the microdata level, the correlations are sometimes even weaker and even the stronger ones are not strong enough to convince me that we are tapping one fundamental unitary construct called 'involvement'.

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Table 1

Aggregate-level issue-specific measures of involvement, satisfaction and loyalty for a weekly magazine (indexed)

Measures	Weeks													
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Issue-reading index	96	101	92	98	106	95	105	106	100	102	95	107	99	98
Cover story reading index	106	91	84	99	98	105	118	91	123	91	92	96	99	108
Issue rating index	98	105	96	102	95	101	100	101	105	102	96	102	101	97
Cover story rating index	84	110	93	104	79	109	109	98	122	100	91	93	106	102
Read 3/4 issue index	95	99	87	103	102	95	113	101	110	97	96	111	91	99
Grade index	105	116	103	83	91	99	105	84	122	115	102	81	97	97
Cover interest index	100	157	114	69	52	111	115	64	160	118	98	44	91	108
Hours spent with issue index	105	104	104	94	94	101	105	99	99	102	99	94	94	105
Money's worth index	102	108	100	94	91	101	102	95	120	101	95	99	96	97
Renewal intention index	-	117	104	95	74	107	91	114	101	101	89	95	105	105

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Table 2

Micro-level correlations among measures of involvement, satisfaction and loyalty for a weekly magazine

(Pearsons R coefficient; N = 2313)

	Avgread	Avgrate	Pcread	Timeread	Mnyworth	Grade	Pchhread	Numread	Resub
Avgread	1.0000	.2974	.5852	.3138	.4268	.2305	.1384	.6740	.2359
Avgrate	.2974	1.0000	.1633	.0867	.4014	.4290	.0307	.1239	.2495
Pcread	.5852	.1633	1.0000	.2457	.3579	.1936	.1078	.5139	.1779
Timeread	.3138	.0867	.2457	1.0000	.1828	.1637	.0198	.2173	.0994
Mnyworth	.4268	.4014	.3579	.1828	1.0000	.4175	.0752	.3411	.2716
Grade	.2305	.4290	.1936	.1637	.4175	1.0000	.0266	.2076	.1719
Pchhread	.1384	.0307	.1078	.0198	.0752	.0266	1.0000	.1519	.0880
Numread	.6740	.1239	.5139	.2173	.3411	.2076	.1519	1.0000	.1422
Resub	.2359	.2495	.1779	.0994	.2716	.1719	.0880	.1422	1.0000

Key

Avgread:	The average reading score given by the respondent to articles and departments in the issue.
Avgrate:	The average rating score given by the respondent to articles and departments which were at least glanced at by the respondent.
Pcread:	The amount of the issue the respondent thinks he/she read. Values – 0 = None; 25 = 1/4; 50 = 1/2; 75 = 3/4; 100 = All.
Timeread:	The amount of time, in house, the respondent spent with the issue.
Mnyworth:	The respondents' opinion about whether he/she got his/her money's worth from the issue Values – 1 = Not at all, 5 = Completely.
Grade:	The grade given to the issue for its quality. Values – 0 = F; 13 = A+.
Pchhread:	The percent of household members who read.
Numread:	The number of articles and departments the respondent gave a reading score.
Resub:	Whether the respondent reported he/she will definitely renew – 0 = No; 1 = Yes.

Table 2 shows a modest but not exceptionally high level of correlation among various measures of readership, average article-level readership scores (Avgread), number of articles at least glanced at and rated (Numread), and respondent self-reports of percent of issue read (Pcread). Issue ratings (Avgrate) are somewhat correlated with perceptions of value (Mnyworth) and global issue ratings (Grade), but again the correlations fall below the .5 level. Time spent with the issues (Timeread) seems to be weakly correlated to all other variables, as does the readership of the issue by other household members (Pchhread). And, alas, renewal intentions (Resub) are only weakly related to the other measured variables. Indeed, attempts to model renewal intention with these data using regression analysis and other extensions of the General Linear Model have not been satisfying.

Why do we see such weak correlations between renewal intention and measures of involvement and satisfaction at the microdata level and such erratic patterns at the aggregate level?

Admittedly other factors influence the renewal decision – among them price-sensitivity, habit, personal circumstances and probably a host of other variables (both measured and un-measured). But even taking that into account, an editor might reasonably return to the basic question of whether circulation is enhanced more by getting people to read most of each issue, some of most issues, or simply by giving everyone at least one story to love in each issue. In other words, should he or she be aiming more for reading scores or for rating scores?

Whether or not we can empirically disentangle these various theoretical forms of involvement-

attraction, affect and cognition remains to be seen. It might be that they are inextricably in-tertwined and that attempts to measure their independent influences upon subscriber beha-viour are doomed. While acknowledging the possibility that our efforts might fail, we never-theless have embarked upon a research programme that attempts to tackle the problem at the behavioural level. That is to say, in our current research the dependent variable is *actual* rather than *intended* renewal – a dichotomous rather than ordinal outcome.

To accomplish this, we employ a modified panel design. We select samples of new and renewed-before subscribers three months prior to expiry date, survey them regarding all forms of involvement and affinity with the magazine. To allow us to control for other factors, we also ask a host of questions regarding level of prior familiarity with the magazine, expectations prior to subscribing, familiarity with and atti-tude towards competing magazines, price-sensitivity and perceived value of maga-zine, whether the magazine is used for work or reimbursed by the employer, and so forth. By selecting on the basis of time prior to expiry date, we are not explicitly taking account of the subscription term, the nature of the previous subscription contract, or other such marketing-related variables; however we retain information on these factors from the file at the time of sample selection and use that informa-tion to introduce statistical controls during data analysis. Our sample size of 3,000 per magazine affords a luxurious enough case count to permit most of these types of statistical analysis.

Unfortunately, the attenuated nature of the workplan for a panel study of this type does not permit me to share results with you today.

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Indeed, as the following workplan calendar shows, I will have no results to share with anyone until next spring.

Calendar

June 1988	Name selection Questionnaire development
August 1988	Fieldwork begins among November 1988 expires
September 1988	Fieldwork closes
March 1989	Follow-up matching of survey respondents to masterfiles to determine actual renewal disposition
April/May 1989	Analysis of survey items and development of discriminant function model of best predictors or renewal
May 1989	Final report

For all of the patience required with panel designs of this type, there are also rewards. For one thing, since we ask renewal intention in the original survey, we get an opportunity to investigate the behaviour/intention discrepancy – a valuable avenue of inquiry for all social researchers. For another thing, since the measure of the dependent variable does not require that the subscriber actually responds to the survey (ie – they renew or don't renew, regardless of whether or not they return their mail questionnaire), we can investigate the effect of the survey itself upon renewal. This is accomplished by selecting a control group that is tracked but not surveyed. In schematic terms, it would look like Figure 1.

Figure 1
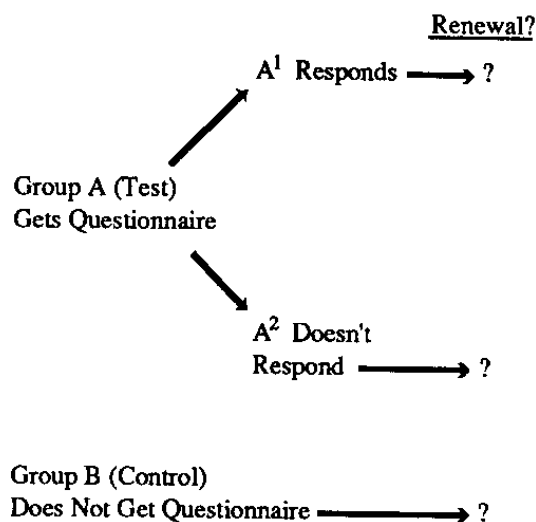
Of course our primary interest is in the relationship between the measures of involvement in Group A1 and their ultimate renewal. To that end, we have selected a mailout sample size that, we think, will still give us a healthy number of cases to analyse next spring after Group A1 has suffered from the twin attritions of survey non-response and magazine non-renewal. I mention these secondary analyses simply because they are attractive features that compensate somewhat for the special headaches caused by panel designs.

This approach to studying involvement has certain inherent problems. For one thing, it takes the behavioural outcome, a renewal decision, as the criterion indicator of 'real' involvement while, in fact, other factors clearly can influence renewal. While the design provides ways to control for those other factors, one might reasonably argue that renewal is not a good

theoretical indicator of involvement. Counter-intuitive though that claim might be, it still would be lent some support by the weak correlations between involvement measures and stated renewal intention that I have already presented.

This design could also be criticised for its abandonment of issue-to-issue variation. By asking about broader subscriber attitudes rather than about involvement in specific issue of the magazines, we leave some of the theoretical questions I have raised begging for answers. However there are good practical reasons for conducting item analysis on involvement measures outside of issue-specific studies. Since issue-specific studies are already heavily freighted with questions about the contents of that issue, it would impose unreasonable burdens upon respondents to put before them every question we have ever conceived as measuring involvement. However if we are able to use this panel study to identify the most promising indicators of involvement, we shall then have a more parsimonious set of questions to include in issue-specific studies. Indeed, by keeping track of individual-level data on respondents to issue-specific studies, we could also later match those data files to subscription records and assess how issue-specific respon-

ses related to actual renewal. But, of course, that line of research would extend even further on the time horizon.

In closing, let me note that I had proposed to deliver a somewhat different paper at this Symposium and mentioned the work reported here only as an afterthought in my cover letter to the Symposium programe committee. I was reluctant to build my presentation around the research I have been discussing, not because I thought it would hold too little interest, but rather because it is necessarily frustrating to raise issues without resolving them. Yet I knew at the outset that our research schedule would only permit me to sketch for you the general approach being taken by this research in progress. I hope that I have not caused any such frustration among delegates here. With any luck, I shall be able to share the substantive results of the research well before any fifth worldwide Symposium on readership research is convened.

References

Wangard, Ursula and Speetzen, Rolf (1985). Yardsticks for exposure quality. Salzburg Proceedings.