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MPX, READING DAYS AND PAGE TRAFFIC

This paper is a short note based on a re-analysis of the 1986 British MPX survey, and the aim is to examine the relationship between reading days and page traffic, for different types of magazine.

The points in mind are: do these data behave in an expected way, or do they behave in such a way as to call into question the validity of MPX? And does the page traffic component of MPX add anything worthwhile to what the reading days tell us?

THE BRITISH MPX SURVEY

The British MPX survey was conducted in February and March 1986. This was too recent to have been described at the previous Symposium in Salzburg, but some of you may have read about it in Ted Whitley's article in *Admap* (September 1986), or seen an account of it elsewhere. It is not my intention to describe the survey in detail, but it may be useful as a reminder to say that MPX is based on three questions:

- (1) The number of separate days on which an informant has read or looked at any issue of the magazine (during the publication interval).
- (2) The number of separate issues the informant has read or looked at on the last day.
- (3) The approximate proportion of pages the informant opened on that last day (of the last issue read, if two or more issues were read that day).

MPX scores are obtained by multiplying these three components together. They are calculated informant by informant, and summed.

MPX scores express the number of times the average reader of the magazine opens the average page.

Unlike the Indian experience reported earlier in this session, in Britain the MPX scores showed great variation, both between publication types and between publications of the same type. It so altered some of the cost-efficiency relationships that it was seen as altering the very currency of buying and selling advertising space, and it has become quite controversial.

The survey interviewed representative quota samples of 3,017 women and 605 men. Results were weighted to the adult population.

A RE-ANALYSIS OF READING DAYS AND PAGE TRAFFIC

While the MPX report obviously shows MPX scores, it does not publish data which analyse page openings *within* reading days: hence this re-analysis of the survey data. One objective in looking at such an analysis is to see how the two sets of information relate to each other: do they both make useful contributions to our understanding of the intensity of reading, or could we simplify things by just asking about, say, reading days? It would certainly speed up the interview and give informants a simpler task. Another objective is to examine the face plausibility of the page traffic data.

The analysis is confined to four magazines each of which is large enough to yield substantial samples of informants who have read the title within the latest issue period. They are *Reader's Digest*, the largest general monthly; *Woman's Own*, the largest women's weekly; and the two programme weeklies, *Radio Times* and *TV Times*.

Table 1

Reading days

	Reader's Digest		Woman's Own		TV Times		Radio Times	
	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low
Weighted base	2,715	3,102	2,040	2,922	5,725	3,780	5,737	3,679
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Page traffic: on last reading day:								
%								
10	20	13	6	8	41	26	43	27
20	10	7	3	3	11	8	9	7
30	10	9	6	5	3	7	3	4
40	5	6	2	4	1	3	1	5
50	15	23	14	15	8	19	8	20
60	2	2	2	2	1	2	1	2
70	4	5	5	1	4	5	4	4
80	9	3	6	4	4	2	5	3
90	2	1	2	4	2	4	3	6
100	24	33	53	54	24	23	23	18

Source: British MPX survey, 1986

To study their readers in terms of reading days (ie the number of separate days on which an informant has read or looked at any issue of the magazine during the publication interval), the magazines' readers have been divided into two groups of approximately equal size: readers with high reading days, and those with low reading days.

For the programme magazines, the high reading days group is defined as those claiming to read on five or more days in the last week. For *Woman's Own*, the highs are those who claim to read on two or more days in the last week. For *Reader's Digest*, the highs are those reading on three or more days in the last month.

Having divided each magazine's readers into those with high reading days and those with low reading days, we can look at page traffic distributions for each group, and for each title, and

ask ourselves whether the patterns match what we already know about the way the different types of publication are used. The figures are shown in Table 1.

THE PROGRAMME WEEKLIES

One thing that is immediately apparent is that the two programme weeklies have very similar figures indeed, and they can be treated together. This makes sense because their editorial character is very similar: a large proportion of pages are devoted to the detailed schedules of TV and radio programmes, arranged day by day, and there are also a number of feature article pages.

Both programme magazines show a distinct difference between readers with high reading days and those with low reading days. More than 50% of those with high reading days (five

or more days in the last week) looked at only a fifth or less of the pages of the magazine on the last day they read a copy. Among those with a low number of reading days, no more than a third read 20% or less of the pages. This makes perfect sense. The really heavy readers are more likely to have previously read the feature articles, and be concentrating only on looking up the programme details for the current day and thus reading very few of the pages that day. Readers with low reading days have fewer days across which to spread their reading of the feature articles, so on a day when they do read, they tend to read a higher proportion of the pages; about a fifth of these light readers read around 50% of the pages on the most recent day.

Reader's Digest

Here again there is a difference in page traffic between those with high and low reading days. The direction of the difference is consistent with the nature of the magazine, with its high number of pages and large number of articles, some of which contain a considerable amount of reading matter.

Those who spread their reading over a relatively high number of days tend to read a relatively modest proportion of the magazine on any one day. 20% read 10% or less on the last day, and 40% of these readers read 30% or less of the pages on the last day. Conversely only 24% of them opened all of the pages in the magazine. On the other hand, readers with a low number of reading days were 50% more inclined to open all the pages, more inclined to open half the pages, and less likely to open 30% or less of the pages.

Woman's Own

Woman's Own is unlike the other magazines in that it shows no significant difference in the

page traffic patterns between readers with high and low reading days.

I suspect that part of the key to this is that the number of reading days is small, even for those in the high group. Remember that 'high' reading days merely means two or more for *Woman's Own*, rather than five or more for the programme weeklies and three or more for *Reader's Digest*. Across all its women readers, *Woman's Own* averages only 1.8 reading days, compared with 3.5 for *Reader's Digest* and 4.9 for the programme weeklies (among adult readers). Therefore for *Woman's Own*, dividing readers on the basis of reading days is to some extent making a distinction with little difference.

Another part of the reason for finding no difference in daily page traffic patterns is probably to do with the nature of the editorial content – a lighter read, with a great deal of visual material, making for a quicker read than the solid text-filled articles in *Reader's Digest* and the detailed reference material in the programme weeklies. This idea is reinforced when one looks at the distribution of the page traffic figures for *Woman's Own*. Just over 50% of readers opened all the pages in the magazine on the last day they read a copy – roughly double the proportion for the other three magazines, and a sign of the fast readability of *Woman's Own*.

CONCLUSION

So we have seen, first, that the page traffic data show differences *between* publications. In fact the average percentage of pages opened are as follows:

Radio Times/TV Times 45%
Reader's Digest 55%
Woman's Own 79%

Differences as large as these can obviously be of real significance in media planning.

Secondly, *within* publications the page traffic data show differences between readers with high reading days and low reading days (for three of the four magazines examined).

My conclusion is that the page traffic question which helps make up the MPX data does two important things:

- it yields results which make good sense, and this reinforces confidence in the quality of the data.

- it does contribute valuable discrimination in addition to that provided by the reading days question, and therefore it is worth having – even though it would be attractive to simplify the reading intensity question to just a measure of reading days.

This analysis is of course conducted at the level of testing for credibility, for face plausibility. It

cannot act as a test of validity; different methods would have to be devised for that if such a thing were possible.

Finally, it is curious that the British MPX survey should give opposite results to those stated by Pam Baxter. In the discussion session it might be fruitful to debate the reason for this difference. Perhaps it is partly to do with the confusion involved in asking an overall page openings question in the context of a Through-the-Book interview, in which skeletonised issues are shown to informants. When, after seeing these skeletonised issues, informants are asked the page exposure question, might they be confused into thinking the question relates to the skeletonised issue they have just been shown?

Reference

Whitley, E (1986). MPX comes to Britain. *Admap*, September.