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2.16 The level of magazine reading

INTRODUCTION

In the last two years, the two best-known methods for measuring the total audiences of magazines in the United States have produced very different audience levels. The 'recent reading' method, applied in personal interviews, has produced levels considerably higher than the 'through-the-book' method, using skeletonised test issues.

Simmons Market Research Bureau (SMRB) uses both methods; through-the-book for non-monthlies and major monthlies, and recent reading for smaller monthlies. Mediamark Research Inc (MRI) uses recent reading for all titles.

The ARF Comparability Study, which compared the two SMRB methods directly by applying them to the same titles, found that the SMRB recent reading method obtained levels which were 27% higher for weekly magazines, 41% higher for tri-weeklies, and 86% higher for monthlies, than the SMRB through-the-book method.

Although there are important differences of detail between the SMRB and MRI recent reading procedures, on the other hand, their results are remarkably close.

Many users of syndicated magazine research data have noted that at least for magazines with the same publication frequency, recent reading and through-the-book do in general agree quite closely in terms of *relative* levels. However, the large differences in absolute levels have caused a good deal of general concern. Obviously, there are at least two possible points of view about them.

The first is that the recent reading levels are 'inflated' and should, if they are used at all, be adjusted downwards to be more comparable with the through-the-book levels.

The second is that the recent reading levels are, in fact, correct; with the implication that given today's field conditions or magazine environment or both, through-the-book is failing to capture a substantial proportion of actual reading.

The ARF Comparability Study was not designed to settle this problem. It explicitly regarded neither of the two methods as the 'yardstick of truth'.

This is a report on a validation study which was designed to settle the issue: is recent reading, or through-the-book, producing results which are nearer the truth?

VALIDATING AUDIENCE LEVELS

Unfortunately, validation in magazine research is not a completely straightforward matter. The reason is that an issue of a magazine can, in principle, be read anywhere at any time. The generally accepted definition of magazine total audience for a specific issue is "those who read or look into the issue at any time during its life". To be sure that a person is or is not a member of the audience, we would need to have accurate information about whether he did or did not read or look into the issue concerned, at *any* time during a period of at least several weeks or months.

The most promising approach to the current problem seemed to be to determine the true level of overall magazine reading, given that this is the major current difference between the recent reading and through-the-book methods. The validation procedure which seemed most promising was 'yesterday recall'. With a very short memory period, losses due to forgetting should be minimised. With the circumstances of reading being still clear in the mind, overstatement due to foreshortening of time should also be minimised. 'Yesterday recall' has been used successfully in other fields of media research, especially radio listening.

The syndicated services provide estimates of reading days as well as of average issue audience, implying a *daily* level of magazine reading. *Yesterday recall can be used to check levels of readers-per-day*. The approach was suggested in discussions by Erwin Ephron, Chairman of the ARF Magazine Research Development Council, though the implementation was entirely MRI's.

To understand how it will work, it is first necessary to understand how estimates of readers-per-day levels can be derived from MRI (or from SMRB), so that these can be compared with levels obtained from a yesterday recall study.

Readers-per-day

Establishing 'reading days' is an important and integral part of the MRI procedure. The respondent has been counted as a reader if he is sure that he read or looked into an issue of the magazine during the most recent issue period (7 days for a weekly, 30 days for a monthly, etc). After establishing the place or places of reading, he is then asked: "On how many different days did you read or look into any issues of it in the last (7, 30, etc) days?"

Readers-per-day for each magazine can be calculated as follows. First we compute total reading days:

Average issue audience	×	Average reading days	=	Total reading days

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TABLE 1

	Readers-per-day ('000,000)
Weeklies (16)	79.7
Bi-weeklies (7)	3.9
Tri-weeklies (2)	7.5
Monthlies (121)	59.1
Bi-monthlies (6)	0.5
Quarterlies (2)	0.1
Total (154)	150.7

For example, *Time* magazine had an estimated audience of 25,800,000 adults; the average number of reading days is 2.1; so the total number of reading days for the average issue of *Time* is 54,300,000.

Total reading days	÷	Days in issue period	=	Readers per day

Dividing 54,300,000 readers by seven, we get an estimate for *Time* of 7,800,000 readers-per-day. Like other audience statistics, this is an average: there may well be considerable variation from day to day, and possibly from week to week.

MRI reported audience and reading days estimates for 154 magazines in Autumn 1979, either individually or as members of groups (not counting daily newspapers or newspaper supplements, including the *New York Times Magazine*). Proceeding as just illustrated for *Time*, the following total for readers-per-day can be derived from the MRI report (**Table 1**). They were calculated from the Autumn 1979 MRI Vol. II, page 30/31.

As pointed out above, SMRB's audience levels based on the through-the-book method are considerably lower than MRI's based on the recent reading method.

SMRB's estimates of reading days, however, are close to MRI's. Taking the publications measured by SMRB with the through-the-book method, the estimates of overall average reading days are as follows:

	Average reading days
MRI	2.56
SMRB	2.81
Difference	+10%

These figures were arrived at by calculating aggregate total reading days for the magazines concerned, and dividing by aggregate total readers.

It is clear that not only is it true that the recent reading

method yields substantially higher average issue audience levels than through-the-book; it must also imply substantially higher readers-per-day levels than through-the-book. Comparison of such levels with 'yesterday recall' data should help to settle the issue of which is nearer the truth.

THE YESTERDAY STUDY

The technical description of the design of this study is given in *The Level of Magazine Reading*, a report produced by MRI in March 1980. The design called for some 1000 completed telephone interviews to be made with a probability sample of adults, with equal numbers of interviews being made each day over a four-week period, in January/February 1980. Special care was taken to ensure that the resulting sample was representative, and that the 'yesterday activity' asked about was also representative.

The interview was introduced with this form of words: "We are doing a survey about the newspapers and magazines people read and look into. I want to ask you about any newspapers or magazines that you read *yesterday*, between the time you woke up and the time you went to sleep."

Newspapers as well as magazines were asked about for two reasons: first, some publications studied in magazine research would be generally known as newspapers (eg the national weekly tabloids); second, the questions would give the great majority of respondents the ability to give some positive response, since most people read at least one newspaper each day.

The detailed line of questioning established:

(a) whether any newspapers or magazines had been read in the respondent's own home yesterday, by daypart, as follows: from waking up through breakfast; after breakfast through lunch; after lunch through dinner; from dinner until going to bed; and, in bed until going to sleep.

(b) whether the respondent had been to work yesterday, and/or had visited anyone else's home, and/or any of a number of public places which were listed; and whether any newspapers or magazines had been read at any of these places, or while travelling to or from them.

(c) any other reading of newspapers or magazines yesterday. Individual titles or types of magazines were not suggested, with the exception of TV programme publications, where it was judged that they could be understated if not asked about specifically, following a question about viewing television yesterday: they obviously are 'used' on a daily basis in a rather different way from other magazines.

Finally, questions were asked to establish the

dayparts during which any out-of-home reading occurred yesterday, and the numbers of different issues of each publication read yesterday.

Two points about this 'yesterday' interview should be noted.

First, the implicit definition of magazine reading is actually quite *conservative*. With the exception just noted of TV programme publications, there was no prompting at all of magazine types or titles. To qualify as a reader, therefore, respondents had to remember — when reminded only of different times of day and of places they might have visited — having read or looked into the publication.

It is quite likely that prompting by title would bring to light additional bona fide reading of magazines. However, to some degree it could also stimulate a certain amount of overclaiming, and on this account was not done.

Second, although the sample used in this research — over 1000 — is large by the standards of validation studies, it will be appreciated that the amount of information provided by each respondent is quite small (in the interests, of course, of enhancing the quality of this information). The methodology would hardly be viable as a means of collecting data on a routine basis.

Specifically, data for individual magazines from such a study cannot meaningfully be tabulated, unless it is conducted on a very large scale indeed. This does not matter when the issue being addressed is the level of magazine reading in total. In the presentation of the results which follows, magazines are grouped.

The most important grouping, of course, is by frequency of publication, especially since the differences between the recent reading and through-the-book levels are associated with frequency (recent reading levels are somewhat higher for weeklies, but *much* higher for monthlies).

To make clear comparisons possible, magazines are grouped by publication frequency as follows:
(a) weeklies, bi-weeklies.
(b) tri-weeklies, monthlies, bi-monthlies, quarterlies.

Group (a) consists chiefly of weeklies. Group (b) consists chiefly of monthlies, and of *Family Circle* and *Woman's Day* which would generally be compared with monthlies.

READING LEVELS FOR MRI MAGAZINES

The data from the 'yesterday' study were first tabulated to make comparisons possible for the 154 magazines reported by MRI, as described above.

Table 2 shows the readers-per-day level calculated from MRI, compared with the actual level found in the 'yesterday' study for these magazines.

The difference is very small and is not significant at the 5% confidence level. 60% of US adults read at least one magazine on the average 'yesterday' — 47% if *TV Guide* is omitted. The average number of magazines read by these readers (including those not measured by MRI) was 1.86.

Turning to the composition of the 152,900,000 readers-per-day in terms of weeklies (etc) and monthlies (etc), as described in the last section, the comparison is shown in **Table 3**.

These compositions are again not significantly different at the 5% confidence level.

There is certainly no support for a belief that MRI inflates the audiences of monthlies relative to weeklies.

We can conclude, therefore, that the 'yesterday' study *confirms the MRI levels*.

This confirmation of MRI levels is strikingly clear. The most reasonable explanation of this close agreement is that people can in general remember whether they did or did not read a magazine within the most recent issue period, and on how many days they did so. If there are errors, they are small, or compensating, or both.

It has been stressed that the definition of reading implied by the 'yesterday' study is a conservative one. Individual magazine titles or types were not mentioned, with the exception of TV programme publications. Respondents therefore had to remember, given the stimulus of times of day and places visited, the magazines they read. Prompting with magazine titles, or specific issues, would probably have captured more 'reading'; even so, the ARF certitude studies suggest that some reading (in the sense in which it might have been classified

TABLE 2

	Readers-per-day ('000,000)
'Yesterday' study	152.9
Estimated from MRI	150.7
Difference	−1%

TABLE 3

	'Yesterday' study	Estimated from MRI
Weeklies	53%	55%
Monthlies	47%	45%

as such by an observer) would still have been missed. However, a case can be made for saying that reading which cannot be readily remembered a day later must have been somewhat casual, to say the least, and can properly be omitted from the audience definition.

At least, it seems that *the reading reported by MRI* is reading *which can readily be remembered on the day following the occasion.*

While the 'yesterday' study has produced results consistent with the recent reading measurement, they would not be consistent with the traditional through-the-book approach.

The 'TTB-T' levels obtained by the ARF Comparability Study can be compared with MRI levels. The results, by frequency of publication, are given in **Table 4**.

A readers-per-day figure which would result from traditional through-the-book measurement can be derived as follows for the MRI-reported magazines:

(a) the ratios in **Table 4** can be applied to MRI data for the publication frequency groups concerned, with the average ratio (.60) being applied to the minor frequency groups (a different assumption would have little effect on

the overall result). This yields estimates of what the TTB audience levels would be.

(b) the estimates of reading days obtained by SMRB and MRI are consistent, as can be demonstrated, if allowance is made for the fact the MRI does not count reading of more than one issue of the same magazine on the same day more than once. The MRI reading days estimate can therefore be used to estimate readers-per-day in either case.

Table 5 gives the resulting total readers-per-day estimates for MRI reported magazines.

DISCUSSION

Since the publication of the study results in March 1980, two main questions have been raised about it.

The first is whether the telephone interview could possibly have caused an inflation of 'yesterday' reading claims, given that yesterday was asked about specifically. This could have occurred, it has been suggested, if respondents invented magazine reading events which, however, actually occurred longer ago.

A selection of interviews were tape-recorded, and listening to the tapes provided no indication of any such inflation. Respondents generally answered the questions without hesitation.

It should be stressed again that individual magazine titles were not prompted, and that all the questions about reading were of the form "which, if any, *newspapers or magazines* did you read or look into (in a specific day part/at a specific place)?" 74% of the sample read at least one newspaper yesterday, which agrees closely with industry statistics on newspaper reading. 60% read at least one magazine yesterday, as stated above – 47% if *TV Guide* is omitted.

As a further check on this point, 200 further interviews were made in May 1980. Respondents who claimed to have read a magazine yesterday were asked a number of supplementary questions about proportion of pages opened, time spent reading, and issue date. They were asked to bring the issue concerned to the phone if it was in the home. There was no indication from these interviews of inflation of magazine reading levels.

Further work could, of course, be done in which respondents could be asked about specific magazines (for example, those passing a six-month screen) and asked when they last read them, without prompting 'yesterday' specifically.

The second question which has been raised is whether the average reading days reported by SMRB *and* MRI could be *underestimates.* This, it is suggested, could undermine the comparisons of 'readers-per-day'.

Although SMRB and MRI reading days estimates are

TABLE 4

| | Gross coverage | | |
	TTB-T %	MRI %	Ratio TTB-T/MRI
Weeklies	93.1	120.7	0.77
Tri-weeklies	21.6	37.9	0.57
Monthlies	196.5	356.8	0.55
Total	311.3	515.4	0.60

TABLE 5

	Readers-per-day ('000,000)	Index
'Yesterday' study	152.9*	100
Estimated from MRI	150.7	99
Estimated from the traditional through-the-book method	100.9*	66

* *Note that if the* SMRB *estimates of reading days had been used in the calculation, these figures would have estimated the total number of* issues *read yesterday, and both should in that case be increased by 10%. The index of 66 would, however, not be affected.*

consistent, the levels reported by the Politz firm up to and including 1966 were somewhat higher. These, however, were obtained by dividing 'yesterday reading' data (in which *both* 'yesterday' *and* specific magazine titles *were* prompted) by average-issue audience data obtained by the through-the-book method. If the through-the-book method (even in the 'full' version employed by Politz) understates average issue audience, this procedure would, of course, lead to an overstatement of average reading days.

If the SMRB skeletonised issue through-the-book levels of audience were right, and if the 'yesterday reading' study levels are also right, then the true numbers of average reading days would have to be very considerably higher than those reported by either MRI or SMRB — almost double for monthlies.

This seems highly implausible. The modal number of reading days for all magazines, except *TV Guide*, according to MRI is one. Many readers complete their reading of a magazine issue on one occasion, or only have the opportunity to read it on one occasion. If the mode is one but the mean were to be five or so for monthly magazines, this would imply that many readers are reading on a quite absurdly high number of days — up to every day of the month!

In the 200 additional interviews referred to above, respondents were asked a new question, for each magazine issue read yesterday: "Did you look into that particular issue of (magazine) at all *before* yesterday?"

58% of readers stated that they *had* read the particular issue *before* yesterday, and 42% said that they had *not* — ie, their reading of that magazine issue was 'first time' reading. Dividing the total number of reading days by the number of first-time reading days yields a figure of $1 \div .42 = 2.4$ average reading days. It is clear that this is *not*, in fact, higher than the levels of average reading days found by either MRI or SMRB.

It is reasonable to conclude, therefore, that these possible objections to the 'yesterday reading' approach to validation are unfounded, and that the data and their interpretation are sound.

CONCLUSIONS

The implication of the results of this study is that the through-the-book method omits large numbers of readers: almost a quarter for the weeklies, and almost a half for the monthlies.

It does so, first, because the screening procedure employed omits many people who might actually have read the test issue. The definition of reading is not made sufficiently plain to the respondent, and the interviewer has no incentive to stress its inclusive nature because of the fatiguing nature of the interview as a whole.

Second, the use of any 'issue-specific' methodology results in two types of loss of readers: one due to memory failure, the other due to the failure to capture late pass-on reading. Both types of loss will tend to penalise monthlies more than weeklies, though all magazines will be understated as a consequence.

Third, the use of skeletonised test issues leads to further understatement due to their distorted appearances. "Full" through-the-book measurement tends to obtain considerably higher levels than the SMRB procedure does (see, eg, the *Time Inc* ten-magazine study conducted by Audits and Surveys in 1975).

Years ago when the through-the-book method was developed, the magazine environment was very different. A small number of magazines with large circulations, available to subscribers at a very low price, was dominant. There are now many more magazines of importance, prices are considerably higher, and it is reasonable to conclude that the passing-on of copies has become much more significant.

The recent reading technique is a straightforward technique which can be applied consistently against all major titles, and is best suited to this new environment, and produces levels consistent with estimates of daily magazine reading from an independent source.