

## EFFECTIVE MEASUREMENT BY SPECIFIC ISSUE READERSHIP

John H. Faasse, The Media Partnership, The Netherlands

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### Summary

More and more advertisers are asking for the number of readers per issue, instead of average issue readership. Measurement of specific issue readership also brings us closer to the measurement of '*open eyes in front of advertising space*'. The paper discusses the merits of cover recognition as a way of measuring specific issue readership.

Though the validity of the method as yet is not quite what it should be, tests with the '*Media Observer*' show that cover recognition indeed seems to be a step forward towards measuring advertising reach.

The road readership research will have to take will inevitably lead to the measurement of specific issues.

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### Introduction

For advertising research, the '90's are the decade of '*accountability*'. More and more, advertisers are demanding to know exactly what they are getting for their money in terms of reach and frequency, and better still, in terms of '*effect*'. Television research gives them the verisimilitude of electronic measurement. The number of viewers is registered every 15 seconds, thus providing them with '*advertising reach*'. Of course, this could not be expected from readership research, could it?

Just as commercial breaks on television attract different numbers of viewers, different issues of a magazine attract varying numbers of readers. Thus, readership research should at least be able to come up with something better than '*average issue*' readership. After all, nowadays most advertisers do not spend on print media the kind of budgets which would enable them to be in the '*average*' issue. Sometimes they are quite happy to be in one issue. And they only want to pay for the number of people who read that specific issue.

Media owners are responding to these demands. Not only in the UK and the USA, but also in the Netherlands, publishers, notably VNU, are experimenting with different advertising rates for different issues of a magazine, depending on the number of copies sold.

But to obtain real accountability it is not enough just to look at circulation figures. Accountability requires more than average issue readership. What you really want to know is the number of *readers* of each particular issue.

But specific issue readership is more than just a means of calculating the rate cards. Specific issue readership could be a step forward from measuring the reach of a medium, i.e. a magazine or a newspaper, in the direction of measuring the reach of an advertisement itself.

Instead of knowing that someone has read x out of 6 or 12 issues of a magazine which featured your advertisement, specific issue readership gives you certainty about whether or not this person **did** have the opportunity of seeing your ad in this magazine.

That specific issue readership brings you closer to '*open eyes in front of open (advertising) pages*' than probabilities do seems logical. But is there empirical evidence to be found to prove this point?

In an indirect way, maybe there is. If specific issue readership increases the probability of '*open eyes*', then you would expect to find a greater contribution to your communication goals from such a '*contact*' than you would from a '*contact*' based on the frequency question.

Thus the idea we are trying to develop in this paper is that a '*contact*' measured in terms of the readership of a specific issue is more '*effective*' than a '*contact*' in terms of a reading probability derived from the measurement of reading frequency.

## The measurement of specific issue readership

Then how can we measure specific issue readership?

Most experience in measuring specific issue readership was undoubtedly gathered using the '*through-the-book method*'. For an overview of the method, see the first chapter of Michael Brown's synopsis of the first four Readership Research Symposia, *Dear Reader: "Can readers recognise issues?"*<sup>1</sup>.

In view of all this it is a shame that the '*through-the-book*' method, with its measurement of specific issues, seems to have gone so much out of fashion. The last remnants of what was once a current in the mainstream of readership research now barely lives on as an endangered species in far-away Canada.

With '*through-the-book*', specific issue readership is, or should I say was, mainly ascertained by showing people stripped or skeletonized issues of magazines.

Most studies showed that the results thus obtained did not differ much from those obtained using complete or full issues. The third possibility is to show only the cover of a magazine. We will come back to this method later.

Are there other ways of establishing specific issue readership?

It is possible to ask people in either a telephone interview or a personal interview to fetch, for example the last issue they read. This enables one to identify the issue exactly. The method is sometimes applied in smaller studies regarding reading behaviour. But in large-scale readership surveys this method is impracticable. It is too time-consuming, leads to non-response, and excludes virtually all out-of-home reading.

By means of media time budget research, it should be possible to keep track of specific issues. Especially in an electronic diary panel, as proposed by Den Boon and Kalfs, it would be relatively easy for the respondents to perform this task. Besides, it would mean an end to the problems posed by parallel and replicated reading, which are seemingly insoluble with current methods.

Eventually, electronic measurement, for example, by means of a watch meter, or a similar device, should make measurement of specific issue readership possible. But it will probably be well into the next century before such a device is operational on a large scale.

### Cover recognition

For its survey into advertising effectiveness, '*Media Observer*', The Media Partnership Research has developed a cheap and simple way of measuring specific issue readership for magazines. We do this by showing respondents a reduced-size, full-color copy of the covers of those magazines. Respondents are asked whether they are sure they have read or looked into this particular issue, whether they are not sure, or whether they are sure they have **not** read or looked into the issue. Illustration 1 gives an example of the kind of show-cards used, in black and white.

Does cover recognition provide us with a valid and reliable measurement of specific issue readership?

The question has been addressed at Readership Research Symposia before. On page 107 and 108 of '*Dear Reader*', Michael Brown reviews a number of contributions concerning "*whether just the cover of a magazine provides an adequate aid to memory*":

In New Orleans, Bob Wilson apparently came up with a positive answer. "*... these methods seemed to work as well as using the normal Through-the-Book approach with skeletonized issues ...*". In New Orleans, Roy Morgan showed that "*... black and white illustrations of magazine covers, three to a sheet ...*" also did the job. From these two studies, one may at least conclude that cover recognition is not inferior to the use of stripped or even full issues.

Looking for '*hard-core readership*', Costa Tchaoussoglou reported in Salzburg on a Dutch experiment with cover recognition in the 1983/84 NIPO Media readership survey. Readers of the women's weekly Libelle were asked to pick the issue most recently read or looked into, having been shown the last four covers and the cover of a pre-publication issue. 14% claimed to have read the future issue. And only 25% of the Libelle readers actually reported the issue which appeared most recently as being the issue most recently read. For subscribers, these percentages were 14% (!) and 51% respectively.

<sup>1</sup> Brown, M., *Dear Reader, Some readership measurement questions ...*, and some answers, RSL, Harrow, 1990.

Costa's conclusion, also quoted in *Dear Reader*: "Cover recognition seems to be a reasonable instrument to establish magazine readership, although 14% claimed to have read a future issue. (...) It is very unlikely, however, that respondents are able to indicate from the cover only which issue they have read *last*."

But in order to establish whether or not people have read or looked into a specific issue at all, the validity of the cover recognition method seems to be acceptable.

#### Recognition of reduced-size full-color covers

Can respondents remember reading a particular issue of a magazine just by looking at a reduced-size full-color copy of the cover? They themselves seem to think so. From an outsider's point of view, the issues of some magazines may all look very much alike. This would give people reason to doubt whether they have seen a certain issue or not. However, the number of people in the 'not sure' category is on average remarkably small (Table 1). In total, 193 covers were examined in 9 different Media Observer waves. Each cover was judged by approximately 1000 respondents. On average, only 3.2% of them were unsure about (not) having seen a cover. For weeklies this is 4.1% as against 1.6% for monthlies. Looking at some individual titles, all women's weeklies, it appears that the choice of Libelle for an experiment into the validity of cover recognition led to a severe test. The covers of Libelle cause more confusion than the covers of any other title.

**Table 1 Uncertainty in cover recognition**

	Average % not sure whether seen or not	Number of covers examined
<b>All magazines</b>	3.2%	193
<b>Weeklies</b>	4.1%	123
<b>Monthlies</b>	1.6%	61
<b>Libelle</b>	6.0%	21
<b>Margriet</b>	4.7%	23
<b>Viva</b>	2.8%	16

Are frequent readers less uncertain than casual readers? In Media Observer the following frequency question is asked: "I will read out to you the titles of a number of magazines. Can you indicate for each magazine how many issues out of every six you usually read or look into?"

In one 'Media Observer' wave the number of different magazines always stays within reasonable limits. Therefore no filter question is asked. And since we are not interested in calculating average issue readership, there are no questions regarding reading in the last publication interval, or yesterday either. Thus the only information we have is reading frequency.

The least confusion occurs for those with a reading frequency of 0 out of 6 issues. Just from looking at the covers, most non-readers are sure they have not seen the magazines. Somewhat more confusion occurs amongst very frequent readers, (6 out of 6). But still, practically all of them can swear they did read or look into the magazines from the covers. By far the most confusion occurs for those readers with a reading frequency of between 1 and 5 out of 6 issues.

A confusion control test with a pre-publication issue, like the test Costa did 10 years ago, is hard to perform nowadays. Production times have diminished considerably. Covers are designed only one or two days before publication of an issue. Therefore we decided to hold a test for possible confusion, using very old issues. We used 5 covers of women's weeklies (1 Libelle, 2 Margriet and 2 Viva), published one year or more before our survey.

To our astonishment, there was no difference whatsoever between the number of people who claimed to have read a recent issue or a one-year-old issue, based on cover recognition. Also, the old issues did not cause more confusion (Table 2).

**Table 2 Confusion control test**

	Seen or looked into	Not sure whether seen or not
Libelle	24%	6%
Margriet	19%	5%
Viva	8%	3%
Libelle test cover	24%	7%
Margriet test cover 1	17%	7%
Margriet test cover 2	18%	6%
Viva test cover 1	7%	3%
Viva test cover 2	8%	3%

There are several possible explanations for these results:

People's memories are far better than we are apt to assume. But then, we did not find a relationship with reading frequency.

The covers for Libelle, Margriet and Viva differ so little from one issue to another that people will always think they have read them.

The last conclusion would imply that cover recognition, based on reduced size full color covers, is not as valid a method as we might wish it to be.

**The Media Observer**

'Media Observer' is the name of a survey designed by TMP research. The main purpose of this study is to determine the optimum number of contacts necessary to achieve a certain advertising goal. Since media expenditures take by far the largest slice of the communication budget, determination of the optimum contact level per medium type is a *conditio sine qua non* for eventual return on investment.

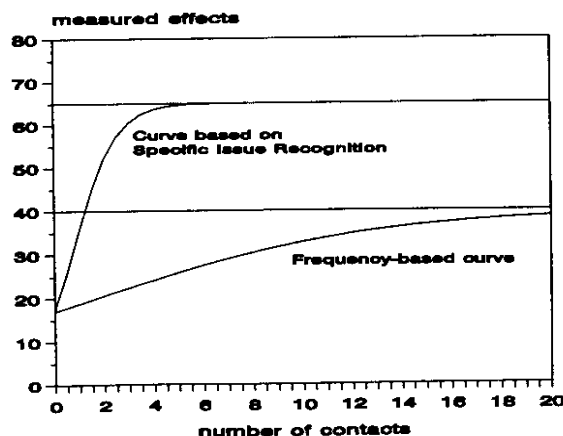
Advertising goals may differ widely from one campaign to another. Standard *Media Observer* looks at a wide range of different goals. On the one hand, effects are measured on the level of the campaign itself, with variables like recall, recognition and likeability. On the other hand, effects are established on a brand level, with indicators such as awareness, brand image, attitudes, and buying propensity.

The charm of the instrument is the measurement of media behaviour and advertising effect on an individual basis in a single survey. This makes it possible to make inferences of a causal nature between the number of contacts and the effectiveness, something which cannot be done in most tracking surveys.

Fieldwork for *Media Observer* is conducted by means of a paper and pencil interview, face-to-face, involving at least 1000 respondents. In the Netherlands there are four waves each year. The average number of campaigns per wave is around 7. The research agency in the Netherlands is Veldkamp/Marktonderzoek bv.

*Media Observer* results are presented in the form of of a graph, with the number of contacts per medium type on the horizontal axis, and effects on the vertical axis. For multi-media campaigns, matrices are produced which enable one to determine the optimal media-mix with respect to a certain advertising goal.

**Specific Issue Readership vs Reading Frequency**



The details of the *Media Observer* technology are described by Jean-Louis Laborie and François Charton<sup>2</sup>.

If specific issue recognition is indeed a step on the way to the measurement of advertising reach, one would expect that a 'contact' in terms of cover recognition would differentiate more than a 'contact' defined as the sum of 'reading probabilities'. In other words: a certain 'contact' with the specific issue in which your advertisement is to be found is more effective than a chance contact of probabilities adding up to one.

### Test results

We tested our hypothesis on a number of print campaigns from the Dutch Media Observer database. For all campaigns, and nearly all indicators tested, 'contacts' with specific issues yielded greater differentiation.

In our opinion, this also means that 'cover recognition' probably isn't such a bad method after all. If a cover recognition 'contact' delivers more effect, it means we are indeed closer to measuring 'open eyes in front of advertising space'.

If the advertisers concerned give their consent we hope to be able to show a number of real cases at the Berlin Symposium.

But alas, this is not the end of the road, by a long way. For these results to be of practical use, one must be able to implement them in media planning. You must know how to buy these effective contacts.

More research is needed to establish the exact relationship between the two kinds of 'contacts' for different types of magazines. By means of the frequency question it is already possible to link results to the regular readership survey, for the Netherlands the SUMMO-Scanner. Eventually readership research will have to be based entirely on the readership of specific issues.

### Conclusions

The validity of the use of 'cover recognition' for measuring specific issue readership is still not proven. Although respondents are quite self-assured, they might not always be right in the answers they give. To answer the question of validity in a satisfying way, it will be necessary to develop a confusion control experiment with different magazine titles, in which weeklies and monthlies are both represented.

A 'contact' with a specific issue is more likely to lead to a certain advertising effect than is a probability 'contact'. Specific issue recognition brings us closer to the concept of 'open eyes in front of advertising space'.

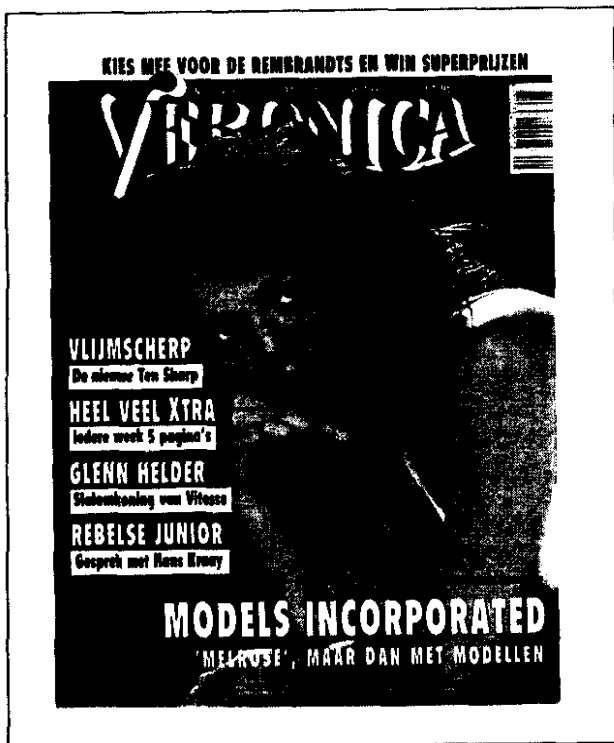
Therefore, and in view of the demands from advertisers, the road will invariably lead to readership research based on specific issue recognition. The signs are clear.

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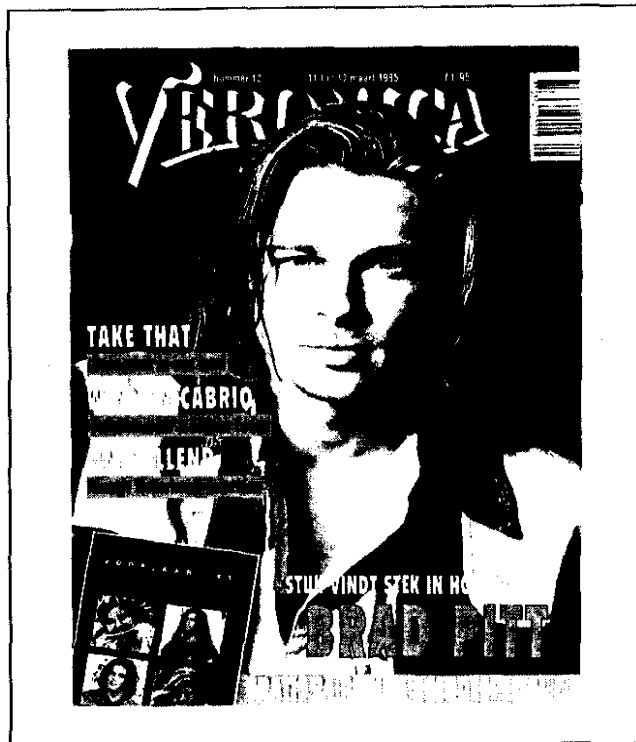
<sup>2</sup> Laborie, J-L. and F. Charton, *Media Observer: Measuring the Return on Media Investment*, in ESOMAR, *From Door-to-door to Satellite: Media Research for More Effective Planning*, Amsterdam, 1994.

Illustration 1

A



B



C

Bladen 4

D