

# THE INTERVAL METHOD - A SUGGESTED PLATFORM FOR MEETING FUTURE CHALLENGES

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## INTRODUCTION

Never has there been a more interesting time to be in media research. As the theme of this symposium attests, new technologies are propelling the media on collision courses. We are in the midst of a revolution and have only just begun to see the impacts, yet it is clear already that the future will pose some great challenges to our current methodologies.

As we know, surprising effects can be produced even by apparently minor adjustments, and undoubtedly over the next few years we will have to make a number of those. For example, in due course it will become necessary to separate the readership of masthead websites from readership of the same titles' printed issues. When the source-of-copy question indicates that website readership is artificially inflating the currency, the methodology will have to be modified to remove it. This is likely to prove more difficult than might be expected.

Another problem – one that has been with us for some time but to which there is still not a satisfactory solution – is how to measure weekly readership of fortnightly, monthly and less frequent magazines, to provide data for short-term media planning. This can be seen not only as a methodological challenge but also as indicating a possible shift in the basic unit of measurement from nett average issue readership (ie. coverage over the life of the issue) to weekly 'opportunities to see'. Whether we need to take it a step further, to actual advertising page exposures, is something else to consider.

Web-tv, web browsers on cellular phones, electronic books, magazines and newspapers, and who knows what other new gadgets and channels of communication, information and entertainment, will create challenges we can barely guess at. So we need to ask ourselves this: How should we prepare the overall media measurement architecture and in particular our readership surveys to cope with the new information demands of the next millennium?

By making the system more adaptable, is the short answer. We might define adaptability as the flexibility to accommodate methodological changes or extensions *without unintended effects upon the results obtained* – in other words, flexibility and stability too. Achieving this would be no mean feat.

This short paper has two purposes. The first is to describe a general research design by which the basic Recency methodology can be extended and adapted to meet some of the challenges. If I can persuade you of its merits, then the second purpose is to outline some experimental work in which you might be interested in participating. It is hoped that some early experimental data will be available in time for presentation at the 1999 Worldwide Readership Research Symposium.

## OVERVIEW

The definitive characteristic of this research design is that it employs two interviews to achieve its objectives. Now, of course there is nothing remarkable about re-interviews *per se*. But the key thing is how the two interviews are designed to interact. One objective is to sensitize the respondent in the first interview in such a way as to produce more complete and accurate reporting of behaviour in the second interview – ie. reporting of the behaviour which occurred during the interval between the interviews. It is suggested that this should also make the results more stable. It stands to reason that stability is increased when respondents answer our questions with greater certainty.

The sensitization is designed specifically for these effects: (a) to establish a reference-point in time which will be clear in the respondent's mind in the second interview; (b) to make the respondent more likely to remember events that take place during the interval; and (c) to give the respondent some practice at answering our questions so that he or she will be more comfortable and focused in the second interview.

A second objective is to reduce respondent fatigue by breaking the overall data-collection into two parts separated in time, and a third is to enable devices (if applicable) to be placed *in situ* to facilitate measurement of behaviour in the interval. Examples of the latter are the installation of software on the home computer to log website visits, or placement of some kind of media diary. Clearly, conducting two interviews doubles some of the data-collection costs. However, the idea is to conduct two interviews with only part of the total sample, calibrating the remainder to the results obtained. Also, the value of the additional information that can be collected should make this a cost-effective response to challenges we need to address one way or another.

To illustrate, an existing Recency-based readership survey could be extended and adapted as outlined below. This is an example of what is possible – other options are discussed shortly.

*First interview:*

- 1.1 Collect product usage and demographic data (Set 1).
- 1.2 Administer the newspaper readership questionnaire.
- 1.3 For magazines, administer the grouped titles screening question only.
- 1.4 Install website-logging software on the home PC.
- 1.5 Provide a TV guide doubling as a simple media diary.

*Second interview:*

- 2.1 Administer the newspaper readership questions again to collect 2-issue (ie. 2 week) duplication data for every day's issue.
- 2.2 Administer the standard Recency magazine readership questions.
- 2.3 Probe magazine reading claims for first-time and repeat reading during the interval.
- 2.4 Collect product usage and demographic data (Set 2).
- 2.5 Uninstall the website-logging software and determine which sites were visited by the respondent personally.
- 2.6 Collect and check the media diary.

## OPTIONS

It can be seen that under the design outlined above, the second interview can replicate an existing Recency interview – ie. what has been added is in fact the first interview. Under an alternative design, the add-on interview might be the second one instead. This choice is one of several major options to be tested experimentally. Others are discussed below.

- *Splits:* The questionnaire is split between the two interviews, and some individual sections also can be split. For example, only the grouped titles screening question might be asked for magazines in the first interview, with the more detailed readership questions being asked in the second. What split produces the best results needs to be determined empirically. One consideration is the frequency of the behaviour in question (eg. reading monthly magazines). The less often it takes place, the greater the risk of over-sensitization. That is, behaviour during the interval might directly be affected and therefore the sensitization might need to be very subtle (eg. merely screening grouped magazine title cards). In contrast, a diary can be placed for high frequency behaviour such as watching television, with little risk of interfering with that behaviour.
- *Devices:* As suggested above, different devices can be placed in the first interview to facilitate data-collection – eg. diaries, software, or special stimuli such as an index of magazine front covers from which respondents can identify cover dates. Again, it needs to be determined whether the improvement in data quality made possible by any such device justifies any behavioural interference it may cause. We are generally opposed to detailed readership diaries for this reason.
- *Contacts:* The two interviews need not necessarily involve the same contact method. For example, the first interview may be by telephone and the second door-to-door.
- *Intervals:* A crucial question is the length of the interval between interviews. There are advantages to it being 7 days but this might not be optimal, especially for magazines. And of course, it will not always be possible for the second interview to be conducted exactly 7 days (or any other pre-determined period) after the first, and this has to be allowed for in the constructs.

## CONSTRUCTS

Depending on the choices that are made between such options, a variety of measurement constructs can be implemented including conventional average issue readership (AIR) and weekly opportunities to see (OTS).

- *Recency-based AIR*: Obviously enough, the standard Recency model can be preserved. If reading claims are collected in the second interview, the issue-period will match or overlap the interval, and so the sensitization created by the first interview is likely to produce a one-time movement in the readership levels.
- *'First Time' Reading*: The 'first time' reading question can be administered to measure unreplicated readership. Under this construct, parallel readership normally is determined as well. The reference timeframe for both questions is the interval – eg. "When did you get that particular issue of [magazine] – was it before or after my previous visit?" The AIR that will accumulate over the lifetime of an average issue is equal to the total number of 'first time' reading events of *any* issues within the interval, adjusted for the difference between the interval and the issue-period.
- *Total OTS*: Readers have multiple opportunities to see advertising in a magazine due to repeat reading of the issue. The total number of days on which an issue is read over its lifetime is equal to the total number of reading days of *any* issues within one issue-period. Interestingly, the overall period over which those reading days are distributed also can be estimated to enable statements of the following kind: "An average issue of *The Magazine* has 4,321,000 readers who read it on 6.3 days spread over 7 weeks and 4 days on average". An experiment can be conducted to determine whether placing a media diary produces a worthwhile improvement in the completeness and accuracy of the daily reading claims.
- *Weekly OTS*: There is increasing interest in the shape of the OTS distribution across a magazine's average issue lifetime. That is, how many of the total reading days occur in the first week after the on-sale date, how many in the second week, etc. This requires a method of determining the on-sale date of each issue claimed. This can be done either by providing respondents with a 'catalogue' of magazine covers in the first interview (say, the 6 most recent for each title), or by showing covers and contents pages in the second and relying upon recall. With the latter, careful thought should be given to how to sensitize respondents in the first interview so as to make them more likely to note covers and cover dates during the interval.

Numerous experimental hypotheses are suggested by the foregoing discussion.

## OTHER EFFECTS

The first interview establishes a clear reference-point in time – something generally lacking when respondents are asked to recall behaviour in a single interview survey. In this way, the Interval Method should substantially reduce telescoping.

Also, the first interview provides an opportunity for prestige-influenced claims to be 'vented', so that they will then be less likely to flow through into readership estimates based on responses obtained in the second interview.

These two benefits are instances of a more general effect. The original idea for this methodology was as a way of 'collapsing the probability wave' which drives response biases. It has been argued previously (eg. Walsh, 1995) that a probabilistic view is needed to fully understand the dynamics of responses to readership surveys (and to almost any other market research questions).

## CONCLUSION

The Interval Method is a conceptually simple yet powerful way of meeting the methodological challenges of the future while also addressing a number of long-standing measurement problems. It can be designed for robustness and stability, while providing the flexibility necessary for satisfying new information needs. The key to its performance lies in how respondents are sensitized in the first interview. Traditionally, researchers have considered sensitization undesirable, but it seems clear that when we have to rely upon the recall of relatively 'low involvement' behaviour, the completeness and accuracy of reporting can be improved by this strategy.

There is enormous scope for collaborative experimental work to 'tune' the methodology for specific information needs, and hopefully there will be important new findings to share at future symposiums.

