

The Case for Direct Questions on Reading Habits¹

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In this test, simply asking housewives how often they read a magazine (regularly, occasionally, never) produced just as good audience estimates as did the editorial interest method, in which respondents had to prove that they read particular issues.

TO LEARN about an individual's actions through an interview, questions can be asked either about his recent behavior or his habits. Questions on habits are used in market research surveys on consumer goods, but they have been virtually excluded from media audience surveys, which usually use only questions that focus on recent behavior. This paper shows that direct questions on reading habits can enable one to deal with problems now inadequately handled by current techniques of measuring reading behavior.

Two typical measurements are the "IPA tech-

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nique" and the "editorial interest technique." The IPA technique has long been used in Great Britain for audience surveys conducted by the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising and has been adopted in France by the Centre d'Etudes des Supports de Publicité (CESP) for their 1957 and 1961 audience surveys; it is also used in Belgium, Germany, and Italy. The technique consists in asking a person when he last looked at a copy of the publication. A "reader" is any person who looked at a copy of a daily "yesterday," a copy of a weekly "during the past seven days," or a copy of a monthly "during the past 30 days."

The reliability of this technique is based on two (obviously weak) assumptions:

1. The number of people who read any average issue is identical with the number who have read *any* issue during the last publication period, i.e., day for daily, month for monthly.
2. People give correct answers about when they last looked at a copy of the publication.

Little is left of these assumptions when one considers the work of Belson (1962; reviewed by Henry, 1962). It is enough to note here that the first assumption ignores the matter of "audience replication," in which readers read a particular issue for

¹ Based on two talks delivered before the European Society for Opinion Surveys and Market Research in 1962 and 1963.

longer than its publication period, i.e., more than one day for a daily. Thus, a respondent may buy a monthly magazine and read it for six months, spending a few hours reading it every month. If during each of those six months he is asked whether he has read a copy "during the past 30 days," he will be registered as a reader of six issues instead of one issue.

As for the second assumption, can a reader really say whether or not he has looked at a copy of a monthly during the last 30 days? To the question, "When was the last time you looked at a copy of Magazine X?", frequent answers include: "I don't know," "I don't remember," "About a month ago."

The fact that the order in which publications are presented to the respondent has a strong influence on answers is a definite indication that either the reader runs short of memory or the investigator runs short of patience during the interview. Relying on the respondent's memory as to whether he has looked at an issue during the last 30 days certainly does not seem to be a safe method for obtaining the facts.

The only logical conclusion, given the weaknesses of the two assumptions, is to reject the IPA research technique, particularly as applied to monthly publications.

The editorial interest technique involves showing the respondent a particular issue of the magazine and then asking him whether he has looked at it. Here, a reader is "any person who, after going through an issue with the interviewer, states that he is sure that he has looked into that issue some time previous to the interview" (Politz, 1953, p. 157). The advantage of this technique as compared with the IPA one is that it eliminates the "audience replication" problem and it allows the study of audience accumulation.

From a theoretical point of view, the editorial interest technique raises less serious criticisms than the IPA one. One problem is that a fairly recent issue may not have built up its full audience, although, on the other hand, if an issue is too old, some readers may have forgotten about reading it. This method also relies on the respondent's memory, but experience shows that a reader can remember for several months whether he looked at a particular issue, even though he may not remember exactly when. The real drawback of the editorial interest interview is that it involves handling a prohibitive number of specimen copies when the survey covers several publications.

A major advantage of using direct questions on

reading habits is that it makes for a much simpler interview. Instead of a long drawn out session which strains the investigator's patience and the reader's memory, very simple questions are asked which every respondent (except perhaps sophisticated media researchers) can readily answer. Since no bulky material is needed to help the respondent's memory, questions on reading habits can cover a large number of magazines in the same interview.

METHOD

An experimental study conducted by the Elvinger Agency on four French weeklies used direct questions on reading habits and editorial interest technique questions on the reading of particular issues. Thus we could check the reliability of the answers given on direct questions about reading habits.

In the spring of 1961, 646 housewives (out of an original sample of 750) in a city in Northern France were interviewed three times on four popular weekly magazines (one general interest, two women's, and one romance magazine). Each interview concerned three particular issues (three, four, and five weeks old) of each of the four magazines. The first wave was March 13-19, the second April 17-23, and the third May 22-28.

The purpose of the survey was to measure audience accumulation up to nine issues, for each weekly. We defined a reader as "any person who, after going through an issue with the interviewer, states that he is sure he has looked into that issue some time previous to the interview." But before asking this question on the particular issues surveyed, the interviewer first asked, for each magazine, a direct question on reading habits: "Do you regularly, occasionally, or never read Magazine X?" Each housewife was then questioned on each of the 12 issues.

RESULTS

Besides obtaining information on audience accumulation, we were able to compare the answers on reading habits with the number of issues read. Briefly, we found:

1. Respondents gave reliable or stable statements on their reading habits.
2. Reported reading habits closely agreed with behavior.
3. "Average issue" audience could be estimated from readers' statements on reading habits.
4. Through simulation, statements on reading habits could be used to predict future audience.

As to the reliability of respondents' estimates, for each magazine the number of persons claiming to be regular or occasional readers varied slightly from

one wave to the other, over the five weeks between each wave, whereas actual readership of the magazine showed wider fluctuations from issue to issue. The average variation between waves in the number of "regular" readers was 2.4 per cent, "occasional" readers 4.7 per cent, "nonreaders" 1.4 per cent, and for actual readers of a particular issue 8.2 per cent.

Table 1 presents a cross-analysis on Magazine H that enables us to check the reliability of each person's answers across two waves. The proportion of housewives giving the same answer on reading habits across two waves averaged 78 per cent overall for Magazine H (77 per cent between waves one and two, 80 per cent between waves two and three, 79 per cent between waves one and three). For the other magazines this overall proportion reached 90 per cent (Magazine N), 81 per cent (E), and 84 per cent (B).

TABLE 1
MAGAZINE H—REPORTED READING HABITS

	Read:			Total
	"Regularly"	"Occasionally"	"Never"	
<i>Wave 1</i>				
"Regularly"	65	9	3	77
"Occasionally"	10	192	63	265
"Never"	4	63	237	304
Total	79	264	303	646
<i>Wave 2</i>				
"Regularly"	61	15	3	79
"Occasionally"	7	200	57	264
"Never"	2	46	255	303
Total	70	261	315	646
<i>Wave 3</i>				
"Regularly"	68	4	3	75
"Occasionally"	14	193	54	261
"Never"	—	68	247	315
Total	77	265	304	646

Table 2 presents a similar cross-analysis, only this one is designed to check the reliability of each individual's reading behavior (actual number of issues read) vis-à-vis the same magazine. For Magazine H, the percentage of housewives who read the same number of issues on two waves was 69 per cent overall (and 69 per cent in each of the three comparisons).

Respondents had three choices on reading habits (regularly, occasionally, never) but four choices on reading behavior (0, 1, 2, 3 issues read). We therefore considered only three types of reading behavior (0, 1 or 2, 3 issues read), in order to make

TABLE 2
MAGAZINE H—NUMBER OF ISSUES READ

	3	2	1	0	Total
<i>Wave 1</i>					
3	56	8	3	8	75
2	10	12	15	19	56
1	6	10	25	39	74
0	15	16	58	89	118
Total	87	46	101	112	646
<i>Wave 2</i>					
3	57	17	3	10	87
2	11	13	12	10	46
1	5	14	21	58	101
0	9	13	37	59	118
Total	82	57	76	131	646
<i>Wave 3</i>					
3	52	9	8	13	82
2	8	20	13	16	57
1	5	9	13	49	76
0	10	18	40	93	118
Total	75	56	74	141	646

a valid comparison between the reliability of answers on reading habits and those on reading behavior. This being done, the proportion of housewives showing consistent reading behavior over two waves reached 73 per cent (Magazine H), 91 per cent (N), 80 per cent (E), and 87 per cent (B).

Thus statements on reading habits appear to be as reliable as reading behavior. Whether we consider respondents' estimates of their own reading habits or their "actual" reading behavior, the results valid for the period of the survey can just as soundly be projected into the future in one case as in the other.

There is close agreement between reading habits and behavior. Table 3 shows the number of issues read by respondents claiming to be "regular," "occasional," or "nonreader" at one wave or another. Reading behavior differs widely from class to class but is fairly similar within a class. Table 4 indicates the average number of issues read by each group for each magazine. Note that the behavior of the occasional reader and nonreader varied fairly widely from magazine to magazine. For Magazine B, the occasional reader read 1.2 issues; for Magazine N, 2.7 issues. Schyberger (1963) also found that respondents' estimates varied considerably depending on the magazine. For example, he found that "seldom" meant reading five out of 12 issues for one magazine and only three out of 12 for another" (p. 33).

TABLE 3
NUMBER OF ISSUES READ, BY READING HABITS

Read:	Magazine:				Average %	
	H	N	E	B		
"Regularly"	0	2	—	1	1	—
	1	2	3	5	2	2
	2	1	—	6	2	1
	3	7	7	6	19	4
	4	4	1	2	5	2
	5	7	3	14	3	3
	6	39	24	28	23	14
	7	12	12	11	5	4
	8	34	6	26	2	8
	9	118	180	145	82	62
	226	236	244	144	100	
"Occasionally"	0	216	60	205	167	33
	1	181	38	114	83	21
	2	106	26	112	44	14
	3	72	17	70	35	10
	4	61	20	42	10	7
	5	62	12	26	6	6
	6	46	9	29	12	5
	7	18	5	4	7	2
	8	17	15	4	1	2
	9	11	9	2	2	1
	790	211	609	367	100	
"Never"	0	718	1,413	936	1,293	88
	1	105	37	70	83	6
	2	58	13	35	23	2
	3	26	18	26	21	2
	4	4	3	1	3	—
	5	6	3	8	—	1
	6	5	3	6	4	1
	7	—	1	—	—	—
	8	—	—	—	—	—
	9	—	—	—	—	—
	922	1,491	1,035	1,427	100	

Since the reading habits were so closely related to reading behavior, it seemed advisable to try to construct a model in which each class of readers would be assigned a particular reading probability. From the data, the following probability scale was devised:

	probability of reading average issue
"regular" reader	.89
"occasional" reader	.24
"nonreader"	.02

This scale's reliability is questionable because of the large variation on issues read by occasional readers (1.2 for Magazine B; 2.7 for N), and because it does not seem reasonable to give any reading probability (above zero) to a "nonreader." These weaknesses could be alleviated somewhat by using a four-level scale in which we replace "occasionally" with "quite often" and "seldom," thus producing more homogeneous groups. With this further breakdown, those answering "never" should have a nil reading probability.

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TABLE 4
AVERAGE NUMBER OF ISSUES READ
(Nine Issues)

Read:	Magazine:				Average
	H	N	E	B	
"Regularly"	7.6	8.2	7.7	7.1	7.7
"Occasionally"	2.3	2.7	1.9	1.2	2.0
"Never"	0.4	0.1	0.3	0.2	0.2

The audience of an average issue of a magazine could be estimated by:

$$A = aX + bY + cZ$$

where A is the estimated number of readers of an average issue; X represents the number of "regular" readers; Y represents "quite often" readers; Z represents "seldom" readers; and a, b, and c are probability factors.

The present data cover three rather than four classes, so Y and Z were replaced by T ("occasional" readers) in this formula:

$$A = 0.89X + 0.24T$$

Table 5 compares audiences estimated by this formula based on reading habits with audiences measured by the editorial interest technique. In eight out of 12 cases, the formula estimate falls within the range of variation for the audience of the individual issues obtained by the editorial interest method. The deviation between the formula estimates and the average audience of the

TABLE 5
AVERAGE AUDIENCE ESTIMATES: READING HABITS FORMULA VS. EDITORIAL INTEREST METHOD
(Nine Issues)

Magazine:	Wave	Formula	Editorial		
		(0.89X + 0.24T)	Interest Method		
H	Wave 1	21.6	20.9	22.8	20.4
	Wave 2	21.9	21.1	28.8	20.4
	Wave 3	20.3	22.6	23.7	21.2
	Average	21.4	22.4		
N	Wave 1	13.9	16.7	15.3	14.2
	Wave 2	13.9	15.2	17.0	17.0
	Wave 3	13.5	14.1	15.0	13.6
	Average	13.8	15.4		
E	Wave 1	19.5	15.2	19.7	18.9
	Wave 2	20.3	17.6	18.6	23.3
	Wave 3	19.2	19.8	15.5	20.4
	Average	19.6	18.8		
B	Wave 1	11.4	9.8	11.0	9.0
	Wave 2	11.6	10.4	10.2	9.0
	Wave 3	12.1	10.5	11.3	9.0
	Average	11.6	10.0		

nine issues averages 9.2 per cent, whereas the average deviation between the audience of a particular issue and the average audience of the nine issues is 8.2 per cent. In other words, the rough formula is about as accurate as relying on a measurement of only one particular issue.

In judging its overall accuracy, we must note that some anomalies occur with the reading habits technique, such as when we get "nonreaders" who have read several of the nine issues. But the other interview techniques suffer from the same weaknesses; according to Belson's studies among the 9.2 per cent who were classed as readers of monthly magazines according to the IPA technique, 3.6 per cent should have been classed as nonreaders. Among the 90.8 per cent classed as nonreaders according to the IPA technique, 9.6 per cent should have been classed as readers.

As to the editorial interest technique, in 2.3 per cent of the cases the housewives were not sure whether they had looked into the issue, and thus these 2.3 per cent were counted as nonreaders. This percentage of doubtful answers shows that the editorial interest technique, at least as applied to French housewives, is not absolutely accurate.

Simulation

Suppose we were to interview a gifted individual with a perfect memory. This individual could tell us which magazines he read in 1963, giving the publication dates of each magazine. Suppose further that we could interview a representative sample of 10,000 such individuals and determine their entire readership for 1963.

Now with this information on punched cards, an advertiser who had run a magazine campaign in 1963 could determine the number of people who could have been exposed to 0, 1, 2, 3 . . . n advertisements. If the advertiser is interested only in some segment of the readers, say some demographic and socio-economic subgroups, then he could obtain a detailed analysis of the coverage of this smaller "useful" population.

We could predict the coverage for a different insertion schedule or different publications. If, for example, the advertiser estimates that a reader must be exposed to six advertisements to be reached effectively, then we could compare different schedules on the basis of the number of useful readers "effectively reached."

Our sample of 10,000 "perfect memories" may inform us perfectly about the past, but it can pre-

dict the future only in so far as the future is similar to the past. That is, behavior patterns must be regarded as relatively stable, as forming readership *habits*. It is by presupposing that some people read *Paris-Match* more or less regularly and other people have the habit of not reading it that we can use a 1963 *Paris-Match* audience survey to determine the 1964 audience. But these habits are not fixed. They may change slowly, but they change.

In spite of this change, we could use the 1963 figures to obtain fairly adequate estimates for 1964. If we can assign to each type of 1963 reading habit a reading probability for a particular issue in 1964, then we could create the set of punched cards needed for simulation. Suppose that reading a publication "regularly" means that the respondent reads, on the average, nine out of ten issues, i.e., a 90 per cent probability of reading a given issue. For "quite often" suppose that he reads one out of three issues, i.e., a 33 per cent probability; "seldom" would correspond to a 10 per cent probability; and "never" would have a zero probability.

Now take someone who says he reads *Elle* regularly, *Jours de France* quite often, and *Confidences* seldom. From the 52 issues of *Elle* in 1964, we choose, using a table of random digits, the issues that this individual is going to read, having so arranged it that each issue has a 90 per cent chance of being drawn. We do the same for the 52 issues of *Jours de France*, giving each issue a probability of 33 per cent, and *Confidences*, giving each issue a probability of 10 per cent.

When we have done the same for 10,000 individuals, we will have a set of 10,000 cards on which a year's readership is punched. Then we can analyze any insertion schedule in *Elle*, *Jours de France*, *Confidences*, and any other publication covered by the survey.

An important capability of simulation is that although it only approximates the truth with respect to one individual's behavior, through the law of games of chance this risk of error diminishes rapidly when one considers the larger group. With a sample of 10,000 this risk is comparable with that due to changes in reading habits!

CONCLUSIONS

Let us repeat the principal hypotheses and guidelines we have had to accept for our direct approach:

1. Reported reading habits can be transposed into reliable probabilities.
2. To be effectively reached, each prospect must

have a certain minimum number of opportunities to see the ads. We do not know if there is a threshold where one passes smartly from no effectiveness to full effectiveness. Nor do we know how to determine this threshold, nor whether it is the same for all people.

3. We have been concerned only with opportunities to see—not with how these opportunities might be converted into ads actually seen.

4. We have had to ignore the influence of format or color on the outcome of an opportunity to see, and the influence of the publication itself on the communication of an advertising message.

We do not pretend that the problem of optimizing a media schedule is almost solved by the simulation technique suggested. But it still would be an important accomplishment to be able to estimate the number of readers of the average issue of each magazine and to analyze a magazine media schedule in terms of coverage and frequency. To this end, the following procedure is proposed:

1. Conduct several audience surveys on particular issues of various magazines with the editorial interest technique. Begin the interview with direct

questions on the reading habits: "Do you usually read this magazine, regularly, quite often, seldom, or never?"

2. Analyze the data so as to arrive at a weight or probability factor on reading an average issue for each of the four reading habits.

3. Ask only direct questions on reading habits in subsequent surveys. The audience of an average issue would be estimated by a formula based on the number of respondents who "regularly," "quite often," "seldom," and "never" read the publication. Simulation would be used to analyze a media schedule in terms of coverage, frequency, and duplication among media.

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There is a hierarchy of facts; some have no reach; they teach us nothing but themselves. . . . There are, on the other hand, facts of great yield; each of them teaches us a new law. And since a choice must be made, it is to these that the scientist should devote himself.

—HENRI POINCARÉ