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HIGH READERS-PER-COPY : AN ATTEMPT AT VALIDATION

INTRODUCTION

In India as well as abroad, users of NRS data (especially publications which have been affected adversely) have often raised the issue of high readers-per-copy for some publications as a reason to question the authenticity of the readership estimates in general.

Arriving at the levels of readers-per-copy (rpc) which are acceptable, and determining possible reasons for high rpc for some publications, has been a major concern of researchers once the NRS results are published. This concern is also evidenced in the papers presented at the Readership Symposia in New Orleans and Montreal and even in the current one at Salzburg.

Before moving into assessing the magnitude of this 'problem' (if I may use that word) and the findings of some studies and analysis carried out by us in India, let us examine the possible reasons why some publications have a relatively higher rpc.

POSSIBLE REASONS

There have been several reasons identified for explaining why some publications have a higher rpc than others. These are:

- (1) Higher pass-along readership for some publications because of reader interest and high issue price.
- (2) The presence of circulating libraries, office and institutional magazine and recreational clubs, and resellers of old magazines, which tend to increase the proportion of the secondary audience for some publications.
- (3) The problem of replication; that is, the inflation of readership estimates as obtained through the

Recent Reading technique because the reading of a publication is spread over several days. This inflation of readership estimates, and therefore of rpc, is likely to affect publications with relatively longer publishing intervals and those which are features or story-based rather than those of a topical nature.

(4) The phenomenon of telescoping by which respondents err on the date of the last reading event, perceiving it to have occurred more recently than it actually did. This phenomenon will tend to favour magazines with longer publishing intervals; that is, through this telescoping effect the rpc of monthlies and fortnightlies will tend to be more inflated than the rpc of weeklies.

(5) The tendency to overclaim, affecting the readership estimates of prestige or status-bestowing publications.

(6) The distortion in estimates because of the lower circulation of the publication relative to sample size.

ANALYSIS OF RPC FOR THE INDIAN NRS

An analysis was carried out on the readership estimates for Bombay provided by the Third National Readership Survey (IMRB, 1983-1984). These readership estimates are based on a sample of 2,654 adults, whose addresses were selected randomly from the electoral rolls. The readership measurement was carried out using the Recent Reading technique and a masthead booklet containing black-and-white photographic reproductions of the mastheads. A total of 120 publications of eight different languages are covered in Bombay.

Table 1 gives an indication of number of publications which have a high rpc in Bombay.

TABLE 1
Number of publications with high rpc

(1) Total number of publications	120
(2) Number for which audited circulations available through ABC	62
(3) Total number of publications with rpc greater than 15	13
(4) Number of publications in item 3 affected by circulation losses due to strike	7
(5) True number of publications with rpc greater than 15	6
(6) Number of publications with rpc greater than 25	3

Let us look at the profile of these six publications a little closely (Table 2). There are three English-language publications and three publications in other languages. There are two weeklies, one fortnightly and three monthlies. There are three general interest magazines, two film magazines and one sports magazine.

TABLE 2
Profile of publications with high rpc

	Type	Circulation	RPC
Sportsworld	English sports weekly	3,595	35.9
Filmi Kaliyan	Hindi film monthly	6,885	28.8
Mirror	English general monthly	6,322	25.0
Lokprabha	Marathi general monthly	14,970	18.3
Manohar Kahaniyan	Hindi general monthly	16,435	17.3
Star & Style	English film fortnightly	19,484	15.4

STUDY DESIGN

In order to arrive at the kinds of factors leading to higher rpc for some publications a study was carried out in Bombay. There were two parts to the study:

(1) A readership survey among 600 adults using the Recent Reading technique, aided by mastheads. This study also provided data on provenance (source of last copy read), the age of the oldest issue still with the household, membership of office/institutional libraries, circulating libraries and the names of publications regularly borrowed from these sources.

(2) A study among 43 circulating libraries, hairdressers and resellers of old magazines to obtain the age distribution of publications and an indication of the age of the oldest issue at these institutions.

The study was carried out in three Parliamentary constituencies of Bombay-South, Central and the North-West. The adult population was sampled using random starting addresses from the electoral lists and by carrying out ten interviews, using a random location method called the Right-hand rule, around each starting address. The institutions were sampled to ensure a reasonable cross-section by size of operation and a geographical spread throughout the survey areas.

The analysis that is presented in this paper considers 11 publications - four publications which have shown high rpc in the Third National Readership Survey and seven other publications which have been selected as competing publications and which provide the benchmark for comparison (Table 3).

Two publications, *Sportsworld* and *Lokprabha* could not be included in the analysis as there were no comparative publications included in the Third NRS.

TABLE 3
List of publications
included in the analysis

English general magazines
* Mirror
Reader's Digest

English film magazines
* Star & Style
Stardust
Screen

Hindi general magazines
* Manohar Kahaniyan
Nutan Kahaniyan
Satyakatha

Hindi film magazines
* Filmi Kaliyan
Sushama
Mayapuri

* Publications so marked have a high rpc in the Third NRS (IMRB 1983-1984)

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Higher pass-along readership

In order to assess whether the starred (*) publications have a higher rpc because of a greater number of pass-along readers, an analysis was carried out on the source of copy for the last issue read. Primary readers were defined as those who have the copy delivered at home or who have purchased the copy themselves or through any other member of their household. All other readers, whether they have purchased it from resellers of old magazines, borrowed the copy or read it elsewhere, have been considered as secondary readers.

Table 4 presents an analysis of the proportion of primary and secondary readers to the total readers of that publication.

It is interesting to observe that in every case the starred publications have a greater secondary or pass-along readership than the other publications in their group.

This substantiates the belief that the higher rpc for some publications is due to the greater secondary audience and that the proportion of the secondary readership varies between publications even in the same interest group.

TABLE 4
Proportion of primary
and secondary readership

	RPC	Primary readers %	Secondary readers %
<i>English general magazines</i>			
* Mirror	25.0	27.8	72.2
Reader's Digest	n.a.	49.1	50.9
<i>English film magazines</i>			
* Star & Style	15.4	16.9	83.1
Stardust	12.9	20.3	79.7
Screen	6.7	41.5	58.5
<i>Hindi general magazines</i>			
* Manohar Kahaniyan	17.3	41.2	58.8
Nutan Kahaniyan	8.2	45.5	54.5
Satyakatha	n.a.	50.0	50.0
<i>Hindi film magazines</i>			
* Filmi Kaliyan	28.8	21.0	79.0
Sushama	9.4	25.0	75.0
Mayapuri	6.7	31.5	68.5

Age of issue

Supportive evidence of the substantial pass-along readership is provided by the fact that the life of a copy is several times the issue period. Thus, the total number of readers for a single copy of a monthly is accumulated not over a single month but over several months. Let us look at some of the key findings (Table 5).

Table 5 clearly indicates that there is considerable pass-along readership and that the readership of a copy accumulates much longer than the issue period.

TABLE 5
Average age of the
oldest issue available

At a primary reader's home	5.2 months
At a circulating library	13.5 months
At a reseller of old magazines	44.8 months

Researchers interested in knowing about the effects of age of issue on readership results in South Africa might like to refer to Wally Langschmidt's study presented in the Montreal Research Symposium (1983).

Membership of libraries

The survey among households has indicated that as many as 11% of the reader households have at least one member of the family as a member of a circulating library. On an average, the number of publications regularly borrowed from the library is 4.2.

Another interesting finding of the study is that the starred publications (those with higher rpc) have over a third of the readership generated through circulating, office and school/college libraries. The corresponding proportion for the non-starred comparative publications is 21% (Table 6). This analysis suggests that one of the reasons why a publication has higher rpc is that there is a greater deal of borrowing from circulating and other libraries.

The problems of replication and the telescoping effect

While this study has not been designed to address the problems of higher rpc due to net replication and the telescoping effects, we feel that these effects are likely to be particular to publications with longer publishing intervals. There is considerable

evidence through readership experiments carried out worldwide to support this belief (Cornish, 1981; Joyce, 1981; Appel, 1981).

TABLE 6
The membership of libraries

Proportion of reader households who are members of circulating libraries	11%
Average number of publications regularly borrowed	4.2
Proportion of readership through circulating and institutional libraries for high rpc publications	34%
Proportion of readership through circulating and institutional libraries for other comparative publications	21%

The analysis of the Third NRS data for Bombay had identified six publications with high rpc - two of which are weeklies, one a fortnightly and three monthlies. There appears to be no direct correlation of high rpc with publishing interval.

However, a more rigorous assessment of the magnitude of these effects needs to be carried out with perhaps a 'Yesterday first-time reading event' method.

Prestige publications

Another possible reason for a high rpc could be the tendency to overclaim readership affecting the estimates of readership of prestige or status-bestowing publications.

One interesting way of judging whether publications are likely to be status-bestowing is to analyse the socio-economic profile of the primary readers (that is, those who themselves

subscribe to or purchase a copy of that publication). Through this analysis one can determine whether the publications that have a high rpc are those which have a high primary readership among upper-income households.

TABLE 7
Proportion of primary readership
in upper income households

% Primary readers with incomes exceeding Rs.1500 p.m.	
Proportion for high rpc publications	52
Proportion for other comparative publications	56

This analysis (Table 7) indicates that there are no marked differences in the profile of primary readers for publications with high rpc and those publications with lower rpc.

Another way of assessing whether the prestige factor is likely to play a part in increasing the rpc level is to compare the issue price of the publications, the hypothesis being that status-bestowing publications are likely to be higher priced than other comparative publications in the same interest group.

Table 8 appears to indicate that there are no major differences in issue price between publications with high rpc compared with others in the same group. Overclaiming of readership due to the prestige factor does not appear to be the reason for high rpc for some publications.

Relationship with circulation

In the first Readership Research Symposium at New Orleans, one researcher (Langschmidt, 1981) after examining theoretical rpc computations

came to the conclusion that where there are small samples and limited circulation there is a definite bias towards large rpc figures.

Table 9 presents the number of publications with high rpc analysed by circulation of the publication.

TABLE 8
Issue price of publications

	Periodicity	Price per copy
<i>English general magazines</i>		
* Mirror	Monthly	Rs 4
Reader's Digest	Monthly	Rs 10
<i>English film magazines</i>		
* Star & Style	Fortnightly	Rs 4
Stardust	Monthly	Rs 6
Screen	Weekly	Rs 1.50
<i>Hindi general magazines</i>		
* Manohar		
Kahaniyan	Monthly	Rs 4
Nutan Kahaniyan	Fortnightly	Rs 4
Satyakatha	Monthly	Rs 3
<i>Hindi film magazines</i>		
* Filmi Kaliyan	Monthly	Rs 4
Sushama	Weekly	Rs 2
Mayapuri	Monthly	Rs 4

TABLE 9
High rpc and
relationship with circulation

	Between			
	Below 10,000 Total copies	10,000- 20,000 copies	Over 20,000 copies	
Total number of magazines	38	13	17	8
Number of magazines with rpc greater than 15	6	3	3	-

While the data are not amenable to any significance testing, there does appear to be some relationship between high rpc and low circulation. Considering this observation in light of the findings that there is greater pass-along readership for publications with high rpc, we are led to believe that publications with lower circulations tend to build up a greater proportion of their readership through borrowing from friends and libraries.

CONCLUSIONS

Publications with high rpc tend to have a much larger base of secondary readers than others even in the same interest group. In terms of the proportion of readership, publications with high rpc have about half as much more readership through circulating and other libraries than other publications in the same group. This greater secondary reader audience appears to be more associated with publications with smaller circulations than those with larger circulations.

Overclaiming of readership due to prestige factors does not appear to be the reason for higher rpc.

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