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LINGUA FRANCA? YOU MUST BE JOKING!

A paper presented at the Fifth International  
Readership Research Symposium - Singapore 1991

Synopsis

Lingua Franca? You must be joking!

This paper proposes that while, in an ideal world, a media research "Lingua Franca" might be possible, in the real world it is not.

Media research provides the currency for the buying and selling of advertising space and time; unfortunately, that currency varies from one country to another. This point is illustrated by quoting differences of demographic classifications in different countries. Attention is drawn to the many different research techniques in current use, none of which are comparable with each other; there is no common definition of media exposure. However, each individual country usually has its own media currencies, particularly those countries with industry controlled research, and the importance of such currencies within each country cannot be over-emphasised.

The difficulties of readership research are discussed, and the advantages and disadvantages of each main method are briefly summarised. The experiences of the International Readership Research Symposia held since 1981 are cited, to point out that a general solution may be impossible to achieve. Attention is drawn to the strength of feeling that leads individual countries to defend their own research techniques and methodology.

Finally, the paper describes another overwhelming obstacle - the "Language Barrier", giving examples to back the case. With some regret, it is concluded that a world-wide research "Lingua Franca" is not a practical possibility.

At first sight, the title of this paper looks a bit odd. With all the excitement and ballyhoo about single markets, global villages and national barriers breaking down, why should there be any limitations or frontiers to advertising research? Why shouldn't there be a "Lingua Franca"? Well, maybe there would not be any difficulty in an ideal world, but we live in a real world and we have to solve the real problems that come with it.

So in trying to find out whether a "Lingua Franca" is possible, let us start by defining the aims of media research and then see how those aims are achieved in different countries. The basic aim of media research is (1) to provide as far as possible an accurate measure of advertising exposure in precisely defined terms and thus (2) to provide a currency for the buying and selling of advertising space or time. The measurement should as far as possible reflect the aims of media planning which has been defined as trying to reach the right people, the right number of times and as economically as possible. Media research, to be valuable, must always concentrate on measuring advertising exposure to people, not on the media through which the exposure takes place. Circulation figures for newspapers are not enough if you don't know how many readers there are. Newspapers don't buy products; their readers do.

Once research can establish how many readers or viewers or listeners a particular medium has, then media planners will compare the cost of each medium to see which provides the best value for money; the "Cost per thousand" has been the basis for media negotiation since the early days of the industry. If a television station has more viewers in peak time, then advertisers, or advertising agencies working on their behalf, will pay more for a spot. Magazines with a large readership can command higher rates for a full page advertisement than magazines with a smaller readership, but if they charge too much then a media schedule composed of several small magazines may be better value than one large magazine.

The research thus provides the currency for the buying and selling of advertising space and time. It is important that any currency is consistent, reliable, universally accepted and universally used; it must be a common currency. Unfortunately, the media research currencies used in different countries are by no means comparable and, unlike monetary currencies, there is no simple exchange rate mechanism to permit conversion from one currency to another. Let me give you some examples.

Let us start with how people are classified. That should be simple enough, you might think, but different countries have very different concepts. The classic example is "Social Grade" or "Socio-Economic classification", which is one of the most frequently used marketing discriminators in the United Kingdom and yet is missing from the media research in some other countries, where the concept of "Class" or "Social Grade" hardly exists and is replaced by "Income" or "Job title" or "Occupation".

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Perhaps social grade is rather unfair; let us try something simpler like "Adults". Surely there is no difference there? Well, I'm sorry but on checking through Erhard Meier's immensely useful summary\* of readership research practices in 29 countries, I found 11 different definitions of "Adults"....

<u>"Adults" aged ....</u>	<u>Countries</u>
12+	4
12-69	1
13+	2
14+	5
15+	10
15-65	1
15-70	1
15-74	1
16+	2
18+	1
19+	1
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11 definitions	29 countries

You may be surprised at all the 12, 13 and 14 year old adults that there seem to be. I found myself more concerned as to why, in some cases, people should have been omitted from the top end of the age spectrum; the idea that, at 66, one is apparently regarded as too dotty to be able to answer readership questions sensibly should give us all pause for thought. But there again, the way my memory is going nowadays, perhaps they are right!

Anyway that just touches on the difficulties of classifying people. Once we start looking at research techniques, the situation gets worse. Research is carried out in many different ways: by telephone, by personal interview, by self-completion questionnaires, by diaries and by push-button meters on a television set. All these techniques can produce results of some value but it is meaningless to compare results from one technique with those from another.

If these difficulties were not enough, they pale into insignificance when we look at the problems of defining media exposure. What is television viewing, for example? Sitting with eyes open watching a television set which is switched on and tuned to a commercial channel? It sounds a reasonable definition, but in France and the UK for example, the definition is "presence in the room with the set switched on" which does not necessarily mean watching the screen. And what is "watching a programme"? Seeing any part of it? What, even one second? 10 seconds? One minute? At least 5 minutes? At least 50%? At least 90%? All of it? And when considering the audience to a television commercial, should one include the increasingly large number of those who have recorded a programme complete with its commercials and don't see it until hours or even days after it was transmitted? If so, then should you include those people who fast-forward through the commercials when playing back the video? Faced with these questions, one can begin to appreciate some of the difficulties.

The definition of readership is no easier. What is "reading"? In the 29 countries included in Erhard Meier's summary that I referred to earlier, I found 29 readership definitions each of which differed in at least some way from the others. "Reading" tends to carry with it implications of mental concentration or at least perusal of the publication with a certain amount of thoroughness; most surveys therefore try to broaden the definition of "reading" to "read or looked at", "glanced through", "paged through", "flicked through", "thumbed through" or "leafed through". Some surveys, including the U.K. National Readership Survey, try to give some guidance by including the phrase "at least a couple of minutes". Some media planners have argued that such a broad definition of reading is useless and gives little guidance to the number of people likely to be exposed to an advertisement, which could be anywhere in the publication; an advertiser with his advertisement on the front page might well feel differently. The important point is that it is meaningless to compare 10% "reading" a publication in one country with the 25% "reading or glancing through" a publication in another country; as somebody must have once said, that would be like comparing apples with oranges.

Does all this matter? Are all these technical problems of definition important or is it rather like a mediaeval disputation as to how many angels can dance on the head of a pin? Sadly, it is desperately important, because a tiny change in a readership questionnaire can make a dramatic difference to the results; and the results of course are readership figures which are used for the negotiations over the spending of millions of pounds of advertising revenue annually.

With all these problems, it is perhaps surprising that any reliable readership currency can be established at all. However, WITHIN a given country, there is usually an accepted set of figures that are used as a basis for the buying and selling of media, though the situation is certainly complicated in those countries, like the USA, where there are two or more competing readership surveys, with different research techniques and different definitions of "reading". Many of the delegates to this conference will be much more familiar with the situation in the USA than I am, but I have been assured by people who claim to know that there is an understandable tendency for media-owners to sell their publications using the research which shows them in the most favourable light; it did not come as a complete surprise to hear that agencies have no hesitation in using alternative research data as support for an opposing argument during negotiations!

In most countries, there is only one readership survey, often controlled by an industry body composed of representatives from media-owners, agencies and advertisers; there is in those cases a media currency which is used, (if not necessarily completely accepted), by all sides of the industry. In the U.K., the National Readership Survey is controlled by JICNARS, the Joint Industry Committee for National Readership Surveys; we therefore have a widely used database for the planning and buying of national newspapers and magazines. There is another survey, called the Target Group Index, which is a commercial survey of the National Press analysed by a wide range of product and brand usage; it is interesting to note that, in the interests of preserving the vital media currency, the results of the independently

produced Target Group Index are adjusted before publication to match the National Readership Survey figures as closely as possible. That in itself shows just how important the establishment of a consistent media currency within the UK is considered to be.

In this context, I have referred elsewhere in this Symposium to the recent study commissioned by the Media Circle and the Media Research Group into the needs of the users of the National Readership Survey. The investigation was conducted by means of personal interviews with about 40 agencies and publishers, followed by a detailed questionnaire sent to all users. It is interesting to note that throughout the interviews, and bearing in mind the criticism that been levelled recently at the National Readership Survey, the need for a common currency was emphasised strongly time and again. That was then confirmed in the survey where 94% of all respondents agreed that the NRS provides an essential currency for the buying and selling of press advertising space. With that in mind, 81% of respondents also thought that TGI readership figures should continue to be adjusted to match the NRS results to preserve the industry currency.

So even if it is not possible to compare the results of one country's research with those of another, countries with an impartial Joint Industry Committee (or JIC, as they have come to be known) indeed have good reason to be grateful because a reasonably consistent currency is then established for each medium. In the United Kingdom, virtually every major medium has its own Joint Industry Committee to carry out research and to provide media data on a co-operative basis. Several million pounds are spent each year on BARB television research. National newspapers and magazines are well served by JICNARS; Independent local radio has its own research body - JICRAR, spending over £300,000 each year; poster contractors have JICPAR and even the new cable television industry has its own research body - JICCAR. Surprisingly, only the regional press, which accounted for £1,500 million of advertising last year (25% of all advertising), has until recently, stood alone and JICless. But even here, after some two years of preparatory and technical work, JICREG - the Joint Industry Committee for Regional Press Research - has just filled the information void and brought the regional press medium into the fold. By modelling newspaper readership from circulation and census data, JICREG can now provide readership data for virtually all the 1600 or so paid-for and free regional newspapers currently published in the U.K. The regional press media currency will from now on, like the national press, be based on readership rather than circulation. The important thing to note about all this is that each country, and the UK is a good example, goes to some lengths to provide consistent and reliable media currencies for use within its own borders. However, there is very little consistency between one country and another, nor indeed much chance of achieving it in the foreseeable future.

Readership research is incredibly difficult. The difficulties of definition, the multiplicity of possible research techniques and the volatility of the results dependent on the smallest changes in questionnaire content or design mean that consistency is, in the light of current knowledge, virtually impossible to achieve. And yet, when using the results of research as a currency, consistency is far more important

than accuracy. We are now participating in the 5th International Readership Research Symposium since 1981. In each of the previous four Symposia, the brightest and most experienced media researchers from all over the world have put in months of work and then come together for nearly a week on each occasion to share their experience and to try to solve the problems of readership research. Leaving aside the question of how intelligent we may or may not be, we are certainly enthusiasts; by the general standards of the advertising industry, we are undeniably dedicated men and women and we have between us put in an enormous amount of work, but one is forced to admit that at, this stage, we are not even within dreaming distance of a general solution.

There are several of course several main approaches to establishing average issue readership. The first, used in the U.K. though perhaps accepted with varying degrees of enthusiasm, is known as the "recent reading" or the "recency" method. That consists of asking people whether they have read or looked at any copy of a given publication within the last publication interval, for example yesterday for a daily newspaper, the last seven days for a weekly magazine or the last four weeks for a monthly magazine. Many of you will no doubt be relieved to hear that I do not propose to detail once again all the horrors of replication inevitably associated with this readership methodology except to point out mildly that the problem still exists.

Another readership measurement method which is used for some readership research in the USA, is known as "thru-the-book". That consists of exposing viewers to specific issues of a publication, which avoids the replication problem and therefore tends to produce lower readers per copy than the recency method for monthly magazines, but it unfortunately has other disadvantages. Firstly, there are the practical difficulties of interviewers physically transporting large quantities of magazines; one approach is to strip out the advertisements to keep the weight down but that is thought by some to distort the results by making the magazine unrecognisable. Secondly, it is very difficult to decide what age of issue should be shown to the respondents; if too young an issue is used, then it does not have time to build up all its pass-on readership; on the other hand if it is too old, then the first readers tend to have forgotten that they have done so which can also lead to under-estimates.

A recent approach, used particularly in the Netherlands, is the "first-time-reading-yesterday" method. That also has disadvantages, among which is the need for a huge sample size to get reliable results for monthly publications. Moreover, while it can generate a probability for each respondent of reading each publication, it cannot directly measure average issue readership and duplication for weekly or monthly magazines, which is a pity when the average issue measure tends to provide the currency which everybody needs. Then there is the approach of the "first time reading in the last publishing interval" on which work has been done in South Africa; again that may have some problems associated with memory difficulties. Another approach it to ask respondents how often they read a publication and then to use mathematics to calculate a probability but again that is not a direct measure of average issue readership.

Anyway, all these methods have advantages and disadvantages and they all have their devotees. Much more importantly, they all have their fanatical opponents who have been scathing in their denunciations of all these techniques on more than one occasion. A great deal of blood has flowed under various bridges since the first Symposium in 1981 and of course the strength of feeling provides the material for thoroughly interesting and involving sessions. But that does not mean that we are any nearer a generally accepted solution. I was interested to note that, when the organisers of this Symposium called for synopses, with the theme of suggesting the methodology for a new survey for an imaginary country, they suggested that discussion might take place under seven headings:-

1. Average issue readership estimation methods  
RR; TTB; FRY; reading frequency etc.)
2. Data collection (Face-to-face; self-completion;  
diaries; computer-assisted telephone interviews)
3. Filters
4. Prompts
5. "Readership" definition and question wording
6. Reading frequency measurement
7. Questionnaire order (including rotation) and length

It is significant that, ten years after the first Symposium, the organisers still recognise that strong disagreement exists about all these topics. As usual, the existence of such disagreement will contribute to a highly stimulating and valuable symposium but it is extremely unlikely that a consensus will be achieved on ANY of those subjects, let alone all of them. And for the same reasons, and at the risk of injecting a note of unpopular realism into the general euphoria, I have to say that I do not foresee, at least within the working lifetime of most of us here, any real prospect of a world-wide or even a Europe-wide media database to provide a universally accepted currency for the buying and selling of all press media.

Within each country, each research technique has been developed after years of argument and discussion; it has been the result of experimentation, testing, fine-tuning, honing and polishing. It has been the subject of weeks of work in countless technical sub-committees, been the cause of triumphs and resignations and been tempered by argument, counter-argument and eventual reluctant compromise. Why on earth should any individual country give up its precious currency simply because a different technique, already considered, evaluated and rejected for apparently good reasons, is used by another country in a different culture and under different circumstances? Why should the Dutch give up "First time reading yesterday"? Would the British seriously accept "Thru-the-book" for over 260 publications currently on our NRS? Sadly, to devise a "Lingua Franca" is beyond our cunning.

Although there is a great deal of research out there in the market place and it can be potentially be of tremendous help for media planning and buying, it is fraught with pitfalls, it is extremely complex and it needs the most careful interpretation by somebody who really knows what he or she is doing. The different definitions, which have existed for years in individual countries but which defy comparison with

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research from other sources, can sometimes make analyses at best unreliable and at worst dangerously misleading. Standardisation does not exist; individual research practices are firmly ensconced behind their national frontiers.

That leads me to a final topic, dealing with a problem which is so obvious and overwhelming that I have not even mentioned it - the language barrier. Most of the problems I have discussed pale into insignificance when one considers the difficulty of finding a translation of a word in one language into a word with precisely the same meaning but in another language. To establish a common currency across International borders, linguistic synonyms would be essential but they do not necessarily exist; a common currency is virtually impossible.

Take a word like "read", for example. When I say "read", I might mean "See", "Look at", "Glance at", "Page through", "Flick through", "Thumb through", "Leaf through", and so on, because those words have all been used in readership surveys. We know what significant differences result from a change in any single word or phrase used in English to define the concept of reading. What sort of expertise could possibly decide with certainty the word to give exactly the same meaning in another language? Let us take French, for example.

One thinks first of all perhaps of "Lire" which means "read". But then there is "Voir" meaning "see", and of course "Regarder", meaning to "look at". "Glancing at" is possibly best translated by "Jeter un coup d'oeil sur" - literally "throwing the blow of an eye on". Perhaps more important are "Parcourir" meaning to "skim through" and "Feuilleter" meaning to leaf through by turning over pages. "Scruter" means to scan something while "Examiner" means to scrutinise something with some care. Then there is "Considérer" meaning to contemplate or gaze on and "Repasser" which can mean to look over something, possibly several times.

Anyway, that is just a glimpse into the language minefield. I have no idea of the real implications of any of those French words nor of the research effects they would produce and whatever bi-lingual expertise were to be brought to bear, an exact translation may not even exist. Consider that problem for all the combinations of European languages, let alone the more exotic world-wide tongues and you begin to get some idea of the difficulty.

"Lingua Franca"? Vous blaguez, n'est-ce pas!

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10th October 1990

\*Reference: Summary of Current Readership Research.  
Compiled by Erhard Meier, Research Services Limited.  
Fourth Readership Research Symposium - Barcelona 1988.