

## **3.6 Methodological experiments with magazine questioning**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The national media survey of the Arbeitsgemeinschaft Media-Analyse (AG.MA), carried out on behalf of publishers, TV and radio stations and advertising agencies and advertisers, includes determining the reach of: about 90 consumer magazines; the national and regional daily newspapers; the TV and radio programmes.

However, the number of magazines to be covered has constantly increased over the years, so that the question of the capacity of interviewers and interviewees arises.

### **THE PROBLEM**

Critics of the media survey say that the questionnaire is not convenient for the interviewee and that the interview is difficult to conduct. Decreasing reach levels are, amongst other reasons, explained by the length and structure of the interview.

For this reason the Association has made funds available to develop, in tests, questionnaire models which retain the current volume of information in full, but make it easier for the interviewer and keep alive the interviewee's interest in the survey subject.

A first series of tests took place in 1979. The aim of these first steps was to test two alternative questionnaire models in comparison with the current model, in similarly structured groups of 200 persons each, with regard to the reactions of the interviewer to the degree of difficulty, possible sources of error, length of interview; the reactions of the interviewees with regard to possible excessive demands on them; the comprehensiveness of the answers in relation to filter questions.

This paper concerns itself exclusively with the experiments in the area of consumer magazines, which in this project offer the widest scope in comparison with other media.

### **HOW DO THE THREE QUESTIONNAIRE MODELS OF THE EXPERIMENT DIFFER?**

#### **The current model**

First step: handing over of 90 cards with coloured facsimile titles of the consumer magazines in double A5 format (mixed order). The interviewee sorts into three groups: unknown; only the name known; have actually

handled. These comprise the general filter.

Second step: split according to three publication frequency categories (monthly, bi-weekly, weekly); determination of the readers in 12-step publication intervals; determination of the reading frequency with the help of a numerical 12-point scale; determination of the readers in simple publication interval.

The second step is completed for all titles before proceeding.

Third step: split according to three publication frequency categories; determination of method of purchase; determination of readership yesterday.

Second and third steps: the interviewee answers with the aid of a list; the interviewer marks the relevant answers in the questionnaire.

Main point of criticism: the interviewee has to concern himself with three separate timings with any title he has read.

#### **The experimental self-completing model**

To begin with, the title cards are divided into three publication frequency categories (no 'general filter').

Within each category, in immediate succession: first step: determination of the last reading event. The interviewee marks the appropriate titles himself on the front of the title card.

Second step: with reading in 12-step publication interval the title cards are shown once again: determination of the reading frequency with help of the numerical 12-point scale; determination of method of purchase.

The interviewee marks the appropriate titles himself on the back of the title card.

The interviewee concerns himself with any read title twice within a short interval and answers only three questions with the same amount of information.

#### **The experimental sorting model**

To begin with, the title cards are divided into three publication frequency categories (no 'general filter').

Smaller title cards in 'playing card' format are handed over.

Within each category in immediate succession: first step: determination of the readers in 12-step publication interval; second step: determination of the reading frequency; third step: determination of the readers in simple publication interval; fourth step: determination of method of purchase; fifth step: determination of readership yesterday.

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With each step the interviewee sorts the title cards onto the appropriate squares on lists which are handed over; the interviewer marks the relevant answers on a duplicate list.

Here the interviewee has to concern himself five times with a title, but within a short interval - not interrupted by other publication intervals. All statements about each title are clearly arranged on a duplicate sheet.

### HOW DO THE INTERVIEWERS REACT TO THE THREE MODELS?

For the experiment 48 interviewers were employed, each interviewer having received two different forms for purposes of comparison.

The results are shown in **Table 1**.

To begin with the result seems clear. The current model gets a strong rebuff, which might lead one to assume at first, that it takes considerably more time. But the evaluation of the time required for print media as noted by the interviewers gave the averages shown in **Table 2**.

The difference is surprisingly small, at only three minutes.

### HOW DO THE THREE MODELS GUARANTEE THE COMPREHENSIVENESS OF THE INFORMATION?

The extent and design of the test are not suitable to derive reach figures for the individual test forms. However, one criterion for the quality of a survey model is the comprehensiveness of its information - ie in this case the question of how many titles pass the different filter processes.

Difficulties in use, incomprehensibility to and excessive demands on the interviewee, time-consuming questioning techniques or even the 'rationalisation' influences of the interviewer are in some circumstances to be seen in these values.

**Table 3** gives a few of the main results.

One criticism of the current model is the objection that the handing over of 88 cards makes excessive demands on the interviewee, so that clarity is lost and titles used are overlooked.

The test results do not confirm this. The general filter of the media survey gives on average the same number of titles as the filter-free, clearly arranged by publication intervals, self-completing model; the sorting model most preferred by the interviewers gives in this category one

**TABLE 1**  
Subjective judgement of interviewer

	<i>Current model</i> %	<i>Self-completing model</i> %	<i>Sorting model</i> %	<i>None of the models</i> %
The questions are most correctly answered here	26	38	49	4
The interviewees tend most easily to break off the interview here	40	23	9	28
Is the easiest for the interviewee	15	36	45	6
The interviewer should be able to deviate from the questionnaire so that the interviewee understands everything	47	30	23	23
The interview lasts longest	49	26	21	6

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**TABLE 2**  
Time required for print media in minutes

	<i>Current model</i>	<i>Self-completing model</i>	<i>Sorting model</i>
Average total	28.3	25.2	25.0
Average – 29 years	28.0	24.1	25.5
Average 30–49 years	29.3	23.1	26.3
Average 50 years +	27.4	28.1	23.7
Average elementary school	28.7	26.8	24.6
Average further schooling	27.5	22.4	26.0
Average men	27.9	24.7	25.5
Average women	28.5	25.5	24.6

**TABLE 3**  
Average number of magazine titles in total

	<i>Have actually handled</i>	<i>Maximum readership (12-step interval)</i>	<i>Readers per issue (simple interval)</i>
<b>Total population</b>			
Current model	22.2	11.8	5.0
Self-completing model	22.3	11.8	3.8
Sorting model	21.0	9.1	4.3
<b>Men</b>			
Current model	21.4	10.0	3.9
Self-completing model	21.5	11.7	4.1
Sorting model	19.6	8.7	4.4
<b>Women</b>			
Current model	22.8	13.2	5.8
Self-completing model	23.0	11.9	3.5
Sorting model	22.1	9.4	4.2

title less on average.

For maximum readership the current model and the self-completing model, when considering the total population, lie again on the same level, the sorting model falling away somewhat. In this category there are already clear differences between the sexes: the current model gives markedly higher reaches for women, while among men the self-completing model is not significantly above the current model.

The results for readers per issue are noteworthy: the self-completing model gives in this readership category the lowest number of titles, slipping below the sorting model, particularly through the behaviour of the female

interviewees. With the current model, when considering the total population, a readers per issue of 5.0, the highest average number of titles, is achieved; however, amongst the male population the sorting model is first, followed by the self-completing model, with the current model only a short distance behind – practically on the same level.

The differences in readers per issue are given an additional explanation if the data are broken down by socio-demographic characteristics (**Table 4**).

In 'difficult' population segments – ie with interviewees who are intellectually less agile – the current model gives the highest number of titles for readers per issue. On the other hand, with the self-completing model

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**TABLE 4**  
Average number of magazine titles in readers per issue

	<i>Current model</i>	<i>Self-completing model</i>	<i>Sorting model</i>
Total population	5.0	3.8	4.3
Men	3.9	4.1	4.4
Women	5.8	3.5	4.2
Elementary school without technical training	4.5	2.5	3.2
Elementary school with technical training	5.0	3.9	4.4
Further schooling	5.5	4.7	5.1
14 to 29 years	6.7	4.3	4.9
30 to 49 years	3.8	4.6	5.1
50 years and older	4.7	2.6	3.1

the number of titles named by these groups drastically declines, the sorting model taking a middle position.

In this connection we would mention interviewer comments which suggest that the self-completing model is something for 'young', 'animated' people, while with older persons, etc difficulties arise. The current model, which on the one hand demands hardly any active participation from the interviewee (except the general filter), but on the other because of repeated handing over of title cards and lists forces involvement with the title, fares better with these groups of interviewees – although at the expense of men and people of middle age, who presumably tend to become more impatient and weary of the repeated procedure. In these groups especially the sorting model proves itself, giving the interviewer and interviewee the impression of quick, clearly arranged and rational questioning, but even here there is an evident loss of titles to be seen with older persons and with persons of lower educational levels. Here the suspicion is confirmed that in difficult cases the interviewer arbitrarily 'rationalises', which is exactly what the sorting model leads to.

### WHAT CONCLUSIONS WERE DRAWN FROM THESE RESULTS?

If one followed the interviewer judgements the result would be clear: the current model fatigues the interviewer and interviewee the most; the interview lasts

longest and the difficulty of keeping the interviewee to the point is the greatest. These interviewer opinions were already known, and it was these which finally led to the conduct of this methodological experiment.

However the suitability of an interview method is not assessable just from the interviewer's reaction. Of course in the media field an interviewer prefers a quick, preferably horizontal interview which is time-saving, above all as the questions which cover reach determination are relatively boring in the view of the interviewee. On the other hand there is the danger, particularly with these models, that interviewer and interviewee quickly 'learn' the filtering mechanism and as the interview proceeds jumps are made to end it quicker; there is a loss of information which operates primarily to the advantage of the figure for occasional use.

The ideal questionnaire is not the one which the interviewer likes the most, but rather the one which records usage more or less completely – including seldom users – but still guarantees that the various population segments are able and willing to collaborate fully to the end.

These requirements are not completely met by any of the three test versions.

### Self-completing model

Interviewer comments and quantitative results show without exception that this technique makes difficulties for the intellectually less agile population segments, ie this model 'functions' only for a part of the whole population.

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### Sorting model

The disadvantage of this model lies for consumer magazines in the reduction of the maximum readership which has an effect even on the readers per issue values; it can be seen that occasional readership is lost.

### Current model

Despite the difficulty in the technical handling mentioned by the interviewers, the participation of the interviewee up to the end of the interview seems more or less to be guaranteed, ie the repeated handing over of title cards and the recurrent pressure to involve oneself with a title are indeed found wearisome but do lead in comparison with the other two models to the largest volume of information.

However the following results give food for thought.

There are indications that readership in the segment 'working men with higher education' is lost. With titles with such a readership structure the sorting model collects comparatively more readers. This result agrees with interviewer comments where the current interview is, particularly in these segments, especially difficult to carry out because of the apparently time-consuming repetitive

procedures.

The stress subjectively felt by the interviewers in the print section could have an influence on the questioning about the other media which immediately follows. With both the simpler models a longer interview time could be allowed for these media.

These aspects led to a second research phase which at the time of writing is not yet finished.

In a representative random sample of about 2000 in each case two survey models were tested – parallel to the current survey – in which the experiences of the first research phase were taken into consideration:

(a) a model which is based on the current method but which meets the interviewers half-way in that, after the general filter, only one more run through is made per title. For each title all questions are arranged one after the other, the interviewer only then going on to the next title.  
(b) a model which retains self-completion of the answers on the title cards, these entries, however, being made not by the interviewee but by the interviewer.

The results of this experiment, which because of its design will also allow quantitative reach comparisons, will be available in the summer of 1981.