

8.2

HOW ARE WE DOING?

In Montreal I attempted to distinguish three levels of objectives in media research: the decision-aiding objectives, the behaviour-modelling objectives and the actual survey or question objectives. And I suggested that too often the survey-objective's tail wags the dog of the decision-aiding objectives and the behaviour-modelling objectives. In terms of what we have heard at this Symposium that would seem to be still the case, but have we heard all that is relevant? Looked at in the kindest light, the US quest for the Gold Standard could be seen as relating to the higher objectives and I genuinely hope it does not turn out to be one of the Golden Egg Awards for things that go drastically wrong. Putting it another way, we hear something of the survey level politics and practically nothing about the higher level politics which affect readership surveys and how they are done. For example, what lay behind the French decision to test six different methods? Was it researcher-driven, or was it because agencies were dissatisfied with the current technique? Why did Germany want to simplify the AG.MA interview? How does having two competing surveys in Japan, Germany and the USA work out in business practice? We are very foolish if we consider our survey research only at the technical level. What we do is affected by, and affects, the political pressures in the advertising business. Obviously to get a more rounded picture will mean inviting a more varied cross-section of speakers, but where a country has gone through a lot of work to change its methods, or indeed to check that they should *not* be changed, when papers on such work are submitted it would seem worth trying to get at least one speaker from the advertiser or agency area to come as well, and put the background to all this work, so that we can appreciate it in its proper context. A publisher too might provide valuable insight - maybe only five or ten minutes would be necessary. What I am suggesting is group papers on

particular developments completed or in progress. We would hope to build up a much better picture of why the experiments which are done were done, and what channels were rejected and why. In my own experience discussions at the Technical Committee are intensely political: the political decisions are made by the governing JICNARS committee, but the infighting is at the technical level.

Now I should like to turn briefly to the Symposium itself and how it has all been organised. We have a near perfect sound system, a perfect visual system, and for the first two days a very comfortable hall. Our thanks are due for all these conveniences and comforts, but has the Symposium become just another conference on readership research, rather than a real interactive Symposium? Is there a case for it to go on as it now is? We have speakers mounting a high stage and declaiming down to the assembled masses, and the seats all face the stage. At New Orleans we had a more radical layout with the speakers at a much lower level. We did not just get questions and comments addressed at the speakers, we had a lot of cross-discussion from the floor. I think the organisation of the conference and the layout had a lot to do with that. I feel we have slipped into a somewhat authoritarian mode which somehow separates the speakers from the rest: maybe we should sacrifice some of the creature comforts.

I should like to hear more people get up and say they do not understand a paper or ask what was the point of it.

On another point I think we still have something of a language problem and we have not solved it. The rustling of papers shows that many people have to use the printed version. Does it help the non-English to put the brief text on the screen as I did, or is it of no help? If it is a help, would it be an idea to ask all speakers to do the

same? Should we ask speakers to send a tape of their speech in advance so that they can be told whether they should rehearse more?

We do not know when or whether the next symposium will be held. I think we should all acknowledge the great cost to Research Services and BMRB of organising such an event. I would like to see these events continue but perhaps we need one or two more sponsors. In the meantime, is a symposium the best way actually to disseminate the material which we discuss? Would it be too costly to consider some way in which the members of the symposium could have papers distributed, say every three or six months, so that they could fit in a more considered reading than can easily be done within the conference period?

Discussion is a most important part of a symposium like this, but it tends to be the first thoughts, and also the first thoughts of just those who think very quickly and speak English very well. If we had papers circulated between conferences, people could prepare much better discussion contributions. In fact, part of the symposium could be devoted to discussion of the inter-symposia papers and part to the submission of new papers. It would also help to bind the group together if we are not to have another symposium for several years.

Turning back to the content of this year's symposium, I have been a bit scathing in private about the Gold Standard approach in the US. I have now re-read Dick Lysaker's paper. I have to admit admiration, rather as one would have admired the founding fathers if they had set out for the US without a compass. The attitudes are understandable but I am afraid that the ship will founder or sail round in circles. Of course Recent Reading is beset by replication, parallel readership, possibly telescoping and certainly random errors. Through-the-Book is beset by the problems of covering a large number of titles, the problem of

confusable contents and the total illogicality of a screening filter for an issue-recognition method. I think they will find that neither of the existing methods is satisfactory, and as an ex-psychologist I would warn that the trauma attendant on that should be prepared for. As I said at New Orleans, I regard the realistic positioning of readership surveys as press negotiation indices, not as records of historical fact, though when one considers the biases in historical interpretation perhaps the difference is not so great. Mind you, we foreigners are not given much chance to see how serious the differences in America really are, or see average issue differences, for individual titles. I was very interested to see from Per Langhoff's paper that the net of two titles increased much less than the gross when they changed methods. How much difference to *schedules* do the two US methods make? But still I think it would be more fruitful to recognise that no readership survey measures readership, it only measures the numbers who respond positively and negatively to the researchers' surrogate descriptions, as represented by the questioning technique. This is what I mean by the only objective definition being the wording of the question. The Gold Standard approach is thus in my view trying to validate an abstraction. More profitable in my view would be to try to fit purple tabs to people who qualify as a reader both by Simmons and MRI, blue tabs to those who qualify only on Simmons, and red tabs to those who qualify only on MRI. They could carry on the work done in Canada and attempt to qualify and quantify the demographics and issue behaviour of each of these three groups. Then one could combine them to see how different the profiles are in advertiser-relevant terms. I have majored on this item because in my view it is in fact the issue that has kept this symposium together. I recognise that if the Europeans continue to be cool towards it the temporary alliance may well break up, but unfortunately I feel that many of us on this side of

the Atlantic believe the quest to be one for a Unicorn.

My remaining comments are not necessarily related to the importance of the papers commented on. I would like, incidently, to see a collation of reader-per-copy levels cross-nationally prepared for the next symposium, together with an indication of what each country regards as acceptable levels of readers-per-copy. We have too little public statement of religious belief nowadays.

On random errors, should we not

consider being brave enough to allow informants to say 'don't know' certainly to 'when last read'. It might be better to know about the numbers of people that cannot answer our questions, and to simulate their replies, rather than to waste money trying to validate random responses.

I would like to say that I do think this symposium has been useful. I hope that they will continue. But it suddenly struck me last night that, given my age, there is a fair chance that I will not be present at the next one. Thank you for your company so far.