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## 1.4 The British national readership survey since New Orleans

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Three months before the New Orleans symposium Pym Cornish and Michael Brown had produced their 'Readership Measurement Reviewed — A Study of Development Options for the NRS' which has had a considerable influence on what has happened to the NRS's development since then. Of course, many of the weaknesses in the survey's methodology were well known, but the combination of their cataloguing and the pressure for broadening the survey have been the mainspring for the many projects achieved or currently under examination. My purpose here is to briefly review the sequence of events since February 1981.

Largely as a result of the interest created by the Cornish/Brown paper, in the summer of 1981 JICNARS decided to mount a seminar to hear the views of NRS users as to what improvements they wished to see on the survey — and, if possible, to determine the priority of these requirements.

Two changes very nearly topped the poll: faster reporting of the survey's results; and coverage of a larger number of publications. A need was also felt for better estimates of cumulative coverage. Revisions of 'qualitative' data — notably place of reading and source of copy — also received considerable support.

The first of these requirements — the speedy reporting of readership estimates for important new titles in dynamic market sectors — was met shortly afterwards: since September 1981 we have published data on a *monthly* basis for all newly launched major daily or weekly titles: *Sunday Magazine*; *Sunday Express Magazine*; *TV Times*; *The Mail on Sunday*; *You Magazine* (added to the *Mail on Sunday*) and the relaunched *TV Times*.

Our policy has been to publish data — total readership, with limited breakdowns — for each month from the time of the publication's launch until the publication of the next full NRS report, or a minimum of six months. Generally, only data for the new publication itself are released; but in the case of the Sunday newspapers, monthly figures on the gross and nett coverage of the total publication group have been circulated.

The next subject for consideration was the length of the media list covered by the survey — currently limited by interview load to approximately 120 titles. This has frankly proved a stumbling-block for JICNARS and its Technical sub-Committee — not in principle but in

execution. Agreement could not be obtained to rotated measurement of different titles in different periods, nor — until other avenues had been exhausted — to removal of titles which no longer qualified under the nominal JICNARS rules of circulation size and/or readership penetration. The route currently being investigated is a 'group titles' approach with respondents potentially screening out, at the first stage of the questionnaire, whole groups of titles (for example all home interest publications or all motorcycling magazines) in which they claimed no readership at all. Thus the main course of questioning would relate to groups of publications within which the respondent claims some readership. The method has its genesis in proposals by Brian Allt of Mirror Group Newspapers and Research Services Ltd., the NRS research contractor, and the current work follows a pilot study by RSL in the summer of 1982. The 'grouped titles' method in test covers over 190 publications versus 123 on the existing NRS technique.

Probably the most radical activity in JICNARS currently is the investigation of the value and use of diary panels as a method of readership data collection for the NRS. The proposal — originating from the advertising agencies — stemmed from the Cornish / Brown review and seeks to extend the NRS's usefulness in certain specific areas: More information on how people use publications; Measurement of the dynamic use of media over time; Quick information on new titles; Direct measures of cumulative coverage and frequency of impact; Potentially better information on source of copy and where read.

This investigation is open ended — it is realised that the work may show either that we should switch to diary panels as the sole technique, that a small scale panel can yield information on some of our known problem areas, or possibly that there is little to be gained from the use of panels even in a role supporting the recent reading technique. The first stage in the work has been an extensive review of previous experience in this field: objectives have now been proposed for a diary panel test, which if agreed, could lead to the setting up of such a test in the latter part of 1983 or early in 1984.

Whilst these specific projects are under way, further work is being undertaken to evaluate respondents' understanding and interpretation of different interview stimuli in an attempt to gain insight into what reactions and levels of media contact we are measuring. A small

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team under Alan Smith of IPC Magazines has evolved a proposal to begin a programme of qualitative research.

All this activity represents a very formidable work load: to cope with it we have established three Technical Study Groups: the Extended Media List, Diary Panels and 'Meaning of Reading' TSG's, (under Brian Allt, Roger Beeson and Alan Smith respectively), reporting and

offering recommendations to the Technical sub-Committee. Setting up these groups has allowed us to increase the number of people contributing to JICNARS' development and enabled us to make progress at a faster rate than would have been possible had we to rely on the time and resources of a small core of people to progress all areas of activity simultaneously.