

The Roy Morgan Research Centre Pty. Ltd.

REF:L:GCM:NZ Telescoping Notes

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Telescoping: The skeleton in the recent reading closet:
Magazine Research Symposium, New Orleans - Valentine Appel, 1981.

(Summary of key points)

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This paper shows a detailed case example focusing on the phenomenon of "telescoping" and the extent that "recency" questions inflates readership levels.

Up until 1981 most US researchers were of the belief that "recent reading" (recency) and "through-the-book" produced similar results.

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Simmons Market Research Bureau Inc. used both methods up until 1979.

In 1979 the Advertising Research Foundation (ARF) in response to concerns expressed by magazine publishers, agencies and advertisers was successful in raising nearly half a million dollars to conduct a methodological study to ascertain the comparability of the two methods.

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In 1979, five months before the ARF "top-line" findings, the industry was stunned to discover that the Simmons "recent reading" (recency) estimates were nearly twice as large as what they had been accustomed to seeing.

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"ARF found that for monthly magazines, the 'recent reading' (recency) method generated audience estimates which were 86% higher than those produced using the 'through-the-book' method, and that for weekly magazines the average was 27%". (See Column 2)

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Amongst the most vocal with regard to the differing results was Timothy Joyce, Chairman of the then newly-founded Mediamark Research Inc. (MRI).

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One month later MRI were to produce their own "recent reading" (recency) readership estimates which were to compete with the Simmons' "recent reading" (recency) readership estimates. MRI broadly distributed an internal MRI memorandum which was ostensibly written to assure MRI sales staff that they could not possibly show readership increases remotely approaching the Simmons' "recent reading" (recency) readership estimates. Timothy Joyce attributed the Simmons' substantial inflation of reading claims to their loose questioning procedure used to establish reading in the publication interval*.

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When the MRI data became available a month later, it was clear to all that the MRI perfected technique (recency) had produced results which were virtually identical to the Simmons "recent reading" (recency) estimates!

* The Simmons questionnaire had asked simply whether or not the publication had been read in the last month, while MRI had developed what they described as a "perfected system" which went on to specify the length of the publishing interval in great detail, even to informing the respondent of the specific date when it began.

Ironically, MRI then was obliged to defend the same "recent reading" (recency) estimates as being logical and accurate which earlier they had denounced as implausible!

The ARF's study was directed at validating the "through-the-book" procedure, believing that it was not possible to validate the non-issue specific "recent reading" method. Actually, however, it is a simple matter to demonstrate that respondents are incapable of judging accurately the "recency" with which past events have occurred. Psychologists have been studying this phenomenon for some time and have generally concluded that:

- the longer the time interval between the event and the judgement of the **recency of that event**, the **less likely** is the judgement to be accurate.
- the longer the time interval between the event and the judgement of the recency of that event, the **more likely** is it to be perceived to have occurred **more recently** than it actually did.

The phenomenon became known as telescoping, and completely explains that the "recent reading" (recency) method produces inflated estimates in general and disproportionately higher estimates for monthlies than for weeklies.

Most of the experimentation on "telescoping" has been performed in the psychological laboratory. Simmons Market Research Bureau shifted their emphasis to a real life demonstration.

"We chose to perform the demonstration using weekly television program viewing because, unlike magazine reading, the time of the viewing occasion is precisely known and there is no possibility of complications caused by replicated and parallel viewing. A total of 700 interviews were completed, 100 on each of seven consecutive days. Respondents were read a list of 20 weekly television shows and asked whether each one had been watched in the past 30 days." (See Column 5)

The results proved conclusively that respondents are incapable of judging accurately whether an event such as their most recent viewing of a weekly television program occurred within the past seven days or not.

If memories were perfect, one would expect to find the same percentage claiming to view on each of the interviewing days regardless of whether the interview was conducted the day after the telecast or six days later.

Simmons Market Research Bureau performed the same experiment using 9 weekly publications, namely:

National Enquirer
Newsweek
New York
The New Yorker
People

The Star
Time
TV Guide
U.S. News & World Report

"Here we produced two estimates of weekly reading, a recent reading estimate based on the past seven day claim and the other based on the number of yesterday readers. However, since we know that some consumers read some magazine issues on more than one day, it was necessary to take that fact into account in order to generate an average issue audience estimate." (See Column 9)

The "recent reading" (recency) estimates were 26% higher, a difference, by the way, which was virtually identical to the +27% difference that was reported for weekly magazines in the ARF Comparability Study, and very close to the +30% difference which was seen for television viewing when no correction for multiple day viewing was required.

The "recent reading" (recency) method in theory is perfectly reasonable if one can accept the assumption that respondents can not only accurately remember that they have been exposed to a particular media vehicle, but also that they can accurately **judge the recency of the last such occurrence**. However, the paper proves conclusively that consumers are incapable of making accurate judgments of whether a media exposure -in this case the viewing of a weekly television show - occurred within the past seven days or not.

The "recency" method produces weekly television audience estimates which are about 30% higher than the estimates which are produced on the basis of "yesterday" recall.

The paper interprets these facts to mean that the "recent reading" (recency) method **significantly overstates magazine audiences and does so by a process called "telescoping" caused by the inability of the respondent to judge whether or not a particular event has occurred within the publication interval.**

Although the Simmons Market Research Bureau study did not directly address this issue for monthly publications as the study did for weeklies, all of the information available both in the psychological literature and in the ARF Study suggests that **as the publishing interval increases so does the severity of the telescoping problem.**

Which leads Simmons Market Research Bureau to their final conclusion. As a result, **not only does the "recent reading" (recency) method produce spurious audience estimates, it does so in such a way as to seriously disadvantage weekly publications relative to monthlies.**