

NEWSPAPER RESEARCH ON THE ROCKS:
AN ARGUMENT FOR THE USE OF Q METHODOLOGY
IN READERSHIP STUDIES

Stuart H. Schwartz
Georgia State University

Roy L. Moore
Georgia State University

Ten years ago William Stephenson wrote about traditional marketing research in *Attitude Research on the Rocks* (Stephenson, 1968: 160):

To be "on the rocks" is either to be shipwrecked or to be cocktailed with gin or vodka. My standpoint in this matter is a well-known one: the current conceptions of "attitude" are indeed shipwrecked; but a different conception, based on Q-methodology offers a potent cocktail, a pick-up for jaded spirits, a heady sippance (if I might coin a new word).

He then outlined a methodology for saving attitude research in marketing involving "four parts subjectivity, to one part Q." Q methodology was offered as a creative alternative for measuring real people and designed to generate promotion and advertising strategies. Q provided the basis for an exciting new avenue of marketing research, variously called "psychographic" or "life style" studies (Reynolds, 1973;

Operant Subjectivity, 1979(Jul), 2(4), 124-134.

Wells, 1974; Wells & Cosmas, 1975). We believe Q can do the same for research on newspaper readership.

This paper argues for the increased use of Q methodology in readership studies and offers "a heady sippance" for journalism researchers and newspaper marketing executives by outlining a new methodological system for better understanding daily and weekly newspaper readers. The system was developed for a daily newspaper that was thinking of venturing into the weekly field and hoped to find in Q what they could not find in conventional research: a way of understanding the collective subjectivity of their potential readers, and a data base that would provide the scientific foundation for marketing and editorial campaigns to increase newspaper consumption.

A major problem with most current newspaper readership studies is sterility. Researchers take to the field, count large numbers of people, total the persons who read a newspaper, and develop a demographic profile. Penrose, Weaver, Cole and Shaw (1974), for example, surveyed a random sample of more than 1,000 persons to develop profiles of daily newspaper readers and nonreaders. The newspaper nonreader was likely to be less educated, Black, and either very young or very old. The results were quite similar to an earlier study by Westley and Severin (1964), which found the nonreader was less educated and more likely came from a low-income household whose head held a job of comparatively low occupational status, and was either very young or very old. Using slightly different categories, Rarick (1973) found that length of residence and home ownership were key factors in newspaper readership. Stone (1977) also found that community involvement--an amalgam of demographics such as length of time in community and home ownership--is an important factor in daily newspaper readership.

Unfortunately, demographics tell us little about the psychological makeup of the newspaper readers, and cannot be effectively used to design persuasive

appeals to attract the nonreader and more strongly attach the reader to the newspaper.

As Ziff (1974) noted, demographics of this sort suffer from four limitations: "The Fictitious Average," "The Minority Skew," "The Insightless Numbers" and "The Homogeneity Myth." The first refers to the nonexistent composite of the newspaper reader's profile put together from a series of demographic statistical studies: the average reader has a high school diploma and a year of college, lived in the community 4.3 years, and makes \$10,000-20,000 a year, etc. The second refers to the fact that for newspapers there do not appear to be major distinctions between readers and nonreaders on many demographic variables. The American Newspaper Publishers Association Foundation (Rarick, 1975), for example, reported that 80% of white men and 80% of white women read a newspaper "yesterday" and that 84% of the nation's whites ages 35-49 did the same, while 78% of ages 25-34 read one "yesterday." The figures are not significantly different, supporting Ziff's point that in a large proportion of cases examined demographically, consistent and substantial skews do not occur.

The third category, "The Insightless Numbers," emphasizes that collections of demographics often fail to pinpoint the *reasons* for distinctions: *Why* are there demographic differences between readers and nonreaders, and *how* do newspaper publishers and editors take advantage of the differences? Unfortunately, traditional demographic research supplies few answers. And those answers are limited by the "Homogeneity Myth." The "high occupational status" reader is often described as if all white-collar workers had a single profile and set of values and needs. Community commitment of a newspaper reader, for example, based on number of years in a community, may overlook the fact that the individual has failed to win a transfer from his employer for the last eight years--he remains by necessity and not choice, and is not at all "committed" to the community.

Like the mythical three blind men of Hindustan, depending on which characteristic we study, we may be perceiving the tail, the trunk, and the feet, but not the elephant. We need a methodology that specializes in elephants rather than just appendages to give a reader profile that goes beyond demographics and traditional attitude research. Outlined by Stephenson (1953) and elaborated by a number of other researchers, Q "is an excellent exploratory technique" (Kerlinger, 1972: 28) that allows the researcher to go beyond demographics and model the subjectivity of individuals--in this case, newspaper consumers. Through the application of Q methodology, the consumer becomes not just a female but a woman with a need to feel part of her community (a subjective feeling that may be objectified through Q methodology) and be feminine and young (other tangible psychological characteristics). By carefully choosing the persons to be tested, newspaper researchers and marketers can use Q to break down seemingly homogeneous groupings of readers into usable psychographic (as opposed to demographic) segments. In effect, Q can be used by newspapers for applied research of the type demonstrated by Mauldin, Sutherland and Hofmeister (1978) in a market segmentation study that developed a psychologically meaningful name for automated teller machines. Schlinger (1969: 53) foreshadowed this kind of research:

...segmentation provided by Q-technique does not depend on demographic variables. Rather, people are grouped according to similarities and differences in attitudes, motives, and wants they project: respondents sort themselves, in a sense Once groups are found, they can be examined to determine composition and kinds of buying and usage behavior associated with each.

Newspaper reading can be related to the personal values and needs of readers through Q and the intimate connection between the reader and his newspaper explored.

As with other consumer products, a key to increased newspaper sales is aggressive marketing, and aggressive marketing depends on research that generates data easily translated into creative promotional campaigns and consumer-satisfying editorial products. The newspaper must be made a part of the reader's life, psychologically connected to his or her mode of living and linked to what Berkman and Gilson (1978: 497) termed "*unified patterns of behavior that both determine and are determined by consumption.*" Mindak (1965) describes the shortsightedness of newspaper executives, who passively rely upon reader habit to increase circulation and fail to make this link, as "marketing myopia." A comparison of newspaper circulation in 1940 with 1970 showed no difference in penetration (Eberhard, 1974). Grotta (1974: 502) laid the blame for this lack of growth squarely on newspaper executives who, using traditional methods and promotion strategies, have failed to offer "the consumer a product which fulfills the needs of the consumer." This "requires the industry to define its product *in* terms of the consumer. The newspaper industry must finally begin to adopt a consumer-oriented marketing approach to its product." He warned that newspaper marketers and researchers have to innovate to avoid obsolescence:

Such an undertaking will require much closer cooperation between people in the newspaper industry and those in academe. If we fail to make a major effort to begin such an undertaking, those who are in the newspaper industry may in the future find themselves in the same position as buggy whip manufacturers. And those of us who study the newspaper may become archeologists, looking at a social institution which failed to survive in a changing environment.

With this in mind, we decided to explore the use of Q methodology to open up a new market for a daily newspaper that was contemplating starting a weekly in outlying communities. Previous research had supplied demographics such as average income, number of child-

ren per household, and occupational status. But it failed in three respects:

1. This conventional research had been unable to provide common ground to unite the three separate communities toward which the new weekly was targeted. The economics of the newspaper business demanded that the weekly address the widest area possible and it was the hope of the newspaper somehow to use the weekly to bring together three communities that, on the surface, shared some demographic categories but little else. In essence, the newspaper wanted to expand into the weekly field and had pinpointed an area within its daily circulation range which would provide an economically viable advertising base. To install a weekly successfully would require finding the commonalities between the communities and translating those commonalities into editorial and marketing ideas that would allow its natural introduction.

2. Data generated by traditional studies are a difficult foundation on which to build promotional campaigns and products. The picture of the communities painted by traditional research was a collection of data, difficult to apply and of little creative value.

3. Finally, large scale data-gathering efforts involving elaborate random sampling schemes and house-to-house personal interviews are expensive and extremely time-consuming. Even the Q-based psychographic marketing studies involve questionnaires of up to 75 pages and respondent samples of 1,000 to 5,000. While yielding much information, such an approach can be expensive, as the Newspaper Advertising Bureau (1973) found when it drew a national sample of 4,000 persons who completed questionnaires containing 300 psychographic questions in addition to 100 or more media and product-use questions. Such an effort is often beyond the reach of newspapers, especially weeklies and smaller dailies.

We carefully reviewed the literature of Q method-

ology, market segmentation and readership research, and developed a questionnaire that avoided all of the above limitations. Grounded in Q methodology, the instrument contained 57 items--as opposed to the 300 often used in marketing segmentation and psychographic studies--and, with supplemental questions about media use, could be administered by telephone in about 20-25 minutes. At approximately \$4 an interview, this represented considerable savings over personal interviews that cost perhaps four to five times as much per person.

To do this, we turned to the suggestions for choosing items outlined by Stephenson (1953, 1967). Items were product-specific, i.e., chosen to apply to the problem at hand so that, as Wells (1975) noted, the discrimination produced by factor analysis is sharper than that produced by a more general segmentation. A semi-balanced block design adapted from Stephenson was used to establish theoretical parameters for the Q-sort items. These steps led to item categories that covered *activities* (negating the need for a separate section and additional interview time), *community identification* (the literature (e.g., Janowitz, 1952; Sim, 1969; Stone & Morrison, 1976) indicated that one key to the success of a weekly newspaper is the attachment of individuals to a specific geographic location), *media use* (print and broadcast), *work, family, social attitudes* and *quality of life*. In addition, each of these categories included both self-based and other-based statements. For example, a self-based community identification statement was "I prefer a community where people mind their own business." An other-based statement was "A few people in my community make all the money."

Exhaustive lists were compiled and items collapsed or eliminated. Items irrelevant to the situation or geographic area (horseback riding, for example, was not a major pasttime in the region) were discarded. In addition, each item was worded to force respondents to make a choice, and thus maximize the variance on the five-point Likert-type scale of agreement or

disagreement. This also eliminated the need for the large number of neutral items usually built into Q-sort decks to fill out the middle portions of the distribution. Data was normalized during the analysis, which allowed us to convert the agreement scores of the individuals grouped by the factors to standard normal scores by type.

One hundred households were randomly selected from each of two of the communities, and 150 from the third, which was larger. Because community newspaper buying decisions are usually made by the head of the household, half of the questionnaires were administered to male heads of household and half to females. Although random sampling is not necessary in Q analysis, random methods were combined with the usual purposive sampling to allow generalization of the types to the whole community (and easier presentation of results to potential advertisers).

Respondents were also asked the number of times weekly they read certain sections of the paper, subscription habits, frequency of shopping in specified malls and department stores, and standard demographic questions. These data were analyzed by type, giving a demographic and media use picture to go along with the psychological lifestyles.

Analysis of the lifestyle types suggested that readership of a new weekly could be built by stressing home repair and "how-to" articles (all types shared strong agreement with such items as "I take great pride in the appearance of my house" and "There's nothing quite like the feeling you get from gardening"). This also suggested the kinds of local advertisers who would benefit most from the audience provided by the weekly--garden, hardware, and household supply outlets that ordinarily do not advertise in the area daily. Involvement in community activities and government work was of little interest to most of the resident types; instead, they wanted to be left alone. However, they did see their communities as shelters against fast encroaching big cities

--critical articles about nearby cities, stories on the problems of other areas (not the three communities) could be expected to meet approval. They would not mind an activist newspaper, as long as activism could be directed toward issues and events that fit into the lifestyle of the community. For example, the proposed weekly could editorially propose and support a "child-watch" program, involving volunteers from the community to report suspicious strangers to the newspaper or the police. All types were basically conservative and extremely concerned with safety and crime, and such a program would make the newspaper a vital part of the community, which most types felt to be a weakness of existing local newspapers. "I like reading articles and stories by people who think like me" was the view of a number of types. A product perceived to originate in the community and not sharing the perspective of the surrounding urban areas would be attractive to the newspaper readers. The types agree that they like to "dress for comfort, not fashion" and seem to prefer a newspaper that does the same--enjoyable, well-organized, and down-to-earth. It should be sophisticated, but not slick--cities are slick.

We conclude with the principle that Q methodology, properly applied, can provide newspaper executives and researchers with the tools for better understanding the psychological needs of their audiences. It can also economically provide the basis for marketing campaigns, and the foundation for an editorial product the readers come to know and depend upon. Standard demographics simply do not provide these answers.

*Stuart H. Schwartz and Roy L. Moore, Department of
Journalism, Georgia State University, Atlanta,
GA 30303*

REFERENCES

Berkman, H.W. & C.C. Gilson. *Consumer behavior: Concepts and strategies*. Encino and Belmont, CA:

- Dickenson, 1978.
- Eberhard, W.B. Circulation and population: Comparison of 1940 and 1970. *Journalism Quarterly*, 1974, 51, 503-507.
- Grotta, G.L. Prosperous newspaper industry may be heading for decline. *Journalism Quarterly*, 1974, 51, 498-502.
- Janowitz, M. *The community press in an urban setting*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1952.
- Kerlinger, F.N. Q methodology in behavioral research. In S.R. Brown & D.J. Brenner (Eds.), *Science, psychology, and communication: Essays honoring William Stephenson*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1972. Pp. 3-38.
- Mauldin, C.R., J.C. Sutherland & J.F. Hofmeister. Operant attitude segmentation and marketing decisions. *Operant Subjectivity*, 1978, 1, 38-50.
- Mindak, W.A. Do newspapers suffer from "marketing myopia"? *Journalism Quarterly*, 1965, 42, 433-442.
- Newspaper Advertising Bureau. *Psychographics: A study of personality, life style, and consumption patterns*. New York: Newspaper Advertising Bureau, 1973.
- Penrose, J., D.H. Weaver, R.R. Cole & D.L. Shaw. The newspaper non-reader 10 years later: A partial replication of Westley-Severin. *Journalism Quarterly*, 1974, 51, 631-638.
- Rarick, G. Differences between daily newspaper subscribers and non-subscribers. *Journalism Quarterly*, 1973, 50, 265-270.
- Rarick, G. (Ed.). *News research for better newspapers*. Vol.7. Washington, DC: American Newspapers Publishers Association Foundation, 1975.
- Reynolds, F.D. *Psychographics: A conceptual orientation*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia, Division of Research, College of Business Administration, 1973.
- Schlinger, M.J. Cues on Q-technique. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 1969, 9(3), 53-60.
- Sim, J.C. *The grass roots press: America's community newspapers*. Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1969.
- Stephenson, W. *The study of behavior: Q-technique*

- and its methodology.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953.
- Stephenson, W. *The play theory of mass communication.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967.
- Stephenson, W. The contribution of Q to attitude research. In L. Adler & I. Crespi (Eds.), *Attitude research on the rocks.* Chicago: American Marketing Association, 1968. Pp. 160-171.
- Stone, G.C. & J. Morrison. Content as a key to the purpose of community newspapers. *Journalism Quarterly*, 1976, 53, 494-498.
- Stone, G.C. Community commitment: A predictive theory of daily newspaper circulation. *Journalism Quarterly*, 1977, 54, 509-514.
- Wells, W.D. (Ed.). *Life style and psychographics.* Chicago: American Marketing Association, 1974.
- Wells, W.D. Psychographics: A critical review. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 1975, 12, 196-213.
- Wells, W.D. & S.C. Cosmas. Life styles. Project on Synthesis of Knowledge of Consumer Behavior, RANN Program, National Science Foundation, University of Illinois Survey Research Laboratory, April, 1975.
- Westley, B.H. & W.J. Severin. A profile of the daily newspaper non-reader. *Journalism Quarterly*, 1964, 41, 145-150, 156.
- Ziff, R. The role of psychographics in the development of advertising strategy and copy. In W.D. Wells (Ed.), *Life style and psychographics.* Chicago: American Marketing Association, 1974. Pp. 129-155.

The correlation coefficient is used to help us probe into these highly subjective matters, and provides us, so to speak, with their grammar. (William Stephenson)