

Practices and Consumption of Readers of the Portuguese Christian Press

Rogério Santos, Catholic University of Portugal

In 2009, the Portuguese Christian Press Association (AIC, Associação de Imprensa de Inspiração Cristã) held a survey of publications that belongs to the Association, with 22 questions. The CESOP (Centro de Estudos de Sondagens e Opinião Pública, Centre for the Study of Polls and Public Opinion) from Catholic University of Portugal was responsible for this survey and its analysis. There were a total of 997 answers from valid surveys, concerning a total of 36 publications.

It was not my intention to project the idea of a community of knowledge (Zelizer), nor to work on concepts such as passive or critical audiences (Hall), but to look into a specific set of publications (daily, weekly, fortnightly, monthly) included in the association. The production of this survey had several objectives, the first of which was to know the readers of the publications identified with religious ideals. Then, the intention was to find out the receptivity of those readers to advertising, as well as relating local, national and international news, with the objective of calculating the interaction in reading between regional and global topics.

The survey, of which I am the author¹, besides the socio-demographic data – age and gender of readers, education and place of residence –, also includes questions on the quality of publications (news, text/image relation). And also: which religious practices? What kind of cultural consumption at home and outside the home? What is the impact of local, regional, national and international news? What is the weight of topics such as religion, politics, culture, economics, sports and advertising?

¹ Researcher Tânia Correia (CESOP) helped me in the construction of the survey. She also interpreted all data obtained in SPSS.

In this text I present the results of the survey and I also observe the criticisms directed at it during the presentation of conclusions, which made me to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of quantitative studies, with exploration of clues for future works.

1. Survey

Christian publications have suffered a decline in advertising investments during the past years, which are crucial for the continuity of these publications, but they also occur in the general press (Weibull and Nilsson, 2010). This survey was designed to find out the quantity of religious practices of their readers and also to identify the consumption of media, from a perspective of globalisation.

All the publications included in AIC were invited to participate in the survey, but only 36 accepted. To communicate with the readers, a questionnaire was inserted in the publications (newspapers or magazines) with a pre-paid envelope, in order to facilitate the posting. It was used the method of self-completed survey sent by mail which, according to Ángeles Cea (2004: 80-82), brings advantages such as eliminating the mediation of an interviewer. At the same time, it reduces the cost of field work, it gives a greater coverage of the study, the interviewed can answer only when he wants (within a reasonable time period), it transmits a feeling of privacy and anonymity to the answers, it reduces errors of mediation and it formulates questions with multiple answer options. Looking at the disadvantages, the self-administered survey can bring coverage problems (wrong addresses, no answers).

There was a publisher's editorial in each publication, notifying the reasons for the survey. After receiving the answers, 997 of them were validated, which are the base of my work. Among the total amount of surveys, there have been six publications that stood out in terms of respondents, which allowed for a better characterisation of them: *Fátima Missionária* (with 139 respondents), *Além-Mar* (105), *Reconquista* (72), *Voz Portuguesa* (67), *Jornal da Lixa* and *A Defesa* (with 51 respondents each).

The results were communicated by the researcher – the author of this communication – during a meeting held with the AIC members in 2010. A dialogue was then established on the evaluation of several tendencies shown in the results. Some members questioned several conclusions, based on daily empirical knowledge.

Some of the conclusions were: the respondents are mostly men, over 65 (some are much older and are retired), have attended university, they live in the coastal districts of the country, live in households of up to three people, have a family monthly income of more than a thousand Euros and are technicians and mid-level professionals (see classification of economic activities). Readers focus more on national news (43.4%), although they also think it is useful to have regional news (33.8%) and local news (22.8%) concerning the area where they live. This means that there is greater concern regarding regional and local news than news that is more encompassing and global.

As shown in Table 1, readers like to read news, reports and chronicles. In my view, this reinforces the weight of journalism of proximity, more interested in getting information from the region readers come from, when the core group of readers lives in that geographical area or when readers live in another area but receive the publication published in their place of birth, which is a way of being in touch with family roots.

Table 1. In this publication, what did you like most

	Answers		% of cases
	Number	%	
Report	295	20,4%	29,6%
Interview	143	9,9%	14,3%
News	421	29,1%	42,2%
Editorial	210	14,5%	21,1%
Chronicle/opinion article	290	20,0%	29,1%
Don't know/don't answer	88	6,1%	8,8%
	1447	100,0%	145,1%

Note: each respondent could include more than one answer

Looking at this table, we can conclude that there is a cultural shutting down, which is the cause of a slow erosion of reading habits, especially when the separation from these communities of origin becomes deeper with the renewal of generations, which are less attached to these communities.

But Camponez (2002: 59) makes a pertinent observation when relating local and global and their potential divergence: on the one hand, globalisation is not a unique process; on the other hand, local culture is no longer a face to face relation. Thus, even though respondents emphasised news and reports on the cities the publications come from, the dispersal of readers throughout the country indicates not just a link to family roots but also the need to know what is happening in those cultural spaces, since they are living in other cultural spaces. This indicates a possible confrontation and/or hybridisation of different cultures, the culture of origin and the culture of acceptance, in the perspective of globalisation.

We wanted to find out the respondents' opinion on the importance they give to religious, political, cultural, economic, sports and advertising issues (Table 2). Obviously, the readers of these publications have high religious practices. From other perceptions and practices, respondents consider "cultural" (52.6%) issues "very important", "political" (62.5%) and "economic" (61.4%) issues "important" and "sports" (51.5%) and "advertising" (69.4%) "not important at all". Thus, of the six big topics presented above, it is obvious that readers of these publications are interested in religious and cultural issues, they have little interest in advertising and sports, and they have some interest in political and economic issues. Since readers did not pay any attention to advertising, one of the reasons why this survey was made, they gave an answer which was the opposite of what was hoped (further on I explore the issue).

Table 2. Consumption practices

	Religious		Cultural		Sports		Books		Internet		DVD		Television	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Very often	711	73,9	81	8,8	83	9,4	496	51,9	349	40	44	5,1	559	58,1
Sometimes	166	17,3	436	47,5	228	25,8	350	36,6	156	17,9	170	19,6	336	34,9
Rarely	63	6,5	333	36,3	340	38,5	101	10,6	76	8,7	265	30,6	63	6,5
Never	22	2,3	68	7,4	233	26,4	8	0,8	292	33,4	388	44,8	4	0,4
Total	962	100	918	100	884	100	955	100	873	100	867	100	962	100
Don't know/don't answer	35		79		113		42		124		130		35	
Total	997		997		997		997		997		997		997	

From consumption practices, Table 2 brings us to the conclusion that this is a public of readers and television consumers, which, according to national studies, allows us to establish a comparison with the average age of those readers. With readers of an older age, the perspective before the internet is completely dichotomous – “very often” and “never” have close values. The number of respondents who never use the internet (33.4%) is close to the number of readers of publications who are over 65. However, since the internet is cheap, always possible to be brought up to date and with ever more people subscribing to it, it is an alternative for information that is worth considering. Campbell (2010: 64) studied religious communities and he points out the age division as the differentiator for subscribing digital technologies (internet, mobile phone). The value of technologies is not so much in their cost but rather their contextualisation in the community and the power to enable contact and affection.

Regarding advertising, the survey concluded that 41.6% of readers do not care for it, while 47.1% just have a brief look at it. When asked which advertisements they remember from the previous issue, 61.1% of respondents “don’t know/don’t answer” (Table 3). With a great margin of distance, respondents remember advertisements to services such as pharmacies and doctors and institutional such and the State and local authorities.

Table 3. Which advertisements do you remember from the previous issue of the publication

	Answers		% of cases
	Number	%	
Services (pharmacies, doctors)	229	19,8%	23,0%
Institutional(State, local authorities)	219	18,9%	22,0%
Consumption (hygiene, clothing)	102	8,8%	10,2%
Don't know/Don't answer	609	52,5%	61,1%
Total	1159	100,0%	116,2%

The readers of publications included in AIC share the issue they buy with the rest of the household and propose subscribers to the publications (Table 4). Once at home, the publication is read by the whole household (63.8% of the cases), which means that, in all the

publications, each issue can be read by three people (48.8%) or even five (21.9%), according to the result of the survey.

Table 4. The issue that you buy/subscribe is read

	Answers		% of cases
	Number	%	
By the whole household	636	56,8%	63,8%
By friends/ colleagues	257	22,9%	25,8%
Don't share it with anyone	135	12,1%	13,5%
Don't know/Don't answer	92	8,2%	9,2%
Total	1120	100,0%	112,3%

More than 50% of subscribers of AIC publications propose new subscribers, which is a good indicator. With such a response it is possible to foresee a good growth of new subscribers, as long as present readers feel enthusiastic about the initiatives taken by the publishers of such publications.

2. Presentation of results and elements for the improvement of the survey

The presentation of results to the association that ordered the study was followed by some comments and criticism.

When the respondents indicate that they don't read advertisements – due to the probable influence it exerts –, that can be seen as *social desirability*, as saying what seems to be politically correct, just as men and people from a medium-high class usually say they don't watch soap operas. Besides the 22 questions in the survey, it would have been necessary to use other methodologies to erase doubts, such as ethnographic studies or in-depth interviews, to get better acquainted with the readers, as some investigations point out.

Even though they fall outside the core target of my research, there are concepts such as *materring maps* (Grossberg, 2003), *cultural map* (Murdock, 2003; Ortega, 2010; Pais, 2001) and *cultural consumptions* (Mantecón, 2009; Leão, 2007; Santos, 2007) that are useful for a better refinement of results. While in Grossberg *materring maps* are identity marks of a generation that differentiate themselves when the affective relation changes, Murdock (2003) analysed investments, distribution of production and relations among organisations and

cultural diversity, Ortega (2010) made diagnosis from the context and platform and Pais (2001) observed two types of relation, *vertical*, within the same “branch” of activity, and *horizontal*, confronting categories, all to verify differences and regularities.

Consumption pacts (negotiations inside and outside the cultural field), reading and intelligibility pacts (Mantecón, 2009: 299-317) and categories of consumers (Leão, 2007; Santos, 2007) are other elements to take into consideration in an analysis of publics. If Leão (2007: 35-36) defined levels based on frequency and sociability, Santos (2007) defined three groups of consumers according to age levels: (20-35 year old generation, urban, already working), irregular or occasional (generation more than 35 years old, urban, with established professions and greater purchasing power) and recent (adolescents, who spend according to monthly allowance). These generations have consumptions where one can distinguish practices of socialization and cultural practices of going out, an interesting division for the study of reading publics of AIC publications, of a higher age bracket, domestic consumption (television, books) and no habit of going out at night.

Another doubt raised in the presentation of these results was related to who filled out the survey. Data indicate the older male of the household, possibly already retired, which distorts results. We did not enquire about the age of the other members of the household, nor their professions, which could have led to errors, due to a faulty construction of the survey, one of the problems of quantitative methodology, as warns Ángeles Cea (2004: 44).

Another remark concerns the small number of respondents of some titles associated with AIC, which inhibits significant conclusions besides the six publications with more surveys delivered. In a future study it will be imperative to insist with the respondents and use complementary methodologies.

However, criticism does not void the impact of results, namely if we establish comparisons with market investigations and analyses. Lennart Weibull and Åsa Nilsson (2010) identify clear tendencies in printed publications, especially since the last decade of the 20th century: loss of advertising due to migration to the internet, the emergence of free newspapers and a price rise in newspapers. Weibull and Nilsson present other conclusions, to be evaluated in the Portuguese reality and, especially, in the publications associated with AIC: the existence of more supplements (many with their own editorial line), fragmentation (with enlargement to cultural, economic and sports themes, for example), the appropriation of tabloid press patterns by quality newspapers (editorial illustration of the central theme of the edition, more space for consumerism, wellbeing, entertainment, gossip).

3. Conclusions

The fall in advertising caused by the economic crisis and the migration to electronic media, the expansion of the internet and the readers' shift to this new medium, associated with the end of paid carriage (sending of publications by mail with the support of the State), are factors that compromise the future of publications of Christian inspiration.

The profile of the reader of Christian publications that is offered here does not allow good expectations, which means changes are imminent, though attracting new subscribers may be a way out, as the surveys indicate. We cannot forget that the publications associated with AIC are mostly sold through subscription and not over the counter; they are, therefore, less permeable to the fluctuation of the printed headline and its consequence in the volume of sales per edition. On the other hand, due to the extreme opinions obtained in the answers of the survey, the internet will undoubtedly represent a means of information that is growing enormously. The internet has less costs associated with it, it enables interaction between readers and the medium and is starting to have interesting advertising investments.

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