
The Influence of Alfred Politz on European Research ¹

A Personal Note

This is neither an objective nor a complete account, but rather a subjective, personalized and limited one. This is so despite the fact that several colleagues have generously helped me trace Politz's influences on research on this side of the Atlantic.

My personal involvement goes back to 1950, when a group of four German researchers were invited under the Fulbright program to study social science, opinion, and market research operations in the U.S.A. Among the researchers we talked to was Alfred Politz. He ranked among the more impressive people we met. The significance of his contributions to research became evident to me only a few years later.

When in 1954 the Axel Springer Publishing House hired me I remembered the examples of media research I had seen in the U.S.A. Consequently, we made every attempt to keep up with the most advanced research projects. Very kindly and generously, Ed Miller of LIFE, Jack Maloney of Reader's Digest and Don Hobart of Curtis sent copies of their latest pieces of research, - and a cartoon movie on the methodology of the famous "Study of Four Media".

Alfred Politz Research had made practically all of those studies. All of them were milestones, - and miles ahead of what we did. They served as references for our work and as sources of inspiration. This was true of their ingenious design, true of their excellent technical execution, and true of their lucid descriptions.

On business trips to the U.S.A. I met him again in 1959 and 1961; and our discussions led, to my surprise, to Alfred and Hugh Hardy offering me the job setting up a German subsidiary company. This was realized in 1962. Unfortunately, our introductory phase of red figures lasted until 1964, by which time the parent company had gotten into trouble. When I suggested buying half the German company, seeing the financial turning point close by, Alfred graciously offered me the whole company at a minimal price. Most gratefully, as well as reluctantly, I agreed and started my own business in 1965.

This personal history of a relatively strong affinity between Alfred Politz and myself may serve to explain the fact that a good proportion of references to his work comes from me.

It must be acknowledged that not all of the Politz research methods were known to, or accepted by, all European researchers. Limited communication was (and still is) the main reason for that. And not everything known was adopted, because of cost considerations, or different requirements, or lack of insight.

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Politz's media research had the greatest impact; since such studies were carried out with the express intent of being published, they were easily available. And they were of such an exemplary character that European media researchers made every effort to get hold of them. In contrast, most of the product, advertising and general market research carried out for the clients of Alfred Politz Research was highly confidential, and reports were seldom released. As a consequence, the largest proportion of what follows is devoted to media research.

Politz Media Research as Benchmark

If references in readerships research articles were counted, most likely Politz would come out as world champion by a wide margin.

Recent correspondence with my European colleagues confirmed his influence on their work:

- Jean-Michel Agostini (France), after quoting 5 of his own papers relating to Politz; "Moreover, the Politz studies on cumulative audiences of U.S. magazines, in which he proposed empirical formulas for estimating cumulative audiences beyond the observed number of issues, were for me a source of inspiration in my subsequent works about the development of media models".
- Tom Corlett (U.K.) recalled that for his first talk on readership research (in 1960) "much of the material for this talk was based on Politz's work"; and that "Politz's techniques were indeed an important topic in most of the significant discussions of readership research which took place in Britain in the early 1960s". He then referred to a 1982 article of his⁽¹⁾ where he contrasts the thorough method employed by Politz with stripped-down techniques by other researchers and concluded: "So you will see that at least the memory of his early work remains powerful and relevant in Britain even to-day."
- Wolfgang Ernst (Germany): "Who else would deserve an appreciation more than Alfred Politz – he really has provided important stimuli."
- Harry Henry (U.K.) wrote: "I knew Alfred, had a certain amount of direct contact with him in the late fifties, and respected his line of thinking – primarily because it was so much the same as my own ...". He went on to refer to his own book on "Motivation Research" in which he had described "the 'British' form of motivation research, following the same general principles of scientifically rigid analysis as Alfred habitually followed" ⁽²⁾.
- Jan D. Noordhoff (Netherlands): "Regarding the Politz Papers, I believe that there is a good reason for recalling somebody whose influence on media research is almost that of a genius. All in all one can say that Politz has had a profound influence on my development and through that on the development of media research in the Netherlands, ... Nobody can afford to ignore Politz!"
- Friedrich Trennstaedt (Germany): "For me and so for IfD Allensbach, the work by Politz was indispensable for the start of German readership research (1949), but especially fruitful for the further development of methods in the 50s and 60s. Most of all we were impressed by his 'psychology' of questionnaires in conjunction with his clear mathematical-statistical considerations regarding inquiry techniques. In my opinion Politz personified almost perfectly the successful synthesis of psychology and mathematics."

- The importance of media research carried out by Politz can also be gauged by the quotes in relevant books. In her 1962 dissertation Eva-Maria Hess wrote: “Politz is regarded at present to be the most significant readership researcher of the USA ...The readership surveys by Politz are distinguished by the special care given to their methodological concepts” ⁽³⁾. In her index of names, Politz leads with 14 entries, compared with 8 for the next name. And in her 1981 book, Politz shares first place with one other researcher ⁽⁴⁾.
- A voluminous Swedish book on mass communication by Jarko Cerha ⁽⁵⁾ refers to such diverse Politz contributions as the “not-at-homes” concept; the glue-spot technique to ascertain ad-page exposure; the measurement by camera of exposure to transit posters; and his statement on the influences of importance, believability, and uniqueness on advertising effect.

There always was, and still is, a remarkable discrepancy between the general respect for Politz’s media studies, and the paucity of equivalent studies carried out in Europe. Why is that so?

There seem to be two major reasons. One was described by Alan Wilson: “...the main inhibitor to importing the new Politz techniques into Europe was the imperative of sample size and so of cost. U.S. media had many times the ad revenue of European equivalents, duly reflected in their research budgets.”

Probably just as important are different priorities set in America and Europe, as expressed by Harry Henry in 1962 ⁽⁶⁾: “We have always regarded it as essential to cover all major press and magazine media at one go. The thinking behind this is that it is less useful to know everything about one magazine ...”

This second factor can easily be illustrated by comparing how many media were dealt with in America and European studies.

For their own competitive reasons, the publishers of the largest U.S. magazines had decided to use the Politz organization to carry out readership measurements of great precision even though that entailed limiting the number of different publications or media covered. The awesome “Study of the Accumulative Audience of LIFE” dealt with just that one magazine. “A Study of Four Media” encompassed 4 magazines, 1 newspaper supplement, 4 radio and 5 TV programs – a total of 14 individual media.

In contrast, the British had included in their “first true readership survey in 1939: 71 magazines, 22 national and 101 regional newspapers”, as Tom Corlett reported. “A further survey with similar coverage followed in 1947; the annual Hulton Readership Surveys (1948-1953) followed a similar pattern – so that a tradition of extensive coverage (at least 60-80 publications per survey) was already firmly established in Britain by the early 1950s.”

The first German cooperative readership survey in 1954 was patterned after the British studies in methodology and scope; it dealt with 48 magazines ⁽⁷⁾.

It was not just the excellence of Politz media studies which constantly kept them in our minds. The very tradition of providing media planners with data on a large (and steadily growing) number of media reinforced this tendency in a peculiar way, as Theodor Harder pointed out in 1961: “The practice of the readership survey including 40-50 objects contains an antimony which consists of this large number of participants exacerbating the re-

quirement for neutrality of the total research design, and at the same time this number is responsible to a large extent for the methodological difficulties to maintain such a neutrality”⁽⁸⁾. No wonder that Harder referred to Politz three times, and suggested following his footsteps – if not in general then in certain areas.

Readership Repetition & Accumulation

Most readership research in Europe had centered on estimating the readers of one average issue. One was aware of the phenomenon of cumulation, but prior to the early sixties few attempts had been made to incorporate that aspect coincidentally with issue readership.

Politz’s “Study of Four Media” had provided readership, audience, and viewer ship repetition plus cumulation data, by interviewing the same respondents six times in the course of one year. This extreme effort caused admiration only. No one was willing to spend so much time and money finding out something deemed secondary in importance.

But the nagging thought remained that perhaps media planning and research were neglecting an important aspect.

In 1955 and 1959 papers, I had mentioned this task for research and referred to the 1953/54 LIFE study by Politz^(9/10). And Theodor Harder had pleaded in his 1961 paper for the inclusion of measurements of reading frequency and readership accumulation, either using the Politz technique or another one.

A little later, a British working party stated, among other requirements: “For all media, problems of cumulation (over media units and over time) need to have careful consideration since coverage (over units and over time) is an essential component of a media plan”⁽¹¹⁾. They, of course, quoted several Politz studies.

But generally the Politz approach was regarded as too cumbersome and expensive if applied to a large number of publications. And no practical alternative was in sight.

Agostini was the first one to show a way how to solve the problem. He used a simple verbal scale of reading frequency (“regularly/occasionally/never”); and checked the answers with the “Politz technique”. The results looked rather promising^(12/13).

However, the breakthrough was achieved by Politz’ alumnus Lester Frankel who proposed asking people how many issues out of 10 they had looked into or read⁽¹⁴⁾. The first European survey based on such a reading frequency scale was carried out in 1964 for “STERN” magazine by the German Politz subsidiary^(15/16).

It paved the way for the universal use of this technique in German. British researchers adopted the scale method soon afterwards⁽¹⁷⁾. And so did numerous other countries.

Reading Days

In Germany as elsewhere, the minimal requirement for a “reader” was to have looked into a copy of a publication. With regard to the chances of a given advertisement being exposed and looked at, advertisers and publishers had the strong feeling that the difference between such a reader and one who thoroughly reads a copy is likely to be great.

As early as 1955 we had made an attempt to shed light on this matter by using some kind of reading intensity scale ⁽¹⁸⁾. Because of the subjective, not validated, character of this approach, it had no success.

Then came the Politz study on “reading days” for Reader’s digest in 1956 (see Politz Papers, Chapter 7, page 180). Its advantages were the simplicity of obtaining such estimates, and its relative objectivity. This led Otmar Ernst and myself to design an experimental study in 1958/59 in which we dealt with reading days plus contacts per day per copy. The results were quite good for our company’s radio and tv guide magazine “Hoer Zu” and paved the way for a series of studies on advertising page exposure and the quality of contacts in the next three decades ⁽¹⁹⁾.

The German cooperative institution (advertisers, agencies, media) which sponsors yearly media surveys incorporated the “reading days” into their program starting in 1962 ⁽¹⁷⁾. And in 1963/64 Odhams Press carried out a study which included “reading days” ⁽²⁰⁾.

Quality of Magazine Readers

The next logical step after establishing on how many days one copy of a magazine is read, was to determine the “quality” of the readers by demographic and purchasing characteristics. These were present in the Politz Media “Study of Primary and Pass-Along Readers of Four Major Magazines”, sponsored by Reader’s Digest.

In a booklet describing a large number of different measurements of the relationship between readers and publications, the intensity of reading etc., Merbold and Johannsen wrote about this Politz study in some detail ⁽²¹⁾. Their reason: “This Politz study was dealt with in an elaborate way because it had been of great significance for the later development of the subject of the relationship between readers and publications. This especially with regard to methods since the qualitative methods used appear time and again (up to the present) in research.”

The subject was chosen for one of the Thomson awards; Agostini won the Gold Medal for his proposal. It was based on the Politz approach but went beyond improving it in certain respects ⁽²²⁾. As a consequence, later surveys everywhere in Europe are likely to have been based on Agostini’s suggestions.

Advertising Page Exposure

The successful attempts by Alfred Politz Media Studies to go beyond the measurement of simple issue contact had also attracted great attention in Europe.

As explained above, the Springer Publ. House had very early carried out studies researching the intensity of reading of its illustrated TV and radio program magazine, Hoer Zu. Its twofold function as a program guide plus family magazine, and its lengthy stay in the household, contributed to the multiple exposure chances of advertisements.

Consequently, in 1962 they commissioned the Infratest institute to duplicate the "Ad Page Exposure" study Politz had carried out for Curtis' "Saturday Evening Post" (see Chapter 7, Page 211). This included preliminary experiments to obtain indications about the validity of the questioning procedure in Germany. As it turned out, the concept was usable with a few minor modifications ⁽²³⁾.

The study was well received. Springer and Infratest researchers went on to design and test substitute techniques for the Politz method and extended measurements into a more qualitative direction ^(24/see also 7).

We used the original Politz method in two studies ^(25/26).

The 1963/64 readership study conducted in the U.K. by Odham's Press include "page exposure" in addition to "reading days". In their Technical Appendix to the report on the latter they stated: "This study owes a great deal to the work of Alfred Politz". Prior to the survey they had conducted validation checks using the "glue spot" technique. No further study of this kind in the U.K. is known.

Politz's strict "APX" method limits the number of publications which can be dealt with in one interview. This had caused sponsors and researchers to refrain from its use. But the concept was so attractive that it induced researchers everywhere to look for a substitute method.

The general direction of these attempts was to find scales with which readers could express how many pages or what proportion of a magazine or newspaper they would look at or read.

Jan Noordhoff compiled a documentation of such efforts in Europe up to 1974 in a book with 49 pages of text plus 117 pages of descriptions of relevant studies ⁽²⁶⁾. Noordhoff's point of departure, headed by the title "Philosophie", were quotes from Alfred Politz's Foreword to the 1957 study on ad page exposure.

In the same vein, Ingeborg Wendt-Maeder began her digest of such studies with this sentence: "From Politz to NINA, in fact from 1958 to 1975" ⁽²⁷⁾. (NINA was the Dutch approach to ascertain exposures).

The Italian point of departure was the "MPX" study of the American Magazine Publishers Assn., the methods of which were duplicated in their 1985 survey. "In presenting the published results of the Italian MPX study," Lilian Denon wrote, "I introduced the subject of MPX ... by quoting extensively ... Politz's studies about advertising page exposure and the value of repetition."

“Blank Page Test”

In 1958 Politz went one step beyond APX with the “personal message” studies for *Medical Economics*, a U.S. medical journal for doctors. They were another way of measuring APX, suited to a publication with only one definable reader per copy that the advertiser cared about. The logic was that remembering a sensational personal message to the individual physician (on a “blank” page), was equivalent to exposure to the page containing it.

This idea appealed to the “*Medical Tribune*”, a newcomer on the already-crowded Swiss and German markets for medical publications.

In 1968 and 1969 they carried out such “Blank Page Tests” in Switzerland by telephone with an interviewer of their own ⁽²⁸⁾. And in 1969 they commissioned us to conduct the same kind of test in Germany ⁽²⁹⁾.

Poster Research

As described in Chapter 7, the Politz researchers had early on (1954) developed the concept of “exposure” as a potentially useful criterion in poster research, and carried out studies realizing that concept.

This was duly noted by a British researcher, Brian Copland, in his “review of Poster Research” ⁽³⁰⁾. But the method did not find his favour; note his fine irony: “The trouble about mechanical devices, to which Americans appear to be addicted, is that they measure with increasing accuracy aspects of the situation which are of decreasing importance.”

I don't know whether the British ever used such a method. The French *Metrobus Publicité* did so in 1961, with slight technical deviations. And the German *Infratest* institute followed suit in 1963/64. Their researchers very carefully considered all aspects in relationship to the Politz “Study of Outside Transit Poster Exposure” of 1959, and carried out a pilot study⁽³¹⁾ “*Vorstudie*”). They succeeded in reducing the interval between exposures from 1 second to 0,5, thereby increasing the accuracy of photographic measurement appreciably. They also combined the measurement by camera with a representative survey to find out people's opportunities to be exposed to outside transit posters.

However, the most precise replication of the Politz technique was in Italy. In 1964 *SIRME* carried out such a study for the Milan public transport advertising institution ⁽³²⁾. They not only credited the Politz organization, they used the original set of Politz cameras, which were loaned them for the purpose.

Testing of Advertisements

The testing of print and tv advertisements with the method described in chapter 6, p.167 of the Politz Papers was practised by the German Politz subsidiary and subsequently my own company for several years.

We eventually discontinued this service because lack of interest in it. One problem was the relatively high cost.

(One needs carefully matched samples of 150-250 persons to ensure that worthwhile differences are statistically significant; and one additional sample is required to serve as control. Both requirements increase costs beyond those of the more simple types of ad testing.)

The author presented the method and some findings of general interest at international researchers' conferences in 1963 and 1965 ^(10/33). The reactions by some members of the audience were gratifying. But neither paper seems to have had any discernable effects on advertising research in Germany or Europe. It is worth noting that an extensive collection of ESOMAR papers on various ad testing methods ⁽³⁴⁾ did not even include a reference to this approach. Curiously, the same case of omissions occurred in the ARF's counterpart ⁽³⁵⁾.

This oversight is all the more remarkable for two reasons:

- (1) In a paper which has had some impact Timothy Joyce had presented the view: "It is also true that the object of advertising is more that of getting the product recognised and known than the advertising recognised and known. This is a point well made by Politz' parable of the three mirrors." ⁽³⁶⁾ He went on to retell it (see Chapter 3, page 40).
- (2) The Politz company had used this ad testing concept in the famous "Rochester Study" and subsequent research. That study had so frequently been quoted as an outstanding example of how to measure advertising effects that Otmar Ernst of the Springer Publishing House decided to have the report reprinted, together with a translation ⁽³⁷⁾.

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