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**PROJECT MUSE<sup>®</sup>**

## COMMENTARY

*This new feature provides a forum for responding to material which has appeared in recent issues of the Southeastern Geographer. All statements are those of the writers and do not necessarily reflect the views of the editor or of the Southeastern Division of the Association of American Geographers, who assume no responsibility for their contents.*

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### Newspaper Circulation Data

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The notion that the Audit Bureau of Circulations reports accurately represent newspaper circulation or service areas is incorrect [Judith F. Russell and William H. Berentsen, "Urban Regions in Georgia: 1964-1979," *Southeastern Geographer*, Vol. 21, No. 2, November 1981, pp. 84-107].

During the course of a study for the state of North Carolina in 1967, we had occasion to compare ABC reports with the results of more than 3,000 interviews for 24 North Carolina cities with regard to newspaper service areas. In all cases the areas were significantly different. We believe the interviews.

Over the past decade we have conducted the Greensboro *News/Record* consumer profile every other year, and some of the reasons for those service area discrepancies have become evident: (1) Commuters and shoppers carry the evening paper outward and buy (and read) the morning paper at work or during a shopping break. The newspaper loses track of distribution at the point of purchase. (2) Some readers prefer to buy the paper(s) rather than chance house delivery. The newspaper loses track of circulation at the point of purchase. (3) Papers distributed to other cities (i.e., Raleigh to Greensboro) are traced only to the receiving distributor. (4) There is quite a lot of newspaper sharing among consumers, and again, the newspaper loses track of distribution at the point of purchase.

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We might add that the management people of the Greensboro *News/Record* believe the survey rather than the circulation data, even though the ABC reports emanate from the circulation department.

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### Comment in Reply

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Professors Hayes and Bennett argue that there are some problems with the use of data from the Audit Bureau of Circulations (ABC) for the delimitation of newspaper circulation areas. Though they do not report the scale at which they were working when they encountered problems with these data, we feel that the greatest limitation on their use is probably for studies of patterns of newspaper *readership* in relatively small regions. A study of readership will be more concerned with the absolute numbers and characteristics of individuals reading the paper than will a study such as ours which focussed on broader issues.

We used ABC data for two investigations of urban regions in Georgia—(a) changing patterns of penetration of the Atlanta *Journal/Constitution* and (b) changing market regions for all papers in Georgia during the period 1964–1979. If the problems noted by Hayes and Bennett materially affect our results, one would expect them to most affect newspaper circulation in areas closest to the newspaper publication and distribution sites. This is because the movement of newspapers away from these sites by way of commuters and shared readers should show a strong distance decay. (1) This being so, our estimates of penetration of the Atlanta papers within Atlanta itself might be somewhat overestimated and the penetration in counties immediately surrounding the city (Atlanta's commuter shed) might be somewhat underestimated. Likewise, movement of Atlanta papers outward from Georgia's smaller cities (distribution sites) should result in similar patterns of over- and underestimation around them. If this were to be true, it would not change interpretation of our results. In fact, it would strengthen our arguments concerning the growing impact of Atlanta on its nearby counties and would least affect our discussion of Atlanta's apparent waning influence on the margins of its newspapers' market region. The latter trend was made apparent by the growing market regions of Georgia's small city newspapers. This growth has been at the expense of the Atlanta papers'

region which extended over larger parts of the state in 1964 than in 1979. If the problems noted by Hayes and Bennett also affect our estimates of penetration of the smaller papers, the impact of the factors noted by them should be to diffuse more papers from publication sites to surrounding counties, again strengthening our statements about the growing economic and social vitality of small Georgia cities.

We can also respond to Professors Hayes and Bennett's comments more generally. Surveys of the type undertaken by them do not, to our knowledge, exist for either large areas of the U.S. or for long time periods. In order to study patterns of change in urban regions through space and time it is necessary to use data which provide consistent, complete coverage. Professors Hayes and Bennett's thoughtful comments notwithstanding, we feel that the ABC newspaper circulation data achieve this within tolerable limits of error. The data have been used commercially for over 25 years and have been used in academic research, including at least one other publication in the *Southeastern Geographer*. (2)

Professors Hayes and Bennett's comments do underscore the need to critically assess the suitability of readily available data for a given research project. Our prior assessment of the ABC data was that they were adequate for the type of investigation we intended to undertake. We remain convinced of this.

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### Notes

- (1) In response to the comments of Professors Hayes and Bennett, Mr. Charles Bennett, Vice President for Communications with ABC, states that "it would be hard to imagine copies purchased in the primary market being carried much beyond that market in any significant quantity" (Personal correspondence; February 26, 1982). We agree.
- (2) Philip D. Phillips, "Newspaper Circulation as a Measure of Metropolitan Influence and Dominance," *Southeastern Geographer*, Vol. 14 (1974), pp. 17-25.