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Consumer Organizations and Their Influence

According to Professor J. J. Boddewyn it should be possible to compare the strength of the consumer movement in one country with that of consumer movements in other countries by looking at the membership rate. In a JCP article on Belgian advertising self-regulation and consumer organizations (Boddewyn, 1983) he states: “The consumer movement is rather strong in Belgium which has a higher membership rate (6.3%) in consumer associations than such countries as Denmark (1.7%) and the United Kingdom (2.8%) which are more commonly associated with such activism.”

However, in my opinion it is not possible to use membership figures as an indication of the strength of the consumer movement, and even less meaningful to use such figures as a basis for a comparative evaluation of the strengths of consumer movements in different countries. It requires quite an extensive knowledge of how consumer policy/movements/councils/associations are functioning in a particular country to be able to judge the influence of the consumer movement in that country. Even people who have worked in European and international consumer movements for a considerable period would be very reluctant to evaluate the impact of the work done in the consumer field in one country as compared with other countries.

It should be noted that the way in which the consumer interest is organized in different countries (see, for instance, OECD, 1983, p. 10) varies to such a degree as to make a membership rate-based comparison totally meaningless. In Sweden, for instance, no private consumer organization exists. Still, Sweden is – as the other Scandinavian countries – well-known as a country with a highly developed consumer policy. However, in a membership rate-based comparison Sweden would be placed on the bottom line, as the membership rate is 0. In other countries consumer organizations issue magazines and count the subscribers to these magazines as their members. Quite a few of these consumer magazines have been good “sellers” and the publishing organizations have consequently acquired a lot of “members.” In Norway, for instance, the semi-public Consumer Council – which is not based on membership – publishes a monthly
to which 230,000 subscribe, i.e., 20% of all Norwegian households. The Danish consumer monthly does not have such a wide readership but this does not mean that the consumer movement is less strong in Denmark than in Norway.

It is furthermore in itself rather doubtful whether the subscription rate to a consumer magazine can indicate anything as to the strength of the consumer movement as a political factor. Some subscribers may be mainly interested in comparative testing, "best buy"-advice, etc., and not at all interested in the consumer movement as such — they may even be opposed to consumer policy progress. Other subscribers such as public administrative bodies, business organizations, and individual enterprises, are hardly likely to count as indicators of the strength of the consumer movement.

In brief, there are three major ways of organizing consumers: (a) a consumer organization based on individual membership; (b) a private consumer organization run by a self-governing, self-elective body publishing a magazine and counting the subscribers as members; (c) a consumer council set up by the government with representation from different organizations or individual members. In some countries more than one of these alternatives, all of them, or combinations thereof can be found.

I do not know from where Mr. Boddewyn obtained the figure 1.7% as regards Denmark. The Danish Consumer Council is an umbrella organization composed of 22 national organizations (and a number of local consumer groups) and does not have personal membership as a basis for its work. We have some personal members, but this is really for historical reasons, and nothing is specifically done to get new members. Subscribers to our magazine *Taenk* are not considered to be members of the organization either. The 22 national organizations, however, comprise about 2½—3 million individual members or more than 50% of the population. This shows that unless one has a very close knowledge of the situation in the respective country, it is better not to try to compare one organization with another, or to guess the level of importance of the consumer movement in one country as compared with another. Definitely, comparison by means of membership rates is more complicated than it seemed to Mr. Boddewyn — not to say: usually quite meaningless. If one were to measure the comparable impact of consumer organizations throughout Europe criteria would have to be found and qualifications and material evaluations made. A simple quantitative evaluation such as that made by Mr. Boddewyn is bound to be misleading.