

**Community Journalism and the Community's Youngest Readers:
A Study of Newspaper Content Directed toward
Readers in Grades 2 through 8**

Anne W. Anderson, M.A.
aander8130@gmail.com

&

Jennifer Greer, Ph.D.

University of Alabama
205-348-6304
jdgreer@ua.edu

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Abstract

Background: A McCormick Tribune Fellowship report addressed the need for news media to attract younger readers from their communities, saying, “[R]eaching a younger audience is not a matter of choice. *It is a business imperative.* Contemporary media will have to adapt to the tastes, lifestyle and gadget-dependency of young people or face extinction” (Whitaker, 2006, p. 5, emphasis added). Studies show that at least half of today’s young adult readers made the decision to read newspapers before age 14. Yet many news organizations identify “youthful” readers as those between the ages of 18 and about 34, and few have newsroom programs in place to attract their community’s youngest readers, those in grades 2 through 8. After reviewing the available literature, the authors studied Alabama newspapers published between May 1 and May 14, 2008, and conducted depth interviews with two newspaper professionals who had produced an award-winning children’s news product. The information gleaned was used to produce a prototype children’s news page.

Research: The study’s two goals were to examine existing content in newspapers with which the youngest readers could connect and to suggest ways such content could be packaged to better serve those readers. A quantitative content analysis examined how much content Alabama newspapers provided during a two-week period to young readers in grades 2 through 8, how much prominence was given to the content, how much of the content was professionally generated, what the focus of the content was, and how accessible the content was to children in grades 2 through 8. Qualitative analysis of the material examined included noting “best finds” and conducting depth interviews with two newspaper professionals to gain further insight. The literature review, the results of the content analysis, and the depth interviews informed the development of a prototype local news page for children in grades 2 through 8.

Conclusion: The literature reviewed emphasized the importance of and need for news organizations to provide proportional coverage about and for the children of their communities. The content analysis suggested current coverage is not proportional and news products generally are inaccessible to children age 14 and under. Such products have been produced, have been successful, and can be emulated, using the suggestions listed, by newspapers serious about developing a new generation of news consumers.

A McCormick Tribune Fellowship report addressed the need for news media to attract younger readers from their communities, saying, “[R]eaching a younger audience is not a matter of choice. *It is a business imperative.* Contemporary media will have to adapt to the tastes, lifestyle and gadget-dependency of young people or face extinction” (Whitaker, 2006, p. 5, emphasis added). Many news organizations identify “youthful” readers as those between the ages of 18 and about 34 (Heys, 2006, pp. 24-32). The World Association of Newspapers, in contrast, defines young readers as “from the time they can hold a newspaper to when they are likely to use it to look for a first job, roughly ages three to 25” (McMane, 2007, p. 7).

The Newspaper Association of America’s “Growing Lifelong Readers” study (2004) found that 50% of today’s newspaper readers who are ages 18-34 began to read newspapers before they turned 14 (p. 14). The study, based on interviews with 1,500 18- to 34-year-olds about exposure to newspapers in school, found more than 60% of adult regular newspaper readers had the greatest exposure to formal newspaper involvement programs in elementary through high school, compared with only 38% of adult readers with no exposure. Even when researchers controlled for other factors, such as parents’ education and income, the difference between the two groups was “quite significant” (Growing Lifelong Readers, 2004, pp. 5-6).

About 25% of the U.S. population is under the age of 18 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008b, Table 2). Yet one survey showed fewer than half of North American news companies have a project of any kind “to facilitate connections among young readers ages 6 to 12 (“Engaging Young Readers,” 2007, p. 28). How news media define “young people” and how media adapt their presentation of news for young people are keys to both news media’s financial survival and the community engagement of future generations. Howard Schneider, former vice-president for

content development at *Newsday*, put it succinctly. “You start attracting Generation Y at 7 and not at 17,” Schneider said (Negron, 2003, ¶ 23).

This paper examines, through content analysis, how newspapers provide news content to their youngest readers, those in grades 2 through 8. Next, the results of the content analysis coupled with in-depth interviews with news professionals inform the development of a prototype product for children.

Following a brief literature review, the method for the content analysis is explained and the results are presented. The second section outlines a qualitative analysis of the “best practices” identified in the papers used in this study. This is followed by a discussion of the considerations in presenting news to the youngest readers, and then concluding remarks.

Literature Review

Children’s needs for information and their viability as a targeted audience have been the subject of almost no academic studies (Kunkel, 1996, p. 57). Some researchers have looked at how preschool-aged children are introduced to the news through “Show and Tell” (Baker & Perrott, 1988, pp. 19-38), at how mass media teach children about the political process (Conway, Ahern, & Wyckoff, 1981, pp. 69-80; Conway, Wyckoff, Feldbaum, & Ahern, 1981, pp. 164-178; Buckingham, 1999, pp. 171-184), at how newspapers cover children’s television programming (Aday, 1998, pp. 96-104), and at how children are portrayed in newspapers (Ponte, 2007, pp. 735-754; *Children in Newspapers*, 2004). A 2007 Pew Research Center study found mixed results when examining whether American parents encourage their children to follow the news or whether they shield them from it (pp. 1-6). A 2005 study by the Kaiser Foundation, “Generation M: Media in the Lives of 8-18 Year Olds,” looked at what types of media this age

group used, how often they used media, and for what purposes, but the study didn't address questions of news content (Roberts, Foehr, & Rideout, 2005).

Just as little research has examined news content aimed at younger readers, so news associations have not focused on learning about children as news sources and subjects, as news consumers, or even as targets for news-sponsoring advertisers. Only within the last 20 years has the World Association of Newspapers (WAN), founded 60 years ago, included a core focus on engaging young readers—including pre-readers as young as age three. “Like everyone else, we used to believe people naturally became newspaper readers when they became adults, an archaic concept by today's standards,” noted Dr. Aralynn McMane (2007, p. 7), WAN's director of Young Readership Development.

News content about children in newspapers

Kunkel (1996) noted the press's “pivotal role” in influencing awareness and public discussion about policy-related issues affecting children (p. 57). However, he cited a 1993 content analysis of both print and broadcast news that found only about 25% of articles written about children dealt with policy issues of any kind. The largest category of articles (32%) dealt with crimes committed by or against children. Another content analysis of print news, notable because it was conducted primarily by elementary and middle school students from 24 countries who examined a total of 70 local newspapers, again found the largest category, 31%, of articles about children was “Children as Victims” (Children in Newspapers, 2003, ¶ 9).

For a time, some newspapers added “kid beats”—mostly gone now, as newsrooms have shrunk in tough economic times—to provide coverage of children directed toward young readers. However, these approaches were labeled by some child advocates as “paternalistic journalism” that failed to give children their own voice in the coverage (Trost, 1996, pp. 47-56).

News content for children

National publications like *Weekly Reader* and *Kidsville News!*, plus the televised *Nick News* and *Channel One News*, provide students with national and international news content.

What they can't provide is local content, something Buckingham (1999) found was important to young viewers (p. 179) and something *Newspapers in Education* (NIE) touts as a selling point for its program:

Content of the weekly/community newspaper is more local and, therefore, less overwhelming to students. It covers their community, not the whole world. Community news is important to the functioning of our democracy because most citizen involvement occurs at the local level. (*Newspapers in Education*, 2005, p. 5)

NIE is one of the most widely recognized efforts by newspapers to put their product in the hands of young readers. These programs, however, do not reach even half of the public school students in the United States. A 2002 NAA report about NIE indicated that while 94% of all newspapers in the United States with a daily circulation greater than 15,000 have active NIE programs, less than 40% of all public school students in the United States received NIE newspapers (*Measuring Success*, 2004).

Further, some journalists have criticized how these products are used. Too often, they contend, these programs fail to engage young readers in community issues. "When newspapers are used in American classrooms," Hobbs (1996) argued, "too often they are used for vocabulary practice and reading comprehension, and not to strengthen students' critical understanding of newsgathering practices, their reasoning or analytical skills" (p. 109)—this despite NIE's recognition that, "[T]he weekly newspaper provides a dimension of local news and the opportunity to relate to the student's own life as well as the lives of family and neighbors. The closer to home a story is, the more motivation is provided to read that story" (*Newspapers in Education*, 2005, p. 5).

Why news content for children is important

Orchestrated media events by those in positions of power, said Kaniss (1991), produce a sort of media myopia about certain subjects to the exclusion of others (pp. 74-75). This myopic marginalizing by media may be especially true of populations, such as children and the poor, who lack the organizational savvy and clout to feed information to newsrooms. In particular, children often end up cropped out of the communal frame by those in news media management, argued McBride (2003), sometimes because they are hard to interview, more often because “their concerns seem frivolous, their lives seem simple” (¶¶ 2-6).

In expanding on their premise that a purpose of journalism is to provide a map by which to navigate society, Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001) contrasted the inclusive journalism of the 1870s with the exclusive journalism (via targeting of various demographics) of the 1970s and later. Modern journalism didn't make

much investment in the youngest Americans. Stories were long, sophisticated, and often required college degrees to follow. ... On television, the emphasis on crime, and also titillation, transformed television news from something that families would gather to watch to something that parents would shield children from. *In the name of efficiency and profit margins, we did nothing to make a new generation that wanted news.* (pp. 164-167, emphasis added)

Perhaps newspapers have underestimated their influence on children and teens as news consumers. Just as newspapers helped the immigrant communities of the late 19th and early 20th centuries assimilate into American life (Stamm, 1985, p. 4), at one time they also served a similar function among their communities' youngest members. Conway, Ahern, and Wyckoff (1981) compared print news use and television news use among high school students during an election cycle and found “only print news use is associated with increased knowledge about those campaign relevant political objects and processes during the pre-primary phase” (p. 76). Potter (2008) provided anecdotal evidence that “technical” or nonfiction reading in the middle-

school grades “succeeds in motivating students and building their reading skills” (p. 50) and noted using newspaper articles in conjunction with two lesson units (pp. 26, 35).

Beyond building engaged citizens, newspapers also should remember that children, especially older children, often have discretionary funds. “Targeting Teens,” a 2007 NAA report, found 53% of youth ages 12-17 spend some time reading the newspaper each week. The same group spends an average of \$107 dollars each week—their own money or someone else’s (p. 5).

Research Questions

The first goal of this study was to examine existing content in newspapers with which the youngest readers could connect. The second goal was to suggest ways this content could be packaged to better serve those readers. A quantitative content analysis was used to help achieve the first goal. In this portion of the study, five research questions were posed:

- Σ RQ1: How much content do newspapers provide for young readers?
- Σ RQ2: How much prominence is given to this content?
- Σ RQ3: How much of the content is generated by the local newsroom?
- Σ RQ4: What is the focus of the content?
- Σ RQ5: How accessible to young readers is the child-oriented content?

For each question, researchers examined whether community newspapers of varying circulations (less than 10,000 and 10,000-75,000) differed from large metro dailies (circulation over 75,000).

Method

Population/Sample

The theoretical population was all general-interest, English-language daily and weekly U.S. newspapers. A convenience sample was drawn from all newspapers meeting that criteria published in Alabama, a state in which 28 daily newspapers and 90 weekly newspapers comprise

the population. First, a sample of 16 daily and 11 weekly newspapers published in Alabama were selected for analysis. Next, a systematic sample was drawn from the issues of those newspapers published between May 1 and May 14, 2008. For dailies, every other issue was drawn either starting with May 1 or May 2. A total of 97 issues of the 16 daily papers were studied. Every issue of the weeklies published in the two-week period was studied, for a total of 26 issues.

Units of analysis

The *primary unit of analysis* was each issue of the daily or weekly newspaper, not including advertising inserts, nationally-produced inserts such as the comics or *Parade*, sponsored local special sections, or voter registration or tax lists. The *secondary unit of analysis* was each qualifying item of children's content. This study did not automatically include all articles and images about activities involving children. Qualifying items had to meet one of three criteria: 1) news articles or images that identified by name a local child age 14 or younger, 2) items (even if nationally produced or syndicated) containing headlines or captions with any of the following terms or any similar terms: *Children, Kids, Youth, NIE*, and the like if the content appeared to be directed toward readers in grades 2 through 8; or 3) similar items with no specific headline or caption word-trigger, but with another visual clue— font choice, cartoon image of a child, etc. Paid announcements, obituaries and advertisements were excluded.

Variables

The variables for each research question are discussed in detail as the findings of that question are presented. To ensure the validity and reliability of the measures used in this study, a detailed codebook was prepared, and the coding directions were pre-tested with two coders working together. After refinements to the codesheet and codebook, one primary coder analyzed all 123 issues, and a second coder examined 10% of the sample (or 12 issues). In total, the

codesheet had 28 items. The first 10 variables applied to the entire issue. Intercoder reliability for eight of these variables (e.g. date of paper, name of paper, total number of pages, etc.) was 100% using Holsti's straight agreement index. For total square inches, agreement was 83%; for whether a qualifying item was present, agreement was 91%. The remaining variables applied to the items. Agreement on these issues ranged from 66.7% (one variable) to 100% (nine variables). Average agreement on all variables in the instrument was 91.6%.

Findings

Demographics of the sample

Of the 123 issues studied, 97 (78.9%) came from dailies and 26 (21.1%) were produced by weeklies. About half (59 papers or 48% of the issues) came from newspapers with a circulation between 10,000 and 75,000, 51 issues (41.5%) were from newspapers with less than 10,000 circulation, and 13 issues (10.6%) with circulation greater than 75,000. The number of pages in the issues ranged from a low of eight pages with 2,208 square inches (three issues or 2.4% of the sample) to a high of 124 pages with 31,326 square inches (one issue or .8%). Just over half (66 or 53.7%) had 16 pages or fewer. Of the 123 issues studied, 102 issues had at least one qualifying item. The 253 qualifying items gave an average of just over two items per issue.

Research Question 1

The first question examined the percentage of content in these papers targeted toward or serving young readers compared to the available news hole. The study compared the square inches of copy targeted toward young readers with total square inches in each issue, found by measuring one entire page, rounding to nearest quarter-inch, and multiplying by the number of pages, excluding stand-alone advertising sections. Next, total square inches per issue were multiplied by 40% to estimate the news hole of the publication. In 2001, second-class postal

mailing rate requirements dictated newspapers have “at least 25 percent non-advertising content in at least 50 percent of their issues during the course of any given year” (Smith, 2001, p. 96). A 2004 Readership Institute content analysis of 52 newspapers with circulations ranging from 10,000 to about 1,000,000 found “the average newspaper has an ad:edit ratio of 34:66 on weekdays,” however, on weekends and in larger papers, the ratio was weighted toward the ads (Peer & Nesbitt, 2004, Section 2, ¶ 2). Therefore, this study used a figure between 25% and 66% for news hole, selecting (somewhat arbitrarily, but consistently) 40% of total space.

As noted above, 21 of the 123 issues studied (17.1%) contained no content about or targeted to children under age 14. Averaging the 123 issues studied, 6.59% of the available news hole contained content about or targeted to children under age 14. Only four news organizations gave more than 10% of their news hole to children’s content. Table 1 shows how each newspaper studied ranked by percentage of news hole content allocated to children’s content.

Table 1: Mean percentage of children’s content per issue for each newspaper, listed from most to least.

Name of Newspaper	Circulation	Issues studied	Mean News Hole (sq in)	Mean % targeted toward children
Selma Times-Journal, The	< 10K	5	1589.76	22.63
Greenville Advocate, The	< 10K	4	966.00	21.71
Elba Clipper, The	< 10K	2	1768.60	16.19
Advertiser-Gleam, The	10K - 75K	4	2709.00	10.13
Times-Journal (Clay County)	< 10K	2	1876.80	9.70
Daily Home, The	10K - 75K	6	2006.40	9.49
Shelby County Reporter	10K - 75K	2	4212.00	8.61
Messenger, The (Troy)	< 10K	5	1382.40	7.99
Andalusia Star-News, The	< 10K	5	1368.96	7.27
Cullman Times, The	10K - 75K	6	2428.47	7.24
Decatur Daily, The	10K - 75K	7	3407.14	7.07
St. Clair Times	10K - 75K	2	2534.40	6.55
Valley Times-News, The	< 10K	5	1598.40	5.95
Outlook, The	< 10K	6	1368.00	5.73
Montgomery Independent, The	< 10K	2	3475.60	5.67
Times Daily	10K - 75K	6	3590.40	5.01
Daily Mountain Eagle	10K - 75K	7	2316.74	4.75

Times-Journal (DeKalb County)	< 10K	7	1624.40	4.48
Clarke County Democrat, The	< 10K	2	2025.20	4.02
Western Star, The	< 10K	2	2223.00	3.99
Tuscaloosa News, The	10K - 75K	7	4948.12	3.59
Huntsville Ties, The	10K - 75K	5	5795.12	3.57
Press-Register, The (Mobile)	> 75K	6	6736.80	2.07
Anniston Star, The	10K - 75K	7	3370.63	1.79
Blount Countian, The	< 10K	2	3588.80	1.43
Birmingham News, The	> 75K	7	5926.86	0.76
Perry County Herald	< 10K	2	956.80	0.00
Average Mean Percent				6.59

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) compared the total percentage of news hole devoted to children’s content across the three circulation sizes, testing for significant differences. As Table 2 shows, larger papers tended to devote a smaller percentage per issue to children’s content than did smaller papers (many of which were the weeklies in the sample). However, the difference was not statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level.

Table 2: Percent of children’s content broken out by circulation size

Circulation	< 10K	10K – 75K	> 75K	(F)
Average square inches of children’s content per issue	137.59	171.97	82.46	NS
% of children’s content based on total square inches per issue	3.56%	2.30%	.55%	5.6+
% of children’s content based on estimated 40% news hole per issue	8.90%	5.75%	1.36%	5.6+

NS = Not Significant; + $p < .1$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Research Question 2

The second question examined the prominence given to the items identified as being of interest to young readers. Prominence factors included visual prominence and complexity. Visual prominence included the number of qualifying photos an item included, whether the item had a front-page teaser or a jump, location of the beginning of the item (apart from the teaser), whether the item was a recurring feature, and the number of total square inches devoted to the item (including photos part of the overall item, which did not include identified children). Complexity

was the number of elements—text, photos, and graphics—included in an item. Production origin of each item was coded as syndicated, wire service, local newsroom or correspondent, community-submitted (adult), community-submitted (child), or other.

While the items were fairly evenly split between whether they appeared in Section A (119 items or 47% of the sample) or in a different section (134 items or 53%), more than half the items (149 items or 58.8%) appeared on an interior page as opposed to a front page (69 items or 27.3%) or back page (32 items or 12.6%). Three items or 1.2 % were in separate pull-out sections. Fifty-seven items (22.5% of the sample), were part of a recurring feature. Some of these were syndicated children's pages; some were recurring local features. The vast majority of the items, 213 or 84.2%, included at least one photo of an identified child. But for 48.6% of the items, a photo and cut line was all that was included in the item.

Next, a prominence score was created by giving an item one point for each of the following criteria met: contained 20 square inches or more, appeared on a section front, included an article, featured at least one photo, jumped to another page, and was teased on the front page or section front. Scores could range from 0 to 6. Eight items (3.2%) scored 0; 1 item scored a 6. Most of the items, 144 or 56.9%, scored a 1 or 2. An ANOVA by circulation size showed no significant differences among small, medium, and large newspapers. Across the board, these items were given very little prominence in Alabama's newspapers in May 2008.

Research Question 3

The third question examined the percentage of children's content generated by the local newsroom staff, freelancers and other community members vs. national, syndicated or wire copy. Local newsroom items included work done by staff reporters as well as stringers—any item with

a byline, even if it was qualified with “Special to.” Any locally focused item without a byline or photo credit identified as staff was assumed to have been submitted by a non-journalist.

Because only articles that included identified local children met the inclusion criteria, only two wire service items (less than 1%) were counted—one dealt with a tornado that had caused damage to a nearby area. The other wire service item originally ran in one paper as a local article about a family outing at an in-county recreation area. It was picked up by the Associated Press and appeared in another Alabama paper. The article was coded as local-newsroom generated the first time and as wire-service copy the second time.

Fourteen newspapers include syndicated children’s pages, accounting for 5.5% of the items studied. Twenty-six items (10.3% of the sample) were children’s drawings or articles submitted by middle-school journalists. The remaining 84% of the items—210 items total—were split between local-newsroom originated (102 items or 40.3%) and community-originated (108 items or 42.7%). One ‘other’ item appeared to have originated in the ad department.

Significant differences emerged in production origin based on circulation size (Chi-Square = 56.70, df=10, p. < .001). As Table 3 shows, larger newspapers tended to use professionally-produced children’s items, whereas smaller newspapers were more likely to publish child-oriented items submitted by the community, either by children or adults.

Table 3: Origin of children’s content items, by circulation size

Production origin	< 10K N (% of 111)	10K - 75K N (% of 131)	> 75K N (% of 11)	Totals N (% of 253)
Non-newsroom, adult community item	55 (49.5%)	53 (40.5%)	0 (0%)	108 (42.7%)
Local newsroom item	42 (37.8%)	52 (39.7%)	8 (72.7%)	102 (40.3%)
Non-newsroom, child community item	8 (7.2%)	17 (13.0%)	1 (9.1%)	26 (10.3%)
Syndicated item	6 (5.4%)	8 (6.1%)	0 (0%)	14 (5.5%)
Wire service item	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (18.2%)	2 (.8%)
Other	0 (0%)	1 (.8%)	0 (0%)	1 (.4%)

Whereas smaller newspapers allotted a larger percentage of their news hole to children's content than did larger papers, newspapers with larger circulation devoted more staff time and energy to providing children's content, perhaps reflecting more available resources and less of a need to rely on community-submitted items. Large newspapers also used no syndicated material in their children's content, whereas smaller papers did use this material. Syndicated material most often consisted of children's pages with generic content such as puzzles, riddles, and games. These were not linked to any news item, either local or national.

Research Question 4

The fourth question examined the focus of the content, including the type of item (news, feature, column, or other) and the subject of the item (i.e., education, health, etc.). Focus also included how much of the news focused on an individual child—whether a child was identified and whether a child was quoted.

News items included almost anything that happened to a child—winning a contest, taking a field trip, etc.—outside of births, birthdays, etc. Not surprisingly, 188 (74.3%) of the 253 items studied fell into the news category, 18 items (7.1%) were features, and two items (.8%) were columns. Milestone events, travel articles, reviews, and syndicated children's pages with no news content were classified as 'Other.' The 45 'Other' items comprised 17.8% of the total.

The largest subject category of children's content was 'Education' (69 items or 27.3%), followed by 'Sports/Outdoors' (52 items or 20.6%). The 'Other' category—syndicated children's pages and milestone events—accounted for 24.9% of the items (63 items). Only one 'Religion' and two 'Health' items were identified in the sample. Children were identified in 235 (92.9%) items (syndicated children's pages being the primary exception), but children were quoted in only 24 (9.5%) items, more often by larger daily newspapers.

Qualifying feature articles appeared more often in the larger newspapers (18.2% of the items in those papers) than in mid-sized (7.6%) or small papers (5.4%). The same pattern was found with columns: 9.1% of the items in large papers vs. 0% in mid-sized and 0.9% in the small papers. Smaller (77.5%) and mid-sized papers (73.3%), however, included more news items than larger papers (54.5%). ‘Other’ items appeared consistently across each circulation-size category.

Significant differences by circulation size also were found in the children’s items’ subjects covered by the newspapers (Chi Square = 24.35, df = 10, p. < .03). As Table 4 shows, large papers framed children more in terms of ‘Sports’ and ‘Family.’ No content about ‘Education’ or ‘Health’—two major issues involving children—was directed toward children. It is important to remember this finding doesn’t mean large newspapers in Alabama didn’t cover education in the time period studied. It may mean that, when the larger newspapers cover education, they do not include identified children in the coverage—they may cover policies affecting education, but not the people being educated. Small- and mid-sized papers may be including more “field trip” blurbs and photos and not be covering as much in the way of policy.

Table 4: Subject of children’s content by circulation size

Subject	< 10K	10K - 75K	> 75K	Total
Education	36 (32.4%)	33 (25.2%)	0 (0%)	69 (27.3%)
Other	25 (22.5%)	36 (27.5%)	2 (18.2%)	63 (24.9%)
Sports/Outdoors	26 (23.4%)	21 (16.0%)	5 (45.5%)	52 (20.6%)
News/Events	6 (5.4%)	8 (6.1%)	0 (0%)	14 (5.5%)
Family	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (18.2%)	2 (.8%)
Home/Garden	0 (0%)	4 (3.1%)	0 (0%)	4 (1.6%)
Health	1 (.9%)	1 (.8%)	0 (0%)	2 (.8%)
Religion	0 (0%)	1 (.8%)	0 (0%)	1 (.4%)

Mid-sized papers provided the most balanced coverage overall, but both small- and mid-sized papers provided little health coverage directed toward children.

Research Question 5

The final research question measured, using readability indexes, the accessibility of the child-oriented content to young readers. Only 80 (31.6%) of the 253 items could be analyzed for readability because they were bylined articles, rather than pictures and cut lines or other content (i.e. puzzles). Readability was scored by copying or importing the item as a Microsoft Word document. Coders used the Microsoft Word grammar feature to determine the Flesch Reading Ease Score, the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level Score, the percentage of passive sentences, the average words per sentence and the average sentences per paragraph. Many industries use the Flesch indexes as a standard of readability (Philpot, & Johnson, 2006, pp. 211-216; Weitzel, 2003, ¶¶ 6-9). If the newspaper did not have an online archive or the item couldn't be located in electronic form, coders typed in at least the first 150 words and ran the readability items.

The Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level score only goes to 12.0, indicating at least a 12th grade education needed to read content. The Flesch Reading Ease scale typically ranges from 0 (most difficult) to 100 (very easy) (Flesch, 1979, ¶ 20-22). Schnellbach and Wyatt (2006) indicated that a Flesch Reading Ease score of 50 to 59 would be considered “Fairly Difficult High School” level, while a score of 60 to 69 indicated a “Standard 8th to 9th grade” level. Flesch called a score of 60 “Plain English.” As Table 5 shows, the average Flesch Reading ease score was almost 60, and the average grade level score was at the 9th grade level, for children in grades 2 through 8.

Table 5: Accessibility measures of child-oriented content

	Reading Ease Score	Grade Level Score	% Passive	Ave. Words per Sentence	Ave. Sentences per Paragraph
Mean	59.7	9.113	9.36%	18.07	2.44
Minimum	14.7	4.1	0%	10.2	1
Maximum	83.3	12.0	44%	*49.2	10

*Note: The 49.2 words per sentence is not an error. One article, with a photo of an identified local child, was a column about blackberry picking, written in stream-of-conscious style.

Twelve articles (15%) identified as child-targeted articles had a reading ease score less than 50, putting them in the “Difficult College” to “Very Difficult Postgraduate” range, based on Schnellbach and Wyatt’s classification (2006). One syndicated page—a product sold to newsroom managers as a child-friendly product—had a reading ease score of 49.8. One item in this syndicated product had 35% passive sentences and averaged 8 sentences per paragraph. No articles in the sample scored less than a 4th grade reading level. The median score was 9.25. Of the 80 articles analyzed, only three (3.75%) scored below 5th grade level. Sixty percent were written at higher than an 8th grade reading level.

Good journalistic writing style emphasizes active voice and short paragraphs, reflected in most articles. Forty articles had 3% or less passive sentences and 90% of the articles averaged three sentences or fewer per paragraph. The average words per sentence, however, was another matter. One writing-for-children “rule of thumb” is for the average number of words per sentence to match the child’s age, and for the average number of syllables per word to match the child’s grade level (Anderson, 2005, ¶¶ 6-12). Only 12 (15%) of the items directed toward children age 14 and under, however, averaged fewer than 14 words per sentence.

Table 6: Accessibility measures by circulation size

	< 10K	10K – 75K	> 75K	(F)
Reading Ease Score	57.310	73.516	57.483	NS
Grade Level Score	9.547	8.768	9.467	NS
% Passive Sentences	13.53	7.52	2.00	3.53*
Ave. Words/Sentence	18.44	17.157	22.967	4.11*
Ave. Sentences/Paragraph	3.28	3.12	2.00	3.13*

NS = Not Significant; +p < .1; *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001

Table 6 shows accessibility differed significantly by circulation size on some of the readability measures, as indicated by one-way ANOVAs run on each variable. Larger papers tended to use much less passive language and fewer sentences per paragraph. However,

sentences were longer in larger papers. Mid-sized papers tended to score a bit closer to the target age level on the Flesch scores, but these differences by circulation were not significant.

One explanation for this difference might be that the larger newspapers almost exclusively used items produced by professional journalists (either local or national bylined articles). They used relatively few community-submitted items and no syndicated items.

Summary of the content analysis findings

The results of this quantitative content analysis are limited in two ways. First, adults coded the content, not children in the targeted age bracket. Second, the results can only be generalized to Alabama newspapers, and then only with caution as the sample was not random. Still, newspapers wanting to draw young readers should note the patterns this study identifies.

Alabama newspapers devoted about 6.6% of available news space to items identifying the 20% of Alabama's population under age 14 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008a) and gave little prominence to child-targeted content. Almost half of the items (48.6%) were just a photo and cut line. Alabama newsrooms generated less than half (40%) of the children's content material. Alabama newspapers tended to frame children in terms of sports, education, and events. Almost no health coverage (less than 1%) was directed to children. Nor did Alabama newspapers allow children to speak very often—children were quoted in less than 8% of the items.

The average reading level of the 80 items that could be analyzed was 9.1, and 12 items scored at the post-graduate college level. Only three articles were written at below 5th grade level. Most material studied was not academically accessible to most children age 14 and under.

Qualitative findings

This study sought to go beyond identifying patterns to offering ways newspapers nationwide might make content more accessible and engaging to the youngest readers. To that

end, some of the “best finds” discovered during the study are listed here. Second, information gathered in depth interviews with creators of a well-regarded children’s news page is presented. Finally, a prototype child-friendly product incorporating some of these ideas is presented.

Best finds

The Advertiser Gleam devoted regular space to middle- and high-school journalists. The *Elba Clipper’s* Sports page devoted two full pages to youth sports ranging from “coach pitch baseball” to Pony and Ponytail League ball, identifying by name players making hits and scoring runs. The *Huntsville Times’* Monday Life section included articles written by a staff writer, the syndicated *Breakfast Serials* and *Kid Scoop*, articles written by high school journalists, plus school news articles, an academic calendar, and a scrapbook feature (school-submitted photos).

Depth interviews with experts

The lead researcher conducted depth interviews with Bill Zimmerman, editor of the *Student Briefing Page*, an eight-page pull-out section published by *Newsday* from 1991-2004, and Howard Schneider, now dean of journalism at Stony Brook University in New York, managing editor of *Newsday* at the time (B. Zimmerman, personal communication, May 1, 2008; H. Schneider, personal communication, July 11, 2008). “Tens of thousands of letters each year” poured in from parents and teachers as well as students. The page was nominated twice for a Pulitzer. The keys to the page’s success were that it was visual as well as textual, was written by experts, assumed no prior background knowledge, assumed children “had brains in their heads,” and sought response (B. Zimmerman, personal communication, May 1, 2008).

The Prototype

The lead researcher took three articles previously written for local newspapers and rewrote them, incorporating the information gleaned from the content analysis and interviews.

Information was presented visually, when possible, hyphenation was turned off, and, to make the articles helpful to teachers, references to academic standards were included. Style differences included referring to adults 'Mr. Brown' or 'Ms. Smith.' The articles were written so they could be linked to articles found elsewhere in the newspaper or to Web pages.

As an example, one reworked article, about a school board contract to lease copy machines, originally ran 765 words, averaged 20.7 words per sentence and 1.7 sentences per paragraph, and included 10% passive sentences. The article's Flesch reading ease score was 41.0, translating to college-level reading. The reworked article included a staged photograph of children measuring a stack of copy paper to create a visual eye-catcher and to include identified children in the item. A pull-out box highlighted key numbers. A second pull-out box told about the bidding process. Math problems were created to generate reader interaction. The rewritten article had a Flesch reading ease score of 82.2, and a Flesch-Kincaid grade-level score of 4.6.

The prototype presumed a separate page within a regular section, making it easier to sell recurring ad space (Janet Miller, *Anniston Star* advertising senior account executive, personal communication, July 10, 2008). For this project, three rewritten articles were placed onto one special page designed to emulate a page in a community newspaper.

Conclusion

The literature reviewed emphasized the importance of and need for news organizations to provide proportional coverage about and for the children of their communities. The content analysis suggested current coverage is not proportional and news products generally are inaccessible to children age 14 and under. Such products for children have been produced, have been successful, and can be emulated, using the suggestions listed, by newspapers serious about developing a new generation of news consumers.

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