

**“New Media Options for On-line Delivery:
Attracting the under-35 reader by examining preferences”**

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Abstract

Newspapers are making gallant efforts to attract and maintain readers ages 18-34. While some newspapers are developing special inserts to attract young readers others are putting their efforts into on-line supplements. If newspapers expect to attract readers ages 18-34, the editorial staff must be able to identify the topics and techniques that can get their attention. This paper will report on the news preferences of college students in central Pennsylvania and the on-line techniques that attract them as readers.

The Lock Haven University students who responded to a 2006 survey gave a high rating for their hometown newspapers, indicated a preference for on-line delivery over hard copy, and general news over sports. They also reported that they read at least one newspaper a week and spend 30 minutes or less looking at the newspaper. The preferences of these students and their peers provide a clue for the direction newspapers must take in order to attract the under-35 reader. They want their news brief, colorful, and electronic.

When Hartman (1999) concluded that the number one problem with the newspapers is the continued hemorrhaging of young-adult readers among newspaper readership, he had no idea about what the 21st century would bring. It is no surprise that while all newspaper readership has declined, young people are increasingly lured away from broadsheets with the titillation of online videos, 140-character news bits, and a host of social media Web sites. When popular culture icon Michael Jackson died from an apparent cardiac arrest on June 25, 2009, millions of “hooked in” news watchers tried to digest the tragedy while CNN waited cautiously to confirm reports of his death. Although Wikipedia, Google, Facebook, and YouTube did not crash, users reported that the sites — most often used by young people — slowed to a crawl.

The congestion experienced on the Internet on that fateful day in June reveals information on news consumption patterns. How today’s youth access the news that’s important to them has implications for everyone in the news business trying to capture the under-35 audience.

Community ties, home ownership, and age have been identified as predictors of newspaper readership (Bogart, 1989; Finnegan & Viswanath, 1988). Typically, younger readers spend less time reading the newspaper than older readers. Nonetheless, Nesbitt and Levine (2005) concluded that young adults, under age 30, could be engaged in newspapers if the content meets their needs. The researchers concluded that the news content should be selected and presented to improve the reading experience and have relevance to their lives. In a joint project with the *Star Tribune* in Minnesota, the Readership Institute found that young readers respond favorably to techniques that engage them in a story. The techniques found engaging were as follows:

- subject matter of interest to the target audience,
- elements of stories that play to young people's experiences
- active headlines that speak directly to readers and play to their experiences,
- stories written to identify "why this matters to" them,
- stories with clear narrative flow, and
- complicated and/or routine stories relegated to other narrative forms.

Bogart (1989) reported that people read about one-fifth of the newspaper. Readers are typically attracted to specific content with layout design being of secondary importance. This project builds on earlier studies and addresses the readership habits of college-aged students, the content that is of most interest to them, and their preferences on how they access news that is of greatest importance to them.

The theoretical framework for this research includes utility theory as it offers some suggestions on how people respond to different news forms that maximize their interests. The theory purports that when a person is faced with a set of objects, he evaluates and ranks them

before making a decision (Miller, 1972; Jeffres, 1978). Jeffres and Atkins (1996) applied this theory to news consumption, suggesting individual's reading pattern might be "homogeneous" as he quickly evaluates and ranks media outlets to avoid disliked formats and choose preferred formats that play to his interests.

The Good News about Students and News Consumption

Young people do have an interest in the news and journalism. While newspaper readership among those under the age of 30 represents a small percentage of readers — just 29% — at least that number has remained constant since 1996 (Pew Research Center, 2006).

Although not as often as editors and publishers prefer, young people still turn to the newspaper when looking for information. Nonetheless, to consumers that were raised on quick access to information, the Internet is important. Internet news consumers say that they are drawn to the Web for news because of its format, accessibility and ease of navigation. Accessibility also explains why television continues as the primary source for news consumers (Pew Research Center, 2008). While the Internet has drawn news consumers, it is used more as a supplement than as a primary source of news (Pew Research Center, 2006)

Another thing that has remained constant among news consumers is that local and community news continues to be the biggest draw for readers. In Pew's 2006 survey, 77% of the respondents indicated that they spend some to a lot of their time reading articles about health and medicine, while 63% spend their time with articles on technology, supporting the idea that content is important. In his best practices essay for online sources for journalists, David Meerman Scott writes that the vast majority of Web sites fail to deliver compelling content. He says that the content may look pretty, but often the design and graphics are in the forefront, not the content (David Meerman Scott, 2005).

Anecdotal Evidence about preferences

When Michael Jackson died, 18 high school students were enrolled in the Dow Jones Multicultural Journalism Workshop hosted by Penn State University with this researcher assigned as professor-in-charge. The six males and 12 females learned about Jackson's death during their dinner break between workshop sessions. As none of them had brought televisions to campus for the two-week stay, they had to rely on other media for their news about the pop star's death. Most found out about the news through their cell phones. However, those who appeared most informed about the details released in the following days were those who said that they were getting their news from the newspapers, made available during the workshop. All students used the Internet to gather news as it unfolded in the days after Jackson's death. Even after spending six hours per day for previous four days in front of a computer, many took time to find out what the *Philadelphia Inquirer* printed about Jackson and to identify news of interests in the broadsheets supplied during the workshop.

The other good news is that young people still are attracted to print journalism. Of the 18 participants, at least four voiced an interest in a print journalism career, despite the economic turmoil of the industry. Two of the four even indicated an interest in starting their own publications.

This paper discusses a project assigned to students enrolled in the Propaganda and Public Opinion course at Lock Haven University in Clinton County, Pa., The students conducted the face-to-face survey to fulfill their course requirement in an elective course in the Communication Media major. The project was part of a partnership with the local newspaper, The Express, a daily publication owned by Ogden Newspapers, Incorporated. *The Express*, serves a small rural community and has a weekend circulation of approximately 9000.

This study examined the media preferences of college students enrolled at the Lock Haven University of Pennsylvania in spring 2006. The questionnaire used was adapted from one used by the Readership Institute and was developed

- 1) To gain knowledge and understanding of students' media preferences,
- 2) To understand how often students read the newspaper, and
- 3) To understand how often students access their hometown newspapers and the topics that interest them.

Methodology

Although the student participants were not randomly chosen, the 397 sample of students who responded to the survey were 51% male and aptly represented Lock Haven's 5,000 students. As most of the LHU student population is drawn from the Commonwealth, students represented the breadth and depth of the types of newspapers across the state, from very small newspapers such as The Progress in Philipsburg and the Record Herald in Waynesboro with circulations under 15,000, to the Altoona Mirror with a daily circulation of about 31,000. In addition, the respondents also represented approximately 20% of the 93 daily newspapers in Pennsylvania. The sample of participants was made up of students from a variety of majors and included a good mix of age and class ranks. An important goal of the project was to get a broad mix of participants to provide a baseline of information for further studies. Students gathered a convenient sample and interviewed respondents from hometowns with newspapers having circulations of 30,000 or less. Most of Pennsylvania's newspapers have a circulation under 50,000 and serve predominantly rural communities. Only 7 percent of the newspapers in the Commonwealth have a circulation over 50,000 (Stringer, 1999).

Using the National Newspaper Readership Survey as a model, each of the 30 students enrolled in the Propaganda course during spring 2006 participated in the study and was instructed to conduct a face-to-face survey of 13 friends and classmates during a two-week period. Several students administered more than 13 surveys, accounting for seven extra surveys collected. One problem with allowing students to conduct surveys without full supervision is maintaining the integrity of the project. To minimize the problem, the instructor spent several classes talking about research ethics and emphasizing that the results are only as good as the process. After the surveys were returned, the University's computer support staff tabulated the data, providing frequency statistics on students' media preferences, usage, and topics of interest.

Findings

Media Preferences Half of the respondents to the survey were male (51%) and three-quarters (76%) were under age 30. The respondents reported that more than two-thirds of them (67%) read one newspaper at least two times a week. Only 11 of 397 or 3% reported that they never read a newspaper. Half of the respondents (51%) said that they rely on television the most for information about issues important to them. Only 8% of the students said that they rely most on the Internet for information about issues that are important to them. But a little less than one-third (30%) of the 397 respondents said that they rely on newspapers for information important to them. Almost two-thirds of the respondents indicated that they read *The New York Times* or *USA Today*, both of which are available on campus regularly.

When the students were asked about their Internet preferences, more than half reported that they access classified ad or shopping Web sites most often. Students (32%) also showed an interest in health, fitness and sports Web sites where they turn most often when gathering news and information from the web.

Readership Habits: Also gathered in this survey was information about students' interest in hometown newspapers while they were away at college. Most of the respondents (80%) indicated that they access their hometown newspapers at least two times a week while away at school. Almost half (46%) indicated that they access their hometown newspaper for general news, while 31% were interested in learning about crime in their areas, and 14% were in learning about sports. More than two-thirds of the respondents (68%) reported that they spend 30 minutes or less looking at the newspaper each week.

Newspaper Ratings: Many of the respondents rated their hometown newspaper quite well. Almost three-quarters, or 73% rated their hometown newspapers as 'good, very good, or excellent.' The students were not as supportive of newspapers when asked about newspapers' role in informing the public about national issues. More than half (62%) disagreed with the statement 'newspapers in general play a very useful role in informing the public about national issues.' Similarly 45% of the college students disagreed with the statement that newspapers in general 'play a very useful role in informing the public about local issues,' while 40% agreed with the statement. They did, however, agree that newspapers are their main source of information for local sporting activities and that newspapers are a good source of sports information. The respondents agreed or strongly agreed with both statements, 76% and 62%, respectively.

Conclusion and Discussion

In response to a decline in newspaper readership, newspapers are looking to find ways to maintain and attract new readers. Young people under the age of 35 are a good target on which to focus. Presumably, if newspapers can maintain and attract students during their college years,

those young people will remain readers throughout their lives, as age is a predictor of newspaper readership and home and ownership and family ties contribute to dependency on local news media (Bogart, 1989; Finnegan & Viswanath, 1988; Stamm & Fortini-Campbell, 1983). The findings from this study suggest that content and time have a major role on the type of media college students turn to for information that is important to them. When they are looking for information that is important to them, more than half of the respondents indicated they they turned to television. However, almost a third of the respondents indicated that they turn to newspapers. It's not surprising that today's college students turn to the *USA Today* as their national newspaper of choice with its colorful pictures, short news blurbs, and content that closely mimics many of the qualities of the Internet. It's encouraging that more than three-quarters of the respondents indicated that they do access their hometown newspapers at least two times a week while at college. (It was presumed that students were accessing their hometown newspapers via the Web, as there are only four community newspapers available on campus.) Their responses provide a catalyst for local newspapers to continue to work diligently to attract and maintain readers under the age of 30, by making relevant information easily accessible on Web sites.

While more than half of the college students in this survey indicated that they are interested in classified ads and shopping news when accessing the web, publishers and editors might want to consider highlighting their classified ads on their websites. In addition, almost a third of the respondents cited health, fitness, and sports information as the websites they visit most often during an average seven-day period. Hence, newspaper web designers might consider how health, fitness and sports news might be moved to prominent positions on the site when appropriate.

College readers' preferences provide suggestions for newspaper Web site design that will meet the needs of new media news consumers. This research supports the idea that editors and publishers — even those with limited resources — *should* and can provide new media alternatives. When examining the Web sites of newspapers that respondents identified as from their hometown, several items that would interest under-35 readers were observed. The *Centre Daily Times* in State College, Pa., for example, includes links to several social networking sites, including Facebook, Twitter and BuzzUp. The *Williamsport Sun Gazette* offers a mobile version, which can be accessed on a Blackberry, by its tech-savvy readers. At the time when this paper was written, the *Sun Gazette* also included a You-Tube video which introduced readers to its viewers. The less-than-two-minute video is titled, “Local News Never Stops” and appeared to be produced by the newspaper staff. Many of the small newspapers, such as the *Times-News* in Carbon County and the *Daily Item* in Sunbury, Pa., that are based in the hometown of the student respondents cater to readers' interest in quick news and offer one- to two-minute videos provided by the Associated Press. The *Lewistown Sentinel* offers another perk to all readers, especially those under-35: a listing of job offerings that is posted on the front page.

The options are endless but so are the concerns about costs relating to making Web site changes. This researcher suggests that newspaper editors partner with local universities to enhance staffs and gain access to the technological knowledge of people they are trying to attract as readers.

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