

*Journal of the Association for Communication Administration*  
29(2000), 304-318

# Information Utility, Reader Interest, Publication Rating and Student Newspaper Readership

CAROLYN LIN

**T**HE declining interest in newspaper readership, particularly among college-age readers, has attracted concern among scholars in recent years (e.g., Barnhurst & Wartella, 1991; Dennis, 1992; Jeffres & Atkin, 1996; Hartman, 1999). In a democracy founded on freedom of the press, fewer than 40% of adults today under the age of 30 subscribe to a paper (Jeffres, 1994). This suggests, as we approach a new millennium, that time spent with newspapers continues to decline even as new media use accounts for the bulk of audience leisure (Bogart, 1989; Timbs, 1993). The present study investigates student motivations for reading a college student paper, including evaluations of performance and content preferences. In particular, we explore dimensions of information utility, reading interest and perceived content quality in order to establish what factors propel readership and quality ratings for an urban campus newspaper. Dimensions of interest in reading and funding an alternative start-up student paper are also explored.

Aside from the student service implications, consideration of these readership demand issues is important in light of the relationship between newspaper readership and knowledge in political and civic issues (e.g., Bagdikian, 1990). Jeffres and Atkin (1996, p. 21) maintain that, "(t)o the extent that newspaper reading encourages a better-informed electorate, a healthy appetite for print may well be critical to the maintenance of participatory democracy". Acting on that sentiment, Penn State University President Graham Spainer actively promoted newspaper reading on that campus, noting that it's "...a perfect way to gain a better understanding of the world" (Hartman, 1999, p. 49). But, as Lin (1994) notes, it remains to be seen how effectively newspapers compete in the increasingly diversified media environment, given a dwindling pool of audience leisure time.

## UNDERSTANDING NEWSPAPER READERSHIP

Although nearly 70% of Americans subscribed to newspapers in the early 1960s, that figure is now closer to 50%, as new media like cable can now be found in 70% of households (Nielsen, 1998). Scholars (Jeffres & Atkin, 1996; Miller, 1987) suggest that recent declines in newspaper readership may be generational, as readership habits have been

eroded by lifestyle changes (e.g., reductions in time among working women), physical delivery problems (e.g., among high-rise apartments) and competition from other media.

Focusing on sociodemographic factors, newspaper readers tend to have an upscale subscriber profile (e.g., Hu & Wu, 1991; Rarick, 1973; Westley & Severin, 1964). Yet readership is typically lower at younger age levels, as age is predictive of newspaper readership (Bogart, 1989; Finnegan & Viswanath, 1988; Stamm & Fortini-Campbell, 1983). In their analysis of college paper readership, Jeffres and Atkin (1996) found a modest relationship with age and a public affairs readership index. Hartman (1999) concluded that the "No. 1 problem in the daily newspaper industry is the continued hemorrhage of young-adult readers." He found that Penn State's program to make daily newspapers widely available on residence halls resulted in a sevenfold increase in newspaper reading.

Finnegan and Viswanath (1988) suggest that links to the community—such as home ownership and family ties—are more common among the elderly. These factors would contribute to a dependency on local news media. Newspaper readership thus helps satisfy information needs and community ties among longer-term residents (Jeffres, Dobos & Lee, 1988; Sobal & Jackson-Beek, 1981).

Newspaper use is therefore likely to be influenced by lifecycle factors related to age groups. For instance, men have the greatest amount of free time when they're at the youngest and oldest ends of the age scale (encompassing ages 18-29 and 65-69). The former grouping is well-represented within traditional college student populations.

Schweitzer (1976) found that marriage and employment in a professional-technical job are also related to paper readership. Even so, demographic analyses have proven less explanatory of readership in recent years, with sociological variables (e.g., community integration) emerging as the primary explanatory factor (Hu & Wu, 1991). The latter study found that education was the only background predictor of newspaper readership, consistent with the view that this group has a greater need for newspapers (Tichenor, Donohue & Olien, 1980).

Aside from demographics, researchers (e.g., Vincent & Basil, 1997) have moved to consider the role of audience uses and gratifications in determining news readership. The larger perspective (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974) suggests that media exposure is an intervening variable in the study of traditional communication effects: "...audiences differ in the gratifications they are seeking from the mass media, and these orientations may be related to certain social conditions and functions or personality dispositions and abilities" (Vincent & Basil, 1997, p. 380). The latter authors' own findings suggest that gratifications sought drive news media use, in conjunction with demographic differences.

In his definitive study on audience newspaper uses, Bogart (1989) reports that people read about one-fifth of the newspaper. Readers are typically attracted by specific contents, preferences for which remain stable over time. Even though some of these preferences may be of interest to only a few, readers exhibit a strong loyalty to a favorite newspaper section. Some 89% of subscribers read through the newspaper at home, and 92% page through the entire document. Bogart's (1989) own research found that readers are attracted to an individual article by its subject matter, as design elements are of secondary importance. Evaluations of quality, reflecting the portion of those who thought the paper did a "good job" in reporting, were as follow: 40% for crimes, sports or inflation; 30-35% for other countries and unemployment; and fewer than 18% for reporting on pollution problems, personal health and neighborhood news.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Newspaper content can be viewed on many dimensions, but it is the traditional notion of "sections" that best describes the variety available in the eyes of readers, who have

definite preferences for news, opinion, culture, sports, and so forth. Utility theory offers some suggestions for how people react when such an "information-rich" medium reaches the point where audiences can maximize their interests (Jeffres & Atkin, 1996). Jeffres (1978) applied the concept of "interest maximization," given the new diversity offered by cable, to describe how audiences may select programs/formats that maximize their interests. As he recounts, the theory assumes that a person—when faced with a set of objects—is able to evaluate and rank order them. Thus, when the opportunity to select one of the elements presents itself, the reader will maximize his/her perceived utility by choosing the most highly evaluated contents (Miller, 1972). As Jeffres and Atkin (1996) suggest, when the newspaper menu expands, each individual's reading pattern might become more "homogeneous" as s/he avoids those formats disliked and selects those preferred. Even though one could devote all of their attention to a select few formats, the paper's college readers may be likely to sample a wide range of contents as they fashion their reading habits. Alternatively, Donohew and Tipton (1973) maintain that the individual operates between the boundaries of variety and redundancy; that is, they alternate between tuning out monotonous information in favor of something new, only to later tune out "new" information if it reaches a certain threat level. The individual is seen as oscillating between the need for a predictable environment and the need for arousal and stimulation (e.g., Neuendorf, Jeffres, & Atkin, in press). As the latter study suggests, researchers working in experimental psychology (e.g., Berlyne, 1970; 1971) have found that the hedonic value of a stimulus is maximized at a moderate level of novelty.

We might expect that people who spend more time with the college paper (in terms of frequency of readership) will alternate between redundancy and variety more than individuals who read less. In particular, heavier readers of the college paper are likely to express higher levels of utility (interest) across a greater range of sections of the campus paper, relative to their counterparts who are less active in reading it. These heavier readers should, in turn, offer higher evaluations across a wider range of contents. Based on that work, it is hypothesized that:

- H 1: Heavier exposure to different sections will predict higher reading frequency.
- H 2: Higher perceived information utility level will predict higher reading frequency.
- H 3: Higher reader section ratings will predict higher reading frequency.
- H 4: Heavier exposure to different sections will predict higher overall publication rating.
- H 5: Higher perceived information utility level will predict higher overall publication rating.
- H 6: Higher section ratings will predict higher overall publication rating.

In order to stem the competitive onslaught of television, newspapers have expanded their use of visual elements in recent years (Altheide & Snow, 1982; Jeffres & Atkin, 1996). As Barnhurst and Wartella (1991) note, newspapers may attract younger readers by focusing on entertainment content rather than hard news.

Perhaps, owing in part to the influence of television (Altheide & Snow, 1982), newspapers have been placing greater emphasis on visual elements. They may be able to attract younger readers by downplaying traditional hard news in favor of "lighter" fare (e.g., advertising directories, advice, cartoons, weather maps and horoscopes). Other commentators (Atkin, 1994; Jones, 1991) maintain that heightened use of colors in the image of TV—per *USA Today*—may enhance readability, particularly among student audiences.

But, with the average American reading only one book per year, and newspaper readership declining, it seems that the print media are fighting a losing battle against electronic

media and emerging Internet channels. As Barnhurst and Wartella (1991) note, college students are generally disinterested in the newspaper, regarding it as a ritual or tool addressing contexts unrelated to their daily work and leisure. This readership does vary by area of study, however, with more humanistic domains showing higher levels of interest in papers (Jeffres & Atkin, 1996).

Given the rapidly changing nature of today's multi-media environment, the following research questions are posed:

- RQ 1: How do regular readers and occasional readers differ in their exposure to different sections perceived information utility and reading interest of the paper?
- RQ 2: How do students who gave high and low overall publication ratings differ in their exposure to different sections, perceived information utility and section ratings?

## METHOD

Study data were collected from a sample of college students (N = 305) in general university education courses including a lower-division math class, an introductory media and an introductory course to film appreciation at a large mid-western urban university. Even though the sample was not randomly selected, it is made up of students from all majors with a good mix of age, gender and racial categories. The primary goals here were to provide a broad categorization of newspaper utility useful for future research, and to examine relationships among certain variables without intending to generalize. Therefore, an extensive questionnaire, not suitable for an economical mail or telephone survey, was developed.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, a college age sample provides a sound profile of two groups deemed important to newspapers: (1) those whom social critics accuse of public affairs ignorance and (2) those whom newspaper executives seek to retain as readers (Barnhurst & Wartella, 1991).

Our students attended an urban "commuter" campus, hence they were older than traditional undergraduate populations and, thus, more closely approximate the 18-34 young-adult public targeted by newspapers and other media. The questionnaire asked students to "please rate your interest in reading the following items in your campus student newspaper" on a 10 point scale (1=uninterested through 10=interested).

*Publication description.* The campus paper under study is a tabloid style and size paper published twice a week. It's subsidized by student fees and draws limited advertising revenues as well. The paper is a student organization governed by the paper's staff and its budget is allocated by a student fee committee (comprised of student organization representatives and relevant school administrators). Even though the paper has a media advisor (an administrator from the Office of Student Life) and a faculty advisor, neither staff member has any formal input into the management or the content of the publication. In fact, the paper has little in the way of news items, focusing instead on opinions, culture (e.g., movie reviews), sports and other service features (e.g., cartoons, crossword puzzles). The paper often receives unofficial "complaints" from readers with regard to its substance and quality. Yet no readership study has ever been conducted to evaluate reader interest or to help improve the paper's content, so that campus readers could be better-served.

*Exposure.* Students were then asked to indicate how often they read each section—news, opinion, culture and sports—on a 10 point scale (1 if "never" to 10 if "always"). The readers who picked the "hardly ever" categories are coded as "occasional readers" (or "0") and the readers who picked the remaining categories are coded as "regular readers" (or "1").

They were then asked to indicate how often they read each section—news, opinion, culture and sports—on a 10 point scale (1 if “never” to 10 if “always”).

*Perceived information utility.* Respondents were asked (1) how well the paper informs them about news and information that directly impacts a “...” university student (1 if “poorly” through 10 if “well”); (2) how useful the paper is in keeping them informed about what is going on at school (1 if “useless” through 10 if “useful”); (3) how much they get out of a paper (1 if “little” through 10 if “a lot”); and (4) how relevant the paper is to a “...” student (1 if “irrelevant” through 10 if “relevant”).

*Reading interest.* Respondents were asked to rate the subcategories of the following sections: News (including metro, regional, state, nation and other), Opinion (politics, culture, education, editorials, other), Culture (including entertainment, arts and literature, other), Sports (university/collegiate, noncollegiate, other) and “Other items relevant to students” (campus news bulletins, cartoons, comics, crossword puzzles and other). A 10-point scale, ranging from “not interested at all” to “very interested” was used to gauge this variable.

Measures in each of the reading interest categories were combined to form a set of indexes, assessed by a confirmatory principal components factor analysis (with varimax rotation).

Factor reliabilities are as follow: (1) news reading interest (including campus, metro, region of state, state and nation:  $\alpha = .72$ ); (2) opinion reading interest (including politics, culture, education and editorials:  $\alpha = .75$ ); (3) culture reading interest (including entertainment, arts/literature:  $\alpha = .77$ ); (4) sports reading interest (including campus and other sports:  $\alpha = .93$ ).

*Section rating.* Respondents were asked to rate the paper’s coverage across the same configuration of subcategories, also on a 10- point scale (1 = poor through 10 = excellent), while a “0” code is entered if a category is deemed not covered by the paper.

These same dimensions were again tapped with regard to reader evaluations across each of the combined topics above, using principal components confirmatory factor analysis. Each factor also produces the following scale reliability results: (1) news section rating ( $\alpha = .87$ ); (2) opinion ( $\alpha = .78$ ); (3) culture section rating ( $\alpha = .84$ ); (4) sports section rating ( $\alpha = .90$ ) and (5) other section rating (including calendar, bulletin, cartoon, comics and puzzle items:  $\alpha = .87$ ). There is also an “other” subcategory for the “reading interest” and “section rating” variables. Here students were asked to provide an open-ended name to be accompanied by a rating. These open-ended items provide additional information on respondents’ evaluations of newspaper contents.

*Reading frequency.* Respondents were next asked how often they picked up a copy of the student paper, with response categories ranging from 3 (if every issue) to 0 (if “hardly ever”). The readers who picked the “hardly ever” categories are coded as “occasional readers” (or “0”) and the readers who picked the remaining categories are coded as “regular readers” (or “1”).

*Overall publication rating.* Students were asked what kind of overall grade they would give the paper. A scale ranging from “0” (or “F”) to “4” (or “A”) was used for this measure. Grades “C” through “F” are coded as “low overall publication ratings” (or “0”). The grades “A” and “B” are graded as “high overall publication rating” (or “1”).

With regard to data analysis, means were computed across all interest and evaluation measures. Mean comparisons (via t-tests) were conducted to contrast occasional and regular readers across the exposure, perceived information utility and reading interest evaluation measures. Another mean comparison was executed to contrast the exposure, perceived information utility and section ratings. Then reading frequency and overall publication rating served as dependent variables in a pair of multiple regression analyses, where measures of exposure, information utility and section ratings were used as predictor variables.

## RESULTS

With regard to RQ 1, the mean contrasts in Table 1 indicate that regular readers expressed higher levels of interest, exposure and information utility for each of the paper's various sections. The magnitude of these relationships is rather striking, as mean contrasts across each of our 13 subcomponent measures were significant at the .01 level.

As for evaluative measures, students were asked what kind of overall grade they would give the paper. The most popular response was "C", selected by nearly half (45%) of respondents. This was followed in declining order by "B" (30.6%), "D" (13.6%), "F" (6.8%) and "A" (4.2%), for an overall mean (or "grade point average") of 2.11 (s.d. = .93), or "C". With regard to RQ 2, mean contrasts for readers who gave high ("B" and above) vs. low ("C" and lower) overall publication ratings suggest that the latter express lower levels of agreement across items assessing perceived information utility and ratings (Table 2). The one exception involved the "cultural section" rating, where the two groups were statistically undifferentiated; these mean comparisons are further reviewed in turn.

The multiple regression analysis (Table 3) for student paper readership was statistically significant, accounting for nearly half of the variance observed ( $R^2=.45$ ;  $p \leq .00$ ). Significant unique predictors of readership frequency included interest in news (Beta=.18), opinion (Beta=.35), culture (Beta=.17) and a high interest rating for "other" contents (e.g., comics)(Beta=.13). The strong predictive role provided by the exposure variables provides support for H 1. Yet, the general failure of information utility and evaluative rating variables, respectively, to predict readership level, leaves H 2 and H 3 without support.

As with the readership model, the multiple regression analysis (Table 4) for overall paper quality evaluation was statistically significant, accounting for nearly half of the variance observed ( $R^2=.47$ ;  $p \leq .00$ ). Interestingly, all the exposure measures were insignificant predictors for this equation, leaving H 4 with little support. By contrast, information utility measures are significant positive predictors of publication evaluation, including utility for news about student life (Beta=.15) and campus activities (Beta = .18) as well as usefulness (Beta = .19) and relevance (Beta = .28). This provides support for H 5. The opposite is true for the last predictor variable, however, as the inability of any of the evaluative rating measures to significantly predict overall publication evaluation leaves H 6 without support.

### *Reading Frequency and Exposure*

Further frequencies were computed after combining our regular and occasional reader groups for descriptive purposes. On average, in terms of reading frequency, students picked up the student paper once a week (s.d. = 1.1). With regard to exposure to various sections, respondents indicated moderate frequency levels for reading the paper's news section ( $m = 4.4$ ; s.d. = 2.9), opinion section ( $m = 4.5$ ; s.d. = 3.0), culture section ( $m = 4.5$ ; s.d. = 3.0), and sports section ( $4.2$ ; s.d. = 3.2).

To assess the relative utility of various sections, it's useful to review overall mean ratings for each. When asked how much they got out of the paper, students' overall median and modal responses encompassed the midpont ("5") on a 10 point scale, ranging from "little" to "a lot" ( $m = 4.58$ ; s.d.= 4.6). The same is true of judgments reflecting how relevant respondents felt the paper was to them as a student, with nearly 21% selecting a rating of "5" ( $m = 5.3$ ; s.d.= 2.3).

With regard to particular quality dimensions, the paper received its highest evaluations for sports coverage ( $m = 6.3$ ; s.d. = 2.8), entertainment coverage ( $m = 6.2$ ; s.d. = 2.7), the campus events calendar ( $m = 6.0$ ; s.d. = 2.6), news bulletins ( $x = 5.8$ ; s.d. = 2.5), other sports coverage ( $m = 5.6$ ; s.d. = 2.9), culture opinion items ( $m = 5.4$ ; s.d. = 4.9), and literature items ( $m = 5.4$ ; s.d. = 2.7).

Middling levels of support were tallied for the paper's coverage of campus news ( $m = 4.9$ ;  $s.d. = 2.6$ ), state news ( $m = 4.6$ ;  $s.d. = 2.7$ ), national news ( $m = 4.6$ ;  $s.d. = 2.7$ ), political opinion news ( $m = 4.6$ ;  $s.d. = 2.6$ ), education opinion news ( $m = 4.6$ ;  $s.d. = 2.6$ ), editorials ( $m = 4.8$ ;  $s.d. = 2.7$ ), cartoons ( $m = 4.3$ ;  $s.d. = 2.9$ ), and comics ( $m = 4.2$ ;  $s.d. = 2.9$ ). The lowest rated features included crossword puzzles ( $m = 3.9$ ;  $s.d. = 3.11$ ), coverage of metro news ( $m = 3.8$ ;  $s.d. = 2.4$ ) and coverage of Northeast (state) news ( $m = 3.6$ ;  $s.d. = 2.5$ ).

When asked how well the paper informs students about news and information pertaining to them, respondents offered middling evaluations ( $m = 5.3$ ;  $s.d. = 2.4$ ). A comparable level of utility was expressed for items gauging the extent to which the paper keeps students informed about (a) what's going on at \*\*\* university ( $m = 5.6$ ;  $s.d. = 2.5$ ) and (b) keeps them informed about news and information pertaining to them as a college student ( $m = 5.2$ ;  $s.d. = 2.3$ ). But lower levels of support were indicated on the item tapping "how much" one can "get out of" reading the campus paper ( $m = 4.6$ ;  $s.d. = 2.2$ ). On the item assessing how relevant the paper's content is to them as a college student, moderate agreement levels were recorded ( $m = 5.27$ ;  $s.d. = 2.4$ ).

In terms of reader interests, the plurality (22.5%) were "very interested" in the student paper, pushing the overall mean for that item to 6.1 ( $s.d. = 3.1$ ). Interest was somewhat lower in reading student-relevant news items from (a) the metro area ( $m = 4.6$ ;  $s.d. = 3.0$ ) and (b) the Northeast \*\*\* region ( $m = 3.9$ ;  $s.d. = 3.1$ ). Higher interest levels were observed for reading student-relevant news from (a) the state ( $m = 5.9$ ;  $s.d. = 4.84$ ) and (b) the nation ( $m = 6.7$ ;  $s.d. = 4.84$ ).

Students also expressed moderate levels of interest in reading about student-relevant opinion in several other realms, including politics ( $m = 5.5$ ;  $s.d. = 3.0$ ), culture ( $m = 6.16$ ;  $s.d. = 2.9$ ), and education ( $m = 5.7$ ;  $s.d. = 2.9$ ). Students were also moderately interested in reading student-relevant editorials generally ( $m = 5.0$ ;  $s.d. = 3.0$ ); they expressed their highest levels of interest in reading student-relevant items about entertainment ( $m = 7.1$ ;  $s.d. = 2.64$ ).

With regard to campus affairs, respondents indicated moderate levels of interest in reading student-relevant sports items about campus sports ( $m = 5.4$ ;  $s.d. = 3.2$ ), which exceeded interest levels in comparable items about "other sports" ( $m = 5.0$ ;  $s.d. = 3.2$ ). Relatively higher interest levels were indicated for reading a Campus News Calendar ( $m = 6.5$ ;  $s.d. = 2.9$ ) and campus news bulletin ( $m = 6.5$ ;  $s.d. = 2.8$ ).

Turning to more general topics, moderate levels of interest were recorded for student-relevant culture items about the Arts ( $m = 5.9$ ;  $s.d. = 3.0$ ) as well as reading cartoons ( $m = 5.4$ ;  $s.d. = 3.2$ ), comics ( $m = 5.5$ ;  $s.d. = 3.2$ ), and puzzles ( $m = 4.7$ ;  $s.d. = 3.3$ ).

## DISCUSSION

The present study provided general support for the expectations derived from utility theory, indicating that localism (i.e., campus news) remains one of the strongest niches for an urban college paper. In the context of utility theory, these findings support the notion of an audience seeking variety (i.e., localism via campus news) rather than story redundancy with other news outlets (Donohew & Tipton, 1973). In fact, study results provide a striking level of support for our expectations that heavier readers would perceive higher utility and evaluation ratings of the newspaper, across all of its component sections. The only exception to this rule involved evaluations of one of the most popular sections—culture—where the higher evaluation offered by heavier readers was not statistically significant (see Table 2). Thus, consistent with other work on utility theory involving such other formatted media as cable TV (Jeffres, 1978), college newspaper attendance appears to be a function of interest maximization.

In particular, it's clear from Table 3 that those who read news, opinion and sports are the ones who read the paper more frequently. By way of explaining these findings, then, it seems the paper is read because it informs as well as entertains. But, while the ratings for different sections covering news, opinion, culture and sports were all irrelevant to readership, and only the positive rating for the "other" section significantly predicts readership, it follows that the quality of the paper's substance actually has little to do with readership. Instead, judging from quality ratings, it's the most trivial section of the paper—"other" (i.e., cartoons and the like)—that drew students to the paper.

Another striking finding is the irrelevancy of section exposure and section quality rating to the paper's overall rating. It's apparent that, due to the low (perceived) quality of the paper, neither the actual reading frequency nor the actual evaluation of the paper has any bearing on the paper's overall rating. Instead, students overlook those two elements and judge the paper based solely on its utility. Since this is the only campus paper, those seeking information about campus activities have no other news choices. In the context of utility theory, this section thus represents the paper's greatest advantage in drawing readership.

The paper itself has very little news coverage, perhaps one or two stories per issue, and is dominated by opinion, culture (e.g., movie reviews) and sports; open-ended responses suggest that this is the main reason why some students don't read it on a regular basis. From a professional perspective, the writing in the paper is not so much the problem; rather, it is the topical substance that is of concern.

However, the fact that students who are regular readers didn't seem to be bothered by either the lack of topical substance or the tabloid style of the paper could mean several things. These could include: (1) apathy about the paper's quality, (2) a lack of discerning taste, (3) the paper's utility as a "limited" and sole information source, and/or (4) a lack of affinity for a commuter campus. The latter elements may reflect a lack of identity between the students, a school, and a thin tabloid paper that's light in substance, one that was criticized in open ended responses—and by another campus publication—for treating itself and others "disrespectfully." By implication from the present findings, it's important for the student newspaper to enhance its news reporting not only for the purposes of better serving readers, but also to help strengthen the tenuous "bond" between the student body and school at an urban commuter campus.

It should be noted that this is an intact sample; results presented here should be considered in light of that limitation. However, the purposive nature of this sample—focusing on college paper readers at a single urban "commuter campus"—may err on the side of overestimating the paper's utility to readers. That is, when approached by investigators, several nonrespondents (i.e., students who refused to complete the survey) demurred by noting that they didn't want to answer questions about a paper for which they have little use. Insofar as disenchanting nonreaders are less likely to fill out a survey, then those left responding had at least some measure of utility for the paper.

And, although the paper's coverage of Campus news fell just below the midpoint in quality ratings, there were some bright spots in the paper. The paper's sports coverage reached above the midpoint in the ratings scale, emerging as the most popular section. This rating is consistent with peer review evaluations offered in a campus magazine that year. The only other news section to score above a "6" on our 10 point scales was that addressing entertainment.

The fact that regional state news generated the lowest levels of interest suggests that the paper would do well by sticking to a campus focus. Given these low levels of interest, it's not surprising to see that coverage of this topic receives the lowest quality rating as well. It's difficult to determine causality in that relationship, as poor quality may simply contribute to lower interest levels, and *visa versa*. The fact that the other non-campus news



holes (e.g., State news affecting college students) received reading interest ratings comparable to the campus coverage suggests that there is a role for reporting about more global topics as well.

Despite middling evaluations across various sections, the paper scored in the high-average realm on the key criterion of keeping readers informed “about what’s going on” at the university. Even so, the paper scored below the midpoint on the criterion reflecting the publication’s relevancy to the university student body.

It is striking that, even amongst this sample of student paper readers, the mean number of times that the paper was read fell in the range of once every two weeks. This finding augers against the present bi-weekly publication schedule that the paper now follows, as students (especially new students) may be unsure of the publication schedule of the paper. That is, to make students become better aware of and accustomed to reading a commuter campus paper, perhaps a “comprehensive” hard-copy paper published every Monday of the week and 5 daily online papers (with each subsequent issue updating the Monday hard-copy issue) per week may better suit students’ reading “schedule.” In addition, a publication format that offers a greater range and quality of coverage may better serve reader interests. This might, for instance, include hard news topics found lacking in the present survey: regional state news (e.g., tuition increase) and metro news (e.g., a new city bus route to serve our students).

### STUDY IMPLICATIONS

Although cross-media usage relationships were not a primary focus of this study, past work (Jeffres & Atkin, 1996) suggests that television is perceived as an “entertainment” medium, and print-based media are regarded as being more “informative.” In that sense, students may well regard reading a newspaper as “work,” which might help explain their relatively higher evaluation of entertainment-oriented reporting. Such a dynamic would also account for the relative popularity of entertainment-oriented reporting uncovered here. Given the primacy of our emerging video culture (Grotta & Newsom, 1983), we’ve seen attempts by commercial papers to enhance their hard news presentation, through expanded use of color and graphics as well as sensational headlines, as per *USA Today*. Even if this type of presentation technique is successful in luring higher readership to the paper, it does not extend to knowledge enhancement, as “entertainment-central” reading is not necessarily accompanied by high levels of interest in reading the “harder” news categories (e.g., metro news).

This relatively low level of interest in community and regional news should be considered in the context of the peculiar niche that a campus newspaper plays in an urban setting. Since major metropolitan areas such as the one in current study are typically “media-rich” environments, students have many more options from which to choose for news, relative to their rural or residential campus counterparts (e.g., multiple metropolitan and community as well as abundant broadcast TV and radio news outlets). In that sense, it’s perhaps neither feasible nor desirable for an urban campus paper to go “head-to-head” against these more lavishly produced cosmopolitan outlets for coverage of hard news, whether local, regional or national in nature. For that reason, the lack of campus interest shown in hard news in the student paper then does not necessarily imply that college students are not interested in hard news per se; it may simply be a testament to the competitive advantage that other outlets enjoy with those topics.

On the other hand, the relatively greater premium on which students place entertainment news also makes sense in a market where other news holes are covered by the competition. This finding is hence consistent with past work (Jeffres & Atkin, 1996), which uncovered an “entertainment junkie” profile—whereby users are willing to consult infor-

mation-oriented media in order to learn about entertainment. As for journalists who hope to make the newspaper a more compelling medium, the present findings support Barnhurst and Wartella's (1991) call to enhance newspaper popularity by presenting stories that connect with the lives of young adults (e.g., with personal approaches of new journalism).

As print and electronic media delivery channels continue to converge in their delivery channels (e.g., the presence of online newspapers) and content presentation style, it will be important to repeat this research across different sample populations. It remains to be seen whether the relationship between these various news vehicles is complementary, orthogonal, or competitive (see Lin, 1994). For the present, though, the soft support shown for the incumbent paper and high degrees of interest registered for variety seeking (i.e., seeking student-focused news) instead of redundancy (i.e., seeking news already covered by other news outlets) provides a positive road map for the paper's growth direction.

In that regard, study findings should also help urban commuter college newspapers to more effectively position themselves in a rapidly changing digital media age, as our typology of content preferences allows editors to more carefully segment their reading audience. The success of measures gauging content-specific exposure, informational utility and evaluation introduced here, able to explain nearly half the variance in newspaper readership and quality rating, underscores the utility of our attitudinal measures alongside more conventional assessment conceptualization. With the addition of Internet news outlets, as media substitution theory would suggest (e.g., Lin, 1994), these new channels are likely to compete with newspapers for advertising revenue and content inputs as well as the key focus of this study—audience time and loyalty. Further work should explore such competitive impacts on readership patterns, as news media options increasingly become an online content staple.

**Table 1**  
**Student t-test for Regular Reader vs. Occasional Readers**

<b>Predictor Variable</b>	<b>t-Value</b>	<b>P &lt;</b>	<b>Regular Reader M</b>	<b>Occasional Reader M</b>
<b>Exposure</b>				
News Section	-11.6	.00	6.0	2.6
Opinion Section	-11.4	.00	6.0	2.7
Culture Section	-11.2	.00	6.0	2.8
Sports Section	-8.4	.00	5.6	2.7
<b>Information Utility</b>				
Student Life	-4.5	.00	5.8	4.5
Campus Activities	-7.1	.00	6.4	4.4
Usefulness	-6.5	.00	5.2	3.7
Relevancy	-5.2	.00	5.9	2.0
<b>Reading Interest</b>				
News Section	-3.0	.00	5.8	5.0
Opinion Section	-4.4	.00	5.0	4.4
Culture Section	-2.6	.01	6.8	4.1
Sports Section	-3.4	.00	6.4	4.8
Other (comics, etc.)	-4.0	.00	5.2	3.9

**Table 2**  
**Student t-test for Positive vs. Negative Overall Publication Rating**

Predictor Variable	t-Value	P <	Grades 3 B M	Grades C £ M
<b>Exposure</b>				
News Section	-8.1	.00	2.3	2.0
Opinion Section	-4.0	.00	4.3	5.8
Culture Section	-2.1	.03	5.4	4.6
Sports Section	-2.2	.02	5.2	4.2
<b>Information Utility</b>				
Student Life	-8.1	.00	6.8	4.6
Campus Activities	-8.1	.00	7.2	4.9
Usefulness	-8.7	.00	6.0	3.9
Relevancy	-8.8	.00	6.9	4.6
<b>Section Rating</b>				
News Section	-5.6	.00	5.2	3.7
Opinion Section	-5.8	.00	6.0	4.2
Culture Section	- .947	.34	6.7	6.4
Sports Section	-3.5	.00	6.7	5.4
Other (comics, etc.)	-5.0	.00	5.9	4.2

**Table 3**  
**Regression Analysis for Reading Frequency**

Predictor Variable	Beta	P <
<b>Exposure</b>		
News Section	.18	.008
Opinion Section	.35	.000
Culture Section	.10	**
Sports Section	.17	.001
<b>Information Utility</b>		
Student Life	-.13	**
Campus Activities	.12	**
Usefulness	.02	**
Relevancy	-.09	**
<b>Section Rating</b>		
News Section	-.10	**
Opinion Section	-.03	**
Culture Section	.06	**
Sports Section	.03	**
Other (comics, etc.)	.13	.034
<hr/>		
R	.67	.000
R <sup>2</sup>	.45	.000
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.43	.000

**Table 4**  
**Regression Analysis for Overall Publication Rating**

Predictor Variable	Beta	P <
<b>Exposure</b>		
News Section	-.05	**
Opinion Section	.03	**
Culture Section	-.13	**
Sports Section	-.01	**
<b>Information Utility</b>		
Student Life	.15	.043
Campus Activities	.18	.028
Usefulness	.19	.007
Relevancy	.28	.000
<b>Section Rating</b>		
News Section	-.05	**
Opinion Section	.12	**
Culture Section	-.09	**
Sports Section	-.003	**
Other (comics, etc.)	.04	**
<hr/>		
R	.69	.000
R <sup>2</sup>	.47	.000
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.45	.000

#### REFERENCES AND NOTES

**Carolyn A. Lin** (Ph.D., Michigan State University, 1987) is Professor of Communication at Cleveland State University, Cleveland, OH 44115.

<sup>1</sup>With over 20 motivation and 60 other items, the response rate for a random administration would have been jeopardized severely, weakening the representativeness of any random sample. Given that readership for student publications was below 25% at the time, a random sample would have produced over 75% unusable responses. Moreover, a large sample was needed to analyze statistically responses to this lengthy instrument.

Althiede, D. & Snow, R. (1982). *Media logic*. Beverly Hills: Sage.

Atkin, D. (1994). Newspaper Readership among College Students in the Information Age. *Journal of the Association for Communication Administration*, 56 (2), 3-10.

Bagdikian, B.H. (1990). *The media monopoly*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Barnhurst, K.G. & Wartella, E. (1991). Newspapers and citizenship: Young adult's subjective experience with newspapers. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 8, 195-209.

Berlyne, D. E. (1970). Novelty, complexity, and hedonic value. *Perception and Psychophysical*, 8, 279-286.

Berlyne, D. E. (1971). *Aesthetics and psychobiology*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.

Bogart, L. (1989). *The press and the public*. Hillsdale, NJ: LEA.

- Dennis, E. (1992). No, TV has not killed the print media. In D. Shimkin, H. Stolerman, & H. O'Conner, *The media age: Living with technology*. New York: St. Martins.
- Donohew, L. & Tipton, L. (1973). A conceptual model of information seeking, avoiding, and processing. In P. Clarke (Ed.), *New models for mass communication research* (pp. 243-268). Beverly Hills: Sage.
- Finnegan, J.R. & Viswanath, K. (1988). Community ties and use of cable TV and newspapers in a midwest suburb. *Journalism Quarterly*, *65*, 456-463.
- Gollin, A. (1985). Are Sunday newspapers flowering while weekday readership wilts? *Bulletin of the ASNE*, *682*, 3-7.
- Grotta, G. & Newsom, G. (1983). How does cable television relate to other media use patterns? *Journalism Quarterly*, *59*, 588-91.
- Hartman, J.K. (1999). Penn State University's president promotes newspapers to students. *Newspaper Research Journal*, *20*, 48-57.
- Henke, L. & Donohue, T.R. (1989). Functional displacement of traditional TV viewing by VCR owners. *Journal of Advertising Research*, April/May, 18-23.
- Hu, Y.W. & Wu, Y.C. (1991). A reconsideration of some sociological and psychological differences between daily newspaper readers and nonreaders. Paper presented to Midwest Association for Public Opinion Research, annual meeting, Chicago.
- Jeffres, L.W. (1978). Cable TV and interest maximization. *Journalism Quarterly*, *55*, 149-154.
- Jeffres, L.W. (1994). *Mass media processes*. Prospect Heights: Waveland Press.
- Jeffres, L.W., & Atkin, D. (1996). Dimensions of interest in newspaper readership among college students: Comparing communication majors and nonmajors. *Journalism Educator*, *51*, 15-24.
- Jeffres, L.W., Dobos, J. & Lee, J. (1988). Media use and community ties. *Journalism Quarterly*, *65*, 575-581, 677. Jones A.S. (1991, April 8). To papers, funnies are no joke. *The New York Times*, (National ed.), p. C-1.
- Katz, E., Blumler, J., & Gurevitch, M. (1974). Utilization of mass communication by the individual. In J. G. Blumler & E. Katz (Eds.). *The uses of mass communications: Current perspectives on gratification research* (pp. 19-32). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- LaRose, R. & Atkin, D. (1988). An analysis of cable subscription as telecommunication behavior. *Telematics & Informatics*, *5*, 377- 388.
- Lin, C. A. (1994). Leisure-time reallocation in a video culture. *Mass Communication Review*, *20*, 3-17.
- Miller, S. (1987). America's dailies and the drive to capture lost readers. *Gannett Center Journal*, *1* (1), 56-68.
- Miller, M. M. (1972). Task orientation and salience as determinants of source utility. *Journalism Quarterly*, *49*, 669-673.
- Neuendorf, K., Jeffres, L., & Atkin, D. (in press). The television of abundance arrives: Cable choices and interest maximization. *Telematics & Informatics*.
- Rarick, G. (1973). Differences between daily newspaper subscribers and nonsubscribers. *Journalism Quarterly*, *50*, 265-270.
- Robinson, J. & Jeffres, L. (1979). The changing role of newspapers in the age of television. *Journalism Monographs*, *63*.
- Rubin, A. & Perse, E.M. (1987). Audience activity and soap opera involvement. *Human Communication Research*, *14*, 246-268.
- Schweitzer, J.C. (1976). A sociological analysis of newspaper subscribers. *Journalism Quarterly*, *53*, 45-50.
- Sobal, J. & Jackson-Beek, M. (1981). Newspaper nonreaders: A National profile. *Journalism Quarterly*, *58*, 9-14.

- Stamm, K. & Fortini-Campbell, L. (1983). The relationship of community ties to newspaper use. *Journalism Monographs*, 84.
- Tichenor, P. J., Donohue, G.A., & Olien, C. (1980). *Community conflict and the press*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Tinsley, H. & Tinsley, D.J. (1982). A holistic model of leisure counseling. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 14, 100-116.
- Tinsley, H. & Tinsley, D. (1986). A theory of the attributes, benefits, and causes of leisure experience. *Leisure Sciences*, 8, 1-45.
- Timbs, L.C. (1993). From couch potatoes to readers: Enriching undergraduate education. *Journalism Educator*, 48/2, 81-85.
- Vincent, R.C., & Basil, M. (1997). College students' news gratifications, media use, and current events knowledge. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 41, 380-392.
- Viswanath, K. Finnegan, Rooney, J.R., & Potter, J. (1991). Community ties in a rural midwest community and use of newspapers and cable television. *Journalism Quarterly*, 67, 899- 911.
- Westley, B. & Severin, W. (1964). A profile of daily newspaper non-readers. *Journalism Quarterly*, 41, 45-50.