

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 095 563

CS 201 522

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TITLE That Newspaper Nonreader Ten Years Later: A Partial  
Replication of Westley-Severin.  
PUB DATE Aug 74  
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the  
Association for Education in Journalism (57th, San  
Diego, California, August 18-21, 1974)  
EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.75 HC-\$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE  
DESCRIPTORS Communications; \*Journalism; \*Media Research;  
\*Newspapers; Press Opinion; \*Public Opinion; State  
Surveys

ABSTRACT

Findings from a 1971-72 North Carolina statewide survey focusing on the newspaper nonreader were compared with results from a similar statewide survey taken in 1961-62 in Wisconsin. Although there were limits to how precisely the two sets of data could be compared, the findings demonstrated that the type of person who chose not to read a newspaper then is the same today. The comparison also provides reasonable evidence that the number of certain kinds of people who choose not to read newspapers is growing. The study suggests that newspapers can react to this development by a more indepth approach to topics of interest to those who find newspapers most useful, generally readers who are urban, well-educated, and of middle age. (T0)

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That Newspaper Nonreader Ten Years Later:

A Partial Replication of Westley-Severin

by

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A paper presented to the Newspaper Division  
at the annual convention of the Association  
for Education in Journalism, San Diego State  
University, San Diego, Calif., August 1974.

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A decade ago Bruce Westley and Werner Severin asked, "Who is the nonreader of daily newspapers?" What is he like--what is his "profile"?<sup>1</sup> Using findings from a carefully conducted 1961-62 statewide survey in Wisconsin, they discovered that persons who did not report themselves as regular newspaper readers were, as a group, low in income and educational and occupational achievement; they tended to be relatively young or relatively old and live in rural areas.

This study reports findings of a similar statewide survey conducted in 1971-72 in North Carolina. The North Carolina study isolated newspaper non-readers to compare, where possible, their "profile" with the decade-earlier Wisconsin findings. Is the daily newspaper nonreader approximately the same "type" of person which Westley-Severin found? By and large, this study finds yes. . . except there is some discouraging evidence that over the last ten years significantly larger numbers of people--especially the poorer and less educated--have decided not to read the newspaper.

#### Method

Details of the Westley-Severin Wisconsin study are available in their published report. The North Carolina study was conducted by the Institute for Research in Social Science at the University of North Carolina from August 1, 1971, through January 31, 1972. As was true in the Wisconsin study, the survey was of the omnibus type, with questions provided by various members of the Institute. Data from some questions were used where the data were directly comparable (or could be made comparable with minor category adjustments) to the data gathered by Westley-Severin in the Wisconsin

study. The survey employed a carefully designed random sampling plan to glean information from 1,130 respondents. Where the Wisconsin study divided respondents into reader and nonreader categories on the basis of "Do you generally read a daily newspaper?" the North Carolina study used answers to the question: "Have you read a newspaper yesterday or today? The North Carolina question was more rigorous, for it attempted to tap respondents' recent memories about their recent media behavior. The North Carolina question also provided a clear "way out." Someone can tell an interviewer "Well, no, I didn't get a chance to see a paper today or yesterday" easier than "No, I don't generally read a daily newspaper." Hence, differences in the number of respondents who fall into the nonreader groups in 1961-62 as against 1971-72 may in part be an artifact of the two question approaches. Or, of course, such differences may result from regional differences in use of media, or as some studies have suggested,<sup>2</sup> from changing media behavior. Even if there are difficulties in interpretations of how many people are reading or not reading the paper, the studies do provide a sound way to compare the relationships found across time between daily newspaper nonreaders and certain socioeconomic, demographic and political factors. Hence the North Carolina study is a replication only in a partial sense--the examination of how "constant" are a set of relationships--but our field has need of studies which attempt to fix what we "know" upon foundations more solid than single major studies, no matter how well they are done.

In addition, social science deals with human behavior which is potentially quite variable over time. Therefore we may need to reestablish from time to time that humans are still acting vis-a-vis the media the way earlier studies have argued. This seems especially true in light of recent studies which have pointed out that mass media have to fight it out for the consumer's relatively fixed dollar--and apparently time--commitment to all mass media.<sup>3</sup>

In short, what one medium gains, another is in great danger of losing. Who is not reading the paper?

Findings and Discussion

As a group, the same type people who did not read daily newspapers in Wisconsin a decade ago still are not reading them. Table 1 shows some socioeconomic characteristics of the 1971-72 North Carolina nonreaders as compared with the 1961-62 Wisconsin findings. The table shows that nonreading is related to relatively lower levels of education and income plus the subjective tendency to rank oneself as a member of the "working class."

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TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

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In the North Carolina study, however, there were many more persons who fell into the nonreading group with decline in education and income. One might assume that North Carolina's much larger black population, which historically has had less formal education than whites, would account for some of this difference. Yet controlling for race, the finding still holds, although a much higher percentage of blacks in almost all categories chose not to read the newspaper.

Partialing out the North Carolina respondents who never used the library and had less than an eighth-grade education resulted in a sharp reduction in the number of blacks and whites included in the study but did not systematically change the percent of nonreaders in the different socioeconomic, demographic, political and media-use categories.

Overall in the 1971-72 and 1961-62 studies, approximately the same percentage of those at the highest education and income levels chose not to read the newspaper. This tendency--that is for the relationships between nonreading and other background variables to hold--is evident throughout most all the comparisons which can be made with the North Carolina data. As Table 1 shows, however, the proportion of those who do not report reading a daily paper is consistently larger, even controlling for race. What does this mean?

As suggested earlier, it may reflect only that one gets different responses from differently worded questions. The North Carolina question left a little more room to answer that one did not see the paper "yesterday or

today." Perhaps the respondent really did not see the paper, even though he did read it normally. In that case, the Wisconsin findings--based on questions designed to elicit a more general media-use pattern--would be more valid. On the other hand, the "highest" categories (in Table 1, education and income) of various breakdowns are very close in both studies; this raises the suspicion that there has been a real decline in the use of daily newspapers by those of lower education and income. Those of higher education and income, and probably of higher "social class,"<sup>4</sup> are proving most loyal to the paper.

But it may be, of course, that those in the South do not read newspapers as much as those living in the Midwest, and that these findings therefore really chart regional differences as much as change in newspaper use over time. This is difficult to assess, but a comparison of each state's circulation-population ratio in the years of the studies reveals little difference in daily newspaper availability (29.7% in Wisconsin in 1961, and 25.2% in North Carolina in 1971).<sup>5</sup> This 4% difference clearly does not explain the far greater percentage of nonreaders in North Carolina in 1972.

In addition, it does not seem likely that basic educational opportunities (in the last ten years, even for blacks) vary that greatly between North Carolina and Wisconsin; both states have similarities in their agricultural and more recent industrial and urban development.<sup>6</sup>

It seems more likely that the North Carolina study finds there has been some decline in use of the daily newspaper, a decline not completely attributable to differences in survey questions or geographic area. De Fleur, citing different diffusion rates of the media and suggesting the differing media functional roles, has pointed out the declining penetration of family groups by newspapers during the past few years.<sup>7</sup> And as people find new

leisure time, they diversify their activities. If one increases his time sailboating, camping and reading magazines or watching television, there may be less time left over for newspapers. Time, like income, is limited. In the case of television, a gradual increase in time committed to that medium in recent years has been accompanied by a sharp rise in the perceived credibility of the medium as a news vehicle.<sup>8</sup> For newspapers, what are other characteristics of those who have decided to let the paper go?

Table 2 shows that those who read the newspaper still tend to be in the "middle age" ranges, with the young and old trailing off in readership.

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TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

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Readers also tend to be urban. Differences in sex did not lead to different media-use patterns, and the small number of North Carolina Catholics precludes any conclusions from the religious background differences found there.

The consistency between the Wisconsin and North Carolina findings in Table 2, however, suggests that the daily newspaper continues to serve a more important function in an urban than in a rural society. This difference is not simply a matter of media availability, for daily newspapers are easily available to rural people today (except in the most isolated places) on the day of publication. Rather, as one scholar has argued recently,<sup>9</sup> it seems likely that in some important ways, the mass media do more than report about society; they are themselves an important part of the highly integrated social mosaic which we have come to call--often carelessly--the urban "mass society."

At another level, Table 2 seems also to indicate that newspapers are still speaking to approximately the same kinds of people they did a decade ago. If so, one might argue that a far-seeing news editor would try to provide relevant news and editorial content for the birds he clearly has in hand--here, for example, the more highly educated, urban audience of middle range in age. This does not mean that one should ignore the young or

old--they are still an important part of the audience--but there probably should be renewed emphasis on more indepth coverage of community topics of use to those actively engaged in community problems and the economic marketplace. The coverage, furthermore, should have a level of sophistication in topic and tone to be truly useful to this group. In other words, to overly democratize the news presentation is to provide material that is not truly useful or interesting to the most important audience of newspapers. The old maxim KISS--"Keep it simple, stupid!"--could not miss the point further when it comes to the changing nature of the newspaper audience. Many daily newspapers are carrying more indepth material on all kinds of topics. This study suggests only that the degree of such emphasis by American newspapers generally should be increased to meet the needs of the main, and most loyal, daily newspaper readers. In terms of the long-range newspaper market, holding, satisfying and building on the present strongest audience is worth the increased cost of more indepth coverage.

Tables 3 and 4 show readers by other characteristics, as was done in the Wisconsin study. The North Carolina study found few differences in nonreadership according to preferred political party. Those without strong sense of party identification, except North Carolina blacks, did make more use of newspapers, perhaps because they do have more "need for orientation."<sup>10</sup>

Where the Wisconsin study found no relationship between amount of television news viewing and nonreadership of daily newspapers, the North Carolina study found simply that those who watched television were more likely to see the paper, while those who did not watch television news "yesterday or today" were more likely not to have seen the daily paper. People who use one medium are more likely to use another. This is true of library use; both studies found that those who use libraries are more likely to read a daily newspaper.

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TABLES 3 & 4 ABOUT HERE

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Summary

This study reports a secondary analysis of data from a 1971-72 North Carolina statewide survey with a focus on the newspaper nonreader. Findings were compared with results of a 1961-62 similar statewide survey in Wisconsin which concentrated on the "profile" which characterized daily newspaper nonreaders. Although there were limits to how precisely the two sets of data could be compared, the current study attempts in a special sense to replicate the decade-old Wisconsin study. Comparison of findings demonstrated that the type of person who chose not to read a newspaper then is the same today. And although there are difficulties in comparing findings from different survey approaches and populations in different regions, there is reasonable evidence that the number of certain kinds of people who choose not to read the paper is growing. The study suggests that newspapers can react to this development by a more indepth approach to topics of interest to those who are finding newspapers most useful. Generally, these readers are urban, well-educated and of middle age.

In terms of the variables examined in these two studies, clearly the newspaper as a general medium has not served all people equally well despite efforts to "provide something for everybody." This study argues that we probably should not try to continue to serve everybody equally; instead, we should try to serve better those who continue to find the newspaper vital and useful in their everyday lives. As a group, those who read newspapers more often represent the present leadership strata of our society. Perhaps by serving them well--making the average newspaper more of a genuine means of explanation for community issues--we better will attract the now-young, future leadership of our communities. Pulitzer's feeling that great newspapers should aim to speak to a nation rather than to a more select audience no longer seems to fit a nation as technologically "wired-in" as our own. With the demon-

strated power of explanation and interpretation of the newspaper, we would be advised to improve the explanatory capabilities of our medium to meet the challenging intellectual capabilities of our audience. This is not a loss for newspapers but a tremendously important opportunity to search out and explain more fully the puzzling complexities of our time.

## Footnotes

1 Bruce H. Westley and Werner J. Severin, "A Profile of the Daily Newspaper Non-Reader," Journalism Quarterly, 41:45-50, 156 (Winter 1964).

2 The Roper Organization, What People Think of Television and Other Mass Media 1959-1972 (New York: Television Information Office, 1973).

3 See Maxwell E. McCombs, "Mass Media in the Marketplace," Journalism Monographs, Number 24 (August 1972).

4 See Westley and Severin, p. 50.

5 The percentages were obtained by dividing the states' total daily newspaper circulations by the total populations according to the 1960 and 1970 U. S. Censuses; 1961 and 1971 newspaper circulation figures came from Editor & Publisher International Yearbooks, 1962 and 1972. The circulation-population ratio for Wisconsin in 1971 was 27.4%; for North Carolina in 1961, it was 24.4%.

6 For example, compare the agricultural and industrial development of the two states in William Francis Raney, Wisconsin, A Story of Progress (Appleton, Wisconsin: Perin Press, 1963) and Hugh T. Lefler and Albert R. Newsome, The History of a Southern State: North Carolina (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1954).

7 Melvin L. DeFleur, Theories of Mass Communication, 2nd ed. (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1970), pp. 44-75.

8 Roper, but also see Eugene F. Shaw, "Media Credibility: Taking the Measure of a Measure," Journalism Quarterly, 50: 306-311 (Summer 1973), and Richard F. Carter and Bradley S. Greenberg, "Newspapers or Television: Which Do You Believe?" Journalism Quarterly, 42: 29-34 (Winter 1965).

9 Eugene F. Shaw, "Urbanism as a Communication Variable," Paper presented to Theory and Methodology Division, Association for Education in Journalism, Berkeley, Calif., August, 1969.

10 Maxwell McCombs, "Editorial Endorsements: A Study of Influence," Journalism Quarterly, 44: 543-548 (Autumn 1967).

a The figures within the parentheses refer to the number of blacks, whites and total in that category in the North Carolina study (always shown on the left) and the total number in the Westley-Severin Wisconsin study. (The black and white totals do not always add up to the North Carolina total because some Indians were in the study.) For example, of the 9 blacks, 120 whites and 133 total respondents with 16 years or more education in the North Carolina study, 0% blacks, 6.7% whites and 6.0% total subjects reported themselves as nonreaders of newspapers. Of the 104 similar respondents in the Wisconsin study, 5.8% said they were nonreaders.

b This was \$7,000 to \$9,999 and \$5,000 to \$6,999 in the Wisconsin study. A more exact comparison could not be made.

c Note the small number of cases.

TABLE 1

## Socioeconomic Characteristics of Newspaper Nonreaders

Respondent's Education	<u>% Nonreaders</u>			Wisconsin 1961-62 Total
	Black	White	Total	
16 years or more (9,120,133/104) <sup>a</sup>	0.0 <sup>c</sup>	6.7	6.0	5.8
13-15 (15,123,141/114)	13.3	17.9	17.7	10.5
12 (41,255,300/344)	31.7	17.6	19.7	10.8
9-11 (58,169,233/150)	53.4	25.4	33.0	16.0
8 (21,63,84/220)	57.1	46.0	48.8	17.3
Less than 8 (60,162,224/111)	83.3	51.9	60.7	18.9
<b>Income, Head of Household</b>				
\$10,000 and up (16,290,313/110)	12.5	11.4	11.5	7.3
\$7,500 to \$9,999 <sup>b</sup> (20,146,167/162)	30.0	21.9	22.8	6.8
\$5,000 to \$7,499 <sup>b</sup> (35,149,189/277)	34.3	27.5	29.6	10.5
\$3,000 to \$4,999 (46,116,168/225)	60.9	44.8	49.4	19.1
Under \$3,000 (65,120,185/243)	72.3	40.0	51.4	19.3
<b>Subjective Social Class</b>				
"Middle class" (41,373,422/440)	36.6	15.5	17.8	9.1
"Working class" (151,472,632/558)	57.6	33.7	39.7	17.0

TABLE 2

## Demographic Characteristics of Newspaper Nonreaders

Respondent's Age	<u>% Nonreaders</u>			Wisconsin 1961-62 Total
	North Carolina 1971-72		Total	
	Black	White	Total	
20s (41,192,240/180) <sup>a</sup>	51.2	31.8	35.4	18.9
30s (40,161,205/226)	45.0	20.5	25.4	11.9
40s (46,186,234/231)	50.0	20.4	26.5	12.6
50s (34,172,207/169)	47.1	25.6	29.0	7.7
60s (25,113,141/154)	68.0	24.8	33.3	11.0
70s and up (17,76,93/96)	70.6	35.5	41.9	24.0
<b>Respondent's Sex</b>				
Men (83,409,501/475)	53.0	25.2	30.1	13.9
Women (122,494,624/580)	53.3	26.3	31.7	13.3
<b>Place of Residence<sup>b</sup></b>				
Under 2,000 population (14,136,151/123) <sup>c</sup>	64.3	30.9	33.8	13.0
2,000 to 9,999 (23,96,121/107) <sup>c</sup>	56.5	24.0	30.6	14.0
10,000 to 24,999 (8,142,150/227)	37.5 <sup>d</sup>	24.6	25.3	6.6
25,000 to 99,999 (32,118,150/116)	56.3	20.3	28.0	9.5
100,000 and up (32,121,156/222)	25.0	11.6	14.1	9.5
<b>Religion</b>				
Catholic (3,32,37/420)	0.0 <sup>d</sup>	21.9	21.6	11.9
Protestant (196,819,1030/588)	52.6	24.8	30.3	14.5

a See footnote a, Table 1.

b The Wisconsin study also included a "rural (farm)" category which could not be reconstructed from the North Carolina data.

c In the Wisconsin study these were 1) under 2,500 population, and 2) 2,501 to 10,000 population. Other minor adjustments in categories were made.

d Note the small number of cases.

TABLE 3

## Political Characteristics of Newspaper Nonreaders

Preferred Political Party	<u>% Nonreaders</u>			Wisconsin 1961-62 Total
	North Carolina 1971-72		Total	
	Black	White		
Republican (7,165,176/339) <sup>a</sup>	100.0 <sup>b</sup>	23.6	27.8	11.8
Democrat (149,357,519/418)	44.3	25.5	30.8	13.6
Independent (24,328,355/102)	58.3	25.9	28.2	9.8
American/no preference (0,7,8/153) <sup>b</sup>	0.0 <sup>c</sup>	28.6 <sup>c</sup>	25.0 <sup>c</sup>	17.7
<b>Strength of Party Identification</b>				
Strong (109,306,421/345)	47.7	28.8	33.7	15.7
Not strong (68,451,534/400)	50.0	20.4	24.5	10.5

a See footnote a, Table 1.

b In the North Carolina study, the fourth category was "American Party" (8 respondents). In the Wisconsin study, it was "no preference" (153 respondents).

c Note the small number of cases.

TABLE 4

## Media-Use Characteristics of Newspaper Nonreaders

Frequency of TV News Viewing	% Nonreaders		
	Black	White	Total
Wisconsin 1961-62			
Daily or more often (654) <sup>a</sup>			12.8
Less than daily (207)			13.4
North Carolina 1971-72			
Those who saw TV news "yesterday or today" (72,454,534) <sup>a</sup>	27.8	18.1	19.7
Those who did not see TV news "yesterday or today" (133,449,593)	66.9	33.6	41.1
Frequency of Library Use			
Wisconsin 1961-62			
Once a month or more (163)			9.9
Few times a year or less (397)			11.0
Never (350)			17.6
North Carolina 1971-72			
Very often (15,91,111)	20.0	14.3	15.3
Sometimes (17,112,132)	17.6	9.8	10.6
Rarely (19,95,115)	36.8	21.1	23.5
Never (154,600,764)	62.3	31.5	38.1

<sup>a</sup> The numbers within the parentheses are the total subjects in the Wisconsin study; in the North Carolina study, they refer to the number of blacks, whites and total subjects.