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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the level of undergraduate college students' involvement with the electronic media (radio, television, movies, music) and print media (books, newspapers, magazines) as it relates to both study and leisure activities. During the 1992-94 academic years, 5100 questionnaires were distributed to college students across the United States. Results indicated that students spend only 4.3 hours per week reading books, newspapers, or magazines for leisure, while they devote over seven times (31.18 hours per week) to movies, music, radio, and television. Also examined were potentially different media habits between students categorized according to demographic characteristics. It would be advisable to replicate this study every two or three years for the next 10 years to establish a basis for extrapolating trends in media usage by enrolled students. Future research could also examine whether student involvement with print media is a function of their choice not to read or a function of their inability to read well. (Contains seven tables of data and 15 references.) (Author/NKA)

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# College Students' Media Habits: A Pilot Study

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## College Students' Media Habits: A Pilot Study

### Abstract

*This study sheds some light on the level of undergraduate college students' involvement with the electronic media (radio, television, movies, music) and print media (books, newspapers, magazines) as it relates to both studying and leisure activities. During the 1992-94 academic years, 5,100 questionnaires were distributed to college students across the United States. Results indicate that students spend only 4.3 hours per week reading books, newspapers, or magazines for leisure, while they devote over seven times (31.18 hours per week) to movies, music, radio, and television. The study also examined potentially different media habits between students categorized according to demographic characteristics.*

### Introduction

In recent years, educators across the United States have consistently proclaimed a noticeable shift in the preparedness and learning patterns of college students. The standard phrase commonly used to describe this new pattern is: "today's college students do not read!"

Not surprisingly, the most popularly assigned culprit for eroding literacy and students' reading habits has been television. As Neuman (1991, xii) commented, "Television's influence on literacy and school learning reflects the current battlefield of concern. Calls for a return to basics mirror nostalgic images of times before television." One can also argue that television-related technologies, such as video games and VCRs, may similarly have caused further erosion in students' involvement with the print media.

In recent decades numerous studies have documented the usage and influence of mass media, particularly television, on children and youngsters, ranging from kindergarten

to high school, relative to learning, reading, comprehension, behavior, academic achievement, development, and perception (Beentjes, & Van der Voort, 1988; Childers, & Ross, 1973; Clifford, 1995; Corteen, & Williams, 1986; Doerken, 1983; Fetler, 1984; Greenstein, 1954; Healy, 1990a; Huston-Stein, & Wright, 1979; National Institute of Mental Health, 1982; Neuman, 1988, 1991; Salomon, 1984; Searls, Mead, & Ward, 1985; Winn, 1977). While these and many other studies are certainly valuable, there is a dearth of research on college students and their media habits.

### **Purpose**

The general consensus within higher education seems to be that today's college students do not read as much as they should or as much they used to prior to the pervasiveness of the electronic media. Rather than spending their leisure time on reading for personal and educational interests, students settle in front of television sets--watching MTV, playing Nintendo, Mortal Combat, or viewing the latest movie released on videocassette. The purpose of this study was to address the following questions: (1) how do undergraduate college students utilize their free time in a given day, (2) how much time do they spend with each of the major media (newspapers, magazines, books, radio, TV, music, motion pictures), (3) how much of the time students devote to reading is related to studying for college courses, (4) how much of students time spent with the media is for pleasure, and (5) overall, how do these activities compare with one another.

### **Methodology**

The data reported and analyzed in this study were collected in the 1992-94 academic years. The time-frame allowed the researchers to discount any possible contaminating effect from "media events," such as the premieres of new TV shows, sports games, or the release of "block buster" albums, movies, or videos. The survey instrument, an anonymous questionnaire, probed respondents' habits regarding major mass media (i.e., radio, television, music, movies, newspapers, magazines, books). In addition to a number

of biographical questions such as educational status, gender, age, employment, and major, students were instructed to log their daily media activities for a period of one week. The instrument was pretested for clarity at a midwestern university which is a commuter campus. An available sample of 158 students enrolled in two introductory courses (i.e., Introduction to Mass Media and Psychology of Learning) was utilized.

A total of 5,100 survey questionnaires were mailed in three stages (2,100 in Spring 1992; 1,000 in Fall 1993; 2,000 in Spring 1994) to deans, department heads, and professors at 125 four-year private and public colleges and universities in 38 states throughout the United States who had agreed to partake in this study by receiving, distributing, collecting, and returning the survey instruments. Although there is a sampling bias due to the use of volunteers rather than a random sample, the researchers believe that the findings of this study reflect the attitudes and behaviors of the students in general.

A follow-up notice was mailed to all participants at every stage of the process. The collected data represent 98 public and private institutions that returned at least 5 questionnaires. In total, 1,138 usable questionnaires were completed and returned (230 from Spring 1992, 255 from Fall 1993, 653 from Spring 1994), resulting in a usable response rate of 22.31 percent. Obtained data were analyzed using SPSS.

### **Characteristics of the Respondents**

The following data represents the number of those students who identified themselves according to a specified demographic area.

Of the 1,138 usable instruments, 439 were from male respondents, 592 from female respondents. The respondents represent a wide range of disciplines, including Humanities (N=124), Natural Sciences (N=113), Communication (N=314), Computer Science (N=108), Education (N=125), Engineering (N=25), Management (N=162), and Nursing (N=41).

The academic status of the respondents indicates Freshman (N=189), Sophomore (N=275), Junior (N=293), Senior (N=274), Graduate (N=30). The number of respondents, according to specified age categories, were: 18-22 (N=718), 23-28 (N=171), 29-34 (N=76), 35 and over (N=98). Of the 1,138 respondents, 205 indicated that they were full-time students, and 567 indicated that they were part-time students. Furthermore, 910 of the respondents were enrolled in four-year public institutions, and 139 were enrolled in four-year private institutions.

### Results and Analyses

As noted above, usable questionnaires were returned by 1,138 students. The following pages display the results obtained from those students and provide analyses of probable implications of those results.

Respondents report spending an average of 50.46 hours per week involved with some form of electronic or print media. Of that average, 70.32% is devoted to leisure, and 29.69% is related to study. Television is the medium which receives the most attention (12.90 hours per week); newspapers and magazines receive the least attention (2.52 and 1.85 hours per week respectively) (See table 1).

**TABLE 1: Average Number of Hours Per Week Devoted to Media, for Leisure or Study**

(Hours displayed are averages of 1,138 respondents; % displayed are of weekly total)

<u>MEDIA</u>	<u>LEISURE</u>		<u>STUDY</u>		<u>TOTALS</u>	
	<u>Hours</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>Hours</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>Hours</u>	<u>%</u>
Television	12.14	24.06	.76	1.51	12.90	25.57
Books	1.17	2.32	11.17	22.14	12.34	24.46
Music	7.16	14.19	0.61	1.21	7.77	15.40
Magazines	1.16	2.30	0.69	1.37	1.85	3.67
Newspapers	1.97	3.90	0.55	1.09	2.52	4.99
Radio	9.03	17.90	0.87	1.72	9.90	19.62
Movie	2.85	5.65	0.33	0.65	3.18	6.30
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>35.48</b>	<b>70.32</b>	<b>14.98</b>	<b>29.69</b>	<b>50.46</b>	

Some students reported confusion about the investigators' usage of music (such as the use of stereo, cassettes, and CD's), television, and radio for study purposes. For example, some students, when listening to radio, music, or having the TV on while studying or working on their class assignments, classified these media as being used for study. Given that confusion, it is suggested that although the total number of hours devoted to media per week may be accurate, the usage of media for purposes of study may be somewhat overstated.

A noteworthy result is that respondents reported reading books, newspapers, or magazines 4.3 hours per week for pleasure, while they devoted 31.18 hours per week to movies, music, radio, and television, more than seven times the leisure reading level.

Furthermore, students tend to watch television for pleasure (12.14 hours per week) about as often as they attend to print media (12.41 hours per week) for studying, but their overall usage of the combined electronic media for pleasure greatly exceeds their usage of the combined print media for studying (31.18 hours per week compared with 12.41 hours per week).

Assuming that the typical number of waking hours per week is 112 (16 hours per day), and that 112 hours per week, therefore, represents the total amount of time available to attend the media, Table 2 reflects the percentages of available time per week devoted to both electronic and print media.

**Table 2: Percent of Waking Hours per Week Devoted to Media for Leisure or Study**

<u>MEDIA</u>	<u>LEISURE %</u>	<u>STUDY %</u>	<u>TOTAL %</u>
Television	10.84	0.68	11.52
Books	1.04	9.97	11.01
Music	6.39	0.54	6.93
Magazines	1.04	0.62	1.66
Newspapers	1.76	0.50	2.26
Radio	8.06	0.78	8.84
Movies	2.54	0.29	2.83
TOTALS	31.67	13.38	45.05

The results in Table 2 indicate that students spend 45.05% of their waking hours per week attending to both electronic and print media. Furthermore, it is apparent that 11.09% of waking hours per week is devoted to print media for purposes related to study, while only 3.84% of waking hours is utilized for leisure reading activities. Conversely, electronic media account for 27.83% of students' waking hours.

Regarding the leisure use of media, electronic media far outdistanced print media (27.83% of waking hours compared with 3.84% of waking hours).

Proportional to the available waking hours, there do not appear to be large differences between weekend and weekday usage in any media category. The largest difference occurred in the Television (Leisure) category where students reported spending 13% of their time on weekends and 10% of their time on weekdays watching television for leisure. (See Table 3.)

Therefore, the data in Table 3 provide an overall impression that students' media habits are similar during weekends and weekdays.

**Table 3: Percent of Waking Hours per Week Devoted to Media for Leisure or Study Differentiated by Weekdays (Monday Through Friday) and Weekends (Saturday and Sunday)**

<u>MEDIA</u>	<u>LEISURE %</u>		<u>STUDY %</u>	
	Weekdays	Weekends	Weekdays	Weekends
Television	10%	13%	1%	1%
Books	1%	1%	10%	9%
Music	6%	8%	1%	0%
Magazines	1%	1%	1%	1%
Newspapers	2%	2%	0%	0%
Radio	8%	8%	1%	1%
Movies	2%	4%	0%	0%

The number of students who engage in leisure use of various print and electronic media for **less than an hour** suggests the relatively low importance of reading to the respondents in this study (See table 4).

**Table 4: Number and % of Respondents Reporting Less Than One Hour of Leisure Involvement per Week with Media**

<u>Less than one hour of leisure use of:</u>	<u>Number and % of Respondents</u>
Books	818 students (71.88% of total sample)
Magazines	678 students (59.58% of total sample)
Music	220 students (19.33% of total sample)
Newspaper	409 students (35.94% of total sample)
Radio	94 students ( 8.26% of total sample)
Television	34 students ( 2.99% of total sample)
Movies	403 students (35.41% of total sample)

Furthermore, examination of data describing the range of hours students employ various media indicates that there is both a smaller magnitude and a more compacted range for leisure reading activities than for the leisure use of television or other electronic media involvement. For example, with the single exception of one student who reported reading books for pleasure for 31 hours weekly, the range of time devoted to leisure reading was from 0-1 hour per week (reported by 818 students) to 14-17 hours per week

(reported by 9 students). Conversely, with the exception of three outlying students who reported about 100 hours of leisure television usage, the range of leisure television watching was 0-1 hour per week (reported by 34 students) to 40-50 hours per week (reported by 11 students).

Finally, the range of the use of books for studying is 0-1 hour per week (reported by 33 students) to 65-66 hours per week (reported by 2 students).

### **INFERENTIAL ANALYSES ACCORDING TO DEMOGRAPHIC POPULATIONS**

ANOVA and TukeyB procedures were used to identify significant differences (at the 0.05 level) in the average reported time devoted to the media categories according to the following 8 demographic areas: **Sex, Major, Class Rank, Age, Class of College (Public or Private), Student Status (Full or Part-Time), and Employment Status (Full or Part-Time).**

Although the above procedures revealed significant differences in one or more media categories according to each of the eight demographic areas, only **Major, Class Rank** and **Age** produced differences which were practically as well as statistically significant. (For the purposes of this study, **practical significance was defined as a difference of 2 or more hours per week** in a given media category based on a specified demographic area.) Furthermore, these differences were found for the Book (Study) and Music (Leisure) media variables for each of the above areas.

Therefore, this study will provide data for the **Major, Class Rank** and **Age** areas. For each of these areas a table of the means and standard deviations of the media categories within that area is provided along with a description of the ANOVA results. (See Tables 5-7).

**Note: As previously stated, some respondents did not provide personal demographic data. Therefore, the total number of students analyzed according to a demographic area will be less than the total sample of 1,138 students in the study.**

### ANALYSIS OF MEDIA VARIABLES BY MAJOR

The One-way ANOVA and TukeyB analyzing each media variable by Major revealed significant and practical differences between the **Book (Study)** and **Music (Leisure)** variables by Major. The ANOVA of Book (S) yielded  $F(7,1004)=5.88$ ,  $p=.0000$ . The ANOVA of Music (L) yielded  $F(7,1004)=3.19$ ,  $p=.0024$ .

#### Media Variable:

(1) **Book (S):** **Communication** (Broadcasting, Public Relations, and Speech) majors reported significantly less hours studying books (mean= 9.12) than reported by **Humanities** (English, Philosophy, and Foreign Languages), **Management**, **Computer Science**, and **Engineering** majors (means of 11.84, 12.83, 13.11 and 15.87, respectively). Furthermore, Education majors (mean=9.83) were exceeded by Management and Engineering majors in this area (means of 12.83, and 15.87, respectively).

(2) **Music (L):** **Education** majors listen to music for pleasure (mean = 4.88) to a lesser degree than the time reported by **Communication**, **Humanities**, and **Nursing** majors (means of 7.82, 9.05, and 10.14, respectively).

**TABLE 5: MEAN AND STANDARD DEVIATION: BOOK (S) AND MUSIC (L) BY MAJOR**

MAJOR	No. of STUDENTS	BOOK (S)		MUSIC (L)	
		MEAN	SD	MEAN	SD
Humanities	124	11.84	8.74	9.05	12.24
Natural Sciences	113	11.74	10.41	7.25	7.84
Communications	314	9.12	7.41	7.82	8.25
Computer Science	108	13.11	10.62	7.07	9.41
Education	125	9.83	7.29	4.88	5.17
Engineering	25	15.87	12.14	6.50	8.27
Management	162	12.83	9.75	6.39	7.23
Nursing	41	13.45	8.84	10.14	12.73

### ANALYSIS OF MEDIA VARIABLES BY RANK

The One-way ANOVA and TukeyB analyzing each variable by rank revealed significant and practical differences between the **Book (S)**, and **Music (L)** media variables by **Rank**. The ANOVA of Book (S) yielded  $F(4,1056)=3.46, p=.0081$ . The ANOVA of Music (L) yielded  $F(4,1056)=4.10, p=.0026$ .

#### MEDIA VARIABLE:

(1) **Book (S)**: The **Graduate** students (mean=15.39) exceeded **Freshmen** and **Sophomore** students in this category (means of 10.12 and 10.43, respectively).

(2) **Music (L)**: The **Freshman** (mean=8.65) students exceeded the **Seniors** and **Graduate** students (means of 6.01 and 4.08, respectively) in this category.

**TABLE 6: MEAN AND SD: BOOK (S), MUSIC (L) BY RANK**

RANK	NO. OF STUDENTS	BOOK (S)		MUSIC (L)	
		MEAN	SD	MEAN	SD
Freshman	189	10.12	7.64	8.65	8.50
Sophomore	275	10.43	8.48	7.76	9.88
Junior	293	12.01	9.90	7.00	8.11
Senior	274	11.67	9.83	6.01	7.51
Graduate	30	15.39	9.27	4.08	4.75

### ANALYSIS OF MEDIA VARIABLES BY AGE

The One-Way ANOVA and TukeyB analyzing each media variable by AGE revealed significant and practical differences between the **Book (S)** and **Music (L)** variables by Age. The ANOVA of Book (S) yielded  $F(3,1059)=9.18, p=.0000$ . The ANOVA of Music (L) yielded  $F(3,1059)=7.35, p=.0001$ .

#### MEDIA VARIABLE

(1) **Book (S)**: The **18-22** age group spends less time reading books for studying (mean=10.39) than do the **29-34** and the **35+** Age groups (means of 14.05 and 14.61,

respectively). Also, the 23-28 age group (mean=11.65) is exceeded by the 35+ Age group (mean=14.61).

(2) **Music (L)**: The 18-22 age group (mean=7.93) exceeded the 23-28, 29-34 and the 35+ age groups (means of 5.93, 4.20, and 5.67, respectively).

**TABLE 7: MEAN AND STANDARD DEVIATION: BOOK (S) AND MUSIC (L) BY AGE**

AGE	NO. OF STUDENTS	BOOK (S)		MUSIC (L)	
		MEAN	SD	MEAN	SD
18-22	718	10.39	8.60	7.93	8.39
23-28	171	11.65	8.54	5.93	7.81
29-34	76	14.05	10.92	4.20	5.87
35+	98	14.61	11.53	5.67	11.01

### Discussion and Implications

The purpose of the current study was to provide a description of the media habits of college students. The current study include limitations of sample size and return rate and the limitation of the use of a media log to self-record media usage. However, despite these limitations, given the descriptive nature of the study, the results obtained in this survey of enrolled college students suggest that there is some demonstrable truth in the various clichés which one hears commonly used to describe college students' behaviors in the 1990s.

**"Today's college students do not read!"** While professors may over-state the case in their attempts to be believed, their claim appears to have merit. College students in 1992-94 spend only 1.2 hours per week engaged in reading for their own purposes or pleasure. Obtained data suggest that reading is reserved for classroom assignments, which account for only 11.09% of a student's waking hours; that the concept of leisure reading is

foreign to most students, and that while older students read more than do their younger counterparts, even their total remains less-than-impressive.

**"Students know how to turn it on, but can't turn the page."** This cliché would appear to be a restatement of the first one, yet it adds clarity rather than just repetition: students spend 27.83% of their waking hours using electronic media for pleasure or leisure purposes; they spend 3.84% of their waking hours reading for pleasure. The ratio of over seven-to-one suggests a nearly insurmountable magnitude of alienation from reading.

**"All they want is to be entertained."** The amount of time students devote to leisure involvement with television, music, and radio suggests that entertainment is a primary objective of many students. If this cliché is intended to describe student orientation, then it appears to be true. If it is intended to suggest that teaching has been reduced to entertainment, the results of this study offer no support.

**"I can't teach 'em if they won't read."** The data suggest that students do not read beyond that which is required for study purposes. Those who would teach need to recognize that the traditional image of students seeking additional print material to read and ponder is not based on reality. Teaching that is wholly dependent on students' reading patterns can succeed only with a small percentage of today's enrolled college students.

**"Television has ruined our students."** Perhaps, but the data suggest only that television is the most popular medium available to students; the data reveal nothing about whether it is an evil medium. To recognize the extent to which students rely on television is consistent with the data; to decry television as having ruined students is consistent only with folklore.

The current study does show that enrolled students devote 50.46 hours per week to some form of media, or 45.05% of their probable waking hours. Of that total, 16.71 hours involve reading (books, newspapers, and magazines), or 14.92% of the waking hours. However, 12.41 hours per week devoted to reading for purposes of study (11.09%

of waking hours) leaves only 4.30 hours per week (3.84% of waking hours) available for reading for leisure or pleasure. The amount of leisure time devoted weekly to non-print media is, on average, more than seven times greater than the amount of time devoted to print media.

It may well be that students believe that they are reading appropriate amounts, but the obtained data clearly indicate that they are not reading very much at all.

It is advisable to replicate this study every two or three years for the next ten years, thereby establishing a basis for extrapolating trends in media usage by enrolled students. Any such attempt to establish a data base would be strengthened considerably by controlling for the possibility of overlapping categories. A second issue to be considered in any replication of this study is the question of students' ability to read: Is student involvement with print media a function of their choice not to read, or a function of their inability to read well? A comparison of the results of this study with reading scores of enrolled students is a recommended next phase of this investigation.

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