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Readership of News about Politics in the Minneapolis Star and Tribune, 1950-1960

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The management of the Minneapolis *Star* and *Tribune*, since World War II, has commissioned yearly studies of the newspapers' readers to learn how much attention was paid to the newspapers' content. An exploratory study was conducted of the data from the surveys made between 1950 and 1960 to measure the general levels of attention paid to news about politics, and to examine the variation of attention over time. Readers' preferences among several kinds of political news content were also noted.

The literature of political science and public opinion research contains almost no accurate information on how much attention is paid by people to the political content of newspapers. The most recent contribution to the literature (Key, 1961:353) prefaced its estimate of reader attention to political news with the author's statement that not much information was available.

Although the evidence is scant, it suggests that an extremely small proportion of the population follows political news in the press with care. Doubtless attention to this type of news increases during the excitement of a presidential campaign. Day in and day out the odds are that less than 10 per cent of the adult population could be regarded as careful readers of the political news.

This paper reports data on attention paid by readers to news about public affairs published in the Minneapolis *Star* and *Tribune* in the decade 1950-1960.² An exploratory, secondary analysis of survey research sought to establish just how much attention was paid on the average to newspaper material that might be classified as political in content. The primary purpose of the analysis was the description of the activity, examination of its variations over time, and comparison of the levels of attention paid to the different kinds of news that could be included in the general political category.

The scanty information on how much attention people pay to the political content of newspapers did not result from the lack of studies of mass-communication media audiences. Broadcasters and newspapers publishers have employed audience measurement research for almost 40

years using techniques that have become more and more sophisticated. This methodological refinement of data collection procedures has made the results of the newspaper research highly reliable, but the information developed has been regarded as trade secrets, the property of the publishers. Because the research is so costly, little of it has been done for academic purposes.

Audience Attention Estimates

There are four general methods of learning how people expose themselves to a communicative process such as reading news about politics. One that poses insuperable problems for field research is direct observation. The other three are survey methods that require the respondent to recall and describe his behavior. The variations in the three methods are accompanied by variations in the reliability of results. The first employs a technique that can be called *evaluative*. It asks the respondent to state whether he paid little or much attention to some given medium. The second, *unaided recall*, requires the respondent to recall and volunteer an identification of some item of media content that he saw or heard. The third and most reliable, employs *aided recall*. The latter is a refinement of the Gallup technique (Gallup, 1930) in which an interviewer put a fresh copy of a recent newspaper before a reader and led him through it, item by item, marking with a crayon how much of each item had been read. Subsequent methodological improvement is described in an extensive literature.

The aided recall method generates *item-based* data. Each item of the publication studied receives a readership score that shows the proportion of the sample that reported reading it. Usually, the data also allow inference about how much of the item (the headline, at least a paragraph or so, or all of it) on the average was read and how many persons in the surveyed population read part or all of the item. Individual respondents, however, are lost in the statistics. One cannot say from item-based data whether a hypothetical 25 per cent of a sample who reported reading an item "A" were made up of the same individuals as a hypothetical 25 per cent reading item "B." By laborious and expensive procedures it is possible to transform the records of the interviews into *person-based* data. These allow statements about how many items of given kinds of content each individual respondent read. Item-based data, however, can be used to investigate questions in which content categories are treated as independent variables, which is what will be reported here.

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Previous Information

The literature on the reported use of newspapers as sources of political information suffers from two shortcomings. First, it is almost entirely taken from studies of presidential election campaigns and allows no statements about the day-to-day use of the medium. Second, it relies almost entirely upon questions classified here as *evaluative*, calling for the respondent to categorize or evaluate his behavior instead of *describing* it. Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1944:168-169), in their Erie County study, generated this trend although they (and Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee, 1954-240) employed some aided and unaided recall methods. At no time in their work, however, was a respondent questioned about more than a front page or a few selected items.

Evaluative questions have been the primary reliance of the University of Michigan Survey Research Center studies of presidential elections beginning in 1952. Here is the relevant portion of the questionnaire employed by the Center in 1952, 1956 and 1960 in the post-election survey (Campbell, Gurin and Miller, 1954:221).

2. We're mainly interested in this interview in finding out whether people paid much attention to the election campaign this year.

Take newspapers, for instance—did you read about the campaign in any newspapers?

2a. (If yes) Would you say that you read quite a lot or not very much

The same questions were used in each investigation made by the Center so that comparability could be presumed to exist from study to study. Yet the data (if we take account of the questions) supply responses that are not reliable evidence of what the respondents actually did. If we are to think the information reliable, we must assume that the respondents correctly and uniformly,

- a) recalled behavior that took place several weeks before the interview,
- b) categorized their activities over a two- or three-month period,
- c) interpreted and applied the suggested categorizations to the recalled behavior.

Research as well as the logical possibilities of error indicate that people are not too able to do these things. First, people vary in ability to recall accurately what they have done. Unpublished data from the 1956 readership study of the Minneapolis *Star* produced evidence of error by 11 out of 14 per cent of a sample that claimed to have read a party platform text in the *Star* two months before the survey (Copeland, 1956). This group, in error, recalled reading a platform text that the *Star* had not printed. There is also evidence that people vary in ability to understand and apply suggested categorizations. Westerstahl, Särilvik and Janson (1961), in a field experiment involving civil defense pamphlets, found that often people differently understood terms or phrases like "read" and "read a pamphlet." There are, therefore, empirical as well as logical grounds for assuming the unreliability of interference of people's media

behavior from evaluate questions that require unaided recollection of activities distant in time.

Method of Analysis

Beginning immediately after World War II, the management of the Minneapolis *Star* and *Tribune* retained the Research Division of the University of Minnesota School of Journalism to conduct yearly surveys of readership of the newspapers. The surveys employed trained, professional interviewers who followed tested procedures to elicit in elaborate detail the reading behavior of a randomly selected sample of readers in the newspapers' metropolitan circulation zone. For a study of trends in newspaper readership, the Research Division had coded the content of the newspaper issues surveyed between 1950 and 1956 using multiple coders and content categories developed for a study of the flow of international news (University of Minnesota, 1960). In the absence of explicit data on inter-coder reliability, the author re-scanned and independently recoded these issues. Issues subsequent to 1956 were scanned and coded by the author and one of the coding team of the 1956 study, unanimity obtaining in more than 90 per cent of the categorizations. Discrepant codings were handled by using a "rule of the previous case," in which items already coded were searched for a similar instance and its category assigned to the one in question. Because no studies had been made of the morning newspaper in 1955 and 1958, eight issues of the *Morning Tribune*, 10 issues of the *Evening Star*, and the 1960 survey issue of the *Sunday Tribune* furnished a total of 602 items for analysis. These had been classified according to content into the following six categories:

1. National political events and activities;
2. Minnesota state, regional or local political events and activities;
3. National governmental affairs;
4. Minnesota state, regional or local governmental affairs;
5. U.S. national defense affairs;
6. U.S.-involved international affairs.

Operationally, the "readership" of each item in these categories was defined to be,

The proportion of a sample of adult residents of the Minneapolis ABC city circulation zone who read the newspaper, who had read as much as they intended to read in the issue surveyed, and who reported that they had read at least some of the item beyond the headline.

The item-based data from readership surveys was employed to answer questions in three related areas of general readership magnitude, variation over time and content preference.

Magnitude

Readership proportions attached to public affairs items showed a striking stability over the decade between 1950 and 1960. The reading of material in the six categories of content seemed orderly and little affected by

the details of the day's news. Table 1 shows that high readership scores seldom exceeded 50 per cent of the sample, and lows almost never dropped below 2 per cent. Table 2 shows that the central tendencies of the distributions each year were also strikingly stable. Average readership for items in the 6 categories of public affairs varied between 10 and 16 per cent in the *Morning Tribune* while averages in the *Star* ranged from 8 to 24 per cent. Particularly noteworthy was the discovery that only about 5 per cent of the items won the attention of more than 35 per cent of the readers.

Two kinds of conclusions may be drawn from the material about the magnitude of attention paid to public-affairs content. The first (Lane, 1955:289) is the inference that news about political affairs in newspapers has little appeal to readers. This might at first seem corroborated by the data of Tables 1 and 2, but the appeal of political news must be examined in comparison with the appeals of other kinds of printed material. Comic strips are the most read form of newspaper content. Nafziger (1948:417) found average readership of comics to be the highest, 46 per cent; the mean item readership of 9 of 10 other subject-matter categories was between 10 and 20 per cent. The study of content between 1950 and 1956 (University of Minnesota, 1960) found average readership of comics to be 38 per cent and placed the average popularity of political materials at about the center of 19 categories of content. Thus, while an aver-

age readership of about 15 per cent, the approximate level of *Star* and *Tribune* 10-year mean and median scores, was not high, political materials were not the least read news materials. Rather, considering all kinds of content, the average appeal of political material seemed "about average."

A second, more theoretically important observation about magnitude, might seek to place political-news readership among various forms of political participation. On psychological grounds, we would expect that persons in the United States would be most likely to participate in those political activities that the society rewards or encourages. They would be least likely to participate in activities that the society suspects, disapproves or punishes. They would be only moderately likely to engage in activities that the society either fails to reward or condemn, whether because the activities are normatively neutral or because the society does not observe them. Thus, the proportion of people engaged in a political activity, other things being equal, would be expected to be highest for activities most approved and lowest for suspected or disapproved ones. It would be moderate for activities that society regarded as indifferent or that were unobservable. There is evidence to indicate that our society approves of voting and disapproves of not voting, disapproves of politicians and active political work, and is largely ignorant of what most people read in newspapers. Thus, readership of news about politics should

TABLE 1. Dispersion of Item Readership Proportions for *Minneapolis Star and Tribune* (Categories 1-6) By Year

Year	1950		1951		1952		1953		1954		1955		1956		1957		1958		1959	
	AM	PM	AM	PM	AM	PM	AM	PM	AM	PM	AM	PM	AM	PM	AM	PM	AM	PM	AM	PM
N items	14	33	27	41	33	57	16	28	22	47	—	38	27	51	19	19	—	29	15	34
Highest score	24	31	48	58	30	41	29	45	37	43	—	37	48	63	39	39	—	40	27	54
2nd Highest	21	28	32	34	27	34	25	31	28	38	—	24	35	42	34	34	—	36	26	45
Lowest score	01	04	02	01	03	03	04	03	04	04	—	01	04	03	05	06	—	01	04	07
Range (high minus low)	23	27	46	57	27	38	25	42	33	40	—	36	44	60	34	33	—	39	23	48
Adjusted Range (2nd high minus low)	20	24	30	33	24	31	21	28	24	34	—	23	31	39	29	38	—	35	22	38
Amount of Range accounted for by highest item	3	3	16	24	3	7	24	14	9	6	—	13	13	21	5	5	—	4	1	10

TABLE 2. Measures of Central Tendency in "Read Any" Per Cent of Response For Combined Categories 1-6

	1950	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959
Tribune										
Median	12%	10%	13%	12%	11.5%	—	16%	13%	—	15%
Mean	11.9	13.6	14.3	12.4	14.9	—	15.4	15.8	—	15.8
Items <i>n</i>	14	27	33	16	22	—	27	19	—	15
Readers <i>n</i>	200	200	191	425	205	—	209	194	—	204
Star										
Median	13%	08%	16%	16%	18%	9.5%	13%	21%	14%	24%
Mean	14.6	11.7	16.8	17.2	17.8	11.1	15.9	18.1	15.2	24.4
Items <i>n</i>	33	41	57	28	47	38	51	19	29	34
Readers <i>n</i>	190	131	209	450	275	205	209	232	221	229
	Median			Mean		n-items		n-respondents		
Tribune (8 years)	13.18			14.5		168		1,828		
Star (10 years)	14.67			16.2		374		2,411		

occupy an intermediate or center position in a scale of proportions of people who participate in various forms of political activity.

This conjecture can be tested by reference to Table 3. Table 3 sets out a moderately comprehensive (although not exhaustive) rank ordering of mean proportions of various samples of the population of the United States engaging in various forms of political activity. In order

TABLE 3. Ranked Popularity of Various Forms of Political Participation

Rank	Form of Participation	1948 ¹	1952 ²	1956 ²	Mean
1.	"Followed campaign in the newspapers"			69%	69%
2.	Minneapolis voters voting in state-wide general election"				68
3.	Read at least two items about politics in 1956 surveyed issue of Minneapolis Tribune"				63
4.	Voted in Minneapolis city general election ³"				45
5.	Voted in Minnesota state primary election ³"				38
6.	"Talk to people and try to show . . . why they should vote for . . . parties or candidates""		27%	28	28
7.	Read more than one fourth of items about politics in 1956 surveyed issue of the Minneapolis Tribune"				27
8.	Voted in Minneapolis city primary election ³"				26
9.	Frequently discuss public issues with friends and take an equal share in the conversation"	21%			21
10.	Mean "read any" proportion for public affairs content readership (Minneapolis Star and Tribune combined, 1950-1959)"				15
11.	Wrote or talked to public official in the last year to let him know what you would like him to do on an issue"	13			13
12.	"In the last four years have you worked for the election of any political candidate?""	11			11
13.	"Did you go to any political meetings rallies, dinners," etc?""		7	7	7
14.	"In the last four years have you contributed money to a . . . party or candidate?""		7		7
15.	"Did you give any money or buy tickets or anything to help the campaign for one of the parties or candidates?""		4	10	7
16.	Frequently discuss public issues with friends and try to convince them"	6			6
17.	"Did you do any other work for one of the parties or candidates?""		3	3	3
18.	"Do you belong to any political club or organization?""		2	3	3

Sources:

¹ Julian L. Woodward and Elmo Roper, "Political Activity of American Citizens," *American Political Science Review* 44:4 (1950), 872-885.

² Angus Campbell, et al, *The American Voter*, 93

³ Computed from data on Minneapolis electoral participation compiled by Charles Backstrom for the 1954-1961 period, averaged for varying numbers of elections. Percentages are per cent of registered voters.

to avoid assumptions about the equivalence of measures, non-parametric statistical measures were used in the table. The median value was taken as the center of the distribution, i.e., half way between the ninth and tenth items, respectively 21 and 15 per cent, or 18 per cent. The approximate .90 confidence interval for the median if the distribution is assumed to be approximately normal would be 18% ± 7%. The 15 per cent mean-item readership falls within the interval allowing acceptance of the hypothesis stated. The evidence and method, to be sure, are crude, and a fairly apparent skew in the distribution limits the propriety of the assumption of approximate normality. But it seems warranted to say that reading news about politics is a form of political participation and that its popularity stands at about the midpoint of a distribution of various forms of political participation.

Time

Although attention has been drawn to the general stability of median scores of item-based readership in the decade, Key (1961:345-6, 353) speculated that interest in politics may rise to a peak at the time of an election and fall to lower levels in non-election years. If this were true, item-based readership scores for political events and activities, as a measure of interest, should increase and decrease in the same pattern. These readership data would be likely to show the phenomenon if it existed, because surveys in even numbered years took place within one to four weeks of the general elections. If readership were to be charted in a time-trend, increased interest in election years would create a saw-tooth profile, higher in even-numbered and lower in odd-numbered years. The *Minneapolis Tribune* contained so many zero frequencies in political events and activities categories that it was not studied. Because there seemed no reason to believe that readers might, as political scientists would, distinguish material about government from that about politics, the categories of governmental affairs and political activities were combined. But to avoid distortion, because of different degrees of prominence of display, only items judged medium in prominence were employed.

The sequence of medians was plotted, but in no case did median item readership approximate the predicted saw-tooth profile. To see if the highest read items would display the predicted phenomenon, the second highest score was also plotted with somewhat larger visual success. In order to examine the likelihood that the graphic presentation failed to show statistically significant differences, the Mann-Whitney test was employed to see whether values in even-numbered years were stochastically larger than those in odd-numbered years. The test statistic values obtained could have occurred by chance under the null hypothesis with a moderately high probability. To test the hypothesis that political interest might be rising or falling in the decade, the "runs" test was employed but it also produced negative results. Readership seemed not to be higher in election years, and no trend manifested itself in the decade.

Content Preference

A Guttman scaling procedure was employed to establish whether readership scores indicated an underlying ordering variable that might be referred to nominally as "interest in politics." After satisfactory completion of this step in the analysis, it was possible to say that readership of news about politics conformed to the patterns predicted under such an hypothesis. Subsequent operations then sought to relate interest as measured by readership to content.

In order to study content effects separately, it was necessary to take into account the effects of prominence of display of items. Front-page items are more visible than those inside the newspaper and should be more read. Items above the fold are thought to be more prominently displayed than those below. Each item was given a score on an index of prominence of display, which, in addition, took account of length. This step made it possible to compare readership only of items of approximately equal prominence.

The effect of content preference within the six categories could not be approached by use of straightforward multiple correlation procedures, therefore a procedure was devised that approached the problem indirectly. Items were sorted into content categories and within each category the items then were sorted into "low," "medium" and "high" levels of display. Finally, the sorted items were arrayed from highest to lowest readership scores and statistics were computed for the 25th, 50th and 75th percentiles of each array. From these statistics, "low," "medium" and "high" levels of readership for each subcategory and display level were estimated. On the assumption that readers tended to prefer one content category to another, it was predicted that the low, medium and high readership statistics for the preferred category should be larger than those of the less preferred category. By eliminating the effects of differences in display, only the effect of content preference would remain. The procedure was applied to the whole six categories, so that the rank order of scores for a given level of readership at a given level of display could be consistent with rank orderings of preference at the other two levels of display if content were the ordering variable. The magnitude of the difference in consistency when display was and was not held constant would indicate the magnitude of readership-score differences attributable to reader preference for the kind of content.

The statistic used to examine consistency of preference orderings was Kendall's Coefficient of Concordance (W). The proposed method of analysis could not be strictly employed for the items taken from the *Morning Tribune* because there were too few scores in subcategories. The original expectations were closely reproduced when applied to items taken from the *Minneapolis Star*. Statistically significant differences in preference among the six kinds of content appeared. A variety of considerations led to the conclusion that the rank ordering characteristic of the *Minneapolis Star* best approximated the "true" configurations of content preferences of newspaper readers. This indicated that people most preferred

to read items that dealt with national political events and activities. Second in preference came national government affairs. Third was content that dealt with U.S.-involved international affairs. Fourth, fifth and sixth in order were regional, state and local governmental affairs; regional, state and local political events and activities, and national defense activities. Overall, people seemed to prefer items that dealt with some aspect of national government and politics to materials originating at some other level of government. These findings do not deny that specific stories about state or local politics achieved large audiences, but it suggests that average preferences inclined toward national news.

Discussion

While it is indicated here that the average level of attention to news about politics is not high, we may note that individual news stories in almost every newspaper studied attracted more than one out of three readers in the sample. These stories were, as might be expected, those that were most prominently displayed, although occasional letters to the editor and similar material received readership scores as high as 45 per cent. There was little to indicate that readers' partisan attitudes influenced their attention. In one newspaper that was studied intensively, most of the people who read the major story about the Republican presidential campaign also read the story about the Democratic one. The stability and general features of readership of news about politics may evidence the operation of a single psychological dimension of political interest and involvement "which varies widely among individuals but which exhibits a great deal of stability for the same person through successive election campaigns" (Campbell, *et al*, 1960:102). This cannot be asserted confidently from these data for this study is restricted to a single community. But the data span 10 years and are not likely to be the product of a single chance phenomenon.

Based on the premise of an underlying order in political affairs, it would seem that comparable data for another city might show figures that are generally higher or lower but the internal consistency and connections would be about the same.

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