

Changing Needs of Changing Readers

A Qualitative Study Of The New Social Contract
Between Newspaper Editors and Readers

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What follows are the first two sections of a large, detailed report prepared by Ruth Clark for The American Society of Newspaper Editors:

1. Foreward and Summary.
2. How the Study Was Conducted.

The complete report should be printed in about three weeks.

A copy will be mailed to every member of ASNE and other key persons in print journalism.

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SECTION I

FOREWARD AND SUMMARY

OVERVIEW

The phenomenon of declining newspaper readership is an extraordinary mosaic of social and behavioral influences that still lie beyond the reach of definitive research. One of the most important but least understood of these is the changing relationship between readers and their newspapers.

We know very little about the subtle forces that seem to be weakening the emotional ties of many readers, making newspapers less wanted, less needed or, in extreme cases, resented. Analyzing the chemistry of individual relations is difficult enough; explaining group attitudes is even more challenging.

The present pilot study is an attempt, nevertheless, to provide some preliminary insights into what might be called "The New Social Contract between Newspaper Editors and Readers." It is an effort to deepen our understanding of findings that have been emerging from major reader surveys of the Newspaper Readership Project.

As a by-product, it is also a demonstration of techniques that editors can use to establish a direct dialogue with readers and non-readers as part of a continuing search for new ways to increase newspaper reading.

The work was commissioned by the American Society of Newspaper Editors and funded by the Readership Council. It was carried out by Yankelovich, Skelly and White, Inc., under the direction of Ruth Clark.

More than 120 regular readers, occasional readers, and non-readers were interviewed in informal focus group sessions in 12 different daily newspaper markets, both competitive and non-competitive, chain and non-chain. As a special feature, editors not only observed all the sessions but participated part of the time.

The result is a unique blend of reader opinion and editor interaction that offers no final answers but provides some clues to the problem of declining readership.

BASIC TRENDS

Reader-Editor Gap -- There is indeed a serious gap between editors and readers, and it is much more than a simple difference of opinion between what editors think is new and interesting and what people want in their newspapers. It is a failure of communication and therefore of basic understanding.

Under the impact of rapid social and cultural change, many readers -- especially young readers and occasional readers -- have developed different attitudes about newspapers. They expect them to be more attentive to their personal needs, more

caring, more warmly human, less anonymous. Instead of faceless editors and reporters -- traditional symbols of objectivity -- they want real people to relate to.

They are skeptical about newspapers, as they have been about most institutions since Vietnam and Watergate, and cold anonymity feeds this. This skepticism also undermines credibility and encourages demands for greater editorial accountability. Clearly, editors must get to know their readers much better than they do now to understand and respond to their needs.

New Social Contract -- In earlier times, the basic contract between newspapers and society was relatively simple. Editors, like the Mandarins in ancient China, decided what readers should read and readers generally accepted their decision. Striving for upward mobility, eager to be good citizens, readers did what they thought was expected of them. They did not question the newspapers' mandate to guide.

But now they are more sophisticated, better educated, less accepting and literally saturated with information. Although they still want newspapers to tell them what is important, hard news about national and international events and governmental actions that affect them, they also want a good deal more. They want new clauses added to their old contract.

Most especially, they want more attention paid to their personal needs, help in understanding and dealing with their own problems in an increasingly complex world, news about their neighborhood, not just the big city and Washington, and advice on what to buy, where to play, how to cope. "I think of a newspaper as a big information supermarket where I can pick and choose what I want," said a young professional woman.

In short, people are much more demanding and selective about what they will spend time to read and less willing than before to let editors make their reading decisions for them.

Personal Journalism -- There is strong evidence that the impersonal nature of most newspapers, their remoteness from ordinary people, is an important factor in declining readership. Many focus group comments suggest that readers feel little emotional attachment and less loyalty to newspapers whose editors and reporters are strangers to them.

In a television age when personalities dominate and credibility depends on the chemistry between anchorman and viewer, it is not surprising that readers want to know who is speaking to them through their newspapers. "How can I believe you if I don't even know who you are?" they ask.

Complaints about cold, unfeeling writing and the obvious popularity of well-known local columnists reinforce the conclusion that people now expect a much more personalized journalism than tradition has permitted. They want to know the editors and writers. They want stories told in terms of people and with human feeling, even compassion. They want to participate vicariously in news events -- to feel and see what is happening -- through vivid, you-are-there reporting. They want a direct, person-to-person relationship with their newspapers.

Self-fulfillment -- One of the dominant traits of modern society, particularly since Vietnam, is a general concern with one's self, a turning away, in a sense, from large, complex issues that seem beyond the reach of individual thought or action. As one reader complained: "Editors live in one world -- and I live in another. They're worried about the Middle East, and I'm worried about meeting my bills."

There are indications in this study and elsewhere that this "focus on self" will continue, among middle-aged and older readers as well as among the young. And the emphasis is subtly shifting from the earlier goal of self-improvement, to get ahead, to self-fulfillment, or gratifying one's immediate desires and needs.

In newspaper terms, the demand is for more help in handling emotional problems, understanding others, feeling good and eating well, having fun, and in general fulfilling oneself. It is also a plea for genuine news about personally helpful subjects like health rather than just the usual heavy fare of politics and government.

This will call for broader definitions of news to embrace a wide range of topics that traditionally stand outside the inner circle of editorial interest but which may actually be more important to many individuals. This may possibly be more important, as one editor put it, than some of the cliché stories that still masquerade as news.

Information Explosion -- The well-known information explosion is obviously a major factor in declining newspaper readership. In the focus groups, it was clear that people are being overwhelmed by the rush of human events and the volume and complexity of new knowledge.

The sense of overload is exacerbated by the increasing busyness of daily life, the time pressures created by two-job families, new leisure-time interests, and dozens of other factors. And competing with newspapers for ever smaller segments of free time are television, movies, records and every imaginable kind of magazine. "I'm a teacher and not a regular newspaper reader," said one focus group member. "There are too many things I want to read...."

The result is that people are making more and more demands on their newspapers to sort out the information they urgently need in their daily lives and to organize it in time-saving ways. They want clear explanations of complex issues. They want news summaries and good indexes. They want mini-reviews -- repeated, if necessary -- of movies, plays and television programs. They want an orderly presentation of content so that the information they need is easily found.

It may also be that they want less time-wasting repetition in their newspapers, The kind of running stories, for example, that laboriously report and headline miniscule new developments and then fill columns rehashing what has happened before. Indeed, a subliminal need for a more time-efficient presentation of information could be a factor in the apparent shift in reading habits from daily papers to catch-up Sunday editions.

CONTENT

National News -- A third of the readers in this study, mostly regular readers, expressed a surprisingly strong interest in national and international news. Another third, mostly occasional readers, said they usually just skimmed the headlines. But all the groups, regardless of personal interest, made it clear they expect editors to provide this kind of hard news as a matter of professional and public responsibility.

In an earlier Newspaper Readership Project Survey, "How the Public Gets Its News,"¹ national and international news scored higher in reader interest than the average local news story, particularly among young people. One explanation was that highly mobile readers lack the community ties that whet appetites for local news. But editors remained skeptical.

The focus group findings suggest that readers do not, in fact, want more national and international news than local reporting. But they do expect newspapers to do a better job of explaining, analyzing and, above all, simplifying world events so that the meaning for ordinary individuals is quickly and easily understood. The emphasis should be on clarification and relevance, not quantity.

Local News -- Whatever the importance of national news, strong local coverage still produces the strongest ties between readers and editors. And, conversely, weak or even indifferent local coverage is a major source of alienation.

In the focus groups, there were numerous complaints about editors who seem more interested in cosmic events than in local affairs, who habitually play down local stories on the front page, who sometimes come from other cities and don't even know their communities.

Many readers made the telling point that local news coverage is far too heavily oriented toward government and politics because editors concentrate on obvious switchboards of news, like City Hall, and do not routinely send reporters out into neighborhoods for grass roots coverage. "Local news around here means City Hall, not what people are doing or have to know," said a regular reader.

A related complaint was that there is far too much emphasis on negative news, partly perhaps because standard beats like police headquarters are keyed to trouble. Readers pleaded for more positive news about their communities, more personal coverage through human interest reporting and local columnists who are, and more service information to help them in their daily lives.

On the issue of crime news, the focus groups were schizophrenic: readers admitted they both sought it and resisted it. They objected to stories about crimes in their own neighborhoods, complained about bias in the treatment of the poor vs. the rich, and suggested that crime is often overplayed just to sell newspapers. But they conceded they like to read the stories.

1. Newspaper Advertising Bureau report, 1977, financed by the Newsprint Information Committee.

Hard vs. Soft News -- Regardless of their personal interests, readers still insist that newspapers provide them with a basic diet of hard news. They expect to be at least exposed to all the important news they need to be well informed in a complex modern world. Many in the focus groups felt so strongly about this, in fact, that they objected to putting anything but news on the front page.

The clear implication is that it is exceedingly risky to cut back on hard news to emphasize soft features. The danger is that many readers, without even understanding why, will get the impression that their newspaper is failing in its duty to keep them informed, that it is somehow less important in the community, less credible, and therefore less meaningful and necessary to them.

But these same readers also want features, and a lot of them, in addition to their basic news fare. They find features easier to read than news, partly because they are written in a personal and conversational style but mostly because they are often aimed at strong individual interests: health, diet, money management, self-improvement, everything that serves the "Me" generation. Self-oriented features, plus hard news, are apparently the key to readership.

FORMAT

Both regular readers and occasional readers agree that reading newspapers is hard work. There is a natural and perhaps growing resistance to the effort involved, contributing to the decline in reading frequency, to the conversion of regular readers to occasional readers and, perhaps, to the shift from daily to Sunday reading. Although fundamental forces are involved in this phenomenon, as we have seen earlier, poor presentation of newspaper content obviously contributes to the problem.

Story treatment -- The overplay of continuing stories when very little is happening on a day-to-day basis was a major irritation cited by the focus groups. Many readers, especially occasional readers, indicated they prefer weekly summaries in news magazines or Sunday editions. As one put it: "I can wait till the story is over and then find out what is really important."

Readers also pleaded for more reading aids such as background boxes and maps to help them grasp complicated news developments quickly and easily. A related complaint was that many stories are too discursive, so that readers waste too much time finding out whether or not they are interested. In most stories, the key facts should be grouped high up to facilitate fast read-or-not-read decisions.

As usual, story jumps of every kind also came in for severe criticism.

Organization -- Most of the regular and occasional readers called for better organization -- much better organization -- of newspapers so that they can quickly and easily find what they want. They called for a standardized grouping of content, with anchored features and departments. They like complete indexes and, where possible, news summaries.

Content should be clearly labeled -- news analysis, arts, fashion, etc. -- and presented in an attractive way with good pictures, art, and typography. Many readers -- especially occasional readers -- complained about blurred pictures, poor color reproduction, and general sloppy graphics.

Many readers also liked the idea of sectionalization, to help them find what they want to read and, equally important, to make it easier to get rid of parts of the paper they don't care about. In some groups, readers also favored compartmentalization of content according to subject matter.

COMMUNICATION WITH READERS

One of the central conclusions of this study is that there is a gap between editors and readers and that the best way to close or at least narrow it is to improve communications.

In large and impersonal cities, especially, editors spend very little time talking directly to ordinary readers. It is a time-consuming and often discouraging process, but it can also be quite useful for the insights it provides.

In her report, Ruth Clark describes a practical way to employ focus groups to help editors communicate directly with readers. While these are no substitute for statistically reliable research, they can sensitize editors and staffs to reader needs and desires.

It is bad technique for editors to lead or participate in the basic focus group discussions. They should observe the groups unseen. The ASNE project, however, showed that editors can profitably join a group in a face-to-face discussion late in a session.

Communication, always the beginning of understanding, is an urgent necessity in this "Age of Volatile Belief", as Zbigniew Brzezinski calls it, when society is in a state of extraordinary flux -- when lifestyles, interests and even basic values are constantly changing.

In an earlier, relatively static period, relations between readers and their newspapers were more stable, better defined, more predictable because the social context was constant. Now these same relations are extremely fluid and therefore more difficult to analyze and track.

This study is just one approach in the search for answers. It is highly experimental and its findings quite preliminary, simply clues that must be tested by other research and ultimately subjected to sound editorial judgment at individual newspapers. For every community has its own special needs and problems; ideas that may be helpful to one editor may not be valid for another.

But one general truth emerges with considerable force: There is need for a continuing dialogue between editors and readers. Whether this is conducted through focus groups -- which Ruth Clark explains in this report -- or some other method, it is clearly necessary to raise the level of editor-reader understanding.

Finally, it should be said that this study is a new adventure for the ASNE. It was proposed by editors and for editors as part of the Newspaper Readership Project. It is part of an initiative that is involving the nation's editors for the first time in a multi-disciplinary attack on an industry problem. It is the beginning of a collaborative process that we hope will lead to better newspapers and increased readership.

ASNE READERSHIP AND RESEARCH COMMITTEE

Michael J. O'Neill, N.Y. Daily News, Chairman
William H. Hornby, Denver Post, Vice Chairman
C. A. McKnight, ASNE Project Director

HOW THE STUDY WAS CONDUCTED

Concept

The study was born at a meeting of the ASNE Readership and Research Committee in the Summer of 1977 when the editors raised a whole series of troubling questions:

- ...What is the mind-set of readers toward newspapers? Is it hostile and, if so, why?
- ...What is it about newspapers that satisfies readers or, on the contrary, creates resistance?
- ...How is the newspaper perceived by the reader? Is it seen as distant, impersonal, unfriendly, dull? What underlies these feelings?
- ...What underlying social trends among readers are editors missing? Would coverage of these trends build readership? What are readers not getting from newspapers that they want?
- ...What is the modern reader's reaction to the daily episodic delivery of news? Would a reader be more attracted to a weekly summary of a whole situation than a daily diet of piecemeal news?

With these issues in mind, two major objectives were established for the study:

- ...To explore the changing dynamics of the newspaper marketplace and provide a better understanding of the new relationship between present and potential readers and newspapers.
- ...To test the use of focus groups as one channel of communication between readers and nonreaders and the editors of newspapers, and to develop a simple how-to guidebook on how to plan, organize and conduct such groups.

Methodology

The choice of the focus group as the main research tool was based on a number of considerations:

- ...The desire to develop hypotheses about basic reader attitudes.
- ...The need to develop qualitative human insights to better understand the statistically more reliable results of the Newspaper Readership Project's quantitative studies.
- ...The potential of the focus group as one effective channel of communication with readers, even for smaller newspapers with limited financial and professional research resources.

Choosing the Sites

The markets covered were chosen to cover a variety of situations including:

- Geographic spread
- Competitive and noncompetitive markets
- The reader without a paper (the New York strike)
- Metropolitan and satellite city papers
- Morning and evening papers
- Standard versus tabloid papers
- Local versus chain ownership

The 12 markets covered were:

- * Buffalo and Niagara Falls, N.Y.
- * Chicago and Rockford, Ill.
- * Boulder and Denver, Colo.
- * Charlotte, N.C.
- * Kitchener, Ont.
- * Minneapolis, Minn.
- * New Britain, Conn.
- * New York City (during strike)
- * Riverside, Cal.

The Groups

The groups were recruited locally according to specified quotas by sex, age, race socioeconomic status and readership (regular, occasional, and non). The discussions were conducted by senior researchers of the Yankelovich organization. Editors and members of their staff watched and listened unseen during most of the conversation.

The method followed a similar pattern:

- ...A guide was developed covering the topics to be discussed (see appendix for typical guide).
- ...With a low-key encouragement of the researchers, readers freely aired their feelings about their own newspapers, other newspapers and their reading habits in general.
- ...About midway into the evening, the editors joined the group and had a face-to-face dialogue.

Analysis

Standard content analysis procedures were used in reviewing the tapes from each of the groups and those basic trends found in several, if not all of the groups, were chosen for inclusion in this report. Verbatim quotes are used to document the finding and to give the reader the flavor of the discussions.