

Assessing Forces in the Selection of Local Television News; Why Teenagers Do Not 'Read All About It'

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Assessing Forces in the Selection of Local Television News; Why Teenagers Do Not 'Read All About It'

Abstract

Reviews of "Assessing Forces in the Selection of Local Television News," by Dan Berkowitz; "Why Teenagers Do Not 'Read All About It,'" by Cathy J. Cobb-Walgren.

“Assessing Forces in the Selection of Local Television News,” by Dan Berkowitz (1991) in the *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, Vol. 35, No. 2; pp. 245-251.

Often members of ACE are involved, either directly or indirectly, with the placement of news items in the mass media, including local television newscasts. Whether this involvement entails the direct distribution of pre-packaged television news stories through a regular video news service or indirectly in the role of media broker, this research applies. It examines the considerations that gatekeepers and TV producers must keep in mind as they assemble the local television newscast.

In this follow-up to his earlier study (Berkowitz, 1990), Dr. Dan Berkowitz “simultaneously examines four competing explanations for news selections in local television: news judgment, resource constraints, electronic technology, and information subsidy.” Berkowitz notes that other studies (Gans, 1979; Sigal, 1986) suggest “that news sources greatly influence the news” and that “newswriters turn to subsidized information” (Tuchman, 1978). He further acknowledges that “newswriters often develop a pool of news sources on whom they rely for easily obtainable information” (Drew, 1972). In contrast, Berkowitz concludes that “news judgments and resource constraints are likely to *override* the impact of sources’ efforts to shape the news.” In light of these findings, ACE members should turn their attention to finding ways to more successfully meet the newswriter’s definition of “newsworthiness” and, secondly, ways of limiting the effect of the station’s resource constraints.

The first step in this process is for the story to make it past the gatekeeper (typically, the assignment editor). A related study (Berkowitz & Adams, in press) found that “the assignment editor discarded nearly 80 percent of the news-related mail received at the station.” In this regard, Berkowitz notes that “visual considerations are often key criteria.” It is, after all, the visuals that separate broadcast television from radio. The greater the visual possibilities, the greater the chances are for successfully gaining the attention of the local TV station.

The visual possibilities must be compelling enough for a station to allocate its limited technological resources (crews, cameras, vehicles, etc.) to cover the story. Berkowitz found that “technological concerns . . . eliminated some items, such as school board meetings and court trials, because they lacked visual potential.” I would suggest that most meetings fall in the same category.

ACE members should note that Berkowitz found “a negative correlation between information subsidy and news judgment ($r = -.19, p .01$), suggesting that much of the subsidized information was not seen as particularly newsworthy.” In interviews with newswriters, Berkowitz found that “newswriters saw their news judgments as an important part of building a newscast, but they also understood their final product resulted from the constraints they faced in doing their jobs. Several newswriters saw that the

ability to cover a story often overrode news judgment . . . in general, information subsidy was secondary to perceived newsworthiness."

The research was conducted at an Indianapolis TV newsroom during four weeks in 1989. During that time, 391 news items were assessed. While Berkowitz acknowledges that this station was not especially atypical, he nonetheless cautions against generalizing the findings to other television news departments due to the wide variation in market size, market competition, experience of newswriters, and resource availability. In this particular case study, the four forces (news judgment, resource constraints, electronic technology, and information subsidy) accounted for a slim majority (51.8%) of the variance in the selection of stories.

The message for ACE'ers in touting stories to TV newsrooms is to ensure 1) it's newsworthy, 2) it's visual, and 3) it's relatively easy to cover.

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"Why Teenagers Do Not 'Read All About It,'" by Cathy J. Cobb-Walgren in *Journalism Quarterly*, Vol. 67, No. 2, (Summer 1990); pp. 340-347.

For many years, newspaper publishers have been alarmed at statistics regarding adolescent nonreadership. A 1988 study for the Newsprint Information Committee, conducted by the Simmons Market Research Bureau, found only 16 percent of adolescents read a newspaper every weekday, and on an average weekday, 59 percent of all teenagers never even picked up a newspaper. Clearly, newspapers are facing a crisis if this trend continues. For example, the Simmons study also found only 41 percent of teenagers reporting they read a newspaper yesterday. A decade earlier, it was 45 percent.

While teenage media habits continually change, researchers have suggested various reasons why they don't read newspapers. A decline in reading aptitude and competition from television, a visually stimulating medium for a generation weaned on it from birth, are two of the main reasons given for teenage apathy toward newspapers. Others include changing lifestyles for teenagers whose daily routine may not easily lend itself to newspaper reading as well as a general decline in newspaper reading in the home. Also, teenagers tend to stereotype newspapers as having an image of a traditional, middle-aged medium. This study looks at how important these factors are in understanding teenage newspaper readership and nonreadership.

Eleventh and twelfth graders in four Dallas, Texas, area high schools completed a survey in English class. The schools were chosen to assure representation of different socioeconomic groups and were given one week to administer the questionnaire. Students ranged from 16 to 19 years old. Newspaper readership was measured by the question: "On an average weekday, how much time would you say that you spend reading the newspaper(s)?" The question was purposely written to record intensity of readership rather than frequency since research indicates time spent with

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a newspaper has declined more than the frequency of exposure. Five groups of independent variables corresponded to the reasons for teenage nonreadership.

Results showed 20 percent of the students to be newspaper nonreaders. This varies with research of young people from 12 to 17 years old, a range filled with younger children and guaranteed to find fewer newspaper readers.

Both readers and nonreaders chose television as the medium to find out about national/world news, city/state news and sports. Both groups also prefer family and friends as information sources about places to go/things to do and products to buy. For readers, newspapers ranked second for national/world news, city/state news and sports. For nonreaders, newspapers ranked second from last on most topics. However, nonreaders are more likely to search the newspaper for products to buy than for any other type of information — providing some good news for advertisers.

The author used factor analysis to study two of the reasons given for nonreadership — (1) the newspaper's image and (2) the influence of the home environment. Newspaper image contained four uncorrelated factors accounting for 54 percent of the variance. Factor one related to the perception of time needed to read the newspaper. Factor two reflected newspaper content, layout and the relevance of editorial and advertising material. The third factor indicated a teenage aversion to reading in general, while the fourth factor suggested teens compare newspapers to television, in forming their image of newspapers.

The factor analysis of the home environment variables yielded four factors accounting for 62 percent of the total variance. Factor one centered on the interaction between parents and teens on personal events such as friends, family, school, and hobbies. Factor two indicated an interaction on national, regional, and local news events — information commonly found in the newspaper. Factors three and four reflected newspaper usage by the male and female parent.

Cobb-Walgren took the data and performed a multiple regression analysis to find the best-fitting linear equation for predicting adolescent newspaper usage. Results of the analysis indicated a teenagers' perception of time and effort needed to read the newspaper was the most significant prediction of readership behavior. Nonreaders feel they don't have the time or that newspaper reading is not a good way to spend their time. Nonreaders also are less likely to read magazines on a daily basis or discuss the news in a family setting. Additionally, the newspaper is less available to nonreaders.

This study confirms the fears of most newspaper publishers. The author suggests several areas for future research, such as investigating the passivity of teens who choose television over newspaper readership and the family's overall media habits. Unless newspaper people do something to increase newspaper readership among teens, the newspaper industry will have a very problematic future.

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