

## Is Print Dead? Characterizing the Influence of Print and Online Audiences From a Readership Survey

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### Abstract

Oregon's Agricultural Progress magazine, published by the Oregon State University Agricultural Experiment Station, has been distributed to Oregonians as a print publication for over 50 years. Recently, a Web version of the magazine, Oregon's Agricultural Progress Online, was introduced. The publication's editors conducted a readership survey intended to profile both print and online readers, learn more about their opinions of the two media, and characterize their involvement in communities across the state. While response to the online survey was negligible, the print survey received a 76% response rate from general subscribers. It characterized an engaged, responsive readership who share the print magazine with others and who function as self-identified stakeholders for the College of Agricultural Sciences and Oregon's Agricultural Experiment Station. Institutions with print periodicals may want to use a similar survey approach to explore the influence of their readers and how print-based communications may be shared through communities where loyal readers live and work.

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Peg Herring and Bob Rost

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## So What?

Is print dead? This question is fueling a debate among communicators as they face the choice of online or print communications. Which medium has the most engagement? Who are the readers and what influence do they have in their communities? To learn more about who reads what and how readers share information, the editors of *Oregon's Agricultural Progress* magazine conducted a market-based survey to profile both print and online readers and characterize their involvement in communities across the state.

## Research

Is print dead? This question is being debated among communicators in both the educational and commercial arenas. Newspapers and magazines are losing advertising dollars while a multiplicity of new electronic gadgets offers instant information to an ever more mobile audience. The trend toward electronic access of news was underscored in a recent study by the Carnegie Corporation, which reports that people ages 18 to 34 no longer rely on traditional print and broadcast media for their news, opting instead for the Internet as their news medium of choice (Brown, 2005).

A cursory view of the literature suggests that ink on paper is a dying medium and that influence is brokered less in print than in electronic media (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2006). Audiences are moving toward information on demand, to media that can tell them what they want to know when they want to know it (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2008).

However, when Jeff Jarvis, an Internet commentator and prolific blogger, asserted that print is where words go to die, his blog attracted a chorus of dissenting opinions from readers—from *online* readers—defending print as the most reliable and longest-lasting form of archiving information, more durable than electronics, and more capable of delivering graphics and aesthetically pleasing pages (Jarvis, 2006). Others have defended print publications, especially magazines, for their ability to provide high-quality content to a clearly identified community of readers (Magazine Publishers of America, 2006). More reliable than a computer, with a seamless user interface, print magazines require no instruction manuals or batteries and can be carried anywhere. In short, the printed word “is superbly designed, wickedly functional, infinitely useful and beloved more passionately than any gadget in a Best Buy” (Levy, 2007, ¶ 1).

Both sides of the print-versus-online debate claim to have a community of devoted readers. But who are these readers? In planning communications and choosing to invest in print or online media, organizations, including land-grant universities, need to know who they are reaching with their publications and what influence their readers have in their communities. Therefore, the authors (the editors of *Oregon's Agricultural Progress* magazine) undertook to design and conduct a readership survey that would characterize the audiences that their magazine reaches in print and online to help them plan where to invest communications efforts.

### Purpose

Readership analyses are among the most important types of evaluation research in agriculture communications today (Wood-Turley & Tucker, 2003) and a valuable tool for analyzing reader opinion (Connors, Elliot, & Heinze, <https://newprairiepress.org/jac/vol91/iss3/3>



1994). A continuing challenge for land-grant university communicators is determining how well publications and other information sources meet users' needs (Tucker, Wood-Turley, & Truong, 1997).

With this in mind, in 2005, the editors of *Oregon's Agricultural Progress* magazine at Oregon State University conducted a readership survey to characterize their print and online audiences, to learn how the magazine contributes to readers' knowledge about agriculture and natural resource research, and to identify readers' community engagement. In addition, the editors wanted a measurement of the "pass-along readership" (Snowdon, 1995) of the magazine through subscribers' circles of influence.

The editors took a market approach to surveying their readerships. Market surveys attempt to characterize a product's market—the consumers of the product—or in this case, the readers of the magazine. The ability to document an influential market can add value to a product, and in commercial magazines, it can boost ad revenues (Reichheld, 2003). By characterizing readers' influence or engagement in their communities, the authors hoped to demonstrate the value of *Oregon's Agricultural Progress* magazine to university administrators. The editors did not ask about readability of the stories or quality of the photos, as earlier surveys of the magazine had done. By seeking to understand the readership itself and measure the community involvement of that readership, the editors followed an approach more often used by business market surveys. The editors sought to determine:

1. Who is reading the magazine? (What is their gender and age? What is the size and location of their communities?)
2. What is their level of community involvement? (Where do they work and volunteer? How likely are they to vote?)
3. How much do they value the information in the magazine? (How much of the magazine do they read? Do they find the information useful? Do they share the information? Would they recommend the magazine to colleagues?)

Because the magazine is circulated to a significant number of Oregon high schools and news media, the editors made an effort to survey science teachers and reporters as well as the print magazine's general subscribers, in order to reach readers in settings where the potential pass-along rate is high (Suvedi, Heinze, & Ferris, 1991).

## Background

*Oregon's Agricultural Progress* magazine was established in 1954 to communicate knowledge generated by OSU Agricultural Experiment Station researchers to the general public. Subscriptions to the magazine are

by request of the individual and are free to Oregon citizens. Circulation has held steady over the past several years at about 9,000 general subscribers and approximately 1,000 schools, libraries, and media outlets. *Oregon's Agricultural Progress* magazine is not only a report to taxpayers from the Agricultural Experiment Station, but also an accountability vehicle that highlights the valuable contributions of the Experiment Station and OSU's College of Agricultural Sciences to Oregon's communities and people. It is produced by a team of editors, writers, photographers, and designers in the OSU Department of Extension and Experiment Station Communications.

Prior to the creation of the magazine, the OSU Agricultural Experiment Station published annual reports, but these were considered to be ineffective tools for communicating with the public. Since the transition to a magazine format, *Progress* editors have periodically conducted readership surveys to assess the communication impact of the publication. Previous readership surveys conducted in 1970, 1982, and 1989 focused on readability—reader interest in the magazine, amount of material read by individuals in a particular issue, and reader opinions about the quality of feature articles and photos. The editors reviewed those older surveys and designed some of the questions in the current survey to provide comparable data. However, the 2005 survey took more of a marketing approach to readership in order to learn more about the civic involvement of readers as a measure of their influence in community circles.

In addition, the survey included online readers for the first time. *Oregon's Agricultural Progress Online* (<http://oregonprogress.oregonstate.edu>) was launched in 1998. According to Web statistics, use of the *Progress Online* site has increased steadily over the past several years. In 2005, for example, Web statistics indicated a total of 56,800 visitor sessions to the site. A visitor session is defined as a user visiting one or more pages on a Web site during a specified time period, or session, usually lasting less than 30 minutes. With this much traffic, the editors expected that a survey of *Progress Online* readers would yield interesting and useful results.

The editors were granted \$11,500 from their department's carry-over funds to work with the OSU Survey Research Center to conduct a survey that would build on data from older surveys, characterize the current print and online readership, and identify their readers' circles of influence.

## Methods

In planning the survey, the editors interviewed three groups with an interest in the survey results: the College of Agricultural Sciences administrators and Agricultural Experiment Station supervisors who underwrite the publication, the Agricultural Research Foundation that helps

<https://newprairiepress.org/jac/vol91/iss3/3>



fund the expense of color reproduction for the magazine, and two of the magazine's former editors who guided the publication's development over much of its 54-year history.

All three groups agreed that demographic information, including readers' ages, genders, work sectors, geographic distribution, and the size of their communities, would be an important component of the survey. The editors also included questions that would characterize readers' civic involvement: Do they vote regularly? Do they volunteer their time? Do they belong to any civic organizations? In what sectors do they work and volunteer? These data had not been collected in earlier surveys and their addition would provide a measure of community engagement and influence.

Of course, the editors also wanted to know what readers thought of the magazine, what knowledge readers gain from it, how they share information learned from the magazine, and—the gold-standard question, according to the *Harvard Business Review*—whether readers would recommend the magazine to a friend or colleague (Reichheld, 2003).

The Survey Research Center on the Oregon State campus provided the editors with a team of survey specialists, some of whom had worked on earlier *Progress* readership surveys. This team helped to design three surveys, each targeted to a particular audience: 1) subscribers to the print magazine, 2) specialty groups (science educators and Oregon news media) who receive the print magazine, and 3) online visitors to the Web-based magazine.

The survey questions for all three target audiences were similar and in many cases identical, designed to gather demographic and civic information, assess reader interest in the publication, and explore if and how readers share information in the magazine with others. The editors hoped to compare demographics and community involvement among the three types of readers.

All surveys included a combination of multiple-choice and open-ended questions. In the end, three surveys were developed: an 18-question survey for general print subscribers sent to a random sample of 753 subscribers, a 10-question survey sent to 600 teachers and 284 journalists who receive the magazine directly, and a 12-question survey for online readers that was posted on the *Oregon's Agricultural Progress Online* Web site.

The OSU Survey Research Center mailed the print surveys to the general subscribers, teachers, and journalists following distribution of the fall 2004 issue of the print magazine. The online version of the survey was posted on the *Progress Online* Web site when the fall 2004 issue was placed online in November.

## Research

Aside from mentioning the survey in the pages of the print magazine and inviting readers to participate, the editors did not advertise the online survey. The population for the online survey was self-selecting. Respondents were Web users who viewed *Progress Online* while the survey was posted and chose to complete and submit the survey. The survey remained active through 2005 so the editors could continue to collect survey data from users of subsequent issues.

The OSU Survey Research Center oversaw the survey, using Statistical Analysis System (SAS) software for data entry and processing. Simple frequency analysis was used to summarize and describe the compiled data. The SAS frequency analysis tools were used to generate frequencies, percentages, cumulative frequencies, and cumulative percentages.

## Results

### *General Subscribers to the Print Magazine*

Results show that *Oregon's Agricultural Progress* print magazine has an engaged and supportive readership. The survey sampled 753 general print subscribers (a 5% margin of error) and received a 76% response rate, considered high by mail survey standards. The survey suggested that *Progress* subscribers are loyal readers. One-third (33%) have subscribed for more than 10 years, and 24% for 6 to 10 years. More than half (51%) reported that they usually read more than three-quarters of each issue of the magazine (Table 1).

Subscribers value the magazine. Results show that 96% of the responding print subscribers rated the magazine as informative to very informative. Responding print subscribers also share the magazine. Results show 83% would recommend the magazine to a friend or colleague (Table 1). And more than three-fourths (78%) pass the magazine on to others or donate them to schools or libraries (Figure 1).

The editors found that *Progress* readers are older: 47% are 65 years or older, 46% are between the ages of 45 and 64, and only 7% are 44 years or younger. *Progress* readers are from all across the state and work in many sectors. According to the survey, 21% of respondents live in the Portland metropolitan area, where over half of the state's population is concentrated. The remaining 79% are from throughout the state (Table 2).

*Progress* readers are involved in their communities (Figure 2). Ninety-eight percent say they vote; 63% volunteer their time; and 72% currently belong to one or more community service, political, or education support organizations (Table 3.)



**Table 1.** *Subscriber Responses* (N = 572)

Variables	Frequency	Percent
How long a subscriber?		
< 1 year	30	5.24
1-3 years	84	14.69
> 3, but < 6 years	106	18.53
6-10 years	140	24.48
> 10 years	192	33.57
No response	20	3.50
How much of the magazine <i>Oregon's Agricultural Progress</i> do you usually read?		
> 75%	291	50.87
50-74%	153	26.75
25-49%	93	16.26
< 25%	31	5.42
No response	4	0.70
How informative is <i>Progress</i> magazine to you personally?		
Very informative	365	63.81
Somewhat informative	187	32.69
Not too informative	13	2.27
Not at all informative	3	0.52
No response	4	0.70
Would you recommend <i>Progress</i> magazine to a friend?		
Yes, I would	475	83.04
Maybe	70	12.24
Probably not	20	3.50
No, I would not	2	0.35
No response	5	0.87

### *Special Groups Receiving the Print Magazine*

The adjusted response rate for science teachers and news media was disappointingly small (11% and 13%, respectively). In both cases, it seems possible that the people receiving the magazine and, therefore, the survey (an office assistant, for example) are not the people who read the magazine.

## Research

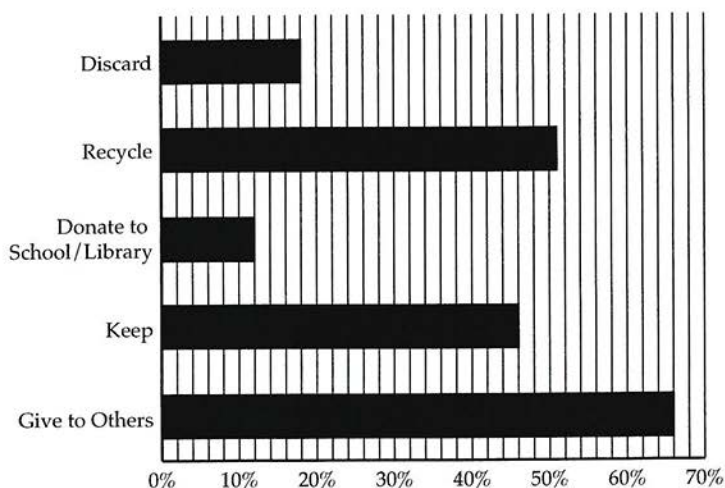


Figure 1. Responses regarding what readers do with past issues. (N = 572)

### Online Survey

The online survey did not generate enough response for data analysis. Despite leaving the survey in place on the *Progress Online* Web site for more than a year and linking every *Progress Online* story to a prominent “Stop Sign” alert requesting that visitors to the site take the survey, the survey received just 11 responses.

### Discussion

Is a print magazine still relevant in a world increasingly dominated by electronic media? Clearly, the print version of *Oregon’s Agricultural Progress* magazine has a responsive and civically engaged readership. The statistics characterize an audience that represents both urban and rural communities throughout the state across many business sectors. Readers are active in community organizations and they vote. They read most of the magazine and they share it with others. The high percentage (66%) of respondents who indicated that they share their copy of *Progress* with others indicates a significant “pass-along” readership for the magazine. This suggests that each issue of the magazine distributed to subscribers has the potential to reach a pool of readers whose only connection to the publication is their association with a current *Progress* subscriber in their community.

In addition, nearly three-quarters of the completed print surveys included supplementary written comments about memorable articles or photographs from past issues, topics the readers would like to see covered in future issues, and general impressions of the content and quality of the

**Table 2.** *Respondent Demographics (N = 572)*

Variables	Frequency	Percent
Age group?		
25-34	5	0.87
35-44	34	5.94
45-54	95	16.61
55-64	164	28.67
65 or over	271	47.38
No response	3	0.52
Where in Oregon do you live?		
Portland metro area	122	21.33
Willamette Valley	246	43.01
Oregon Coast	47	8.22
Southern Oregon	57	9.97
Central Oregon or Eastern Oregon	92	16.08
No response	8	1.40
In what area do you work or volunteer?		
Do not work or volunteer	105	18.36
Agriculture	142	24.83
Food	15	2.62
Natural resources	25	4.37
Tourism	4	0.70
High tech	10	1.75
Other industry	14	2.45
Government agency	39	6.82
Education (K-12)	25	4.37
Higher ed./adult ed.	27	4.72
Medical/legal services	16	2.80
Other services	17	2.97
Other	41	7.17
More than one selected	41	7.17
No response	51	8.92



## Research

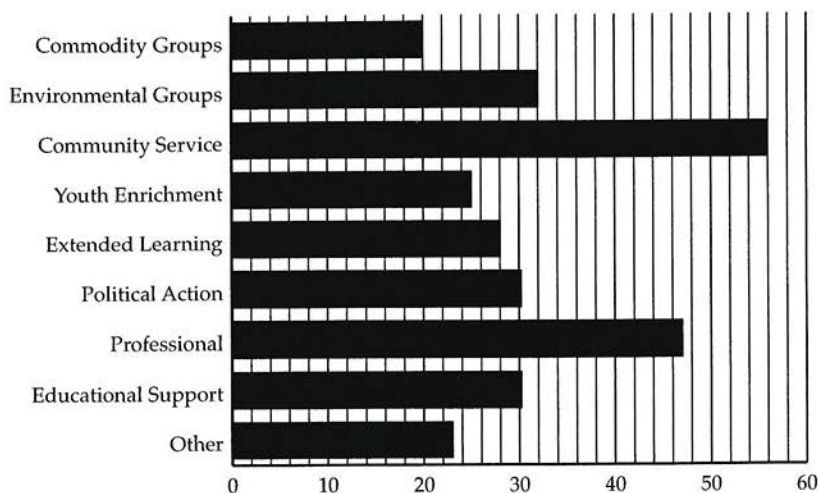


Figure 2. Respondents' organizational affiliations (many indicated belonging to multiple groups). (N = 410)

Table 3. Respondents' Community Involvement (N = 572)

Variables	Frequency	Percent
Do you vote in Oregon elections?		
I usually vote	561	98.08
I usually don't vote	8	1.40
No response	3	0.52
Have you volunteered with an organization within the last 12 months?		
No	200	34.97
Yes	363	63.46
No response	9	1.57
Do you currently belong to any organizations?		
No	146	25.52
Yes	410	71.68
No response	16	2.80

magazine. The willingness to add written comments to an already lengthy survey suggested an engaged readership for which the magazine provided meaningful communications.

These statistics validate an important return on the investment the college makes to support the magazine as a medium of public education and

accountability. In many ways, *Progress* readers function as stakeholders for Oregon State University and the College of Agricultural Sciences as they read and share stories from the magazine.

But what about younger readers? The editors received very few surveys from people between the ages of 18 and 34, the group identified by the Carnegie Report as turning away from traditional sources of news and information (Brown, 2005). Two conclusions are possible: either few people between the ages of 18 and 34 are reading *Oregon's Agricultural Progress* magazine, or younger readers have no interest in filling out a survey questionnaire.

And what about online readers? Despite the prominence the editors gave to its position on the Web site, and despite its long-term presence on the site, the online survey did not attract a significant response from its readership, although the site received nearly 57,000 visitor sessions during the time the survey was posted. In retrospect, the Web component of the survey may have failed because it was designed to be self-selecting. In the absence of a direct personalized appeal to take the survey—comparable to receiving the printed request and survey in the mail—potential online respondents apparently saw no compelling reason to volunteer their time for the survey. Recent research offers some support for this conclusion. According to Kiernan, Kiernan, Oyler, and Gilles (2005), online surveys have poor response rates, suggesting resistance to this method. Kiernan et al. added that Web surveys parallel the poor response rates for e-mail surveys that are self-selecting.

## Conclusions

Print is not dead, although print readers of *Oregon's Agricultural Progress* magazine are getting older. This survey tapped a responsive audience among print readers that is engaged and willing to fill out and mail a survey questionnaire. In contrast, the online survey was dismissed by nearly 57,000 Web visitors who saw no reason to take the time to respond.

The original purpose of the study was *not* to compare survey methodologies, but to use survey methods to compare the readership of print and online magazines. A low response rate from online readers made it impossible to make these comparisons. Unfortunately, the survey may not have been passed to the primary readers at the schools or media bureaus. The editors recommend that future surveys include a note clearly requesting that the questionnaire be passed to specific science teachers and reporters.

However, the enthusiastic response from print readers suggested a compelling argument for continuing to print the magazine. The survey revealed a loyal print readership that is civically engaged, values the magazine, and shares it with their communities. In other words, the print



## Research

magazine reaches influential people—across the state and in many sectors—who share information from the university and the college within their circles of influence as community members, volunteers, and voters.

The readership survey provided evidence that, despite their age, readers of *Oregon's Agricultural Progress* magazine represent a supportive community across the state whose members serve as stakeholders for the College of Agricultural Sciences. These data provide compelling evidence that the print magazine communicates effectively with an influential audience spread across the state and many sectors.

The editors reported their findings to the three groups they had initially interviewed for advice before developing the survey: college administrators, foundation funders, and former *Progress* editors. All three groups found new reasons to continue their support for the venerable print magazine that remains the voice for agricultural progress in Oregon.

In addition, the survey helped to identify future possibilities to increase the magazine's effectiveness in print and online:

1. Engage online readers through the influence of print readers.  
Channel the interest of print readers to additional features online by publishing links to more information in the print magazine. Encourage print readers to share stories by e-mail and contribute to online conversations about particular topics featured in each issue of the print magazine.
2. Engage younger audiences through the influence of older readers.  
In particular, engage high-school-age readers through their teachers by developing curricula and learning guides for *Progress Online*. In addition, engage college-age readers through their parents by sending subscriptions to families of agricultural sciences undergraduates to stimulate conversations at home.

## About the Authors

Peg Herring is a professor of communications and assistant head in the Department of Extension and Experiment Station Communications at Oregon State University. Bob Rost is a professor of communications and interim director of noncredit courses at the extended campus of Oregon State University.

## Keywords

print communications, online communications, readership survey, market survey, research magazine, Oregon State University, *Oregon's Agricultural Progress*, subscriber survey

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