

READERSHIP INSTITUTE

Media Management Center at Northwestern University

NEWSPAPER CONTENT

WHAT MAKES READERS MORE
SATISFIED

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INTRODUCTION

The Impact study's approach to understanding content and consumer preferences is unique. Rather than asking consumers to describe what kinds of news and information they want and how they should be covered, the Impact study measured newspaper content, measured consumer reaction and then looked for significant correlations between the two.

In a nationwide consumer study, 37,000 readers and non-readers in the 100 Impact newspaper markets told us how important different types of information and news are to them. They were also asked how satisfied they are with their local newspaper's coverage of that topic. Researchers then measured news content in those same local newspapers, documenting exactly to what consumers were reacting.

What follows is a report of news in U.S. daily newspapers – what's being covered and how. This report also details how readers and non-readers respond to different content approaches.

METHODOLOGY

Researchers examined a reconstructed week of Impact newspapers, using non-consecutive days to reduce the distortion of any single news event. After completing a census of 74,000 stories in those newspapers, 47,000 stories were selected for in-depth analysis. (For a detailed methodology see Appendix A.)

Measurements must accurately reflect the substance of the content in a consistent, reliable way. Perhaps more important than measuring what types of news are covered is how news is covered. To achieve that, the Readership Institute designed a multi-dimensional approach to measuring each story. For each story, researchers measured many characteristics including (see Appendix B for complete listing):

- **Theme:** What's the story about? Stories were classified into one of 26 types.
- **Origin:** Where did the story come from, staff, wire service or reader?
- **Geographic focus:** Is it a local, state, regional, national or international story?

- **News style:** How is the story written? Is it a straight-news, inverted-pyramid style or does it use a more narrative, feature-style of writing? Is it commentary, criticism or advice?
- **Visual complexity:** Does it use photos, graphics or color to tell the story? Where is it placed on the page and does it jump? Many variables were included in this measure.
- **Front page diversity:** Ethnic diversity of photographs and gender diversity of sourcing on all front page stories.
- **Overall counts:** Measures of total number of stories by type, length, proportion of area, etc.
- **Content organization:** Sectioning, content promotion, typographic and other overall measures were also studied.

Teams of specially trained readers analyzed stories using specific classification instructions. Consistency was continuously checked to minimize any individual coder's bias.

WHAT'S NEWS

Impact newspapers range in circulation size from just more than 10,000 to more than 600,000 copies per day. They're located in small towns and major metropolitan areas and everything in between. Newsroom staffs range from a crew of 10 full-time equivalent employees to hundreds of reporters and editors filling hundreds of pages. Considering this wide range in size and circumstance, how does newspaper content differ?

The first, obvious difference in content is in the sheer quantity. Newspapers with circulations between 10,000-25,000 average 32 pages and 72 stories per weekday issue; newspapers of more than 200,000 run 104 pages with 162 stories. Regardless of size, newspapers dedicate about 8 percent of all printed pages to listings. Larger newspapers clearly have greater "news hole" resources – more space (as an absolute measure even if not as an editorial/advertising ratio).

The smallest newspapers print 21 stories per week for each full-time equivalent position (FTE) in the newsroom. FTE numbers include reporters, editors, senior managers,

photographers, clerical staff, etc. Newspapers of more than 200,000 circulation print about 1.4 stories per week per FTE. The difference in the quantity of stories published per newsroom employee on a typical day results in some predictable differences between larger and smaller newspapers. Smaller newspapers rely more heavily on wire-generated stories than their larger counterparts. At the smallest newspapers, of the 21 stories printed weekly per each FTE, eight are staff-written and the rest come from other sources, including wire services. At the largest newspapers, 0.7 staff-written stories per FTE are printed weekly with an equal amount coming from wire services and other sources. With more staffing resources, larger newspapers produce more staff-written commentary and feature-style stories than smaller newspapers.

But do these differing resources translate into different approaches to the news? Fundamentally, they don't.

Newspapers demonstrate remarkable consistency both in what is considered news and how it's covered. A typical weekday U.S. newspaper – regardless of size – offers a story mix emphasizing sports, politics/government/war, police/crime, health/home/food/fashion/travel and business stories. These five categories take up almost 75 percent of the typical weekday newspaper's space. The other 25 percent is a mix of entertainment, science, arts, disasters, etc.

Sunday newspapers are more diverse than weekday newspapers. The top five topics still dominate, but their proportion in the paper shrinks to 50 percent. Business, community news, arts and science and other topics get more emphasis Sunday than on weekdays and make up the difference. This pattern holds true for newspapers regardless of size.

Sports and politics, the two most frequently covered topics, can be described in more detail. Sports coverage includes 40 percent professional sports, 38 percent college (inflated because of the NCAA basketball tournament, which fell during the study period), 13 percent high school and 10 percent women's sports (at all levels). Politics stories are 38 percent elections, 22 percent business (for example stories about the impact of government on business), 11 percent crime (for example, stories about official corruption) and 8 percent war with the balance spread out over a range of other topics. Election coverage focused 60 percent of space on national elections (because of the March presidential primaries during the

time of the study), 20 percent local, 14 percent state and regional, and 6 percent international elections.

The quantity of local coverage is another important dimension of what's covered in the newspaper. A look at front page stories shows that smaller newspapers put more emphasis on local stories than do larger papers – 58 percent compared to 43 percent of front page space. Larger newspapers devote more space to national and international stories on the front page.

However, this greater emphasis on local stories is confined to the front page. Looking at the overall content picture, newspapers – regardless of size – cover local news in the same proportion. Most newspapers devote 34 percent of space to local news, 16 percent to state and regional news, 40 percent to national news, and 10 percent to international. Larger papers devote slightly more space to international events, but the difference is minimal.

Some themes are primarily written with a local geographic focus: community announcements, obituaries and stories about ordinary people; education; crime; disaster and arts. (Not coincidentally, newspapers that have a significantly higher percentage of stories with a local angle emphasize these themes.) The themes least likely to be written with a local angle are movies; television; politics, government, war and international; and sports.

HOW NEWS IS COVERED

Every story can be told in a variety of ways. It can be long or short, include photographs, be written in a straight news way or have a more feature-style approach. As mentioned before, the Readership Institute attempted to measure a wide variety of different approaches.

Larger newspapers run more photographs, with one photograph for every two stories; smaller newspapers run one photograph for every three stories. Larger newspapers run slightly more graphics and offer more long stories. If we look at the quantity of long stories – stories measuring at least one-third of a broadsheet page – small newspapers run 10 percent long stories compared with 13 percent in the largest newspapers. On Sundays the difference

increases, with small papers running 15 percent long stories compared to 23 percent in large papers.

Larger newspapers run more stories written in a feature-style or commentary/criticism style. The emphasis on narrative storytelling, rather than a straight-news approach is more pronounced on Sundays. On Sundays, large newspapers print 54 percent “straight news” stories, with the balance features and commentary. Small newspapers run 65 percent straight news. Weekdays, large and small newspapers alike print 71% straight news, 16 percent features.

Large newspapers run more stand-alone sections, averaging more than 10 on Sundays, and jump more stories. Small newspapers offer more “go and do” information – with 12 percent of stories including phone numbers, addresses, times, prices and other information to make stories more useful.

Another dimension of how stories are covered is the diversity of people quoted and photographed. The Impact content study measured all photographs on the front page and the frequency that faces of color and white faces appeared. After excluding international stories to remove distortion, larger papers show greater diversity on their front pages, reflecting their location in more diverse communities. Fourteen percent of photos in papers 10,000- 25,000 circulation include a face of color. That increases to 23 percent of all photographs in the largest newspapers.

If we look more closely at the types of front-page stories most likely to picture a face of color, some striking differences emerge. Twenty-six percent of all front page stories showing a face of color are about police or crime compared to 15 percent of photographs with white faces. Nine percent of photographs showing faces of color on the front page are sports photographs, compared to 4 percent of photographs showing white faces. In contrast, white faces are more likely to be seen in stories about business (7 percent compared to 4 percent) and science (4 percent to 0.4 percent). This distribution holds constant regardless of newspaper size.

The study also investigated gender diversity in sourcing. Of the 3,500 front page stories that we studied, 93 percent included a quote from a man, 50 percent included a quote from a woman. Overall, male sources outnumbered female sources almost 3-to-1. Men are more likely to be quoted in stories about politics, business, parenting, religion and science.

Women are more likely to be quoted in stories about health/home/food/fashion/travel, education and ordinary people.

CONTENT AND CONSUMER SATISFACTION

The purpose of Impact is to determine how to increase newspaper readership. In the 450-question survey answered by 37,000 readers and non-readers, we looked at a range of possibilities including demographic factors, such as age and education, the issue of “no time to read,” service and content. We found that factors outside of newspapers’ control (such as demographics and time starvation) are not nearly as important as newspapers’ content and service. Importantly, we found that even the slightest increase in overall content satisfaction increases readership.

Having independently measured satisfaction and the editorial content, we could answer the question: what are newspapers with higher satisfaction doing differently? We studied each news theme, looking at which content practices increased satisfaction. Although, on average, newspapers behave very consistently, some newspapers are measurably different in their approach. By measuring consumer satisfaction for papers that are doing different things, we are able to identify what content practices relate to satisfaction.

As part of this analysis, we found that some types of content, politics and war, for example, tend to be grouped in readers’ minds. Although we had collected data for each topic individually, we combined them for further analysis based on consumer reaction.

The table below explains the satisfaction-related content characteristics by topic area. For example, newspapers with the highest satisfaction in politics coverage had more politics stories, a stand-alone opinion section, included more photographs in their politics coverage and more feature-style politics stories. These practices increased overall satisfaction. We also looked at subgroups, including heavy readers, light readers, younger readers (younger than 23), women, men, etc. If we found additional content preferences, they have been noted in the “special group reactions” column. This column should be interpreted as identifying additional ways to appeal to the special group.

| Content Type | Satisfaction-Related Characteristics | Special Group Reactions |
|--------------------------------------|---|--|
| Arts | Increased quantity Shorter stories Entertainment listings | Heavy readers: Commentary/criticism |
| Business & personal finance | Commentary, criticism & advice Increased quantity | Young readers: photographs Women: national focus Light readers: shorter stories Heavy readers: stock listings |
| Community news & ordinary people | Increased quantity First-person point of view from ordinary people Feature-style stories Youth section | Young readers: photos Light readers: more local, less national |
| Crime, courts & legal | Local, staff written Decreased quantity | Women: fewer photographs Young readers: fewer photos |
| Disaster & accidents | Decreased quantity Fewer color photographs | Young readers: shorter stories Light readers: shorter stories Women: feature-style stories |
| Education | Increased quantity Longer stories More featured on the front page Education section Youth section | None |
| Health, home, food, fashion & travel | Increased quantity Feature-style stories “Go and do” information | Young readers: weekend & lifestyle sections Women: photographs, health, food and youth sections Heavy readers: community announcement listings |
| Parenting, relationships & religion | Youth section Shorter stories Community announcement listings Increased quantity | Young readers: photos |

| Content Type | Satisfaction-Related Characteristics | Special Group Reactions |
|-----------------------------------|--|---|
| Politics, government & war | Increased quantity Stand-alone opinion section Color photographs Feature-style stories | Young readers: shorter stories, more graphics |
| Pop music | Graphics Color photos Increased quantity Entertainment listings | Women: feature-style stories |
| Science, technology & environment | Increased quantity International focus Longer stories Feature-style stories More, bigger photographs | None |
| Sports | Feature-style content | Men: Commentary |
| Television & movies | Shorter stories Increased quantity Feature-style stories Entertainment listings | Heavy readers: commentary |

Every content variable that we collected was tested against consumer reaction. Only the ones that showed a statistically reliable reaction are presented here. Many results are not surprising – they scientifically confirm what editors have anecdotally known for some time. It’s not surprising that readers prefer shorter stories about parenting rather than long ones, but it’s interesting that those same readers also include the presence of a youth section (a section geared for young people) in their opinion of overall parenting coverage.

Just as noteworthy are the cases where a content practice doesn’t appear to influence satisfaction. A good example is the number of jumps in a newspaper. Anecdotally we have heard that readers don’t like stories to jump from one page to another, but in our research it doesn’t influence satisfaction. There are two possible reasons:

1) Readers don't care enough about jumps to alter their overall satisfaction with the newspaper.

2) There is not enough difference in the number of jumps among newspapers to measure how it might influence satisfaction.

When newspapers use a different approach, we can then test consumer satisfaction with one technique versus another. If the differences in approach are minimal, readers may not notice.

Sports coverage, which only offers one idea for increasing overall satisfaction, raises the same questions as jumps. Could it be that readers don't care about other dimensions of coverage, the proportion of professional vs. high school coverage, for example? Or could it be that most newspapers cover sports in the same way so we can't judge what differences might matter?

It should also be noted that while the content analysis measured many aspects of a newspaper's substance, it could not measure things such as the quality of writing, thoroughness of reporting, overall effect of presentation and other more subjective dimensions. It could be that these might be extremely important in terms of satisfaction but do not appear in this study.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study paint an exciting picture for newspapers. Using the most rigorous methods possible, a picture emerges of readers who understand what newspapers offer. Content matters to readers, and without prompting, readers recognize differences in coverage. Many findings confirm what editors instinctively know, that increasing the quantity of coverage, changing how the news is written and promoting content more effectively makes a difference. Changing content can increase satisfaction – and that satisfaction has the potential to translate into higher readership.

This report provides a broad summary of content analysis results, for a complete tables of results, visit our website at www.readership.org and download the “Newspaper Industry Content Report.” It offers content analysis broken down by circulation group.

We also encourage you to read “The Power to Grow Readership” which talks about the highest opportunity content areas – looking at how content satisfaction relates to real reading behavior. This publication outlines which content areas offer the most promise for building readership and how content relates to branding, service and other important factors.

APPENDIX A: METHODOLOGY

The newspaper content analysis includes all types of news information that appear in daily and Sunday newspapers and some types of advertising. Stories, photographs, graphics, agate listings, classified advertising, indexes and comics all fall within the scope of the study. Display advertising is the only area that has been intentionally excluded because of practical limitations and the already sizable body of work on the subject.

The newspaper content analysis functions on two levels: The first level focuses on stories themselves, looking at the who, what, when, where and how of newspaper articles. The second level includes other kinds of information such as agate listings, promotional material, classified advertising, as well as the overall presentation, structure and promotion of content.

Circulation Strata

The circulation strata into which Impact newspapers have been grouped for comparison are:

Strata I: 10,000 to 25,000 (34 papers)

Strata II: 25,001 to 50,000 (22 papers)

Strata III: 50,001 to 100,000 (22 papers)

Strata IV: 100,001 to 200,000 (11 papers)

Strata V: 200,001 and above (15 papers)

Selecting Representative Issues

Seven publishing days from March were selected to form a reconstructed week of non-consecutive days. The sampling plan was designed to minimize distortion caused by a single major news event, holidays or other extraordinary circumstances. Each newspaper provided a complete final home edition for the dates March 6, 9, 12, 15, 18, 21 and 24 from 2000. We excluded all pre-printed advertisements and syndicated supplements such as USA Weekend, Parade magazine and stand-alone television guides. In a few, rare circumstances where the specific date requested was not available, a comparable edition from the same day of the week was substituted.

For this study we analyzed 710 issues from 104 different newspapers. Some of our sampled newspapers do not publish on one or more days of the week, which is reflected in the total number of issues analyzed.

Identification and Classification of Stories

We identified stories using fixed criteria: they had to be at least two inches in length, they had to be in complete sentences with a central theme and could not be paid advertisements.

Often, short stories on a related subject share a common header, e.g., “Police News” or a similar listing. Each of these shorter items was treated as an individual story and counted only if two inches or longer, measuring from the headline to the final line of the story, excluding pictures. There were two exceptions:

- Advice columns such as “Dear Abby” or “Ann Landers” were treated as one story.
- Specialty columns consisting of tidbits of info with *one identified author* (e.g., celebrity gossip columns) were treated as one story.

All other contents were considered listings, content promotion or paid advertisements. We identified approximately 74,000 stories in 26 different story types.

We then selected a stratified sample of 47,500 stories for in-depth analysis. We stratified our selection to ensure a proportional selection by newspaper, day of the week and story type. We also analyzed every front page story, an additional 3,569 stories. Some front page stories were analyzed twice, by different coders to allow us to evaluate inter-coder reliability.

Parallel with story analysis, we studied non-story content such as listings, in-paper content promotion, sectioning and other general characteristics of the newspapers. These were studied using the same sample issues.

Coding Procedures and Reliability

A team of coders was trained using a detailed guideline explaining the rules for categorizing stories; their work was cross-checked. We measured inter-coder reliability in several ways:

1. All coders code the same stories: Each coder was given 10 randomly selected and identical stories to code to evaluate the coding of the entire team. We then compared the two sets of coding sheets for each story on key variables. The results were:

Cohen's kappa coefficient of agreement: Mean .76

Range .52-.93

2. Variable pairs of coders code same subset of stories: We randomly selected about 1 percent of the stories and had them recoded. That is, each of these 450 stories was coded by two different people. We then compared the two sets of coding sheets for each story on key variables. The results were:

Cohen's kappa coefficient of agreement: Mean .65

Range .52-.73

3. Variable pairs of coders code same subset of stories: All 3,569 front-page stories (about 7 percent of the total data set) were coded by two groups of coders. We then compared the two sets of coding sheets for each story on key variables. The results were:

Cohen's kappa coefficient of agreement: Mean .64

Range .15-.86

The results of our reliability analysis show that, overall, coders agreed with each other and were consistent. The level of inter-coder reliability was satisfactory by social science standards.

APPENDIX B: LIST AND DEFINITION OF VARIABLES

I. Presentation

Graphics: graphs, charts and any non-photographs used to help tell the story; note whether or not any graphic appears in color.

Photo: in addition to noting both the number of photographs as well as whether or not color is used, please note the number of photographs in which either an identifiably Caucasian face or face of color, or both, appears; if such determination is not possible, or if the picture is not of people, then please note this as well.

Sidebar: a short accompanying article that expands on the main theme, a.k.a. “fact box.” It must be visually associated with the main story – nearby with a similar graphic treatment.

Jump: a story is said to have “jumped” when it is continued on another page – usually with a tag such as “see Tree Page 8” at the end.

II. Placement

Front Page: with a check, note whether the story appears on the front-page.

Geographic Header: groups several articles together, but is located somewhere on the page, rather than at the top of the page, a.k.a. “topical ids.”

Section: using the coding scheme below, record the section in which the story appears. Be careful not to confuse the story’s content with the section in which it appears. In smaller newspapers, e.g., every story, regardless of content, will be classified as being in the “Front” section.

Front Section

Local Only

Local, State & Regional News

State/Regional News

Sports

Business

Food

Lifestyle/Arts/Entertainment

Weekend Entertainment

Family & Parenting

Youth-oriented

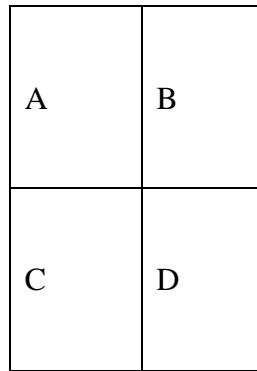
Education

Home, Garden & Real Estate

Books

Editorial/Opinion
 Fashion
 Sunday Magazine (non-syndicated)
 Science or Health
 Computers & Technology
 Travel
 Classifieds – general
 Classifieds – auto
 Classifieds – real estate
 Classified – employment
 Other

Quadrant: using the following graph, mark the location of the story on the page with the following letter designation. If the story extends across two quadrants, mark the quadrant in which the majority of the article appears.



III. Origin/Source of Story

- A. Wire/News Service: stories from AP, Reuters or any other “news service.”
- B. Staff: stories with a byline that are not specifically identified as being with a news service.
- C. Reader: use only on either editorial pages where readers write columns or letters to the editor, or in cases where stories are specifically identified as being written by readers.
- D. Unknown: use only when the source of the story is not presented or determinable.

IV. Geographic Focus: or target subject; please use both the following three questions as well as the following list of options:

Questions:

- Is a specific locality, state, region, or nation identified in the story?
- Is the story significantly more interesting to state, region, national or international readers?

Does the story seem to be tailored for people from a certain locality, region, state or nation?

By answering these questions, the subject should become clear. However, although mention of specific geographic areas is important to note, it can be sometimes misleading. For example, there may be mention of the United Nations in New York, but that doesn't mean that it's a New York story. Similarly legislation can be passed in Washington, D.C., which deals directly with a local issue. It's important to consider what makes the story newsworthy, and, more specifically, why is it in this newspaper?

A. Geographic List:

1. Local¹
2. State
3. Regional
4. National
5. International
6. None

V. Treatment

General News: any story that emphasizes facts of a recent event.

Feature: longer, more reflective tone; often humorous or entertaining.

Commentary/Criticism: any story that offers a first-person opinion or is a stated opinion of the newspaper, e.g., editorials, opinion or advice pieces, art, music and entertainment criticism and product advice, etc.

“How-to”: article offering very specific information, the central purpose of which is to offer advice on a certain issue.

VI. Themes

1. Politics/government (see subcategory list)
2. Police/crime/courts/legal (see subcategory list)
3. Natural disaster/accident
4. Business, Economics & Personal Finance
5. Sports (see subcategory list)
6. War/International Conflict
7. Parenting and Relationships
8. Science and Technology
9. Health, fitness & medicine
10. Education
11. Jobs and Career

¹ refers to the locality, state, region in which the paper is published.

12. Automotive
13. Travel
14. Environment
15. Religion/Spirituality
16. Ordinary People
17. Home, Garden and Real Estate
18. Food
19. Movies
20. Popular Music
21. Television
22. The Arts (e.g., dance, classical music, museums, etc.)
23. Community Announcements (including weddings, events, etc.)
24. Obituaries
25. Fashion and Beauty
26. Other

A. Thematic Subcategories for codes 1, 2 & 5

1. Politics/government:

1. Police/crime/courts/legal
2. Business, Economics & Personal Finance
3. War/International Conflict
4. Health & medicine
5. Education
6. Science and Technology
7. Environment
8. Family & Parenting
9. Elections
10. Other

2. Police/crime/courts/legal:

1. Politics/government
2. Business, Economics
3. Sports
4. Science and Technology
5. Education
6. Parenting & Family

5. Sports:

1. Recreational
2. High School
3. College
4. Professional
5. Women's sports
6. Police/crime/courts/legal