By Bruce H. Westley and Werner J. Severin

# A Profile of the Daily Newspaper Non-Reader

*Who is the newspaper non-reader? This study shows him to be low on the scale in occupation, income and education; either quite young or old; more likely a farmer than a city dweller; and relatively disinterested in social life.*

► Reading the daily newspaper is doubtless one of the most thoroughly institutionalized behaviors of Americans. Despite the inroads made by television, the newspaper continues to be the chief source of information for most of us. Elsewhere, as in Philadelphia, "nearly everyone" reads his newspaper every day.[1]

But not quite everyone. There is still a substantial minority which is not regularly reached by newspapers. Because the newspaper is basically a "universalistic" medium—one which must somehow be all things to all people within its area—there is reason to be concerned about the non-reader. What sort of person is he?

An opportunity to study the social composition of the daily newspaper non-reader group was presented when the Wisconsin Survey Research Laboratory put its first state-wide survey into the field in the winter of 1961-62.[2] Interviews were completed with 1,057 Wisconsin adults chosen on an area probability sampling basis. This represented 87% of the households selected.

Among many other questions the survey asked: "Do you generally read a daily newspaper?" The context of the question was a series of items relating to the respondent's use of television, radio and the newspaper. Answers were obtained from all but two of the 1,057 respondents.

[1] For example in an earlier report based on the present investigation, the authors found that 86% of Wisconsin residents report that they read newspapers every day, 37% read more than one newspaper, and 8% read three or more. The same report shows that 81% listen to radio news daily and 71% watch television news daily. Nearly half reported spending at least an hour a day with their newspaper(s). When respondents were asked which of the media they regarded as "most important to you in finding out what is going on," 45% listed the newspaper first, 31% said television and 24% said radio. When they were asked a similar question stressing "finding out about local community events," the newspaper was assigned first rank by 62% of respondents, radio by 32% and television by 6%. See Bruce H. Westley and Werner Severin, *How Wisconsinites Use and Appraise Their Daily Newspapers and Other Media* (Madison: School of Journalism, University of Wisconsin) (mimeo).

[EDITOR'S NOTE: According to the Television Information Office, a national survey in November 1963 by Elmo Roper and Associates found that 55% of respondents named "television" as the source from which they get most of their "news about what's going on in the world today," while 53% said "newspapers." The percentages in this survey add to more than 100%, since some people named more than one medium.]

[2] The authors express their gratitude to the Wisconsin Survey Research Laboratory and especially its director, Harry Sharp, but also to the 15 other participating University of Wisconsin faculty members whose questions were used in connection with this analysis. They also wish to thank the Graduate Research Committee for a grant of machine time from the Numerical Analysis Laboratory, which is supported in part by the National Science Foundation and the Wisconsin Alumni Research Foundation.

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Negative answers were given by 13.54% of the respondents. This report analyzes the characteristics of this non-reader group.

### *Results*

The results are shown in Tables 1 through 5, which group attributes of respondents into five kinds of independent variables: social status, demographic, social interaction, political identification and media use. The tables present the percent of all respondents in a given category who answered "no" to the question. The number of persons in each category is given in parentheses.[3]

Table 1 presents the socio-economic characteristics of our non-reader group. Here the evidence is clear and consistent. In all six measures of socio-economic difference there are significant differences between people of high and low status, with low status associated with high non-readership.[4]

TABLE 1

*Socio-Economic Characteristics of Newspaper Non-Readers*

| | % Non-Readers |
|---|---|
| *Socio-economic index* | |
| High (201) | 6.0 |
| Medium (364) | 10.2 |
| Low (349) | 18.6 |
| *Occupation, head of household* | |
| Professional (96) | 4.2 |
| Proprietors, managerial (142) | 7.0 |
| Clerical, sales (111) | 9.0 |
| Skilled (149) | 14.1 |
| Semi-skilled (200) | 15.5 |
| Unskilled, service (126) | 11.1 |
| Farmers (95) | 26.3 |
| *Respondent's education* | |
| 16 years or more (104) | 5.8 |
| 13-15 (114) | 10.5 |
| 12 (344) | 10.8 |
| 9-11 (150) | 16.0 |
| 8 (220) | 17.3 |
| Less than 8 (111) | 18.9 |
| *Income, head of household* | |
| $10,000 and up (110) | 7.3 |
| $ 7,000 to $9,999 (162) | 6.8 |
| $ 5,000 to $6,999 (277) | 10.5 |
| $ 3,000 to $4,999 (225) | 19.1 |
| Under $3,000 (243) | 19.3 |
| *Subjective social class* | |
| "Middle class" (440) | 9.1 |
| "Working class" (558) | 17.0 |
| *Father's socio-economic index* | |
| High (138) | 9.4 |
| Medium (276) | 8.3 |
| Low (612) | 16.5 |

Occupation, is, of course, one of the better indices of social status. Here we have converted occupation data into the form of a "socio-economic index" developed by Reiss.[5] This "purified" scale yields one of the strongest relationships in the entire study. The data for census-type occupational categories are also shown.

"Subjective social class" was determined by asking what class respondents considered themselves, "upper," "lower," "middle" or "working." Too few respondents chose the first two alternatives to permit analysis. The working class-middle class difference, however, proved to be highly significant.

Education and income, two other more or less standard measures of social class, also show a reasonably consistent relationship to regular newspaper reading.

The occupation item reveals another variable that is more "demographic" than "socio-economic." The largest non-reader category proves to be "farmer," an occupation which in Wisconsin refers to persons drawn from a wide range

[3] These sub-totals do not usually add to 1,055 because answers to the item in question were not obtained in every case or the question was not applicable in every case. To save space in the tables these "not ascertained" and "not applicable" figures have been omitted.

[4] Although significance data are not supplied in the tables, sampling error may be estimated on the following basis:

In percentage points, sampling error is—

—for percentages:

| | near 10 | | | near 20 | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| —where category *n* is: | 300 | 200 | 100 | 300 | 200 | 100 |
| 300 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 5 | 6 | 8 |
| 200 | | 5 | 6 | | 7 | 8 |
| 100 | | | 7 | | | 9 |

—at .10 for two-tailed test. Thus a difference larger than 4 percentage points may be regarded as significant when the numbers of cases in the two categories compared exceed 300 and the percentage values are near 10. The authors are indebted to the Wisconsin Survey Research Laboratory for these estimates.

[5] Consult Albert J. Reiss, Jr., *Occupations and Social Status* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1961).



of the social status spectrum. Further evidence for this rural-urban difference is shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2

*Demographic Characteristics of Newspaper Non-Readers*

| | % Non-Readers |
|---|---|
| *Respondent's age* | |
| 20s (180) | 18.9 |
| 30s (226) | 11.9 |
| 40s (231) | 12.6 |
| 50s (169) | 7.7 |
| 60s (154) | 11.0 |
| 70s and up (96) | 24.0 |
| *Respondent's sex* | |
| Men (475) | 13.9 |
| Women (580) | 13.3 |
| *Place of residence* | |
| Rural (farm) (260) | 25.0 |
| Places under 2,500 (123) | 13.0 |
| 2,501 to 10,000 (107) | 14.0 |
| 10,001 to 25,000 (227) | 6.6 |
| 25,001 to 100,000 (116) | 9.5 |
| Above 100,000 (222) | 9.5 |
| *Respondent's birthplace* | |
| Nonfarm (652) | 11.2 |
| Farm (400) | 17.5 |
| *Years at present residence* | |
| 20 or more (500) | 13.4 |
| 5 to 19 years (331) | 11.2 |
| 4 years or less (224) | 17.0 |
| *Religion* | |
| Catholic (420) | 11.9 |
| Protestant (588) | 14.5 |

Referring to Table 2, we find no sex difference in being non-readers of newspapers but all the other variables reveal differences consistent with commonsense expectations. Newspaper reading is again shown to be a particularly urban characteristic. Farm residents are the most likely to be non-readers. Residents of cities of 10,000 population or more are most likely to be readers. (Differences among these city size categories are not individually significant.) These are cities which, in nearly all cases, have daily newspapers of their own.

The difference between Catholics and Protestants proved to be an artifact of the rural-urban difference.[6] Not unexpectedly people who are relative newcomers to their present place of residence are more likely to be non-readers than those who have lived at the same place five years or more.

The age data, though not unexpected, show a clearly curvilinear relationship to being a regular newspaper reader. Non-readers are a relatively high proportion of persons in their 20's but they decline to a low in the 50's, rising again to the highest figure of all among the elderly.

Table 3 groups the evidence for a relationship between newspaper non-reading and the degree to which people are in communication with others. The

TABLE 3

*"Sociability" Characteristics of Newspaper Non-Readers*

| | % Non-Readers |
|---|---|
| *Number of formal associations* | |
| Three or more groups (271) | 4.8 |
| Two (261) | 11.9 |
| One (312) | 16.0 |
| None (209) | 23.4 |
| *Church membership* | |
| Yes (888) | 12.0 |
| No (165) | 21.2 |
| *Frequency of church attendance* | |
| Once a week or more (595) | 10.3 |
| More than once a year (350) | 14.3 |
| Once a year or less (106) | 29.2 |
| *Frequency of visits—* | |
| *—with relatives* | |
| Once a week or more (494) | 12.8 |
| More than once a year (524) | 13.7 |
| Less often or never (28) | 21.4 |
| *—with neighbors* | |
| Once a week or more (266) | 10.9 |
| More than once a year (494) | 13.2 |
| Less often or never (286) | 16.8 |
| *—with fellow workers* | |
| A few a month or more (376) | 12.8 |
| A few a year (332) | 11.7 |
| Less often or never (300) | 16.0 |
| *—with others* | |
| Once a year or more (225) | 15.6 |
| More than once a year (728) | 11.3 |
| Less often or never (89) | 25.8 |

[6] In our sample, respondents in cities 25,000 and over were 53% Catholic, in smaller places 38%, and farm respondents 33%. Thus a "religious" difference in newspaper reading appears to be a function of place of residence.

sharpest differentiation here is in the number of formal organizations to which the respondent belongs. This is, in fact, one of the strongest encountered in the entire study.

Such associations are not, of course, entirely a matter of sociability. Being a member of formal organizations is usually associated with two characteristics already shown to be related to newspaper reading, social status and urbanism.

It might also be suggested that there is a sort of "social integration" variable operating here; persons who are involved in social interaction through formal organizations may be regarded as well integrated into their respective communities. But there is also evidence here that the more people interact socially with others the more they tend to be regular newspaper readers. For example, being or not being a church member shows a strong relationship to being a newspaper reader. But regular church attendance shows an even stronger relationship to our dependent variables. Finally, social interaction with others, regardless of whom, proves to be consistently associated with being a newspaper reader.

Table 4 presents the data in relation to political identification and political participation. Here we find no difference between the party of choice and being a newspaper reader. But we find a substantial and significant difference between two categories of nonpartisans, those who state no preference and those who think of themselves as independents. Among the partisans, those who acknowledge a strong party tie are significantly less likely to be regular newspaper readers than those who regard their partisan identification as less strong. This appears to contradict another finding: that those who voted in the last presidential election were more likely to be newspaper readers than those who did not. Thus one measure of strength of partisan identification appears to be yielding different results than another. Further analysis of this question has been undertaken.

One additional analysis was performed to ascertain whether readers differ from non-readers in their attention to other media, and particularly in their attention to the information content of other media. Table 5 presents the result. Non-readers did not differ from readers either in respect to hours spent

TABLE 4

*Political Characteristics of Newspaper Non-Readers*

| | % Non-Readers |
|---|---|
| *Preferred political party* | |
| Republican (339) | 11.8 |
| Democratic (418) | 13.6 |
| Independent (102) | 9.8 |
| No preference (153) | 17.7 |
| *Political "leaning" of party non-identifiers* | |
| Republican (78) | 12.8 |
| Democratic (79) | 10.1 |
| Neither, no leaning (119) | 18.5 |
| *Strength of party identification* | |
| Strong (345) | 15.7 |
| Not strong (400) | 10.5 |
| *Political participation* | |
| Voted for president 1960 (869) | 12.4 |
| Did not vote (182) | 18.7 |

TABLE 5

*Media-Use Characteristics of Newspaper Non-Readers*

| | % Non-Readers |
|---|---|
| *Time spent with television* | |
| 4 hours or more daily (178) | 15.2 |
| 2 hours to less than 4 (362) | 13.0 |
| Less than 2 hours (368) | 13.4 |
| *Time spent with radio* | |
| More than 3 hours daily (180) | 15.5 |
| 1 to 3 hours (398) | 13.3 |
| Less than 1 hour (180) | 12.7 |
| *Frequency of TV news viewing* | |
| Daily or more often (654) | 12.8 |
| Less than daily (207) | 13.4 |
| *Frequency of radio news listening* | |
| Daily or more often (667) | 13.0 |
| Less than daily (151) | 12.7 |
| *Frequency of library use* | |
| Once a month or more (163) | 9.9 |
| Few times a year or less (397) | 11.0 |
| Never (350) | 17.6 |



with radio and television nor in respect to their relative attention to news by radio and television. In only one other respect did non-readers display a distinctive pattern and that was in their use of the public library. Here the difference is large, consistent and significant, non-readers of newspapers being more likely to be non-users of the library as well.

## *Discussion*

Being or not being a regular newspaper reader, at least in Wisconsin, appears to be related to a number of variables, chiefly social class, urbanism and extent of social contact with others. The single generalization that seems to lurk in these data might go something like this: the newspaper reaches nearly everyone except those who tend to be relatively isolated, both by distance from neighbors and by a relative lack of social contact with others, in both formal and informal settings.

It might seem reasonable to suspect that isolation would tend to have the same effect on the audience composition of all the media. This is not the case and this point deserves some elaboration. The data from this same survey tends to show that a different relation exists between newspaper and radio audience behavior than between newspaper and television audience behavior. For example, heavy newspaper reading was associated with *not* having TV but unrelated to having a radio set.[7] In respect to this point, another study reported by the senior author provides a basis for comparison between the non-newspaper reader and the non-television owner. A survey conducted in Madison, Wisconsin, in 1956 found that 14% of a sample of 798 homes had no television.[8] These were analyzed by various characteristics of the respondent's household. The differences between non-TV owners and non-newspaper readers are striking.

For example, we did not find a direct relationship between not owning TV and socio-economic status. While it is true that the lowest income group was the least likely to have TV, other indicators of status gave a more complicated result. There was no difference in owning TV between occupational groups when they were all lumped together into "white collar" and "blue collar" categories. Part of the explanation appeared to lie in the fact that not owning TV was characteristic of certain high-status occupations and certain low-status occupations. Among homes least likely to have TV were those of professionals of all kinds on the one hand and unskilled, service and domestic workers on the other.

Furthermore there were very large differences in TV owning within the highest occupational category, socio-economically speaking, professionals being among the least likely and proprietors and managers among the most likely to be TV owners. This difference was even more clearly apparent when we compared types of organizations with which members of the family were affiliated. Of those active in professional societies, 22% had no TV; of those active in business groups, 1.4% had no TV.

► A similar curvilinear pattern is found with respect to education. The non-television household is likely to be headed by a chief wage-earner who has less than a high school education or who has gone beyond college. The differences are on this order: for less than high school, 15% had no TV; among high school graduates who did not go to college, 8%; those with some college or a college graduate, around 11%; those who went beyond college, 30%.

"Visiting" data were not available in the study of the non-TV home but it was possible to compare the non-TV

[7] Of those who had TV, 48% spent an hour or more with the newspaper; of those who had no TV, 61% spent an hour or more with newspapers. The comparable figures for radio were 49% and 45% (not significant).

[8] See Bruce H. Westley and Joseph B. Mobius, "A Closer Look at the Non-Television Household," *Journal of Broadcasting*, 4:164-173 (Spring 1960).

household with the newspaper non-reader with respect to organizational affiliations. Here the pattern in quite similar. Families with no organizational affiliations were less likely to be TV owners, just as we find individuals with no formal associations least likely to be regular newspaper readers. (Of course, no urban-rural comparison was possible in a one-city survey.)

The fact that we found no difference in use of the other media by readers and non-readers of newspapers appears puzzling at first. Here two alternative hypotheses are available. The "information seeking" hypothesis would predict that non-users of newspapers should tend to use other media less as information channels, but neither more nor less for other purposes. Thus we would expect that newspaper use would predict no difference in gross time spent with other media but more attention to *news* in other media. The "time budget" hypothesis, on the other hand, would predict that non-users of one medium would tend to spend more time with other media, regardless of purpose. Thus we would expect that newspaper non-users would spend more time with radio and television and give more attention to radio and television news.

Neither hypothesis gains any support here. We find no relationship at all, either with respect to time spent with the media or attention to news.

► Other data from this same study actually provide a better test of these hypotheses. The earlier report showed a positive relationship between *time spent* with the newspaper and time spent with radio, but no relationship between time spent with the newspaper and time spent with television.[9] The same was true in the case of attention to news in the other media. Those who spent more time with the newspaper listened to more radio newscasts but did not watch more television newscasts.[10] This outcome is interesting enough but supports neither position.

We are left with the question why those who are not regular newspaper readers use other media neither more nor less but *how much* they use newspapers is related to use of radio but not television.

The answer may lie in the very strong and consistent indications in our own data that taking a newspaper is an attribute of social class and less clearly a matter of communication behavior. The earlier report shows that relative use of the newspaper (time spent) was not related to use of other media, and may therefore be regarded as an attribute of communication behavior but not an attribute of social class.

Are the results reported here generalizable only to Wisconsin adults? Technically the answer is "yes," since only Wisconsin adults were sampled. However, when the results reported here are compared with those from a national study, the outcomes appear to be highly similar in all instances where similar items were included. As a by-product of their nationwide survey for the National Association of Science Writers, the Survey Research Center in 1957 found highly similar results in age, sex, urbanism, education and income.[11] It seems reasonable therefore to assume that these results may be expected to hold wherever these media compete for attention until there is evidence to the contrary.

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[9] The figures are as follows: of those who spent less than an hour with radio, 42% spent an hour or more with the newspaper; for those who spent three hours or more with radio, 58% spent an hour or more with the newspaper. For television the corresponding figures were 46% and 51% (not significant).

[10] Of persons who listened to radio newscasts daily, 51% spent an hour or more with newspapers; of those who listened less often, 38% spent an hour or more with newspapers. The comparable figures for TV were 49% and 45% (not significant).

[11] *The Public Impact of Science in the Mass Media* (Ann Arbor: Survey Research Center, University of Michigan, 1958). The study was directed by Robert C. Davis in cooperation with the Surveys Committee of the National Association of Science Writers, whose chairman was Prof. Hillier Krieghbaum, Department of Journalism, New York University.