By Richard F. Carter and Bradley S. Greenberg

Newspapers or Television: Which Do You Believe?

Noting conflicting results in reports of media use and believability, this California study finds evidence of bias in one Roper question and explores reasons given by respondents for their preferences.

► Which of the mass media does the public prefer to use and believe when it comes to reporting the news? A recent report by Roper and his associates covers the results of three national surveys conducted in 1959, 1961 and 1963.[1] These purport to show television more favorably situated in the public eye than the newspapers.

However, the Roper questions include two which to us seem to be of dubious methodological purity and biased against newspapers.

The first question, and our initial reservation about it, was:

> First, I would like to ask you where you get most of your news about what's going on in the world today—from the newspapers or radio or television or magazines or talking to people or where?[2]

Although the question ostensibly asks for a comparison of media use—i.e., "where do you get *most* of your news" —the results show that about half the respondents gave more than one answer. And where this occurred, there is no indication of preference for one or the other. We wondered what would happen if the respondent had been allowed to give only one response—to really answer the question posed.

Previous data on use of media give newspapers the edge but do not bear directly on this question. Deutschmann, in his summary of findings in the Inland Press study of three papers, reports that his study and two earlier studies all showed more persons used newspapers than television the day previous to the interview.[3] However, this finding does not preclude the possibility that of those who used both, more would find "most of the news" through television. In addition, the Roper findings suggest a trend toward television from newspapers with the transition coming after 1960—when the last of the studies reported by Deutschmann were completed. However, a later study by Carter and Clarke in Minneapolis showed greater use of newspapers than of television.[4] And a recently reported 1961-62 study by Westley and Severin (1964) showed a preference in use of newspapers.[5]

[1] Elmo Roper and Associates, *New Trends in the Public's Measure of Television and Other Media*, Television Information Office, New York, 1964.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 2.

[3] Paul J. Deutschmann, *The X, Y, Z Papers*, Communications Research Center, Michigan State University, 1960 (mimeo).

[4] Roy E. Carter Jr. and Peter Clarke, "Suburbanites, City Residents and Local News," JOURNALISM QUARTERLY, 40:548-58 (Autumn 1963).

► The authors are both assistant professors of communications, Dr. Carter at Stanford and Dr. Greenberg at Michigan State. They were both at Stanford when this study was carried out. An earlier report of this research was given at the 1964 AEJ convention.

Roper's second question was:

> If you got conflicting or different reports of the same news story from radio, television, the magazines, and the newspapers, which of the four versions would you be most inclined to believe—the one on radio or television or magazines or newspapers?[6]

This question seemed to us to be biased in two ways, one to the disadvantage of both television and the newspapers, the other only to the disadvantage of the newspapers. First of all, both television and newspapers would seem to suffer from comparison with magazines because of the great difference in time lag between event and report. So we wondered what would happen if we dropped magazines from the Roper question. Second, the *special case* of conflicting reports would seem to us to work against the newspapers because of the *visual* dimension. The *apparent* credibility of the two would seem to be affected by the difference between them in the extent to which the event is described with—or without—mediation. So we wondered about the relative credibility of newspapers and television in the absence of conflicting reports.

A number of studies have shown that newspapers have more prestige than television. Schramm found adults in the San Francisco area gave higher prestige ratings to newspapers than to television.[7] His later studies of children and television with Lyle and Parker showed that sixth and tenth graders gave higher prestige ratings to television, but with a change toward higher prestige ratings for newspapers coming at the end of their secondary education.[8] Deutschmann and Kiel found that adults in eight out of ten major cities rated newspapers higher than television on a scale labeled: RESPONSIBLE.[9] In five out of ten instances, newspapers were rated higher than television on a scale labeled: TRUTHFUL. Television rated higher in four; one was a tie. On the other hand, the Westley and Severin study reported television as giving "the most accurate and truthful news."[10] Again, then, the previous evidence is not sufficient to allow a charge of question bias to stand by itself. Further, even if bias in this question may be shown, it would be of some interest to check on the assumption that *apparent* credibility carries the day when the newspapers and television disagree. In their article, Westley and Severin note this possibility, but suggest three others: TV newsmen are better known and thus better trusted; newspapers take editorial positions more often than do TV stations; and, people may personify a newspaper institution more often than a television channel.[11]

So we undertook a methodological study. We interviewed by telephone over 500 adults in the San Jose, California, area. Each interviewer alternated among four forms in questioning. The four forms were: (1) The Roper question on media use; the Roper question on relative believability of the media. (2) Our question on media use; the Roper question on relative believability of the media. (3) The Roper question on media use; our question on relative believability of the media. (4) Our question on media use; our question on relative believability of the media. Thus, for either question, half the sample got our question and half got the Roper question.

Our question for media use was as follows:

> From which *one* of the following sources do you get *most* of your news about what's going on in the world today—from the newspaper or radio or

[6] Bruce H. Westley and Werner J. Severin, "Some Correlates of Media Credibility," JOURNALISM QUARTERLY, 41:325-35 (Summer 1964).

[6] Roper, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

[7] Wilbur Schramm, *The Audience for Educational Television in the San Francisco Bay Area*, Institute for Communication Research, Stanford University, 1957 (mimeo).

[8] Wilbur Schramm, Jack Lyle and Edwin B. Parker, *Television in the Lives of Our Children* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1961).

[9] Paul J. Deutschmann and Donald Kiel, *A Factor Analytic Study of Attitudes Toward the Mass Media*, Communications Research Center, Michigan State University, 1960 (mimeo).

[10] Westley and Severin, *op. cit.*, p. 326.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 326.

TABLE 1

Media Use Reports from Two Different Questions

	A	*B*	*C*	*D*
	Question allows but one answer (Ours)	*Question allows more than one response (Roper's)*	*Inflation (B-A)*	*Relative Bias (C/A)*
Newspapers	44%	79%	35%	.80
Television	32%	66%	34%	1.06
Radio	14%	53%	39%	2.78
Magazines	7%	26%	19%	2.72
Other People	3%	6%	3%	1.00
	(N = 246)	(N = 261)		

television or magazines or talking to people or where?

Our procedure on media believability went a little further than substitution of a different question. We asked the following question separately for radio, television, and newspapers: "We would like your opinion on the reliability of (e.g., *radio*) for news. If perfect reliability is 100 percent, in your opinion, what percentage of the news on (e.g., *radio*) do you believe (from 0-100%)?" For half the sample, these three questions were followed with the Roper question. For the other half of the sample, only the Roper question was used. We asked all subjects after the Roper question *why* the respondent was inclined to believe the selected medium.

Results

Table 1 compares the results of our two questions on media use. In this particular sample, newspapers lead television no matter how the question is asked (columns A and B). Allowing multiple responses, as in the Roper version, gives considerable inflation to the estimates of reliance on any medium for "most of the news" (see column C). But, as we suspected, there is some evidence that the bias in the multiple response question favors television rather than newspaper; for it inflates the estimate by 80% for newspapers and by 106% for television (see column D).

One very interesting aspect of Table 1 is that the responses obtained using the Roper question are nearly the same as what Deutschmann reports Sindlinger found in 1957 by simply asking a national sample for *all* of the media they had used the previous day.[12] (Sindlinger's results were: newspapers, 79%; television, 62%; radio, 55%; and magazines, 27%). Deutschmann's own studies in Michigan gave similar rankings of the media in use, but generally higher use estimates.

Our expectation with respect to the "believability" question was that the special case of conflicting reports was biasing toward television in the light of the previous evidence of newspaper prestige. Therefore we asked half the sample to rate each of the media (newspapers, television and radio) separately prior to answering the Roper question on believability. Newspapers came off quite badly in comparison to radio and, especially, to television. The average reliability of news on television was given as 82% of the time; on radio as 77% of the time; in the newspapers as only 68% of the time. Westley and Severin reported that newspapers were perceived more credible than radio.[13]

The results of asking the Roper question on believability in differing contexts are given in Table 2. It turned out that when we preceded the Roper question with our separate questions, the later question on conflicting reports gave television a better vote than when the question was asked alone as in the Roper surveys. However, we still have

[12] Deutschmann, *op. cit.*

[13] Westley and Severin, *op. cit.*, p. 326.

TABLE 2

Most Believable Medium in Case of Conflicting Reports

	A	B
	Roper question asked alone	*Roper question preceded by separate questions*
Newspapers	29%	22%
Television	46%	53%
Radio	15%	13%
Don't Know	10%	12%
	(N = 266)	(N = 255)

not shown the extent of the difference for television and newspapers on believability. If we take the separate evaluations of the media made by half the respondents prior to answering the Roper question, we find that 62% of those rating both newspapers and television rated television higher. Only 14% rated newspapers higher than television; 24% rated them equal. (Analysis of the 54 respondents who rated television and newspapers equal in the separate questions showed that 43% chose television in the special case of conflicting reports while 28% chose the newspapers. Some 13% chose radio; 16% had no preference.)

Before we look at the reasons given for preferring one or another medium in the case of conflicting reports, let's examine the reasons given by the 59 respondents who said they wouldn't choose any from these three. Some 53% said simply that all three are the same and therefore they would select no one of them as most believable. Another 15% said they would believe none of them; they would "wait and see." No reason was given by 24%, miscellaneous reasons by 5%.

Table 3 gives a summary of reasons for media preferences when the accounts disagree. As expected, television gains considerable support because of its visual dimension (see lines 8 and 9b). Generally, this is because of the "seeing is believing" attitude evidenced in line 8. But some of the respondents simply liked to see the commentators report the news—even though the news might be the same wire service account available in the newspapers. More of the personality factor is seen in the responses concerning personnel (see line 3).

Television and radio both show substantial support because of the bias perceived in newspaper accounts (see line 2): "exaggerated," "biased," "opinionated" and "magnified."

Newspapers, and to a lesser extent radio, appear to draw on the habitual usage of single medium (see line 1; also probably lines 5, 6 and 7).

Although we ruled out magazines because of the obvious time factor, time appeared as a factor anyway. Both radio and television found favor because of an assumption that the report would be more recent (see line 9a). On the other hand, newspapers found support in the assumption that they would have had more time to get the complete story (see line 6).

In Table 4, we see that a preference for newspapers in the case of conflicting reports is more likely to be due to age than to education. The greater reliance on newspapers among older respondents is consistent with the kinds of reasons previously reported—single media use and habitual preference.

The difference in preference by sex (the women choosing television more often than the men) parallels the Westley and Severin findings.[14]

An interesting question remains: Why did the special case favor the newspapers? Why did they do better in direct contrast to television than when evaluated alone for believability? The visual factor *should* have favored television in the special case of disagreement. Perhaps the 29% who gave as a reason that they "would believe it because they could see it happen" should be viewed as a small proportion, not a large proportion!

Does the answer lie in what seems to be a possible distinction that the sins of

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 329.

TABLE 3

Summary of Reasons for Media Preference in Case of Conflicting Reports

		A Newspapers	*B* Television	*C* Radio
1.	*Limited experience* (*e.g.*, only use one medium for news)	21%	5%	22%
2.	*Bias perceived in other medium or media* (*e.g.*, newspapers "exaggerate"; television "dramatizes")	2%	18%	15%
3.	*Better personnel* (*e.g.*, preference for commentators, reporters)	1%	12%	4%
4.	*Medium has to be good* (*e.g.*, libel laws; TV has such large audience; radio has such small audience)	2%	4%	1%
5.	*General confidence in medium* (*e.g.*, preference for print; previous experience with radio)	16%	—	13%
6.	*General confidence in completeness of account*	20%	5%	3%
7.	*General confidence in accuracy of medium*	23%	5%	5%
8.	*Specific confidence in accuracy of account* (*e.g.*, on-the-spot coverage by radio, TV, and wire services; for TV, "you can see it happen")	3%	29%	8%
9	*Specific attributes which favor medium:*	7%	24%	18%
	a. More recent account	(—)	(9%)	(18%)
	b. Pictures	(—)	(15%)	(—)
	c. Time to digest content	(7%)	(—)	(—)
10.	*Miscellaneous*	2%	2%	7%
11.	*No reason given*	8%	6%	7%
		105%	110%	103%
		(N = 131)	(N = 258)	(N = 73)

newspapers are in commission (as in their perceived biases; line 2 of Table 3) while the sins of television are in omission (as in the lack of persons who give a reason of general confidence in television's accuracy and completeness of account; lines 6 and 7 of Table 3)? Westley and Severin suspected this. Our data suggest they were correct.

In Table 5, we show the relationship

TABLE 4

Media Preference in Case of Conflicting Reports by Sex, Age and Education

	A Newspapers	*B* Television	*C* Radio	Total
Sex:				
Male (N = 170)*	33%	49%	18%	100%
Female (N = 291)	26%	60%	14%	100%
Age:				
to 29 (N = 155)	27%	60%	13%	100%
to 39 (N = 106)	26%	50%	24%	100%
to 49 (N = 92)	27%	61%	12%	100%
50+ (N = 100)	34%	52%	14%	100%
Education:				
Less than 12 years (N = 112)	23%	60%	17%	100%
12 years (N = 158)	32%	56%	12%	100%
Some college (N = 110)	31%	52%	17%	100%
College graduate (N = 62)	24%	55%	21%	100%

*Fewer cases are used here because those with no single preferred medium were dropped.

TABLE 5

Relationship of Media Believability to Media Use

Part A. Separate questions asked

		Medium Most Used:	
		Newspapers	*Television*
Relative Believability:	TV > Nsps.	48%	66%
	TV = Nsps.	28	26
	Nsps. > TV	24	8
		100%	100%
		(N = 46)	(N = 38)

Part B. Case of conflicting reports

		Medium Most Used:	
		Newspapers	*Television*
Medium Believed:	TV	37%	81%
	Radio	15	5
	Nsps.	48	14
		100%	100%
		(N = 94)	(N = 73)

of media use to conditions of believability. Using the results from the separate questions on believability, we have sorted respondents into those whose ratings for newspapers and television differed in one direction or the other, or were equal. The relationship of these classifications to use is shown in Part A of Table 5. There is some relationship between use and believability, but when we compare the medium used with the medium believed in the case of conflicting reports, there is a much stronger relationship, as shown in Part B of Table 5.

Perhaps the answer lies in the apparent paradox that the newspapers frequently are seen to be both right and wrong. When it comes to an issue where one must be chosen, the greater use of newspapers tends to favor the newspapers in the direct comparison.

Conclusions

We had little difficulty showing that an anti-newspaper bias was operating in the Roper question on which media are used—or which medium is used—for most of the news. But the anticipated anti-newspaper bias in the Roper question on the special case of conflicting reports did not appear in our study. Newspapers seemed indeed to be favored by this question. When the media were evaluated singly, newspapers were worse off than in this special case.

Conceivably, removing magazines from the second question could have biased results toward newspapers. This might occur if there were a print, nonprint dimension involved. Those who would have selected magazines might have selected newspapers here. But there is certainly no evidence of this. The only changes from the Roper results are toward greater support of television.

Analysis of the reasons given for preferring one of the media in the case of conflicting reports, and an analysis of the relationship between use of the media and believability, together suggest that newspapers gain in a direct contrast with television because they are perceived *both* to be right more often *and* to be wrong more often.