

Summer 1987

The Nonreader Problem: A Closer Look at Avoiding the Newspaper

Jeremy Harris Lipschultz

University of Nebraska at Omaha, jeremy.lipschultz@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/commfacpub>

 Part of the [Communication Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lipschultz, Jeremy Harris, "The Nonreader Problem: A Closer Look at Avoiding the Newspaper" (1987). *Communication Faculty Publications*. 78.

<https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/commfacpub/78>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Communication at DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Communication Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.



by Jeremy Harris Lipschultz

The Nonreader Problem: A Closer Look at Avoiding the Newspaper

Why do some people avoid reading newspapers? Are their reasons different from those of regular readers? Findings from a survey suggest responses to a sample of avoidance statements by readers are more clearly defined than those of nonreaders. This study also raises questions about distinguishing between "regular" and "casual" readers, as findings provide only limited support for the use of "casual" readers in future research. Further development of avoidance gratification theory might help newspapers convert nonreaders to future readers.

Understanding why some people do not read newspapers or use other media has both practical and theoretical importance.

Emphasis in the 1970s on the uses and gratifications approach¹ to media studies failed to produce much data on so-called avoidance items. Unlike uses of mass media, avoidance questions ask for responses on why one might not use mass media.

Becker² provided the most conceptual analysis to date. His factor analysis yielded a cluster of what was termed "avoidance motivations of various sorts." In this framework avoidances measured were not mirror-opposites of gratifications; they are quite distinct from positive gratifications.

The focus in uses and gratification literature in recent years has broadened, turning toward an expectancy-value approach,³ the use of dependency theory,⁴ or evolutionary empirical models.⁵ These models attempt to extend previous efforts by adapting the theory to a more cognitive perspective.

In this connection Fishbein's⁶ work on attitudes and beliefs and Vroom's⁷ on motivation are important in theory development. As Swanson⁸ noted "commitment to addressing conceptual issues may thus be read, without overstating the case too strongly, as

Lipschultz is a graduate student in the School of Journalism at Southern Illinois University. Data contained in this article were collected by graduate students in a research methods course.

one sign of the field's maturation." Refining a useful model, however, has sometimes been hampered by an ambiguity of concepts. Further, a more complete picture of the uses and gratifications paradigm may be difficult, if not impossible, without a stronger conceptualization of what avoiding mass media means to the potential user. The present study focuses on the act of using or avoiding use of newspapers.

Early work on avoidances was primarily limited to a discussion of the demographic patterns of the newspaper nonreader. Westley and Severin⁹ found that nonreaders were generally very young or old, living in rural areas, and of lower income, educational or occupational status.

A similar study a decade later¹⁰ found that the number of nonreaders appeared to be increasing, but their demographic characteristics were essentially the same. This replication study showed income and education were important variables in describing the newspaper nonreader.

Poindexter¹¹ went beyond simple demographic data analysis of the newspaper nonreader to answer: "Why don't nonreaders read newspapers?" Lack of time, use of another medium, cost and lack of interest apparently all were important in the decisions. A list of 15 avoidance items was reduced to five factors: 1) newspaper content; 2) use of other media; 3) poor eyesight; 4) bias; and 5) lack of time.

Poindexter's study identified two groups of nonreaders: typical (young or old, poor and under-educated) and

"atypical" nonreaders, those not fitting the categorical demographic definitions.

Much of the avoidance research has centered on the nonreader without relating data to that collected about readers. Analyses sometimes assume regular users of mass media do not have their own special avoidances, whether that be toward type of news stories, sections of the newspaper, or more generally toward types of mass media which may use color, pictures, the written or the spoken word.

Studying avoidances may also relate to newspaper business questions. Research on the presumed poor health of newspapers suggests it may be the psychological health rather than business health that is poor. Skylar¹² reports that the \$18 billion in annual revenues are more than radio and television combined. Yet newspaper readership has declined while magazine and paperback book sales soar.

One answer to this may be found in work done on readability. Fowler and Smith¹³ found that over time magazines appear to be easier to read than newspapers. There may be a connection between the ability to read comfortably, socialization, motivation and the significance of education as a predictor of nonreading.

The decision to read or not read a newspaper is just one decision of many about mass media use. We need to know more about whether avoiding one media leads to use of another.

Previous avoidance research fails to explain adequately the forces behind reading or not reading the newspaper.

Exploratory work on the more general issue of mass media avoidance would be helpful, especially since other media have been shown to be significant in the avoidance of the newspaper.

While Becker found avoidances are different from positive gratifications, it is hypothesized here that within a list of avoidances there will be clusters of differing motivations. In particular, these differences may be related to levels of interest. For instance, Edelstein and Larsen¹⁴ noted variations in reader intensity. Some readers were grouped and called "fans," regular, moderate or casual in a typology:

This study examines 12 avoidance related characteristics in the decision to not read a newspaper. The focus is on attitudinal rather than demographic data. It is hoped some perspective can be brought to the avoidance gratification paradigm that will suggest sophisticated questions in future research.

Methodology

Data for the study were collected as part of a more general newspaper readership survey in Carbondale, Ill., in 1985. A total of 408 persons were questioned by phone about their newspaper usage.¹⁵

Almost 15% of the sample identified themselves as not usually reading a newspaper. When asked if they had read a newspaper today, nonreaders jumped to 43%.¹⁶ Three groups were developed from the two sets of responses (nonreaders, casual readers and regular readers).

1) Nonreaders said they usually do not read a newspaper and had not read

one on the day questioned.

2) Casual readers said they usually read a newspaper but had not read one the day questioned.

3) Regular readers said they usually read a newspaper and had read one the day they were questioned.

Twelve avoidance statements were rated by the group in the sample. A three-point scale of agreement was used to determine whether the reason applied (3 = a lot, 2 = somewhat, or 1 = not at all). The questions were read:

"Here are some reasons people have given for not reading newspapers or for not reading very often. Do they apply a lot, somewhat, or not at all? One reason people have given is..."

The reasons were then listed.

- It takes too much time to read a newspaper regularly.

- Newspapers don't print much of interest to me.

- Newspapers cost more than they are worth to me.

- Newspaper stories are too one-sided and biased.

- You cannot trust what you read in most newspapers.

- Newspapers have too much advertising.

- Newspapers generally are poorly written.

- Most stories in newspapers are difficult to read.

- There is not much in newspapers that is useful to me in my daily life.

- There is too much detail in most newspaper stories.

- By the time I see a story in a newspaper, I've already heard about it

TABLE 1: Mean Scores for Nonreaders and Readers

Item	Nonreader (n=55)	Casual (n=119)	Usual (n=229)	Total	P
Radio-TV	2.44	1.90	1.99	2.02	.001
Cost	2.09	1.47	1.49	1.56	.001
Useful	2.00	1.34	1.35	1.44	.001
Time	1.84	1.61	1.32	1.48	.001
Interest	1.84	1.38	1.34	1.42	.001
Trust	1.83	1.47	1.49	1.53	.001
Ads	1.76	1.55	1.61	1.61	n.s.
Attractive*	1.76	1.50	1.51	1.54	.03
Bias	1.72	1.62	1.65	1.65	n.s.
Details	1.50	1.29	1.22	1.28	.01
Writing	1.45	1.50	1.42	1.44	n.s.
Reading	1.31	1.19	1.18	1.20	n.s.

*In all cases but the variable "attractive," a significant difference indicates there were two significant pairs of differences. The Scheffe procedure in ANOVA was used.

from radio or television.

- Most newspapers are not very attractive or easy to look at.

Analysis in this report is segmented into three stages. First, mean score ratings are compared between readers and nonreaders on the avoidance statements. Second, demographics of the subgroups are considered. Third, factor structures are developed.

Results

Analysis of variance was used to test for significant differences between readers and nonreaders on the avoidance items. Nonreaders gave significantly higher levels of agreement, indicative of a theoretically distinct group. Yet only the response "already heard on radio or television" leaned

toward strong agreement by nonreaders as a strongly held attitude.

On six of the avoidance items, nonreaders were significantly different from both groups of readers. Nonreaders were more likely to cite use of radio-TV, cost, usefulness, interest, trust and the amount of detail in the newspaper as reasons for not reading a newspaper.

On only one item, time ("*It takes too much time to read a newspaper regularly*"), casual readers were significantly different from the usual reader. The casual reader rated the avoidance statement with a significantly higher level of agreement.

On only one item, attractive ("*Most newspapers are not very attractive or easy to look at.*"), nonreaders were

significantly different from regular readers, but not from the casual reader.

So there is another aspect to the avoidance question. Avoidance, in some cases, may exist for readers, whether they are casual or regular.

In this study if a respondent reported not reading one of the two local newspapers (the *Southern Illinoisan* or the *Daily Egyptian*), then a open-ended question was asked: "Is there any special reason you do not read the _____?" Nonreader answers were quite different for each of the two papers. More than 200 responses were obtained, with multiple responses included in the descriptive analysis, (see Table 2).

Local factors may play a role in "avoiding the newspaper." In the case of the student-operated newspaper, for example, distribution free of charge eliminates cost as a factor. But, limited off-campus distribution makes availability most important.

In the case of the *Southern Illinoisan* a recent change from afternoon to morning publication was mentioned by some people as a reason for not

reading that newspaper. Fowler¹⁷ found that the newspaper reading habit may adjust over time to such a change.

Overall, interest in the content of the newspaper was a major response in this phase of the questioning. However, it is important to note that these results may be specific to the role of a campus paper in a college town. Perhaps the responses to the open-ended questions would be most useful in designing future avoidance statements.

Demographics

Past research has dealt extensively with the demographic differences between readers and nonreaders of newspapers. It has been reported that nonreaders tend to be very young or old, of lower income levels, from rural areas and with less formal education.

In the present study gender, urban/rural status, employment status and marital status were not significant in describing differences.

Education was a significant consideration and age provided limited explanatory power. Nonreaders tended to have a high school education or less,

TABLE 2: Reasons for Not Reading Local Newspapers

<i>Southern Illinoisan</i> (n=128)		<i>Daily Egyptian</i> (n=133)	
Content	24.2%	Availability	37.6%
Cost	22.7	Interest	34.6
Read other	18.7	Chance only	13.5
Morning change	3.9	Time	10.5
Availability	3.1	Other response	3.8
Other response	5.5		

TABLE 3: Years Formal Education for Readers and Nonreaders

<i>Groups^a</i>	<i>0-12 Years (n=135)</i>	<i>13-Plus Years (n=268)</i>
Nonreaders (n=55)	65.5%	34.5%
Casual Readers (n=119) ^b	26.1	73.9
Readers (n=229)	29.7	70.3

^a $\chi^2 = 30.65$; $df = 5$; $p < .01$
^bCasual readers are not significantly different from usual readers.

and were less likely to have a higher education of any kind.

The data on age are helpful in making some descriptive distinctions between readers and nonreaders of newspapers. Unlike data reported in the past, the nonreader was not very young or old, although the sum of nonreaders and casual readers yields a

group less likely to be in the older break. Casual readers tended to be younger.

In this study, age differences might be explained by relocation of younger people to a relatively isolated college town. Stamm¹⁸ considered the relationship between community ties and readership. And since other studies

TABLE 4: Respondents in Age Classifications

<i>Groups^a</i>	<i>0 to 25 (n=127)</i>	<i>26-56 (n=172)</i>	<i>57-plus (n=104)</i>
Nonreaders (n=55)	30.9%	38.2%	30.9%
Casual Readers (n=119) ^b	40.3	47.9	11.8
Readers (n=229)	27.1	41.0	31.9

^a $\chi^2 = 18.46$; 8 df ; $p < .05$
^bAge differences are the strongest support in the present study for distinguishing "casual" readers.

have found length of residence and anticipated length of stay in a locale are significant readership predictors, age might be an artifact of the Carbondale market.

Yet the results of this investigation suggest further clarification of the "non-reader" and "casual reader" is needed.

Factor Structures

In line with the goals of the present

study, a factor analysis of the variables used should help direct future researchers design avoidance statements along theoretical dimensions. This should aid in hypothesis testing.

Factor analysis¹⁹ was used to construct cognitive patterns among avoidance items for the three readership groups. In the Poindexter study previously mentioned, a five-factor solution was developed for nonreaders (con-

TABLE 5: Factor Analysis of Avoidance Statements by Groups

<i>Groups:</i>	<i>Factor 1</i>	<i>Factor 2</i>	<i>Factor 3</i>
Nonreaders*			
Interest	.65	.06	.35
Cost	.55	.26	.21
Bias	.30	.00	.75
Trust	.51	.34	.79
Writing	.29	.22	.62
Reading	.25	.95	.21
Useful	.89	.30	.45
Detail	.19	.59	.19
Radio-TV	.58	.10	.31
Attractive	.34	.31	.48
Readers**			
Interest	.61	.34	.39
Cost	.55	.27	.26
Bias	.36	.61	.31
Trust	.34	.75	.33
Writing	.30	.42	.52
Reading	.37	.31	.68
Useful	.75	.27	.41
Detail	.47	.17	.51
Radio-TV	.33	.16	.22
Attractive	.45	.21	.48

*The nonreaders solution accounts for 64% of the total variance. Within the solution, factor 1 accounts for 61%.;factor 2, 22%; and factor 3, 17%.

**The readers solution accounts for 55% of the total variance. Within the solution, factor 1 accounts for 73%; factor 2, 16% and factor 3, 11%.

tent, media, eyesight, bias and time).

The present study's avoidance items were analyzed for structure. Two items, time and advertising, did not correlate with any other item and were not included in the secondary analysis. Casual and regular readers were combined for the factor analysis.²⁰

Analysis of casual readers was not helpful and suggests that a more clearly defined concept is needed.²¹ The theoretical "casual reader" simply did not produce distinct data for purposes of interpretation. However, the statements used in the study may not have been sensitive to the potential group differences.

Nonreaders, similar to readers, displayed a clear utility factor which included interest in stories, cost of the publication, usefulness of the information and timeliness relative to radio and television reports.

A second clustering for the non-reader developed around difficulty of news stories and detail of information. The credibility questions of bias and trust were lumped with poor newspaper writing and attractiveness of the paper.

However, for readers the divisions were clear. A factor clustered about credibility, with bias of news stories and trust of information included.

Another factor for readers was evaluative in nature including difficulty of news stories to read, poor writing, detail of stories and attractiveness. This suggests readers as a group exhibit a more consistent pattern of responses to the sample of avoidance statements in this study.

Discussion

Newspaper readers and nonreaders share many perceptions about why they avoid reading. Yet we can also see that they are theoretically distinct.

There may be subtle differences between the regular and casual reader, although a different methodological design would be required to explain such subtle differences. A more sensitive instrument might suggest some of those in the casual reader group properly belong with readers, while others may properly group with nonreaders.

Beyond the significant differences in amounts of formal education and age, demographics were not very useful in highlighting the differences between readers and nonreaders.

It is possible that some of the significant differences described in past work may be impacted by demographic changes over time. Lifestyles have also changed during the last three decades. Television news viewing, fewer afternoon newspapers and changes to morning publication may be important in understanding nonreaders.

In the context of Stamm's observations on community and communication, mobility and ties to place may be important. Length of stay in a community and anticipated longevity can be used as variables to predict media use.

Attitude studies, such as the present effort, operate at the individual level of analysis. Yet many of the answers being sought are ultimately societal in nature. And the lack of data over long

periods of time limit the ability to draw causal inferences.

Factor structures suggest that different patterns of cognition exist for readers and nonreaders. Both groups share common but not identical structures on utility items. Psychological data might help explain the motivations behind reading or not reading the newspaper. The factor structures here suggest perceptions of newspapers by nonreaders are not as clear as those by readers.

Past conceptualization of the "atypical" nonreader is not clear, and more work needs to be done to define and refine the group. As Becker has said, avoidance gratifications appear to be neither mirror-opposites nor separate factors.

When respondents agree, "It takes too much time to read a newspaper," are they indicating a function of their activity or are they really saying there is nothing in the paper worth their time relative to other activities? The answer to this question is important for understanding differences between casual and regular readers, if there are any differences.

Admittedly, one of the weaknesses in this type of research has been the problem of clearly defining the concepts of "readers" and "nonreaders." It may be more a case of levels of media use which could be discovered through more intensive questioning.

Janowitz,²² for example, as early as the 1950s developed a typology using levels of exposure and involvement to develop a readership index. Nonreaders, low on both exposure and

involvement, accounted for 16% of the sample. "Partial readers," average on exposure and involvement, accounted for 33% of the sample. This group was distinguished from regular readers (40%) by high levels of exposure, yet only average involvement. And "fans" (11%) were high on both involvement and exposure. This typology should be used to test a list of avoidance statements.

The conceptualization of a "casual" (partial?) reader poses other problems. One is a measurement problem of determining how to quantify newspaper readership. Number of days per week of reading, number of papers read, number of stories read, type of stories read, recall ability and long-term memory of content all may be useful in developing stronger measurement tools.

There might also be a group of "heavy" readers (fans?) displaying different patterns from regular readers. It is clear that simple use of "reader" compared to "nonreader" is not adequate for future research on avoidance.

Clarification of the meaning of "avoidances" would also be helpful. Factors, such as utility, credibility and physical description of newspapers should be applied to design research to probe more deeply.

It is difficult to imagine uses and gratifications research progressing substantially without a more developed conceptualization of avoidance gratification.

It seems clear that the area of avoidance is worth more attention by scholars than has been given pre-

viously. More sophisticated research might well yield a better understanding of the motivations – both reward and punishment – involved in mass media

use in general. This should provide greater insight into why people read or do not read newspapers.

NOTES

1. Jay G. Blumler and Elihu Katz (eds.), *The Uses of Mass Communications: Current Perspectives on Gratifications Research*, (Beverly Hills: SAGE, 1974).
2. Lee Becker, "Measurement of Gratifications," *Communication Research*, (1979), 6:54-73.
3. Philip Palmgreen and J.D. Rayburn II, "Merging Uses and Gratifications and Expectancy-Value Theory," *Communication Research*, (1984), 11:537-62.
4. Lawrence Wenner, "Gratifications Sought and Obtained in Program Dependency: A Study of Network Evening News Programs and 60 Minutes," *Communication Research*, (1983), 9:539-60.
5. Jack M. McLeod, Carl R. Bybee and Jean A. Durall, "Evaluating Media Performance by Gratifications Sought and Received," *Journalism Quarterly*, (1982), 59:3-12, 59.
6. M. Fishbein, "An investigation of the relationships between beliefs about an object and the attitude toward that object," *Human Relations*, (1963), 16:233-40.
7. V.H. Vroom, *Work and Motivation*, (New York: John Wiley, 1964).
8. David L. Swanson, "The Continuing Evolution of the Uses and Gratifications Approach," *Communication Research*, (1979), 6:3-7.
9. Bruce H. Westley and Werner J. Severin, "A Profile of the Daily Newspaper Non-Reader," *Journalism Quarterly*, (1964), 41:45-50, 156.
10. Jeanne Penrose, David H. Weaver, Richard R. Cole and Donald L. Shaw, "The Newspaper Non-Reader 10 Years Later: A Partial Replication of Westley-Severin," *Journalism Quarterly*, (1974), 51:631-38.
11. Paula Poindexter, "Daily Newspaper Non-Readers: Why they don't read?" *Journalism Quarterly*, (1979), 54:764-70.
12. David Skylar, "Why Newspapers Die," *The Quill*, (July-August 1984), 12-16.
13. Gilbert L. Fowler and Edward J. Smith, "Readability of Newspapers and Magazines Over Time," *Newspaper Research Journal*, (1979), 1:3-8.
14. Alex Edelstein and Otto Larsen, "The Weekly Press' Contribution To a Sense of Urban Community," *Journalism Quarterly*, (1960), 37:489-98.
15. Data were collected by a group of graduate students in a research methods course at Southern Illinois University under the direction of Dr. L. Erwin Atwood. The data on avoidances in this study are a small part of a broader survey on newspaper uses in the Carbondale area.
16. All calling was done during the after dinner hours. Use of "today" was not expected to cause a problem since both local newspapers are morning publications.
17. Gilbert L. Fowler, "An Examination of Readership Changes: Does Altering Publication Time Affect the

Reading Habit?" *Newspaper Research Journal*, (1985), 7:37-44. Unfortunately, no data were collected on the change in Carbondale.

18. Keith R. Stamm, *Newspaper Use and Community Ties*, (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1985).

19. A rotated oblique solution was obtained using SPSS. Correlations between factors one and two were -.47, one and three .48, and two and three .42. The results were not statistically significant. The solution provided is orthogonal in nature.

20. Only by combining casual readers

with the larger group of readers could a comparative analysis be conducted. The results do not provide insight into whether there are differences between readers with different habits of reading. 21. Analysis of casual readers yielded a one-factor solution based upon an Eigenvalue of 1.00 or greater. The variables of usefulness, interest, details and cost explained 57% of the variance.

22. Morris Janowitz, *The Community Press in an Urban Setting*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952, 1967).