

Gerald Stone

**EXAMINING
NEWSPAPERS**

What Research Reveals
About
America's Newspapers

The SAGE COMMTEXT Series

EXAMINING NEWSPAPERS

The SAGE CommTEXT Series

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*This book is dedicated to
Leonard and Adele Stone,
loving parents.*

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INTRODUCTION

Without the benefit of research, the presses would still turn and the newspaper still publish. But what lands on the reader's front porch is all the better for research of the quality available today. This book furnishes a useful guide to current research.

Given the pace of life on a newspaper, making decisions on the basis of gut instinct is faster, certainly. And research often frustrates us by only confirming what already can be guessed. Of course that can be useful as well. What research provides is invaluable for moving decisions with big price tags off dead center and for generating a consensus among people—colleagues or customers—with diverse opinions. I can think of no area of newspapers that cannot benefit from the combination of competent research and intelligent application of the findings.

With the current and growing fragmentation of the media, particularly television, with more than 4 of 10 American homes already hooked up to cable, with more than one-third of all American households having videocassette recorders, with 11,000 different magazine titles being published in the United States, newspapers hunger for what research can tell them about being relevant to their audience and about competing successfully for people's time and dollars. We want to know who our readers are, and who they are not, what they like and do not like about us, what they rely on us for, how and when and where they read the paper, and how they use and regard newspapers compared to other media. We want to know whether we are using news space effectively: Should we change the mix of local, national, international, sports, and business news? Does anybody read the bridge column? Do they prefer our comics section or *The Other Paper's*? Would readers be interested in a weekly science section? In the hands of savvy editors, information of this sort can reinvigorate a newspaper and help them reach new audiences.

Although it is beyond the scope of Professor Stone's book, it is worth mentioning that these same sorts of research techniques have an even more direct bearing on content when the newsroom uses them to add substance and support to articles about problems, trends, or attitudes

that would otherwise be difficult to quantify. For example, postelection polling in November 1986 revealed that race played an important role in the overwhelming defeat of Republican William Lucas's campaign to become Michigan's first black governor. Research also provided the backbone for two *Free Press* series examining the city of Detroit's image problem—one showing how the rest of the county views Detroit, one telling Detroiters how they view themselves.

Research plays a key role in other areas of the newspaper as well. Some examples:

Advertising—Research allows our sales representatives to show advertisers how their customer profile matches that of our readers as well as that of the readers and viewers of competing media.

Circulation—We learned what types of circulation discount offers were most effective and how long we were likely to retain a customer who signs up for a discounted subscription.

Production—We evaluated the impact on circulation of giving out-of-state customers papers with later news and sports, yet delivered at the accustomed time.

As the first chapter indicates, much of newspaper research is proprietary since it has been funded by individual newspapers or newspaper groups for the purpose of enhancing their own viability. Nevertheless as someone who has initiated and read the results of a considerable number of such research projects, I can tell you that what you will read in this book about the highlights of recent research on newspaper content and reader habits echoes generally much of what you might read in private research keyed to a specific city or publication. For that reason, this book will be a handy compendium for the editor who wants to gauge quickly whether any research exists to support an impending decision. Another section newspaper practitioners will find interesting and useful is the information about newsroom demographics.

For students, the sections on how newsrooms are organized and how content decisions are made can provide starting places, at least, for learning more about newspapers, although I caution against accepting any generalizations about newsrooms. They are all so very different. Newspapers' individuality and lack of conformity are, after all, part of why they are fascinating to study as well as to read.

—David Lawrence, Jr.
Publisher, Detroit *Free Press*

USING THE TEXT

Of course the subtitle is an exaggeration. No single volume could begin to contain the totality "What Research Reveals About America's Newspapers." A better subtitle might be "Some Findings from Some Research Studies on Some Topics Related to Newspapers." And the addendum might be "As Selected, Synthesized, and Interpreted by One Writer in the Mid-1980s." However, the square inches of book covers have limitations similar to those inflicted by the number of pages between the covers. Readers will recognize these limitations as the author openly admits them.

Still, the book is an attempt to present part of the body of knowledge gained over the years about newspapers and the newspaper industry. It is intended for students of journalism and communication as well as industry practitioners who might find the book useful as a single source covering a variety of topics—all related to how newspapers gather, write, edit, and disseminate information and how readers use newspapers. For instance, the author receives inquiries from industry practitioners nearly every month that go something like this: "I've been asked to speak at an international convention about trends in newspaper page design and the use of pictures. Where can I find some research on that topic? The speech is next week."

Three things are obvious: The speaker is already a recognized industry authority on design and photos, so the speech will go well regardless of whether it includes an overview of research on the topic; the speaker doesn't know a source from which to begin gathering research findings on his or her own field of expertise; and there's little hope of making the deadline. This text could help that speaker prepare his or her remarks—at least the next time such a speech is requested.

On the other hand, a recent inquiry was "I'm supposed to speak on newspaper special sections next week. Do you know of any research on special topic supplements or special sections newspapers occasionally publish?" Here the industry professional will get little assistance because the topic is not included in this text. Although special issues certainly deserve some research attention, they haven't been a popular research

topic to date. Space limitations have resulted in many such omissions, a regrettable but necessary outcome of any selection process.

A primary audience for this text is the student who seeks a broad overview of the newspaper research field. This reader will find limitations as well, but should gain substantial insight about the major themes of research on the newspaper industry and some outcomes of investigations on those themes. References at the end of each chapter will lead a student to further readings on a specific interest.

Newspaper practitioners—those who are yet to be invited to deliver major presentations on their field of expertise—should also find this text useful. As a compilation, it is a single source with abundant information arranged in industry specialty areas: Reporters can learn what the research has provided about sources and writing a news article; editors can learn about broad categories of newspaper content and how audiences use the information newspapers provide.

The text also serves as a compendium of newspaper research findings for industry and academic researchers—a starting point from which to launch their own investigations.

In all, then, this text is intended as a map of newspaper research. To the extent it serves that purpose, it has reached its goal. As a synthesis of newspaper research, an effort has been made to provide outcomes substantiated by the bulk of findings on a range of topics. From those whose research has centered on the more controversial topics (Are newspaper groups a blessing or an evil?), the author asks temperance on the interpretations he has drawn. From those whose worthy research has been inadvertently omitted, the author asks understanding. It is an oversight.

—*Gerald C. Stone*
Memphis, Tennessee

WHAT HAS BEEN WRITTEN AND WHY

Research on newspapers mirrors the lengthy development of inquiry into the mass communication process generally with the exception that it focuses on a competitive industry involved in news and information dissemination.

In a profit-making industry much work is initiated, carried out, and reported under highly competitive conditions; hence much of it is never reported at all. Newspapers are born and exist in continual competitiveness. They compete against other papers—both daily and weekly papers, paid and freely circulated—mail circulars, magazines, billboards, the broadcast media, and cable. Continued survival often demands a cloak of secrecy about every tidbit of information regarding the newspaper's position in its market. Right or wrong, most individual newspapers and groups have subscribed to this view of fierce competition. Consequently, individual newspapers have retained a competitive edge that has kept them healthy, or at least alive. However, more evident today is the restricted growth of a body of knowledge about the newspaper industry (Hynds, 1975).

PROPRIETARY VERSUS PUBLIC RESEARCH

Two major types of research deal with the newspaper industry: (1) "public" research by newspaper organizations and independent scholars and (2) "proprietary" research by individual newspapers and the firms they hire. Studies in the former group are often fragmented. They follow the researchers' special interests or timely fads (Stamm, 1985; American Society of Newspaper Editors, 1985). The extent and quality of the latter group are a matter of speculation since the material simply is not available for perusal, although there has been some recent insight offered through computer banks of proprietary research (Einsiedel, 1983; see also Mohn, 1982).

Proprietary research has been extensive and perhaps more edifying (at least to industry practitioners who order it) than public research

since it is more lavishly funded and often continuing. Commercial research firms contracted by individual newspapers often do major update studies of the local market annually. Some of these firms are Belden Associates; Market Opinion Research; Clarke, Matire & Bartolomeo; and MORI Research. Additionally, large newspaper groups, such as Gannett, Knight-Ridder, Times-Mirror, and Media General, conduct extensive proprietary research programs throughout the year. Occasionally the methodological approaches used are shared openly at meetings of the Newspaper Research Council. More often, both the research approaches and the results remain part of the private domain of the funding organization. An inkling of the extent of this proprietary research is suggested by the kinds of known studies.

- (1) a massive computer bank of new themes compiled through a sophisticated, daily content analysis of a major metropolitan paper to enable prediction of what kinds of automobiles purchasers would want five years later
- (2) a factor-analysis project that determined the relative importance of some dozen elements responsible for street sales of a major daily (Meyer, 1980)
- (3) use of the Lusher Color Test to determine how people of different personalities select among newspapers
- (4) identification of life-style types that contribute to readership patterns (Bryant, 1976)
- (5) annual lists of averaged financial statement information on daily newspapers by circulation categories (Inland Press Association)

These are only some of the innovative approaches that have come to light, usually long after being developed by the private firms. Most of these research approaches are still not available for public scrutiny.

Fortunately, what is available for study does provide a substantial and valuable body of knowledge about newspapers. It includes: (1) cooperative research by organizations such as the Newspaper Advertising Bureau (NAB), the American Newspaper Publishers Association (ANPA), and others; (2) academic research available in scholarly publications such as *Journalism Quarterly*, *Newspaper Research Journal*, and others; (3) books and reports by both academic and industry scholars; and (4) special investigations funded by newspaper groups and foundations that receive attention in industry periodicals.

WHY NEWSPAPERS?

In spite of the newspaper industry's competitive nature, there is a surprisingly rich field of available research on this mass medium. Actu-

ally, relatively sophisticated research reports on the industry can be found prior to 1920 (Rogers, 1918). Using even the early 1950s as a starting point provides enough history of research on the newspaper industry in the United States.

Newspapers have been the focus of mass media research for a variety of reasons. Among them are the following: (1) They were the single dominant news medium for much of the twentieth century; (2) their content was easily accessed for study purposes, as opposed to the content of the film and broadcast media; (3) the professional background of mass media scholars during most of the twentieth century was more likely to have been in newspapering; (4) journalism schools were dominated by newspaper curricula through the 1960s; (5) the industry had funds for market research; and (6) there was more organization in the newspaper industry, which had developed a variety of press associations and newspaper groups capable of pooling funds for some research purposes.

Of these reasons, the binding thread is the newspaper industry's long domination of the mass field. Early editions of *Journalism Quarterly*, mass media's earliest continuing scholarly journal, confirm an overwhelming representation of topics related to newspapers.

Newspapers have possibly the widest variety of research needs among the mass media. Publishing a newspaper requires knowledge about information gathering, writing and editing news and opinion, graphics and design, advertising sales and design, circulation promotion, newsroom management, employee relations, printing, technological developments, distribution, maintaining market share, and, most importantly, audience effects. This industry's range of research needs is equivalent to that of the manufacture and sale of durable goods and one of the nation's major social institutions combined.

PATTERNS OF SCHOLARLY RESEARCH THEMES

Newspaper research is in an infancy stage compared with other social sciences. While studying newspapers follows the general pattern of other social science research, it is compressed into fewer decades.

The earliest studies were press criticism, a tradition of research through essays on one or more aspects of the field. The tradition continues (Crouse, 1973). In the late 1800s and early 1900s, writing appeared to follow the "great man" style of historic study. This is still a popular approach (Halberstam, 1979). However, newspaper

research was quick to apply more scientific social research tools and techniques. Even as it was being brought to its contemporary sophistication, newspaper research experimented with statistics and survey methods (Schramm, 1963). In fact, newspaper research used content analysis as a staple very early in its history (Berelson, 1952).

The patterns of scholarly research themes on newspapers follow the general outline of:

- (1) What is right or wrong about how the newspaper industry operates; particularly is the content of newspapers serving the public?
- (2) Which are the important newspapers and who are (or were) the key figures guiding them?
- (3) How are the various departments of newspapers managed?
- (4) How are news articles produced?
- (5) What happens in the newspaper's internal selection process and what effect does that process have on the content of papers?
- (6) What major news topics are covered in newspapers?
- (7) Who does and does not read newspapers?
- (8) Can principles be found that will provide the optimum quality, circulation, or income for newspapers?
- (9) What is the newspaper's market position relative to other mass media?
- (10) What effect does newspaper content have on audiences?
- (11) Are there broad principles that explain individuals' or audiences' involvement with newspapers?

These themes overlap considerably. The list is not a distinct chronological presentation, although an attempt has been made to place the themes on a time continuum. Sadly, some of the more widely researched themes are not necessarily the most important, and the outcomes of several are no longer valid due to changes within the industry or society. Finally, some themes have been researched without great success. For example, while the audience for newspapers has been explicitly identified, for most practical purposes, the few attempts to derive broad principles about how audiences interact with the media have been disappointing.

One of the goals of this overview of research about newspapers is to discriminate between *knowledge* and *speculation*. In this case, *knowledge* is based on substantial research undertakings (or several lesser studies that together derive the same results), rigorously controlled and completed under conditions that may be assumed still to prevail. For instance, even a major study of how people rely on newspapers for public affairs information should be viewed with skepticism if completed before the advent of television in the early 1950s.