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The road to “reader-friendly”: US newspapers and readership in the late twentieth century

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Abstract: Readership has always been a necessary element in news transmission, but it took on added importance with journalism's widespread commercialization in the 1800s. It became an increasingly urgent issue, particularly for US newspapers, toward the end of the twentieth century. Readership was unexpectedly in steady decline and the cause didn't appear to be clearly identifiable. As readers left, the print industry pulled together to find out why—and to strategize, collaboratively, on ways to win readers back, keep the ones they still had, and attract new ones. A key focus became making content “reader-friendly.” This paper delves deep into some of the dynamics and outcomes of that time. Newspaper readership continues to decline in the early part of the twenty-first century, but readership online is on the rise. The study suggests that readership itself may not have been the problem; newspaper readership was.

Subjects: Journalism; Journalism & Professional Media; Journalism History; Media Communication; Media, Information & Communication Industries; Press & Journalism

Keywords: readership; newspapers; reader-friendly; journalism

1. Introduction

Whether to make money, wield influence, right wrongs, record, inform, or stir opinion and discussion, newspapers have always sought readers—and rarely, if ever, with more focus than in the latter years of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first century. US newspaper history from the rise of the penny press in the 1830s includes iconic images of newsboys hawking papers on street corners, attracting readers with noise, headlines, and stories while luring customers away

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Leslie-Jean Thornton is a former US newspaper journalist whose interest in “bigger pictures” led her to doctoral work and a Freedom Forum fellowship at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Dr Thornton is currently an associate professor at Arizona State University's Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication. “The road to “reader-friendly”” grew from curiosity over how and why newsroom topic teams (groups of journalists assigned to take team approaches to coverage) were formed. She is particularly interested in the intersections of professional and scholarly journalism perspectives, how professional practices change in the context of technological and social developments, social media, and the visual communication of information. On Twitter and Instagram, she is @ljthornton.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Newspapers in the US have lost popularity as print publications for decades, but the work produced by newspaper-employed journalists is still vital whether you hold it in your hands or view it on a screen. Newspapers are no longer published solely in print; some have transitioned to being wholly digital. Decisions made when they were distributed only on paper, however, continue to shape how news is covered today. In the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s, as explored in this paper, important industry-backed research drew conclusions as to the best ways to reach readers. Among the suggestions were to group coverage into topics and to prioritize popular subjects. This alone has significance in terms of public service, professional norms, and issues of civic and social literacy.

from the competition (Schudson, 1978). For decades, it was paper against paper. However, as concentrated ownership patterns resulted in less direct competition, as technology brought more options for advertisers and readers, as US settlement patterns shifted from cities to suburbs and as the country's population grew ever bigger, older, and more racially and ethnically diverse (Shrestha & Heisler, 2011), newspapers looked for ways to prosper as an industry. An early collaborative focus was on readership, as evidenced by the American Newspaper Publishers Association studies of newspaper audiences from 1939 to 1941 (Sikes, 1942).

Declines in US newspaper readership, beginning mid-twentieth century, brought increasing urgency to industry research efforts. Although there were already many scholarly studies focused on multiple aspects of readership (Lain, 1986), few working journalists were likely to know about them or extend them credence if they did (Bogart, 1991). Relations between newsroom journalists and journalism scholars/teachers who increasingly lacked newsroom experience were difficult, often hostile (Wicklein, 1994). Scholars who hadn't worked as journalists were characterized, by journalists, as producing esoteric studies for "tiddly-wink academic games" (p. 46), for example. Their quantitative methodology was distrusted, seen as irrelevant in focus and design by journalists of that time, but seemingly valued to the point of "methodological fascism" by research journals (pp. 47–48). Given that climate, professionals and the industry organizations that represented them were more likely to trust their own research, or at least research undertaken at their behest, than advice that came solely from academia. The ANPA research projects from 1939 to 1941 began a small collection of industry-aligned studies that caught the attention and participation of US newspaper journalists during the middle and latter parts of the twentieth century. As will be shown, they employed both quantitative and qualitative methodology, and were driven by pragmatic concerns: developing strategies to acquire or keep readership that was economically desirable.

During the last two decades of the twentieth century, efforts to win and keep readers by providing easily accessible, reader-driven content became known as "reader-friendly" journalism. It was a practice that drew advocates and detractors, and it had widespread ramifications. This historical narrative links and explores key developments in industry–research collaborations to show how the "reader-friendly" concept came about and how it stood to affect US newspaper journalism in the 2000s. In 2016, as this is currently observed, "reader-friendly" is no longer the catchphrase, but the concept is in many ways an antecedent to the way content is valued in an increasingly digital distribution system where search engine optimization shapes how news is presented, and clicks and likes define what readers like and get (Batsell, 2015; Usher, 2010). This study explores how a focus on "reader-friendly" came about, and how certain strategic choices related to readership affected some US newsroom practices during a formative time in the US newspaper history (Shepard, 1998; Stepp, 2000). It draws on key industry studies, organizational records (such as the proceedings of the American Society of Newspaper Editors), and contemporary reports and analyses to provide an account both descriptive and contextual. Of those research initiatives, three appear to have had the most impact on the industry in terms of what content was presented, how it was gathered, and why, which were my research goals. ASNE's Newspaper Readership Project, a six-year effort, began in 1977. *Keys to our Survival*, a joint project of ASNE and MORI Research, was released in 1991. Information from Gannett's ongoing research was proprietary, but the rippling effects of *USA Today's* launch in 1982 and much of the research leading up to it are well documented (McCartney, 1997; Prichard, 1987).

1.1. By the numbers

Although readership and circulation are not synonymous, they are closely related when speaking about print newspapers. Circulation figures are measurable; they are used in estimating readership, which is generally calculated as the total circulation multiplied by the average number of people who will read each issue, or is established by survey. After World War II, US newspaper circulation rose along with the country's population, but it stabilized in the 1970s, hovering around 62 million.

Since 1987, circulation has been in steady decline. Between 1990 and 2002, reflecting years within the scope of this study, circulation dropped roughly 1% a year for a 11% decline over 12 years (Newspapers, 2004).

The overall circulation of newspapers in the US reached its zenith in 1987 with 62.8 million subscribers, but that gives an overly positive view of newspaper readership at that time. Another measure, penetration, takes into account the percent of the population that either buys or reads the publication, and is usually defined by comparing the number of copies sold to the number of households in the circulation area. If circulation stays the same but the population increases, readership is presumed to have weakened and the unmet potential for sales to have grown. In 1950, household penetration by daily newspapers nationwide was 123%.¹ By 1990, 67% of households bought a paper. Penetration was down to 53% by 2000 (U.S. Census, 2000).²

Sunday papers have a different record. Perhaps it was more a part of the culture, or the content was different enough to make a difference in sales. Sunday sales remained stronger than dailies' for a longer time, and Sunday readership at the end of the century still carried a "disproportionate impact" on the industry (Barringer, 2000), grossing in the late 1990s some 40–50% of revenue (Mogel, 2000). The post-World War II surge in Sunday publication—not of accompanying magazines, which were separate entities and fared differently, but the actual paper in a Sunday incarnation—countered the decline in the total number of newspapers. In 1950, there were 1,772 dailies and 549 Sunday papers. By 1998, there were 1,489 dailies and 897 Sunday papers. From 1950 to 1995, Sunday circulation increased 32.6% (Picard & Brody, 1996, p. 20) with a circulation high of 62.6 million in 1993, dropping to 60.1 million in 1998. Daily papers had a circulation of 56.2 million at that time (Cranberg, Bezanson, & Soloski, 2001; pp. 20–23). By 2002, Sunday circulation had dropped to 58.8 million (Editor & Publisher Yearbook Online Data, 1940–2003, n.d.). For print journalists, the Sunday paper was a showcase where one's "best" work, whether defined by writing, depth, or appeal, found the biggest audience. For them, the best showcase was foundering. No other format equaled it in scope or accepted practice.

Newspaper forays onto the Internet were just beginning in the late 1990s with widely varying representations online (Dans, 2000). This study focuses on the time leading up to the early twenty-first century when digital presence became a major new platform focus for news organizations, particularly newspapers (Li, 2006; Thornton & Keith, 2009). In the latter part of the twentieth century, print newspapers were grappling with how to keep readers and it was affecting their everyday practice. In 1991, at the annual ASNE convention, Wayne Ezell (editor of the Gannett-owned *Boca Raton* (Fla.) *News*, described his newsroom's efforts to address issues flagged by the Keys project. "As we changed the newspaper in major ways," he said, "everybody in the newsroom had to think of readers in a different way, and to think more reader-driven in terms of the stories they wrote" (ASNE, 1992, p. 85).

1.2. Readership studies, 1978–1991

It was easy to follow numbers and see what sold when; it was far more difficult to find out why papers sold—when they did. Inability to break the code wasn't then (and isn't now) from lack of effort. Both the newspaper and advertising industries, separately and collaboratively, made numerous attempts to harness readership by finding out what readers want. Their research methods included telephone surveys, call-in polls, focus groups, in-person queries, mail surveys, and clip-out/mail-back coupons (Beam, 1995, p. 37).

Editors and publishers of the 1980s and 1990s implemented and inherited content changes resulting from consultant Ruth Clark's early work for ASNE, the American Society of Newspaper Editors (Freeman, 1997).³ Part of the first research to be fully funded by the newspaper industry, "Changing Needs of Changing Readers" was widely circulated after its completion in 1978; 5,000 copies were distributed to the ANPA,⁴ the NAB,⁵ the ASNE, the APME,⁶ the National Conference of Editorial Writers, the Newspaper Research Council, and the Canadian Daily Newspaper Publishers Association (Bogart,

1991, p. 138). Based on focus-group findings in 12 cities (10 participants per panel) and a series of “communication labs,” Clark told editors that newspaper content should be more useful, more entertaining, “more caring, more warmly human, less anonymous” (Meyer, 2004b, p. 128; Bogart, 1991, p. 140).

Some researchers saw deep flaws in her work, arguing the findings were not generalizable (due to what they saw as insufficient data and unsuitable sampling methodology) and the results superficial. Chief among the critics was sociologist Leo Bogart, who was directing a large-scale quantitative readership study funded by ASNE, ANPA, and NAB at the same time. Both Bogart’s and Clark’s studies were part of the Newspaper Readership Project, a three- (that later grew to six-) year initiative launched by ASNE in 1977. A number of agencies did work for the project. Bogart’s statistical survey, released concurrently with Clark’s findings, contradicted Clark’s. Readers were clear in their preference for hard news, he found.

1.2.1. *Soft, not hard, is heard*

Clark’s work carried more weight with working journalists, however. *Changing Needs* had “an electrifying effect on the news business,” Lee Stinnett, ASNE executive editor, said when asked for a comment for Clark’s *New York Times* obituary in 1997. “She may have changed newspapers more than anybody else in this century,” wrote Reese Cleghorn (1997), former president of the *American Journalism Review* and ex-dean of the University of Maryland’s College of Journalism. Several factors appear to have been in play. Clark, an executive with the well-regarded Yankelovich, Skelly and White research firm, involved editors from the start, letting them sit in on focus-group sessions. She presented the results in the clear, newspaper-oriented language that had made her popular as a consultant for proprietary newspaper research for years before the ASNE study.⁷ A qualitative researcher, she used words, not statistics, to get her points across.⁸ It was “research that editors could understand and control, in contrast to the studies that they saw being imposed upon them by an alien force, the Newspaper Advertising Bureau,” wrote Bogart (1991), who was then general manager of the alien force (See also Gyles, 1998, p. 24). In Bogart’s memoir of the project, he recalled that ASNE’s project director, retired *Charlotte Observer* editor C.A. (Pete) McKnight, attended five focus sessions, “which made her recommendations aces high with him.” It was presumably easier to extend credibility to a process one had experienced than to a pile of spreadsheets.

Unfortunately, the message of the research seems to have been misconstrued, possibly because it was reported without sufficient context. Editors reacted as if it were a clarion call to “soft” news; the catch phrase “News You Can Use” caught on as a sound bite explanation of what should be published. Some editors then carried out their own informal (and non-scientific) research forays into what readers wanted and generally found their impressions confirmed. Philip Meyer (1985), who pioneered newsroom use of computer-assisted research and was at the time a research consultant for Knight-Ridder, feels they were ill served:

These editors took off in pursuit of soft content and service features with such enthusiasm that they sacrificed traditional hard news content to make room for stories about how to paint your kitchen yellow and the like. None of the data ... say that you can do that and get away with it. Indeed, their message is quite the contrary: hard news works, and you cut it back at your peril. ... The prudent editor will find a way to try new things without cannibalizing the very categories that do the most for readership as identified by the formal model. (pp. 45–46)

Cleghorn commented that Clark’s “most influential report on newspapers may have resulted in more harm than good. That was not her fault. When editors heard her message, they took it out the window” (1997, p. 4). It was, he said, a turning point—the first popular transformation of editors into marketers in the current sense of the word. It is here that we begin to see widespread interest in altering the news mix, expanding local beats, diminishing non-local news coverage, and reinforcing the “me me me” orientation of the reader. “Local, local, local” read a bumper sticker distributed by

Gannett⁹ marketers in the 1980s. “Our strategy is local, local, local,” reiterated Gannett CEO Douglas McCorkindale (2005) at a corporate lunch for media and entertainment analysts in March 2005. The push to make readers find stories personally relevant was open to wide interpretation, as later developments made clear.

But in 1978, at the Cape Cod meeting where Clark and Bogart informally announced their research results, the newspaper industry was faced with two conflicting reports: hard news vs. soft. It went with soft, to an extent that evidently surprised and discomfited Clark herself. Her second report, released in 1983 and based on focus groups as well as a 1,300-person survey, contradicted her earlier findings. “More hard news” was the message.

In 1989, ANPA declared at a circulation and readership conference, “Keys to Success,” that 15 years of effort had failed to stop the slide. “What was required, speaker after speaker said, was nothing short of a fixation on what readers want: in short, a newspaper that is relevant, useful, accessible and provides impeccable customer service” (Bagby, 1991, p. 22).

1.3. Key topics

“Keys to Our Survival,” from a joint project of the ASNE Readership and Research and Future of Newspapers committees conducted by MORI Research, was released in 1991.¹⁰ It identified four, but targeted two, kinds of readers: those considered “at risk” of being lost (13%) and those who were potential converts (13%). They had several traits in common (including that the majority of both groups was under 35), but were more dissimilar than alike. The typical potential reader was “seriously interested in events, hard news.” The typical at-risk reader “wants news presented quickly, easy and fun.” The problem: “The future of daily newspapers as a mass medium may depend on our ability to capture two kinds of readers who don’t feel a strong commitment to the kinds of newspapers we now are producing,” summarized Kris McGrath of MORI. A further problem: quick, easy, and fun news is not serious, not “hard” news. How to please both kinds of readers in the same publication? Would that content please the 55% who were loyal readers? Nineteen percent of the population was classed as either poor prospect or non-reader. Editors and publishers were faced with a conundrum. Assuming one kept the loyal readers and didn’t care about the poor prospects, logic would dictate going after the largest of the two crucial market segments. With both at-risks and potentials accounting for 13% of the population, however, the choice could not be made by the numbers; some other criteria had to be called into play.

“Keys” respondents had been asked to rate their interest in each of 33 topics. Eleven of the content categories were chosen by at least 40% of the respondents. From the strongest to the weakest, they were: your own city or town; your neighborhood; national news; your region; state news; health and health care; crime news; international news; news that’s helpful with everyday living; TV listings and program information; and advertising for stores you shop.

1.3.1. News topic clusters

More helpful than ratings, the report said, was looking at related topics as clusters for “packaging and promoting news and feature content.”

If topics that have common interest are grouped together in the newspaper, readers who have an interest in those topics can be made more aware of their coverage. Packaging topics this way can create an impression of increased coverage of “my interests” even though the actual news space devoted to coverage of the topics has not increased. Grouping related topics also makes newspapers more time-efficient for readers. (Keys to Our Survival, 1991, pp. 9–11)

From the list of 33 options, 7 “news topic clusters” were identified: parenting and personal concerns; daily home life; sports; hard news; leisure; area news; and money. The clusters were broken down into types of news. “Daily home life,” for example, included food, food buying, and recipes; advertising for stores you shop; fashion; TV listings and program information; health and health care;

news that's helpful with everyday living; and home remodeling and decorating. "Hard news" comprised international news; national news; state news; and science and technology (Keys, p.10).

These topic clusters are closely related to the topics some innovative newspapers chose in designing issue-oriented teams as the basis of their newsroom organization. *The Orange County Register's* shopping mall reporter was part of the Southern California Culture team, for example. Another *Register* team was "The Way We Live." "Passages," "Quality of Life," "Community Roots," "Leisure," "Transactions," "City Life," and "Governance" were the topic clusters (in the beginning, they called them "circles") chosen by *The State* in Columbia, South Carolina, in its January 1992 newsroom reorganization. The Quality of Life team covered issues that included crime, housing, health, food/nutrition, and the environment (Johnson, 1993). Other papers selected similarly broad concepts around which to build teams.

In 1995, the publisher of *The Miami Herald* told his staff that the paper was to "focus its newsroom resources on nine subject areas that readers have told us are especially important and useful." They were: local government, education, sports, environment, consumer news, Florida news, health and medicine, Latin America and crime. "Sorry, Mr. Perot," observed Glaberson (1995, p. D7) in his article for *The New York Times*. "The Presidential race didn't make the cut." *The Herald's* chief political writer, Tom Fiedler, said he thought "the net effect of this is a lot of head scratching in the newsroom." Joining national politics as missing topics, staffers noted, were religion, economics, investigative reporting, and world affairs.

Joseph Angotti, a former NBC news executive, expressed a concern many held about editors seemingly abdicating responsibility for deciding what news needed to be covered in favor of news that surveys said people wanted. Would reader research have provoked coverage of the civil rights movement? "I think one of the problems with *The Herald*—and with a lot of newspapers—is they pay too much attention to focus groups," he said" (Glaberson, 1995, p. D7).

1.4. Newspapers losing women, young people

Fewer women were reading the paper, and that was of major concern in terms of advertising. Worse, though, was that young readers were becoming ever scarcer, which presented a more complex problem. "We are having a hell of a time catching people young enough," said James Squires, editor of the *Chicago Tribune*. "We have been predicting...that our readers are going to die and we won't have any to replace them" (Shaw, 1989, p. A1).

Various surveys agreed: while there was little difference by age as to who read newspapers in 1970, there was a big difference by the start of the 1990s. By 1991, 69% of 45–65-year olds reported reading a newspaper "yesterday" (a standard poll question to reveal readership), while 53% of 18–24-year olds replied the same way, according to NAB research. Simmons Market Research Bureau recorded a drop of 20% in "yesterday" reading by 18–24-year olds between 1967 and 1987 (Thurlow & Milo, 1993, pp. 34–35). And, while education and income correlates positively overall with newspaper readership, that was not the case for younger readers. The once-young Baby Boomers¹¹ were clearly not following the industry's expectations that they, like their parents, would develop a newspaper habit as they grew up and settled down. Researchers began to talk about a "generational shift" (Gollin, 1991, p. 10; also Meyer, 2004a, pp. 14–22). They noted, however, that readership levels were high for college students—who just weren't reading local dailies (Thurlow & Milo, p. 36). Alternative and campus publications drew students' attention and loyalty, prompting Thurlow and Milo, to ask if the industry wasn't ignoring the obvious—that efforts to draw readers might be best based on what the prized demographic was already reading.

If daily newspapers are going to recapture readers, they may have to reinvent their products to attract these young college students. They may have to introduce products that are free, that are less government meeting-oriented and more issue-oriented, and that contain healthy sections of listings and leisure-time coverage. (p. 37)

Women, 60% of whom read a newspaper daily in 1991, according to Simmons research, made up 52% of the population and were more likely than men to be making buying decisions. Therefore, a drop of seven percentage points since 1981 in female daily readers had publishers concerned that advertising might slip. *The Wall Street Journal* reported in 1992 that major chains, including Knight-Ridder, Thomson Corp. and Scripps Howard, were “prodding their papers to be more appealing to women.” Thomson, for example, “started adding more life-style news after determining last year that the category was getting only half the space devoted to sports” (Pearl, 1992, p. B1). The need to appeal to women had been “answered” in the past by establishing separate women’s sections, but there were problems with that in a time when women wanted to be not separate but equal. Some people thought topical coverage might be a way to incorporate women’s interests into the main pages on an equal footing with men’s.

1.5. Reader as editor

Meanwhile, about eight years before topic team-oriented newsrooms made industry news and as The Newspaper Project came to a close, the largest newspaper chain in the country was preparing to put its extensive reader research into effect.

Gannett’s launch of *USA Today* on 15 September 1982, put topical journalism on front stage: the new paper was divided into four main areas of interest: News, money, sports, and life. Self-billed as the first national newspaper, it was designed for newsstand sale, not subscription. Its vending machines were modeled after television sets, and the part of the newspaper that showed (“above the fold”) was inspired by the fast-moving images and bright colors that had entranced the desirable “young” demographic as the cohort was growing up (Emery & Emery, 1996, p. 490).¹² It was news for people in a hurry, on the move, with change in their pockets. In a textbook of mass media history, Campbell (2000) called *USA Today* a parent of “postmodern” journalism. “It incorporated features closely associated with the postmodern style,” he wrote, “including an emphasis on surface slickness over substantive news and the use of brief news items that appealed to readers’ short attention span” (pp. 251–252).

Edited to appeal as well as inform, it caused shockwaves when it led¹³ its first front page with the death of Princess Grace of Monaco rather than the London assassination of Lebanese President-elect Bashir Gemayel, whose country was in the midst of a bloody war. News of the former American actress was what people were talking about, decreed Al Neuharth, *USA Today*’s publisher, founder and de facto editor, after taking an informal poll in the lobby bar of the Capital Hilton Hotel. Thus, it was ruled the most important story and played on the front page accordingly (Prichard, 1987, p. 6, 21). It may have been the only US paper to run the Kelly story as the lead. That was fine by Neuharth, who was looking to produce something different.

USA Today, distinguished by quick reads, eye-catching color artwork, technically advanced photo reproduction, and reader-grabbing stories, was harshly and widely derided within the industry and profession; its nickname was McPaper. “It has no serious set of priorities,” Ben Bagdikian (as cited in Prichard, 1987, p. 22) wrote.

Stories are played up or down not because of their inherent importance but on the basis of their potential for jazzy graphics or offbeat features. If *USA Today* accomplishes only partly what its promotion predicts, which is to make a major impact on newspaper reading, it will be no gain for the reading public, which gets a flawed picture of the world each day from the new paper, and a serious blow to American journalism, since the paper represents the primacy of packagers and market analysts in a realm where the news judgment of reporters and editors has traditionally prevailed. (p. 22)

Four years later, in 1986, *USA Today* had an audited circulation of 1.4 million, making it the second largest newspaper in the country after *The Wall Street Journal*. It still lost money, but less. In 1985, its operating loss had been \$102 million. At the end of 1986, it posted a loss of \$70 million. Advertising

and circulation continued to grow. In January 1986, Neuharth addressed students of the Wharton School of Business, telling them that “much of *USA Today*’s success has been from listening to the reader—not editors and publishers and other so-called experts—and giving those readers what they say they want” (pp. 339–340).

That philosophy was evident from the start, and not just in the coverage of Princess Grace. When *USA Today* was less than a week old, Jonathan Yardley (1982) of the *Washington Post* wrote that its ability to divine what people were interested in was its “real revolution” (p. C1). But Yardley’s article, published in the Style section and written in the first person, was hardly flattering.

Like parents who take their children to a different fast-food joint every night and keep the refrigerator stocked with ice cream, *USA Today* gives its readers only what they want. No spinach, no bran, no cranberry juice, no liver. The world according to *USA Today* is not ordered by events but by the perceptions of its readers—as, of course, those perceptions are perceived by *USA Today*. Hard judgments about the relative weight of events go by the board; what counts is figuring out what the customers want, and coming up with an ample supply of it.

He called the approach a “radical departure” (p. C1). TV journalist Linda Ellerbee quipped that “it doesn’t rub off on your hands, or on your mind” (Neuharth, 1989, p. 157). *Washington Post* executive editor Ben Bradlee said that if *USA Today* was a good newspaper, he was “in the wrong business” (1989, p. 156). Neuharth agreed, telling his staff “Bradlee and I finally agree on something. He is in the wrong business” (p.156). Seven months after the launch, *USA Today*’s circulation topped 1 million (*Gannett USA*, n.d.). In 1986, Simmons reported that the paper had 4.8 million readers per day, the most of any US daily newspaper.

2. Changing content and presentation

In 1990, as the *Orange County Register* embarked on its topic-based, beat-changing experiment to reconnect with readers, *USA Today* was flourishing. Its style had influenced newspapers throughout the country, leading to flurries of weather maps and seemingly endless debate over optimum lengths of stories; the extent to which stories should be “packaged” and “briefed” into news nuggets; the choice of which stories should run and where; the importance of including “foreign” news in domestic publications; and the extent to which news judgment should be influenced by polls, surveys, and market research decisions. At Wharton, Neuharth boasted—as he often did—that *USA Today* was the most imitated newspaper in America. “They called us McPaper,” he said in repeated interviews, “but everybody’s stealing our McNuggets” (Pritchard, p. 240. Also, Balz, 1983; Glaberson, 1994; Isikoff & Sugawara, 1987; McGuire, 1992; Ritzer, 2000).

Research backs him up. Utt and Pasternack (1989), who credit *USA Today* with sparking a design revolution in newspapers, found in a late 1980s survey of 93 daily newspaper editors that nearly half used the Gannett paper for design ideas. In 1991–92, Gladney (1992) surveyed 230 large US dailies to see how far they had adopted *USA Today* innovations in terms of striking formats and brief, light, entertaining articles. His research indicated that *USA Today* formats were embraced by group- or chain-owned papers as well as those of small-circulation independents, but that “large, elite metro dailies are most likely to resist the innovation” (p. 68) with the smaller, non-traditional papers most likely to adopt the content and presentation changes.

The changes were less popular among many reporters. In 2002, the *Los Angeles Times* reported: “Still, for many working journalists, there are few things quite so depressing as poking their heads out of a hotel room and finding *USA Today* hanging on the handle” (Rutten, 2002, p. E1; Violanti, 2002, p. C4). The paper’s nickname was “Useless Today”; those pleased to be employed by Gannett were impolitely dubbed Gannettoids. For journalists in the newsrooms of the 1980s and 1990s, mockery fought off the specter of what they feared: Bottom-line journalism, marked by management practices brought over from the business side of the wall to promote superficiality at the cost of substance.

Toward the close of 1993, Roberts (2003), who had quit as executive editor of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* in 1990 after publicly protesting further newsroom budget cuts, told the National Press Club:

Today, as competition diminishes and disappears, many newspapers seem to be in a race to see which can be the most shortsighted and superficial.... I think, quite simply, that we are imperiling newspapers in the name of saving them. (p. D3)¹⁴

3. Reader-friendly

For a while, it seemed as if every publication, not just newspapers, wanted to be reader-friendly. Indeed, “reader-friendly,” spanning budgets, cookbooks, Bibles, histories, environmental documents, were the marketing buzzphrase of the 1980s and 1990s, so well known that it could be used in headlines with no fear that readers would miss its meaning. “City budget will be more reader-friendly,” announced the *Seattle Times* in 1990 (November 9, p. E3). Three years later, the paper itself was the example in its headline: “Tomorrow’s *Times* more reader-friendly.” Next year, *The Times-Picayune*, in New Orleans, announced its “Design is ‘reader-friendly’” (6 June 1993, p. A2).

“Reader-friendly” crossed borders. In 1994, Tran Ngoc Chau, editor of the *Saigon Times*, explained how Vietnamese news publications had changed since free-market journalism replaced governmental subsidization in 1986. “The Vietnam press now considers the reader the king,” he said (Dudman, 1994, p. A6). In Canada, a top editor at the *Ottawa Citizen* described his paper’s foray into the fray.

Every few years, newspapers suddenly develop an urge to get in touch with their readers. Usually this urge coincides with a slump in circulation, the emergence of a new competitor or the latest fad from newspaper research centers in the U.S. For the *Citizen*, all three are relevant right now: Like that of most Canadian dailies, our circulation has suffered during the recession; the biggest competition isn’t so much another newspaper as a tug-of-war with many contenders for your shrinking free time; finally, the American media gurus have pronounced that newspapers must be “reader-friendly.” (Calamai, 1992, p. B6)

The definition of “reader-friendly” varied from newspaper to newspaper, possibly from journalist to journalist. The subject was, in newsroom parlance, a “talker.” It provoked heated discussion. For some, it was a sincere and needed effort to communicate important information in meaningful, direct, ways. For others, it was marketing hype, window dressing, and a serious threat to “real” journalism. Many newsroom changes were justified in the name of creating “reader-friendly” content, including participating in focus groups, writing about different subjects in different ways and, sometimes, forming topic teams around subjects that readers were perceived as wanting covered.

USA Today and the *Boca Raton News* were described by their creators as driven by readers’ interests and designed with the readers in mind. They were the “poster children” of the movement, serving as highly visible examples. Less obvious and less heralded were early efforts by some of the large metropolitan dailies, including *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Boston Globe*, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Christian Science Monitor*. By the end of the 1980s, *The New York Times* had phased in changes to its back sections, was beginning to run more feature stories on the front page, and was gearing toward color. *The Wall Street Journal* added a “Money” section in 1980, followed by “Money and Investing” in 1989. *Weekend Journal* debuted in 1998, *Personal Journal* in 2002 (Goodrich, 1989). “I don’t degrade soft news,” said Thomas Winship, retired editor of the *Boston Globe*. “It’s trend reporting. That’s about all that’s left for us, and it’s a mighty fine segment of news to concentrate on” (El Nasser, 1989, p. B1).

“Editors have reacted to the whips of television and changing lifestyles,” ANPA reported in 1988. “They have been prodded by *USA Today* and stimulated by high-quality color and computer-driven graphics” (El Nassar, p. B1) At the same time, it noted, they’re trying to maintain their watchdog role. “We got into the business to change the world,” said N. Christian Anderson, editor of *The Orange County Register*. “But we’re all in the business of marketing. And in our stomachs, we have to come to grips with that concept” (El Nassar, p. B1).

Not everyone could. In 1987, Bill Kovach quit as editor of the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*¹⁵ after fighting with the paper's owners, Cox Enterprises Inc. The chain management wanted its papers to publish "lighter," livelier stories, and to make format changes Kovach felt edged out hard news. He pushed for more investigative stories; Cox didn't consider them sufficiently reader-friendly (El Nasser, 1989). Kovach's two-year tenure as editor won the paper two Pulitzer Prizes, something that hadn't happened there in 20 years.¹⁶ He was replaced by Ron Martin, first editor of *USA Today*.¹⁷

Some 10 years later, "reader-friendly" was firmly entrenched in journalists' lives—but after 10 years of battling for circulation and readership, the marketing aspect of the concept was dominant, not the journalistic possibilities. Iver Peterson, of *The New York Times*, summed up many editors' feelings toward "reader-friendly" in (1997): frustrated and mad. In 2001, the title of a book reporting on the state of the American newspaper pointed to what many suspected—that the reader may not have been the winner in "reader-friendly" adjustments. *Leaving Readers Behind*, spearheaded and edited by former *New York Times* and *Philadelphia Inquirer* editor Gene Roberts and backed by the Pew Charitable Trusts and the Project for Excellence in Journalism, concluded that readers were getting "diluted, less serious, less substantive news" (Roberts, Kunkel, & Layton, 2001, p. 7). Readership and circulations continued to decline.

4. Discussion

The underlying theme of these research approaches and solutions was to listen to the reader, a broad imperative that could be interpreted in many ways. It was. When the researchers listened, they heard different things. Clark, in 1978, heard that readers wanted newspapers to be "more caring, more warmly human, less anonymous," which was translated into meaning softer content. Bogart heard that they wanted more hard news. Journalists who heard a researcher speaking to them in their own language listened to Clark in such numbers, and took her advice to such lengths, that even Clark recanted, in 1983 coming out in support of more traditionally journalistic news.

In 1982, Gannett sharply divided the US journalism world between those who supported *USA Today's* blatant devotion to giving the reader what the reader wanted, and those who felt a deeper, more nuanced journalistic style would better benefit the public, providing what readers truly wanted. The 1991's *Keys to our Survival*, however, forced journalists to make a choice if its findings were to be followed. Of the four groups identified as making up the populace, two were targeted as actionable: newspaper readers at risk of leaving, and potential converts. The two groups, however, wanted their news in seemingly mutually exclusive ways: context, substance, and depth versus quick, easy, and fun. Economics and time constraints alone could, and usually did, dictate the choice.

The readership initiatives were consistent in suggesting that attention be paid to the type of content readers wanted. This, too, was a broad imperative open to interpretation. The summary view of Clark's and Bogart's findings was soft vs. hard. *Keys* delved deeper, identifying news topics and categorizing them into topic clusters. Gannett had already visibly done that, designing newspaper sections corresponding to news, money, sports, and life. In some cases, newsrooms took what was found about readers' interests and organized ways to delve deeper or more consistently into those topics through team-driven reporting (Thornton, 2009). In others, it was a case of repackaging content to appear more substantive, or topics were used to create advertising vehicles (Attaway-Fink, 2005). As businesses, solutions were likely to reflect marketing concerns more than news values.

There is a fundamental point that must be recognized in all of these studies: They were commissioned by newspaper organizations intent on saving newspapers. As problem-solving ventures (Weiss, 1979), their focus was necessarily narrow (a print platform) and success needed to fit predetermined criteria (such as affordability). Phil Meyer, in talking about the newspaper industry, likened it to the railroad industry failing to realize it was in the transportation business and therefore losing relevance (and flexibility) in a changing society (2004a). From 2000 to 2015, readership for print newspapers fell, overall, and newspaper organizations saw unprecedented losses in resources and staff. According to Audit Bureau of Circulations data, daily circulation figures went from 61,990,000 in 1978 to 40,420,000

in 2014, lower than they were in 1940 (Newspaper Association of America, 2015). During the latter part of that time, readership online increased (Pew Research Center, 2009) and millions flocked to participate in social media, becoming, in essence, their own reporters and publishers. This suggests that readership itself may not have been the problem; newspaper readership was. Had the research been more broadly designed, would this have been discovered? Were the solutions employed to “fix” readership backfiring by actually having a beneficial effect, just not for print?

Newspapers continue to be a vital component of the news mix despite severe economic and operational challenges, and that makes a clearer understanding of their history important. As of 2013, news produced by newspaper-based organizations was read either in print or online weekly, or accessed monthly via mobile devices, by 69% (164 million) of the US adult population (Newspaper Association of America, 2013; para 3). Much of what is shared online on social media platforms (such as Twitter and Facebook) by journalists and non-journalists alike links to content originating from news organizations that operate as newspapers in print and online (Pew Research Center, 2015). Even though the industry didn’t get the results it sought in terms of readership, listening to the reader proved prescient, particularly when viewed from the vantage point of 2016 when comments, social media, and participatory journalism efforts are staples of the modern media environment. Ruth Clark may have been on to something when she reported that readers wanted care, warmth, and transparency from their news providers. Perhaps, in trying to attach those qualities to deliverable (and marketable) newspaper journalism, the point was missed that those qualities might best (and most genuinely) come from the journalists themselves, no matter the publication platform. It is intriguing to think what might have resulted from the studies if, instead of growing out of what was then a pronounced rift between professional journalists and journalism scholars, they had come from a mutually beneficial collaboration based on respect for multiple, sometimes different, research interests and methodologies.

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Notes

1. A penetration of 123% means that the average household bought 1.23 newspapers.
2. In 2004, about 55 million newspapers were sold each day, with 59 million on Sundays. That translates into about 54% of people in America reading a paper each day, with 62% on Sundays.
3. Ruth Clark joined Yankelovich, Skelly, and White in 1970, heading up its public opinion research work as executive vice-president. The firm initiated The New York Times/Yankelovich poll in the 1970s. She left the firm in 1983 to begin her own firm, Clark, Martire, and Bartolomeo. Prior to joining YS&W, she was the vice-president at Louis Harris and Associates. Among her many media clients were *The New York Times*, *The Daily News*, *The Virginian-Pilot*, and *The Chicago Tribune*.
4. The American Newspaper Publishers Association.
5. National Advertising Bureau.
6. Associated Press Managing Editors.
7. *The Virginian-Pilot*, one of the first papers to switch to a topic-team newsroom, was a client of Clark’s in the 1970s and 1980s. According to a longtime *Pilot* staffer, the information she gleaned through focus groups in the early 1980s was instrumental in moving the paper to zoned editions. The paper, while based in Norfolk, covers south Hampton Roads, a collective name for the region that also includes Chesapeake, Suffolk, Virginia Beach, Isle of Wight, and Portsmouth. “Readers in one area said they were only interested in news of that area, so that’s pretty much what we gave them,” according to Randy Jessee, who joined the *Pilot*’s sister paper in Norfolk, the *Ledger-Star*, in 1976. The *Pilot* and *Ledger-Star* merged in 1982; Jessee was news systems editor for both papers beginning in 1979. The zoned editions gave rise to criticism that the “good” news was placed in the zoned editions (that other areas did not get), but the “bad” news made it into the general-circulation portion of the paper. When the *Pilot* reorganized into teams, much of the geographic orientation was replaced. Interview, 5 July 2005.
8. “All those statistics—what do they tell editors about what to do (even assuming they would be credited as accurate and revealing, given their anti-quantitative biases)?” C.A. McKnight, 20 April 1981, in conversation with Leo Bogart (Bogart, p.139).
9. Gannett, in 1985, owned 83 daily newspapers in 33 US states and Guam, a national news service, 7 television and 14 radio stations, outdoor advertising operations in the US and Canada, 21 weekly newspapers and the Louis Harris & Associates research group. Gannett built its empire by accumulating newspapers primarily from smaller areas.
10. A total of 1,264 adults from the contiguous US was interviewed from 22 February to 20 May 1990 by MORI Research personnel. Each interview was conducted by telephone with a follow-up mailed questionnaire and an ensuing phone call to record the answers.
11. “Baby Boomers” are those born in the post-WWII era, with the numbers peaking in 1958–59.

12. Television had also become the main competition in news delivery. A 1963 Roper poll found that television “had ousted newspapers as the prime news source.”
 13. To lead with a story means to package or present it visually as the most important news of the day.
 14. The commentary, which also appeared in the *American Journalism Review*, was excerpted from a speech given by Roberts in November at the National Press Club after Roberts received its Fourth Estate Award.
 15. The staffs of the two newspapers merged in 1982 but continued separate publication until becoming the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* in November 2001.
 16. After leaving the Atlanta papers, Bill Kovach was appointed a Nieman Fellow and remained as curator until 2000. He is the founding director of the Committee of Concerned Journalists, which began in June 1997.
 17. Ron Martin was succeeded as editor of the *Atlanta-Constitution* in 2002 by Julia Wallace, who was promoted from within.
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