



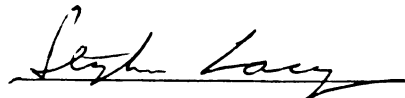
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READERSHIP
OF
THE MONROE EVENING NEWS
MONROE, MICHIGAN
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Carol Ann Schlagheck

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**READERSHIP
OF
THE MONROE EVENING NEWS
MONROE, MICHIGAN**

**By
Carol Ann Schlagheck**

A THESIS

**Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of**

MASTER OF ARTS

School of Journalism

1992

ABSTRACT

READERSHIP
OF
THE MONROE EVENING NEWS
MONROE, MICHIGAN

By

Carol Ann Schlagheck

In the last decade, The Monroe Evening News has, by most standards, become a dramatically better daily newspaper. However, the newspaper has fallen short by the standard that may be most significant -- circulation. Peaking at 27,364 in the early 1980s, circulation dropped to about 22,900 by late 1990. This thesis determines what types of news Evening News readers are interested in and defines the "typical" reader.

Four hundred Evening News subscribers were interviewed by telephone. The survey found that they get most of their local and state news from this newspaper, but their information about national and international events primarily from television. Evening News readers are interested in news about local units of government, police and crime. They also like entertainment stories. They are interested in consumer and how-to stories, but are not very interested in obtaining news electronically, in part because few have home computers.

DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to the memory of my grandfather, Howard C. Schlagheck (May 2, 1908 - May 24, 1992), a former Toledo Blade printer who always was interested in my newspaper work.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As this project and my time at Michigan State University draw to a close, I would like to extend my gratitude to the School of Journalism for offering a master's degree program at the Birmingham campus. Without this program, which unfortunately has had to end, I know I never would have attended graduate school. I want to thank my committee members, Stephen Lacy, Ph.D., Lucinda Davenport, Ph.D., and John Molloy, Ph.D., for their great assistance. Dr. Lacy was very generous with his time and expertise, even over the summer. And a big hug goes to Dee Dee Johnson, the School of Journalism graduate secretary who has held my hand long-distance since I first called to inquire about this program almost three years ago. She is part secretary, part friend and part saint – a tremendous asset to the department.

Thanks, too, to the people at The Monroe Evening News, where I have worked since 1978. Steve Gray, Deb Saul, Lee Hatfield and others offered information, suggestions and moral support that was greatly appreciated.

The biggest thanks goes to my family. My mother, Yvonne Schlagheck, and sister, Susan Jones, helped immensely with the phone survey. My husband (and Evening News co-worker), Charles Slat, went far beyond the call of duty in helping me master a new computer and keep things running at home. I absolutely could not have done this without him. But, most of all, I want to thank and apologize to our 3-year-old son, Christopher, who shared me with my computer all summer.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Four years ago, in 1988, the future of The Monroe (Michigan) Evening News looked as bright as the sunrise over nearby Lake Erie. After some rough times in the early 1980s, which saw several major retailers leave town and stalled efforts to revitalize Monroe's decaying downtown business district, business was picking up at The Evening News. Circulation had grown to more than 27,000 and the paper was drawing new advertisers from two major shopping complexes – Manufacturers' Marketplace, a factory outlet development along bustling I-75, and Frenchtown Square, Monroe County's first indoor shopping mall. In addition, the Detroit Newspaper Agency's Joint Operating Agreement had just been approved. While most Detroit-area competitors saw the JOA as bad news, The Evening News' owners saw it as an opportunity. Monroe is far enough (50 miles) away from Detroit not to be in direct competition for advertising dollars, but close enough that many in the Evening News circulation area (all of Monroe County and parts of Lenawee, Washtenaw and Wayne counties) buy Detroit newspapers, especially the Sunday editions.

Grattan Gray, publisher of the family-owned Monroe Publishing Co., was eager to capitalize on the merger of the two Detroit Sunday papers. With the JOA, Gray and his son, Evening News Editor Stephen Gray, and others in management, stepped up discussions of starting a Sunday paper in Monroe. By October of 1988, they decided that The Evening News no longer would be a six-day-a-week paper -- delivered in the afternoons during the week and in the morning on Saturday. By December, planning committees had mapped out a new format. Several new staffers, including a graphics-minded news editor, were hired in early winter and The Monroe Sunday News premiered with great fanfare April 9, 1989.

In some ways, it was a celebration of years of hard work and a symbol of how far the newspaper had come. Following many industry trends over the previous decade, The Evening News had become a much more interesting, more aggressive and more attractive newspaper even before the debut of the Sunday edition. Under Steve Gray's leadership, the paper his grandfather, JS Gray, bought in 1926 had been transformed. Redesigned and reinvigorated, the paper had become a source of pride for the Gray family and the staff. The Sunday paper was the finishing touch, something that made some staffers feel that they no longer were working for a small-potatoes newspaper. The seven-day-a-week Evening News was a "real newspaper."

Others have agreed. The Evening News has won a host of awards, just last year (1991) capturing the Michigan Press Association's "General Excellence" commendation.

But that's not the end of this story.

With the introduction of the Sunday edition, Evening News circulation began a steady decline. It reached its lowest point -- 22,900 -- in December of 1990 and has yet to recover. Circulation has been rising steadily since Lee Hatfield was hired as circulation director in February of 1991, but the current total of 23,300, still is a far cry from the 27,364 peak. Hatfield, not the news department, universally is credited for any circulation recovery. He has implemented strong marketing and customer service programs that have brought results.

But why the decline? That's a question no one has been able to answer definitively. Management was prepared for some falloff with the Sunday paper. After studying Sunday paper implementations in other communities Monroe's size, the Grays had become convinced that the Sunday paper had to be offered as part of a seven-day package. In small towns where the Sunday paper was optional, it died. The Evening News deal was this: People could purchase just the Sunday paper, but they couldn't buy just the six-day daily paper. To continue getting the daily paper, they had to take the Sunday edition. Also, the seven-day-a-week subscription came with a \$1 price hike. The hike, which increased the weekly subscription rate from \$1.25 to \$2.25, took effect a week after the Sunday paper was introduced.

Actually, only 50 cents was to cover the cost of the Sunday paper. The other 50 cents was a subscription rate increase that had been scheduled to take effect a year earlier, Steve Gray said. The Grays had decided to postpone the increase because of inevitable cancellations that follow any rate hike. At the time, the paper was

presenting itself to all the new national advertisers in town and it wanted the numbers as large as they could be.

Though the Grays knew the Sunday paper and the rate hike would mean cancellations, they were surprised at how many people dropped the paper and how fast. For a time, management considered making the Sunday paper optional, but, again drawing on the experience of fellow Inland Press Association members who had tried it, opted to tough it out. The seven-day rule remains today.

But the Sunday paper and rate hike aren't the only possible reasons for the drop in circulation. Another likely factor is the recession, which could be why the paper has been so slow to regain lost readers. Like most Michigan cities, Monroe has been hard hit by the national economic slump, particularly as it has affected the automotive industry.

A third reason for the decline could be the overall trend toward decreased daily newspaper readership. Virtually every daily newspaper has felt a drop in penetration, even in areas where population increases have continued to fuel circulation. People do not read newspapers like they used to, whether because they do not have the time to make newspapers a daily habit or because they do not have the inclination to get their news from papers.

This thesis is an attempt to determine how The Monroe Evening News might improve its product to help rebuild readership. Through a survey of Evening News subscribers, it is hoped that the newspaper staff can learn what types of news local readers are interested in, and how readers feel the newspaper is serving their needs. The project also is an effort to identify the "typical" Evening

News reader by sex, age, income and interests, in as much that such identification is possible.

The goal is to distill current thought about newspaper readership into a picture of the readers in one community.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The media's critics often complain that bad news gets the most ink. But the story's the same when the bad news hits close to home. Newspaper readership is getting a lot of attention from researchers and journalists these days. Not only is the news bad -- it's potentially fatal.

Twenty-five years ago, in 1967, almost three-quarters of American adults read newspapers every day. By 1988, only half of the nation's adults were newspaper readers. Average daily newspaper readership dropped from 78 percent of U.S. adults in 1970 to 62.4 percent in 1990, according to the Newspaper Advertising Bureau. Everyday newspaper readership dropped from 73 percent of U.S. adults in 1967 to 52.6 percent in 1990, reported the National Opinion Research Center in Chicago.¹

¹Mary Alice Bagby, "Transforming Newspapers for Readers," Presstime, April 1991, 19.

National readership statistics are worse for young adults, those between 18 and 29. In 1967, two-thirds of young adults (67 percent) read a newspaper daily, but that figure plunged to 29 percent by 1988.²

Even where readership has remained steady, market penetration is down. In the 35-year period between 1952 and 1987, American newspaper circulation remained fairly level at 50 million to 60 million while the nation's population grew from about 160 million to 250 million.³ During the same period, the number of American households climbed from about 58 million to more than 90 million, almost doubling.⁴ As market penetration has fallen, so has newspapers' share of total U.S. advertising volume, increasingly feeling competition from television. Newspapers' advertising volume was nearly \$35 million in 1952 (during television's infancy), but shrunk to about \$27 million in 1987.⁵

U.S. daily newspaper circulation, pegged at 62,324,156 for 1990, scarcely has budged from its 1970 level of 62,107,527, but population increased about 22 percent and the number of households

²Robert P. Clark, "Greed is Dangerous," The ASNE Bulletin, July/August, 1990, 26.

³Chart in The ASNE Bulletin, Jan. 1989, 3. Source cited: Editor & Publisher (newspaper circulation) and U.S. Bureau of Census, Current Population Report, series D-25, Nos. 802, 1006 and 1011 (population).

⁴Chart in The ASNE Bulletin, Jan. 1989, 4. Source cited: Editor & Publisher (newspaper circulation) and Newspaper Advertising Bureau (households).

⁵Chart in The ASNE Bulletin, Jan. 1989, 4. Source cited: Newspaper Advertising Bureau Inc., Economic and Media Analysis Unit/Research Department.

rose 47 percent during the same 20-year period.⁶ And among those who continue to turn to newspapers as a source of local news, some are looking to community weeklies rather than dailies.

A growing population no doubt helped The Monroe Evening News build circulation in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, but real growth was attained by increasing the circulation area, a strategy that still is being employed. Initially a "Monroe paper," the newspaper began reaching out to the rural areas of Monroe County and, by the 1970s, to every corner of Monroe County. Two satellite offices were opened in the late 1970s and early 1980s, in communities that had been the domains of other newspapers. The first such office was in Bedford Township, a community just north of the Ohio line. Though Bedford rivals the city of Monroe in population, it has no strong local newspaper of its own and, because it largely is a bedroom community for Toledo, has been a stronghold of Toledo Blade circulation. The Bedford bureau remains open and has seen gains both in circulation and advertising, though not to the extent that was hoped. The second satellite office is in Flat Rock, in lower Wayne County. Through this office, The Evening News has seen substantial gains in areas that do not feel they are well served by the Detroit metro papers. These gains have come despite the presence of some healthy weekly newspapers in the area.

The core of The Evening News circulation area remains Monroe County, however. And the county has seen some decline in population. In the 1980 U.S. Census, total county population was

⁶Bagby, Presstime, April 1991, 24.

pegged at 134,659. By 1990, that total had dropped to 133,600.⁷ That population drop might help explain some of the recent decline in Evening News circulation, but certainly it is not the whole explanation. Circulation dropped more than population.

Spurred by the national statistics, the American Society of Newspaper Editors conducted a survey of 1,264 adults in the contiguous United States during the first half of 1990. The results of the study, called "Keys to Our Survival," showed that:

- * 55 percent of those surveyed were loyal readers, or people who read the paper nearly every day. They have a high regard for daily newspapers and prefer hard news.

- * 13 percent were at-risk readers, or people who read the paper fairly often (up to four times a week), but find little value in it. They are not newspaper fans. They primarily are interested in news that helps them cope with everyday living.

- * 13 percent were potential readers, or people who occasionally read newspapers. They like papers and respect them, but don't consider them good sources of knowledge on current events. They have a high interest in national, international and business news.

- * 19 percent were poor prospects, or nonreaders. They show little interest in newspapers. Women were more likely than men to turn up in this category.⁸

⁷"Monroe County Population and Land Use Statistics," figures from U.S. Census Bureau, provided by Monroe County Planning Department.

⁸Keys to Our Survival, (Washington, D.C.: American Society of Newspaper Editors, 1990), 3.

Loyal readers mostly are over age 35. Typical potential readers are under 30; undergoing major life changes such as marriage, children and job changes; pressed for time; busy, but in control; seriously interested in events and hard news; and cosmopolitan. Typical at-risk readers are under 30; read selectively and less thoroughly; want news presented quickly, easily, fun; feel harried and unable to control events; retreat to protected, provincial world, and like stories on interesting people.⁹

For the future, the question seems to be whether newspapers have to become new creatures to attract new readers or whether they can increase readership by sticking with the fundamentals, and becoming better newspapers. Both ideas are receiving a great deal of attention within the industry. But the two concepts may not be mutually exclusive. Newspapers can attract new readers by improving their quality, as several studies, including one by Stephen Lacy & Frederick Fico of Michigan State University, have shown.¹⁰ The secret might be for newspapers simply to redefine some traditional concepts of news and of how papers best serve their readers.

In June, 1987, a group of 35 editors and publishers formed New Directions for News, an organization devoted to addressing some of the problems facing newspapers today, including declining readership. And in 1991, the American Newspaper Publishers

⁹Ibid., 4.

¹⁰Stephen Lacy and Frederick Fico, "The Link Between Newspaper Content Quality & Circulation," Newspaper Research Journal, Spring 1991, 46-57.

Association tapped its new director from one of the greatest sources of change within the industry -- USA Today. Cathleen Black, who was publisher of the mold-breaking Gannett Co. national newspaper since 1984, promises to continue leading change. She has overseen a \$500,000 advertising campaign to raise the profile of newspapers with potential advertisers and readers. "I think that newspapers have not marketed themselves very aggressively or very cohesively to national advertisers," she said.¹¹

Black sees a strong future for newspapers. "I would imagine by the year 2000, many newspapers will be better edited, better designed, better organized, with the understanding that our readers live in a time-pressed mode and that to keep their loyalty and following we have to be responsive to those pressures," she said. While stressing that she does not mean all paper have to be like USA Today, Black said she thinks the Gannett experiment has shown "that news and information can be displayed graphically and visually and it makes for a more interesting newspaper, particularly for a younger generation who has grown up with television being a major part of their lives."¹²

Publishers have begun paying attention to the literacy problem in the United States, recognizing that unless people can read, and unless they learn to enjoy reading, they are not going to read newspapers. Project Read, a national program which matches

¹¹Associated Press wire story, dateline: Washington, D.C., June 11, 1991.

¹²*Ibid.*

volunteer tutors with those who cannot read, is receiving increasing support from newspaper companies, including The Evening News.

The acknowledgment that not all people can read newspapers is not new. For decades, newspapers have at least attempted to simplify writing so that people who read at junior high level, or lower, can understand the stories. Journalism schools emphasize short leads, editors hate long words, and most news "paragraphs" contain only one relatively brief sentence. Newsrooms including that at The Evening News have relied on tests like the "Fog" index, which computes sentence length and word length to determine the level of education needed to read the stories. There and elsewhere, the goal (if not the reality) has been to write so that a junior high student could understand the story.

While some educated adult readers find this condescending, there is concern that the average adult does not read at the level his or her education would suggest. Many high school graduates read only at an elementary level, for instance.

However, some have found that, if anything, the readability of American newspapers has worsened. Wayne A. Danielson, Dominic L. Lasorsa and Dae S. Im of the University of Texas found that, as society has become more complex, the terminology of newspaper articles has become more difficult to read, according to the widely used Flesch Reading Ease Score.¹³

¹³Wayne A. Danielson, Dominic L. Lasorsa and Dae S. Im, "Journalists and Novelists: A Study of Diverging Styles," Journalism Quarterly, Summer 1992, 436-446.

One recent study showed that easy-to-read writing might not be the answer to declining readership after all. The study, conducted at the University of Maryland, found that readers preferred news copy that was easy to read only if it also was interesting.¹⁴ It found that if readers judged a story "interesting," they also perceived it to be of high quality overall, regardless of its readability based on the traditional "Fog" index. Though stories used in the study ranged from 7.0 (seventh-grade level) to 22.8 (post doctoral) on the Fog index, the index appeared to have no relationship to positive reader evaluations of stories. Willingness to buy a newspaper was linked to feelings that the reader had a desire to keep reading. One implication of this may be that journalists no longer have the luxury of assuming that people want to read their stories. Today, "newspapers must offer readers news that is intriguing, and they must present it in ways that make its value and relevance immediately clear," the study shows.¹⁵

An interesting aside to the McAdams study is that it used news stories selected from The Monroe Evening News in seven topical areas: local news, state news, national news, international news, sports, features, and editorials. Editor Steve Gray altered the stories to increase their readability by making sentences shorter and terms less complex.¹⁶ He and McAdams had expected that the easier-to-

¹⁴Katherine C. McAdams, "Easy-to-Read Writing is Not Enough to Attract Readers," The ASNE Bulletin, March 1991, 26.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 27.

read stories would be the most preferred by those in the study group, 445 adults.

The study could be flawed, however, in that the survey group was highly literate. Of the more than 400 readers used in the experiment, 239 were students in continuing education classes at the University of Maryland, 73 were undergraduate (non-journalism) students, and 133 were others in the university community, in clerical, service, managerial and professional jobs.

Peter Francese, publisher of American Demographics magazine, suggests that newspapers find out what interests their readers. "My first suggestion is to look at what they spend their money on," he said. Food, apparel, travel, home furnishings and health-related goods all are prime topics for stories.¹⁷ Different types of families and households are among "the most important things newspaper executives should be looking at. Two-wage-earner families have less time to read newspapers. People without kids have more time to travel, read, shop, have pets and hobbies and have time to read about those things. It's incumbent on publishers to understand those interests."¹⁸

An idea being tried at some newspapers is involving "regular folks" in daily news meetings, be they rotating representatives from other departments or, as heretical as it sounds to newsroom curmudgeons, inviting readers to staff meetings. The Concord (New Hampshire) Monitor has a board of contributors, community

¹⁷Davis, Presstime, April 1991, 11.

¹⁸Ibid.

members who contribute articles and suggestions. Half of the board is replaced every six months.¹⁹

Community outreach projects at the Rocky Mountain News have shown that its readers want more international news, more information about local political candidates, more stories about schools and education, more articles on science and the environment, more news with a human face. In trade, they are willing (even eager) to accept less news about meetings and bureaucracy. "What has surfaced in almost two years of talking directly to readers is that they want dependability. They want information they do not get elsewhere -- information that is important to where and how they live.... They want their newspapers to help them live -- at home, at leisure, at work, in their communities, their states, their nation and the world -- as informed and involved citizens," said associate editor Jean Otto.²⁰

George Arwady, publisher of the Kalamazoo (Michigan) Gazette, was among the Associated Press Managing Editors members who participated in a 1991 Detroit panel that focused on the similarities between publishers' woes and those of auto executives. He said the newspaper industry should respond to its readers' needs just as the automobile industry has redirected its thinking about its customers. Newspapers, like the Big Three, must work to improve their products. "The number one product problem in the newspaper

¹⁹Richard Louv, "Extra! Extra! Tell Me All About It!" Christian Science Monitor, June 27, 1991, 9.

²⁰Jean Otto, "Reaching Out to Readers: A Mutual Survival Policy," Presstime, July 1991, 47.

industry today is that we have very dull newspapers," Arwady said.²¹

Nancy Woodhull, former president of Gannett News Services, has suggested, "Maybe the problem with newspapers today is that we are not newspapering very well. If we just hire good reporters, have them do good stories, put the good stories on Page One and alert readers to those good stories, maybe our industry's problems would be solved."²²

Some, including Nan Johnson, managing editor of the Glenwood (Colo.) Post, feel small papers have made a big mistake by "growing up" in the last few years. By eliminating the chicken-dinner news and trying to look like the big-city papers, community newspapers may have lost their communities. "Why do people in a small town buy a local newspaper? They want to read local news. Granted, if there is a major national story breaking, such as the blow-up of the Challenger, it should be on Page One of every newspaper, no matter the size. But that is the exception to the rule."²³

People in small towns don't want sophisticated papers, Johnson said. "What they want is clear, concise and accurate news and features about their schools, government, neighbors and businesses,

²¹Tony Case, "Hardships in Common," Editor & Publisher, Nov. 9, 1991, 31.

²²Nancy Woodhull, "Do We Simply Need Better Newspapers, or Something Totally Different?" The ASNE Bulletin, January 1989, 7.

²³Nan Johnson, "Editors Should Savor 'Chicken Dinner' News," The ASNE Bulletin, February 1989, 28.

things that personally affect them in their life in a small town. That's what we should be giving them."²⁴

While newspaper market penetration declines across the nation, the 25,000-circulation Wooster (Ohio) Daily Record has penetration figures that major metros would envy. The Record's daily penetration for 1990 was 105.21 papers per 100 households, the highest in the country. Its secret is nothing short of old-fashioned. "We spend a lot of time writing stories that probably make the big fancy metro guys wince," said Melody Snure, managing editor. "We're a scrapbook paper in some ways. People come in and they'll buy 10 extra copies of their daughter's wedding, or their honor roll. We print all that stuff. And, darn it, you can't tell me that we're not a good, legitimate paper because we print club news and we print personals."²⁵

There is a cyclical relationship between newspapers, readers and communities. It's a cycle that can benefit all three. The more newspapers tell what's really going on in a community, the more readers will care about that community and keep buying newspapers to learn about what's going on ... and the cycle continues.

Gerald Stone concluded that stronger attachment to the community was associated with higher levels of newspaper circulation in the community. "People who are solidly established in the community are the best clients for newspapers. Their interests are closely associated with the content newspapers provide." It

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵W. Dale Nelson, "Little Papers Score Big," The Quill, July/August 1991, 26.

would seem to follow that those people are reading newspapers for local news.²⁶

Eugene F. Shaw and Lisa Fortini-Campbell found that in small towns the newspaper is considered a vital link to local and political happenings. A small-town daily newspaper, particularly one that is far from a larger metropolitan area, has virtually no competition for the news it provides.²⁷

Jay Rosen, assistant professor of journalism at New York University, makes the argument that:

Anything that pulls people out of their private worlds into the public realm is good for newspapers. The reason for this is simple, but frequently overlooked. People who are involved and interested in community affairs are doing, in a sense, productive work for newspapers, in the same way that employees who learn a new skill are creating an asset, not only for themselves, but for their companies. Active citizens produce, by their own involvement, the desire to attend to public affairs, which then becomes a task the newspaper can relinquish. Of course, no one can argue with recent efforts to make the daily newspaper easier on the eye. A more attractive product is always an advantage, as long as the product has value in the first place. But what makes the newspaper valuable to people? Page design is not an answer to this question, but public-spirited

²⁶Gerald Stone, Examining Newspapers: What Research Reveals About America's Newspapers, Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage Publications, Inc., 1987, p. 113.

²⁷Eugene F. Shaw and Lisa Fortini-Campbell, "Newspaper Reading in Small Towns," ANPA News Research Report No. 12, June 9, 1978.

journalism can be.... Rather than attempting to draw the attention of distracted readers, newspapers should encourage readers to live the kind of life that naturally draws them to the paper. Inform people that a hazardous waste dump exists behind their homes and they will quickly become readers of everything they can find about hazardous waste. No flashy colors or handsome charts will be needed to draw their attention toward news coverage of environmental issues. By perceiving their own stake in such issues, citizens make themselves into patrons of the newspaper, relieving the newspaper of an expensive (and often degrading) chore: grabbing the attention of otherwise uninterested readers.²⁸

Rosen's theory is similar to that explored in detail by researcher and author Keith R. Stamm in his book, Newspaper Use and Community Ties. Stamm concludes that while there is a strong correlation between community involvement and newspaper readership, community ties also affect what one reads and how one reads.²⁹

Responsible newspapers always have provided a mix of news that their readers want and news that their readers need. But that mix is changing. Readers' needs are different than they were decades ago. Society has changed and so have newspaper readers. People are busier today. Many are less literate. And readers' wants also are changing. Many rely on weekly newspapers to give them

²⁸Jay Rosen, "Newspapers' Future Depends on Shaping Trends in How People Live," The ASNE Bulletin, December 1989, 16.

²⁹Keith R. Stamm, Newspaper Use and Community Ties: Toward a Dynamic Theory, Norwood, N.J.: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1985.

their community news in a concise package. Like it or not, daily newspapers today have a great deal of competition, not only from weeklies and the electronic media, but from all the possible ways that people can spend their time. Newspapers trying to stall the readership decline might be wise to ask what news is important to their readers -- and give them more of it.

"Guesstimates" about such reader interests are made every day, in newsrooms across America. In daily planning meetings, editors take part in ritual discussions about news budgets, news holes and the makeup of their next editions. The sessions go something like this: Editors toss around the news of the day, trying to decide what their readers want to read. What should go on the front page? What should be relegated to Page 10B? What should be developed into a longer piece for Sunday? The judgments are based on a combination of the editors' own experiences, their knowledge of the world and of the newspaper business, their perceptions of readers' interests and, largely, by their own gut feelings about the stories.

It's far from an exact science. And, if declining newspaper readership is any indication, editors often miss the mark in deciding what news is important to their subscribers.

The scenario is much the same at The Monroe Evening News. Each day at 9 a.m., Editor Steve Gray, Managing Editor Deborah Saul, News Editor Harry Orscheln and Local Editor Bob Stiegel meet in the Saul's office to discuss placement of the day's stories. In recent months, Circulation Director Lee Hatfield has sat in on the meetings so he will know which stories to promote on news racks that day.

The editors try to determine which stories will appeal to their readers -- which the readers will want to read and which they will need to read. The group comes up with a plan for Page One, some ideas for Page 3A (the main local news page) and discusses any upcoming newsroom projects.

Often, the decisions aren't so easy. Which story is most important: a bombing in London, England, or a road-paving dispute in Monroe County's London Township? The plight of the Haitian boat people or a marina development on Lake Erie? A new United States postmaster general or a new postmaster in South Rockwood?

There are debates. Some in The Evening News newsroom feel that Page One should be dominated with world, national and state news. Many of their readers get no other paper, they stress. Others feel that the newspaper should emphasize local news, even at the expense of trimming or eliminating some wire stories. This is a local paper, after all. As the news hole has tightened with a recessionary drop in advertising, the arguments have grown stronger.

This research is an attempt to eliminate some of the guesswork. By asking Evening News readers how interested they are in various forms of information and whether they would like to see more, less or the same of certain types of stories, this project may shed some light on the "typical" Evening News reader and, in a sense, invite him/her to those daily editors' meetings. These are the questions the thesis research was designed to answer:

* Do people who subscribe to community daily newspapers get most of their local (county, city, township and community) news from the newspaper? Where do they

get their information about state, national and international events -- from the local newspaper, a state newspaper, television?

While state, national and international news is available through many media, community newspapers (generally those with circulations under 100,000) often are the only media covering events in their small towns. Community ties have been shown to increase community newspaper readership. People who are interested in their towns are more apt to read newspapers. It follows that they are reading those newspapers primarily for news about their communities, but are depending on television and other media for information about state, national and international events.

*** How interested are community daily newspaper readers in news about their local units of government?**

People care about government actions that affect them, particularly those that involve spending taxpayers' dollars. It seems to follow that community newspaper subscribers are interested in what their governmental units are doing.

*** How interested are readers in local police and court news?**

Traditionally, the police blotter has been a staple of community newspaper coverage. At The Evening News, every arrest, every proceeding in the criminal courts, every stolen car, every injury accident are reported on Page 2A. Names, ages and addresses are included in arrest and court proceedings. What do the readers think? Do they want to see more crime coverage, or less?

*** How interested are community daily newspaper readers in entertainment stories -- those about television shows, celebrities, music?**

One trend as newspapers try to appeal to a diminishing audience is to entertain more and, as some see it, inform less. This especially has been viewed as a way to woo younger readers, who profess less interest in hard news (politics, etc.) and more interest in entertainment news. One study showed that 49 percent of those ages 18 to 24 would choose a newspaper that was mostly feature stories over one that was all news.³⁰

Though the survey identified "entertainment news" as stories about TV shows, celebrities and music, readers may define it differently. At times, virtually any kind of news can be entertaining, from a particularly spirited city council debate to a blow-by-blow account of a bank robbery. In small towns, sometimes the most humorous page of the newspaper is not the comics, but the police news. At The Evening News, one recent police story told of someone who broke into a Frito-Lay truck and stole only a few bags of pretzels and a couple cases of dip.

*** How interested are readers in consumer and how-to stories? What types of stories would help them with their daily lives?**

One of the greatest strengths of newspapers always has been their willingness to give people the information they need, not just

³⁰Leo Bogart, Press and Public: Who Reads What, When, Where, and Why in American Newspapers, Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1989.

the information they want. Today, perhaps that means newspapers helping readers with their daily lives. Consumer and how-to stories do just that.

*** Would readers be interested in obtaining news electronically? If so, what type of news? And through what medium?**

One way that newspapers are diversifying themselves as information providers is by offering both news and other information via push-button telephone, computer linkage and cable television. This combines the resources of newspapers with the immediacy of the electronic media. Are readers interested? If so, how would they like to receive the information?

*** Who are The Evening News' subscribers? How old are they? How long have they lived in the community? How much education do they have? Overall, what do they think of their newspaper? What is the profile of the "typical" Evening News reader?**

Knowing the audience can make a big difference in directing news coverage, writing stories and placing stories. Knowing the "typical" Evening News reader can keep staffers from judging the value of news stories merely by their own interests, which can differ greatly from the readers' interests if the staff is of a different age, education level, etc., than the typical reader.

There are some inherent dangers in defining a "typical" reader, however. Just as no one could precisely fit the U.S. Census Bureau's "average" of having 2.3 children, few readers literally will be described by the definition of "typical" that the survey creates. Thus,

the newspaper risks alienating some readers if it attempts to cater to this fictitious "typical" reader.

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

To determine the interests of The Monroe Evening News readers, a telephone survey of 400 current subscribers was conducted during the period from May 16 to May 30, 1992. In selecting subscribers for the survey, the author relied on a computer printout of all home-delivery customers. For obvious reasons, readers who buy their newspapers off the street and store racks were not included in this survey. The total population was 19,692, which represented The Evening News' home-deliveries as of May 13, 1992.

The printout sorted subscribers by five circulation districts. District 102, the area in the city of Monroe north of the River Raisin, contained 3,149 subscribers; District 140, in the city south of the river, 2,708 subscribers; District 203, populated areas north of the city limits, 2,523 subscribers ; District 204, populated areas south of the city limits, 2,086 subscribers; and District 205, rural motor-route

subscribers throughout Monroe County and parts of Lenawee County, 9,226 subscribers.

Because the circulation districts were not equal, either in population or geography, the author determined which percentage of total circulation that district represented and then set out to survey a proportionate number of subscribers within each district. District 102 represented 16 percent of total home-delivered subscriptions, so 64 surveys (16 percent of the 400 total) were conducted within that district. Similarly, 56 surveys, or 14 percent, were conducted within District 140; 52 surveys, or 13 percent, within District 203; 40, or 10 percent, within District 204; and 188, or 47 percent, within District 205.

Within those districts, roughly every 49th home was selected randomly by dividing the circulation total by the number of surveys needed within that district. For example, in District 102, there were 3,149 homes and 64 surveys were to be completed. Dividing 3,149 by 64, it was determined that every 49th subscriber should be surveyed. Using this method, every 48th subscriber in District 140 was called, every 49th in District 203, every 52nd in District 204 and every 49th in District 205. Overall, roughly every 49th Evening News subscriber was called, as 400 surveys represents roughly one-forty-ninth, or 2.03 percent, of the total 19,692 home subscribers.

Calls were made by a core group of five surveyors during daytime, evening and weekend hours. They found it necessary to call 565 subscribers to complete the 400 surveys, for a response rate of 71 percent. The other 165 potential respondents either were unavailable or uninterested. Each selected subscriber was called a

minimum of three times during various times of day and evening, before being eliminated from the survey. Several were called more than three times if they had expressed any interest in answering the questions at a later date. The Memorial Day holiday weekend fell in the middle of the two-week surveying period, a fact which seemed to hinder participation. It was difficult to reach people at home from Friday through Tuesday of that weekend, and many of those who were at home said they were entertaining, or just about to leave or otherwise could not take time for the survey.

If a name had to be eliminated from the survey, either because the party could not be reached or had said no, it was replaced with another name from within the same circulation area. If every 49th name had been selected on the first pass through the circulation listing, the 50th names were selected as replacements. Because listings were sorted by street, the logical outcome was that the surveyors would be contacting the neighbor of the person who had been unavailable. That seemed to be the fairest way to keep the distribution even, although it was easier to reach people within certain neighborhoods than in others. In some areas, four or five homes were contacted before someone was interviewed for the survey.

In addition to balancing the survey geographically, an attempt was made to interview a balanced number of men and women. That was much more difficult. It became obvious from the first day that the surveyors were interviewing more women than men. By the second day, they began asking for male readers, but even that was difficult. In many cases, the subscriber households were headed by

women, frequently widowed senior citizens. As will become apparent in the Results chapter, one quarter of those interviewed were over age 66, a group that tends to be disproportionately female. There also seemed to be a tendency on the part of male readers to say, "Hang on a minute, I'll let you talk to my wife. She reads the paper more than I do." Some men even asked us to call back later when their wives would be home. Ultimately, the survey was answered by 274 women and 126 men, for an awkward split of 68.5-31.5 percent.

There was concern that anything other than a 50-50 male-female ratio could bias the results. For that reason, many of the responses are given not only for total respondents, but are broken down by male and female.

Though not the primary focus of this study, age often has been found to affect reader interest. In some areas, Evening News survey results are divided by age category to see whether that is a factor in Monroe. This especially is important because age distribution of survey respondents was so much different than that for the general population. While one-quarter of the respondents were over age 66, the number of Monroe County residents over age 65 is only 10 percent of the total population, 13,827 of 133,600.³¹

The survey (Appendix A) was supplemented by a two-page list of definitions (Appendix B) that helped surveyors accurately and consistently answer any questions the respondents had about the questions themselves.

³¹U.S. Census information from Monroe County Planning Department.

Each survey typically took about 10 minutes, though interviews lasted longer when the subscribers made additional comments. They were encouraged to make any comment they wished in the open-ended portions of the survey.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Among the goals of this survey were to identify the interests of home subscribers of The Monroe Evening News as they related to specific categories of news, to test the waters for The Evening News expanding into electronic news services and to create a profile of the "typical" Evening News reader, to the degree that is possible. The results offer responses to specific survey questions -- but they also offer a great deal more. In the course of this project, some of the author's preconceptions have been supported, some have been disproven. Yet some of the most interesting information has come in the form of "surprises," details about the newspaper's readers that were unexpected. In some cases, trends became apparent in areas that were not even addressed by the survey. Both the research question responses and the unexpected insights will be presented here.

* Do people who subscribe to community daily newspapers get most of their local (county, city, township and community) news from the newspaper? Where do they get their information about state, national and international

events -- from the local newspaper, a state newspaper, television?

The expectation was that people are reading The Evening News primarily for local news and they are depending on television and other media for information about state, national and international events. The first part of this preconception, that subscribers get most of their local news from The Evening News, was supported by the survey, to an even greater degree than anticipated. Fully 86 percent (344) of the 400 respondents said they get most of their information about local news events from The Evening News. Also, some of the 38 (9.5 percent) who were categorized as "other" (See Table 1), responded that they get most of their local news from more

Table 1

Primary sources of news by type

| | Int'l | National | State | Local |
|--------------|-------|----------|-------|-------|
| Television | 60.0% | 60.0% | 29.0% | 2.5% |
| Evening News | 8.5 | 9.0 | 32.0 | 86.0 |
| Other papers | 6.5 | 4.5 | 5.0 | 1.0 |
| Radio | 3.5 | 2.5 | 4.0 | 1.0 |
| Other | 21.5 | 24.0 | 30.0 | 9.5 |

N = 400, margin of error $\pm .05$ at 95 percent confidence level

than one source, often including The Evening News. That could mean that the paper's importance as a local news source actually is understated by the 86 percent figure.

Somewhat surprisingly, 127 (32 percent) said The Evening News is their primary source for state news. While not a majority,

that 32 percent is the highest state news ranking for any of the media choices. That indicates that, among subscribers surveyed, The Evening News is the single greatest primary source for both local and state news. It had been expected that television (Monroe is within the broadcast range of at least four Detroit stations that cover Michigan news) and the two Detroit daily newspapers would have better showings in this category. Television ranked second, with 118 readers (29 percent) saying that TV is their primary source of local news, and the "other" category ranked third with 30.5 percent. Competing newspapers were distant followers. (Though results for various other newspapers were collapsed into Table 1 because the cell totals were so small, the survey listed them separately.)

Though not delineated as such in Table 1, the "other" listing was used for tabulation purposes whenever a subscriber said he/she could not list just *one* source of news under that question, as well as when someone gave an answer that was not mentioned above, such as national news magazines like Time or Newsweek, or national newspapers, like The Wall Street Journal or USA Today. In the case of state news, the "other" response often meant that the person relies on both The Evening News and one of the Detroit papers, or both The Evening News and television, for instance.

This survey suggests that people are getting their local and state news from The Evening News, but they are getting their national and international news elsewhere -- and not from any other newspaper. In both the national and international news categories, the primary news source is television, with well over half the

respondents saying they get most of that information from television (Table 1). The Evening News ran a distant second in each category.

From a competitive standpoint for The Evening News, it is interesting to note that not a single respondent said he or she gets most of his/her local news from The Monroe Guardian, the weekly newspaper in town. Not shown on Table 1 is the fact that six of the "other" responses in the local news category were for a combination of The Evening News and The Guardian. The obvious response to this is that the respondents are Evening News subscribers, so of course they get most of their local news from The Evening News. However, The Monroe Guardian claims that it has a circulation far greater than the daily paper's and that it is delivered (on a voluntary pay basis) to every geographic area of the county. Such claims have caused some units of government to consider transferring legal advertising from The Evening News to The Monroe Guardian, despite Evening News assertions that people "invite" The Evening News into their homes and read it, while The Guardian often is pitched as "junk" mail. This survey serves to bolster assertions that people who get both papers rely most heavily on The Evening News for local information.

The survey results also indicate that the Toledo and Detroit daily newspapers have very little impact on Evening News subscribers, but that The Detroit Free Press seems to be the strongest of the three competitors in terms of where people get their news. Perhaps that is because The Free Press is a morning newspaper and some people seem to prefer that. Though there was no question on the survey about preference between morning and afternoon

newspapers, some readers did comment on Evening News wire stories being old, or being rehashes of Free Press stories and stories they've already heard on television. One subscriber commented, "I would like The Monroe Evening News to come out earlier (morning) so I don't have to buy The Detroit News on the way to work."

No statistical differences were found between the way men and women obtain their news.

*** How interested are community daily newspaper readers in news about their local units of government?**

The stated expectation was that people care about government actions that affect them, particularly on a local level. This survey supported that assertion, showing that, on a scale of 1 to 5, with "1" being low and "5" being high, 85 percent of Evening News readers ranked their interest at least a "3" (Table 2).

Table 2

Subscribers' interest in local government, expressed on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being low and 5 being high

| <u>Interest level</u> | <u>1</u> | <u>2</u> | <u>3</u> | <u>4</u> | <u>5</u> |
|-----------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| Percentage | 6 | 9 | 27 | 30 | 28 |

N = 400, margin of error $\pm .05$ at 95 percent confidence level

Responding to the question, which asked them to rank their interest in "governmental meetings in your city, township or village," a majority of the readers questioned (58 percent) answered with a

"4" or a "5," the highest two answers. The average interest level in local news was 3.6.

Perhaps most interesting about this response was that there was no significant difference between males and females, nor among readers of different ages. They all say they are interested in news about their local units of government. The author had not expected much difference between men and women, but would have predicted some distinctions among age groups. Generally, it would seem, interest in government would increase with age, as people buy homes, pay taxes and raise children. This survey did not bear that out, though this could be due to sampling error. With roughly a third of those surveyed over age 60, young people were under-sampled.

It was anticipated that length of residency would influence interest in local government. That did not seem to be the case. Length of residency was not statistically significant as a determiner of interest in local government. It was interesting to note, however, that 72 percent (289) of the 400 readers surveyed have lived in the community more than 21 years.

After asking people to rate their interest in news about their local government, the survey asked them whether they would like The Evening News to provide more coverage of the topic, less, or about the same as it currently offers. Sixty-nine percent (Table 3). responded that they would like coverage to be the same, though a significant number, 28 percent, said they would like to see more coverage. Only 3 percent would like less local government coverage.

Table 3

**Subscribers' demand for coverage of local government news,
expressed as a desire to see more, less or the same coverage when
compared with that currently provided**

| Demand | More | Less | Same |
|-------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Percentage | 28 | 3 | 69 |

N = 400, margin of error $\pm .05$ at 95 percent confidence level

*** How interested are subscribers in local police and court news?**

For as long as anyone can remember, The Evening News has published a daily crime log, complete with a police column of break-ins, thefts, robberies and arrests, an accident column reporting on most, if not all, injury accidents, and a listing of every proceeding in the district and circuit courts, from divorces to murders. The assumption always has been that "this is what newspapers do"; The Evening News, to a large extent, always has served as a newspaper of record. Under no circumstances can a person keep his or her name out of the arrests, divorces, marriage licenses, etc. If it happened, it is reported.

From time to time, there is discussion about how much detail should be included in crime stories -- especially "petty" ones -- but, in general, the thought always has been that the readers need, and probably want, all the information The Evening News can give them when it comes to police and courts.

This survey confirms that sentiment. The results (Table 4)

Table 4

Subscribers' interest in police and court news, expressed on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being low and 5 being high

| Interest level | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|-----------------------|----------|----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Percentage | 4 | 9 | 23 | 27 | 37 |

N = 400, margin of error \pm .05 at 95 percent confidence level

suggest that there is a strong interest in police and court news. Sixty-five percent of respondents rated their interest in police and court news as "4" or "5." Fully 88 percent ranked it as "3" or better on a scale of 1-5. The average interest level was 3.8.

That's not to say everyone loves the crime blotter, however. Five percent (18 readers) rated their interest as a "1," and several readers made negative comments about the coverage, such as:

"People's name, age, etc. should not be in the police news."

"Police news is a bunch of gossip, and unnecessary."

"There seems to be too much emphasis on police and court news, who was sentenced. I don't need to see that. Who follows up to see if they're innocent? That page rubs me the wrong way."

Some readers said that they do not like to see stories about officials who drink and drive. Two comments were that the driving-while-intoxicated arrests of a state representative from Monroe County and the acting Monroe city manager should not have gone on Page One. Those stories were too embarrassing to the men, the readers thought.

Men are less likely than women to be interested in police and court news (Table 5), and younger people are less likely than older people (Tables 6) to read it.

Table 5

Subscribers' interest in police and court news, expressed on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being low and 5 being high, by sex

| Interest level | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | N = |
|----------------|----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Male | 9% | 13% | 21% | 25% | 32% | 126 |
| Female | 3 | 7 | 24 | 27 | 39 | 274 |

N = 400, chi square = 13.26, d.f. = 4, P < .05

Table 6

Subscribers' interest in police and court news, expressed on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being low and 5 being high, by age

| Interest level | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | N = |
|----------------|----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Ages 18-30 | 0% | 11% | 22% | 37% | 30% | 46 |
| 31-40 | 6 | 7 | 30 | 34 | 23 | 83 |
| 41-50 | 7 | 13 | 18 | 32 | 30 | 76 |
| 51-60 | 5 | 8 | 34 | 18 | 35 | 62 |
| 61 and older | 5 | 7 | 16 | 20 | 52 | 131 |

N = 398, chi square = 33.89, d.f. = 16, P < .01

There could be many reasons for this, but one explanation may be that women and older people tend to be more interested in crime news because, statistically, they are most likely to be victims of

crime. Another potential explanation is that, in a community where people tend to stay for their entire lives, young men (who commit most crimes) do not like having information about their infractions remaining permanently in the local memory.

Though 17 percent of the respondents asked for more police and court news, and 9 percent sought less, the overwhelming majority (75 percent) said coverage should stay the same (Table 7). Those who asked for more coverage often commented that they would like more details about where and how the crime took place.

Table 7

Subscribers' demand for coverage of police and court news, expressed as a desire to see more, less or the same coverage when compared with that currently provided

| Demand | More | Less | Same |
|------------|------|------|------|
| Percentage | 17 | 8 | 75 |

N= 400, margin of error $\pm .05$ at 95 percent confidence level

*** How interested are community newspaper readers in entertainment stories – those about television shows, celebrities, music?**

One of the biggest trends in newspapers today is that toward more entertainment stories and, some would argue, less hard news. Reporters at virtually every paper, including The Evening News, are encouraged to write shorter, snappier, even fewer, news stories and to do more "pieces" on television stars, movie premieres, music concerts and fashions. No longer are such stories relegated to the "feature" or "entertainment" sections, either. They just as often are

turning up on Page One or local-section fronts, sometimes as "localized" versions of national stories.

The recent opening of the "Batman Returns" movie was a prime example. The premiere was covered as a news event in most cities. A Detroit television news anchor even brought her McDonald's lunch bag into the studio so viewers of her "news show" could see that McDonald's was promoting the Batman movie. At The Evening News, a photographer was assigned to see if there was a line outside a movie theater. The line wasn't all that long, but the photo (complete with the marquee announcing show times for the movie) ran on Page One. Are reporters whose city hall or political stories get bumped for such hype being too sensitive? Maybe, according to this survey.

Overall responses indicate that about half (49 percent) of respondents ranked their interest as being high, either a "4" or "5" (Table 8), while another 30 percent ranked it as being a "3." Only 21 percent of the readers ranked their interest in entertainment information as low, a "1" or a "2." The average interest level was pegged at 3.4.

Table 8

Subscribers' interest in entertainment stories, expressed on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being low and 5 being high

| Interest level | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|----------------|---|----|----|----|----|
| Percentage | 8 | 13 | 30 | 26 | 23 |

N = 400, margin of error $\pm .05$ at 95 percent confidence level

The author speculated that age would have a great deal to do with how interested someone is in entertainment news. Throughout the newspaper industry, entertainment news has been seen as one way to woo young readers. At The Evening News, however, it does not seem to be only young readers who are looking for entertainment stories. There was no statistically significant difference between the age of readers and their interest in entertainment stories.

There is a significant difference when it comes to the sex of respondents, however. Women are far more likely (Table 9) than men to look for entertainment stories.

Table 9

Subscribers' interest in entertainment news, expressed on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being low and 5 being high, by sex

| Interest level | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | N= |
|----------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Male | 13% | 17% | 32% | 24% | 14% | 126 |
| Female | 5 | 12 | 29 | 27 | 27 | 274 |

N = 400, chi square = 15.04, d.f = 4, P < .01

Despite their strong interest in entertainment stories, Evening News readers seem satisfied with the amount of coverage such stories are given. Seventy-five percent (302 of the 400 respondents) said entertainment coverage should be the same as currently offered, while 21 percent would like more coverage and 4 percent less.

Table 10

Subscribers' demand for coverage of entertainment news,
expressed as a desire to see more, less or the same coverage
than currently is provided

| Demand | More | Less | Same |
|------------|------|------|------|
| Percentage | 21 | 4 | 75 |

N = 400, margin of error $\pm .05$ at 95 percent confidence level

*** How interested are readers in consumer and how-to stories? What types of stories would help them with their daily lives?**

The preconception was that Evening News readers would be interested in more consumer and how-to stories because such stories can help them with everyday concerns. That was heavily supported by the survey. Male, female, young, old, virtually everyone interviewed indicated at least a moderate interest in consumer and how-to stories, with more than a third (37 percent) suggesting (Table 12) that The Evening News needs to provide more such information. Fifty-one percent of respondents indicated a high (a "4" or a "5") interest in how-to information (Table 11), with another 30 percent expressing moderate interest, a "3." Only 19 percent exhibited a low interest in such information. The answers averaged to 3.5.

Table 11

Subscribers' interest in consumer and how-to stories,
expressed on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being low and 5 being high

| Interest level | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|----------------|---|----|----|----|----|
| Percentage | 5 | 14 | 30 | 27 | 24 |

N = 400, margin of error $\pm .05$ at 95 percent confidence level

Table 12

Subscribers' demand for coverage of consumer and how-to
stories, expressed as a desire to see more, less or the same
coverage when compared to what currently is provided

| Demand | More | Less | Same |
|------------|------|------|------|
| Percentage | 37 | 4 | 59 |

N = 400, margin of error $\pm .05$ at 95 percent confidence level

*** Would readers be interested in obtaining news electronically? If so, what type of news? And through what medium?**

If offered weather reports, election returns or classified advertising on cable television, Evening News subscribers might be interested. Otherwise, most don't seem ready yet to accept news electronically, be it by cable, push-button telephone or computer (Table 13).

Table 13

Subscribers' likelihood of acquiring information by alternative means, as expressed by type of information

| Likelihood | Very likely | Likely | Not likely | Unsure |
|--------------------|--------------------|---------------|-------------------|---------------|
| Weather | 17% | 32% | 51% | 0% |
| Local news | 12 | 40 | 48 | 0 |
| Community calendar | 9 | 36 | 55 | 0 |
| World news | 9 | 33 | 57 | 1 |
| Ad updates | 9 | 26 | 65 | 0 |
| Classifieds | 7 | 24 | 68 | 1 |
| Sports scores | 7 | 11 | 80 | 2 |
| Stock prices | 4 | 10 | 85 | 1 |
| Horoscopes | 3 | 11 | 86 | 0 |

N = 400, margin of error $\pm .05$ at 95 percent confidence level

Nearly half (49 percent) of those surveyed said they would be "very likely" or "likely" to use electronic means to access up-to-the-minute weather reports, but few of the other proposed categories of information received such interest. Sizable numbers of readers said they were "likely" to use electronic services to obtain information about local news, world news, classifieds and community calendar,

but, in most categories, the majority of readers said they were "unlikely" to take advantage of the services. Under local news, the mention that seemed to elicit the most positive responses was that of election results, something Evening News readers have become accustomed to accessing by telephone. For years, the newspaper has staffed its switchboard on election nights to give results as they come in for local races.

Of those who expressed any interest in electronic news, 45 percent (178), said they would like it via cable television. Sixteen percent said they would use a push-button telephone to access such information and only 6 percent said they would use a computer (Table 14).

Table 14

Subscribers' preferred electronic media for receiving news

| Preference | Telephone | Cable TV | Computer | None |
|------------|-----------|----------|----------|------|
| Percentage | 16 | 45 | 6 | 33 |

N = 400, margin of error $\pm .05$ at 95 percent confidence level

At least in some areas of Monroe County, the problem might be one of availability. In parts of the Dundee area, for instance, subscribers said they might be interested in such services, but their rural area still has no cable television and General Telephone does not offer them push-button telephone service.

Availability also is an issue with computers. Only 81 people (20 percent) said they own home computers. It is interesting to note that only 26 of those 81 computer owners (7 percent of the 400 total

respondents) would want to receive any type of news or information via computer. Some said they don't use their computers much or they have them just for their children, who use them for games.

Age is a factor when it comes to computer use. As Table 15 shows, 78 percent of the computer owners are between the ages of 31 and 50. Computer use drops off virtually to zero after age 61, the age range which includes most of the surveyed readers.

Table 15

Percentage of subscribers who use home computers,
sorted by age

| Use computer | Yes | No |
|--------------|-----|-----|
| Age 18-30 | 11% | 89% |
| 31-40 | 41 | 59 |
| 41-50 | 37 | 63 |
| 51-60 | 16 | 84 |
| 61 and over | 3 | 97 |

N = 398, chi square = 62.65, d.f. = 4, P < .01

*** Who are The Evening News' subscribers? How old are they? How long have they lived in the community? How much education do they have? Overall, what do they think of their newspaper?**

As mentioned in earlier sections, this survey ultimately was unbalanced both in terms of sex and age, two factors which seem to reveal a great deal about Evening News readership. Try as the surveyors might to reach male readers, only 126 of the 400 (31.5 percent) interviewed were men; 274 (68.5 percent) were women (Table 16). The surveyors did not even try to balance the ages of respondents. It became obvious from the outset that the newspaper's circulation is heavily populated with senior citizens, people who developed the newspaper habit long ago. Of the 400 surveyed, 99 (25 percent) were ages 66 or older (Table 17). When those ages 61-65 are added, the "senior" readership jumps to 33 percent, a third of the total.

Table 16

Sex of survey respondents

| <u>Male</u> | <u>Female</u> |
|-------------|---------------|
| 31.5% | 68.5% |

N = 400

Table 17

Age of survey respondents

| Age | Percent |
|-------------|---------|
| 18-20 | 1.5 |
| 21-25 | 3.5 |
| 26-30 | 6.5 |
| 31-35 | 9.0 |
| 36-40 | 12.0 |
| 41-45 | 8.0 |
| 46-50 | 11.0 |
| 51-55 | 9.0 |
| 56-60 | 6.5 |
| 61-65 | 8.0 |
| 66 and over | 25.0 |

N = 398

Table 18Years survey respondents have lived in the community
covered by The Evening News

| Years in area | Percent |
|---------------|---------|
| 0-5 | 8 |
| 6-10 | 5 |
| 11-15 | 7 |
| 16-20 | 7 |
| 21-30 | 17 |
| 31 or more | 56 |

N = 400

Table 19

Education of survey respondents,
listed as highest level of schooling completed.

| Education | Percent |
|-----------------------|---------|
| Grade school | 4 |
| Some high school | 11 |
| High school | 43 |
| Trade school | 3 |
| Some college | 17 |
| 2-year college degree | 9 |
| 4-year college degree | 9 |
| Graduate school | 4 |

N = 400

Table 20

Household income of survey respondents

| Income range | Percent |
|---------------------|---------|
| < \$10,000 annually | 12 |
| \$11,000-\$20,000 | 16 |
| \$21,000-\$30,000 | 19 |
| \$31,000-\$40,000 | 17 |
| \$41,000-\$50,000 | 17 |
| \$51,000-\$60,000 | 8 |
| \$61,000-\$70,000 | 5 |
| \$71,000-plus | 6 |

N = 293

Table 21

Amount of time subscribers spend reading
The Evening News each weekday,
 time expressed in intervals of minutes

| Time | <10 | 10-20 | 20-30 | 30-40 | 40-50 | 50-60 | >60 |
|---------|-----|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-----|
| Percent | 4 | 18 | 24 | 20 | 10 | 13 | 11 |

N = 400

Table 22

Amount of time subscribers spend reading
The Evening News each Sunday,
 time expressed in intervals of minutes

| Time | <10 | 10-20 | 20-30 | 30-40 | 40-50 | 50-60 | >60 |
|---------|-----|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-----|
| Percent | 6 | 11 | 16 | 16 | 11 | 18 | 22 |

N = 400

When totals from the previous tables (Tables 16-22) are averaged, the "typical" Evening News reader emerges as:

- * Female
- * Age: 46-50
- * Household income: \$31,000-\$40,000
- * Has lived in community 21-30 years
- * Education: Some college or trade school
- * Number of newspaper readers in household: 2.3
- * Time spent with The Evening News daily: 30-40 minutes
- * Time spent with The Evening News on Sundays: 40-50 minutes

Such categorization can be dangerous, however. No cross-referencing was done to determine how many of Evening News subscribers actually are 48-year-old women who attended trade school, live in households with 2.3 readers and incomes of \$35,000, but it's a good bet that there is no such animal.

The U.S. Census Bureau listed the median family income of Monroe County residents as \$40,532 for 1989.

Readers, who had been asked to rank their interest in various news stories on a scale of 1-5, also were asked to rank their overall satisfaction with the newspaper. No guidelines were given; respondents were free to base their judgments on anything from news content to whether the carrier hits the porch. Based solely on feedback that is received in the newsroom (via phone calls, letters and people who stop by), it was expected that the responses would be somewhere in the middle of the range, with high ratings balancing

out low ones. Some news staffers, upon hearing that *readers* actually were going to be questioned about the news product, were quite concerned about negative feedback. They were convinced that every comment would be criticism, that readers would ask for "more" coverage of every category, and that the newsroom would be faced with trying to meet these new, impossible expectations. Quite the contrary. By and large, the survey indicated that Evening News readers are satisfied with the paper -- in fact, they really like it.

Though their interest level in any one type of news never was higher than 3.9 (Table 23), readers ranked their overall satisfaction with The Evening News at 4.2.

The depth of good feeling toward the paper was apparent in many unsolicited positive comments, such as:

"I really like it."

"I enjoy reading it."

"I have lived in Saginaw and Grand Rapids and Kalamazoo. Your paper is the best. It covers a lot and covers Monroe like a big town. I'm very impressed with your paper."

"For a local newspaper, I think it's a pretty good paper. Like The Toledo Blade is terrible for a town that size."

Some surprises:

In several instances, the survey indicated subscriber attitudes that had not been anticipated. For instance, the average interest levels cited for various stories (Table 23) pointed out some interesting discrepancies between what readers want and what the staff has assumed they want. Club news and farm news, long staples of The Evening News diet, really aren't enjoyed that much, according

to the survey. Yet news about health, science and the environment, covered only sporadically covered by the newspaper, are of great interest to its readers.

Interestingly, the story topics ranked highest by this survey are surprisingly similar to those listed as primary interests in Leo Bogart's 1977 study.³² In that research, 15 years ago, people ranked best food buys; health, nutrition, medical advice; human-interest stories on people in the news; consumer news; and articles on the environment as top interests. Also, Bogart noted that stories about the weather, accidents or disasters, letters to the editor and human-interest stories attract readership for more than would be indicated by their presence in most newspapers.

Another notable point is that readers profess the highest interest of all (3.9 average) in national news, yet most get that news from a source other than The Evening News. Similarly, weather news received a fairly high interest level (3.5), but many told the surveyors that they don't rely on the newspaper for weather reports. Though the surveyors did sometimes have to stress this point, it seems clear that the respondents made the distinction between rating their interest in the topics and rating how much of that news they received from The Evening News.

Also interesting is the amount of time that readers spend with The Evening News each day (Tables 23 and 24). People still seem to find a sizable amount of time for the newspaper habit.

³²Bogart, 294-295.

Table 23

**Subscribers' interest in types of news stories, by category,
on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being low and 5 being high.
Also, average rating achieved by each category of news**

| Interest level | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Ave. |
|-----------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|-------------|
| Obituaries | 3% | 10% | 15% | 20% | 52% | 4.1 |
| Letters to ed. | 5 | 8 | 16 | 25 | 46 | 4.0 |
| National | 3 | 8 | 18 | 35 | 36 | 3.9 |
| Health | 5 | 7 | 27 | 29 | 32 | 3.8 |
| Police | 5 | 9 | 22 | 27 | 37 | 3.8 |
| Schools | 7 | 9 | 22 | 24 | 38 | 3.8 |
| Govt. announce. | 3 | 7 | 25 | 32 | 33 | 3.8 |
| Comm. activity | 3 | 10 | 24 | 32 | 31 | 3.8 |
| State news | 2 | 7 | 31 | 39 | 21 | 3.7 |
| Science, envir. | 5 | 9 | 28 | 30 | 28 | 3.7 |
| Local govt. | 7 | 10 | 26 | 29 | 28 | 3.6 |
| International | 4 | 11 | 30 | 30 | 25 | 3.6 |
| Weddings | 8 | 12 | 22 | 23 | 35 | 3.6 |
| Editorials | 6 | 9 | 28 | 29 | 28 | 3.6 |
| Local opinion | 7 | 12 | 28 | 28 | 25 | 3.5 |
| Business | 3 | 13 | 32 | 32 | 20 | 3.5 |
| Consumer | 5 | 14 | 30 | 27 | 24 | 3.5 |
| County govt. | 7 | 12 | 30 | 27 | 24 | 3.5 |
| Weather | 12 | 9 | 28 | 16 | 35 | 3.5 |
| Entertainment | 8 | 13 | 30 | 26 | 23 | 3.4 |
| Syndicated op. | 8 | 20 | 29 | 25 | 18 | 3.2 |
| H.S. sports | 17 | 14 | 23 | 22 | 24 | 3.2 |
| Pro sports | 22 | 21 | 21 | 15 | 21 | 2.9 |
| College sports | 23 | 23 | 24 | 16 | 14 | 2.8 |
| Rec. sports | 22 | 20 | 26 | 18 | 14 | 2.8 |
| Farm | 21 | 28 | 23 | 15 | 13 | 2.7 |
| Clubs | 25 | 26 | 25 | 14 | 10 | 2.6 |

N = 400

Table 24

Subscribers' demand for coverage of news, sorted by type,
expressed as a desire to see more, less or the same coverage
as compared with what is currently provided

| Demand | More | Less | Same |
|----------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Health | 43% | 2% | 55% |
| School news | 40 | 1 | 59 |
| Letters to editor | 39 | 2 | 59 |
| Consumer, how-to | 37 | 4 | 59 |
| Science, environment | 36 | 3 | 61 |
| Govt. announcements | 35 | 2 | 63 |
| Local government | 28 | 3 | 69 |
| National | 27 | 4 | 69 |
| Community activities | 25 | 1 | 74 |
| State | 25 | 1 | 74 |
| County government | 25 | 4 | 71 |
| High school sports | 24 | 5 | 71 |
| Business | 24 | 2 | 74 |
| International news | 23 | 4 | 73 |
| Local columnists | 23 | 5 | 72 |
| Weather | 22 | 4 | 74 |
| Entertainment | 21 | 3 | 76 |
| Professional sports | 20 | 10 | 70 |
| Editorials | 19 | 2 | 79 |
| Police, courts | 17 | 9 | 74 |
| Recreation sports | 16 | 7 | 77 |
| College sports | 16 | 10 | 74 |
| Farm | 11 | 10 | 79 |
| Clubs | 10 | 10 | 80 |
| Weddings, births | 8 | 1 | 91 |
| Obituaries | 4 | 2 | 94 |

N = 400

Table 25

**Rankings for news stories, by type, when subscribers' interest
and subscribers' demand are combined**

| Type of story | Ranking |
|----------------------|----------------|
| Health | 1 |
| Letters to editor | 2 |
| School news | 3 |
| Science, environment | 4 |
| Govt. announcements | 5 |
| Consumer, how-to | 6 |
| National | 7 |
| Local government | 8 |
| Community activities | 9 |
| State | 10 |
| County government | 11 |
| Business | 12 |
| International | 13 |
| Local columnists | 14 |
| Weather | 15 |
| High school sports | 16 |
| Entertainment | 17 |
| Editorials | 18 |
| Police, courts | 19 |
| Professional sports | 20 |
| Recreational sports | 21 |
| College sports | 21 |
| Farm | 22 |
| Weddings, births | 23 |
| Clubs | 24 |
| Obituaries | 25 |

CONCLUSIONS

The responses shown in Table 1 are revealing in that they show how little people use The Evening News as a source for national and world news, even though a great deal of that news is presented in The Evening News each day. For decades, Page One has swung like a pendulum between being a showcase for local news and being first and foremost a place for the "bigger" stories that move on the Associated Press wire. Once the thought was that no local story could run above the fold. Then the thought was to start (and jump) several local stories each day, while still leaving lots of room for wire copy. There were years when virtually no local photograph ever made in onto Page One, and, more recently, most of the Page One photos have been local. Currently, the goal is to strike a balance between local and wire copy, but Page One always has at least a couple of local stories, including features and news analysis, not just fatal accidents and election returns.

The philosophy behind the heavy dose of wire news on Page One, and throughout the paper, has been that earlier studies have shown that most Evening News subscribers get no other newspaper. Many do subscribe to The (Toledo, Ohio) Blade, The Ann Arbor News or one of the two Detroit dailies, but most do not. If The Evening News is the only paper in the home, the theory has gone, it needs to have all the major news stories of the day, not merely the local ones. Traditional news judgment often has put "important" world and national news ahead of local news on the premise that it's a rare day that the Monroe County Board of Commissioners or the Monroe City Council does something of greater significance the United Nations or the U.S. Congress. Readers disagree, if this survey is any indication. The Evening News and, perhaps, other newspapers are missing a tremendous opportunity to increase their readership. Historically, newspapers have striven to give people news they *need*, but that concept has been defined rather narrowly. Readers *need* to know about tax millages, they *need* to know about street closings, they *need* to know about burglaries in their neighborhoods. But is that all they *need* to know? Not at all, according to this survey

What is it that they want to know how to do? The answers were fleshed out in another survey question:

*** People rely on various kinds of information to help them deal with the everyday concerns of their lives. Please tell me, in your own words, what kinds of information you wish you had more of.**

They did.

While no statistical qualitative analysis has been done on the responses, some of the more representative comments were:

"Articles on home issues, saving money, home hints, cleaning and shopping. Hints from Heloise."

"The Better Business Bureau offers some how-to's for people. Would like to see more. Also, more coverage of protection from scams."

"Consumer stories, environmental, national and international, health."

"Stories for elderly people and people on disabilities, (stories that) help them take advantage of what's available. More in-depth on police items."

"Horoscopes."

"More consumer-type things. All around -- health care, home and garden."

"More how-to. With the economy like it is, people tend to do more themselves around home."

"More how-to's, household tips, etc."

"More personal, self-improvement, tips on handling stress."

Many comments on health coverage could be considered a plea for more consumer and how-to stories, such as:

"More health information, more information and updates on diseases, things that would affect my kids, like AIDS."

"More health stuff, recipes."

"More news on health and healthier lifestyles."

Clearly, life is tough. These readers seem eager to get any information that will make their lives easier, help them save money, save time, live healthier, be happier.

There was no question on the survey about satisfaction with The Evening News' Sunday edition. Despite its rocky start with subscribers who didn't like being forced to pay \$1 for it, the Sunday paper seems to have become a part of The Evening News habit. The staff puts a great deal of effort into the edition and, more than three years after its debut, still has the kind of pride that a parent reserves for an offspring.

The readers, apparently, have a different view. Even without any question on the survey about the Sunday edition, 53 of the 400 subscribers took the opportunity to vent their anger about The Monroe Sunday News. Some still are furious that they were forced to take the Sunday paper -- at the higher subscription rate -- if they wanted to keep their weekly editions. Some say they just don't like the paper. One reason many do not want it is that it has virtually no coupons; unlike some of the larger metropolitan daily newspapers, it does not pay for itself.

Here is a sampling of the remarks on the Sunday paper:

"I got really mad the first time you came out with the Sunday paper and shoved the Sunday on us. They save some of the (weekly) news to put in on Sunday."

"Disappointed in the Sunday paper. Too thin, kind of bland. Section A is too thin. I would rather just go back to the daily."

"I do not like the Sunday paper. A waste of time and money."

"I really don't like to have to buy the Sunday paper. I read it but don't like to have to buy it. If I didn't have to, I wouldn't. I get The Blade on Sunday and the coupons pay the price."

"Sunday paper is a big disappointment."

"What I don't like is that you have to take the Sunday paper. The Blade doesn't make you. That is what has turned me off a little on the Monroe paper."

"Your Sunday paper is a farce. There's nothing in it. You can discontinue it. I think you're doing the people of Monroe County an injustice. A lot of people have stopped the paper because they hate that Sunday paper. If you're holding half the news until Sunday, forget it. You shouldn't have to take it to get the daily."

Yet, the survey indicated that people read the Sunday paper. On average, they spend 10 minutes longer with it than they do with the daily paper (Tables 21 and 22). And there were a few positive comments about the Sunday paper, like these:

"I'm glad we have the Sunday paper now."

"I used to hate your Sunday paper. Now I'm used to it. I'm dropping The Free Press."

"I like the Sunday paper."

In examining both the open questions and the interest and demand rankings (Tables 23, 24 and 25), Evening News subscribers appear similar to those surveyed by other researchers. The advancing age of newspaper readers has been well documented throughout the industry, and other studies have pointed out reader interest areas that are like those found in the Monroe area.

For instance, local and state news have ranked high in the Bogart studies, as have stories about crime, education, health and entertainment. In seeking news about these subjects, Evening News readers are not unique.

Limitations of the survey

Though this survey offers some insights to subscribers of The Evening News, it has some limitations.

Perhaps the greatest limitations are those that have been discussed previously, the imbalance in both the age of the respondents and in the sex of respondents. It is difficult to determine whether these imbalances were the results of a truly disproportionate readership or merely an indication of who was home answering the phone when we called. It is possible that we interviewed more women and senior citizens simply because they were available. Any further study should include a greater effort to balance these groups.

Another survey might also put greater emphasis on younger readers, who were under-represented here but are important to any newspaper's future.

In retrospect, the survey probably should have been delayed until after the Memorial Day holiday weekend. The holiday seemed to have a negative impact on people's willingness to participate, as well as in the surveyors' success in reaching people at home. The author underestimated the effect that the holiday would have, though postponing the survey had been considered. One factor was that postponing the survey would push it into June, and the beginning of vacation season.

The survey included only home subscribers, not other readers. Those who buy the newspaper occasionally, or even every day, from vending racks or corner stores were excluded. Because they decide each day whether or not to buy the newspaper, their opinions might have been of significant value.

Perhaps the non-surveyed group that could have provided the most valuable information is the 3,500 or so subscribers who have abandoned The Evening News over the last four years. Though including those people would have changed the complexion of the survey substantially, perhaps some work should have been done in this area. For the future, it might be valuable for the circulation department to follow up on all cancellations, calling or sending postcards to "quits," asking them why they gave up the newspaper. Some of this is done already, but perhaps the findings should be compiled and shared with the editorial staff.

While the survey was so lengthy that it at times tried the subscribers' patience, it was not exhaustive in terms of information gathering. Several categories that were not included probably should have been, such as questions about interest in religious news and local politics.

CHAPTER 6

RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of this survey stand to reaffirm many of the editorial decisions that have been made at The Evening News. Without a doubt, the results show that readers like the newspaper and share many of the same priorities as the news staff. Still, the survey points out quite a few ways in which The Evening News could improve its product, boost readership, and, possibly gain revenues through increased circulation and the advertising income that could follow.

Any time news coverage is changed to benefit certain readers, a newspaper risks losing others. However, using the survey results as a springboard, changes could be justified in the following areas:

Local news emphasis

The numbers show that The Evening News is its readers primary source of information about local and state government. but that most readers get their national and international news from television. At best, it seems that they read Evening News stories on world and international events as background to what they've seen on television.

As the news hole shrinks with reduced advertising, and push literally does come to shove between local news and all the wire reports, perhaps local news should get a higher priority. Core local news stories, such as those about local units of government and crimes, should get preference in the day's planning meetings and receive greater consideration for Page One play. Perhaps the bigger question, however, and one which is not answered here, is what types of local government news people want and how stories should be covered.

The Evening News is strongest among those who are interested in the community it covers. With this heavy interest in local news, The Evening News is in a prime position to exploit the cyclical relationship among readers, their community and their newspaper. The better the newspaper covers its community, the more its readers will rely on it to do so, the more readers will become interested in the community, and the cycle will continue.

State news emphasis

State news also should get a bit more emphasis, perhaps taking a position that is equal to or even greater than that of the lesser-read national and world stories. Currently, state wire reports often are relegated to the second section to make room for "more important" stories from national wire. Perhaps that should be rethought, and state news moved forward.

The Evening News could take a more active role in covering state issues. While its size and budget keep it from being a "state newspaper" like some of the larger metros, the paper could improve

its coverage of state legislation, focusing particularly on how events would affect Monroe County.

More timely stories

Quite a few readers commented that The Evening News seems to be late with the news. This observation seemed to stem from the readers seeing the same or similar stories in the morning Free Press. Some also seemed to come from astute observation of the number of stories that are held everyday. It is not unusual for a meeting follow to run three or four days after the meeting, even if the story was written the following morning. In days of tight news holes, it is difficult to fit all the day's news into every edition, but some improvement may be in order. With better planning, both in terms of story assignments and page layouts, some of this possibly could be avoided.

Follow-up stories

Some of the "open-ended" questions evoked comments about readers "losing track" of stories. Something is reported, then that's it. Several asked for more follow-up stories, possibly in the form of human interest stories on victims of crimes that were reported in the newspaper.

More how-to stories

The survey points out a definite demand for more consumer and how-to stories, including those on health-related topics. Other categories that had significant "more" ratings (Table 24) include science and the environment, and road closings and other government-type announcements. Like consumer and how-to stories, these, too, could be described as "news-you-can-use."

Health tips, consumer tips, recipes, household tips and fix-it advice all are the types of stories that readers are requesting, yet they are not difficult stories to produce. The U.S. Government and a variety of consumer agencies have storehouses of information on such topics, and local experts, from the health department director to the Cooperative Extension Service home economist, always are ready to share their knowledge.

The Evening News should make consumer stories a part of its routine coverage plans and, if possible, assign reporters to consider such stories part of their "beats."

This might have the added benefit of attracting younger readers, who aren't yet interested in government and other "hard" news, but might be interested in a story that told them how to save money on clothing or care for a car.

Strive for a younger audience

Evening News readership is dying -- literally. As the circulation base ages, it is not being replaced with a like number of young readers.

A number of ideas are being tried throughout the United States to boost readership among young people. Some, including a Children's Page, have been tried at The Evening News with varying success. Most recently, the newspaper has sponsored a Boy Scouts of America Journalism Explorer Post, a group of teen-agers interested in careers in journalism. Plans are for this group to write some stories about teen issues in the community.

Because readership among teen-agers is sporadic, at best, perhaps the best way to lure teen readers is to offer stories they are

interested in on a regular basis. A weekly teen page, not unlike The Free Press' "Freep" page, might give teens something to look forward to each week in the paper, while getting them to at least scan it on other days. Perhaps using the Explorers as a start, The Evening News could develop such a youth page with teen writers.

For some time, The Evening News has discussed the merits of Newspapers In Education programs. It should seriously consider getting involved in such a program.

One of the readers interviewed for this survey identified herself as a teacher and said she was interested in obtaining copies of The Evening News early enough in the day (and for free) so that she could distribute them to her students for current events discussions. The newspaper has much to gain through such an endeavor.

Another way to reach young people is through an informal "speaker's bureau." Reporters, editors and others who have spoken with area high school classes (and younger grades) have come away with a sense that they have built relationships. Students need to hear how newspapers work and reporters need to hear what is on the minds of teens. Through just a little promotion, the staff easily could help boost interest among young people.

Bigger print

Now that this survey has identified that a third of The Evening News' readership is 60 or over, maybe there needs to be more attention paid to whether or not those people truly can read -- or see -- the newspaper. Several people commented that they would like bigger type in the newspaper. The crossword puzzle was singled out

for mention. The Evening News has made strides toward improving readability by typeface changes, but perhaps more needs to be done. The crossword puzzle, the television listings, the community calendar, the classified advertisements and many of the sports standings are especially difficult to read.

Again, there is a trade-off. Bigger type will shrink the news hole further. Perhaps one way to start (or compromise) would be to increase the type on the "Over 50" page and reduce the use of tiny type for things such as crossword puzzles and sports scores.

Expand listings of upcoming events

Community activities received the second-highest overall interest rating (3.8), tied with school news and government announcements. Yet, at The Evening News, reporting on community activities is bound by longstanding rules that seem to have little current meaning. The "Bulletin Board," for example, the daily Community Page listing of upcoming public activities, highlight each event one time only. Events also are listed in small type in the "For Everyone" calendar, usually for a day or two. The thinking, logically, is that there is not enough room on the Community Page for events to be mentioned more than one day in the Bulletin Board. It makes sense -- to everyone but the reader.

Several readers pointed out a need to read about more community events *before* they happen. While the newspaper often publicizes big events with photographs and big stories *after* they are over, the events usually get only small listings before they occur. With the hectic pace of many people's lives today, that might not be enough. Perhaps the paper could consider expanding its policies with

regard to how many times an event can be listed in the calendar or Bulletin Board, listing major events several times. Space on the Community Page could be stolen from club news, which takes up a disproportionate amount of space, especially considering the low interest level rating it received in the survey.

Club news primarily serves the clubs. Perhaps less could be reported on club meetings *after* they happen, leaving more room for advance notices. It hardly seems right that a club can get by with an 8-inch "folo" when local government stories (of high interest) often are cut to 4 or 6 inches.

Consider entertainment as news

Redefine the word "news" as anything that people are doing. If everyone is talking about Batman, just maybe that's news, whether crusty city hall reporters think so or not.

Turn a negative into a positive. If television is giving newspapers too much competition, newspapers should write about television. Stories on television programs and TV celebrities can draw readers who are "tuning out" newspapers.

Keep working on coupons

Coupons mean a great deal to readers, and to circulation. Though the big coupon advertisers don't like to bother with "small" newspapers, The Evening News should continue to work on the problem, perhaps providing discounted ad rates for 'coupon' type ads.

Remember the Raisin -- and the Sunday paper

Hindsight is 20/20, and from the view in 1992, many at The Evening News wish that the introduction of the Sunday paper, and

the companion rate hike, could have been handled differently. But, at this point, the paper needs to go forward. Lingering resentments aside, the Sunday paper is a strong news product that draws advertisers. The Sunday paper consistently is larger than the daily (roughly 36 pages rather than about 20), even though readers may perceive it as "thin" because it is substantially smaller than the Toledo or Detroit Sunday papers.

The circulation department has become much more customer service oriented in the past few years and has seen the results in circulation that is growing steadily, although slowly. The paper is regaining readers lost after the Sunday paper.

For the future, perhaps the best use of the Sunday paper experience is as a lesson in marketing. It will be remembered as a bloody battle, but one which was pivotal in the war.

Electronic news

The raw data seems to indicate that there is very little market for electronic transmission of news and information. But that can be deceiving. Closer examination reveals an emerging trend toward computer use among those of middle age, people who likely will be The Evening News' main circulation base in the coming years.

Despite the expressed hesitancy toward using electronic media, it might be wise for The Evening News to offer some form of electronic information as a way of building toward the future. In a sense, the newspaper has been offering this service for years, by inviting readers to call in for election results and by permitting staffers to give out sports results on Friday and Saturday nights.

Through these means, some readers already have been using electronic means (their telephones) to access newspaper information.

Perhaps the logical first step is for The Evening News to offer election returns and weekend local sports scores via push-button telephone connection. That would prove as a test market for true reader interest, as opposed to their predicted interest, and even could be used to determine whether local advertisers are willing to "sponsor" electronic forms of news. The Friday night high school football scores could be "brought to you" by Monroe Bank & Trust, for instance.

A second foray into electronic news dissemination could be running Evening News classifieds, again with advertising sponsors, on local cable television stations. This is the type of electronic service readers most desired by readers, according to the survey. It also might be desired by cable operators who, facing reregulation, may want to do more in the way of local access public service.

Invite the reader in

With the help of this survey, hopefully Evening News staffers will be better able to think in terms of the reader when planning each day's news coverage. The reader profile, as well as the interest tables, were planned as a way to "invite" the reader into the morning editors' meetings. Focus groups and reader advisory boards could help do the same thing.

A successful newspaper needs to try to satisfy most of its readers, but perhaps another overall conclusion can be drawn from the survey based on the following tidbits from its responses:

"The Sunday paper has too much advertising."

"The editorials are too biased."

"The paper is a little opinionated. Too liberal."

"It has become much more conservative thinking...I've told that to many people."

"I have a gripe against the editor about Japanese trade. I think he has Japanese blood running through his veins."

"I like the Hi-Lite ad. I go through that three or four times."

"I'd like more news about Lawrence Welk and less about the girl who wants to go topless."

The conclusion: You can't please 'em all.

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APPENDIX 1

SURVEY

| | <u>Date</u> | <u>Result (Complete, no ans., msg.)</u> | <u>Initials</u> |
|---------|-------------|---|-----------------|
| Call #1 | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| Call #2 | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| Call #3 | _____ | _____ | _____ |

Name (from circulation listing) _____

Address (from circulation) _____

Hello, this is (your name) from The Monroe Evening News. Because you are a valued Evening News subscriber, we are interested in your opinions on our news coverage. Would you please take about 10 minutes to answer some questions for me? (If answer is no, ask if we could call back at a more convenient time. When?)

Section 1

I'm going to list several different types of news stories. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being low and 5 being high, please tell me how interested you are in each category of news. Then tell me whether you think The Evening News should provide more coverage of the subject, less coverage, or about the same coverage as we currently provide.

| | How interested? | Coverage should be: |
|---|-----------------|---------------------|
| Weather new | 1 2 3 4 5 | More Less Same |
| County govt. | 1 2 3 4 5 | More Less Same |
| Your schools | 1 2 3 4 5 | More Less Same |
| Clubs | 1 2 3 4 5 | More Less Same |
| Govt. meetings in your city, township or village | 1 2 3 4 5 | More Less Same |
| Road closings, recycling schedules and other govt. announcements | 1 2 3 4 5 | More Less Same |

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| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|------|------|------|
| National news | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | More | Less | Same |
| Obituaries | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | More | Less | Same |
| Community activities | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | More | Less | Same |
| Pro. sports | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | More | Less | Same |
| College sports | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | More | Less | Same |
| H. S. sports | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | More | Less | Same |
| Rec. sports | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | More | Less | Same |
| Int.'l news | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | More | Less | Same |
| Weddings, births | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | More | Less | Same |
| Entertainment (TV, music, celebrities) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | More | Less | Same |
| Police and court | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | More | Less | Same |
| Letters to ed. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | More | Less | Same |
| Local opinion columnists | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | More | Less | Same |
| Syndicated opinion columnists | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | More | Less | Same |
| Editorials | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | More | Less | Same |
| Farm news | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | More | Less | Same |
| Local business news | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | More | Less | Same |
| State news | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | More | Less | Same |
| Consumer and how-to | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | More | Less | Same |
| Health news | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | More | Less | Same |
| Science and environmental news | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | More | Less | Same |

Again on a scale of 1 to 5, please rate your overall satisfaction with
The Monroe Evening News:

1 2 3 4 5

People rely on various kinds of information to help them deal with
the everyday concerns of their lives. Please tell me, in your own
words, what kinds of information you wish you had more of.

Section 2

Many people get their news from more than one source, such as from television, radio, Monroe Evening News, Monroe Guardian, Toledo Blade, Detroit News, Detroit Free Press and word of mouth.

Where do you get most of your information about international news?

Television _____
Radio _____
Monroe Evening News _____
Monroe Guardian _____
Toledo Blade _____
Detroit News _____
Detroit Free Press _____
Word of mouth _____
Other _____

Where do you get most of your information about national news?

Television _____
Radio _____
Monroe Evening News _____
Monroe Guardian _____
Toledo Blade _____
Detroit News _____
Detroit Free Press _____
Word of mouth _____
Other _____

Where do you get most of your information about state news?

Television _____
Radio _____
Monroe Evening News _____
Monroe Guardian _____
Toledo Blade _____
Detroit News _____
Detroit Free Press _____
Word of mouth _____
Other _____

Where do you get most of your information about local news events?

Television _____
 Radio _____
 Monroe Evening News _____
 Monroe Guardian _____
 Toledo Blade _____
 Detroit News _____
 Detroit Free Press _____
 Word of mouth _____
 Other _____

Section 3

Some newspapers are making their news and information available to the public in new forms, such as by telephone, computer or cable television. If the following information were available through such services, how likely would you be to use it?

| | | | | |
|--------------------------------------|-------------|--------|------------|--------|
| Up-to-date sports score | Very likely | Likely | Not likely | Unsure |
| Weather | Very likely | Likely | Not likely | Unsure |
| Stock prices | Very likely | Likely | Not likely | Unsure |
| Horoscopes, soap opera updates | Very likely | Likely | Not likely | Unsure |
| World, national, state news | Very likely | Likely | Not likely | Unsure |
| Local news, such as election returns | Very likely | Likely | Not likely | Unsure |
| Community events calendar | Very likely | Likely | Not likely | Unsure |

| | | | | |
|---|----------------|--------|---------------|--------|
| Additional info. on sale items advertised in Evening news | Very likely | Likely | Not likely | Unsure |
| Classified ads such as those for autos, homes or help wanted | Very likely | Likely | Not likely | Unsure |

If you were to use these services, would you prefer to do so:

Through your push-button telephone (recorded info.) _____

On a cable television channel _____

Do you use a home computer? _____

(If yes), would you like to use these services through telephone
link to your home computer? _____

Is there some other type of news or information you'd like to receive
by telephone, computer or cable? If so, what?

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Section 4

On average, how much time do you spend reading The Evening News each weekday?

less than 10 minutes _____

40-50 minutes _____

10-20 minutes _____

50-60 minutes _____

20-30 minutes _____

more than 60 minutes _____

30-40 minutes _____

On average, how much time do you spend reading The Evening News on Sunday?

less than 10 minutes _____

40-50 minutes _____

10-20 minutes _____

50-60 minutes _____

20-30 minutes _____

more than 60 minutes _____

30-40 minutes _____

How many people in your household read your Evening News? _____

Would you mind telling me your age?

18-20 ____

41-45 ____

21-25 ____

46-50 ____

26-30 ____

51-60 ____

31-35 ____

61-65 ____

36-40 ____

66 and older _____

Male _____

Female _____

How long have you lived in this community?

0-5 years _____

16-20 years _____

6-10 years _____

21-30 years _____

11-15 years _____

31 years or more _____

How much education have you completed?

Grade school _____

Some college _____

Some high school _____

2-year degree _____

High school _____

4-year degree _____

Trade school _____

Graduate school _____
(master's, Ph.D., MD, JD, etc.)

Would you please tell me your approximate household income? Is it:

Under \$10,000 a year _____

\$41,000 - \$50,000 _____

\$11,000 - \$20,000 _____

\$51,000 - \$60,000 _____

\$21,000 - \$30,000 _____

\$61,000 - \$70,000 _____

\$31,000 - \$40,000 _____

\$71,000 and up _____

No answer _____

Is there anything else you would like to say?

Thank you very much for your time.

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DEFINITIONS OF SURVEY TERMS

Weather news – forecasts, stories on flooding, drought, snowstorms, etc.

County government – Monroe County Board of Commissioners, county agencies such as road commission, drain commission, sheriff's department

Your schools – School board meetings, activities of public schools in your community

Clubs – Organizations such as Jaycees, Kiwanis, Altrusa, garden clubs, women's groups, etc.

Government meetings – City council, township board, village council meetings

National news – News from around the nation, such as fires, crime, national elections, other political events, Congress, U.S. Supreme Court, etc.

Obituaries – Deaths of local people

Community activities – Festivals, fish dinners, craft shows, fund raisers, plays, speeches, etc.

Recreation sports – Community sports such as men's and women's and youth volleyball, softball, bowling

International news – World social and political happenings, government of foreign countries, terrorism, natural disasters

Police and court news – Local police reports, arrests, actions taken in local circuit and district courts

Letters to the editor – Letters written by readers and published on the editorial page.

Local columnists – Opinion columns written by Monroe Evening News staff members such as Editor Steve Gray, Sports Editor Ron Montri, others

Syndicated columnists – Commentary written by national columnists such as Ellen Goodman, William Rusher, Andy Rooney, Dear Abby

Editorials – The newspaper's commentary on local, state, national and international events

Farm news – Crop prices, effects of weather on farmers, etc.

Local business news – Openings and closings of local businesses, management promotions, retirements, stories on what various businesses produce, trends, etc.

State news – News from throughout Michigan, including political events, state government, stories about people and events in other communities in the state.

Consumer and how-to – Stories that give consumers information to help them make decisions or that tell you how to do things such as save money, buy a house, raise children, repair a car, etc.

Health – Medical news, information about nutrition, exercise, ways to keep healthy.

Science/environment – News about scientific discoveries and environmental issues such as pollution and its effects.

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