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ABSTRACT

Employing the community attachment model, a study hypothesized that the greater the personal experiences in and the greater the attachments to a community, the greater the reading of the local newspaper. The primary logic is that social ties and feelings of attachment generate needs for information that can be satisfied through reading of the local newspaper. Social priming is a metaphor to describe this process. Data collected through a probability survey of 349 students on a small midwest university campus support the hypotheses. Reading of the campus newspaper was higher among students who were more attached to the community and who lived on or near the campus, and reading was lower among those less attached and among commuter students. (Two tables of data and 23 notes are included.) (Author/RS)

Community Attachment, Social Priming and Newspaper Reading

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Employing the community attachment model, this study hypothesizes that the greater the personal experiences in and the greater the attachment to a community, the greater the reading of the local newspaper. The primary logic is that social ties and feelings of attachment generate needs for information that can be satisfied through reading of the local newspaper. Social priming is a metaphor to describe this process. Data collected through a probability survey of students on a small Midwest university campus support the hypotheses. Reading of the campus newspaper is higher among students who are more attached to the community and who live on or near the campus, and reading is lower among those less attached and among commuter students.

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Research on community attachment suggests that personal experience with and interpersonal discussions about issues facing a community normally should increase usage of the mass media. The major reason for this is that personal experiences and interpersonal discussions increase as community attachment increases, and research shows that people who are more attached to a community read the newspaper more than those who are less attached.[1] Social ties and feelings of attachment to a community generate needs for information that often can be satisfied through reading of the local newspaper.

In contrast to the community attachment approach, a number of agenda-setting researchers have argued since the late 1970s that personal experience with and interpersonal discussions about issues or problems in a community lessens the need to rely on the mass media which, in turn, lessens media effects.[2] As Palmgreen and Clark put it:

> The ability of citizens to witness firsthand many local political problems and events often may obviate the need to rely on the mass media as "extensions of one's senses." Certainly a person does not need the media to inform him that street repair is a major community problem, particularly if one of the streets in question is in front of one's home. Neighborhood interpersonal networks are often heavily laden with content arising from personal observation. ... every citizen of the community is a potential initial source for such local political "news" ...[3]

Does personal experience with an issue or, more generally, personal contact with a social system decrease or increase reading of the local newspaper? Following the community attachment model, this study hypothesizes that the greater the personal and interpersonal experiences in a social system and the greater the attachment, the greater the usage of the local newspaper. These hypotheses are tested using a probability survey of students at a small Midwest university.

Previous Research

The literature on community attachment and agenda-setting at first glance seems worlds apart. Community attachment researchers have been interested primarily in the relationship between newspaper reading and community attachment or social integration. Agenda-setting researchers, in contrast, have focused primarily on the relationship between media coverage of issues and public perceptions of the most important issues facing a community, or issue salience. These are real differences, to be sure. But a closer examination shows that both approaches share a common concern with trying to explain how social roles and personal experiences may mediate the effects of mass-communicated messages.

Agenda-Setting and the Obtrusive Contingency

The notion that personal experience can diminish reading of the newspaper or use of other media emerged after a number of agenda-setting studies in the mid-1970s failed to find a relationship between news content and

issue salience.[4] More formally, this has been called the obtrusive contingency, where obtrusiveness is defined as the amount of personal experience people have with issues. Under conditions of high obtrusiveness, the media are expected to have little or no effect on issue salience, but under conditions of low obtrusiveness the effects are expected to be strong. The assumption behind this hypothesis is that personal experience is a functional substitute for mass-mediated messages.

During the 1970s and 1980s, researchers who specifically tested the obtrusive contingency generally found support for it. For example, Palmgreen and Clarke surveyed 400 Toledo, Ohio, residents, asking them to identify local and national problems that they thought the local and national governments should try to resolve. They hypothesized that agenda-setting effects would be stronger for national than for local issues because "the ability personally to observe local problems and the greater influence of interpersonal channels at the local level should lead to a reduction in the influence of the media issue agenda on personal agendas."[5] Rank-order correlations supported their hypotheses. In a more recent study, Iyengar and Kinder also found that people who are more active in the political process and are more interested in politics are less susceptible to agenda-setting effects. "The more removed the viewer is from the world of public affairs, the stronger the agenda-setting power of television news."[6]

Although researchers who have specifically tested the obtrusive contingency have often found support for the idea,[7] empirical evidence from other agenda-setting studies has raised questions. For instance, inflation and crime are widely believed to be obtrusive issues, but several studies have found strong agenda-setting effects for them.[8] The obtrusive contingency also has been challenged on theoretical grounds. Erbring, Goldenberg and Miller argue that personal experience may enhance rather than assuage media effects.[9] This proposition, which has been called the cognitive priming hypothesis, holds that conditions in a person's environment sensitize, or prime, the individual's attention with respect to the issue in question. Their data show, for example, that agenda-setting effects for unemployment are stronger among people who are unemployed and who have a union member in their family. Similarly, although Iyengar and Kinder reported that agenda-setting effects are stronger for the less political active, they found that elderly viewers, after being exposed to news reports detailing the financial difficulties confronting the social security fund, are much more likely than younger viewers to say social security is one of the most important problems facing the country.[10]

Demers, Craff, Choi and Pessin also have argued that the obtrusive contingency fails to take into account the degree of consonance between media messages and personal experiences. That is, one might expect stronger, not weaker, agenda-setting effects when a media message reinforces a personal experience or an interpersonal discussion.[11] In a time-series analysis of three obtrusive and three unobtrusive issues, they found some support for the cognitive-priming hypothesis but no support for the obtrusive contingency.[12]

Community Attachment and Social Priming

In contrast to the research on agenda setting, the community attachment approach implies that personal experience with and interpersonal discussions about issues normally should increase rather than decrease reading of the local newspaper. This proposition is logically deduced from two others. The first is that social ties increase social interaction. In other words, people who are more attached to or involved in a community have more personal experiences with and interpersonal discussions about issues and concerns in the community. The second proposition is that people who are more attached to a community read the local newspaper more than those who are less attached. Social ties stimulate needs for information that often can be satisfied through reading of the local newspaper.

Social priming is a metaphor that is useful for describing this process. Personal and interpersonal experiences that social actors have as a result of their social ties and linkages to a community "prime" or generate needs for information which, in turn, increases reading the local newspaper.[13] Normally experience is not a functional substitute for media messages because rarely are the two identical or isomorphic. For example, although a homeowner does not need to rely on the media to determine whether his or her street needs repair, the personal experience of driving on a deteriorating street cannot tell the homeowner whether the street will be repaired, when it will be repaired, how long the repairs will take, and whether taxes will increase. Of course, some of these questions can be answered through interpersonal discussions with neighbors or through direct contact with city hall. But these are not always reliable sources of information, and most homeowners do not have the time and resources to investigate these questions personally. A more efficient way to obtain information about proposed road repair is to read the local newspaper.

The newspaper is superior to the neighborhood grapevine because it specializes in the production of

information for public consumption. Unlike citizens, reporters have privileged access to the centers of power in a community, and, as a consequence, can obtain information in a more efficient and reliable fashion.[14] And even if the homeowner has direct access to city hall, he or she is still more likely to read the newspaper than other citizens since the newspaper is one more source of information that may influence the outcome of the issue. Thus, far from substituting for media messages, personal experience normally increases a citizen's interest in learning more about an issue or concern, and the local newspaper is an important source of information for satisfying that interest.

Empirical research provides a great deal of support for the notion that community attachment is strongly correlated with reading of the local newspaper.[15] Recent studies suggest that reading depends more upon social ties than the other way around,[16] but the relationship is undoubtedly reciprocal. Social ties prime needs for information, while reading the newspaper can satisfy such needs and, concomitantly, reinforce and promote feelings of attachment.[17] Although virtually no research has explored the effects of personal experience in or contact with a social system on newspaper reading, the concept of social priming suggests that personal experience also will increase reading the local newspaper. This does not mean that personal experience will always increase reading patterns. One contingency should be the extent to which the two are isomorphic. For example, attending a sporting event normally should obviate the need to watch a re-run of the game on television later. Nevertheless, even in this case some die-hard sports fans will have a desire to watch the game later to analyze the action in-depth.[18]

Three additional qualifications about the theory offered here also are necessary. First, the types of social linkages that prime usage of the media is not the same for all types of media. Reading of the local newspaper has been strongly linked to local community ties (e.g., home ownership, memberships in local organizations, having children in school, etc.), but this has not always been the case for other types of media.[19] For example, reading of the metropolitan daily or viewing the television news may depend upon other types of social linkages to the community, such as occupation, education and income.

Second, social ties are not the only factor influences media usage. Competition in the marketplace and media consumption patterns, for instance, also play a role.

And third, the effects of social priming may vary across social systems. In small, homogeneous communities, persons who are more integrated in the community would be expected to read the local paper more than those who are less integrated, according to the community attachment model. However, reading the paper is not crucial for integration in such a system. The local paper may be considered a redundant source of information, as news can often be obtained through interpersonal contacts and experiences. "News travels fast in a small town" is an expression that captures this process. In large, pluralistic systems, on the other hand, individuals would be expected to depend more on mass media for accomplishing their goals because such systems are too large to be monitored through interpersonal contact alone.[20]

Hypotheses

If social ties to and personal experiences in a social system generally serve to prime individuals needs for information and news, then one would expect the following in terms of reading of the local community newspaper:

H1: The greater the community attachment, the greater the newspaper reading.

H2: The greater the personal experience in or personal contact with a community, the greater the newspaper reading.

H3: The greater the community attachment, the greater the personal experiences, and vice versa.

Method and Measures

Data for this study were collected during telephone interviews October 15 to November 2, 1992, with 349 students attending the University of Wisconsin in River Falls, Wisconsin, a community of about 6,000 year-around residents located 30 miles southeast of St. Paul, Minnesota. Calls were placed to a total of 492 students, for a total response rate of 71 percent.[21] The primary purpose of the survey was to learn more about student attitudes and opinions toward a number of social and political issues. Interviews were conducted by students enrolled in a public opinion course taught by the author.

UW-RF is a state-operated educational institution with an enrollment of about 5,500 students, most of whom are undergraduates. Many students say they enrolled in UW-RF because they prefer a small, rural-like campus. Although more than half of the students grew up in small towns and rural areas of Wisconsin and Minnesota,[22] in terms of their positions on various political and social issues, they are nearly identical to students nationwide.[23]

Table 1
Correlations Between Newspaper Reading and Independent and Control Variables[a]

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Newspaper Reading	1.00	.30**	-.25**	-.06	.01	.10	-.09*
2. Community Attachment	.30**	1.00	-.27	-.03	-.21	.03	-.04
3. Commuter Student	-.25**	-.27**	1.00	.13**	.21**	-.03	.11*
4. Grew Up in Urban Area	-.06	-.03	.13**	1.00	.18**	.15**	.04
5. Years at UW-RF	.01	.09	.21**	.18**	1.00	.03	.02
6. Father's Education	.10*	.06	-.03	.15**	.03	1.00	.08
7. Female Gender	-.09*	-.04	.11*	.04	.02	.08	1.00

[a]N=335

*p<.05
**p<.01

The major source of news on campus is the *Student Voice*, an award-winning weekly newspaper written and edited solely by students. Like most campus newspapers, the *Voice* gives primary coverage to the traditional centers of power on the campus, including the administration, student and faculty groups, and sports teams.

The dependent variable is reading the school newspaper. This was created by multiplying the values from two measures:

1. "In an average month, how many issues of the Student Voice do you read or look at?" Responses were recorded on a five point scale ranging from 0 to four. Half of the students (50%) reported that read the Voice four times a month; only 15% reported not reading it all.

2. "About how much time, on the average, do you spend reading each issue of the Student Voice? Less than one hour, one to two hours, or more than two hours?" Responses were recorded on a three-point scale from 1 to 3. Eighty-four percent of those reading the Voice reported reading it less than one hour; 16 percent read it for more than one hour.

The distribution of the final reading index approximated a normal curve (mean=3.2, SD=2.3, range= 0 to 12).

The two key independent variables are community attachment and personal experience in or contact with the university community. Community attachment was created by summing the values of two separate measures:

1. "How close do you, yourself, feel to the university community at River Falls — would you say you feel very close, somewhat close or not very close to the university community?" Responses were recorded on a three-point scale, with 25 percent saying they felt "very close," 60 percent "somewhat close," and 15 percent "not very close."

2. "How many university clubs, groups, organizations and sports teams are you a member of?" Responses ranged from zero to six, with a mean of 1.4.

The zero-order correlation between the two measures was .35 (p<.001). The values were standardized before creating the final index, which was skewed in a positive direction but not seriously (mean=0.00, SD=.819, range= -1.24 to 2.59).

Personal experience, the other key independent variable, was measured by the following: "Do you consider yourself a commuter student?" The assumption underlying this measure is that commuter students have fewer personal and interpersonal experiences at the university; that is, living in the community exposes students to the issues and problems facing the university community and interpersonal discussions about them. The survey showed that nearly a third of the respondents (29%) consider themselves commuter students, many of whom (about half) live in the Twin Cities. The rest of the

Table 2
Zero-Order and Fifth-Order Partial Correlations Between Newspaper Reading and Independent and Control Variables[a]

	Zero-Order Correlations	Fifth-Order Partial Correlations
Community Attachment	.30**	.24**
Commuter Student	-.25**	-.17**
Grew Up in Urban Area	-.06	-.04
Years at UW-RF	.01	.03
Father's Education	.10*	.10*
Female Gender	-.09*	-.07

[a]N=335

*p<.05
**p<.01

respondents (71%) live on campus or in the River Falls area.

Four control variables also were employed: (1) structural complexity of the community in which the respondent grew up (rural=1; urban=2); (2) years attended UW-RF; (3) father's education (from less than high school to graduate degree, coded 1 to 5); and (4) gender (male=1; female=2). Previous studies have shown that community pluralism, years spent in a community, and education correlate positively with newspaper reading, while gender is often a good predictor of community attachment (i.e., females more attached).

Because of missing values on some of these measures, the total number of respondents included in this analysis is 335.

Findings

The data support all three hypotheses.

The first hypothesis posited that the greater the community attachment, the greater the newspaper reading. Table 1 shows that the zero-order correlation between the community attachment index and newspaper reading is .30 (p<.01). Students who feel more attached to the community and who belong to more clubs and organizations read the campus newspaper more often. Table 2 shows that the correlation drops slightly when controlling for commuter status and the other control variables (from .30 to .24), but the relationship is still highly significant (p<.01). Community attachment is the single best predictor of newspaper reading.

The data support the second hypothesis, which proposed that the greater the personal experiences in a community, the greater the newspaper reading. In Table 1, the zero-order correlation between commuter status, the surrogate measure of personal experience in the community, and newspaper reading is -.25 (p<.01). That is, commuter students read the newspaper less frequently than students who live in the community. Table 2 indicates that this relationship declines slightly when controlling for community attachment and the other control variables (from -.25 to -.17), but it remains highly significant (p<.01).

The third hypothesis — the greater the community attachment, the greater the personal experiences — also is supported. Table 1 shows that the zero-order correlation between community attachment and commuter status is -.27 (p<.01). Commuter students feel less attached to the community and belong to fewer organizations.

Table 1 also shows that two of the control variables, father's education and gender, are significantly related to newspaper reading: The higher the father's education, the higher the reading and males read the newspaper more than females. However, both of these relationships are weak (r=.10 and r= -.09), and Table 2 shows that gender becomes nonsignificant (p<.05) when controlling for the other variables. Community attachment and commuter status are clearly the most important variables explaining newspaper reading.

Summary

This study examined the effect of community attachment and personal experience on reading a campus

newspaper. It was hypothesized that the greater the personal experience in or contact with a community and the greater the attachment to a community, the greater the reading of the local newspaper. The primary logic behind these hypotheses is that social ties and feelings of attachment generate needs for information that can be satisfied through reading of the local newspaper. Social priming is a metaphor to describe this process.

Data collected through a probability survey of 335 students at the University of Wisconsin in River Falls, Wisconsin, support the hypotheses. Reading of the campus newspaper is higher among students who are more attached to the community and who live on or near the campus; reading is lower among those less attached and among commuter students. These findings held up when controlling for complexity of community in which the respondent grew up in (rural vs. urban), years attending UW-RF, father's education and gender. Future research should consider examining whether the notion of social priming may be extended to use of other media, including daily newspapers, network and cable television, and radio.

Endnotes

1. See, e.g., John R. Finnegan, Jr., and Kasisomayajula Viswanath, "Community Ties and Use of Cable TV and Newspapers in a Midwest Suburb," *Journalism Quarterly,* 65:456-463,473 (Summer 1988); Morris Janowitz, *The Community Press in an Urban Setting,* 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967); Robert E. Park, "The Natural History of the Newspaper," *American Journal of Sociology*, 24(3):273-289 (November 1923) and "Urbanization as Measured by Newspaper Circulation," *American Journal of Sociology*, 34 (1929); Keith Stamm, *Newspaper Use and Community Ties: Toward a Dynamic Theory* (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, 1985); and Phillip J. Tichenor, George A. Donohue and Clarice N. Olien, *Community Conflict and the Press* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1980), p. 57.

2. See, e.g., Tony Atwater, Michael B. Salwen, and R. B. Anderson, "Media Agenda-Setting With Environmental Issues," *Journalism Quarterly,* 62:393-397 (1985); Kim A. Smith, "Newspaper Coverage and Public Concern About Community Issues: A Time-Series Analysis," *Journalism Monographs,* Vol. 101, (1987); David Weaver, Doris Graber, Maxwell McCombs and Chaim Eyal, *Media Agenda-Setting in a Presidential Election: Issues, Images and Interest* (New York: Praeger, 1981); James P. Winter, "Contingent Conditions in the Agenda-Setting Process," pp. 235-243 in G. C. Wilhoit and H. de Bock (eds.), *Mass Communication Review Yearbook,* Vol. 3 (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1981); and H. G. Zucker, "The Variable Nature of News Media Influence," pp. 225-240 in B. D.4 Ruben (ed.), *Communication Yearbook,* Vol. 2 (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1978).

3. Philip Palmgreen and Peter Clarke, "Agenda-Setting With Local and National Issues," *Communication Research,* 4(4):435-452 (October 1977), p. 437.

4. Winter, *op. cit.*

5. Palmgreen and Clarke, *op. cit.*, p. 437.

6. Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder, *News That Matters: Television and American Opinion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 63.

7. See Warrick R. Blood, "Unobtrusive Issues in the Agenda-Setting Role of the Press," *Dissertation Abstracts International,* 43, 8-A (Doctoral Dissertation, Syracuse University, 1981); Chaim H. Eyal, "Time Frame in Agenda-Setting Research: A Study of the Conceptual and Methodological Factors Affecting the Time Frame Context of the Agenda-Setting Process," *Dissertation Abstracts International,* 40, 6052-A (Doctoral Dissertation, Syracuse University, 1979); and Zucker, *op. cit.*

8. For inflation results, see Roy L. Behr and Shanto Iyengar, "Television News, Real-World Cues, and Changes in the Public Agenda," *Public Opinion Quarterly,* 49:38-57 (1985) and Michael Bruce MacKuen and Steven Lane Coombs, *More Than News: Media Power in Public Affairs* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1981). For crime, see Smith, *op. cit.* Also see Ardith B. Sohn, "Newspaper Agenda-Setting and Community Expectations," *Journalism Quarterly,* 61:892-897 (Winter 1984).

9. Lutz Erbring, Edie N. Goldenberg and Arthur H. Miller, "Front-Page News and Real-World Cues: A New Look at Agenda-Setting by the Media," *American Journal of Political Science*, 24:16-49 (February 1980).

10. Iyengar and Kinder, *op. cit.*

11. David Pearce Demers, Dennis Craff, Yang-Ho Choi and Beth M. Pessin, "Issue Obtrusiveness and the Agenda-Setting Effects of National Network News," *Communication Research,* 16(6):793-812 (December 1989).

12. *Ibid.*

13. The difference between cognitive priming and social priming is that the former refers to psychological while the latter to sociological processes. Some of the examples that Erbring, Goldenberg and Miller gave of cognitive priming (e.g., employment status, union membership) are more accurately classified as social priming because the need for information stems from an individual's social ties or linkages to a community.

14. This is not to say that newspaper accounts are always reliable, but normally they are more reliable than informal grapevines, in which information may be distorted as it passes from one neighbor to another.

15. Leo W. Jeffres, Jean Dobos and Jae-won Lee, "Media Use and Community Ties," *Journalism Quarterly,* 65(3):575-581,677 (Fall 1988); Finnegan and Viswanath, *op. cit.;* Janowitz, *op. cit.*; Stamm, *op. cit.*; Tichenor, Donohue and Olien, *op. cit.*

16. Keith R. Stamm and Avery M. Guest, "Communication and Community Integration: An Analysis of the Communication Behavior of Newcomers," *Journalism Quarterly,* 68(4):644-656 (Winter 1991) and Lori Collins-Jarvis, "A Causal Model of the Reciprocal Relationship Between Community Attachment and Community Newspaper Use," paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Montreal, August 1992.

17. This does not necessarily mean that all news promotes feelings of attachment or is functional for the system. An in-depth series that promotes the gay movement, for example, may alienate religious groups and raise doubts about the extent to which a community of shared values and sentiments exists. However, the assumption here is that newspaper content generally promotes community integration.

18. The distinction here is that need to analyze the action later is a need that differs from the original need to watch the game.

19. See, e.g., Finnegan and Viswanath, *op. cit.*

20. Sandra J. Ball-Rokeach, "The Origins of Individual Media System Dependency: A Sociological Framework," *Communication Research*, 12:485-510 (1985); Sandra J. Ball-Rokeach and Melvin L. DeFleur, "A Dependency Model of Mass Media Effects," *Communication Research*, 3:3-21 (1976); David Pearce Demers, *Structural Pluralism, Competition and the Growth of the Corporate Newspaper in the United States,* Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Minnesota (December 1992); and Olien, Donohue, Tichenor and Hindman, *op. cit.*

21. The denominator includes "no answers" and answering machines.

22. The survey asked, "Which of the following best describes the type of place where you grew up? A large city, a medium-sized city, a suburb, a small town, a rural area or farm. Fifty-four percent said a small town, a rural area or farm.

23. The results of the survey were compared with those from the National Survey of University Freshman conducted by the University of California at Los Angeles.