RESETTING AND REINVENTING PRINT MEDIA:
LEARNING FROM COLLEGE MEDIA

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ABSTRACT
A readership study, employing an online survey (n = 275), was conducted to determine the reading preferences of students, faculty, staff, and alumni for the student magazine and web site of a technological university. The print version (53%) was preferred over the online version (22%), with 25% having no preference. Internet and social media were the preferred news media with Facebook dominating all other sites. Few had downloaded the app (7%), despite the fact that 92% owned smartphones. Attitudes toward news were positive and predictive of reading specific sections. Reading the technology section was significantly related to being “part of my daily habit,” “part of my civic duty,” “helpful in making choices,” and negatively related to “inconvenient.” Additional qualitative responses are discussed.

Keywords: College press, print, social media, transitioning.

INTRODUCTION
In the fall of 2012, Rochester Institute of Technology’s (RIT) student-run magazine, Reporter, was printing a weekly magazine with little focus on online content and thousands of dollars in debt. A plan was developed to create daily online content supplemented by a monthly magazine with a mobile app to access their contents. No tuition revenue is received since Reporter is produced independently of course credit. There is no charge for either the monthly magazine or the online publication. Moving from a weekly to a monthly was partly a cost-cutting measure, but the magazine had moved to an online website to complement the weekly magazine in 2000.

The website simply served as a digital version of the weekly magazine, with no added content for online consumption. Social media were rarely used to share articles or information, despite the fact that Twitter and Facebook were regularly used by journalists and news consumers for distributing and obtaining the news, respectively. In 2013, the number of issues printed was reduced from 6000 to 3000 due to lack of demand, and a preliminary website redesign was unveiled. Reporter hoped to create
content solely for the purpose of online distribution and differentiated the two media by creating the positions of online managing editor and print managing editor.

In the spring semester of 2014 Reporter began to create separate print and online content. Print content included more longform feature stories, while articles on the website became shorter and released daily. Mobile applications for iOS and Android devices were created, along with a video department to produce more multimedia stories. These changes called for an analysis of its readership to assess the transition from a print-only, weekly product to a 24-hour news cycle run solely by full-time students but read by students, faculty, staff, administration, and alumni.

Highly educated people (those with a bachelor’s degree or postgraduate education), have shown the highest increases in time spent consuming news and are most likely to use digital and traditional platforms (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2010). The college press can serve as a model of success or failure in transitioning to new media and attracting an educated audience.

Review of Literature

We consume and are consumed by media. Globally, people spent 485.3 minutes per day using media in 2014 (Austin et al., 2015). However, only 16 minutes was spent with a newspaper (down 25.6%), and magazine readership fell to 23 minutes (down 19%) over the last four years. Globally, the amount of time spent reading newspapers dropped by 25%, and the amount of time spent using the Internet increased 12.9% in 2010 to 22.6% in 2015 (Austin et al., 2015). The same study found that in the U.S., people read as much as they ever have, but there has been a marked decline in reading on paper. It has been predicted that 28.6% of the time spent using media will involve the Internet.

Not surprisingly, reading on mobile, tablet, and desktop devices has increased. Online news consumption is on the rise, and news is now shared and discussed on social networking sites. The number of Americans reporting that they saw news or news headlines on social networking sites has doubled since 2010 (Pew Research Center, 2012b). The Pew Research Center (2012) found that 60% of Americans under the age of 25 got their news digitally. Newspaper readership has fallen across all age groups since 1999 with young adults (18-34 years of age) far less likely to read a print newspaper compared with other age groups (Edmonds, Guskin, & Rosenstiel, 2011). These disruptions present challenges as well as opportunities for all media, but nowhere is this more the case than with college media. College media have had to switch to online distribution and compete with other media for students’ time and attention.

It is not clear that young people use the Internet or mobile devices for the purpose of news. The Pew Research Center reports that although younger audiences are most likely to use media technologies in their daily lives, they do not report using these technologies to obtain news at higher rates than older people (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2010). Mindich (2005) points out that news is not a focus of Internet use for the young, “It would be easy to dismiss the decline in newspaper readership and television news viewership among young people by saying that they get their news, somehow, via the Internet and other sources. As I will show later, however, most young people use the Internet for everything but news” (p. 5). This raises the first research question, “What are the preferred sources of news?”

Despite the rise of social media as news outlets, users of Facebook and Twitter admitted that they hardly ever or never get news from those sources (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2010). Although nearly all people under 30 use the
Internet, 80% say they have social networking profiles, 58% use cell phones to go online, and only 48% accessed news through any digital source the day before. Most younger people (57%) received news from traditional media (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2010), and a number of studies have reported that most people find the print newspaper more useful, satisfying, likeable, and enjoyable than the online versions (Chyi & Chang, 2009; Chyi & Lasorsa, 2002; Chyi & Yang, 2009; De Waal, Schoenbach, & Lauf, 2005; Online Publishers Association, 2004). One survey (Iheartnewspapers, 2013) reported that college students prefer print newspapers with 60% preferring the print edition, versus 24% undecided, and 16% prefer the online version. This raises the next research question, “Which version of Reporter do readers prefer?”

Social media have become news platforms, especially for younger audiences. It has been reported that 47% of Facebook and 52% of Twitter users get news from those sites with Reddit topping the list at 62% (Holcomb, Gottfried, Mitchell, & Schillinger, 2013). Although 47% find news on Facebook, those users account for 30% of the population. However, most U.S. users are not actually seeking news on that platform with 78% finding news incidentally and only 4% reporting it is the most important means of getting news (Mitchell et al., 2013). Younger people (between 18 and 29) on Facebook constitute 34% of Facebook news consumers (Mitchell et al., 2013). This sets up the question, “Which social media sites are most accessed for college news at RIT?”

Mobile media have experienced widespread growth. Pew Research found that 85% of adults use the Internet and 67% use smartphones (Duggan, 2015). Although Facebook leads social media with 72% of adults online and 62% of all American adults, growth has leveled off (Duggan, 2015). However, Pew Research surveys report that most of the social media platforms studied have witnessed a significant rise in the proportion of U.S. adults using them (Duggan, 2015). In particular, Twitter has experienced a 7-point increase in users from the 16% in 2012 to 23% of online adults in 2015. Given the popularity of discussion on sites and forums among young adults, it is important to know which are being used by one’s readership. This leads to the research question of how many downloaded the mobile app for Reporter magazine?

Young adults have a tendency to view news negatively (Mindich, 2005; Pew Research Center, 2006). Drawing in part from Pew Research Center’s (2006) biannual report of media use, Lewis (2008) produced a list of dominant words and phrases used to describe news including negative and positive assessments, “too time-consuming, boring, irrelevant to me, hard to understand, mostly negative, not enjoyable to read/watch, inconvenient, biased, informative, something to talk about, entertaining, part of my daily habit, helpful in making choices, part of my civic duty, easily accessible, and objective/fair” (p. 40). The present study employed those descriptions to gauge how respondents felt about news and whether they predicted readership. This sets up the next two research questions: “How do respondents feel about news?” and “How do these attitudes predict readership of the content sections?”

Newspapers have increased investment in multiplatform news delivery in an attempt to attract young readers (Graybeal, 2011). Younger audiences report spending more time online as compared with other age groups (Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project, 2011). However, two studies (Ha & Fang, 2012; Panek, 2014), found that students’ overuse of technology can produce a displacement effect resulting in less time spent with traditional news media. This effect can also displace Internet use.
One online survey (Lewis, 2008), found that most college students believed that they would be less dependent on the Internet in five years. Given that media are fast changing and in transition, it makes sense to find out what respondents believe their most often used sources of news will be. Knowing that colleges and universities tend to offer four and five-year degrees, the time frame of five years was used. To follow Lewis’ (2008) “forward-looking focus” (p. 37), respondents were asked “In five years, how often do you think you will get your news from the following media?” The options of Internet, television, newspapers, magazines, radio, and smartphone were offered.

**Method**

Participants: An online survey was hosted on an RIT website, and participants were requested to complete the questionnaire through email. The survey was also promoted through Reporter's social media on Facebook and Twitter. All present students, faculty, staff, and alumni were asked to assess readership of both the monthly and online editions, to better understand the ever-changing college and alumni audience. In particular, they were asked about which social media sites they access for news, whether they prefer print or online versions of Reporter, what their content preferences are, and how they assess the mobile app. Additionally, they were asked what changes they would recommend, how they felt about news in general, what media they will use to access news in five years, and what media devices they own.

College students are an important population to the study of news consumption. Lifelong habits are formed around the time people begin college (Al-Obaidi et al., 2004; Barnhurst & Wartella, 1998; Schlageheck, 1998). It has been claimed that Internet use has become a part of their daily lives and that it is used for both news and entertainment (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2000; Metzger et al., 2003). Although the use of college students in social science research as a representative sample has long been questioned (Basil, 1996; Calder, Phillips, & Tybout, 1983; Courtright, 1996; Peterson, 2001; Potter et al., 1995; Sparks, 1995), the present study includes faculty, staff, administration, and alumni. The demographics might be predictive of future trends in news media, especially since they constitute a coveted demographic of the highly educated much sought after by news media and advertisers alike.

Response rates: Pew Research reports that response rates have declined dramatically (2012c). It is reported that the response rate in a telephone survey was 36% in 1997 but only 9% at the time of the report. This is evident both in the U.S. and other countries. Our survey of 18,606 students resulted in 275 completions and partial completions by students for a response rate of 1.5%. Calculated by dividing both by the sample size is one method of determining the response rate. However, that does not take into account those who might have been unavailable during the time of the survey.

**Research Questions**

What are the preferred sources of news? Overwhelmingly, Internet was the chosen medium for news, followed by social media. Although the former encompasses the latter, together they account for more than all other media combined. Word of mouth is, strictly speaking, not a medium, but it came out higher than magazines as a source for news. Obviously, one is free and it can be argued that you get what you pay for. With the demise of the weekly newsmagazine (see Macht, 2013 and Thompson, 2012), perhaps magazines are no longer thought of as news media. It has long been known that newspapers are losing ground, but network television news was recently reported to be
gaining while cable news was declining (Matsa, 2015). The results of this study show a steep drop off after social media with network news trailing by a wide margin (see Figure 1).

Which version of Reporter do readers prefer? In a not-so-surprising finding, the readership overwhelmingly preferred the print magazine 53% (141) over the online version 22% (57) with 25% (66) having no preference. This might be due to a difference in content, since the print magazine tends to favor the feature story and has longer articles. There is also high quality photography and illustration on glossy paper. The fact that it is free might also appeal to audiences used to paying for magazines.

Which social media sites are most accessed for news? Facebook was the overwhelming favorite and came in well ahead of Twitter. This is not unexpected since it has been estimated that about 10% of U.S. adults use Twitter for news while 41% get their news from Facebook (Barthel, Shearer, Gottfried, & Mitchell, 2015). Although similar, the two have different features and audiences, but Twitter tends to have a wider range of news content. Although Reddit provides news content for 62% of its users, only 3% of the U.S. population uses the site (See Figure 2).
How many downloaded the mobile app for Reporter magazine? Only 17 of 253 (7%) respondents had downloaded the app. This is surprising considering that 231 reported owning smartphones and 242 owning laptops. It may be that given the choice of reading a print magazine on glossy paper, an online news site on a high resolution screen, or a news feed on a smartphone, respondents would choose one of the former and elect not to download the app. In addition, some commented that they were not interested in using space on their phone for the app and cited some glitches in the app as reasons to not download it. RIT is a digital-rich environment with wireless, high speed Internet access everywhere on campus. Given the ample number of magazines conveniently placed across the campus, perhaps the app is not viewed as necessary. However, an alternative explanation could also be due to the lack of publicity. A number of respondents reported they did not know about the app in a comments section of the questionnaire. Still another possibility is the confusion with another RIT app named “RIT mobile.”

How do respondents feel about news? Using a semantic differential ranging from accurate (1) to inaccurate (5), subjects were asked to describe their feelings about news. Their responses were very positive. What follows is the rank order followed by means (see Table 1).
Table 1 Subjects feeling about news ranked by means.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feeling</th>
<th>Mean</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Something to talk about</td>
<td>1.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easily accessible</td>
<td>1.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informative</td>
<td>2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertaining</td>
<td>2.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part of my daily habit</td>
<td>2.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helpful in making choices</td>
<td>2.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biased</td>
<td>2.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part of my civic duty</td>
<td>2.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mostly negative</td>
<td>3.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective/fair</td>
<td>3.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not enjoyable to read/watch</td>
<td>3.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irrelevant to me</td>
<td>3.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too time-consuming</td>
<td>3.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boring</td>
<td>3.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inconvenient</td>
<td>3.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hard to understand</td>
<td>4.16</td>
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</table>

The first eight descriptions were positive, and only objective/fair came after “mostly negative.” This could be, in part, due to the rise in talk radio and cable news, although “bad news” has been a common complaint.

How do these attitudes predict readership of the content sections? To see if these attitudes predicted readership of certain content, a correlation (Spearman’s rho) was used to test for significance. A number of significant relationships were found between these attitudes and certain sections of the publication.

“Boring” was positively correlated with the views section ($r = .151$, $p = .024$) but negatively with the leisure section ($r = -.138$, $p = .038$). In other words, readers who tended to find news boring were more likely to read stories in the views section but less likely to read those in the leisure section. The views section tends to be more position-based and takes the form of essays, student opinions, and messages texted or left on the answering machine at the Reporter office. The leisure section is more serious than the views section and tends to offer students diversions in terms of thought and action. These sections appeal to both those who find news boring and, conversely, those who find news interesting.

“Biased” related only to the news section. The more biased readers believed news to be, the less they read it ($r = -1.66$, $p = .013$). The news in Reporter tends to be gleaned from other sources; consequently, it may be subject to the same attitudes readers have toward mainstream media. Another possible explanation is that readers are already familiar with the story and choose not to read it in other publications or websites such as Reporter.

“Hard to understand” and “objective/fair” were both related to the sports section. The harder readers found news to understand, the more likely they read the sports section ($r = .137$, $p = .040$) and the more objective/fair they believed news to be, the less likely they read sports ($r = -.159$, $p = .017$). This may be due to the nature
of sports reporting. It is rarely considered hard news, and the objective aspects, such as scores and won/loss records, are so timely and perishable, they are best reported online but not in a monthly magazine. Consequently, sportswriting in weekly or monthly magazines often takes the form of human interest stories about athletes or issues surrounding athletics. Sports satisfies those looking for diversion without taxing the reader, and if hard news and objective reporting of important events is sought, the sports section is one of the least likely places to find it.

It must be remembered that RIT is a technological institution focused on career education, and this is strongly reflected in attitudes and readership of the technology section. A majority (52%) of respondents came from three of the Institute’s nine colleges: the College of Imaging Arts and Sciences, the College of Engineering, and the College of Computing and Information Sciences. Each of these colleges has a strong technological focus and, consequently, so do their students. The technology section of Reporter was significantly related to “part of my daily habit” (r = .157, p = .018), “part of my civic duty” (r = -.239, p = .000), “helpful in making choices” (r = .161, p = .015), and negatively related to “inconvenient” (r = -.140, p = .036). Whether students, faculty, staff, or alumni, readership is concerned with technology whether one is teaching, learning, or practicing.

Which media do respondents believe they will use for news five years from now? It appears the Internet and the smartphone are most likely to be used more often. This contradicts Lewis’ (2008) finding, but eight years is a long time in terms of technological advancement. Given the sample of people with ties to a technological institution, this is not surprising. Traditional media all show predicted declines. Media will have to adapt or face attrition or extinction (see Table 2).

Table 2 Estimates of news media use in five years.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Accessed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Less often</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspapers</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magazines</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smartphone</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conclusions

It was clear that social media and Internet were the top two news sources that respondents preferred; 215 respondents preferred the Internet, while another 164 preferred social media. Television, as a source of news, came in third with 98 respondents. However, the same respondents overwhelmingly preferred the print version of Reporter to the online version (147 preferred print to 57 online, while 66 persons had no preference). The students, faculty, staff, administration, and alumni who responded to the survey also stated that they most often learned of Reporter content through print articles, and many stated as a general comment that they had never visited the website or were unaware of its existence. In fact, 132 respondents said that they had never read an article on the Reporter site.

This is cause for some confusion. In February of 2016, the Reporter website experienced 31,000 page views and 10,000 sessions with 22.6% being returning users. When you consider that the organization only prints 3,000 copies of the print edition each month, it becomes apparent that the online website experiences a greater number of readers than the print edition each month. The survey was distributed through Reporter’s social media on Facebook and Twitter, as well as through RIT’s email services. Social media is the magazine’s dominant medium for promoting online articles; consequently, one could hypothesize that the survey would have a larger response rate from those who prefer reading Reporter articles online, as opposed to the limited ones in print. However, that hypothesis would not be supported by these findings. It may be that those who responded to the email request to take part in the survey had developed a “magazine habit.” Perhaps the tone of the email, requesting feedback to improve the magazine, appealed more to those who read the print version. Future research might inquire into readership loyalty and desire to improve the publication. It is clear that Reporter’s website needs to be advertised more to reach a larger audience that is still relying solely on the print magazine, even though the website is on the cover and the Table of Contents of each print issue.

The survey asked readers for suggestions to improve the website. The addition of a comments section is important, particularly with regard to fostering a community in their readership. On the survey, 111 respondents asked for a commenting feature to be added to the website, while only 30 disagreed, and 95 respondents were indifferent on the matter. It should not be ignored that several of the comments on Reporter’s website were content related. Readership cannot be increased if people do not enjoy what they are reading.

Many comments asked for more campus news in particular and less commentary of national or international matters at a campus level. Others asked for specific topics to be considered, such as mental health on RIT’s campus. Although this has been written about before, perhaps repetition of articles or article subject matter can happen more frequently on a college campus due to the ever-changing audience of current students. Overall, it may be concluded that the school press would be well advised to go local rather than global.

When asked in general which social media sites were most frequently used to access the news in general, survey respondents overwhelmingly preferred Facebook with Twitter falling shortly behind. YouTube and Redditt were a close third and fourth, respectively. These tendencies were reflected in those who said that they were
following Reporter’s social media in exactly the same order but at much smaller percentages, leading us to believe that promotion of Reporter’s social media is also important to reaching this part of the readership.

In response to the question of where readers felt they would be getting their news in five years, most said they would access news more often through the Internet or social media, while newspapers, magazines, and radio were overwhelmingly predicted to be accessed less often. This follows what we had hypothesized based on other studies. Thus, we can conclude that the shift from a weekly, print-only operation to a more online and multi-media approach was a move that was inevitable. Focusing on these media in the form of mobile applications, social media, and the Internet will be more important in the coming years, and remaining attentive to other, future tools will undoubtedly change the face of Reporter as well as news in general.

The survey led us to conclude that the most important task is to focus on developing the mobile application. Although the mobile application is available free for both Android and iOS smart devices, 236 respondents stated that they had not downloaded the mobile app. When they were asked why, answers almost always had to do with a lack of knowledge of the application. Others reported problems with the app, such as glitches that caused the app to force close when opening different articles. Some respondents pointed to limited space on their phone or an excess of apps that they do not really need. Clearly, more attention and effort needs to be focused on creating an app that people feel they “need” on their phones. Casual glitches cannot occur frequently, and overall style and usability of the app need to be improved, including special requests for a more mobile-friendly way of showcasing photos and push notifications. More attention needs to be paid to promoting the mobile app, so that more people know of its existence and use it to access content.

A number of significant correlations were found between attitudes toward news and reading certain sections that focused on different types of content. Those who believed news to be biased were less likely to read the news section. This serves as a good lesson for more than just college media. Eliminating bias from the news section and confining it to editorial or op-ed section can attract newsreaders by directing them to what they want to read. Additionally, readers who believe news to be objective or fair can easily find their own way to other sections, such as sports. Those who felt that news was a daily habit, part of their civic duty, helpful in making choices, and convenient, were significantly more likely to read the technology section. Only two significant differences were found between students and faculty. Students were more likely to characterize news as “something to talk about” (t = 2.59, df = 150, p = .01) while faculty were more likely to characterize news as “part of my civic duty” (t = 2.15, df = 151, p = .03). Motivations may differ, but technology attracted readers. There may be more to this than the technological bias of RIT students, faculty, staff, and alumni. More and more newsreaders have to be more tech savvy, and this may influence not just the means by which they consume the content, but the very content itself. News organizations would do well to consider adding technology sections if they have not already done so.
REFERENCES


