

# Reading Newspapers Ranked Lowest Versus Other Media for Early Teens

By Carol J. Pardun and Glenn W. Scott

Researchers have long been interested in adolescents' media use. Surprisingly, however, few studies have investigated young teens' newspaper consumption habits. These studies document the significant declines in newspaper readership in general and among young readers in particular.<sup>1</sup>

Fewer researchers have examined the impact of race on newspaper readership.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, there are no large-scale studies that specifically look at racial differences among early adolescent newspaper readers. This study attempts to address that gap.

## Background

Newspaper studies indicate that adolescents who avoid traditional news consumption in their teen years<sup>3</sup> will most likely continue the behavior into their adult years.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, industry groups such as the powerful NAA and the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) have renewed a focus on capturing the interests of younger news consumers. The Newspaper Association of America has optimistically argued that the battle for youthful readers has by no means

been lost. Citing figures from a 1998 survey by Teen Research Unlimited, the NAA estimated that 75 percent of teens spend 2.5 hours a week reading newspapers. Their favorite sections: comics, sports, entertainment, and horoscopes. Even if teens use newspapers widely, however, they don't necessarily find them relevant.<sup>5</sup>

This increasing focus on the reading habits of children and teens underscores the importance of understanding adolescent newspaper use in the context of a contemporary environment full of media choices. Indeed, there is no shortage of media vying for young people's attention. Most recent research describes contemporary American adolescents living in a world where the mass media are pervasive. Roberts found that a majority of adolescents, aged 8 to 18, owned a radio (70 percent), tape player (64 percent), a TV (53 percent), and a CD player (51 percent) – all in their bedrooms.<sup>6</sup>

## Racial Issues

Even less attention has been focused on racial patterns of news reading. Much of the research on race and

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the news has focused on how blacks and whites are portrayed differently in the news, particularly in crime reporting.<sup>7</sup> Others have focused on content analysis in the electronic media such as studies that focus on minority representation on television.<sup>8</sup> A few others have investigated how race impacts our interpretation of news stories.<sup>9</sup>

Given both the clear need to gather more age-sensitive data on teen media use and the importance of examining such use according to different racial backgrounds, this study captured data on newspaper readership by a diverse demographicsample of middle-school students entering their teenage years.

## Research Question

The study addresses the following research question:

### **RQ1:**

To what extent does race play in early adolescents' use of newspapers?

## Method

Students from three local school districts in the Southeastern United States were recruited during fall 2001 to participate in a survey that gathered information about their media use. Researchers sent about 5,000 surveys to students at their homes. A total of 3,261 students (65 percent) returned the media survey with signed parent/guardian consent. Participant demographics were generally representative of the entire student body, although African-American males were

underrepresented in the sample compared with the school population (18 percent vs. 22 percent) and white females were over-represented (26 percent vs. 22 percent). The age of respondents ranged from 11-16. The mean age was 12 years and 9 months. The mode was 13.

## Results

Nearly two thirds (62.4 percent) of the sample reported that their family subscribed to a newspaper, with whites subscribing at a higher rate (70.6 percent) than blacks (55.4 percent) ( $n = 2,931$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $X^2 = 81.362$ ,  $p < .000$ ). The teens' families subscribed to specific newspapers at different rates, however, as Table 1 shows. Blacks and whites preferred different regional papers although both papers were equally available in the respondent living area.

Low socio-economic white students were less likely to subscribe to a newspaper than were high SES white students ( $X^2 = 58.621$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .000$ ), but SES had no impact on whether black families subscribed to a newspaper, ( $X^2 = .02$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .468$ ). Both the mother's and father's education were significantly correlated to newspaper subscription for the white sample, although not in the direction one might expect. In other words, the more educated the parents were, the less likely they were to subscribe to the newspaper (mother:  $R^2 = -.274$ ,  $p < .01$ ; father:  $R^2 = -.291$ ,  $p < .01$ ). There were no significant correlations for the black teens and their parents' education.

**Table 1**  
**Newspapers that White and Black Adolescents Read**

	<i>% of Whites who read the paper regularly</i>	<i>% of Blacks who read the paper regularly</i>	$X^2$	<i>P-value</i>
<i>National Newspapers</i>				
<i>USA Today</i>	7.8	8.3	2.401	.301
<i>New York Times</i>	8.8	6.2	7.148	.008
<i>Regional Newspapers</i>				
<i>Herald Sun</i>	61.6	83.0	172.380	.000
<i>News and Observer</i>	51.9	38.4	62	.000
<i>Local Newspapers</i>				
<i>Oxford Ledger</i>	10.0	12.4	6.055	.048
<i>Butner-Creedmoor News</i>	9.5	5.2	21.820	.000
<i>Chapel Hill News</i>	21.4	5.8	150.541	.000
<i>Daily Tar Heel</i>	3.8	4.0	2.244	.326

( $N=2,957$ ,  $df = 2$ )

*Newspaper Readership*

The young teens were asked how many days out of seven they were likely to read the newspaper or watch the news on television. Whites read

the paper more days (2.18) compared to blacks (1.97) ( $n = 2,669$ ,  $df = 2,667$ ,  $t = 2.174$ ,  $p < .03$ ). There were no significant differences in the number of days that blacks (2.78) and whites (2.91)

**Table 2**  
**Racial Differences in Readership of Newspaper Sections**

	<i>% of Whites who read the section regularly</i>	<i>% of Blacks who read the section regularly</i>	$X^2$	<i>P-value</i>
International News	24.8	13.4	58.996	.000
U.S. News	32.1	34.7	2.16	.142
Celebrity News	26.0	31.5	10.936	.001
Local News	30.5	35.0	6.704	.010
Advice Columns	10.6	5.9	20.166	.000
Horoscopes	26.0	20.8	11.075	.001
Lifestyle Section	5.1	9.4	20.404	.000
Entertainment	38.8	45.0	11.253	.001
Advertisements	15.3	18.0	3.766	.052
Sports	57.1	57.6	.075	.784
Comics	76.2	64.2	50.844	.000

( $N = 2,911$ )

**Table 3**  
**Racial Difference in the Mean Importance of Particular Media**

	Whites	Blacks	t	df	Sig.
Network TV	2.23	2.47	-5.968	2,845	.000
Cable	2.75	3.25	112.724	2,842	.000
Being online	2.65	2.14	11.665	2,841	.000
Listening to music	3.26	3.35	-2.329	2,848	.020
Using computer	2.38	2.11	6.725	2,847	.000
Reading magazines	2.32	2.01	7.576	2,846	.000
Going to movies	2.54	2.81	-6.407	2,847	.000
Renting movies	2.79	2.86	-1.805	2,845	.071
Playing video games	2.33	2.60	-5.967	2,847	.000
Reading a book	2.39	2.06	7.376	2,845	.000
Reading the newspaper	1.78	1.73	1.430	2,845	.153

1 = "I could live without it"; 4 = "I would hate to give this up!"  
 N = 2,850

watched the news on television ( $n = 2,697$ ,  $df = 2,695$ ,  $t = 1.254$ ,  $p < .21$ ).

Students were asked to report what kinds of grades they typically got in school. Curiously, while there was no significant difference in the interaction of grades and race with watching the news on television (whites:  $n = 1,454$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $F = 1.409$ ,  $p < .238$ ; blacks:  $n = 1,174$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $F = .729$ ,  $p < .535$ ), there was a difference among whites for the number of days of reading the newspaper, although consistent with the parents' educational levels, not in the direction one might expect. White teens with lower grades read the paper more often than whites with higher grades ( $n = 1,432$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $f = 5.574$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

#### Sections Read

Overall, comics were the most read section (71.1 percent) followed by sports (56.6 percent) and entertainment (41.5 percent). For the most part, blacks and whites preferred different sections of the newspaper as Table 2 shows.

White teens read international news, comics, horoscopes and advice columns at a higher rate than did black teens, while the black adolescents preferred local news, celebrity news, lifestyle and entertainment. There were no significant differences in U.S. news, advertisements, or sports.

#### Newspaper Importance

To get a clearer picture of the role that newspapers play in these media-savvy teens' lives, the young adolescents were asked to rank the importance of different media in their lives. More than half (51.3 percent) of the sample said they could live without reading newspapers. In contrast, only 7.4 percent said they could live without music. Blacks and white had significantly different views on how important each medium was, with the exception of renting movies (which was rated relatively high by both groups) and reading a newspaper.

Reading the paper was ranked the lowest by both demographics. See Table 3.

## Discussion

Results from this survey indicate some interesting and under-researched areas of newspaper readership among early adolescents, particularly as it relates to race. For example, for the 10 newspaper sections that were examined, blacks and whites read them at significantly different rates. Four of the sections (local news, celebrity news, lifestyle and entertainment) were more often read by black teens, while international news, advice columns, horoscopes and comics were more often read by whites. Given that the children in this sample were from the same middle schools in the sample area, were exposed to the same curricula in school, live in rural, city and suburban areas at relatively the same rate, it is interesting that race may have a significant impact on newspaper readership as early as the seventh grade.

Second, it was surprising to learn that within the white adolescent cohort, newspaper consumption tended to have a negative effect on the intellectual lives of these teens. Why this may be—and why it was not found within the black teens—warrants additional research.

Third, according to this study, newspaper readership is not a priority to the majority of early teens. Given the importance of cultivating future generations of newspaper readers, it may make more sense for the newspaper industry to focus their efforts on developing readers at the elementary level, rather than middle- or high-

school level. Given that there were significant racial differences in importance of all media except renting movies (which was rated second highest by whites and third highest by blacks) and newspapers is telling. Sadly, newspapers appear equally irrelevant in the eyes of both black and white early adolescents.

Still, the fact that the vast majority of blacks and whites did read sections of the paper regularly is a potential bright spot. The newspaper industry should develop more race-specific programs that will enhance habit-forming features that can serve as gateways for adult media use. Programs such as the popularly used Newspapers in Education model have achieved some success in introducing newspapers as subjects of study in elementary and middle school classrooms. Continuing efforts to attract teen readers, such as AP's announced venture with age-specific tabloids, offer the promise of content enhancements that provide more age-appropriate relevance. Turning the trend toward declining readership will take more than these efforts. The results from this study indicate that, overall, race plays a significant factor in the way early adolescents relate to the media. Perhaps rather than focusing on only age-specific products, age and race-specific products would have a better chance of breaking through the multi-media clutter that our adolescents have become so adept at negotiating.

### Notes

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