DOES PERSONAL EXPERIENCE IN A COMMUNITY INCREASE OR DECREASE NEWSPAPER READING?

By David Pearce Demers

Many agenda-setting researchers argue that personal experience with issues or events in a community diminishes use of mass media. This study challenges this notion and, drawing on the community attachment model, hypothesizes that personal experience normally will increase newspaper reading. Personal experience increases reading because rarely is it identical or isomorphic with news coverage, especially in pluralistic systems, and because, like social ties in general, personal experience often stimulates additional needs for information. Data support the key hypothesis when it comes to reading of the local community weekly and student newspapers, but not for the metropolitan newspaper.

Since the late 1970s, a number of agenda-setting researchers have argued that personal experience with issues or problems in a community diminishes use of the mass media, which in turn reduces media effects. The assumption behind this argument is that personal experience is a functional substitute for mass-mediated messages. 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”.

In contrast to this argument, research on community attachment implies that personal experience with issues or problems normally should increase usage of mass media. The reasoning here is that personal experience, like social ties in general, stimulates needs for information that often can be satisfied through exposure to mass media. Research shows, for example, that people who are more involved in a community read the newspaper more than those who are less involved.

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Does personal experience with an issue or, more generally, personal contact with a social system decrease or increase reading of the local newspaper? Drawing on the community attachment model, this study hypothesizes that personal experience stimulates newspaper reading. Data from two probability surveys — one of residents in a small community and the other of university students — are used to test the hypotheses.

The literatures on community attachment and agenda setting at first glance seem 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 (issue salience). These are real differences, to be sure. But a closer look shows that both share a common concern with trying to explain how social roles and personal experiences mediate the effects of mass-communicated messages.

Agenda-Setting and the Obtrusive Contingency. The notion that personal experience can diminish media use emerged during the 1970s after a number of agenda-setting studies had failed to find a strong relationship between news content and issue salience. Researchers argued that personal experience is a functional substitute for mass-mediated messages. More formally, this proposition 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 effects are expected to be strong.

During the 1970s and 1980s, researchers who specifically tested the obtrusive contingency generally found support for it. 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.” Rank-order correlations supported their hypotheses. Studies by Zucker, Blood, Eyal, and Iyengar and Kinder also may be interpreted as supporting the obtrusive contingency.

Although researchers who have specifically tested the obtrusive contingency have often found support for the idea, 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. More important, 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. This proposition, which has been called the cognitive priming hypothesis, holds that conditions in a person’s environment sensitizes, or prime, the individual’s attention to an issue. 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 politically 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 an important problem facing the country.\textsuperscript{13}

Demers, Craff, Choi, and Pessin also have criticized the obtrusive contingency on the grounds that it 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. Only when the media message and personal experience are incongruous could one expect reduced media effects. In a time-series analysis of three obtrusive and three unobtrusive issues, they found some support for the priming hypothesis but no support for the obtrusive contingency.\textsuperscript{14}

\textit{Community Attachment and Personal Experience.} In contrast to the research on agenda setting, the community attachment approach implies that personal experience with issues or events 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 have more social ties to a community, particularly involvement in community organizations, would be expected to have more personal experiences with issues and concerns in the community. The second proposition is that people who are more involved in a community read the local newspaper more than those who are less involved. Social ties stimulate needs for information that often can be satisfied through reading of the local newspaper.\textsuperscript{15}

Community attachment researchers have not specifically tested the personal experience hypothesis. However, empirical research shows that involvement in and attachment to a community are strongly correlated with reading of the local community weekly newspaper.\textsuperscript{16} For example, Janowitz found that reading of the urban community weekly newspaper was positively associated with home ownership, involvement in community organizations and the neighborhood, and having children in school.\textsuperscript{17} Stamm and Fortini-Campbell also reported that reading of the local community newspaper was correlated with involvement, feelings of closeness to the community, and the extent to which a resident identified with community.\textsuperscript{18} Recent studies suggest that reading depends more upon social ties than the other way around,\textsuperscript{19} but the relationship is undoubtedly reciprocal. Social ties prime needs for information, while reading the newspaper can satisfy such needs and concomitantly promote feelings of attachment.\textsuperscript{20}

\textbf{Theoretical Perspective}

The theoretical perspective taken in this paper is that personal experience with an issue or event under most conditions will increase media usage. 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 discussions with neighbors or through direct contact with city hall, but these are not always reliable sources of information, and most homeowners are too busy
or have few resources to investigate these questions personally. A more efficient way to obtain information about proposed road repair is to read about it in 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 understand how to gain access to the centers of power in a community, and, as such, can generally obtain information in a more efficient and reliable fashion than most citizens and can provide additional assets, as well. This does not mean that news stories are simply reflections of some “objective reality” — stories are social constructions that are shaped by many factors, including the power of the social actors, professional norms, and organizational dependencies (e.g., news beats). But the specialized knowledge and privileged access to sources that reporters have does mean that news is rarely identical to the personal experiences of citizens or other subjective bystanders, and thus personal experience is not typically an adequate functional substitute for mass-mediated messages.

Instead, personal experience with an issue or event under most conditions will increase media usage. Usage will increase because personal experience, which can be considered a consequence of as well as a source of social ties, generates needs for information and news. 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 promotes reading the local newspaper. A good illustration is the politician. The typical politician has many personal experiences with issues and events in a community and yet, contrary to the obtrusive contingency, he or she is usually one of the biggest consumers of news. The reason for this is no secret: Politicians follow the news closely because they need information to help them make decisions and to achieve their goals (e.g., re-election). Thus, far from substituting for media messages, personal experience normally increases a citizen’s interest in learning more about an issue, and the newspaper is one important source of information for satisfying that interest.

Although personal experience normally increases use of media, this does not mean that personal experience will always promote increased media usage. One contingency very may be the extent to which the two are isomorphic. For example, attending a political debate normally might be expected to obviate the need to watch a re-run on television later. However, it is important to point out that some witnesses to a debate later frequently seek out mass-mediated messages, partly because they are interested in how others have interpreted the debate and how the debate may influence the election campaign.

Three additional qualifications to the theory being presented here are also necessary. First, although media effects under most conditions would be expected to increase as media usage increases, this is not a necessary outcome. Effects will depend partly on the interaction between mass-mediated messages and cognitive or social structural linkages.

Second, the relationship between personal experience and media use may vary by type of media or social system. Reading of the local community weekly, for example, has been strongly linked to local community ties, but some studies have found that community involvement has virtually no effect on reading the metropolitan daily. One explanation for this finding is that the amount of involvement or personal experience individuals can have in a large metropolitan community is so limited that such experiences alone are
insufficient for priming general needs for information. This does not mean that reading of metropolitan newspapers is unrelated to social ties; instead, it means that the types of social ties stimulating usage of weekly versus metropolitan newspapers often differ. To be sure, metropolitan newspapers, like weekly newspapers, provide cultural content that reinforces general system values and norms and may promote integration at a normative level. However, the metropolitan paper contains a higher volume and percentage of public affairs and business-oriented content than the local community weekly, and such content is particularly useful to political and economic elites, for whom “being informed” is critical to role performance in a highly complex, interdependent system. This explains in part why reading of the metropolitan daily is usually highly related to education and income.

The third qualification to the theory being presented is that even though personal experiences and social ties are important factors influencing use of media, they are not the only factors. Competition in the marketplace, availability of media, and psychological or individual needs (e.g., loneliness) also may play an enabling or a constraining role.

**Hypotheses**

Drawing on the community attachment model and the analysis above, it is hypothesized that the greater the personal experience with issues or events in a community, the greater the newspaper reading. Again, the logic here is that under most circumstances personal experience with issues or events in a community is not identical to mass-mediated messages; personal experience, like social ties, also generates needs for information that, in turn, can be satisfied through reading of the local newspaper.

As discussed above, this hypothesis also would be expected to apply to both community weekly and metropolitan newspapers, since personal experience may generate needs for information in either system. However, because the amount of personal experience most individuals have in a large metropolitan community is more limited and media cover only a fraction of the issues and events in those communities, the relationship would be expected to be stronger for reading of community weeklies. Thus, the relationship between personal experience and newspaper reading will be stronger for local community newspapers than for metropolitan daily newspapers.

**Method and Measures**

Two datasets are employed. The first is derived from telephone interviews from 20 October to 10 November 1993, with 334 adult residents of River Falls, Wisconsin, a community of about 9,000 year-around residents located thirty miles east of St. Paul, Minnesota. The names were randomly selected from the telephone directory, which contains more than 90 percent of the working residential telephone numbers in the community. Calls were placed to 539 households, with a total response rate of 62 percent. Interviewers, who were students enrolled in an undergraduate public opinion course, were instructed to randomly select male and female heads of household based on the last digit of the telephone number (even number=female, odd number=male).

The second study is based on telephone interviews 15 October to 2 November 1992, with 349 students attending the University of Wisconsin in
River Falls. The names were randomly selected from the student-staff telephone directory. Calls were placed to 492 students, with a total response rate of 71 percent. Interviews also were conducted by students enrolled in a public opinion course.

River Falls is an ideal place for testing the personal experience hypothesis. More than half of its residents commute to work in the Twin Cities, and both of the metropolitan daily newspapers (St. Paul Pioneer Press and the Minneapolis Star Tribune) are available through home subscription. The community also is served by a weekly newspaper, the River Falls Journal, which, like most community newspapers, is oriented to the local community and the established institutions of power, including city hall, the local school system, and church and community groups. Nearly all of the content is local.

The University of Wisconsin in River Falls is a state-operated university with an enrollment of about 5,500 students, most of whom are undergraduates. It also has a high proportion of commuter students (about 30 percent). Although more than half of the students grew up in small towns and rural areas of Wisconsin and Minnesota, in terms of their positions on various political and social issues, they are nearly identical to students nationwide.

The major source of news at the university 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. Readership of the student newspaper is quite high, with more than half of the students saying they read it every day of the month.

Dependent Variable. In both studies, the dependent variable is time spent reading the newspaper. This was created by multiplying the values from two measures:

1. "In an average (month/week), how many issues of the (River Falls Journal/Student Voice/Pioneer Press/Star Tribune) do you read or look at?" For the weeklies, responses were recorded on a five-point scale ranging from 0 to 4; for the dailies, on an eight-point scale (0 to 7).

2. "About how much time, on the average, do you spend reading each issue of the (name newspaper)?" For the weeklies, responses were less than one hour, one to two hours, or more than two hours. For the dailies, the responses were less than one-half hour, one-half to one hour, or more than one hour.

The values for reading the student and the weekly community newspapers ranged from 0 to 12. Reading of the student newspaper had a slightly positive skew (mean=3.2, s.d.=2.3). Distribution for reading of the community newspaper among River Falls residents was nearly normal (mean=5.3, s.d.=3.4). The values for reading the two daily newspapers, the Star Tribune and Pioneer Press, ranged from 0 to 42 (each having a 0 to 21-point scale). This measure was positively skewed (mean=7.7, s.d.=6.8), but there was only one outlier (value=42) and it did not have an impact on the strength of the correlations with the independent and control variables (see analysis below).

Independent Variables. The independent variable is personal experience. Two measures were employed:
1. "How many (university/River Falls/Twin Cities) clubs, groups, organizations, and sports teams are you a member of?"

2. Is respondent a commuter student/worker? In the university study: "Do you consider yourself a commuter student?" In the River Falls community survey: "In which city do you work?" Commuters were given a value of "0" and noncommuters a value of "1."

The first measure is often described as a measure of community involvement. The assumption in this study is that people who are members of community groups or organizations generally have more personal experiences with the issues or events in a community than nonmembers. The values in the university survey ranged from 0 to 6 (mean=1.4, s.d.=1.3); the values in the River Falls community survey for memberships in River Falls organizations ranged from 0 to 8 (mean=1.4, s.d.=1.6) and for memberships in the Twin Cities organizations ranged from 0 to 6 (mean=1.3, s.d.=1.6). Not surprisingly, River Falls residents have few attachments to the Twin Cities.

The assumption underlying the second set of measures above is that people who live or work in a community have more personal contact with the issues facing a community. In the university survey, 71% of the students reported that they live in River Falls (i.e., they do not consider themselves commuter students). In the River Falls survey, 48% work in River Falls; 29% work in the Twin Cities.

Control Variables. One measure of self-reported community attachment was used:

"How close do you, yourself, feel to the (university/River Falls/Twin Cities) community — would you say you feel very close, somewhat close, or not very close?" A four-point scale was used in the River Falls community survey ("extremely close" was added as the highest value).

This measure is similar to Stamm and Fortini-Campbell’s tie-to-structure identification measure. It is crucial to control for this variable in the analysis, since some of the variance encompassed by the personal experience measures, especially the organizational membership variable, may contain a cognitive-affective component, as opposed to just the personal experience component. In the university survey, 25% of the respondents said they were "very close" to the university community, 60% were "somewhat close," and the rest (15%) were "not very close." More than a third (36%) of the respondents in the River Falls survey said they were "very" or "extremely" close to River Falls, while only 14% felt the same about the Twin Cities.

Four other independent/control variables are employed in the university study: (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=0; female=1). 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.

Eight additional control variables are employed in the River Falls study: (1) gender; (2) years lived in River Falls; (3) income; (4) respondent’s education (1- through 6-point scale); (5) number of children under age 18 living in the household; (6) marital status (0=single; 1=married); (7) age (5-point scale); and (8) home ownership (0=no; 1=yes). Excluding the missing values, the minimum sample size for the regression analysis is 281.

Data for reading of the weekly community newspapers generally support the first hypothesis that the greater the personal experience in a community, the greater the newspaper reading. However, data for reading the metropolitan newspaper do not generally support the first hypothesis. The data support the second hypothesis.

Table 1 shows that the zero-order correlations between reading the student newspaper and organizational membership and between reading and living in River Falls are moderately strong and statistically significant (p<.01). Students who are members of campus organizations or clubs and those who live near the campus read the campus newspaper more often. The extent to which students feel close to the university community and father's education are also significantly related to newspaper reading. The effect of the personal experience measures on reading also holds up in the multiple regression analysis. The second column in Table 1 shows that the coefficients for the two personal experience measures decline somewhat when controlling for the other variables, but they remain statistically significant (p<.01). Additional analysis (not shown) indicates that the declines are a function of shared variance between the two personal experience measures and the closeness measure.

TABLE 1
Reading the University Student Newspaper Regressed on Personal Experience Measures and Control Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>Zero-Order Coefficients</th>
<th>Beta Coefficients*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal Experience Measures</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Memberships</td>
<td>.27**</td>
<td>.18**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live in River Falls (noncommuter)</td>
<td>.25**</td>
<td>.17**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closeness to Community</td>
<td>.19**</td>
<td>.11*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father’s Education</td>
<td>.10*</td>
<td>.09*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female Gender</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grew up in Urban Area</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years at University</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*aStandardized regression coefficients; Adjusted R-Square=.12; F=7.29; n=327
*p<.05; **p<.01
The data in the River Falls community survey provides partial support for the first hypothesis. The zero-order correlations in Table 2 show that both of the personal experience measures — organizational memberships and whether the respondent works in River Falls — are significantly related to reading of the River Falls Journal as expected (p<.01 and p<.05, respectively). A number of the other independent variables — including closeness to the community, age, number of children in home, homeowner status, and years lived in the community — also are related to reading the local newspaper. However, only one of the two personal experience measures — organizational memberships — remains significantly related to reading of the community newspaper when closeness to the community and the other independent variables are controlled (p<.05). The zero-order effect of working in the community disappears (p>.05). This suggests that working in the community may not generate enough personal experiences to prime needs for information.

Consistent with previous studies, self-reported closeness to the community, age, number of children in the home, and homeowner status are significantly related to reading the River Falls newspaper. But in contrast to previous research, income and education are negatively related to reading (p<.05), suggesting that higher socioeconomic River Falls residents are less oriented than lower status residents to the local community. This may stem from the fact that higher status residents have more social and business contacts or linkages to the Twin Cities.

Data for reading the two metropolitan daily newspapers generally do not support the personal experience hypothesis. The organizational mem-

TABLE 2
Reading the River Falls Journal Regressed on Personal Experience Measures and Control Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>Zero-Order Coefficients</th>
<th>Beta Coefficientsα</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal Experience Measures</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Memberships</td>
<td>.23**</td>
<td>.12*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work in River Falls</td>
<td>.09*</td>
<td>.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closeness to Community</td>
<td>.30**</td>
<td>.18*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.31**</td>
<td>.21**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Children in Home</td>
<td>.20**</td>
<td>.18**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Owner</td>
<td>.26**</td>
<td>.15*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>-.11*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.22**</td>
<td>.11*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent’s Education</td>
<td>-.13*</td>
<td>-.10*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years Lived in River Falls</td>
<td>.28**</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent Married</td>
<td>.18**</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

αStandardized regression coefficients; Adjusted R-Square=.27; F=10.36; n=281
*p<.05; **p<.01
berships variable is significantly related to reading of the metro papers on a bivariate basis ($r = 0.14, p < 0.01$; data not shown), but this relationship becomes nonsignificant when controlling for the other variables ($\beta = 0.10, p > 0.05$). Only income holds up as a predictor ($\beta = 0.16, p < 0.05$). Education, which previous research often has found to be related to reading of the metropolitan newspaper, is not a significant predictor in the regression model.

These findings and those reported above for reading the university and River Falls newspapers support the second hypothesis, which expected that the relationship between personal experience and newspaper reading would be stronger for the small community newspapers than for the large metropolitan dailies. But this finding is overshadowed by the fact that personal experience and community attachment play virtually no role in predicting readership of the large metropolitan newspaper.

Discussion

This study examined the effect of personal experience on reading of community and metropolitan newspapers. In contrast to the obtrusive contingency, it was hypothesized that the greater the personal experience people have in a community, the greater the reading of the local newspaper. The primary logic is that personal experience is rarely a substitute for media-generated messages, and personal experience also stimulates needs for information that can be satisfied through reading of the local newspaper. Social priming is a metaphor to describe this latter process.

Data collected from nonuniversity residents and from students generally support the hypotheses in terms of reading the weekly newspapers. Reading of the campus newspaper is higher among students who are involved in university organizations and who live on or near the campus, and reading is lower among those less involved and among commuter students. Similarly, reading of the River Falls community weekly is higher among River Falls residents who are more involved in community organizations. All of these findings hold up when controlling for a number of factors, including self-reported closeness to the community, education, and years in the community. However, the relationship between reading the River Falls paper and working in the community did not hold up when controlling for other factors, and the data for reading of the metropolitan daily provide virtually no support for the model.

The reasons for these latter findings are not entirely clear. However, one possible explanation for the lack of a relationship between working in River Falls and reading the local newspaper is that the workplace may not generate enough personal experiences to prime needs for information. The assumption underlying this measure is that people experience a relatively high level of contact with community issues and events in the workplace, but this may be exaggerated. In terms of reading of the metropolitan paper, the data support the argument that the amount of personal experience most individuals have in a large metropolitan community is so limited that it alone cannot provide a sufficient foundation to prime general needs for information. This does not mean that metropolitan newspapers cannot serve specific needs for information or news generated as a result of personal experience; however, the number of events and issues in a large metropolitan community is so vast that even a large metropolitan daily cannot cover enough of them to serve the specific needs of even those individuals who have many social ties to the metropolitan community.
Instead of personal experience or community attachment, the data support the argument that functional linkages to the social system (e.g., income) appear to be the most important driving forces behind reading of the metropolitan daily. Unlike the community weekly, the metro daily contains a higher volume and percentage of public affairs and business-oriented content. Such information is ideally suited to serve the needs of the cosmopolitan worker, for whom "being informed" is critical for functioning in a more complex, interdependent community. Future research should examine in more depth how these functional ties, social ties in general, and personal experiences influence newspaper reading as well as use of other new, emerging electronic forms.

NOTES


4. Winter, "Contingent Conditions."


7. Zucker examined three obtrusive (costs of living, unemployment, and crime) and three unobtrusive (pollution, drug abuse, and energy) issues over an eight-year period and concluded that the agenda-setting effects were stronger for the unobtrusive issues. See Zucker, "The Variable Nature of News Media Influence."
8. Using audience-based rather than a priori measures of obtrusiveness, Blood concluded that the amount of experience respondents had with three issues during the 1980 presidential election (inflation, recession, and Iran hostage crisis) diminished agenda-setting effects. However, obtrusiveness was positively, not negatively, correlated with media exposure. Warrick R. Blood, "Unobtrusive Issues in the Agenda-Setting Role of the Press," Dissertaton Abstracts International 43, 8-A (Ph.D. diss., Syracuse University, 1981).

9. Eyal reported no agenda-setting effect when he analyzed rank-order correlations for a list of eleven issues taken from the 1976 presidential election, but an effect did emerge when the unobtrusive issues were analyzed separately. 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" (Ph.D. diss., Syracuse University, 1980).

10. Iyengar and Kinder found that people who are more active in the political process and are more interested in politics are less susceptible to agenda-setting effects. Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder, News That Matters: Television and American Opinion (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 63.


15. See, e.g., Stamm and Fortini-Campbell, "The Relationship of Community Ties to Newspaper Use."


18. Stamm and Fortini-Campbell, "The Relationship of Community Ties to Newspaper Use."


20. 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.

21. 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.


23. 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 in the past have been labeled 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.

24. One might speculate also that the more complex the event or issue, the less the likelihood of obtaining isomorphism.

25. Lobbyists, for instance, typically will follow public affairs news very closely, but one would not expect strong agenda-setting effects for such persons, because they usually will see their own special interest as being more salient or important than the media's agenda. This explains why some agenda-setting studies have found little effects for people who are highly involved in political affairs - such people typically have strong opinions regarding the most important issues facing the community.

26. See, e.g., Finnegan and Viswanath, “Community Ties and Use of Cable TV and Newspapers.”

27. This is not to say that metropolitan newspapers cannot serve specific needs for information or news generated as a result of personal experience. Opera fans may turn to the metropolitan newspaper to read a review the day after a performance. However, the number of events and issues in a large metropolitan community is so vast that even a large metropolitan daily cannot cover enough of them to serve the specific informational needs of even those individuals who have many personal experiences in the metropolitan community.


31. One reviewer of this paper remarked that the *New York Times* is the ultimate agenda-setting medium but possibly the least palatable medium for community ties folks because it deals with national issues and political questions instead of local issues and social questions. While it is true that community ties researchers have paid less attention to national than local media, there is no reason why “tiesters,” as the reviewer called them, could not apply their theoretical framework to the *Times*. For example, one could
argue that the reason highly educated people are more likely than lower educated people to read the Times is because they are more likely to have jobs that require them to have knowledge of public affairs and they are more likely to interact with people who are informed about public issues. Of course, both of these factors are social ties that prime individual’s needs for information.

It also is important to point out that the theoretical model being offered here is not necessarily in opposition to arguments that dependence on mass media is greater in large, pluralistic systems than in small, homogenous ones; see, e.g., Sandra J. Ball-Rokeach, “The Origins of Individual Media System Dependency: A Sociological Framework,” Communication Research 12 (October 1985): 485-510; Sandra J. Ball-Rokeach and Melvin L. DeFleur, “A Dependency Model of Mass Media Effects,” Communication Research 3 (January 1976): 3-21; David Pearce Demers, Structural Pluralism, Intermedia Competition and the Growth of the Corporate Newspaper in the United States, Journalism Monographs, no. 145 (Columbia, SC: AEJMC, 1994); and C.N. Olien, G.A. Donohue, P.J. Tichenor, and D.B. Hindman, “Community Attachment, Newspaper Use and Social Structure” (paper presented at the annual conference of the American Association for Public Opinion Research, St. Petersburg Beach, FL, May 1992). The assumption has been that social actors in large, pluralistic systems depend more on mass media for accomplishing their goals because such systems are too large to be monitored through interpersonal contact alone, while mass media in a small community may be considered a redundant source of information, as news can often be obtained through interpersonal contacts and experiences. This argument is valid to the extent that personal experience and mass-mediated messages are isomorphic. But in most communities today, even small ones, the extent that the news and personal experience are isomorphic is very limited. The typical citizen in a small town cannot even begin to experience all of the events or issues covered in the local paper. Thus, a threshold effect is reached very quickly and, as a consequence, personal experience normally stimulates rather than diminishes reading of the local paper.

This information was obtained through a personal interview with a representative of Ameritech, the telephone company serving the River Falls community. A telephone book sample rather than random-digit dialing was used to improve the efficiency of fielding the study as well as reduce cost to student interviewers. In River Falls, most telephone users are charged a small fee for local telephone calls, and it was estimated that student interviewers would have had to call 10 to 20 telephone numbers to obtain a completed interview using random-digit dialing, which could have produced a $15 to $50 telephone bill. It is important to point out that the findings reported herein may contain a systematic bias because homes without listed telephone numbers are excluded, but that bias is likely to be small because the proportion of those homes to the total is small.

The denominator includes “no answers” and “answering machines.”

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.

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

Half of the students (50%) reported that they read the Voice four times a month; only 15% reported not reading it all.
38. Analysis also was conducted using just the first measure of newspaper reading (number of issues read), and it produced nearly the same findings as the multiplicative measure.

39. Stamm and Fortini-Campbell, "The Relationship of Community Ties to Newspaper Use," 10-11, use a much more elaborate measure of community involvement, but this does not mean that organizational membership has little or no predictive value. See, e.g., Janowitz, Community Press in an Urban Setting.


41. The notion that large metropolitan communities are more structurally complex and contain a higher degree of interdependence than small, rural communities is strongly supported in the sociological literature. See, e.g., Tichenor, Donohue, and Olien, Community Conflict and the Press.
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