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Why people read or avoid reading the San Jose Mercury News editorial page

Roger McCall Gilbert
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**Why people read or avoid reading the San Jose "Mercury
News" editorial page**

Gilbert, Roger McCall, M.S.

San Jose State University, 1989

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WHY PEOPLE READ OR AVOID READING

THE SAN JOSE MERCURY NEWS

EDITORIAL PAGE

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty

of the Department of Journalism and Mass Communications

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science

by

Roger McCall Gilbert

May 1989

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This study will examine the reasons people either read or avoid reading the daily newspaper's editorial page. It will use a uses and gratifications framework to explore what influences contribute, positively or negatively, toward gratifications sought from the editorial page by potential readers.

Why should the uses of the editorial page be studied? The answer may exist somewhere in the wealth of studies which have been conducted concerning the functions, uses and effects of other media, especially television. One landmark study suggested that issues considered important by the public coincide with salient issues in the media (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). A number of mass communication studies, notably Boorstin (1971) and Patterson (1980), have criticized the media for not providing to the public essential content needed for the formation of well-considered public opinion. And Graber (1982), in an analysis of public opinion formation, argued that the public "elite," or decision-makers, gain much of the information for their opinions from the media, and specifically from such places as the editorial page.

The editorial page now competes with a diverse range of media choices. The page is highly touted by both its publishers and editors, yet it is also by far and large a two-page spread buried in the local section of the daily newspaper. Flashy media technology and a wider array of media choices beg the question of what purpose the page serves to its readers. What motivates people to spend time with the editorial

page instead of pursuing alternative choices? Stonecipher (1979) reported that John Oakes, editorial page editor for the New York Times, speaking to members of the National Conference of Editorial Writers in 1976, stated that the basic function of the editorial page is to offer constructive criticism of the social, political, economic, and sometimes moral dilemmas of society. Oakes noted, each editorial page editor is capable of having “some effect on the public policies of his community and his country” (p. 24).

At the same conference, Philip L. Geyelin, editorial page editor for the Washington Post, stressed that the page even has an agenda-setting function and effect for the community.

Does the editorial/opinion page have an effect on its audience (or on the community)? To answer this question it would seem enlightening to discover who reads the editorial page and why they read it. If the mass media diet lacks substance, as Boorstin and Patterson suggest, and the editorial page provides a place for constructive thought, as Oakes and Geyelin suggest, then one interesting question is to find out why newspaper readers choose to read or avoid the page. Ultimately, an understanding of newspaper readers' assessments of the page could influence the editors and publishers to make the page more accessible to a larger readership.

This study will attempt to discover readers' perceptions of the functions and gratifications of the editorial/opinion page. The study will describe the varying gratifications associated with the page by editorial readers, the various demographic backgrounds of readers and non-readers, and the varying levels of utility and activity associated with reading the page which may influence readers' overall impressions of the page.

Their responses may then afford a constructive evaluation of the purposes and functions of today's editorial/opinion page.

Literature Review

Applying Concepts of Expectancy to the Media

One premise for this study is that society has a number of expectations about the editorial pages. This argument suggests that readers and non-readers of the pages, as well as their publishers, editors, and writers, have many individual as well as collective beliefs associated with what is on the editorial pages and what one gets out of reading them.

The analytical measurement of expectancy (of any form) essentially began with Tolman (1932), who was chiefly responsible for developing the concept. Tolman was an early proponent of a utilitarian theory of motivation. He argued that people strive to “map” their worlds according to their needs, to become familiar with their surroundings, and to fill in enough details to orient themselves to their world.

In a later study, Vroom (1964) suggested that people's expectancies and belief about work occupations can be influenced by their perceptions of the occupation's rewards. Vroom noted that these perceptions may be based partially on social influences — such as stereotypes, or on actual, remote or surmised experiences. He noted that some perceptions may be closely related to the “reality” of an occupation and that some perceptions may be grossly inaccurate.

Vroom argued that a central assumption of expectancy is that “a person has preferences among outcomes or states of nature” (p. 15). He further channeled his explanation by referring to preferences as “expectations of utility.” Important to the study at hand, Vroom proposed that behavior is affected not only by preferences among outcomes, but also by expectancies which suggest these outcomes to be probable.

Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) developed an extensive conceptual framework to understand expectation and belief formations. Distinguishing beliefs from other concepts of expectancy, such as attitude, Fishbein and Ajzen defined “belief” to be the line a person associates between an object and attribute. In other words, they described the association as a person's information about an object. Further, they defined the strength of this belief (or “belief strength”) as the likelihood a person would offer that a given object would have a particular association with a certain attribute. In their study, Fishbein and Ajzen divided beliefs into three types: (1) descriptive, or directly experienced information; (2) informational, or accepted information from outside sources; and (3) inferential, or beliefs formed by logic and/or personal theories.

Galloway and Meek (1981) were the first to apply expectancy theory to perceptions of the media. To determine “expectancy,” respondents to a television use survey were asked, before and after viewing, to what extent they would expect specified programs to have certain attributes. Galloway and Meek also tested preferences for these attributes with the use of a value scale. Respondents to their survey assessed gratifications of the two programs with value statements ranging from “usually very important” to “usually not at all important.” Galloway and Meek concluded from their study that attention to media and media content is more likely if the gratifications consequent to the media “are both highly expected and highly valued” (p. 445).

Whereas Galloway and Meek focused on a person's individual attractions to television, Blumler's (1979) landmark study of British television viewers suggested that what people get out of the media can be related to what they believe they are supposed to get out of the media. He proposed that societal influences, or

“normative influences,” are important determinants of audience expectations and orientations toward the media. As an example, he found that it may be socially expected for men to be more cognitively oriented to mass media than women.

In addition, Lichenstein and Rosenfeld (1983 & 1984) demonstrated that normative expectations exist about the media as well. They compared characterizations and expected functions of different media to gratifications associated with each medium that were reported in an audience survey. From this study, Lichenstein and Rosenfeld found that each medium has its own image, and that this image is consistent among audience members regardless of whether they are “fans” of the medium or “non-fans.” In the second study, based on a survey in which audience members responded by judging how “most people” would probably think about aspects associated with the media, Lichenstein and Rosenfeld confirmed from the consistencies in the survey responses that normative expectations exist for each medium. As an example of these beliefs, Lichenstein and Rosenfeld noted that television was viewed as a source of entertainment and as a means of obtaining information about daily life. By contrast, one of the beliefs about magazines and newspapers was that although they were viewed as ways to find out about the government, they were not viewed as ways to overcome loneliness.

Palmgreen and Rayburn (1985), who initially investigated the relative utilities of the media through a gratifications sought/obtained model, proposed typologies of motivation to explain media use after summarizing a series of studies which had adopted an expectancy-value approach. In agreement with the concept of normative expectations suggested by Lichenstein and Rosenfeld, Palmgreen (1984) argued that an expectancy/evaluatory consumption of the media results in the perception of certain gratifications obtained, which then feed back to reinforce or alter an individual's perceptions of the gratification-related attributes of a particular newspaper, program, or medium.

Attempting to explain the relationship between gratifications sought and gratifications obtained, Palmgreen and Rayburn (1985) based their gratifications-expectancy model on an outgrowth of numerous studies (Atkinson, 1957; Fishbein, 1963; Vroom, 1964; Galloway & Meek, 1981; Blood & Galloway, 1983; and Palmgreen & Rayburn, 1982, 1983, 1984 among others). Palmgreen and Rayburn (1985) suggested these studies all view behavior as a function of “(1) expectancy . . . that an object possesses a particular attribute or that a behavior will have a particular consequence; and (2) evaluation — that is, the degree of affect, positive or negative, toward an attribute or behavior outcome” (p. 62). Palmgreen and Rayburn postulated that gratifications sought from a media source are a function of the beliefs and expectations that audience members hold about that medium and its attributes. They expressed this relationship in the following model:

$$GS_i = b_i e_i$$

where

GS_i = the i^{th} gratification sought from some media object, x (some medium, program, content type, etc.);

b_i = the belief (subjective probability) that x possesses some attribute or that a behavior related to x will have a particular outcome; and

e_i = the affective evaluation of the particular attribute or outcome.

Palmgreen and Rayburn (1985), p. 63.

Palmgreen and Rayburn argued that if an attribute is both strongly believed to be a component of x and is evaluated very positively, then relatively strong gratification-seeking can be predicted for that attribute. On the other hand, if either evaluation is weaker or more moderate, then the gratification-seeking will tend to be more moderate (p. 63). They additionally suggested that combinations of these positive or negative evaluations would explain gratification-seeking motivations. See Figure 1.

Figure 1**Model Explaining Avoidance/Gratification-Seeking**

<u>Belief in Possession of Attribute</u>	<u>Evaluation of Attribute</u>	
	Negative	Positive
No	Negative Approach	Seeking of Alternatives
Yes	True Avoidance	Positive Approach

Palmgreen and Rayburn (1985), p. 68.

In these typologies, Palmgreen and Rayburn suggest that a majority of avoidance motivations are caused by a negative evaluation of an attribute. They described *true avoidance* as the motivation of an audience member who believes that a medium has a negative attribute. Palmgreen and Rayburn described *negative approach* as the motivation of audience members who use a medium because they do not believe that it has that negative attribute. On the other hand, *seeking of alternatives* they suggested to be the motivation caused by a positive evaluation of an attribute, but belief that a medium does not have that attribute. And finally, *positive approach* is a motivation caused by a positive evaluation and belief that the medium carries that attribute.

The above model could potentially apply directly to an understanding of newspaper reader motivations toward reading the editorial page, or alternatively, avoiding the page. Expectancy-value relationships to attributes are likely to apply to uses of the editorial page. Relationships among expectancy-value associations with attributes of the page likely apply to the individual reader's use of the page. Palmgreen and Rayburn's (1985) study potentially offers that reader motivations

toward the editorial page may be defined by combining beliefs associated with the page by a person and the person's evaluation of the importance of those attributes in his or her personal life. This study can gather information needed to test this model and utilize it to explain editorial page avoidance or gratification-seeking motivations.

Developing the Concept of an Active Audience

The attributes or beliefs that apply to the above model will either be (1) gratifications sought by readers from the editorial page or (2) expected functions of the editorial page believed to exist by readers and/or editors of the page. What *gratifications* people seek and/or obtain from the media have largely been discovered through uses and gratifications research. A central assumption in these studies is that the media audience is active.

Effects Research Asks: What Do People Do With the Media?

Prior to the development of the uses and gratifications approach, Harold Laswell (1948) described the communication process as performing three functions: surveillance of the environment, correlation of its parts, and transmission of a social inheritance. Wright (1960) subsequently added to this list the function of entertainment, and he proposed that the media may alternatively perform “dysfunctions.”

The uses and gratifications approach was developed as a response to early mass communications effects studies. During World War II there was an interest in the possibility of a “hypodermic needle effect” because of the increased use of propaganda techniques that had begun in the first world war; this model of direct effects suggested that an audience provided with a stimulus would be directly affected by that stimulus.

However, the Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1948) panel study of peoples' voting dispositions, measured over time and in comparison to media coverage, found

that communications are more or less effective, depending on a person's predispositions. Their study established the principle of a “two-step flow” in the communication process. This suggests that some communications are not absorbed directly by audience members, but that audience members may reject or accept information provided from communications after the message has traveled through intermediate personal channels.

Hovland, Janis, and Kelley's (1953) research on communication and the stimulus-response process in attitude change similarly indicated that group memberships strongly affect the acceptance of communication opinions. Summarizing a majority of contemporary media effects studies, Klapper (1960) proposed that the media achieved limited effects — and that their major achievement was to reinforce existing attitudes.

Katz (1959) argued that mass communications research could profit by shifting away from the studies of effects, or as he phrased it, studies which asked: “What do the media do to people?” Instead, he suggested researchers in the field should begin to ask: “What do people do with the media?” And, Bauer's (1964) identification of an “obstinate audience,” in response to persuasive communications, contributed to the emergence of the concept of an active audience.

Studies of Audience Needs

Blumler and McQuail (1969), in an investigation of audience uses of media coverage of the 1964 General Election in Britain, sought to determine why people followed election coverage if, as effects studies had indicated, the coverage had little or no influence on their opinions. Half the respondents of the large sample survey indicated that people used the political broadcasts as a source of information. Blumler and McQuail labeled this audience activity, in accordance with Laswell's

media functions, “surveillance of the political environment” (p. 251).

Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1974) summarized early uses and gratifications studies. In their seminal study, they suggested that an outgrowth of effects research into “intervening (audience) variables” contributed to a shift in interest by many researchers to the study of audience “needs.” Klapper’s “reinforcement effect,” for example, had been investigated in a series of studies of soap opera use. Blumler, Brown, and McQuail’s (1970) study of the listeners of a radio serial that tended to uphold traditional family values suggested some of the program’s audience could be distinguished as seeking reinforcement of certain values, while others in the audience could not. This indicated that audience needs could determine the utility of program attributes. Reinforcement, then, was seen by uses and gratifications researchers as a goal sought by audiences, depending on their needs, rather than as a universal effect.

The first paradigm of the uses and gratifications approach, provided by Katz, et al. (1974), described its view of communication effects as: “(1) the social and psychological origins of (2) needs, which generate (3) expectations of (4) the mass media or other sources which lead to (5) differential patterns of media exposure (or engagement in other activities), resulting in (6) need gratifications and (7) other consequences, perhaps mostly unintended ones” (p. 510).

Motivations and Activity

Although the concept of an active audience is almost taken as an article of faith in this approach, Blumler (1979) challenged researchers to investigate the range of meanings associated with the concept of activity. For example, he suggested that some media invite more or less activity than others. He argued that more empirical data were needed to test the multi-functionality of media content and its relationship

to those gratifications sought by audience members in different demographic circumstances and holding different social values.

Becker (1979), analyzing gratification measures utilized in several studies of newspaper and television use, suggested that motivations for media use could be clustered into three dimensions. He argued that the motivations for avoidance were empirically distinct from the motivations of surveillance (and vote guidance). He additionally suggested that a third dimension consists of “excitement seeking, reinforcement, and the use of the media for communicatory utility” (p. 71).

Palmgreen, Wenner, and Rosengren (1980, 1985) divided audience needs into categories of “gratifications sought” and “gratifications obtained,” based on several chief assumptions (derived especially from studies by McQuail et al., 1972; Rosengren & Windahl, 1972; Katz, Gurevitch & Haas, 1973) that are common in uses and gratifications research. The assumptions they summarized are: “(1) the audience is active, thus (2) much media use can be conceived as goal directed, and (3) competing with other source of need satisfaction, so that when (4) substantial audience initiative links needs to media choice, (5) media consumption can fulfill a wide range of gratifications, although (6) media content alone cannot be used to predict patterns of gratifications accurately because (7) media characteristics structure the degree to which needs may be gratified at different times, and further, because (8) gratifications obtained can have their origins in media content, exposure in and of itself, and/or the social situation in which exposure takes place” (p. 14).

Lichenstein and Rosenfeld (1983), however, in their study of media images, argued that the concept of relating people's *needs* to media use was too “simplistic” and that it failed “to explain either use or gratification adequately” (p. 99). Instead, in Lichenstein and Rosenfeld's (1984) study of individual decisions about media

gratification choices, they suggested that the utilization of the media is a process involving (first) the acquisition of normative expectations about the gratifications from the media, and (second) individual decisions about how to seek gratification(s) from the environment.

Levels of Involvement with the Media and Their Relation To Media Choice

Levy and Windahl (1984 & 1985) subsequently proposed that gratifications received and/or sought may be tempered by varying degrees of audience involvement with the media. Basing their study partly on the temporal dimensions of activity described by Blumler (1979), Levy and Windahl (1984) investigated levels of audience involvement before, during, and after exposure to the media. Their findings indicated that as audience activities vary, so do their levels and forms of gratifications vary. Levy and Windahl also reported that differing forms of audience activity, influenced by whether they are alone or with companions, have an effect on the gratifications received from the media. Levy and Windahl (1985), in a theoretical overview of audience activity, proposed that activity could be further understood by measuring audience: (1) selectivity, (2) involvement, and (3) utility — as well as measuring audience activity as it occurs before, during, or after exposure.

Rubin and Perse (1987) applied Levy and Windahl's types of audience activity in an investigation of the relationship between audience activity and motivations for television news viewing. In accordance with Levy and Windahl (1985), they defined *selectivity* to be the degree to which viewing is a nonrandom selection. They defined *involvement* to be the extent to which the audience attends to and reflects on content. And they defined *intentionality*, which incorporated Levy and Windahl's concept of utility, as the extent to which viewing is planned and purposive. Based on several earlier studies (Jeffres, 1978; Rubin, 1983, 1984),

Rubin and Perse additionally proposed that two general orientations toward the media, based on motives, attitudes, and behaviors, are characteristic of media use. They suggested that *ritualized* use is a less intentional, less selective use of the media or medium; and that *instrumental* use is more intentional and selective, reflecting purposive exposure to specific content. In their study, audience activity related in largely predictable ways to media use motives and attitudes. Rubin and Perse found in one analysis that instrumental motives, affinity and positive belief evaluations, are linked to intentionality and involvement.

This finding would suggest, in terms of editorial page readership, that high degrees of reader intentionality and involvement would be related to, or influence, the sum of the beliefs and evaluations a reader might have for gratifications associated with the editorial page. In a similar sense, Rubin and Perse suggested that incorporating measures of audience activity into expectancy-value investigations will increase their explanatory power.

In sum, levels of audience activity may be important variables which influence reader expectancies of gratifications associated with the editorial page.

The Role of Demographic Variables and Levels of Community Interest

A number of studies have indicated that gender and education are powerful factors which affect voluntary exposure to the media (Key, 1961; Sears & Freedman, 1979). Similarly, these factors seem to affect exposure to newspapers (Schramm, 1945; Stamm, 1985). Interestingly, Fitzgerald (1986) argued that editorial readership may be unique and that several studies have indicated that this readership is demographically unpredictable.

Social Purpose Ties To Use of the Media

Kippax and Murray (1980), in a study relating media gratifications to their perceived utilities, argued that media use in general is not directly tied to the needs

of the audience members. They found that media use is best predicted by demographic variables rather than by need determinants. For example, they noted that cinema attendance is related to age and that “teenagers use the cinema not only for entertainment but for a dating venue” (p. 338). Similarly, they found that the perception of utility from newspaper reading varies according to gender, educational status, occupations, and age.

Blumler (1985) argued that whole population sampling may be less appropriate than specialized sampling approaches which could more accurately judge, within people's life circumstances, the individual's media motivations and uses. Blumler emphasized that linkages exist between social background characteristics and reported gratifications obtained from the media by audience members. For example, he noted that people who work with expressive occupational values were more apt to derive cognitive satisfactions from media use. Similarly, he suggested that “the number of organizations joined by respondents — trade unions, religious, charitable, professional, political, business, civic, educational, sports, and social groups — (seem) to operate as a stimulant to information-seeking” (p. 47).

Community Ties

Stamm (1985) found that interest in the community and knowledge about the community are significantly related to peoples' use of the editorial page. He argued that recent studies have consistently found that readers' use of the newspapers and especially the editorial section(s) is closely related to their participation in the community. For example, the more often people vote in local elections and the more interested they are in local politics, the higher they rate the importance of newspapers for surveillance.

Stamm also argued that an individual's expectation for their length of residency in the community can serve as an important predictor in determining

newspaper readership. Refuting previous suppositions that actual length of residency would relate significantly to community interest, Stamm's recent summary of contemporary studies suggest that "*anticipated* length of residence" is a much stronger predictor of newspaper subscription. Stamm described a combination of "spatial" and "cognitive" links to residency in the following typology:

1. Drifter — short past (in community) and short anticipated residence;
2. Settler — short past and long anticipated residence;
3. Relocator — long past and short anticipated residence;
4. Native — long past and long anticipated residence.

Stamm (1985), p. 127.

Stamm reported that empirical studies have demonstrated that "natives" tend to be the most interested and most involved in the community, i.e., they are the most frequent church attenders, and/or community meeting attenders. Levels of interest in the community, Stamm reported, are followed in descending order by settlers, relocators, and drifters.

These demographic and community interest variables likely contribute to gratifications sought and perceptions of the functions of the page by potential editorial page readers. Education and gender are easily tested variables. Stamm's research indicates that an individual's link to community residence may also prove to be an important factor which influences gratifications sought from the page. And levels of community participation, as Blumler and Stamm suggested, such as voting and participation in community organizations, may also prove to be important factors in this analysis.

Functions of the Editorial Page

function: The proper, normal, or characteristic activity of a person or thing.
— The American Heritage Dictionary

The previous studies have suggested what factors may influence gratifications sought and/or perceptions of the functions of the editorial page that might be identified by the individual reader. Weibull (1985), who suggested ways to improve the validity of uses and gratifications research, argued that the approach should complement its investigations with “clearly specified media characteristics” (p. 145). He noted that the media structure — the media institutions and media output — “can function either as *reinforcement* or as *constraint* in the relationship of gratifications sought” (p. 134). Therefore, it may be appropriate to include the perceived functions of the editorial page into analyses of why people read or avoid the page. A number of functions — for the readers, for the newspapers, and for society, have been suggested for the editorial page.

The Editorial Page Viewed as a Public Forum for the Villagers

In an early mass communications study, Park (1925) proposed that one of the functions of the press is to reproduce in the city, as closely as possible, conditions similar to life in the village, where public opinion and gossip were the main sources of social control. Later, the Hutchins Commission (1947), which advocated a “Social Responsibility Theory” of the press, listed requirements for a free and responsible press. Among those requirements, the commission stressed that the press should provide: an intelligent account of the day's events in a context that gives them meaning; a forum for exchange of comment and criticism; a means of projecting the opinions and attitudes of groups in society to one another; and, a

method of presenting and clarifying goals and values of society (pp. 20-21). On a large scale, one function of the press that suggests itself from these requirements is that it should provide communications necessary to run a democracy.

This view is partially included in a list of three societal/community functions of the editorial page, provided by Clayton (1977). As an editorial writer for the Washington Post, he suggested that the page tells decision makers that somebody is watching them. He also suggested that the page can stimulate reader interest in unexpected subjects, and that, over the years, the page can help create a climate of public opinion that makes some actions acceptable and others not.

Maynard (1977), another Washington Post editorial writer, noted that one of the page's functions is to help understand common problems in the community, and that the page indirectly functions to assist people to see themselves as neighbors.

Similarly, Geyelin (1977), editorial page editor for the Post, argued that the primary purpose of the page is to inform, illuminate, and even educate readers about priorities, values, and principles that "ought to figure into the conclusions" about topics of public interest.

The Editorial Page Viewed as a Director of Public Opinion

Hulteng (1973) narrowed the "social control" function of the press proposed by Park (1925) to the editorial page by ambitiously proposing that the page has a "gyroscope function." This concept suggests that the editorial/opinion page serves as a "rudder and compass" for society and helps to make up for the loss of primary ties to the family and local community.

The editorial page has also been suggested to have an "agenda-setting function." (Geyelin, 1977). Previously, Cohen (1963) suggested that: "The (press) may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is

stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (p. 13). This hypothesis was first empirically tested by McCombs and Shaw (1972) in a study of the 1968 presidential election. Their study demonstrated that issues with a high degree of media salience frequently correspond to issues which are salient with the public. The study did not determine, however, that the media set the public's agenda. Lang and Lang (1981) suggested that the agenda-setting process occurs as a result of feedback loops among media exposure, political interest, and events on the elite level feeding one another. Whether or not there is an agenda-setting “effect,” Stonecipher (1979) argued that one function of the editorial page is to *help* set the agenda and determine “priorities” during election campaigns or debates of public issues.

The Editorial Page Viewed as a Source of Information

Graber (1982), agreeing with Lang and Lang's analysis, categorized the media audience into “elite” and “nonelite” groups. She defined the elite group as those who demonstrate some degree of opinion leadership and/or political decision making. Instead of an agenda-setting function, Graber proposed that for the elite the media function to provide an *information* framework, which sets the boundaries for political discourse. For the nonelite group, she proposed that the media function to help form “snap judgments” about public issues.

And finally, on the social level, the editorial page has been suggested to serve as a watchdog, not only of the government, but of the press and its coverage of the news (Geyelin, 1977; Stonecipher, 1979). This function, they argued, is apparent in the letters sections and the ombudsman columns.

Functions of the Page for Individual Readers

Several authors have suggested that the editorial page may serve a variety of functions for its individual readers. Clayton (1977) cited that although the page

should help to establish a “framework” for public discussion, it should also function to provoke some kind of reaction from its readers. Similarly, Stonecipher (1979) argued that one job of the editorial is to move people. He noted that explanation of public issues is now often achieved in news magazines and television documentaries and that the purpose of editorials is to provide conclusions.

Hulteng (1973) offered that the page serves three specific functions for the reader. First, the page provides an explanation of the (confusing) events around him. Second, the reader (perhaps unconsciously) looks for *bench marks* against which to test his own thinking and shape his own conclusions about the meaning of events. The third function is that the page provides a public forum, giving the average citizen a voice in society.

Similarly, Geyelin (1977) suggested, while supporting the agenda-setting hypothesis, that readers turn to the editorial page because they want to know what they ought to be thinking about. And he suggested that the page should “redefine” the news (rearrange news items so that they make sense), and provide to the reader fresh ways to think about current issues.

Functions of the Editorial Page for Newspapers

The editorial page has also been noted to serve several functions for the newspaper. Stonecipher (1979) proposed that the *primary* role of the page may be to express the tone of the paper. However, each element of the page may contribute separately as well to the tone of the editorial page spread.

Fitzgerald (1986), for example, argued that editorials should “take a definite stand” for two reasons. First, the paper should aim to inform its readers about what it considers to be important public issues. And second, each editorial position assumed by the paper can contribute to establishing the “character” of the newspaper.

Similarly, Yovovich (1984) argued that the letters to the editor (the public forum element of the page) function as an important determinant of what makes one newspaper “great” and another not. Stonecipher (1979) noted that many newspapers have supplemented the forum section with an “ombudsman” column and “opinion” page, which may or may not voice opinions in accordance with the newspaper’s editorial stance. One paper, the Hartford Courant, has even created a public seat on its editorial board to “demystify” the editorial page process and to promote the newspaper’s direct involvement with the community (Davies, 1986).

Limitations Imposed on the Editorial Page

A number of mitigating factors, however, may have altered or continue to alter the principle functions of the editorial page on all three levels, i.e., its functions for the society/community, for the individual reader, and for the newspaper.

Community standards, for example, may limit the content of the page. Repeated studies have indicated that the letters to the editor section ranks consistently as one of the highest read sections in the average newspaper (Hulteng, 1973). Stonecipher (1979) suggested that the function of the “letters” column is to provide a barometer of public opinion and a gauge of what is on readers’ minds. Steiken (1986), highlighting a case of an editorial page responding to community standards, reported that the editorial staff of the Rapid City Journal declared “letters on abortion no longer acceptable” (p. 18).

The presentation of the page may also play a role in the effectiveness of its functions. Swanson (1948) determined that newspaper articles which are easier to read will often hold a reader’s attention for a longer period of time. Much later, Stonecipher (1979) suggested that an attractive layout and graphic design of the editorial page has become increasingly important. Atkin (1981) found that audiences

will be more apt to accept/consume media contents which require the least effort and/or are attractively presented. And, McGuire (1981) proposed that a presentation of complicated issues will hold an audience member's attention longer if it does not promote a high degree of anxiety.

Specifying these concepts to the editorial page, Sandman, Rubin, and Sachsman (1972) have suggested that publishers don't mind bland editorial pages because they do not want editorials that will scare off or anger readers. Similarly, Fitzgerald (1986), citing publishers' interests in the page, noted that the editorial page can function as a marketing asset for the paper. Stonecipher (1979), in a list of some of the limitations of the "opinion function," suggested that publisher ambitions (to make money) and reader needs (to be entertained) may explain why the page is often bland. In this view, the page functions to maintain the status quo in a related manner to the "cultivation" function of television, suggested by Gerbner and Gross (1976). A "publisher-reader coalition," Stonecipher noted, can override attempts by editorial/reporters to "change the world" (p. 24).

Thundering editorials, laced with opinion, which once appeared on the front pages of some newspapers no longer realistically exist (Yovovich, 1984; Fitzgerald, 1986). Curtis (1986) noted that today's editorial pages often "balance" the responsibility of offering opinions on important subjects with providing to the reader analyses of "interesting" topics. Curtis argued that this is partially because of the competition that the editorial page now has with so many "interesting" media alternatives.

Although these studies indicate that the editorial page serves a variety of functions, the functions that probably most directly apply to the page's readership are on the societal/community and individual levels. For example, a non-reader of the page may acknowledge that the page serves important functions for society, such as

providing a public forum. Since an audience activity study has not previously directly examined the editorial page, it should be informative to compare responses to gratifications sought from the page by individuals with their levels of interest and/or readership of the page.

In sum, the functions most applicable to this study will be as follows: (1) The page helps create a climate of public opinion; (2) It offers analyses of common problems in the community; (3) It tells decision-makers that somebody is watching them; (4) The page informs people of values and principles that ought to figure into conclusions about topics of public interest; (5) It tells its readers what to think about; (6) It provokes reactions from its readers; (7) The page gives readers bench marks against which to compare their personal opinions; (8) It gives average citizens a voice in society; (9) The page gives readers fresh ways to think about the news; and (10) It entertains its audience.

Summary

This study will investigate what gratifications are expected and valued from the editorial page by potential readers and what factors influence readership. The list of gratifications associated with the page will be based on several uses and gratifications studies (Becker, 1979; Kippax & Murray, 1980; Palmgreen, Wenner & Rayburn, 1980; Galloway & Meek, 1981) and on perceived functions of the page, derived from the summary of functions listed above, and from any additional functions stressed in interviews with Bay Area editorial page editors.

First, the study will ask the potential editorial page readers to agree, positively or negatively, whether the page offers these gratifications. Second, the survey will ask how readers value each of these gratifications. Third, the study will assess reader activity through measures of their reported intentionality, selectivity, and involvement with the page. And finally, the survey will assess the readers'

demographic locations and levels of community interest.

Overall, the study will attempt to determine the relative significance of each demographic, community interest, and activity variable in explaining avoidance or gratification-seeking motivations toward the page. The study will then examine how all these factors relate to editorial page readership. Curtis (1986) suggested that the functions of today's page now compete with "interesting" media alternatives. This study should help to ascertain what is interesting about the editorial page. And it might discover whether any normative expectations deter avoiders from turning to the page.

Chapter 2

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Subjects

Seven-day subscribers of the San Jose Mercury News were the respondents in a survey designed to identify the strengths of attitudes and motivations of readers from a wide range of demographic backgrounds toward the newspaper editorial page. Although the Mercury News is a Bay Area publication, for simplicity, only residents of Santa Clara County were used to comprise the random digitally generated list of subscribers.

The editor and assistant editor of the Mercury News were approached with the proposed questionnaire. An agreement was reached whereby the paper would provide a random list of its subscribers with the provision that the questionnaire should be no more than 40 questions, should take no more than seven or eight minutes to administer (out of their concern for their customers) and that the survey include several questions of specific value to the Mercury News, i.e.: what didn't the readers like about the Mercury News editorial page?; and, did readers think the page agreed too much with a conservative viewpoint (the Reagan administration) or was the page viewed as too liberal? Attitude and motivation theoretical questions were reviewed by the editors of the page. In a few cases, wording was rephrased to advantage; the editors' experience with the page helped in these cases to phrase the functional purpose of an attribute being studied with a wording which could be immediately understood by the average editorial page reader.

The random list of subscribers contained 723 names representing a cross-section of socioeconomic backgrounds, and included all of the urban and suburban communities of Santa Clara County.

From the grand list, a pilot list of 50 names was drawn by systematic random sampling. A pilot run of the survey was done for two reasons: to determine the approximate response rate, and to test the survey for unexpected calamities. After 15 surveys had been completed, an important finding emerged. An unexpected error had occurred in response to the motivation questions which were structurally based on Galloway and Meek's (1981) procedure. Each of these questions began with the same phrase: "How important is it to you that...." A remarkable response consistency occurred with this premise. Almost every subscriber responded: "It's very important." Due to this kind of consistency, these value questions were rephrased in order to sift out the intended response variations. The actual questionnaire's motivation questions began: "How important is it to you, on a typical reading day, that...."

A second pilot run was given with the updated and final version of the questionnaire. Fifty numbers were drawn by systematic random sampling from the remaining 673 numbers on the master subscriber list provided by the Mercury News. Out of this first run of the actual survey, 30 numbers resulted in completed questionnaires, with the remaining 20 being split between refusals, reaching disconnected numbers, reaching out-of-date numbers (new residences which did not subscribe to the newspaper), and numbers with no one home. The target goal was to accomplish between 220 and 230 surveys. With a predicted response rate of 70 percent, after taking out disconnected numbers and non-subscribing residences, it was calculated that a sample of 290 should be drawn from the remaining 623 unused

names on the random subscriber list. (The first 100 random numbers had been crossed off the list.) For simplicity, and insurance, 300 names were actually drawn, again by systematic random selection.

Overall, from this list of 300 residences, every other number was attempted to be reached at least five, but not more than ten times. Only residents, 18 and over, who lived at the subscribing home were surveyed.

Questionnaire administration took place between August 1, 1987 and March 20, 1988. The average survey took eight minutes per respondent and at least three calls to get someone to answer the phone.

Interviews were conducted almost entirely by the researcher due to limited financial resources. Several attempts were made to gain the assistance of associates in the interviewing process, and several of the interviews were conducted as training exercises with people who generously offered to help. However, some of these people created more hindrance than help because of consistent rejections from respondents. Problems occurred with potentially qualified interviewers as well; these problems were primarily due to the interviewers' own lack of time and limited motivation to keep calling people who were not home. Because the list of names was comparatively short and the survey needed to be completed, interviews which were the responsibility of others were ultimately conducted by the researcher. All attempts were made to remove bias from the scoring of responses. This was an exploratory study, with a general hypothesis, and therefore, no weighted favor of one kind of response for another was granted.

Measures

A total of 229 surveys were successfully completed. Out of the 350 names, (50 from pilot/response rate run of the actual survey and 300 from the main sample) 23 were subtracted due to disconnected numbers or reaching non-reader residences.

The overall response rate from the total number of countable calls (229 out of 327) was 70 percent.

The comprehensive, response-strength measuring questionnaire contained 37 items. Some items were presented in a five-questions-in-one format, resulting in 50 total response items. The data covered in the questionnaire included: measures of readership of various sections of the paper, including focused questions on sections of the editorial page; dimensions of gratifications specific to the editorial page — surveillance, social interaction and avoidance (affinity); measures of reader involvement with the page; demographic questions; and finally, items sought by the Mercury News editorial staff specifically seeking audience reactions and preferences toward the Mercury News editorial page.

Measures of beliefs and values followed the approach of Galloway and Meek (1981), but were refocused and based on the suggestions of the functions of the page, suggested by Hulteng (1973), Geyelin (1977), Clayton (1977), et al. Reader involvement with the page was measured in accordance with Levy and Windahl (1984 & 1985), and Rubin and Perse (1987). Community attachment items were based on Stamm (1985), and demographic items were based on Kippax and Murray (1980). Items gauging readership response to the quality of the Mercury News were inserted for the Mercury News' own information in an agreement with the editors.

The following path model was the basis for the questionnaire and the discovery process which follows. See Figure 2:

Figure 2**Path Model of Analysis** **Readership of the Editorial Page**

For brevity, references to the editorial two-page spread are simply referred to in this study alternately as the editorial page or as the editorial pages; all efforts were made during the administration of the questionnaire to ensure that the respondent included the facing opinion page in his or her considerations when speaking about the “editorial page.”

Readership was tested with a straightforward approach, asking simply how often on average the person turned to various sections of the paper. The editorial section was listed last so as not to arouse suspicion or incite inflated responses. After respondents offered how often they read the “page,” non-readers were filtered out of three succeeding questions concerning readership of specific parts of the editorial section. Readers and occasional readers were asked how frequently they looked at the editorial columns, the letters, and the editorial cartoon. The frequency of opinion page readership was not tested here, due to the need for a time-efficient questionnaire. In a later open-ended question to readers of the page, however, respondents were asked what sections of the page(s) they liked best, such as a

particular columnist, or the opinion section, or the letters, etc. Measures of readership may be found in questions 1 through 7 in Appendix 1. In addition, four open-ended and/or highly specified questions regarding readership habits with the editorial page were asked in the latter half of the survey. These questions asked the respondents alternately what grabbed their attention when they scanned through the page, and what kinds of things about the Mercury News editorial page they did not like.

Gratifications measures

A total of 18 gratification questions were asked of each respondent during the survey, regardless of whether they read the page (ever) or were regular readers. Three dimensions of media gratifications were used, based on the categorization proposed by Becker (1979). Becker's choice of *avoidance* as a dimension was utilized, but is referred to in this study as a positive dimension called *affinity*. Each of the three dimensions of gratifications: surveillance, social utility, and affinity tested the respondents for levels of belief and levels of motivation. For each dimension three questions describing attributes associated with page were asked in a format which asked the reader (first) to what degree they believed each of the three attributes related to the page, and later in the questionnaire, reworded the same statement asking the reader (second), how important each of those attributes were to them on an average day. The approach of the two parallel lines of questioning is based on the method of Galloway and Meek (1981). The belief questions may be found in items 8 through 16 in Appendix 1; the value questions are found in items 17 through 25.

Surveillance

The attributes of the surveillance questions selected from the multifaceted suggestions of the functions of the page suggested by several of its editors and

researchers. Notably, Clayton (1977) suggested that the page exists for readers to keep a watchdog role on decision-makers, Hulteng (1973) and Graber (1982) proposed that the page has an agenda-setting function, such as that suggested by McCombs and Shaw (1972), and that on the individual reader's level, the page helps a reader to figure out what's going on in the world (Graber, 1982; Hulteng, 1973; Blumler & McQuail, 1969).

Social Interaction

Measures of social utility were based on studies of audience needs, especially those examining reinforcement-seeking such as Klapper (1959), Blumler and McQuail (1969), and excitement-seeking and participation-seeking (Blumler, 1979; Becker, 1979).

Affinity

Measures of affinity, or “motivated affection” for the page, were designed with a reverse response intent. That is, the statements were worded with an avoidance perspective, following Becker's (1979) identification of an identifiable dimension of “avoidance.” These questions offered the non-reader a chance to agree with negative attributes associated with the page, while they forced the regular reader to oppose statements. Becker (1979) observed that some forms of media can be boring to some people. Schramm, Rubin, and Sachsman (1972) suggested that the editorial page editors do not want to scare off readers. This latter point initiated this study's investigation of page readability and complexity. And to investigate competing media alternatives (Becker, 1979; Curtis, 1986; Geyelin, 1977), one set of parallel questions gauged how people felt about reading the editorial page when time was limited, and there were other media choices to select from.

Reader Involvement/Activity

Three questions were used to gauge reader's involvement with the page in addition to the test of their straightforward readership of the page. These questions were based in intent on Levy and Windahl's (1984 & 1985) and Rubin and Perse's (1987) investigations of activity, but were reworded and refocused to gauge aspects of involvement specifically associated with the act of reading the editorial page. The questionnaire items probed how often people wrote letters to the editor, and what provoked them to write. The items also gauged whether or not readers felt that the page influenced their opinions about some issues. These questions may found be in items 26 to 28 in Appendix 1.

Community Interest

Questions measuring community attachment were based on the typologies proposed by Stamm (1985), and questions concerning community involvement, i.e., voting, and community participation, were based on Blumler (1979) and Stamm (1985). An additional community involvement interest measure can be gleaned from the question inserted by the editors of the Mercury News regarding preference for editorials on local, state, or international subjects. Community questions may be found in items 37 to 40 in Appendix 1.

Demography

Three measures of demography were used: gender, age, and education. These were based on numerous studies, including especially Kippax & Murray (1980). Respondents under the age of 18 were rejected and were asked to get someone older — due primarily to their inability to vote. Demography questions are found as the last three items (48 to 50) in Appendix 1.

Response alternatives were scored on a 1 to 5 scale, higher for agreement with a given statement and lower for disagreement with the statement. The 37-item

questionnaire was recoded to 50 items after completing the interviews (see Appendix 2). Items 29 and 30 of the recoded questionnaire, a two-part open-ended question asking what catches readers' eyes when they turn to the editorial section, were coded by tally count and nominal categorization. Responses to items 29 and 30 of Appendix 1 overlapped and were essentially indistinguishable. Responses to these items were eventually combined and sorted into nine categories.

Analysis

The preliminary method of analysis used was correlation. Each of the independent gratification variables associated with the page were tested for possible relationships to the dependent variable of readership of the editorial page (question 4 in Appendix 1). In addition, the individual variables of community attachment, editorial page activity/involvement, and demographic location were also correlated with the dependent variable of readership of the editorial page. Those variables that did not demonstrate a significant relationship to editorial page readership were removed from further consideration as contributing factors to the prediction of readership. Appendix 3 lists all pair correlation values for variables which did not relate significantly to the page's readership.

Many of the proposed functions/gratifications of the page and community attachment/demographic locators were related to the editorial section's readership. Variables which did not relate included: sex, education, belief that the page offers other peoples' opinions, belief that the page offers support for their own opinion, length of residence in the community, and anticipated length of residence in the community. These latter factors, as stated, were removed from further consideration of editorial page readership for the purpose of this study.

Of note, however, it was found that education, while not relating to the use of the editorial section, related significantly to the readership of the business pages.

Similarly, although it was found that sex did not prove to be a determinant of editorial page readership, a significant relationship was noted between sex and frequency of reading the letters to the editor. Women tended to read the letters more often than men.

Index Development

Some intended indices, such as community attachment, due to the elimination of some of their variables, were reduced through the preliminary analyses to two and even one factor representing their hypothesized dimensions, which were hoped to contribute to an understanding of editorial page readership. The following pairs or single factors were used for further study. See Table 1:

Table 1
Single Factor Indicators and Paired Groupings

Indicator Label	Variable(s)	Representing Dimension	Indicator Correlation to Editorial Page Readership	
Age	age	Demography	$r=.40$	$p=.001$
Community	participation in organizations + voting habits	Community Attachment	$r=.14$	$p=.019$
Involvement (with Page)	thought about/sent letters to the editor + opinions strengthened/alterd by page	Involvement (Activity)	$r=.51$	$p=.001$
Social Utility Belief	page offers a place to find support for own opinions	Social Utility Beliefs	$r=.13$	$p=.022$
Affinity Values	Readers highly value (1) (even) boring editorials + (2) value the editorial page, even read it at the expense of other sections.	Affinity Values	$r=.51$	$p=.001$

Three approaches were used to group and create indices for study out of the parallel sets of gratifications questions.

The first method involved breaking each of the dimensions into their two corresponding groups (beliefs and values) to create a total of six indices. In addition to the single factor (Social Utility Belief) and the paired group (Affinity Values), already listed in Table 1, four additional indices appeared to operate significantly with the dependant variable of editorial page readership. Table 2 lists the four additional gratification indices examined in the first analysis.

The second grouping and index development method reduced the amount of indices to three, namely each of the three dimensions: guidance, affinity, and social utility. This method simply combined the individual sets of beliefs and values for each dimension. For example, the index "Social Utility" contained four variables, all the variables mentioned above in Social Utility Values plus the single Social Utility Belief variable. Table 3 lists the grouping of gratification variables examined in the second analysis.

The third approach operated differently, creating two indices on a cross-dimensional basis. Essentially this method grouped all the belief variables significantly related to readership into one index "Beliefs" and into a second index grouped all the significant value variables into an index called "Values." Table 4 lists the cross-dimensional grouping of gratification variables examined in the third analysis.

In addition, one readership index was created — called "Hardcore." The intent of this index was to tease out further conclusions from borderline significant relationships. The makeup of this index is listed in Table 5 (p. 37).

Table 2
First Grouping of Gratifications Indices

Index Label	Variable(s)	Representing Dimension	Index Correlation to Editorial Page Readership	
Guidance Beliefs	the page helps keep tabs on the government + helps to sort out public issues + helps tell readers what they should think about	Guidance	$r=.15$	$p=.011$ $\alpha=.62$
Affinity Beliefs	the page is not boring + the page is more important than many sections of the paper + the page is not complicated.	Affinity	$r=.40$	$p=.023$ $\alpha=.48$
Guidance Values	readers highly value (1) keeping tabs on the government + (2) daily thinking about public issues + (3) being informed of what they should be thinking about.	Guidance	$r=.33$	$p=.001$ $\alpha=.73$
Social Utility Values	Readers highly value (1) reading other peoples' opinions + (2) articles supporting their own opinions + (3) feeling like they are participating in public events.	Social Utility	$r=.30$	$p=.001$ $\alpha=.74$

Since the three approaches to the gratifications analysis were used, and since their data pool was the same, three correlational tables were generated. Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4 show the correlations between all of the individual contributing indices and factors with the dependent variable (readership of the editorial page).

Table 3
Second Grouping of Gratifications Indices

Index Label	Variable(s)	Representing Dimension	Index Correlation to Editorial Page Readership	
Guidance	Guidance Beliefs + Guidance Values	Guidance	$r=.29$	$p=.001$ $\alpha=.69$
Affinity	Affinity Beliefs + Affinity Values	Affinity	$r=.45$	$p=.001$ $\alpha=.49$
Social Utility	Social Utility Belief + Social Utility Values	Social Utility	$r=.25$	$p=.001$ $\alpha=.68$

Each of the indices was tested for reliability. The pairs, of course, related significantly through correlational analysis. The indices of three variables and more, with one exception, fell short of a reliable Cronbach's alpha of .80. The exception was the grouping of "Values," with an alpha of .83. The nearest other grouping approaching the Cronbach's alpha reliability criterion was "Beliefs," with a .70 alpha.

Table 4
Third Grouping of Gratifications Indices

Index Label	Variable(s)	Index Correlation to Editorial Page Readership		Cronbach's Alpha
Beliefs	Guidance Beliefs + Affinity Beliefs + Social Utility Beliefs	$r=.31$	$p=.001$	$\alpha=.70$
Values	Guidance Values + Affinity Values + Social Utility Values	$r=.43$	$p=.001$	$\alpha=.83$

Table 5

Index Makeup of Hardcore Readership of the Editorial Page

Index Label	Variable(s)	Representing Dimension	Index Correlation to Editorial Page Readership
Hardcore	editorial page readership + letters to the editor readership + cartoon readership + editorials readership.	Readership	$r=.90$ $p=.001$ $\alpha=.72$

What emerges from these index tables is that all of these groupings bear some relation to readership of the editorial page. What is not apparent from this initial analysis is to what extent one group explains more about readership than another.

Chapter 3

RESULTS

Demographic Overview

This study had a slightly uneven sex ratio: 58 percent of the respondents were women, and 42 percent were men.

The majority of respondents had acquired some college education (38 percent) or attained a completed college degree (29 percent) for a combined representation of 67 percent. People with graduate degrees comprised 14 percent of the respondents, while people with high school diplomas comprised 18 percent. Only one percent (three respondents) had not achieved a high school diploma.

The average age of the respondents was 43, with the majority of the respondents clustered around the young side of “middle age”: 25 percent were between the ages of 40 to 49, and 27 percent were between ages 30 and 39. Young adults, between the ages of 18 and 29, comprised 18 percent of the respondents, while 14 percent of the respondents were between the ages of 50 and 59, and respondents 60 years and above represented 16 percent of the respondents. The youngest respondents were 18 and the oldest respondents were 81.

Community Ties

Length of reported residence in the Bay Area ranged among respondents from less than one year to 71 years. Length of residence had a fairly even distribution and representation in years across the span of one to 30 years. Those people who had

lived in the area from one to ten years totalled 28 percent. Those having lived in the area 11-20 years numbered 25 percent, 21-30 year residents represented 31 percent, from 31-40 years nine percent, and 41 years or more represented seven percent. The average length of residence among the respondents was 21 years.

Expected continued length of residence in the area rated strongly in favor of those who intended to stay in the Bay Area “for the duration.” Those who intended to stay an undetermined “long time” accounted for 65 percent of the respondents, while 14 percent suggested they intended to stay between six and ten years. People who intended to move away from the area in five years or less numbered 18 percent. An additional three percent offered that they might move somewhere between 11 and 15 years down the road.

Community participation rated low among this group of respondents, with 64 percent stating that they did not regularly participate in, belong to, or attend any kind of community organization or function. However, 26 percent reported participating in one or two groups; the most frequently mentioned community organization mentioned by participators was the church. An additional ten percent of the readers actively participated in three or more groups.

Reported voting participation, which was measured by whether they voted in the less popular governor's election of 1986, rated highly among the readers of the Mercury News. Slightly more than 71 percent responded that they had voted in that election.

Readership of the Mercury News and Its Editorial Page

Most people responded that they looked at part of the front page of the Mercury News on a daily basis (78 percent), and an additional 12 percent said they looked at the front page most days. Only ten percent of the respondents looked at the front page once in a while or less often.

Among the three inside sections of the paper that the survey tested, the most frequently read section on a daily basis was the Living section, followed by the business section, and finally the editorial pages. On a combined basis of “most days” and “daily” for each of these sections, 75 percent read the Living section, 55 percent read the business pages, and 43 percent read the editorial section. Of note, 18 percent of the respondents stated they never read the editorial pages, and 14 percent said they rarely looked at it. See Figure 3 for readership of the editorial page.

Among those people who looked at the editorial page at least sometimes, 33 percent looked at the letters to the editor once in a while, 31 percent looked at them daily or most days, and 36 percent looked at them rarely or skipped them altogether.

Figure 3

The editorial cartoon scored well. Some 42 percent looked at the cartoon daily or most days, 27 percent looked at it once in awhile, and 31 percent seldom or never looked at the cartoon when they turned to the editorial page.

Readership of the editorials themselves was not questioned on a frequency basis. Instead, readers were asked what their habits were when they had occasion to look at the editorials. (This did not assume that the editorials were read on a daily basis.) Among the editorial page readers, 47 percent said that when they read the editorials they read them all (eight percent), or read what interested them and skimmed the rest (39 percent). Another 36 percent said that they picked and choosed only what appealed to them, and 17 percent said they never bothered to read the editorials even when they were looking at the editorial pages.

Reader Involvement with the Editorial Page

Among readers of the editorial page, nine percent felt very strongly that the editorial pages had changed or strengthened their opinions about some issues, and an additional 36 percent felt that sometimes the page could influence their opinion. On the other hand, 12 percent felt very strongly that reading the editorial page had no influence on their opinions, and 21 percent felt that in general the pages had no influence on their opinion. About 22 percent didn't know whether or not the editorial page affected their opinion.

Measures of participation in the page revealed that 37 percent of the readers had at one time or another either sent or seriously contemplated sending a letter to the editor (three percent had sent three or more letters, 13 percent had sent one or two letters, and 21 percent had seriously thought about sending a letter). Another 26 percent offered that the thought had crossed their minds to send one, and 37 percent simply said they had never really considered sending one.

Among those who sent letters, 70 percent indicated that the primary reason had been that they wanted to state their opinion, and another 18 percent offered that that they had been prompted to write because they disagreed with an editorial. Other reasons for writing, such as that they agreed with a news story, or disagreed with a news story, totalled about 12 percent.

Asked out of all the elements on the editorial/opinion pages what caught their eyes when they turned to those pages, the most common answer was the editorial cartoon (22 percent) followed by the letters (20 percent). This was an open-ended question which was tallied and later categorized into nine items for simplified interpretation. When a reader, for example, said that they immediately read a column or editorial if it was about toxic waste, then this was eventually scored as interest in a "specific topic." (Specific topics rated nine percent, while "oh, just current issues" tallied seven percent.) Following the lead of the cartoon and the letters came "headlines" with 16 percent favor and "columns/columnists" with 13 percent. See Figure 4 for the remaining categories.

Figure 4

What Catches Readers' Eyes When Turning to the Editorial Page

Readers of the page were also asked what subject matter they preferred for Mercury News editorials. Cumulatively, 83 percent ranked local issues in their top three out of five choices, state issues were ranked in the top three by 71 percent, national issues received 78 percent interest as one of the top three choices, while international issues was listed as one of the top three choices by only 29 percent, and ethical issues received 38 percent favor.

In terms of judgment of the editorial page content, 43 percent of the readers said that the credibility of the editorials was “very high” and 42 percent said that the editorials were pretty credible.

Overall, 42 percent of the readers said that, on average, they agreed with the editorials (nine percent agreeing with them almost always, 33 percent agreeing most of the time). People who agreed or disagreed on an issue by issue basis with the editorials numbered 51 percent, while seven percent rarely or almost never agreed with the editorials. The remainder of the readers of the page did not grant that the editorials were credible.

Finally, in terms of content, 39 percent of the readers thought the Mercury News editorials provided a fair balance of comment toward the Reagan White House, whereas 17 percent tended to believe the Mercury News was too fair with the Reagan administration, and 12 percent thought the Mercury News was too severe toward the president. A large segment of readers (32 percent) did not have an opinion, or stated they didn't know.

Parallel Beliefs and Motivations Toward the Editorial Page

All respondents, regardless of whether they were regular readers of the page or non-readers of the page, were asked the belief and motivation sets of questions. There were only three missing cases. In terminology, in this section, “readers” refers

specifically to readers of the editorial pages, and “non-readers” to those people who did not read, or avoided, the page. It is assumed that all respondents are, of course, readers of the Mercury News itself.

Investigating the normative aspects of the page, in accordance with Levy and Windahl (1984 & 1985), demonstrated that the subscribers of the Mercury News hold a wide variety of perspectives about the editorial pages and their functions. (It is interesting to note that the editors of the pages were somewhat skeptical of these questions prior to the calls, and then later somewhat taken aback by the strength of the “negative” response levels toward some of the “obvious” functions questions.)

Guidance

Guidance questions asked if the editorial page offered the reader help in understanding and sorting out public issues. In the case of whether the editorial page offers something which can be helpful toward judging the performance of government officials (proposed by Clayton, 1977), 49 percent believed the page was helpful (19 percent strongly agreed, 30 percent agreed somewhat), yet 29 percent tended to not believe the page was helpful (seven percent totally disagreed, 22 percent disagreed somewhat). Twenty-two percent neither agreed nor disagreed that the page offered something to help judge government officials. The parallel motivation question did not refer to the editorial page, but simply asked the respondents how important it was for them to keep tabs on the performance of government officials. Again, 49 percent felt it was important or very important to know about government officials, and 29 percent did not feel it was important to keep track of them, and 22 percent felt it was neither important nor unimportant.

Geyelin (1977) suggested that one of the pages' functions was to help readers (and society) sort out the priorities of public issues. This was also believed by 63

percent of the respondents (17 percent strongly, and 46 percent “somewhat”). Only 23 percent of the respondents disagreed (nine percent strongly disagreed, and 14 percent disagreed somewhat) with this function, and 14 percent were undecided. Asked how important it was to them, as individuals, to think about public issues on an average day, 47 percent felt that it was important to them personally, while 24 percent felt it was rather unimportant, and 29 percent were undecided.

Finally, the spiciest question, asking readers, as Geyelin (1977) suggested, whether or not they believed the page provided to readers a place with opinions and information about what they *should* be thinking about (i.e. this essentially asked readers whether they thought the page served as a “guiding light,” functioning to help set the public's agenda of discussion). Quite a few people thought about the question for a few seconds and then said, “Hey, wait a minute, I don't like that question.” Others merrily answered the question, without hesitation. Nevertheless, 24 percent strongly believed the page offered the “what you should be thinking about(s)” and 39 percent mostly agreed with the statement. Only nine percent entirely disagreed, and 16 percent disagreed somewhat. An additional 12 percent toed the middle line, neither believing nor disbelieving this function.

Even more reaction-causing was the parallel motivation statement accompanying this function. It is worthwhile to quote the statement which asked: “How important is it to you, on a typical reading day, that you know what you should be thinking about?” Some respondents objected and asked, “Who's to *tell me* what I should be thinking about?” In these cases, the question was restated to soothe their fears, with “How important to you is it that you *feel* that you know what you should be thinking about....” Still, 23 percent did not feel it was important to them to know “what they should be thinking about.” Overall, however, 54 percent felt it was

important to keep up with what they should be thinking about and 23 percent stated it was neither important or unimportant. See Figure 5 for an overview of reader responses to guidance gratification items.

Figure 5

Readers' "Average Day" Values of Guidance Gratifications

Affinity

Affinity questions attempted to gauge the strengths of interest or disinterest held by readers of the Mercury News toward the paper's editorial pages. In accordance with Becker (1979), who suggested that characteristics of avoidance

actions added up to a strong factor for interpretation of media use, this study's affinity questions offered negative attributes associated with the page.

The first question asked the respondents whether they thought the page was generally boring. Almost a third, 31 percent, felt strongly (seven percent) or believed somewhat (24 percent) that the page was indeed boring. By contrast, 51 percent felt it was interesting (not boring), and 18 percent were undecided. On the motivation scale a similar pattern occurred with 31 percent judging it was important to them personally to read even boring editorials on an average day. The majority, however, at 51 percent, felt it was unimportant to read editorials that did not interest them, and 18 percent were undecided.

The second affinity question — asking whether readers would rather spend time elsewhere, while reading the newspaper, than in the editorial section — stemmed from numerous studies, especially Fitzgerald (1986). Fitzgerald suggested that the editorial page has, and will have in the near future, an increasing amount of competition, or appealing media alternatives, that vie for the audience's limited time. This suspicion was confirmed by the majority of the respondents, with 79 percent (50 percent strongly, and 29 percent somewhat) stating that the editorial pages were not their first choice of interest in the paper; most respondents stated that they *would* rather spend time in another section of the newspaper than in the editorial section. More probing in this regard, the value question asked the respondents how likely it would be for them to read the page, out of all the other sections of the paper, if time were limited on that given day. Only 19 percent thought it was important for them to read the editorial page instead of other choices (six percent feeling that it was very important, 13 percent stating “just important”). The majority, 64 percent, felt reading the editorial page instead of other sections was relatively unimportant. And 17 percent were undecided.

Finally, researchers such as Schramm (1949) and Becker (1979) have suggested that if media are perceived as too complicated by some members of their audience, they will tend to be consumed less. About one-fourth of the respondents believed that the page was complicated and difficult to read (nine percent strongly, 17 percent somewhat). But the majority, 59 percent, did not believe the page was too complicated (24 percent strongly disbelieving, 35 percent disbelieving somewhat), and 15 percent were undecided. The parallel motivation question, which allows several interpretations, simply asked readers how important it was to them on the average that they understand what they are reading. Some people responded that they understood everything, so they were not sure exactly how to respond. Others responded, "Of course it's important." The clear majority, 88 percent, either thought understanding what they read was very important (53 percent) or important (35 percent). Only two percent did not think it was important and ten percent were undecided. For an overview of reader responses to affinity gratification items, see Figure 6.

Social Utility

These questions, following the functional suggestions of Hulteng (1973), attempted to ascertain whether readers of the Mercury News thought the page was useful for comparing their own opinions to the opinions of others, and getting a feeling that they are caught up in the decision-making process. An overwhelming 90 percent of the respondents believed strongly (64 percent) or somewhat (26 percent) that the pages offered a place to find other peoples' opinions. A low three percent strongly disbelieved, or disbelieved somewhat, that the page offered other peoples' opinions. Some of the people who were undecided (seven percent) objected to the question, explaining it this way: "No, it doesn't offer peoples' opinions; it's just the opinions of a bunch of editors." In terms of motivation, 46 percent felt it was

Figure 6 **Readers' "Average Day" Values Toward Affinity Gratifications**

important to read other peoples' opinions on an average day. But 38 percent felt it was unimportant, and 16 percent felt it was neither important nor unimportant to read other peoples' opinions on an average day.

The reinforcement-seeking question, based on studies such as Klapper (1960), sought to measure attitudes of agreement with the content toward the editorial page.

A majority, 75 percent, of the respondents believed that the page offered a place to find support for their own opinions (26 percent strongly, and 49 percent somewhat), while only 12 percent did not believe the page offered a place to find support for their own opinions (seven percent strongly disbelieving, and five percent disbelieving somewhat), and 13 percent were undecided. However, only 47 percent valued reading articles which supported their own opinions, while 31 percent thought reading such reinforcement material was relatively unimportant. Twenty-two percent had no opinion.

Finally, in accordance with Blumler (1979) and Becker (1979), respondents were queried whether reading the page was perceived and/or valued as a means of participating or of feeling like they are participating in the public arena. About half of the respondents (20 percent strongly, 31 percent somewhat) believed that the page offered a way to make them feel like they were participating in current events. Another 32 percent disagreed with the idea (15 percent strongly, 17 percent disbelieving somewhat), and 17 percent were undecided. From the motivation perspective, 51 percent felt it was important on an average day to feel like they were participating in public events, 30 percent felt it was relatively unimportant to feel like they were participating, and 19 percent stated it was neither important nor unimportant for them to feel like they were participating. For an overview of reader responses to social utility gratification items, see Figure 7.

Operating Indices

Indices showing significant explanatory relationships to readership of the editorial page were made up of six groupings from the dimensions of demography, community interest, involvement with the editorial page, and with 15 of the gratification variables. The gratification variables were recombined for regression

Figure 7

analysis purposes into three different groups to test for optimum explanatory power. (Refer to Tables 1 through 5.) All of the indices appear to operate independently, with the exceptions that Age related significantly to Community, and Involvement related significantly to the gratifications groupings (such as Guidance Beliefs and Social Utility Values). See Table 6.

Table 6

Pearson Correlation Coefficients for Third Grouping of Gratification Indices

	Readship	Age	Comm	Involv	Beliefs	Values
Readership	—	.40 ^c	.14 ^b	.51 ^c	.26 ^c	.43 ^c
Age		—	.35 ^c	.05 ^a	.01 ^a	.06 ^a
Community			—	.08 ^a	.00 ^a	.07 ^a
Involvement				—	.39 ^c	.49 ^c
Grat Beliefs					—	.60 ^c
Grat Values						—
	^a $p \geq .05$	^b $p \leq .05$	^c $p < .001$	N=229		

Predicting Editorial Page Readership

Separate multiple regressions were computed with the variable of editorial page readership and with the index of hardcore readership. For each of these two cases, three attempts were made to explain readership by including in separate equations one of the three different groupings of gratifications. Also included in every one of the regression equations were Age, Involvement, and Community (refer to Table 1). Variables with significant F scores were retained, and stepwise multiple regression was recomputed until each variable in each equation made a significant contribution. In the final analyses, Age was entered first, then Involvement, then the remaining variable(s).

Table 7 shows the results of multiple regression for the most significant items associated with the first grouping of all six categories of belief and value gratifications. The components are limited, yet straightforward and contributing overall to an explanatory R of .69. Since Involvement shows such a significant explanatory contribution, it should be noted here that this index is weighted, carrying both a (prior) experience with the page connotation and an *activity* or, how-much-you-get-out-of-it, connotation.

Table 7

Variables Associated With Readership of the Editorial Page (Using First Grouping of Gratification Variables)

Item Description	Beta Coefficient
Age	.32
Involvement	.38
Affinity Values	.29
<hr/>	
R = .69	F = 66
	df = 3, 224
	p < .001

In the case of the same analysis with Hardcore as the dependant variable of readership, this grouping of gratifications variables yielded one additional final remaining variable — Affinity Beliefs. Out of all the gratifications groupings, this analysis with Hardcore was the only one of the three multiple regression equations that demonstrated a significant change from the basic readership analysis; therefore it is the only one of the three analyses with Hardcore shown. (See Table 8.) In this analysis of Hardcore, Affinity Beliefs also demonstrated significant explanatory power. Since Hardcore is by definition (and the filtering process of the questionnaire) a gauge of the likes and dislikes of those people who *do* read the page, the change of the Affinity Beliefs index to a significant relationship with readership habits, coupled with the strength of the Involvement index, indicates that among those people who do read the page, the more often they read, the more highly they believe it is one of the more interesting sections of the paper. Interestingly though, no significant relationship demonstrated itself that Hardcore readers believed the page offered guidance or social utility-type gratifications.

Table 8

Variables Associated With Hardcore Readership of the Editorial Page
(Using First Grouping of Gratification Variables)

Item Description	Beta Coefficient
Age	.28
Involvement	.43
Affinity Values	.22
Affinity Beliefs	.11
<hr/> R = .72 F = 60 df = 4, 223 p < .05	

Table 9 shows the results of the regression analysis with the three dimensions Guidance, Affinity, and Social Utility used as the groupings of the gratifications in the equation.

Table 9
Variables Associated With Readership of the Editorial Page
(Using Second Grouping of Gratification Variables)

Item Description	Beta Coefficient
Age	.31
Involvement	.37
Affinity	.32
$R = .69$ $F = 51$ $df = 3, 223$ $p < .05$	

The final multiple regression analysis yielded the strongest multiple R with the highest degree of significance. This equation entered the third grouping of gratification variables, Beliefs and Values, into the regression analysis with Community, Involvement, and Readership. See Table 10.

Table 10
Variables Associated With Readership of the Editorial Page
(Using Third Grouping of Gratification Variables)

Item Description	Beta Coefficient
Age	.36
Involvement	.38
Values	.22
$R = .66$ $F = 58$ $df = 3, 224$ $p < .001$	

Here the index Values, with a Cronbach's alpha of .83, demonstrates itself to be a strong predictor in the readership equation. The significance of this equation is the greatest ($p < .001$) among the three grouping analyses and it has a respectably high multiple R value of .66, indicating that not only do three factors — age, involvement with the page, and values of several gratifications associated with the page — contribute strongly to an understanding of readership, but that a high degree of readership predictability (confidence) may be generated from this equation. The Beta coefficient for Involvement is the highest, followed by Age.

Due to the significant correlational relationship between Values and Involvement (see Table 6) it is clear that Involvement's share of Values reduces the impact of Values in the equation.

The following path model presents itself from Tables 6 and 10. See Figure 8:

NOTE: Free-standing numbers are zero-order correlations between all variables in model. Numbers in parentheses are beta-coefficients from Table 10.

Chapter 4

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

An understanding of the relationship between readership of the editorial page and various factors, such as demographic backgrounds of its readers, the readers' ties to the community, their experience with the page, and their views and attitudes about the page was attempted in this study. The following final chapter offers interpretations of the data presented in the previous pages, responds to the exploratory questions posed in the introduction, and presents recommendations for further research.

Interpretation of Data

Overview

The proposed path model suggested that variables within three dimensions — demography, community ties, and involvement with the page — would be related to and influence peoples' beliefs and values about gratifications obtained from the page, which would then ultimately relate to how often the page is read. This analysis begins with a look at readership of the page, then starts from the beginning of this path model of investigation and traces back to readership.

Readership

Although the editorial section is usually found in the Mercury News several pages inside the Local section, a large percentage of those surveyed — almost 70 percent — responded that they looked at the editorial page at least once in awhile.

Conversely, 30 percent of those surveyed did not make a point to read the page or consciously avoided it. A love-hate polarity of attitudes toward the page and readership of the page demonstrated itself between those who were fans of the section and those who were nonfans. One woman, a fan, remarked: "I have to read the page to defend my opinions against my college kids. You bet I read the page." On the other hand, another woman, an avoider, remarked: "I don't read the editorial page too often. I'm not a rabble rouser — I imagine the people who read it are like that — rabble rousers."

Readership of the page itself seemed to be selective. More women than men preferred reading the letters to the editor. Some people did not care to read the editorials, while others claimed to read them twice daily. The editorial cartoon caught most peoples' attention the most often when they first turned to the page.

Demographic Relations To Readership

Education seemed to bear no relation to readership of the page, yet proved significant to readership of the Business section. Although many of the issues involved in the editorial page are complex in scope, people with a wide range of educational backgrounds either look at the page, or disregard it. Some Ph.D. respondents, for example, flatly avoided the page making such remarks as: "I've got my own opinions, I don't need to read others," and "They have incorrect analyses," and "It's just the opinions of a bunch of editors." Since education is apparently unrelated to readership habits with the page, there may be some kind of balance, regardless of college education or lack of college education, among those who could care less about current issues, and those who faithfully read the page to keep informed of the public issues.

Age proved to be the most straightforward, and one of the strongest factors

relating to readership of the page. Age had an F value of 53 ($p=##$) in the optimum prediction equation of Age, Involvement, and Values with Readership; this means that the variation with the respondents closely approximated the line of prediction calculated by the equation. The older the readers of the newspaper, apparently, the more likely they are to be readers of the editorial page. One elderly man stated: "We're older, so we have time." In fact, one 75-year old woman remarked that she daily put in 2-1/2 to 3 hours on the editorial page.

Age also related significantly to readership of the front page and the Business section, but was not a factor in relation to the Living section. Since this study found that advancement in age appears to increase the likeliness of readership of the editorial page, as well as the latter, this suggests that older people often have more time to sit down and read everything they want to in the paper. By contrast, most people (75 percent of the respondents) find time to read the Living section regardless of whether they are young or old.

Sex related significantly to readership of the Living section and the Business pages, but not to the editorial page. However, letters were read more often by women than men.

Community Ties

Neither length of residence in the Bay area nor expected length of residence appeared to relate significantly to readership. Length of residence, however, approached significance. Its relationship to readership, however, may partially be explained by its significant relationship to age.

Community involvement of the readers, defined by their reported voting participation and/or belonging to community groups, was related to readership of the page, but proved not to be a significant predictor in the regression analysis. People who participate in community activities tend to read the page more often, and people

who vote tend to read the page more often. Several respondents remarked that the page became important to them close to elections, but in the intermediate times it did not receive their attention.

Local issues were preferred the most for editorial content by the respondents. In fact, preference for local issues related significantly to editorial page readership. For example, one respondent offered that he looks for local issues in the editorials, but for national issues he turns to the TV for information and ideas.

Overall, it appears that while interest in local issues and community participation seem to relate to readership of the page, they are not significant and consistently present factors in predicting its readership.

Involvement with the Page

Involvement with the page appeared as one of the strongest factors in predicting readership of the page. Involvement was defined by whether or not people thought that their opinions had been influenced by the page and whether or not they had seriously considered or sent a letter to the page. Due to the filtering process of the survey, only readers of the page (those who read the page more often than “never”) responded to these items. Non-readers of the page were scored as missing cases for these items. The high significance, both in correlation with the page and in a step-wise multiple regression analysis, indicates those people who feel the page has influenced their opinions, and/or those who felt like participating in the page are more likely to read the page. On one hand, this seems like a chicken-or-egg-first relationship, meaning that people have to read the page first in order to have their opinions changed. Yet the strength of the relationship between the index of Involvement and Readership of the editorial section suggests that people who are riled up or influenced by the page are more apt to become its regular fans.

Relation of “Operating” Variables Age and Involvement to Gratification Beliefs and Values

Almost all the gratification belief and gratification value measures related significantly to readership of the page. These measures could be grouped in three manners: by dimension; by dimension beliefs and dimension values; and simply by all gratification beliefs and all gratification values. The strongest predictor which emerged from these groupings was that of gratification values. Using the grouping method of gratification beliefs and gratification values, then, as the basis for further explanation, it is interesting that Involvement related significantly to both Beliefs and Values, but Age did not relate to either, nor did Age relate to Involvement. Although peoples' beliefs did not ultimately relate to readership, the relationship of Involvement to gratification beliefs and gratification values indicates, again, that the more people get something out of the page, the more they believe it performs those functions proposed by editorial page editors (such as Clayton and Geyelin), and the more highly they value those items. Age, on the other hand, seems to be unrelated to the values and beliefs people hold toward the page.

In general, regardless of whether they read the page or not, more people tended to believe in the proposed functions of the page than to disagree with those functions. It should be no surprise that a percentage of the subscribers do not think about, care about, or believe in any of these functions. However, the editors of the Mercury News were somewhat taken aback by the presence of, for example, 20 percent of the respondents disbelieving or disbelieving strongly that the page can help people to judge government officials. However, peoples' comments helped to clarify the way people responded. One man described the page as “plain inaccurate.” Another said simply: “I believe it is editors' opinions and placements on the page.”

Two dimensions in the values grouping, Guidance and Social Utility, indicated a similar pattern with Beliefs — that is to say, more people tended to value or highly value the gratifications listed than to not value them. However, the margin of difference decreased in all these cases. For example, close to 80 percent of the people believed the page offered other peoples' opinions while ten percent did not. Yet half the respondents valued reading other peoples' opinions, compared to 30 percent who did not. The differences in strengths of beliefs and values suggest that normative expectations do exist for the page, but that these expectations have less to do with readership than the motivational value the individual readers have toward each of the gratifications that may be obtained from the editorial page.

The Affinity items scored the most significantly within the group of value statements. These items, asked with a reverse intent, gave people who avoided the page a chance to unload their venom. Responses to the affinity (avoidance) gratification items demonstrated themselves to be significantly related to the prediction equation of readership (See Table 7). While only roughly 30 percent of the respondents felt it was relatively unimportant to read “boring” editorials, a comparable 31 percent of the respondents seldom or never read the editorial page. Likewise, almost 30 percent of the respondents felt that if their time was limited it was relatively unimportant to read the page compared to reading other sections of the paper. These may be the same people; this suggests that there a more noticeable pattern may exist among avoiders of the page than among readers the page. One avoider presented his feelings this way: “I confess, I'd go through the classifieds before I'd read the editorial page.” Another avoider explained, “The reason I don't read more is guilt. It makes me feel guilty about what I can't do.” And still another stated: “It's not boring, just slanted.”

The Editorial Page and Its Competition

What emerges from this study is that age, experience with the page, and positive value attitudes toward many of the gratifications that may be obtained from the functions of the editorial page are significant predictors in determining readership of the editorial section. However, throughout the administration of the survey, people often referred to competing alternatives or readily referred to other options available to them instead of preferring to read the page. Geyelin (1977), Clayton (1977) and others suggested that the page serves as a public forum for democracy, offering a place for people to exchange ideas and express opinions. Even among the respondents who were avoiders in this study there was a strong current of interest and enthusiasm for this concept of exchanging ideas and gathering information about current events. A good share (65 percent) of the readers of the Mercury News do look at the editorial page at least once in a while. Yet both among readers and avoiders many unsolicited comments mentioned public talk radio as preferable source of obtaining peoples' opinions. And while the clear majority sentiment shows that people respect the paper's credibility, the respondents preferred to read its coverage of local issues more than any other editorial page subject matter. One man offered: "It's the local paper; when it comes to national issues, Dan Rather influences me."

Limitations Imposed on the Editorial Page

"Ads, ads, ads. The paper just piles up. You have to hunt for the news." This respondent's clear opinion was echoed by many people. The editorial section, which contains no advertisements, is embedded in a large metropolitan paper inside many pages, meaning that a reader has to go through more effort to find the section than to glance at the front page. In fact, a few of the non-readers of the page, who

subscribed to the Mercury News, were not exactly sure what the editorial section was when they were asked if they read it.

By far and away, the most significant factor which seems to relate to the range of readership of the page is peoples' limited leisure time. Older people, especially those retired, tend to read the page more often than young people. One 45-year-old woman, for example, stated: "I used to read the editorials, but I'm too busy doing volunteer work now to read the whole paper." Among the Affinity Belief items, respondents were asked how strongly they believed they would prefer to spend time with other sections of the paper. Eighty percent of the respondents, including readers and non-readers alike, either believed or believed strongly that they preferred to spend time in other sections of the paper rather than in the editorial section. One woman commented that she enjoys reading the letters when time permits, but generally she skips them.

Response to Introductory Questions

Among the respondents, the majority felt that the editorial page was both credible and interesting, and valued reading the page because it provided peoples' opinions, fair arguments, and helpful insight into public issues. The page does apparently influence its audience to some degree. It was found that the more frequently people read the page the more frequently on average they would estimate that the page had either strengthened or altered one or more of their opinions. Although the page received high marks for presentation and content, with special interest by the respondents in coverage of local issues in the editorial section, three key factors appear to hold people back from joining the ranks of regular editorial page readers. The first factor is limited time. Older people read the page more than younger people; people state that they would read it, but they can't read the whole

paper every day. The second factor is peoples' preference for alternative media sources for opinion exchange. Public talk radio and television both received a fair share of unsolicited comments as sources of opinion information sought by the respondents. Finally, among all the readers of the paper, from all socio-economic backgrounds, there may possibly exist a definable group of people who share values characteristic of "editorial page avoidance." A typology of people who avoid the page may be that they are predominantly young, they do not value the gratifications of the editorial page, and they do not have much experience with the page, or feel that the page has influenced their opinions.

Future Research

Further research would be valuable to replicate and/or test the findings of this study. Several measures could be incorporated into further research of the section.

First, specific competing media could be compared. People could be asked to rate the amount of satisfaction gained from differing public forum media that are now available. Specifically, "talk radio" could be included in a future study of the editorial page and media alternatives for public opinion.

Also, measuring time available to people and time spent in the newspaper and on the editorial page would be helpful to understand what percentage of the potential readers of the page skip the editorial section due to no fault of the section, but to its audiences lack of available time. This measure could also be compared to the amount of time people spend with alternative opinion forum media choices.

Another focus could specifically address the editorial page avoider. Since Affinity suggested itself to be a strong indicator in terms of readership of the page, more investigation could possibly turn up significant characteristics of opinion avoiders.

Other studies, notably Stamm (1985), have indicated that community attachment is strongly related to newspaper subscription and editorial page readership. This study was not able to replicate those findings. Perhaps with a larger sample, or more refined questions about residency in the community and interest in community issues, a relation can still be found that would enter community interest into the prediction equation for readership. It seems with such a high preference by respondents of this study for local issues that such a relationship should exist.

Finally, the uses and gratifications approach to understanding editorial readership could be refocused on audience activity with the newspaper and with other activities and interests in peoples' lives. This seems to indicate that the functions of the page proposed by its editors and researchers do exist in many peoples' minds, but this study does not adequately address what activities influence people to turn to the page. It also does not attempt to gauge what interests people have before they open the daily newspaper. People interested in politics, for example, would presumably be more interested in the page than people interested primarily in gardening. "Ask me about the sports page," was a typical non-reader remark, while a semi-reader of the page commented: "Around election time I start leafing through it."

This study suggests the editorial page is a healthy and respected section of the newspaper and that it has both a large and faithful audience. Yet it also indicates that the newspaper audience may easily be distracted by time limitations or competing media alternatives. Age is apparently a key factor in understanding readership of the editorial page. To widen the base of its editorial section readership, the Mercury News and other newspapers could profit by attempting to catch the attention of

younger readers and by emphasizing perhaps even more on local issues. It is hoped that further research on the editorial page and its purpose will help to widen the section's already considerable readership base.

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APPENDIX 1
QUESTIONNAIRE

PHONE NUMBER _____

CALL #1 _____

CALL #2 _____

CALL #3 _____

WHY PEOPLE READ OR AVOID THE NEWSPAPER EDITORIAL PAGE

HI, I'M _____, CALLING FROM THE JOURNALISM DEPARTMENT AT SAN JOSE STATE (pause) WITH THE COOPERATION OF THE SAN JOSE MERCURY NEWS. I'M DOING A SHORT SURVEY AS PART OF THE RESEARCH FOR A MASTER'S THESIS. I'D LIKE TO ASK YOU SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT WHY YOU READ THE MERCURY NEWS. COULD I HAVE A FEW MINUTES OF YOUR TIME TO ASK SOME QUESTIONS?

(IF RESPONDENT ASKS FOR TIME ESTIMATE, SAY ABOUT 7 MINUTES).

1. How often do you look at all or part of the front page?

Daily _____
Most days _____
Once in a while _____
Seldom _____
Never _____

2. How often do you look at all or part of the Living section or the comics?

Daily _____
Most days _____
Once in a while _____
Seldom _____
Never _____

3. How often do you look at the business pages?

Daily _____
Most days _____
Once in a while _____
Seldom _____
Never _____

4. How often do you look at the editorial page?

Daily _____
Most days _____
Once in a while _____
Seldom _____
Never _____

(For "NEVER" readers ask the next two questions, 5 and 6, but suggest responses ONCE IN A WHILE, SELDOM or NEVER. You don't need to ask question 7.)

I'M NOW GOING TO ASK YOU SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT THE EDITORIAL PAGE.

5. How often do you read the letters to the editor?
Daily ____
Most days ____
Once in a while ____
Seldom ____
Never ____
6. How often do you look at the editorial cartoon?
Daily ____
Most days ____
Once in a while ____
Seldom ____
Never ____
7. When reading the Mercury News editorials, do you generally
Read them all ____
Read only those with subjects that appeal to you ____
Read those that appeal to you, skim the others ____
(Never read) ____

(Please ask all respondents to answer all of the questions, 8 to 25. For nonreaders you can say: NOW EVEN THOUGH YOU DON'T READ THE EDITORIAL PAGE, IN THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS I'M GOING TO ASK HOW STRONGLY YOU BELIEVE OR DO NOT BELIEVE THAT...)

IN THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS I'M GOING TO ASK HOW STRONGLY YOU BELIEVE OR DO NOT BELIEVE THAT THE MERCURY NEWS EDITORIAL PAGE OFFERS CERTAIN REWARDS TO YOU.

8. Do you believe that the editorial page offers something which can help you judge what kind of jobs government officials are doing?
Believe strongly ____
Believe somewhat ____
Not sure ____
Do not really believe ____
Strongly do not believe ____
9. Do you believe the editorial page generally is filled with boring analyses that usually would not keep your interest?
Believe strongly ____
Believe somewhat ____
Not sure ____
Do not really believe ____
Strongly do not believe ____

10. Do you believe the page offers you a way to help you sort out the priorities of an issue?
Believe strongly ____
Believe somewhat ____
Not sure ____
Do not really believe ____
Strongly do not believe ____
11. Do you believe the editorial page offers a place to find other peoples' opinions about public issues?
Believe strongly ____
Believe somewhat ____
Not sure ____
Do not really believe ____
Strongly do not believe ____
12. Do you believe it offers a place to find support for your own opinions about public issues?
Believe strongly ____
Believe somewhat ____
Not sure ____
Do not really believe ____
Strongly do not believe ____
13. Do you believe the editorial page offers some good things, but you would usually rather spend time with other sections of the newspaper.
Believe strongly ____
Believe somewhat ____
Not sure ____
Do not really believe ____
Strongly do not believe ____
14. Do you believe the page offers you a place to find out what public issues you should be thinking about?
Believe strongly ____
Believe somewhat ____
Not sure ____
Do not really believe ____
Strongly do not believe ____
15. Do you believe the editorial page offers editorials or columns that are often complicated, or difficult to follow.
Believe strongly ____
Believe somewhat ____
Not sure ____
Do not really believe ____
Strongly do not believe ____
16. Do you believe it offers you a way to feel like you are participating in current events?
Believe strongly ____
Believe somewhat ____
Not sure ____
Do not really believe ____
Strongly do not believe ____

NOW I'M GOING TO RESTATE THESE ITEMS IN TERMS OF THEIR
IMPORTANCE TO YOU--ON A TYPICAL READING DAY

17. How important is it to you, on a typical reading day, that you are able to judge what kind of jobs government officials are doing?
- Very important ____
Important ____
Neither important or unimportant ____
Not important ____
Not at all important ____
18. How important is it to you, on a typical reading day, to read editorials or columns about public issues, even if they seem boring?
- Very important ____
Important ____
Neither important or unimportant ____
Not important ____
Not at all important ____
19. How important is it to you, on a typical reading day, to do some sorting out of certain public issues?
- Very important ____
Important ____
Neither important or unimportant ____
Not important ____
Not at all important ____
20. How important is it to you, on an average reading day, that you read other peoples' opinions about public issues?
- Very important ____
Important ____
Neither important or unimportant ____
Not important ____
Not at all important ____
21. How important is it to you, on a typical reading day, that you are able to read articles which support your own opinions about public issues?
- Very important ____
Important ____
Neither important or unimportant ____
Not important ____
Not at all important ____
22. How important is it to you, on a typical reading day, that you read the editorial page instead of other sections of the newspaper that might interest you?
- Very important ____
Important ____
Neither important or unimportant ____
Not important ____
Not at all important ____

23. How important is it to you, on an average reading day, that you know about what issues you should be thinking about?
- Very important ____
 Important ____
 Neither important or unimportant ____
 Not important ____
 Not at all important ____
24. How important is it to you, usually, that you are able to understand most of what you read in the Mercury News?
- Very important ____
 Important ____
 Neither important or unimportant ____
 Not important ____
 Not at all important ____
25. How important is it to you, on a typical reading day, for you to feel that you are participating in some way in current events?
- Very important ____
 Important ____
 Neither important or unimportant ____
 Not important ____
 Not at all important ____

(For "NEVER" readers, you can now skip to question #37)

NOW I'M GOING TO ASK YOU SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR INVOLVEMENT WITH THE EDITORIAL PAGE.

26. Do you feel that the editorial page has changed or strengthened your opinions about some issues?
- Feel very strongly ____
 Sometimes this is the case ____
 Really couldn't say ____
 Don't feel it changes your opinions in general ____
 Definitely don't feel it has changed your opinions ____
27. Have you ever seriously thought about, or sent a letter to the Mercury News?
- Yes, have sent three or more ____
 Yes, have sent one or two ____
 Haven't sent one, but seriously thought about it ____
 Crossed your mind, but not seriously ____
 Never really thought about sending one ____

(IF ONE HAS BEEN WRITTEN)

28. Did you write your letter in order to
- Agree with an editorial ____
 Disagree with an editorial ____
 Agree with a news story ____
 Disagree with a news story ____
 Other reason ____

29. When you turn to the editorial page, what generally are the first two things that grab your interest?

1. _____

2. _____

30. What are your favorite parts or columns of the Mercury News editorial page?

31. Do you feel that Mercury News editorials

Agree too much with the Reagan administration ____

Disagree too much with the Reagan administration ____

Mix agreement and disagreement about right ____.

Or don't know ____.

32. Please rank, in a 1st, 2nd, etc. through 5th sequence, your preference for:

(You would prefer, first,...)

Editorials on local subjects ____

Editorials on state subjects ____

Editorials on national subjects ____

Editorials on international subjects ____

Editorials on ethical issues ____

33. In a scale of 1 (high) to 3 (low), rate the Mercury News editorials for:

Fairness ____

Clarity ____

Good writing ____

Vigor, (or the strength of their position they take) ____

Credibility ____

34. What don't you like about the Mercury News editorial page?

(Why not?) _____

35. How often do you agree with the editorial positions of the Mercury News?

Mostly agree ____

Usually agree ____

Agree once in a while ____

Seldom agree ____

Almost never agree ____

36. Do you read the Mercury News election recommendations?

Usually ____

Once in a while ____

Never ____

37. How long have you lived in the South Bay area?

38. How long do you plan to continue living in the South Bay area?

39. Did you vote in last November's election?

Yes _____

No _____

40. Do you regularly participate in any community organization?
If so, how many organizations? _____

41. What is the highest level of education you have had?

No highschool _____

Highschool _____

Technical school _____

Some college _____

College degree _____

Graduate degree _____

42. What is your age?

43. Mark the gender.

male _____ female _____

THANKS A LOT FOR YOUR COOPERATION. THIS IS A CONFIDENTIAL
SURVEY.

APPENDIX 2

QUESTIONNAIRE — CODED FOR DATA ENTRY

PHONE NUMBER Code Sheet

CALL #1 _____

CALL #2 _____

CALL #3 _____

WHY PEOPLE READ OR AVOID THE NEWSPAPER EDITORIAL PAGE

HI, I'M _____, CALLING FROM THE JOURNALISM DEPARTMENT AT SAN JOSE STATE (pause) WITH THE COOPERATION OF THE SAN JOSE MERCURY NEWS. I'M DOING A SHORT SURVEY AS PART OF THE RESEARCH FOR A MASTER'S THESIS. I'D LIKE TO ASK YOU SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT WHY YOU READ THE MERCURY NEWS. COULD I HAVE A FEW MINUTES OF YOUR TIME TO ASK SOME QUESTIONS?

(IF RESPONDENT ASKS FOR TIME ESTIMATE, SAY ABOUT 7 MINUTES).

1. How often do you look at all or part of the front page?

- 5 Daily ____
4 Most days ____
3 Once in a while ____
2 Seldom ____
1 Never ____

2. How often do you look at all or part of the Living section or the comics?

- 5 Daily ____
4 Most days ____
3 Once in a while ____
2 Seldom ____
1 Never ____

3. How often do you look at the business pages?

- 5 Daily ____
4 Most days ____
3 Once in a while ____
2 Seldom ____
1 Never ____

4. How often do you look at the editorial page?

- 5 Daily ____
4 Most days ____
3 Once in a while ____
2 Seldom ____
1 Never ____

(For "NEVER" readers ask the next two questions, 5 and 6, but suggest responses ONCE IN A WHILE, SELDOM or NEVER. You don't need to ask question 7.)

I'M NOW GOING TO ASK YOU SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT THE EDITORIAL PAGE.

5. How often do you read the letters to the editor?

- 5
5 Daily ____
4 Most days ____
3 Once in a while ____
2 Seldom ____
1 Never ____

6. How often do you look at the editorial cartoon?

- 6
5 Daily ____
4 Most days ____
3 Once in a while ____
2 Seldom ____
1 Never ____

7. When reading the Mercury News editorials, do you generally

- 7
4 Read them all ____
2 Read only those with subjects that appeal to you ____
3 Read those that appeal to you, skim the others ____
1 (Never read) ____

(Please ask all respondents to answer all of the questions, 8 to 25. For nonreaders you can say: NOW EVEN THOUGH YOU DON'T READ THE EDITORIAL PAGE, IN THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS I'M GOING TO ASK HOW STRONGLY YOU BELIEVE OR DO NOT BELIEVE THAT...)

IN THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS I'M GOING TO ASK HOW STRONGLY YOU BELIEVE OR DO NOT BELIEVE THAT THE MERCURY NEWS EDITORIAL PAGE OFFERS CERTAIN REWARDS TO YOU.

8. Do you believe that the editorial page offers something which can help you judge what kind of jobs government officials are doing?

- 8
6vid
5 Believe strongly ____
4 Believe somewhat ____
3 Not sure ____
2 Do not really believe ____
1 Strongly do not believe ____

9. Do you believe the editorial page generally is filled with boring analyses that usually would not keep your interest?

- 9
Affin
5 Believe strongly ____
4 Believe somewhat ____
3 Not sure ____
2 Do not really believe ____
1 Strongly do not believe ____

10. Do you believe the page offers you a way to help you sort out the priorities of an issue?

- 5 Believe strongly ___
4 Believe somewhat ___
3 Not sure ___
2 Do not really believe ___
1 Strongly do not believe ___

11. Do you believe the editorial page offers a place to find other peoples' opinions about public issues?

- 5 Believe strongly ___
4 Believe somewhat ___
3 Not sure ___
2 Do not really believe ___
1 Strongly do not believe ___

12. Do you believe it offers a place to find support for your own opinions about public issues?

- 5 Believe strongly ___
4 Believe somewhat ___
3 Not sure ___
2 Do not really believe ___
1 Strongly do not believe ___

13. Do you believe the editorial page offers some good things, but you would usually rather spend time with other sections of the newspaper.

- 5 Believe strongly ___
4 Believe somewhat ___
3 Not sure ___
2 Do not really believe ___
1 Strongly do not believe ___

14. Do you believe the page offers you a place to find out what public issues you should be thinking about?

- 5 Believe strongly ___
4 Believe somewhat ___
3 Not sure ___
2 Do not really believe ___
1 Strongly do not believe ___

15. Do you believe the editorial page offers editorials or columns that are often complicated, or difficult to follow.

- 5 Believe strongly ___
4 Believe somewhat ___
3 Not sure ___
2 Do not really believe ___
1 Strongly do not believe ___

16. Do you believe it offers you a way to feel like you are participating in current events?

- 5 Believe strongly ___
4 Believe somewhat ___
3 Not sure ___
2 Do not really believe ___
1 Strongly do not believe ___

NOW I'M GOING TO RESTATE THESE ITEMS IN TERMS OF THEIR
IMPORTANCE TO YOU--ON A TYPICAL READING DAY

17. How important is it to you, on a typical reading day, that you
are able to judge what kind of jobs government officials are doing?

- 5 Very important ___
4 Important ___
3 Neither important or unimportant ___
2 Not important ___
1 Not at all important ___

18. How important is it to you, on a typical reading day, to read
editorials or columns about public issues, even if they seem
boring?

- 5 Very important ___
4 Important ___
3 Neither important or unimportant ___
2 Not important ___
1 Not at all important ___

19. How important is it to you, on a typical reading day, to do some
sorting out of certain public issues?

- 5 Very important ___
4 Important ___
3 Neither important or unimportant ___
2 Not important ___
1 Not at all important ___

20. How important is it to you, on an average reading day, that you
read other peoples' opinions about public issues?

- 5 Very important ___
4 Important ___
3 Neither important or unimportant ___
2 Not important ___
1 Not at all important ___

21. How important is it to you, on a typical reading day, that
you are able to read articles which support your own opinions
about public issues?

- 5 Very important ___
4 Important ___
3 Neither important or unimportant ___
2 Not important ___
1 Not at all important ___

22. How important is it to you, on a typical reading day, that
you read the editorial page instead of other sections of the
newspaper that might interest you?

- 5 Very important ___
4 Important ___
3 Neither important or unimportant ___
2 Not important ___
1 Not at all important ___

23. How important is it to you, on an average reading day, that you know about what issues you should be thinking about?

- 73
6vif
- 5 Very important ____
 - 4 Important ____
 - 3 Neither important or unimportant ____
 - 2 Not important ____
 - 1 Not at all important ____

24. How important is it to you, usually, that you are able to understand most of what you read in the Mercury News?

- 24
Affin
- 5 Very important ____
 - 4 Important ____
 - 3 Neither important or unimportant ____
 - 2 Not important ____
 - 1 Not at all important ____

25. How important is it to you, on a typical reading day, for you to feel that you are participating in some way in current events?

- 25
Soc
- 5 Very important ____
 - 4 Important ____
 - 3 Neither important or unimportant ____
 - 2 Not important ____
 - 1 Not at all important ____

(For "NEVER" readers, you can now skip to question #37)

NOW I'M GOING TO ASK YOU SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR INVOLVEMENT WITH THE EDITORIAL PAGE.

26. Do you feel that the editorial page has changed or strengthened your opinions about some issues?

- 26
- 5 Feel very strongly ____
 - 4 Sometimes this is the case ____
 - 3 Really couldn't say ____
 - 2 Don't feel it changes your opinions in general ____
 - 1 Definitely don't feel it has changed your opinions ____

27. Have you ever seriously thought about, or sent a letter to the Mercury News?

- 27
44
- 5 Yes, have sent three or more ____
 - 4 Yes, have sent one or two ____
 - 3 Haven't sent one, but seriously thought about it ____
 - 2 Crossed your mind, but not seriously ____
 - 1 Never really thought about sending one ____

(IF ONE HAS BEEN WRITTEN)

28. Did you write your letter in order to

- 28
- 5 Agree with an editorial ____
 - 4 Disagree with an editorial ____
 - 3 Agree with a news story ____
 - 2 Disagree with a news story ____
 - 1 Other reason ____

~~26.~~ When you turn to the editorial page, what generally are the first two things that grab your interest?

29 X. 0 = no answer, lefts = 1, headlines = 2, editorials = 3, columns = 4,

30 X. cartoon = 5, silver pen = 6, specific topics = 7, current issues = 8, all = 9

~~30.~~ What are your favorite parts or columns of the Mercury News editorial page?

31. Do you feel that Mercury News editorials

- 4 Agree too much with the Reagan administration ____
3 Disagree too much with the Reagan administration ____
2 Mix agreement and disagreement about right ____.
1 Or don't know ____.

~~32.~~ Please rank, in a 1st, 2nd, etc. through 5th sequence, your preference for:

(You would prefer, first,...)

- 32 Editorials on local subjects 54321 (all)
33 Editorials on state subjects ____
34 Editorials on national subjects ____
35 Editorials on international subjects ____
36 Editorials on ethical issues ____

~~38.~~ In a scale of 1 (high) to 3 (low), rate the Mercury News editorials for:

- 37 Fairness ____ 3-2-1
38 Clarity ____ 3-2-1
39 Good writing ____ 3-2-1
40 Vigor, (or the strength of their position they take) 3-2-1
41 Credibility ____ 3-2-1

34. What don't you like about the Mercury News editorial page?

(Why not?) -----

~~42~~ 35. How often do you agree with the editorial positions of the Mercury News?

- 5 Mostly agree ____
4 Usually agree ____
3 Agree once in a while ____
2 Seldom agree ____
1 Almost never agree ____

43 36. Do you read the Mercury News election recommendations?

- 3 Usually ____
2 Once in a while ____
1 Never ____

44 37. How long have you lived in the South Bay area?

11

45 38. How long do you plan to continue living in the South Bay area?
~~long time = 5, 11-15 yrs = 4, 6-10 yrs = 3, 3-5 = 2, 0-2 = 1 *~~

46 39. Did you vote in last November's election?

1 Yes

0 No

47 40. Do you regularly participate in any community organization?

If so, how many organizations? 1, 10 = 0

48 41. What is the highest level of education you have had?

1 No highschool

2 Highschool

~~Technical school~~

3 Some college

4 College degree

5 Graduate degree

49 42. What is your age?

21

50 43. Mark the gender.

male 2 female 1

THANKS A LOT FOR YOUR COOPERATION. THIS IS A CONFIDENTIAL SURVEY.

(45) * long time = 4, 11-15 yrs = 3, 6-10 yrs = 2, 0-5 yrs = 1

APPENDIX 3

NON-SIGNIFICANT PAIR CORRELATIONS WITH EDITORIAL PAGE READERSHIP

Appendix 3

Non-Significant Pair Correlations with Editorial Page Readership
 (Based on Item Recoding and Renumbering as Listed in Appendix 2)

Questionnaire Item #	Variable Investigated	Dimension	Pearson Correlation
11	Belief the page offers a place to find other peoples' opinions	Social Utility Beliefs	p=.491
16	Belief the page offers a way to feel like the reader is participating in current events	Social Utility Beliefs	p=.276
24	Important to under- stand what is read in <u>Mercury News</u>	Affinity Values	p=.148
44	How long lived in South Bay area	Community	p=.133
45	How long plan to live in South Bay area	Community	p=.181
48	Highest level of education achieved	Demography	p=.202
50	Sex	Demography	p=.300

APPENDIX 4

**SAN JOSE MERCURY NEWS FEATURE REVIEW OF
FREQUENCY RESULTS**

Commentary

Readers have their say on MN editorial pages

James O. Goldsborough

THE average reader of the Mercury News editorial pages is 42 years old, has lived in the South Bay Area for 20.8 years, is likely to be actively involved in his community's affairs, believes these pages help him better understand his community and his country and rates Scott Willis' cartoon as his favorite editorial page feature.

He is, surprisingly, about equally likely to be a high school or college graduate and, unsurprisingly, equally likely to be a man or a woman. He is likely to have voted in the last election (71 percent). He prefers local editorials to state ones, national editorials to international ones. He tends to think we're fair toward the Reagan administration.

These and other revelations are the fruits of a year-long labor by San Jose State graduate student Roger Gilbert, 27, whose master's degree thesis in mass communications was about us. Gilbert's interest was in finding out why people read the Mercury News editorial pages. Since that is a subject of some interest to us, we decided to help him.

Ten months ago, we helped Gilbert draft a list of 50 questions he would ask our editorial page readers. Nine months ago, we gave him a list of 750 Mercury News seven-day subscribers. Eight months ago,

he started his telephone interviews, his goal, set by his advisers at San Jose State, to reach 225 randomly selected readers, which would be a representative sample from which to draw conclusions about what our readers like and dislike about us.

Three months ago he finished the interviews and began his statistical analysis.

Admittedly, we had some trepidation about undertaking this. Many people don't like telephone surveys, especially ones with 50 questions. We told Gilbert that if he started running up against protesting readers, he'd better drop the project.

But 75 percent agreed to respond, 228 out of 304 people reached by phone. Of the 76 people who hung up on him, he says, "most thought it was some kind of advertising pitch." Of the 228, "only three were hostile, and by the end of the interview they were unhostile."

The analysis turned up some common-sense answers. A reader

Dan Hong

reads the Mercury News editorial pages, Gilbert found, because he "believes in or values the qualities of the pages, which allow him to survey the community and nation, and believes in or values the pages as a public forum for opinions."

Not every Mercury News reader is an editorial page reader. Gilbert's sample showed that 17.5 percent of Mercury News readers never read the editorial pages (compared, for example, with only 3.9 percent who never read the Living section).

Interestingly, while education was not a factor in reading either the front page or the editorial page, it proved to be a factor in reading other pages. "More readers with less education are more likely to read the Living section than not," Gilbert concluded, "and conversely, there is a significant relationship between higher levels of education and increased readership of the business pages."

One goal of the study was to determine why a reader might not be an editorial page reader. "If a person doesn't care about

keeping track of government officials' performances, doesn't care about reading opinions, doesn't generally think about issues and doesn't feel a responsibility to read something if it has no direct interest to them, this person will not read the page," writes Gilbert.

No great loss there. But back to the people who do read the pages. One thing I particularly liked about the survey was, as Gilbert explains it, evidence that "as people become more familiar with the pages, their beliefs about the pages tend to become more positive."

Put another way, daily readers tend to like us more than occasional readers. These are not pages that drive readers away.

Leaving aside the 17.5 percent of readers who avoid the editorial pages, what did Gilbert find among the 82.5 percent that read the pages?

He found that 17.1 percent read all the editorials, 75.2 percent read those on subjects that appeal to them and perhaps just skim the others and 7.8 percent never read the editorials.

showed readers gave us highest marks for clarity, followed in order by good writing, vigor, credibility and fairness.

Question 34 on the list was unique. Gilbert simply asked the reader: "What don't you like about the Mercury News editorial page?"

Answers to this question covered the spectrum, from too left-wing to too right-wing, but five or more readers agreed on the following dislikes: biased toward interests that support the newspaper, too easy on city politicians, too eager to climb on popular bandwagons, don't write enough about minorities, don't have editorial rebuttals to opinionated letters.

Gilbert took notes on readers' comments as they answered the questions. Though obviously less representative than the survey itself, three comments are worth repeating.

✓ "I don't read the editorial page too often," said a 51-year-old woman. "I'm not a rabble-rouser. I imagine people who read it are rabble-rousers."

✓ "I have to read the page to defend my opinions against my college kids," said a 45-year-old woman. "You bet I read the page."

✓ My favorite: "I put in 2 1/2 hours daily on the editorials," said a 75-year-old woman.

James O. Goldsborough is associate editor of the Mercury News editorial pages.

Our editorials and Reagan

We asked the question: Do you feel that Mercury News editorials

Source: Roger Gilbert

Mercury News

The Wright stuff

GOP finds sleaze is bipartisan issue

In addition to Wright, Gingrich has compiled a list of 14 other House Democrats, 5 percent of the majority, who stand either accused or convicted of criminal conduct or grossly unethical behavior. As

The county supervisors built a narrow, winding