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Paul Brooks

Elmira (NY) Star-Gazette

Will Norton Jr.

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, hwnorton@gmail.com

John W. Windhauser

Louisiana State University

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Leaders and non-leaders

By Paul Brooks, Will Norton Jr., and John W. Windhauser

Newspaper editors often think of community leaders as being different from other newspaper readers. Such an assumption is supported with studies showing that opinion leaders have greater exposure to mass media than their followers and read different types of articles than do non-leaders.

But a recent study in Oxford, Miss., shows that media use patterns by leaders and non-leaders in a small rural community do not differ as much as previous studies seem to indicate. Perhaps the main reason that former studies reported vast differences in these two groups was the selection of opinion leaders. Earlier studies were skewed toward a selected type of leader and did not include all possible types. In our study we tried to include all possible types.

We identified community leaders in the rural Mississippi community of approximately 9,000 people by surveying the directors of 63 civic, social and fraternal organizations, and the complete memberships in 12 of those 63 groups. Respondents were asked to identify people in Oxford who were the most influential in health, industrial growth, business and trade, education, religion, recreation, community beautification, music and art, welfare and charity, and agriculture and forestry.

They also were asked to identify the most significant community problems in the last five years and those persons who were actively involved in each of them. Finally, the respondents were asked to list the organizations in which they held

Paul Brooks is a reporter for the Elmira (N.Y.) Star-Gazette; Will Norton Jr. is chairman of the journalism department at the University of Mississippi; and John W. Windhauser, a journalism faculty member at Louisiana State University, is the former editor of the College Press Review.

membership during the last five years.

From the resulting data and from referrals by decision-making leaders, a list of community leaders was compiled. In-person interviews were completed with 106 persons (86 percent of the leaders' list) to obtain their media usage. Next, a random sample of 250 persons from the Oxford community was selected and 218 (83 percent of the sample) were interviewed in person. Interviews lasted between 30 to 45 minutes.

Overall, leaders and non-leaders were quite alike in their use of the media and they all tended to read local, regional and national papers, in that order. Both groups said they get most of their news from newspapers, even though leaders read more newspapers and non-leaders had a higher use of the broadcasting media.

Leaders and non-leaders both read local, regional, national newspapers, in that order

Although regular newspaper readership was significantly lower among non-leaders than leaders, both groups preferred the local paper, the *Oxford Eagle*, and the closest metropolitan daily, the *Memphis (Tenn.) Commercial Appeal*, as their main newspaper(s). About 89 percent of the opinion leaders regularly read the *Oxford Eagle* and 93 percent read the *Commercial Appeal*. No readership differences were found for the two national newspapers, the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*. *USA Today* is not available in the Oxford community.

Among newspaper columnists regularly read, Art Buchwald, the humorist, was first, followed by muckraker Jack Anderson. Anderson's column was the main choice among opinion leaders. Ann

Landers, Art Buchwald and Jack Anderson had the highest readership scores for the other group. Both groups were about equal in their readership for the other 16 columnists.

A few other print readership similarities were found for books and magazines. The three national news magazines and the *Reader's Digest* had the highest readership. The major differences were the significantly higher proportions of leaders reading *Newsweek* (60 to 44 percent), *Time* (60 to 46 percent) and *U.S. News and World Report* (60 to 29 percent). *Reader's Digest* had 39 percent regular readership for opinion leaders and 35 percent for non-leaders.

As for the other 19 magazines included in this study, the overall readership scores were quite low except for three magazines where opinion leaders had significantly higher scores. These were for the *Scientific American* (16 to 7 percent), *Business Week* (31 to 17 percent) and the *New Yorker* (34 to 18 percent).

Community opinion leaders read significantly more books in their profession and preferred non-fiction, informational and detective stories. Non-leaders read significantly more books focusing on suspense and sex. Both groups were alike in their regular readership of religious books and chose books in their profession as their most frequent selection. Nearly all of the leaders surveyed had regular monthly book readership compared with less than one in five respondents for the non-leader group.

On an average day, roughly 20 percent more non-leaders than leaders spent more than two hours watching television programs, 46 to 28 percent, and spent more than two hours listening to the radio, 17 to 9 percent. A similar pattern was found for weekend viewing and listening.

But again, differences appeared to have been more quantitative than qualitative.

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No significant variations were found between the groups for the 11 types of television programs or for the nine varieties of radio programs. Nor were any differences found for the 10 categories of movies.

Leaders usually selected news and sports programs, followed by informational and public affairs shows, comedies and movies. Comedies, movies and news

Non-leaders spent more time watching television programs and listening to radio

programs were the main choices of the non-leaders.

Generally, these findings suggest a strong tendency for community leaders to have a higher use of the print media—newspapers, books and magazines—than non-leaders. Non-leaders clearly preferred the broadcast media. But, both groups depended on their community newspaper for their news. While the results are not conclusive, the patterns of media use are indicators that community opinion leaders and their followers in rural communities need their local newspaper more than previous studies indicate. □

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