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# *Newspapers and Political Awareness\**

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*Theory:* The theory of print superiority is examined as it relates to the role of local newspapers in facilitating information acquisition about U.S. elections.

*Hypothesis:* The appearance of print superiority reflects variance in the characteristics of different news mediums' audiences rather than a unique capability of local newspapers to convey information.

*Method:* Capitalizing on Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania's eight-month newspaper strike in 1992, survey data from the Pittsburgh and Cleveland areas are compared via a quasi-experimental method.

*Results:* Exposure to a major local newspaper does not enhance knowledge of national or international politics, but contributes to self-perceived knowledge regarding local political campaigns. Characteristics of respondents, including education and prior political knowledge, are the strongest predictors of information acquisition concerning national and international events.

Many pivotal questions concerning the relationship between news media and electoral behavior involve the extent to which media facilitate learning about politics. This matters because effective democratic governance presupposes the presence of an informed electorate. Popular input into government will be vacuous if citizens fail to understand the political system, or if citizens fail to comprehend the intricacies of policy debates. Consequently, many analysts are disturbed that Americans as a whole apparently possess what little understanding of politics. For example, Bennett (1988) critiques citizenship in the United States, drawing on evidence that a large portion of Americans cannot pass a test of basic political knowledge. Barely half of the persons surveyed as part of the National Election Studies can name the congressional candidates in their district (Yeric and Todd 1989), and knowledge levels are still lower for questions concerning specific policies and issues (e.g., Kuklinski, Metlay, and Kay 1982; Sigelman and Yanarella 1986).

My focus is the relationship between news media and political

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awareness. Television is one of the alleged culprits responsible for low levels of political knowledge in the United States. Newspapers, the argument goes, are relatively well suited to convey information about politics, but the growing significance of television has numbed the minds of Americans. This raises the central empirical question to be addressed in this paper: do local newspapers uniquely contribute to the information base of the American electorate? Previous research on this question has produced conflicting evidence, in part because of the variety of methodological approaches employed. This study capitalizes on unusual social circumstance—the eight-month 1992 newspaper strike in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania—will investigating its impact on levels of political awareness.

### **Broadcast Media, Print Media, and Information Acquisition**

Research on the question of which news medium best promotes information acquisition has been inconclusive. Cross-sectional individual-level studies typically suggest citizens learn more from newspapers than from television. Survey data provide a measure of the respondents' political awareness, and also indicate each respondent's primary news source. Regressing the former variable on the latter usually demonstrates that people who turn to newspapers as their primary source of news know more than people who turn to broadcast media (e.g., Robinson and Levy 1986; Robinson and Davis 1990; Berkowitz and Pritchard 1989; Weaver and Drew 1993).

That such studies identify a causal relationship must be viewed with skepticism. Many factors distinguish newspaper readers and nonreaders, and any combination of those factors may account for aggregate differences in knowledge levels. Analysts sometimes address this point by including statistical controls for education or other characteristics of their survey respondents. However, because the control variables are correlated with the choice of a primary news medium, it is not possible to derive a unique statistical estimate for any of the independent variables.

Two recent studies challenge newspapers' unique ability to foster information acquisition. Price and Zaller (1993) find that newspaper exposure is generally unrelated to news recall in multivariate statistical models that account for the influence of prior political knowledge. Similarly, Neuman, Just and Crigler (1992) show that the link between knowledge and news medium evaporates when they control for the cognitive skill of their experiments' participants. Prior political knowledge and cognitive skill damage the purported impact of newspaper exposure

on information acquisition because both variables indicate the individual's motivation and ability to assimilate new information. The acquisition of new information comes most easily for persons generally familiar with the issue in question, and for persons willing to expend the effort needed to process the new data.

Proponents of print superiority may question the control variables introduced in Price and Zaller (1993) and Neuman, Just, and Crigler (1992). A lifetime of exposure to newspapers may contribute to a person's prior political knowledge as measured by Price and Zaller. Likewise, reading the newspaper may hone the cognitive skills discussed by Neuman, Just, and Crigler. Additionally, the laboratory context of the Neuman, Just, and Crigler possibly intensified participants' attention to the project's television news stories, overcoming the important real-world differences in format that distinguish newspapers from television.

Ultimately, the question remains open as to whether newspapers possess some unique capacity to foster learning. No method in the social sciences is without limitations, and thus confidence in findings often grows only when there is an accumulation of corroborating results from a diversity of methodological perspectives. Toward this end, it would be highly instructive if we could compare the knowledge levels of individuals who live in a world with newspapers with those of individuals who do not have access to newspapers. Such comparison is the objective of this study.

### **Designing the Social Experiment**

Methodologically, this study hinges on a simple premise: insight regarding the significance of newspapers can be gained by examining how people are affected when newspapers are not available. Due to a strike by drivers employed by the Pittsburgh Press Company, Pittsburgh residents had no major local newspaper for eight months, from May 18, 1992 to January 18, 1993. The strike began soon after Pennsylvania's primary elections, meaning that Pittsburgh voters weathered the entire 1992 general election season without newspapers. This study introduces an experimental dimension by contrasting political behavior in Pittsburgh with political behavior in Cleveland, Ohio, where access to major local newspapers was not constrained.

Data are from a postelection survey administered in Pennsylvania's Allegheny County and Ohio's Cuyahoga County. Telephone interviews were conducted between November 13, 1992 and December 7, 1992. The full data base includes 635 individuals who voted in the 1992 general election. There are 100 or more completed interviews from the incountry

portions of six congressional districts, three each in the Cleveland and Pittsburgh metropolitan areas.<sup>1</sup>

Since Cleveland respondents had access to a major local newspaper while Pittsburgh residents did not, we can determine how local newspapers affect information acquisition by comparing knowledge levels among the two sets of respondents. The strike acts as an experimental manipulation, but one that is imposed on an entire metropolitan area rather than just a small group of laboratory subjects. Because *everybody* in the area lacked access to a major local newspaper, the design cuts through the tangled web of causality faced in many previous studies.

The quasi-experimental design escapes the artificiality of laboratory experiments, but also fails to capture the critical methodological strength of the laboratory experiment, random assignment of participants. In the laboratory, characteristics of participants will vary, but randomization means that the statistical contribution of such variance will be random error. Cleveland and Pittsburgh *are* different, and perhaps what makes Cleveland different from Pittsburgh will also produce variance in the political behavior of voters from the two regions. However, Cleveland was chosen as the second area to be studied because Pittsburgh and Cleveland have much in common culturally, historically, economically, and politically. Such commonality potentially serves to limit the methodological consequences of the absence of randomization.

It is my contention that the single factor likely to produce different levels of information acquisition in Pittsburgh and Cleveland was the newspaper strike. Evidence for this point emerges from review of aggregate characteristics of the two counties' populations, and from comparison of Cleveland and Pittsburgh respondents on a variety of individual-level traits. First, Cuyahoga and Allegheny counties are comparable in size, economic performance, and educational attainment, and the 1992 presidential vote in the two counties was virtually identical both in the number of total votes and in the distribution of votes among the leading candidates. Second, this study's Cleveland and Pittsburgh respondents are statistically indistinguishable on numerous political and demographic traits, including age, education, income, partisanship, strength of partisan attachments, ideology, and civics knowledge. In short, the Cleveland and Pittsburgh data are sufficiently comparable to enable meaningful quasi-experimental analysis (Mondak 1993).

<sup>1</sup>The six districts are Ohio's 10, 11, and 19, and Pennsylvania's 14, 18, and 20. The survey includes 107 items focusing on respondents' political and demographic characteristics, vote choice, media use, political discussion, and political knowledge. The study's completion rate is slightly greater than 40%. For more detailed discussion of the survey's design see Mondak (1993).

In any experiment, proof must be provided that the manipulation worked as intended. Here, it is essential to demonstrate that the newspaper strike altered media-use patterns. Denied access to a major daily paper, Pittsburgh respondents report receiving substantially less campaign information from local newspapers than respondents in Cleveland (Mondak 1993). The large gaps between Cleveland and Pittsburgh are nearly identical in size for the presidential, senate, and U.S. House races. Further, the strike limited actual levels of media exposure for the House races, because Pittsburgh residents were unable to locate satisfactory substitutes for their missing newspapers.<sup>2</sup>

This study's measures focus on national and international affairs. But perhaps most people do not read the local newspaper to acquire such news. People who turn to print media for national and international news may have as their primary source either magazines or national newspapers. If this is the case, then the deck would be stacked against the print-superiority thesis by virtue of this study's design. However, for most people the local newspaper is clearly the primary print medium for national and international news. First, local newspapers win the battle versus news magazines and national papers largely by default; the combined weekly circulation of the top magazines is under ten million, and the combined daily circulation of the top national newspapers is barely five million (Davis 1992). Second, local papers do cover national and international affairs. In October, 1992, for example, there were 218 front-page stories in the Cleveland *Plain Dealer*. Of these, 68% concerned national or international events. Third, surveys show that national print sources have little reach compared with the local newspaper. In Cleveland, for instance, 19.4% of this study's respondents said that the local newspaper was their primary source of news about the 1992 presidential campaign, and 46.9% said it was their second source. The comparable scores for national newspapers and magazines combined are only 5.8% and 9.1%.

### **Objective Measures of Knowledge**

To determine the impact of local newspapers on political knowledge, knowledge scores for Cleveland and Pittsburgh respondents will be compared. The most common approach in measuring knowledge is use of an objective test; survey respondents answer a quiz designed

<sup>2</sup>Pittsburgh residents turned to broadcast media and national print sources for news about the senate and presidential campaigns, and generally found those alternatives to be acceptable replacements for the local newspapers. In contrast, adequate substitutes were not available for news pertaining to the region's U.S. House races.

to gauge political awareness. However, considerable caution must be exercised to construct an effective objective measure (see Delli Carpini and Keeter 1993). Further, analysis of how well survey respondents recall a few stray facts about politics arguably sidetracks us from study of the fundamental dynamics of political behavior. Teachers recognize that the student who best remembers names and dates does not necessarily hold the best understanding of history. Likewise, the voter who can recall the names of every candidate for every office may not possess a particularly deep understanding of political affairs.

Despite possible limitations, the objective measure of political knowledge may be our best tool to identify levels of political awareness. Hence, an extensive battery of knowledge items was included on the postelection survey. Specifically, the survey includes 17 questions designed to measure respondents' knowledge of national and international affairs. Table 1 summarizes the knowledge items, and reports results for the two sets of respondents: differences between Cleveland and Pittsburgh are minimal. In no case does the gap reach conventional levels of statistical significance, and only three items (2, 3, and 17) even approach statistical significance.<sup>3</sup>

The 17 items form three distinct batteries. Questions 1–5 focus on matters that were in the news contemporaneous with the 1992 campaigns, but that did not directly concern the campaigns. These current events items were constructed using a two-step procedure. First, the news sections of all September and October 1992 issues of the Cleveland *Plain Dealer* were analyzed to select topics for possible inclusion on the postelection survey. Second, approximately 80 students in two political science courses at the University of Pittsburgh answered a series of knowledge items resulting from that analysis. I first selected for the public-opinion survey questions that had been answered correctly by at least 20% of students on the pretest. Among the resulting subset, I then picked five questions that varied in degree of difficulty. Zaller (1992) argues that when only a few items are used to measure a knowledge domain, a mix of easy and difficult questions should be included. This approach reduces the average inter-item correlation, but facilitates con-

<sup>3</sup>Exact wording of the knowledge questions is available from the author. In some cases, respondents could have known the answers to the questions in Table 1 prior to the onset of Pittsburgh's newspaper strike (e.g., #3 "What is NAFTA?"; also #5 and #8), possibly minimizing the significance of the Pittsburgh-vs.-Cleveland comparisons. However, there is no difference in the pattern of results for these few items and the rest. Indeed, the NAFTA item is one of the three in which Cleveland respondents outscored their Pittsburgh counterparts by a margin that approaches statistical significance.

**Table 1. Objective Measures of Political Knowledge**

Topic	Percentage of Respondents Answering Correctly		t-Value
	Cuyahoga County	Allegheny County	
<i>A. Current events:</i>			
1. Size of the 1992 federal budget deficit	11.7	13.2	-0.571
2. Site of October earthquake killing over 500	10.7	6.5	1.896*
3. Meaning of NAFTA	12.0	8.0	1.675*
4. Number of Bush's vetoes overridden by Congress	26.6	25.5	0.311
5. Continent where Somalia is located	59.4	57.2	0.557
<i>B. Campaign news:</i>			
6. Perot's support in the polls when he reentered the race	32.9	29.2	0.996
7. Party with majority in the House after the elections	86.7	84.9	0.651
8. State with the most electoral college votes	66.6	63.7	0.756
9. Number of women candidates for senator in 1992	11.4	14.5	-1.158
10. Winner of the first presidential debate in the polls	82.5	80.3	0.697
11. Debate format recommended by commission	22.4	27.4	-1.446
<i>C. Presidential candidates' policy positions (which candidate proposed each policy):</i>			
12. Decrease in cost of living adjustments for retired federal employees	35.5	33.5	0.548
13. \$.50 per gallon gasoline tax	65.6	66.3	-0.179
14. Reduction of U.S. troops in Europe to 150,000	13.6	15.3	-0.607
15. Motor-voter legislation	38.0	37.1	0.226
16. Statehood for DC	34.4	34.7	-0.065
17. Balanced budget amendment to the Constitution	26.9	20.6	1.889*

\* $p < .10$



struction of a scale that better differentiates knowledge levels than if all questions are of mid-level difficulty (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1993).

In Table 1, results for the first five items reveal that the questions did indeed vary in difficulty. Overall, results for the five items provide no evidence that local newspapers uniquely contribute to knowledge regarding national and international affairs. Cleveland scores exceed marks for the Pittsburgh respondents on four of the items, but the slight differences are unsatisfactory proof that local newspapers affect readers' knowledge levels. Further, comparison of summed responses for all items in the first battery shows no Cleveland vs. Pittsburgh difference ( $t = 1.197$ ).

The second battery of knowledge addresses campaign news, or, broadly, the horse-race aspect of the 1992 elections. Questions 6–11 were chosen from a larger item set on the basis of pretest results. This battery performs quite well, with the percentage of respondents answering the items correctly ranging from 13% (item 9) to 86% (7). Cleveland and Pittsburgh scores are highly similar for all questions in this battery, and also for summed responses for all items in the battery ( $t = .355$ ). We fail again to find evidence that access to a local newspaper influences voters' knowledge of national politics.

Questions 12–17 are about policy positions advanced by the three presidential candidates. With one exception (question 13), these items were drawn from a special series that was run by the Cleveland *Plain Dealer* from late September to Election Day. Once again, the particular questions included on the post-election survey were determined by pretest results. The *Plain Dealer's* series presented the candidates' views on a specific issue each day. Each article appeared on a page of section A that was devoted to campaign news. A sidebar usually titled "Candidates' Views" served to highlight this issue coverage.

The *Plain Dealer's* issue series apparently did not much enhance the information level of the Cleveland electorate. Cleveland respondents outperformed their Pittsburgh counterparts on only three of the six policy items, and the difference approaches statistical significance only for item 17. Likewise, scores for the battery as a whole are similar in the two regions ( $t = .604$ ). Voters with access to a major local newspaper that specifically highlighted the issues learned nothing more about those issues than did voters who had no newspaper at all. The evidence runs in strong contrast to the oft-stated conclusion that newspapers uniquely contribute to voters' issue awareness.

Cleveland and Pittsburgh results for the 17 knowledge items do not differ in any significant or systematic manner. Thus, local newspapers apparently do not uniquely augment information acquisition, in national

and international affairs. However, debate over the information value of newspapers usually pits the local newspaper against broadcast media. Table 1 shows local newspaper offer no singular contribution to the knowledge base of the electorate, but this finding does not speak directly to the contrast between newspapers and broadcast media. Other print sources are part of the information mix. Some Pittsburgh respondents, especially those with robust civics knowledge, turned to national print media when local newspapers became unavailable (Mondak 1993). That reliance on national print sources may account for the absence of an information gap seen in Table 1. Thus, it remains possible that local newspapers better inform their audiences than do broadcast media.

If we can account for the influence of national print media within the information mix, then the comparison reduces to broadcast media *and* local newspapers (Cleveland) vs. only broadcast media (Pittsburgh). Unfortunately, it is not possible to control statistically for the effects of national print media and still maintain the purity of this study's quasi-experimental design. Pittsburgh respondents who relied on national print media are not a random subset of Pittsburgh voters. Instead, persons with robust civics knowledge were the most likely to turn to national newspapers and magazines for information about the presidential campaign. Thus, if an effort is made to control for national print media, then it is essential to also control for civics knowledge. Identical circumstances demand control for education.<sup>4</sup>

The impact of national print media will be measured with a dummy variable coded 1 for respondents who reported national newspapers or magazines to be one of their top two sources of news about the presidential campaign. This variable is then added to regression models in which the dependent variables are scales created from responses to the three-batteries-of-knowledge items:

$$\text{Current-Events Knowledge} = a + b_1\text{Pittsburgh} + b_2\text{Civics Knowledge} + b_3\text{Education} + b_4\text{National Print Media}$$

Simultaneous estimation of  $b_1$  and  $b_4$  determines if knowledge levels in Cleveland and Pittsburgh differ after accounting for the influence of national print media. However, we know that civics knowledge and education are correlated with use of national print media, and that civics knowledge and education both predict information acquisition. Thus,

<sup>4</sup>Civics knowledge is coded 0 to 4, the number of basic knowledge questions answered correctly by the respondent. Education is coded 0 (grade school or less) to 7 (graduate school).

**Table 2. Regional Variance in Political Knowledge, with Control for Use of National Print Media**

	Dependent Variable		
	Current Events	Campaign News	Policy Positions
Constant	-0.119 (-0.948)	1.673**** (10.798)	0.842**** (4.542)
Pittsburgh	-0.098 (-1.332)	-0.075 (-0.804)	-0.090 (-0.839)
Civics knowledge	0.390**** (12.482)	0.435**** (11.405)	0.389**** (8.485)
Education	0.060*** (2.817)	0.050* (1.923)	0.054* (1.703)
National print media	0.329** (2.596)	-0.379 (-1.399)	0.582**** (3.123)
Pittsburgh × national print media	—	0.748** (2.304)	—
Number of cases	629	628	629
$R^2$	.265	.216	.155
Change in $R^2$	.008	.007	.013

Note: The “change in  $R^2$ ” statistic indicates the improvement in model performance that comes with adding the national print media terms to models that include only Pittsburgh, civics knowledge, and education. *t*-values are in parentheses

\* $p < .10$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*\* $p < .001$ .

these variables must be included in the statistical models, or else the coefficient for national print media will be artificially inflated. That bias would affect the estimate for the Pittsburgh-vs.-Cleveland contrast, and thus would preclude assessment of the impact of local newspapers on information acquisition.

Regression estimates are depicted in Table 2. The Pittsburgh dummy variable (1 = Pittsburgh; 0 = Cleveland) represents the impact of living in a region where local newspapers are not available, controlling for the influence of national print media. This variable contrasts the effect of access to only broadcast media (Pittsburgh) with the effect of access to both broadcast media and local newspapers (Cleveland). Unfortunately, this test is neither as pure nor as simple as the previous quasi-experimental comparisons. Nevertheless, the results in Table 2 are quite striking: even after controlling for the impact of national print media, access to a major local newspaper has no effect on knowledge of current events, campaign news, or candidates’ policy positions.

Civics knowledge emerges as an extremely strong and consistent

predictor of information acquisition. This finding corroborates Price and Zaller's (1993) point that prior political knowledge outperforms competing variables as a measure of media exposure. Education also acts as a highly consistent predictor of knowledge, but the independent effect is much weaker than that of civics knowledge. Finally, results for the national-print-media dummy variable are mixed. For all respondents, reliance on national print media predicts both current events knowledge and knowledge of the presidential candidates' policy positions (for these dependent variables, the national print media  $\times$  Pittsburgh interactions were insignificant). In contrast, reliance on national print sources increased knowledge of campaign events only for Pittsburgh respondents. Although the impact of national print media provides some support for a specialized version of the print superiority thesis, too much should not be made of this point. The change in  $R^2$  statistic at the bottom of each column in Table 2 indicates the improvement in model performance when the national print media variables are added to a model including only the Pittsburgh dummy variable, civics knowledge, and education. These scores are extremely slight, providing further evidence for the point made previously by Price and Zaller (1993) and Neuman, Just and Crigler (1992): characteristics of the person drive information acquisition far more than do characteristics of the medium.

### Subjective Measures of Knowledge

Despite their strengths, objective-knowledge questions alone do not provide a fully satisfactory indicator of political knowledge. As a complement to objective recall items, the postelection survey also include a simple alternative: respondents were asked to assess their knowledge about the 1992 presidential, senate, and U.S. House candidates. On the plus side, each question's parameters perfectly match the domain of interest. For example, rather than sampling a respondent's recall of various facts concerning a U.S. House race, a single item can be used to capture the entirety of the subject. The down side, of course, involves the highly subjective nature of self-assessment. However, this limitation does not hamper comparison of Cleveland and Pittsburgh data. What is some knowledge to one respondent may be a great deal of knowledge to another, but there is no reason to believe that what is "some" knowledge in Cleveland constitutes "a great deal" of knowledge in Pittsburgh.

Table 3 displays results for the self-reported measures of political knowledge. The data instill at least some confidence that respondents' self-reports provide useful information. First, respondents willingly admitted to being imperfectly informed. Some respondents may have exaggerated their knowledge levels, but the aggregate scores fall far enough

**Table 3. Self-Reported Knowledge about the 1992 Presidential, Senate, and U.S. House Campaigns**

	Cuyahoga County	Allegheny County	<i>t</i> -Value	<i>N</i>
Presidential	2.537	2.666	-2.624*	631
Senate	1.997	2.065	-0.068	635
House	1.967	1.717	3.702**	630

Note: Cell entries are regional means. Data are drawn from three questions: "By the end of the campaign, how much did you know about this year's presidential, senate, congressional candidates—a great deal, some, only a little, or none at all?" Results are coded 0 (none at all) to 3 (a great deal).

\* $p < .01$ ; \*\* $p < .001$ .

below the theoretical maximum of 3.0 to suggest that such exaggeration was not universal. Second, results form an intuitively appealing pattern, with self-reported knowledge reaching its highest point for the presidential race, and its lowest for the U.S. House elections. It is highly plausible that respondents as a whole were indeed considerably more informed about the presidential candidates than about the Senate candidates, and were somewhat more informed about the Senate candidates than about the House candidates.

Comparing results for Cleveland and Pittsburgh, we see very different patterns for the three sets of elections. At the presidential level, scores reach high marks in both Cleveland and Pittsburgh. The advantage in Pittsburgh is substantively minor, but the effect does achieve statistical significance. Together, results for the presidential and Senate elections are highly revealing when considered from the perspective of Pittsburgh's newspaper strike: voters without access to a major local newspaper perceived themselves to be at least as well informed about the 1992 presidential and senate elections as voters who did have access to a local newspaper.

In contrast with results for the presidential and senate elections, scores for the House races suggest that media exposure does influence political knowledge. Self-perceived knowledge is a full one-quarter of a point lower in Pittsburgh than in Cleveland. Pittsburgh voters were not able to find fully satisfactory alternatives to the striking newspapers for news about the local U.S. House races. Table 3 reveals that living in a media-poor decision-making context brings an important tangible implication: when media exposure is limited, voters report a corresponding decline in their knowledge about the subject in question.

For years, analysts have debated the relative worth of print and

broadcast media. Useful perspective is gained by stepping back and considering what the audience members themselves have to say about the question. Self-reported knowledge levels reveal that voters perceive that lack of access to a major local newspaper brings no handicap whatsoever provided that alternative news sources are available. Pittsburgh's presidential and Senate voters were entirely unfazed by the absence of their daily newspapers. If self-reported measures of knowledge can be accepted as valid, then these results indicate that local newspapers enjoy no unique ability to enhance the information base of the electorate. Only for the House races, where the newspaper strike limited actual media exposure, did Pittsburgh voters perceive that their knowledge about the candidates suffered.

### Conclusion

In 1992, residents of the Pittsburgh area lived for eight months without a major local newspaper. This study reveals that this lack of access to print media brought strikingly little influence on the ability of Pittsburgh residents to keep informed about national and international events. The absence of local newspapers had no effect on any objective indicator of political awareness, whether it be an individual fact or a knowledge domain. Further, control for exposure to national print media failed to alter results, and exposure to national print media added only very slightly to readers' knowledge levels. Likewise, survey respondents did not perceive the absence of a local newspaper to have any adverse effect on their ability to stay informed about the 1992 presidential and Senate campaigns. Cumulatively, the evidence is shattering for any theory of print superiority.

Local newspapers may exert no unique influence on the information base of the American electorate, but this does not suggest that media are irrelevant. Media *do* matter. When voters live in a media-poor environment, as Pittsburgh's House voters did in 1992, knowledge levels decline. Hence, contrary to minimal-effects views of media, the dynamics of political behavior are affected by media exposure. However, these same dynamics are not influenced by the particular medium from which the voter receives the news. The importance of local newspapers is not some mystical capacity to convey a deep understanding of factual information. Instead, the local newspaper is important because it often is the only medium to provide adequate coverage of local politics.

Methodologically, this study demonstrates that there is much to be gained by merging the characteristic strengths of survey and experimental designs. Previously, different methods have produced different results, and doubt has remained regarding the influence of media exposure

on information acquisition. By capitalizing on unique social circumstances, this paper's quasi-experimental design has captured both the internal validity of the experiment and the external validity of the survey. Similar quasi-experimental techniques promise to augment understanding of many social and political phenomena.

For many analysts, it will remain troubling that American citizens demonstrate a consistently poor understanding of the basic facts of government. Unfortunately, the prescription for that end remains elusive. The easy answer is to blame the citizen. People just do not care enough about politics. People will not even read a newspaper. However, this study suggests that the easy answer misses the mark. Television is not the culprit, and local newspapers are not the savior. If we truly desire to increase the knowledge levels of voters, the most immediate returns likely will be gained by improving the clarity with which issues are debated by candidates, and reported by media.

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