

# Reviews

**"Perceived Influence of Media on What Goes on in a Community,"** by Kim A. Smith, *Journalism Quarterly*, Vol 61, No. 2, Summer 1984, pp. 260-264+.

Previous research on opinions and expectations of local media have reported somewhat dichotomous results: Small, homogeneous communities generally feel that newspapers should be agents promoting social consensus while larger, more diverse communities seem to support media dissemination of controversial information.

The focus of this research was to examine the impressions of Louisville, Kentucky, citizens regarding the relative influence of media in that city and how positively or negatively they feel about them.

Data were gathered with a quota sample of 430 people aged 15 or older. The sample was stratified by race, sex, and income. To determine media influence, researchers showed respondents a list of 12 selected private sector groups, including print and broadcast media. Then they asked them to choose the two with the greatest influence in the community as well as the two with the least. The quality of media influence was determined by reading the list to respondents and asking them to rate each one either "mostly positive" or "mostly bad."

Both television/radio and daily newspapers ranked first and second, respectively, in terms of perceived influence on the community within each demographic category, except for those 60 or older. They chose churches/synagogues as more influential than daily newspapers.

However, with regard to the *quality* of influence, 73 percent of the respondents rated daily newspapers "mostly positive" while 61 percent rated television/radio as "mostly positive."

While these ratings are encouraging concerning media's perceived influence, the quality of the influence ranked behind other institutions. Daily newspapers (73%) ranked seventh and television/radio finished ninth with a 61% "mostly positive" rating. The media fell behind such institutions as churches/synagogues (88%), universities/colleges (84%), the medical profession (83%), banking/financial institutions (80%), retail stores/businesses (79%), and industries/manufacturers (75%).

In eighth place were utilities at 70 percent. Both daily newspapers and television/radio media were seen by more respondents as having a "mostly positive" influence than the last three private sector groups: real estate professionals (57%), the legal profession (53%), and organized labor (48%).

These findings indicate some tentative implications for communication in general. Not surprisingly, television/radio ranked just above daily newspapers in terms of perceived influence, due possibly to their persuasiveness. However, in an age when television is the dominant news source for the nation, the public perceives the quality of that influence to be much higher in daily newspapers.

If we merely want to get a message disseminated, the broadcast media may be the best vehicle for distribution. On the other hand, if we want our message attended to in the most positive manner, Smith's research suggests using daily newspapers. Of course, this assumes a relationship between perceived influence, perceived credibility, and community use—a relationship the author states is ripe for future studies.

Smith's study has some weaknesses. It is based on data gathered over seven years ago when media were basking in the sunshine of Watergate triumphs. In light of present day attacks, the quality of the media's influence may be less. Also, in determining that quality, only two categories were used—"mostly positive" or "mostly bad." Those who did not or could not respond to those categories were arbitrarily classified "mixed." In two instances this accounted for more than 10 percent of the responses. Certainly a more discriminating instrument, such as a Likert scale, would provide more meaningful data.

In spite of these shortcomings, this research indicates some interesting possibilities concerning message dissemination.

*Richard Carlson*  
*University of Missouri-Columbia*