Annenberg School for Communication

Departmental Papers (ASC)

University of Pennsylvania *Year* 1988

Social Surveys and the Use of the Mass Media: The Case of the Aged

Charles R. Wright
University of Pennsylvania, cwright@asc.upenn.edu

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons.
http://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers/90

Charles R. Wright

21 Social Surveys and the Use of the Mass Media: The Case of the Aged

On the occasion of the twentieth-anniversary issue of the *Public Opinion Quarterly* in 1957, an issue devoted to twenty years of public opinion research, Herbert Hyman reflected on the existing state of theory about public opinion (Hyman, 1957; pp. 54–60). The state of theory was bleak, he commented, if one looked for a grand theory that integrated the vast empirical findings of past and contemporary studies of public opinion. Things looked brighter, however, if one looked for theoretical orientations of more modest scope, for example, theories of the middle range, a phrase suggested by Robert K. Merton (Merton 1949; pp. 4–5).

Hyman's Ideas about Opinion Polls and Theories of Public Opinion

Hyman offered several suggestions as to how future survey research could contribute theoretically relevant data that, over time, would strengthen sociological theories about public opinion formation and its social consequences. We review them here because they provide useful guides to ways in which survey research also can contribute to our theoretical understanding of mass communication audiences.

One reason for the difficulty in developing theories of public opinion formation and change, Hyman argued, is that public opinion surveys, especially public opinion polls, tend to focus on current social

I wish to acknowledge, with thanks, the helpful editorial and sociological comments of Hubert J. O'Gorman and the research assistance of Chien Joanna Lei and Michael Lightfoot.

issues and thus do not provide a running account of public opinion about topics not yet socially or politically salient or about former issues no longer "hot." Because of this, analyses tend to focus on immediate, short-term factors relating to current public opinion. There is limited opportunity to relate public opinion to such macroscopic social determinants as the law, social change, and so on. We miss the social determinants of opinion formation and change.

Second, he states, public opinion polls by and large concentrate on adults—as if their opinions appeared with no history. Public opinion theory would be enriched by data on the various precursors to adult opinions, by research on socialization and the stabilization (or change) of views, and the mechanisms through which such socialization and stabilization occur.

Theories of public opinion need to go beyond their usual focus on the individual person and his or her views. One needs to search for what is fundamental and also common to a group or society, such as social values. Hyman saw promise in the secondary analysis of surveys that contain clues to determinants of public opinion rooted in social structural factors, group membership, and reference group phenomena.

Survey analyses could benefit, too, from attempts to conceptualize and measure units of public opinion going beyond the individual. It would be constructive, for example, to develop indexes of public opinion (in addition to scales of individual opinions) reflecting the social distribution of opinions among groups, regions, or other units of society.

Finally, what is the point of all these efforts? Not, Hyman implies, merely to describe the general state of the population's opinions on a particular issue but rather to link public opinion to the political process—to understand, so to speak, the larger social consequences of public opinion formation, maintenance, and change.

To summarize, Hyman argued that our theories of public opinion would be enriched by social surveys that provided for continuity over time, a broader range of population, examination of data at the level of social groups rather than individuals only, the development of measures to reflect the social distribution of opinions within and between units of society, and attempts to link the data to larger social issues of social order and change.

Relevance for the Study of Mass Communication Behavior

Hyman's insights into these opportunities for the inductive development of public opinion theory from public opinion polls also illuminate

the strengths and weaknesses of trying to develop middle-range theories about mass communication behavior from survey research. The similarities between public opinion polls and surveys of communication behavior are readily apparent.

Both fields have been active in recent years. Yet both share the tendency to focus on matters of the moment. Just as we tend to begin collecting public opinion data about new topics such as toxic waste, abortion, and other matters only after they become social issues, so too we tend to gather data on various features of mass media audiences only when they become timely. As a result, we often lack valuable baseline data that would contribute to our understanding of consistencies and variability in audience behavior over time. National surveys of television behavior in the 1950s and 1960s, for example, rarely focused on the aged, a group now of considerable social and sociological interest.

Audience measures also tend to report on the individual's mass communication behavior rather than on patterns of behavior of social segments or groups. Just as public opinion polls have transformed the empirical study of public opinion—once conceived as a social phenomenon—into the precise science of measuring and enumerating the individual's opinions, so too mass communication surveys tell us more about the individual's mass media habits than about mass communication as a social phenomenon.

There are exceptions. Some surveys have examined communication patterns at the household level, but these are rare. Studies of the role of mass communication in even larger social units, such as friendship and peer groups, should enrich our theoretical understanding of the processes and consequences of media behavior.

Indexes of communication behavior that characterize and summarize group differences also should strengthen theoretical analyses. Just as it has proven useful, for example, to classify individuals according to their patterns of media behavior (heavy or light users of print, television, both, or neither), so it might be of interest to develop indexes of media behavior that allow trend studies and contrasts among age groupings, social classes, ethnic groups, even entire societies.

Surveys shedding light on institutionalized patterns of mass communication also have theoretical interest. Surveys can contribute, for example, to our sociological knowledge of the social norms and folkways surrounding media use by persons differentially located in the social structure—as by social class or age, for example.

Hyman's suggestion to broaden the range of respondents also applies to communication surveys. Communication theory could benefit from more studies that relate earlier behavior to the patterns of media

usage, gratifications, and functions found among persons later in life. Surveys also could give greater attention, for example, to the very elderly population than has been done in the past. Furthermore, certain segments of the population—institutionalized adults, for example—tend to be systematically excluded from most regularly conducted national audience surveys.

Finally, it seems clear that the study of mass communication relates to our sociological interest in the larger topics of social control, stability, and social change. Surveys can contribute to this effort. For example, attention is being given to how mass media are used during the process of adult socialization. (For one discussion, see Wright 1985, pp. 185–201.) These studies, usually local and often exploratory in nature, have begun to link media behavior to larger sociological interests in social class differences and in the assimilation of adult immigrants, as examples. As another example, previous and recent surveys of the media's role in affecting individuals' opinions on social issues have been reexamined in terms of larger issues of public opinion and public agenda building.

On balance, then, the prospect for building and strengthening our theoretical understanding of mass communication behavior through survey research seems good. We have yet, as Hyman observed for the field of public opinion, to build a comprehensive theory. That day is yet to come. Its arrival, we suggest, may depend greatly on firmly established foundations of data collection, sociologically oriented descriptive accounts of mass communication behavior, and middle-range theory—accomplishments now within the reach of survey design and analysis.

One of the more promising strategies of survey research that can assist in this enterprise is secondary analysis of sample surveys originally conducted for other purposes. This strategy, as readers of this volume are sure to recognize, is one widely promoted and codified by Herbert Hyman in his own research (Hyman 1972). We will employ it here, together with a mode of descriptive survey analysis that I have introduced elsewhere, called *constructional analysis* (Wright 1975, pp. 379–413), in search of patterns in the mass media behavior of the aged, a topic that is of interest to both sociologists and mass communication researchers today.[1]

Constructional Analysis

Constructional analysis, unlike traditional multivariate analysis, does not seek to determine how much variance is statistically explained, di-

[1] See, for example, Davis and Davis 1985; Atkin 1976.

rectly or indirectly, by the independent variables under study. Rather, the approach is descriptive and comparative. It resembles, to some extent, the use of surveys for what Hyman (1955, p. 119) has termed "differentiated descriptions." The strategy of constructional analysis is to search for, describe, and contrast patterns of communication behavior between types of people classified according to constructed combinations of social characteristics. These social characteristics are selected because they promise to be theoretically important or sociologically interesting. By and large, they are indicators of people's positions in the social structure.

The relevance of these social categories for the study of mass communication behavior comes from the theoretical expectation that such social locations provide differential access to the mass media and differential norms concerning their use. Category selection is guided by sociological theory or experience. In previous analyses using one sample survey, for example, I found it useful to contrast the media behavior of persons classified according to intergenerational occupational mobility, cumulative intergenerational levels of education, educational achievements of husbands and wives, and status sets of aging, retirement, and widowhood.

The strategy of contrasting carefully constructed types of respondents is one that Hyman has used advantageously in his own survey analyses, sometimes colorfully referring to the process as a horse race. Respondents' views and opinions were contrasted according to constructed types that reflected differences in social position and social experiences. (As examples, see Hyman 1983; Hyman, Levine, and Wright 1967, pp. 165–70; Hyman, Wright, and Hopkins 1962, pp. 288–89; Hyman, Wright, and Reed 1975, pp. 73–74.) In these instances, contrasts were made in order to demonstrate the influence of a specific key variable under comparatively favorable or adverse conditions. For example, the impact of an educational program in citizenship was shown to endure even among its graduates who later lived in communities where public sentiments might not support some of the values encouraged by the program, in addition to enduring for respondents living in more supportive social contexts.

The strategy of constructional analysis used here seeks more to discover patterns of behavior associated with certain combinations of variables, such as status sets, than to determine the impact of one key variable. In the section that follows I shall further demonstrate constructional analysis by exploring, through secondary analysis of national surveys, data on the mass media behavior of the elderly population in America.

Mass Media Behavior of the Aged: Some Prior Research

Relatively few national studies in the past provide specific data about the mass media behavior of our nation's very elderly or moderately elderly people.[2] There are some major exceptions to be noted.

An important national survey of noninstitutionalized older Americans, in 1974, gives data on mass media behavior measured in broad terms, such as whether or not respondents *ever* spend any time watching television, reading newspapers, or listening to the radio. By these measures, the proportion of people using various mass media dropped somewhat among the very elderly in comparison to others. Nevertheless, a majority—and often a sizable majority—of relatively old people reported spending time with the mass media (National Council on the Aging 1975).[3]

Robert Bower's studies of television and the public provide an unusual example of planned continuity in sociological audience surveys, being based on national surveys conducted in 1960, 1970, and 1980. He reports that, by and large, the amount of time spent watching television in the evenings and on weekends increases for people in their twenties, falls off for those in their thirties and forties, increases for people in their fifties, and then drops a bit for people of age sixty and over (Bower 1973, 1985).

Leo Bogart cites data from marketing surveys showing that about three-fourths of respondents of age sixty-five or older said that they read a newspaper "yesterday." About the same percentage of younger old people (aged 55–64) also said they had read a paper. Somewhat fewer people in their twenties and thirties said so (Bogart 1981, p. 116).

These exceptions (there may be others; a complete review of the literature is beyond our purposes here) provide glimpses into the mass media behavior of our nation's elderly population. They spur our interest to learn more. It is not easy to do so, however, from any available single national survey. Therefore, the strategy of secondary analysis of several comparable surveys seems worth exploring.

[2] Data through the late 1960s are reviewed by Riley and Foner (1968) and by Schramm (1969). Riley and Foner concluded that television viewing and radio listening received increased time in older age. More recent data, mostly from local surveys, are given by Atkin (1976) and Davis (1980). Data from commercial surveys also can provide sociologically useful information on the media habits of the aged.

[3] The 1974 survey was replicated in 1981, but some of the earlier mass media questions were not repeated. The 1981 data show a decline in the proportion of respondents who believe that the media accurately report the condition of the elderly. See National Council on the Aging 1981.

Data for Secondary Analysis

One reason that detailed data on the mass media behavior of the more elderly are rarely presented is that relatively few very old people are captured in general cross-sectional probability samples.[4] This limitation also applies to the surveys that we use here for our secondary analysis. But by pooling data from several national samples we can obtain sufficient numbers of elderly respondents for some comparisons.[5]

The *General Social Surveys* of the National Opinion Research Center provide the necessary data. We draw upon these national sample surveys for the past decade, using data from 1975, 1977, 1978, 1980, 1982, and 1983—years when questions were asked about mass media use (National Opinion Research Center 1983).

Our first problem is to determine what age categories to use. Transitions in age status in our society are only crudely and arbitrarily indexed by chronological age. Because age sixty-five has certain legal and social consequences, many surveys classify respondents aged sixty-five or more as elderly. But that convention may not provide an appropriate sociological criterion for other research purposes. It is difficult to determine who should be classified as old independent of the survey research problem at hand. We will classify persons aged seventy to seventy-nine as moderately elderly, octogenarians and nonagenarians as more elderly.[6]

Each of the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) national samples of about 1,500 respondents contains only about forty-five respondents who are eighty or more years of age. Therefore, we have pooled data from our six surveys for a combined yield of slightly more than 260 cases from this rare population. We also have a total of approximately 750 septuagenarians.

Each of the NORC surveys selected also contains questions on the mass media behavior of American adults. The questions have the advantage of calling for direct and simple reports of overall media ex-

[4]Those who are, of course, are usually persons living in private households and therefore do not represent the institutionalized or hospitalized elderly. This limitation applies also to the data used here for our secondary analysis of the use of mass media by the aged.

[5]We assume, for our purposes here, that pooling the data does not distort the patterns of media behavior that accompany various age categories. On this point, see Reed (1975), who presents an example of studying "rare" populations by pooling survey data for secondary analysis and a discussion of some of the methodological considerations.

[6]As a check on possible distortions caused by defining old age as beginning at seventy rather than at the conventional age of sixty-five, the following analyses also were run for the moderately elderly, defined as aged sixty-five to seventy-nine and then as seventy to seventy-nine. Raising the threshold to seventy made no appreciable difference in the findings.

posure from the respondents.[7] They record what respondents tell survey researchers about their media behavior. These data can be compared across age groups and other categories of people to discover similarities and differences in reported media behavior. The surveys provide more data on the amount of reading, viewing, and listening that elderly people say they do than are available in any single prior survey cited above. They make it possible, therefore, to examine whether regular, even heavy use of these mass media is more or less common among the elderly than among other age groups.

The surveys (which cover a variety of topics, some repeated each year) inquired as to how often the respondents read a newspaper, watched television, and listened to the radio. These are the communication behaviors that will concern us here. The specific questions were as follows:

> How often do you read the newspaper—every day, a few times a week, once a week, less than once a week, or never?
>
> On the average day, about how many hours do you personally watch television?
>
> Do you ever listen to the radio? [if *Yes*]: On the average, about how many hours a day do you usually listen to the radio?

The surveys also contain data on various social characteristics of interest to us, such as marital status, thus making them suitable resources for our secondary analysis and construction of contrast types.

Patterns of Mass Media Use among the Aged

Popular stereotypes of the aged may lead to contradictory expectations about their mass media behavior.[8] On the one hand, it may be expected that elderly persons—especially the most elderly—disengage from many social roles and lose some of their interest in social events. Freed from certain social responsibilities, the elderly may reduce their mass media use too, no longer having to keep up with current events through daily newspaper reading, for example. On the other hand, social disengagement and increased leisure time might combine to lead elderly persons to increase their use of the mass media

[7] All self-reports on behavior have certain limitations, of course. But the data presented here, taken in the aggregate and used in conjunction with broad response categories of use, seem adequate for our purposes. The simplicity of the questions makes it unlikely that responses would be systematically biased between age groups or between the other social categories that we have constructed for comparisons.

[8] For data on the public's image of the aged, see *The Myth and Reality of Aging* (National Council on the Aging 1975). For an analysis of some factors leading to misconceptions about the elderly, by the general public and by the elderly themselves, see O'Gorman 1980, 1985.

TABLE 21.1. *Daily Mass Communication Behavior of Elderly and Younger Adults*

Age of respondent	Read a newspaper		Watch TV 3 hrs. & up		Listen to radio 2 hrs. & up	
	Pct.	(N)	Pct.	(N)	Pct.	(N)
80 or older	62%	(215)	56%	(258)	51%	(122)
70–79	72	(637)	61	(747)	58	(319)
60–69	73	(980)	57	(1181)	57	(504)
50–59	72	(1201)	46	(1409)	62	(631)
40–49	65	(1202)	42	(1409)	56	(639)
30–39	53	(1634)	45	(1949)	63	(1015)
18–29	39	(2088)	55	(2439)	71	(1250)
All respondents	58%	(7959)	50%	(9392)	63%	(4480)

Source: Data from the *General Social Surveys,* National Opinion Research Center, for various years from 1975 through 1983.

for mass entertainment, to "escape" into the world of television, for example. Early social researchers, as Davis and Davis (1985, pp. 79–80) point out, characterized the aged as "embracers" of television, like very young children.

Our first task is to examine the communication behavior of the older respondents to discover whether in fact they are heavy or light users of the mass media. We also want to see whether the most elderly differ greatly from less elderly and younger respondents.[9] Data on daily mass media use by persons in different age categories are presented in Table 21.1

First let us consider newspaper reading. Does increasing age, with its presumed disengagement from many of society's role obligations, seem to be accompanied by a sharp drop in the proportion of people who keep up with the daily newspaper? Apparently not.

The majority (62 percent) of the respondents who were eighty or older said they read a newspaper every day (68 percent read a paper at least a few times a week). This compares favorably with the proportion of people in their forties who read a newspaper every day (65 percent) and is higher than the figures for people in their twenties and thirties. Likewise, 72 percent of the septuagenarians are daily readers (and 82 percent read a newspaper at least a few times a week), a figure similar

[9]Our purpose here and in subsequent analyses is descriptive and comparative. We wish to examine the patterns of media use by persons in various age categories without statistically "controlling" for other differences among them, such as varieties of education, state of health, or income. In other words, we are not concerned with determining the amount of variance in media behavior that is statistically "explained" by age as an independent variable.

to that for persons in their fifties and sixties. (It is the case, however, that 19 percent of the respondents aged eighty or more said that they never read a newspaper, as compared to only 4 to 7 percent among younger respondents.)

These findings show that daily newspaper readership is about as common among the aged as among the rest of the population. A substantial majority of our older respondents usually read a newspaper every day; an overwhelming majority read a paper at least once a week. Although our data cannot tell us what people read in their newspapers, the strong pattern of frequent newspaper readership suggests that most elderly people do remain in touch with current news and world events, at least through daily exposure to newspapers.

Television provides another look at the world, for both news and entertainment. One plausible expectation is that television provides a convenient at-home medium for escape from boredom, and therefore very old people may be especially dependent upon it for mass entertainment.

Our survey data suggest that life does become less exciting (although no less precious) with changes in age status. Though a little more than half of both the young and the middle-aged respondents found life to be routine or even dull, 64 percent of the septuagenarians (N = 377) and 66 percent of the oldest respondents (N = 134) found it so. But more to the point concerning escape from boredom, 33 percent of the most elderly respondents (N = 58) said that they often have time on their hands, as do 26 percent of the moderately elderly (N = 136). It needs to be noted, however, that the most elderly respondents are not generally less happy than others, 35 percent saying that they are very happy (N = 258), as compared with 40 percent among the moderately elderly (N = 742). Nor are very old people more likely to condone suicide for someone who is tired of living. So the aged, as a group, are not necessarily more depressed than others. More of them are simply likely to have time on their hands and to find daily life falling into a routine.

Whatever very old people may be doing to fill their hours, they are not television addicts, at least no more so than others. Nearly everyone in the surveys reported watching some television each day. The average (median) respondent reported watching television for about three hours a day. Table 21.1 presents data on the percentage of respondents from each age category whose viewing was average or more. Of the oldest respondents, 56 percent watched television for three or more hours every day, but so did 55 percent of young adults in their twenties. It is true that slightly lower percentages of respondents aged

thirty to sixty spent this much time watching television (probably because of other time-consuming duties of work and family). But the increase in proportion of regular viewers among the aged is modest. Very heavy viewing (six or more hours a day, reported by 10 percent of the total population) is engaged in by 17 percent of the oldest respondents and by 13 or 14 percent of the people in their twenties, sixties, and seventies. As might be anticipated, such heavy viewing was less common (about 7 percent) among persons in their middle years. With these minor exceptions, then, the aged resemble other adults rather than differing markedly from them in amounts of television exposure.

It is worth remembering, however, that nearly all of the elderly watch television for several hours a day and therefore have this second channel of news and entertainment to keep in touch with the world.

Finally, we consider radio listening. Radio, at least during the period of these surveys, was a young person's medium, probably because of its music format. Still, some of its fare—news, sports, talk shows, telephone call-ins, classical and nostalgic music—might be expected to appeal to the elderly and very old people, especially during the potentially sleepless late-night hours. And radio use depends less on good eyesight than does newspaper reading or television viewing.

Nearly everyone said they listened to the radio for some time every day. The average (median) respondent in our surveys reported listening to the radio between two and three hours a day. Table 21.1 presents data on the percentage of persons in each age category who listened this much or more per day.

Clearly, young adults favor radio, 71 percent listening for two or more hours a day. Beyond that, however, there are only minor and unsystematic differences in the percentage of "moderately heavy" radio listeners (ranging from 56 to 63 percent) up to the oldest age category. A bare majority of respondents of age eighty or more listened that long. Still, all of them did listen to the radio every day, if only for a few minutes or an hour or so, and therefore they too made use of this mass medium, adding a third possible avenue for news and entertainment.

These findings, unrefined though they may be, are quite informative about the mass media behavior of the very old population. The proportion of people who are regular, even heavy, users of television, newspapers, and radio drops only slightly among the most elderly population. This suggests, on the one hand, that, perhaps contrary to popular beliefs, the very old, as a group, are no more (but no less) media-dependent than others. On the other hand, it is important to

note that a sizable majority of older people make regular use of the mass media and, to that extent, remain in contact with the world around them.

Thus, secondary analysis adds to what was known before about the media habits of the aged. Nevertheless, we would hope for more continuity in research on media behavior, as Hyman urged in his case for continuity in public opinion polling. Future primary surveys that focus more regularly on the mass media habits of the heterogeneous elderly population would provide the continuity essential to trend studies and would produce adequate numbers of cases for more refined analyses. A similar call for regular general surveys of the aged is made by Pearlin (1982).[10]

In the meantime, in order to obtain sufficient cases for further secondary analysis here, it is necessary to broaden our category of elderly to include both moderately elderly and older persons. We will set it at age seventy and above. Combining people moderately elderly and older into one category necessarily obscures any differences in mass media behavior between these two age groupings. Nevertheless, given the findings reported above, these differences are relatively small and not qualitatively radical. We proceed, then, to construct our next comparison groups by adding a social contextual condition—size of household.

To Be Old and Alone

One of life's changes that may accompany aging is a reduction in household size, perhaps to the point where one is living alone. To be living by oneself while young may be exciting—one's first fling at freedom—but to be old and alone may add up to just plain lonely. (Being old and living alone do not necessarily lead to loneliness, however. On this point, see Peplau and Perlman 1982, pp. 327–47.)[11]

Peter Townsend and Sylvia Tunstall (1968) have observed that people who are old and living alone seem likely to use the mass media. In an analysis of a national survey of the elderly in 1962 these authors report that 53 percent of elderly persons living alone in America had watched television during the previous day, and 56 percent had lis-

[10] Pearlin (1982) argues for the need for comparative analysis of age cohorts, preferably longitudinal studies but also independent cross-national surveys, as a basis for the development of theory and as a protection against falsely generalizing from experience with a particular age cohort.

[11] Also see other chapters in Peplau and Perlman (1982) for reviews of the literature on loneliness and discussions of theoretical and methodological issues. On conceptualization and measurement of loneliness, also see Wenger 1983.

tened to the radio. Jeremy Tunstall also reports that old people living alone in Great Britain make frequent use of the home-centered mass media, namely newspapers, radio, and television. "The mass media," he suggests, "appear to affect isolated old people in two separate ways. Some of these old people are very well informed about recent political events and trends in popular entertainment. . . . On the other hand, another strong impression . . . is that the mass media serve to emphasize to these old people their own isolated state" (1966, p. 197).

Various combinations of age status and social circumstances provide their own special context for the likely use of mass media. We will examine mass media use for nine constructed combinations of age status and living conditions: people living alone who are young (18–29), middle-aged (30–69), or elderly (70–89); people living with one other person, who are young, middle-aged, or elderly; and young, middle-aged, or elderly people living with two or more other persons. In this analysis our attention will be focused on the three elderly types, but data on the six other types are considered occasionally for contrast.

The number of cases in each of these constructed types varies because some of the dependent questions were not asked each year and therefore did not involve the total pool of 9,429 respondents. The smallest group from the combined samples was ninety-nine cases of elderly persons living in households with two or more other people.

Before examining media use, it is helpful to get some ideas about what living alone may signify for the quality of the respondent's life. Whatever the age group, people who live alone are less likely to say that they are *very* happy than are people who live with others. (Surprisingly, perhaps, the group who is least likely to report happiness is not the young or the old but middle-aged people who live alone.) Older people who live with someone (or with several people) are the most likely to report general happiness.[12]

To be old and alone is not necessarily more likely to mean time on one's hands than is being old and living with others. Elderly respondents, as noted earlier, were more likely than others to find themselves with extra time on their hands, and this holds regardless of the presence or absence of others in the household. (The only others equally likely to have "idle" hours were young people living alone.)

To be old and living alone is not associated with fear or with approval of suicide if one is tired of living. Old respondents living alone

[12]One study, in Cleveland, Ohio, reports that morale among elderly persons living alone was somewhat lower than among those living with a spouse but higher than among those living with their grown children (Mindel and Wright 1983).

were about as likely as others to say that they felt safe and secure at home. And old people in general were the least likely group to approve of suicide.

These data suggest, then, that to be old and living alone is to have time on one's hands, but no more so than other elderly people, and to be about as happy and secure at home as other people. In general, our nine constructed groups do not differ greatly along the few psychological characteristics examined. Nevertheless, different combinations of age and living arrangements may be associated with differences in mass media behavior, thus reflecting the social aspects of these arrangements. That is, the presence or absence of others in the household might contribute to different patterns of mass media use.

Newspaper reading is one possibility. The presence of others in the household might increase the likelihood of a newspaper being available, either through subscription by a household member or through someone carrying a paper home. Television viewing also might reflect the presence or absence of others. At the very least, one is likely to be exposed to the television set turned on by others, unless one is able to escape to another part of the house. Radio listening seems the least likely to be affected by surrounding social relationships. It has become a personalized medium when one wishes—with earphones—and even if one lives among others, radio can be privately turned to for music, talk shows, news, and sports, late into the sleepless nights. On the other hand, radio listening can be a socially shared experience, voluntary or not—boombox and all.

The media behavior for our nine types is contrasted in Table 21.2. Certain patterns can be discerned, two of which seem relevant to our concern about media use and the aged.

First, it is clear that the previously demonstrated finding that the aged are regular daily users of the mass media is sustained even for those who are living alone and therefore possibly more disengaged. The findings suggest that to be old and living alone means keeping in touch with life aided by regular use of the mass media. A majority of our elderly alones read newspapers everyday, watch television for three hours or more each day, and listen to the radio for two hours or more a day. No other type matches this consistency of media use across the board. Only elderly respondents living with two or more other people come close to it.

Second, by contrast, to be young and living alone is to be mainly radio-oriented, among the mass media studied. (We regret the absence of data on movie attendance.) In no other type is there so high a percentage (77 percent) who listen so much to the radio each day and so low a percentage of television and/or newspaper "fans." Also, rela-

TABLE 21.2. *Daily Mass Communication Behavior of Nine Constructed Types of Age and Living Arrangements*

Type[a]	Read a newspaper Pct.	(N)	Watch TV 3 hrs. & up Pct.	(N)	Listen to radio 2 hrs. & up Pct.	(N)
Young, alone	39%	(254)	37%	(297)	77%	(167)
Middle-aged, alone	58	(802)	47	(958)	68	(500)
Old, alone	68	(406)	61	(487)	67	(216)
Young, twosome	39	(577)	50	(679)	73	(362)
Middle-aged, twosome	70	(1494)	51	(1810)	60	(834)
Old, twosome	73	(360)	59	(419)	42	(181)
Young, group	39	(1257)	61	(1463)	70	(721)
Middle-aged, group	63	(2721)	45	(3180)	57	(1455)
Old, group	69	(86)	58	(99)	64	(44)

Source: Data from the *General Social Surveys*, National Opinion Research Center, for various years from 1975 through 1983.

[a]For details on construction of types, see text.

tively fewer young people are daily newspaper readers, whatever the size of the household where they live.

It is not contended that either age or residential status causes or explains these observed differences in media behavior. Rather, constructional analysis has led us to *compare* media behavior of carefully constructed types of respondents. These types combine one indicator of the respondent's position in the life course—age—with an indicator of social context—size of one's household. This research strategy has disclosed some interesting differences in mass media behavior that may serve to correct popular misconceptions about the elderly and that, in themselves, warrant further examination.

Young and Old Men and Women Alone: The Single and the Widowed

In the space remaining in this chapter, we shall explore only a few additionally constructed types with no attempt at a fuller description or analysis. We first consider gender.

For the total sample, much as expected on the basis of prior research, men and women differ in their mass media behavior. A higher percentage of men than women are likely to say that they read a newspaper every day, whereas a smaller percentage of men than women report relatively heavy television viewing. Gender makes little or no difference in the percentage of people who listen to the radio for several hours a day.

Our focus here, however, is on people living alone. And for them,

further contrast by gender does not disclose different patterns of mass media use. The general patterns described above prevail. There are no important statistical differences between men and women living alone in the percentage of each who read a newspaper every day or watch television more than average, or listen to the radio regularly. (See Table 21.3.)

We extend the construction by adding another social status to our typology of age and household size: marital status. Complications arise in constructing these additional combinations, however, because of practical limitations. One finds few cases in certain potential types, even when starting with large total samples pooled from several national surveys. For example, nearly all of the young people living alone are single; there are (fortunately, from our human point of view) hardly any cases of young people living alone who are widows or widowers. Nevertheless, there are sufficient cases of certain interesting types to permit description and contrast here. We continue to focus on respondents who are living alone, first the young and then the elderly and middle-aged.

Most young people living alone are single and have never been married. Their mass media behavior shows a pattern similar to youth in the aggregate. That is, radio is their medium. A relatively small portion of them read newspapers (41 percent) or watch a lot of television each day (36 percent), but many more (75 percent) listen to the radio for several hours a day. This pattern holds for both young men and young women.

Most elderly respondents living alone are widowed. These respondents, it might be argued, face day-to-day life with triple social "handicaps." They are elderly, live by themselves, and are without the daily support and interaction of their chosen mates. They seem likely candidates, on the one hand, to withdraw from interest in newspaper events and, on the other hand, to escape into heavy viewing of television entertainment. The data, however, suggest they do neither—at least no more so than others. (See Table 21.4.) Their mass media behavior follows a pattern similar to elderly respondents in general. That is, a majority of them (67 percent) read a newspaper every day; thus, they have not withdrawn from this contact with the world. A majority of them, but not an extraordinarily high proportion (61 percent) watch television for three or more hours a day; there is no sign of massive addiction to television. And a comparable majority (64 percent) listen to the radio for several hours each day. This pattern is similar for both widows and widowers.

Middle-aged widows and widowers living alone also show a pattern of moderately heavy daily exposure to the mass media—64 percent

TABLE 21.3. *Daily Mass Communication Behavior of Men and Women Living Alone*

Type[a]	Read a newspaper Pct.	(N)	Watch TV 3 hrs. & up Pct.	(N)	Listen to radio 2 hrs. & up Pct.	(N)
Young men, alone	41%	(152)	39%	(179)	73%	(97)
Young women, alone	35	(102)	34	(118)	71	(70)
Middle-aged men, alone	56	(346)	39	(421)	67	(219)
Middle-aged women, alone	60	(456)	53	(537)[b]	68	(281)
Older men, alone	70	(92)	54	(110)	67	(48)
Older women, alone	67	(314)	63	(377)	67	(168)

Source: Data from the *General Social Surveys,* National Opinion Research Center, for various years from 1975 through 1983.

[a]For details on construction of types, see text.

[b]$p < .0001$ (chi-square test). No other differences between men's and women's media behavior were significant at the .01 level.

TABLE 21.4. *Daily Mass Communication Behavior of Widowed Persons, Middle-aged and Older, Living Alone or with Others*

Type[a]	Read a newspaper Pct.	(N)	Watch TV 3 hrs. & up Pct.	(N)	Listen to radio 2 hrs. & up Pct.	(N)
Middle-aged, widowed, & alone	64%	(250)	57%	(296)	69%	(130)
Old, widowed, & alone	67	(335)	61	(400)	64	(176)
Middle-aged, widowed, and with others	65	(151)	51	(183)	68	(74)
Old, widowed, and with others	62	(85)	57	(97)	55	(40)

Source: Data from the *General Social Surveys,* National Opinion Research Center, for various years from 1975 through 1983.

[a]For details on construction of types, see text.

reading a daily newspaper, 57 percent watching television, and 69 percent listening to the radio for several hours each day.

It seems fitting that our demonstration end with this look at the media behavior of elderly widows and widowers, for this is a group of special concern in one of Herbert Hyman's recent research projects (Hyman 1983, pp. 34–38). As part of his larger study on the enduring effects of widowhood, Hyman reports (on the basis of secondary

analysis of several national sample surveys) no appreciable difference in the percentage of elderly widowed (aged 60–79) and younger widowed (aged 40–59) who read the newspaper daily or who watch television for four or more hours a day. He comments that "surely such activity connects the individual to the larger social world; brings the person into contact, albeit at a distance, with great events and small happenings involving others."

Thus, mass communication behavior is linked to larger social matters. In this way too our survey data on the mass communication behavior of the aged and others—contrasting data on men and women who are elderly and alone, single or widowed—sheds light on their potential links to the larger society and current events through their daily use of the mass media.

Conclusion

Our essay began by drawing upon Hyman's earlier remarks on public opinion polling and extending them to suggest ways in which future social surveys can contribute sociologically useful data about people's mass media behavior. It is my optimistic hope—as it was Hyman's hope concerning the future of public opinion polling and theory—that in time we will have a wealth of systematic, theoretically relevant survey data about our mass communication behavior from which to work.

These developments will be most welcome. But while awaiting their arrival we can do much through exploiting currently available resources. In particular, we can begin to explore the relations between mass communication use and social structure by following a strategy of secondary analysis of previous national surveys.

I have suggested one research tactic for the discovery, description, and comparative analysis of patterns of mass communication behavior through secondary analysis—constructional analysis—and have illustrated its usefulness in the study of such special and often "rare" survey populations as the aged, people living alone, the widowed, and persons combining these statuses. Such comparative descriptive accounts help to dispel, refine, or support popular preconceptions and stereotypes about mass media use by persons of various social types. In this way they provide the empirical base necessary for future theoretically directed survey analyses aimed at explaining genuine differences and similarities in the use of the mass media by people differentially located in the social structure.

Bibliography

Atkin, Charles K. 1976. Mass media and the aging. In Herbert J. Oyer, and E. Jane Oyer, eds., *Aging and communication,* pp. 99–118. Baltimore: University Park Press.

Bogart, Leo. 1981. *Press and public: Who reads what, when, where, and why in American newspapers.* Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum.

Bower, Robert T. 1973. *Television and the public.* New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

———. 1985. *The changing television audience in America.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Davis, Richard H. 1980. *Television and the aging audience.* Los Angeles: University of Southern California Press.

Davis, Richard H., and James A. Davis. 1985. *TV's image of the elderly: A practical guide for change.* Lexington, Mass.: Heath.

Merton, Robert K. 1949. *Social theory and social structure.* Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press.

Mindel, Charles H., and Roosevelt Wright, Jr. 1983. Differential living arrangements among the elderly and their subjective well-being. In Phyllis M. Foster, ed., *Activities and the "well elderly,"* pp. 25–34. New York: Hawthorn Books.

National Council on the Aging. 1975. *The myth and reality of aging in America.* Washington, D.C.

———. 1981. *Aging in the eighties.* Washington, D.C.

National Opinion Research Center. 1983. *General Social Surveys, 1972–1983: Cumulative Codebook.* University of Chicago.

O'Gorman, Hubert J. 1980. False consciousness of kind: Pluralistic ignorance among the aged. *Research on Aging* 2 (1): 105–28.

———. 1985. Pluralistic ignorance and false consciousness of kind: The impact of perceived personal problems on the perception of others' problems. Paper presented to the 55th Annual Meeting of the Eastern Sociological Society, Philadelphia, March 17.

Pearlin, Leonard I. 1982. Discontinuities in the study of aging. In T. K. Hareven and K. J. Adams, eds., *Aging and life course transitions: An interdisciplinary perspective,* pp. 55–74. London: Tavistock.

Peplau, Letitia Anne, and Daniel Perlman, eds. 1982. *Loneliness: A sourcebook of current theory, research, and therapy.* New York: Wiley.

Reed, John Shelton. 1975. Needles in haystacks: Studying "rare" populations by secondary analysis of national sample surveys. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 39: 514–22.

Riley, Matilda White, and Anne Foner, eds. 1968. *Aging and society.* Vol. 1: *An inventory of research findings.* New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Schramm, Wilbur, 1969. Aging and mass communication. In Matilda White Riley, John W. Riley, Jr., and Marilyn E. Johnson, eds. *Aging and society.* Vol. 2: *Aging and the professions,* pp. 352–75. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Townsend, Peter, and Sylvia Tunstall. 1968. Isolation, desolation, and loneliness. In Ethel Shanas, P. Townsend, D. Wedderburn, H. Friis, P. Milhoj,

and J. Stehouwer, eds., *Old people in three industrial societies,* pp. 258–87. New York: Atherton.

Tunstall, Jeremy. 1966. *Old and alone: A sociological study of old people.* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Wenger, Clare. 1983. Loneliness: A problem of measurement. In Dorothy Jerrome, ed., *Aging in modern society: Contemporary approaches,* pp. 145–67. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Wright, Charles R. 1975. Social structure and mass communications behavior: Exploring patterns through constructional analysis. In Lewis A. Coser, ed., *The idea of social structure: Papers in honor of Robert K. Merton,* pp. 379–413. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

———. 1985. *Mass communication: A sociological perspective.* 3rd ed. New York: Random House.