

Getting smart about dumbbed-down news

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Not that there was much doubt about it, but a new study has proven empirically that readers are more interested in poker and Paris Hilton than in stories about foreign policy.

Presented in the last few days at the respective national conferences of America's publishers and editors, these new findings are about to hit the nation's newsrooms like a grenade in a bunker. It's worth discussing them before anyone does anything rash.

Although the study could be taken as a license to dumb down the news, it really suggests quite the opposite approach. It is a mandate for journalists to work harder to find intelligent, imaginative stories they can present in creative, compelling ways.

Conducted by researchers at the Minneapolis Star Tribune and the Readership Institute of Northwestern University, the study found that a newspaper edited to push a reader's hot buttons will resonate more strongly with young adults than the standard-issue product. The need to attract young readers is urgent. About a third of adults under the age of 30 read newspapers today, or approximately half the number who read them 15 years ago, according to the institute.

"Newspapers tend to talk about topics, keeping a distance between themselves, the topic and the reader," said Nancy Barnes, a member of the research team. "In this experiment, we actively sought to talk to readers directly, and engage them every step along the way. That makes the newspaper seem more personal."

The researchers created what they call an "experience newspaper" to evoke the "feelings, emotions and motivations" that would encourage people to read it. The team asked 140

adults under the age of 30 to give their reactions to not only an original, conventional edition of the Star Tribune, but also to alternative versions containing more gut-grabbing stories, headlines, artwork and writing.

The front page of the "experience paper" -- which put poker and Paris in place of George Bush and a yawner about blogging politicians -- won by a large margin. Sixty-five percent of the group liked the "experience" paper vs. 15% for the original issue.

The "before" and "after" front pages are reproduced below so you can experience the "experience" yourself. Although I am over 30 and read newspapers too often to qualify for the panel, I agree the "experience" version is better, but not necessarily because they substituted Paris for the Prez. Let's look at what they did:

The top half of original front page was dominated by the day-old story of Bush's trip to Europe plus a huge spread about a woman who intends to walk each and every street in Minneapolis. Those stories, as well as the piece about blogging pols, were eliminated altogether from the "experience" paper.

The front page of the revised edition was dominated by a story on the pros and cons of legalized poker. Interestingly, the poker story was listed on the news budget for the original paper but never actually saw print. A story on identity theft wrested from the middle of the financial section was souped-up for the front page by adding a photo of Paris Hilton and a reference to the private numbers stolen from her mobile phone.

One story that survived from "before" to "after" was the piece on a proposal to collect DNA samples from anyone arrested for a felony. The traditional third-person headline and first paragraph were replaced with a breezy, "License, registration and saliva, please" -- the better, evidently, to help potential felons identify more closely with the article.

Because the "after" paper is arguably more lively, seemingly more relevant and perhaps more visually appealing than the original, there is a temptation to conclude that sizzle, shallowness and style trump substance when it comes to attracting young readers.

I would argue, however, that the "after" paper is not better because it contains a revised mix of articles, but rather because the researchers worked harder to present the chosen stories in more clever and engaging ways than the pieces carried in the original. With an

equal degree of thought, effort and time, the stories dumped from the original paper could have qualified for a place in the "after" paper, assuming they were worth doing in the first place.

The lesson is not that journalists have to dumb down the news to save their industry. Actually, it is quite the opposite. They have to get smarter.