

The Decline of Daily Newspapers and the Third-Person Effect

Martin Johnson
Associate Professor
Director, Media & Communication Research Lab
Department of Political Science
University of California, Riverside
martin.johnson@ucr.edu

R. Kirby Goidel
Scripps Howard Professor
Director, Manship School Research Facility
Manship School of Mass Communication
Department of Political Science
Louisiana State University
kgoidel@lsu.edu

Michael Climek
Operations Manager
Manship School Research Facility
Manship School of Mass Communication
Louisiana State University
mclimek@lsu.edu

Abstract

Members of mass media audiences tend to believe that others are more susceptible to the influence of media messages than they are themselves. This third-person effect underlies other phenomena like hostile media judgments. It tends to be studied in terms of the effects of enduring and established forms of communication, especially those viewed as having potential negative effects—politically biased messages, other forms of propaganda, and communication that could harm reputations. We investigate third-person effects in relation to the reduction of information in a political environment. The New Orleans *Times-Picayune* ended daily print circulation in September 2012 in favor of a three-day per week publication schedule and on-line news offerings. Using original survey data, we investigate the concerns expressed by residents of the primary *Times-Picayune* circulation area about the informational challenges this reduced publication schedule presents them and others readers. We find evidence of a third-person effect on judgments about changes at the *Times-Picayune*.

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The well-documented “third-person effect” empirically describes an important insight about how people relate to mass media and their neighbors. Individuals, the first-person, tend to believe that they themselves are independent-minded and resilient to the effects of mass media. However, these same independently minded audience members view mass media as quite influential on the beliefs of others, third-person actors. As a result, people tend to believe mass media appeals designed to persuade are quite a bit more persuasive than they actually are because there are far more of *he’s* and *she’s* than *me* (Perloff, 1989, 1999; Mutz, 1989; Hoge, Glynn, and Jeong, 2006; Jensen and Hurley, 2005).

Media sociologist W. Phillips Davison documented the third-person effect after anecdotally identifying it in a variety of contexts (1983). It has subsequently been studied extensively and documented in an array of settings (Banning and Sweetser, 2007; Hoffner and Rehkoff, 2011; Jensen and Hurley, 2005; Seate et al., 2012; Wei, Lo, and Lu, 2008; Schmierbach, Boyle, and McLeod, 2008). Third-person effects are important because they are connected to other judgments with implications for the legitimacy of mass media and social systems, including the hostile media effect (Reid, 2012; Hoffner and Rehkoff, 2011; Wei, Chia, and Ven-Hwei, 2011). People develop concerns about perceived hostile media because they believe that while their views are not shaped by news media, the views of other are directly effected, and dramatically so, by biased news reporting.

Most of this research investigates third-person effects in the presence or expansion of mass media. In other words, we know well that people think others are influenced by an existing media stimulus. If you show a person a political campaign television commercial in support of a particular candidate, that person forms beliefs about its effects on other viewers. In addition, most of this research revolves around the potential harms associated

with mass media—its effect of biasing opinion, misinforming the public, and sully reputations (Perloff, 1999; Ye et al., 2008). However, we do not know much about third-person effects associated with the absence or removal of media or in the context of the beneficial and informative role mass media plays.

As skeptical as Americans are of mass media (Gronke and Cook 2007), people tend to recognize its value as well. There remains a strong commitment to the importance of a news media for a functioning democratic system, even among members of the mass public. According to the First Amendment Center (2012), 75 percent of Americans agree with the survey item “it is important for our democracy that the news media act as a watchdog on government.” As traditional news media decline—newspapers partially or completely suspend publication, news organizations close capitol and foreign news bureaus, and broadcast news casts shift budgets away from covering local news—we anticipate that members of the public will expect this decline to have effects on democratic function. Understanding what happens to judgments about media and others when news media are in decline is important given that many traditionally important forms of mass communication are, in fact, in decline.

This research note investigates the third-person effect in a somewhat novel situation that provides a useful window on the expansiveness of third-person beliefs. We investigate the presence of third-person judgments conditioned by the decline of print news, assessing how people believe the loss of newspaper service will affect other readers and their ability to stay informed. We also investigate one of the theoretical mechanisms potentially underlying third-person judgments—social distance. Specifically, we test the

hypothesis that third-person judgments are exacerbated by social and physical distance between a person and the audiences whose susceptibility to persuasion she is assessing.

Theoretical Expectations

Third-person judgments involve an *individual* assessing *others'* susceptibility to the influence of media messages. Our first and most basic theoretical expectation is that we will observe third-person effects on judgments about the impact of the loss of news media similar to the kind of third-person effects observed in other settings. While people will likely perceive the loss of access to traditional news media to be a problem for them in keeping informed about politics and current events, they should view these detrimental effects as more of a problem for others (Perloff, 1999; Paul, Salwen and Dupagne, 2000; Brosius and Engel, 1996).

In addition, social distance should exacerbate these third-person judgments. We hypothesize that the more socially similar that individual is to the others she is evaluating, the less severe the apparent third-person effects we will observe (Cohen, Mutz, and Gunther, 1988; Tewksbury, 2002). Essentially, a person who thinks of himself as relatively independent-minded and resilient to media effects will think of others who are like him as perhaps slightly less independent and resilient, but certainly more independent and resilient than others who are less like him (Gunther, 1991). Discussed in greater detail below, we operationalize social distance using physical proximity.

Extant research offers competing expectations for the role of physical proximity as a moderate of third person perceptions. In its initial articulation, the “social distance corollary” included geographic distance within its conceptual boundaries (Cohen et. al., 1998) Subsequent research has found that differences in third person perceptions based on

geographic distance disappear when social group referents are included in the model (Ye et. al., 2008). Other research by Eveland et. al. (1999) suggest an important linkage: Perceived exposure to messages drives perceptions of third person effects. In the current study, a similar logic applies but it is the absence of exposure that matters. Citizens closest to New Orleans will be perceived as most affected by the change in newspaper publication.

Research Setting: New Orleans' Reduced *Times-Picayune* Schedule

In May 2012, Advance Publications, Inc., announced its plans to reduce the publication schedule of the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* from daily circulation to three days each week—Wednesday, Friday, and Sunday—starting in fall 2012. The daily newspaper had been serving the greater New Orleans, Louisiana, area since 1837. The corporation, which owns more than 30 newspapers in 12 states, scheduled a similar downsizing of its newspapers in Alabama, the *Birmingham News*, *Huntsville Times*, and the *Press-Register* in Mobile, along with substantial reductions in the reporting staffs of all four newspapers. Advance rebuffed the offers of New Orleans residents, including those made by New Orleans Saints and New Orleans Hornets owner Tom Benson and other local notables, to purchase *The Times-Picayune*.

The *Times-Picayune* published its final daily paper Sunday, September 30, 2012. New Orleans is now the largest metropolitan area in the U.S. without a daily printed newspaper. Advance intends to develop the digital presence of the *Times-Picayune*, www.NOLA.com, as well as the other Gulf Coast region newspapers it has downsized. This restructuring is similar to changes Advance implemented with its Michigan newspapers, rebranding the *Ann Arbor News* as AnnArbor.com, with a twice-weekly print edition, and

consolidating its operations and many others into a Grand Rapids-based MLive Media Group.

Data: New Orleans area survey

Prior to the final publication of the daily *Times-Picayune*, The Public Policy Research Lab at Louisiana State University fielded an original survey to assess New Orleans-area residents' reactions to the loss of the daily *Times-Picayune*. The *State of Newspapers in New Orleans Survey* was supported by The Reilly Center for Media & Public Affairs and several professors in the Manship School of Mass Communication at LSU. All respondents reside in the greater New Orleans area which we defined as Jefferson, Orleans, Plaquemines, St. Bernard, St. Charles, St. John the Baptist, and St. Tammany parishes.

The survey included a traditional landline telephone survey combined with a survey of Louisiana cell phone users. The combined survey includes 1,043 respondents (530 landline respondents from a random digit dialing sample and 513 respondents from available cell phone blocks). Interviews were conducted from July 31 to August 26, 2012. Table 1 shows the characteristics of the combined sample and compares the demographics of these respondents to Census estimates for the seven parishes sampled. The sample over-represents women, college-educated and older people, as well as residents of Orleans Parish.

[Table 1 about here]

In order to investigate our hypotheses, we rely on both observational and experimental research designs embedded in the survey. Given that a portion of our analysis is experimental, we model the raw rather than weighted data below. Our analysis

centers on survey questions about the potential effects of the end of daily *Times-Picayune* publication. We asked all participants this question:

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? “The changes underway with the *Times-Picayune* will make it more difficult for ME to stay informed about current events” Strongly agree, Somewhat agree, Slightly agree, Slightly disagree, Somewhat disagree, Strongly disagree.

This question assesses their first-person judgments about the *Times-Picayune* schedule change. In order to assess the basic third-person effect, we compare participants’ self-assessment with their beliefs about the effect of reduced publication on other people.

Assessing these third-person judgments involved an experimental manipulation. Survey respondents were assigned at random to one of two versions of a question asking about effects on other people. Version one asked about “people” in general, while the second version of the question specifically asked about “people in Orleans Parish.”

Version 1. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? “The changes underway with the Times-Picayune will make it more difficult for PEOPLE to stay informed about current events” Strongly agree, Somewhat agree, Slightly agree, Slightly disagree, Somewhat disagree, Strongly disagree.

Version 2. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? “The changes underway with the *Times-Picayune* will make it more difficult for PEOPLE IN ORLEANS PARISH to stay informed about current events” Strongly agree, Somewhat agree, Slightly agree, Slightly disagree, Somewhat disagree, Strongly disagree.

Our assumption is that “people” with no specific geographic identifier allows us to gauge the general third-person judgments respondents make. The geographic tag “in Orleans Parish” effectively manipulates social distance. Orleans Parish residents asked about other Orleans Parish residents will see these neighbors as quite similar to them, as well as generic “people” asked about in Version 1 of the question. However, people who reside in parishes farther away from New Orleans will see themselves as more different

from residents of Orleans Parish. These differences may involve beliefs about race, class, age, and lifestyle. We do not try to isolate the specific mechanisms at work in the present project.

Consequently, in addition to these survey questions, we also tracked the parish of residence for each respondent. This allows us to estimate their proximity from New Orleans. We use a rather blunt indicator of proximity. Given we know the parish of residence for each respondent, we approximate the physical distance of each respondent from New Orleans using the driving distance between the Parish seat for parish of residence and the City of New Orleans.¹ We list these Parish seats and distances in Table 2.

[Table 2 about here]

Findings

Independent of the geographical frame for the third-person judgment, we find substantial evidence of our basic expected third-person effect. We code responses to both questions on a six-point scale, with 1=Strongly agree and 6=Strongly disagree. High scores on all of these questions indicate respondents do not think the restricted publication schedule of the *Times-Picayune* will have an effect. We see a significant difference between the perceived effect on themselves ($M=2.7$) and the perceived effects on others ($M=2.1$) among respondents assigned to the “people” version of the question ($t=9.03$, $p<.0001$).

¹ Driving distances were obtained from Google Maps. We entered each of the cities in Table 2 into the interface along with New Orleans, Louisiana. The distances in Table 2 are the first recommended routes for travel between each parish seat and New Orleans. We also used an even coarser indicator of distance, whether the respondents lived in Orleans Parish itself, one of the parishes adjacent to Orleans, or one non-adjacent to New Orleans. This distance metric provides similar results.

Similarly, among people assigned to the “people in Orleans Parish” version of the second question, we see significant differences between self-assessed harm ($M=2.7$) and perceived effects on others ($M=2.0$; $t=8.84$, $p<.0001$). Thus we find support for our most basic expectation that people will perceive the less frequent publication schedule will make it more difficult for others to stay informed than it will affect them.

Across the entire sample, there is no treatment effect for our question wording manipulation for third person judgments. Respondents who were asked about “people” had similar judgments about the effects of restricted *Times-Picayune* publication ($M=2.1$) compared to respondents asked about “people in Orleans Parish” ($M=2.0$; $t=0.20$, NS). However, our expectation is that social distance—operationalized as proximity—activates the third-person effect. Consequently, we need to examine whether proximity moderates the treatment effect. We expect to see no difference between respondents assigned to the different treatments either in New Orleans or close to the city. We should see a stronger, reliable treatment effect among respondents residing greater distances from the city.

To test this expectation of heterogeneous treatment effects by proximity, we model judgments about the effects of a restricted *Times-Picayune* on other people in either target group as a function of assignment to the “Orleans Parish” residents treatment, the distance between the respondent’s Parish seat and New Orleans (shown in Table 2), and the interaction of these two. We also control for the effects the respondent perceives for herself.

[Table 3 about here]

Table 3 reports OLS regression coefficients for this model. The “Orleans” treatment coefficient, which represents the treatment effect for survey respondents residing in

Orleans Parish (i.e., distance=0) is not reliably different from zero. However, the interaction between the “Orleans” treatment and distance suggests that people who live farther from New Orleans see the restricted publication of the *Times-Picayune* as having a more deleterious effect on Orleans Parish residents than “people” in general. Social—and physical—distance exacerbates third-person judgments, as we anticipate. Figure 1 shows these heterogeneous treatment effects estimated in this model. The farther the respondent resides from New Orleans, the greater the difference between the perceived effects on “people” versus “people in Orleans Parish.”²

[Figure 1 about here]

Discussion

This note demonstrates the third-person effect pertains more broadly than is anticipated in the current literature. People perceive much harm associated with mass media and that this harm will have a greater effect on others than themselves. They craft similar judgments about the loss of potentially informative mass media.

In this era of declining traditional news, this finding has deep resonance and broad repercussions. To the extent that citizens believe others are less informed about politics and public affairs, they may also have less faith in democratic processes and institutions. Beyond this particular case study, third person perceptions may manifest themselves where newspaper circulations have declined. As traditional news media audiences dwindle, are citizens more likely to ascribe less information to their fellow citizens, particularly those citizens who least like themselves? And, are there any subsequent

² In addition to proximity, we tested for heterogeneous treatment effects by race and ethnicity of respondent. We found no evidence of reliable treatment effects moderated by respondent race or ethnicity.

implications for support for democratic processes, perceptions of political legitimacy, and/or political and social trust? As with most research, we raise more questions than we can answer as the research is limited in several important ways. First, we utilize a blunt instrument of geographic distance. While we believe more precise estimates of distance would add clarity to the findings, we can be certain in the absence of better measures. Second, we are unable to attribute the moderating effect of geographic proximity to perceptions of exposure (or in this case a lack of exposure) or to perceptions of downward social projections. We would argue that the effect is likely a combination of these two factors that bears exploration in future research. New Orleans residents are likely more reliant on the Times-Picayune for news and information and New Orleans residents are likely seen as distinct from residents in outlying communities. Regardless, the results are not a mere reflection of demographic differences: The results presented here hold across social group referents (i.e., race, gender, etc). Third, because the results are rooted in a survey experiment with a sample representative of a major metropolitan area, we can have greater confidence that the results are more generalizable than those obtained within a narrower subject pool (see Druckman and Kam 2011 for a thoughtful discussion of subject pools and inferences from experiments). However, because they are limited to a specific location (New Orleans), we cannot be certain that we would find similar results in different locations. Nonetheless, we would contend that the pattern is likely to replicate itself in areas where an urban or metropolitan population is viewed as distinct from outlying neighborhoods.

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Table 1: Selected Demographics of Survey Participants and Louisiana Residents

Characteristic	Raw Data %	2011 Census Estimates %
Gender		
Male	39%	48%
Female	61%	52%
Race		
White	58%	61%
Black	35%	32%
Other	7%	7%
Education		
Less than High School	5%	16%
High School	21%	30%
Some College	33%	22%
College	40%	32%
Parish		
Jefferson	32%	37%
Orleans	41%	30%
Plaquemines	2%	2%
St. Bernard	2%	3%
St. Charles	4%	4%
St. John the Baptist	2%	4%
St. Tammany	18%	19%
Age		
18-24	6%	13%
25-34	12%	19%
35-44	10%	17%
45-54	20%	20%
55-64	24%	16%
65 and over	28%	16%

Table 2. Parish Seats in the New Orleans Area

Parish	Parish Seat	Distance from New Orleans
Jefferson	Gretna	5.2 mi.
Plaquemines	Pointe a la Hache	48.5 mi.
St. Bernard	Chalmette	8.5 mi.
St. Charles	Hahnville	26.0 mi.
St. John the Baptist	Edgard	39.1 mi.
St. Tammany	Covington	41.3 mi.

Table 3. Third-person Judgments about *Times-Picayune* Schedule Reduction

	β (s.e.)
“Orleans” treatment	0.070 (0.098)
Parish Distance from New Orleans	0.007* (0.003)
“Orleans” treatment \times Distance	-0.010* (0.005)
Perceived effect on self	0.489*** (0.020)
Constant	0.660 (0.085)

N = 1006
F_[4, 1001] = 149.85***
R² = 0.375

Figure 1. Heterogeneous Treatment Effect by Distance from New Orleans

