What ARE they reading? News selections by college students

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Abstract
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Abstract (72 words)

It has been well documented that college students and young adults are infrequent readers of newspapers. But when they do pick up a paper or surf to a news-oriented Web site, what draws their attention? An analysis of more than 1,500 article summaries prepared by college students over a two-month period shows a special interest in news items that the students feel closeness with or attachment toward, either geographically or psychographically.
Introduction

It has become axiomatic that young adults, including college students, do not read newspapers with any regularity. Industry statistics and academic research show two broad, unmistakable trends: (1) that young readers – usually defined either as teens, 18-to-24 year olds, or sometimes both groups together – read the least of any age demographic; and (2) this already weak attraction to the newspaper is getting weaker over time.

For example, in a recent collection of statistics on the industry the Newspaper Association of America puts daily newspaper readership at 37 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds.\(^1\) The Project for Excellence in Journalism’s 2007 State of the News Media report says 35 percent of that age group had read a newspaper during an average week in 2006, down from 38 percent in 2005 and 42 percent in 1999.\(^2\) Mindich calls this a phenomenon of being “tuned out”\(^3\) and Patterson notes that “The newspaper, particularly, has little appeal to young Americans. Two-thirds of teens and young adults more or less ignore its news coverage.”\(^4\)

But while much attention has been focused on this longstanding trend of declining readership levels, close examination of the types of content younger readers do find attractive is largely lacking. Industry coverage tends to focus on analysis of strategies to combat young-reader apathy – such as drawing young readers in with offerings such as special teen-oriented content\(^5\) or tabloids such as Chicago’s Red Eye,\(^6\) or even focusing on the value of classified ads\(^7\) – without looking in detailed ways at what young people are reading. Likewise, little academic research has been done regarding what young readers are paying attention to when they actually do read the paper. This study seeks to fill this gap by analyzing an extensive set of news selections by college students over an eight-week time period for evidence of what types of stories draw their attention and why.

Literature review

The connection between age and newspaper readership has been studied at least since the groundbreaking work of Westley and Severin in the early 1960s, which documented the relationship between readership and several demographic variables, including age and education level. Both of these variables were positively correlated with reading the paper – i.e., those with less education and younger people read less while more-educated individuals and older people read more (up to a point; readership peaked around middle age and declined again among the elderly).\(^8\) Building on this work were researchers such as Schweitzer,\(^9\) who reported on demographic differences (such as education level) between subscribers and non-subscribers among 18-to-24 year-olds; and
Stevenson\textsuperscript{10} and Peiser,\textsuperscript{11} both of whom used cohort analysis to determine that succeeding generations each were reading less than their older counterparts.

Studies specifically of college students have also tended to focus on the frequency-of-reading variable, and often report reading rates far below the industry figures cited earlier. Thurlow and Milo surveyed students on a California campus and found extremely limited readership of the local daily even though there was widespread readership of both the campus paper and a free-distribution alternative weekly that was available on the campus. In their survey, more than half the students never read the local daily paper and only 8.6 percent read it more than twice a week (seven times or more per month).\textsuperscript{12} Bressers and Bergen similarly found that while the campus paper was popular at a large Midwestern university, 70 percent of the students surveyed said they never read the local daily paper. Of the 30 percent who reported that they did look at the local paper, just 13.8 percent of them read it daily.\textsuperscript{13} (Taking 13.8 percent of 30 percent yields an effective daily readership of around 4 percent.) Schlagheck, however, found a different result in a study of another Midwestern campus, where a third of the students reported reading the newspaper either “today” or “yesterday,” and 74 percent reported that they had read the paper at least once in the previous week.\textsuperscript{14}

The conventional wisdom is that young adults, particularly college students, are not picking up the printed version of the paper but are getting news from Internet sources. But Bressers and Bergen found that to not be the case, either. Only 17.3 percent of their sample reported reading online papers other than the campus paper (which in itself had low online readership, which the researchers attributed to its high print readership). Of that 17.3 percent who did look at online papers only 11.6 percent of them – or 2 percent of the total sample – were daily readers of online papers from outside the campus.\textsuperscript{15} Patterson’s report likewise said that in addition to not using the printed newspaper “an absolute majority of teens and young adults are non-users” of the Internet for news consumption.\textsuperscript{16}

While lack of reading frequency among young adults and college students has been extensively documented, less attention has been paid to content preferences among these readership groups. Stone and Boudreau compared content preferences of 18-to-34-year-olds with 35-and-older readers in two surveys nine years apart, and found differences in preference rankings at both points in time. In the more recent of their two survey periods, the younger group reported news about the university in town and local news as tied for their top area of interest, followed by national news, entertainment and state news in third through fifth places.\textsuperscript{17} Schlagheck’s study also investigated content preferences but reported results differently, as percentages of the college-age survey respondents who mentioned particular topics that they looked for in the paper. The top-ranked topics were sports (31%), comics (24%), and classified ads (23%).
Industry data, surprisingly, also has a notable gap in information about the content preferences of this supposedly vital reader demographic. The NAA, for instance, reports content preferences of teens (ages 12 to 17) and the baby boom generation, classified for its purposes in two age groups of 40-49 and 50-59. Leading content preferences among teens include comics, read by 49 percent of respondents in a 2005 survey, as well as sports (42 percent), entertainment (41 percent) and local news (32 percent). Among 40-to 49-year-olds, 86 percent report reading the main news section, 82 percent the local news section, 62 percent entertainment, 59 percent sports and 54 percent business. Numbers for the 50-59 group are comparable, within a couple of percentage points for most of the topics. But this extensive set of NAA industry statistics, which includes other demographics such as readership by Hispanics and African-Americans, does not report on content preferences of the 18-to-39-year-old market segment.

**Methodology**

For this study, news interests of a group of 42 students at a small liberal arts college in the Northeast were assessed through a content analysis of weekly self-reports on news stories the students had read in the prior week. The mean age among 32 of them who reported their ages in a survey done at the end of the semester was 22 years old and the median age was 21. Only three were older than 25: two 26-year-olds and one 50-year-old. (The survey, which was done to collect demographic data and other information about the students’ news-consumption habits, was completed by 40 of the students but several left the age question blank.)

The reports generated by the students were graded class assignments due each week for an introductory journalism course that is a requirement in the college’s communication/journalism program. Thus, while all of the students were communication majors, not all had a deep or specific interest in newspapers or journalism. Many were more interested in other program tracks such as public relations or media production but were in the course simply because it is a part of the major.

For the assignment, the students were directed to write a one-paragraph summary for each of five different articles they had read the previous week, which was to include a short (two- to three-sentence) analysis of the news value of the article. The assignment stipulated that articles should be taken from print newspapers or online sites associated with print newspapers (as opposed to sites such as CNN.com or FoxNews.com). The guidelines required that the articles come from at least three different days of the week and further directed students to avoid sports and entertainment coverage because the main pedagogical goal of the assignment was to get the students to expose themselves regularly to the type of hard-news writing that the course was intended to teach. These reports were collected from 42 students in two different sections of the course, for a total
of approximately 200 individual story reports per week, over a course of eight weeks during September and October 2007. In the end, 1,514 total story reports were collected for analysis.

The database of story reports was content analyzed by coding each report by source, geographical reference and story topic. The four geographical divisions were local, state/region, national and international news. Source categories included the local daily paper, two national newspapers and two other categories representing in-state and out-of-state sources. As the reports were collected for analysis, no distinction in sourcing was made for online vs. hard-copy reading of the news. But in the post-collection survey it was clear that most students gained access to most of their news online. More than 40 percent of the students said their news collection was exclusively done online (n = 17, 42.5% of 40 who answered the survey) while another 35 percent (n = 14) reported a mix of print and online sources but more from online. Only 7.5 percent of students (n = 3) said they collected all of their news in print while another 7.5 percent (n = 3) said they used a mixture of sources but more print than online. Ten percent of the students (n = 4) said they used about an even mix of online and print resources to do their assignments.

The 13 topics were derived from the “story themes” divisions of the massive content analysis done as part of The Readership Institute’s Impact Study of a few years ago. They were:

- Police, crime and court news;
- War and international conflict/politics;
- U.S. national government and politics;
- State/ regional government and politics;
- Local government and politics;
- Business, economy and personal finance;
- Science and technology;
- Health, fitness and medicine;
- Environment and weather;
- Education.
- Accidents/disasters
- Events and activities
- People/human interest news

The data were coded by the principal researcher and an undergraduate student research assistant. Inter-coder reliability was determined by having them both code an overlapping two weeks of the data, or about a quarter of the total story selections. These category ratings were then evaluated with the PRAM computer program, which calculated an average percentage agreement across all coding categories of .796 and a Scott’s pi of .733.

This data-collection method has some limitations, of course, including:
That the sample pool of 42 students is not particularly large;
That the students were specifically directed to ignore two topics that prior research have shown to be most popular among the age group, namely sports and entertainment news;
That many students likely did not report on every news article they read during the week, since the assignment required that they address only five articles;
That, conversely, some students in all likelihood would not have read even the five articles they reported about because the assignment forced them to read the news when they otherwise might not have done so. Indeed, in the semester-ending survey, only 10 percent (n = 4) said they completed the assignment without a change in their news exposure. An additional 40 percent (n = 16) said they “paid a little more attention” to the news because of the assignment, and half of them (n = 20) reported paying “a lot more attention” to the news than they would have in the absence of this assignment – to collect five stories a week. Presumably, these are the utter non-readers described by Mindich, Patterson and others.
These limitations are balanced, however, by the methodology’s ability to create a large database of articles – more than 1,500 of them – reflecting detailed student interests over a sustained period of time. The exclusion of sports and entertainment news has the benefit of focusing the research specifically on students’ hard-news interests, in a more detailed way than prior academic studies or even industry research, which has tended to measure interest in broad, general categories such as “local news.” More voracious readers who had to select just five articles of a myriad they had read most likely selected the most memorable or most interesting ones to write about, so their responses are valuable as indicators of what they favored most among the news choices available to them. Conversely, the “forced” readers who might have read nothing in the absence of the assignment are a category of readers whom newspapers would like to reach, so including their news preferences is valuable also. Finally, the open-ended nature of the school assignment resulted in narrative reports that not only allowed for categorization of story selection by type of content for a quantitative analysis, but also allowed for examination for qualitative data about why students were interested in a particular story or whether they felt some sort of connection with it that drew them into reading it.

Findings

Quantitative analysis

Local news accessed through the local news organization was the most popular type of information reported on by the students, with local police items by far the most
popular single story topic. The aspect of “local-ness” was a prominent one throughout the quantitative and qualitative findings, in fact.

More than half of all the news-story reports (n = 885, 58.5 %) were based on articles from the local newspaper. In that group, 67 percent (n = 600) were locally oriented and the remaining 33 percent (n = 285) were coverage of state, regional, national and international items read through the local outlet. In its print version this paper is a medium-sized (circulation approximately 170,000) seven-day morning operation owned by one of the nation’s major newspaper groups. Like other newspapers of its size, it has a well-established Internet presence that is regularly used to post breaking news, which is then followed up in the print edition.

Of those 600 local stories accessed through the local paper or its Web site, more than a third (n = 213, 35.3 %) were police, court or crime items. Other popular local topics from this source were business and the economy (n = 70, 11.5 %), education (n = 67, 11.1 %) and health and medicine (n = 53, 8.8 %). Local government and politics trailed all of these content categories with 41 citations (6.8 %). (Table 1: Theme by geography.)

After the local daily paper, the next most popular source for news reading was the New York Times, with 13.9 percent of the article citations (n = 210) coming from it. Another national paper, USA Today, was also a popular choice with 9.5 percent of the articles (n = 143) coming from it. Approximately 11.3 percent of the articles (n = 171) came from other daily newspapers around the state, many of them recognizable from the details in the reports as being the students’ hometown papers. An additional 5.2 percent of the articles (n = 79) came from other sources, mostly other large and recognizable papers such as the Washington Post, Miami Herald and Los Angeles Times, while 1.7 percent (n = 26) came from sources that could not be determined. (Table 2: Theme by source)

Overall geography of the stories broke down as follows: 40 percent local (n = 604), 14.9 percent state (n = 226), 33.2 percent national (n = 503), and 11.4 percent international (n = 180). Many of those stories coded as state news were also in some sense “local” because while they were from elsewhere in the state and were reported by other papers from around the state, they were based on articles students had read about hometown events in their hometown papers. (Table 3: Geography by source)

As for story topics, news of police, crime and court activities was not only well-read at the local level, but was popular from other geographical settings as well. Students logged 416 reports of crime, police and court news at all levels, accounting for 27.5 percent of all articles. These included those 213 items coded as local news in the local paper, as well as 61 state and national items from the local paper (274 total from that source), 53 state items reported by other papers around the state (which, again, in some
cases were students reading about hometown incidents in their hometown papers), and 89 national-level crime stories from all remaining sources. (Table 2: Theme by source)

After police and crime news, the next-most-popular topics students reported on were international conflict and politics (n = 153; 10.1 % of all reports), national government and politics (n = 151; 10.0 %), business and economic news (n = 137, 9 %), health and medical news (n = 130; 8.6 %), and educational news (n = 111; 7.3 %). Students showed a greater interest in local educational happenings – including, of course, news of their own college and others in the area – than education coverage from other places (local educational stories n = 67, or 60 % of all educational articles) but less of an interest in local health news as compared with reports from other locales (local health news n = 53, or 40.7 % of all health reports). Business news was about evenly split, with 70 reports (51.1 %) of a local nature and 67 (48.9 %) non-local. (Table 1: Theme by geography)

**Qualitative analysis**

In reading through the student reports of stories selected, it became clear that many times a reader was drawn to a story because of some type of personal connection that transcended interest in the content for intrinsic reasons. (An example of what is meant by “intrinsic” to the content would be selecting an election story with a rationale of wanting to know more about the candidates, or selecting a story about the Iraq war simply because it’s an important topic to know about.) To evaluate some of these personal connections, the reports were subjected to a qualitative content analysis seeking out descriptions of personal tie-ins with the goal of categorizing them among a few broad themes. The themes that emerged were:

- Geography, either a direct connection to the locale of a story in the local area or interest in a story from elsewhere because it was the reader’s hometown.
- Personal characteristics or experiences reflected in the story topic.
- Personally knowing someone involved in the story or event, or someone in a similar circumstance.
- News about college students or with an impact on college students.

**Location, location.** Proximity is one of the classic characteristics of news value that every introductory journalism text describes, and personal connections to the locale of a story were regularly displayed in student descriptions of stories they selected. These took the form of such aspects as living near the neighborhood where a murder took, shopping at a plaza that was about to be redeveloped, or expressing “hometown pride” in a report about a harvest festival in a small community. Several students selected articles at various times involving businesses and industries in their hometowns, such as a strike
at an auto-parts factory in a city about 70 miles away. In a story about an accident on a lake that involved a boat exploding, a student who lives nearby wrote “this article is significant to me because I heard the explosion and there have been a lot of boat-related accidents on [this] lake in the past year.” Another student who selected a story about the plans in Tuscaloosa, Ala., to re-segregate schools said it was meaningful to her because she grew up in Birmingham, Ala. And when the inspection of a local bridge (similar to the one that had collapsed in Minneapolis a few weeks earlier) found some minor deficiencies, a student’s report on an article about the inspection noted that “I use this bridge almost every day, so its safety concerns are also a concern to me.”

**It’s about me.** Hobbies, entertainment interests, vacation memories and even medical conditions factored into why some stories appealed to readers. A hunter selected a story about the state’s deer census; a dog-lover who selected a story about an arrest for cruelty to dogs wrote that “the article caught my eye because it was about an animal. I have a soft spot for dogs.” Similarly, a story about a fund-raiser at an area animal shelter was included by one student because she had adopted her cat from that shelter. When another college in the community was sued by a student with diagnosed depression so that her psychological helper dog could live with her in the dorm, it drew the attention of a student who admitted in the write-up that he also has the condition. “I don’t have it that bad,” he wrote, “but it’s interesting to see how someone else copes with it.” A story about the traveling version of the Vietnam memorial coming into the community prompted a student to recall seeing the real thing in Washington, D.C., while a news report on the death of a member of the famous Von Trapp singing family elicited a reminiscence of a family vacation to Vermont when the student’s father pointed out the house where “the family from the Sound of Music” lived. A student took special interest in a report about suicide rates among 10- to 14-year-old girls both because she has a 10-year-old daughter and because she had two friends who committed suicide at young ages. The same student in another week selected an article about American girls reaching puberty at younger ages, again because of her two daughters. A student selected a story about campaign donations by music stars Faith Hill and Tim McGraw because, she wrote, “country music is my favorite genre and it’s interesting to see where they stand on the political spectrum.”

**“My friend’s friend …”** Knowing someone who is in the news is, of course, a powerful reason to be interested in a story, and one that was cited with some frequency in the reports. (One student even included the “society-page” write-up of her sister’s wedding, which included the name of student herself as a bridesmaid!) Stories about suicide, autism, cancer and even a cancer-research fund-raiser all were included with notations that the reader knew someone affected by the situation; stories about Iraq and
Afghanistan were selected by students with friends or family in the military. A student who selected a story about an area Irish music festival noted that she was of Irish ancestry, and also that the headlining act at the festival was a pair of brothers who happen to be her uncles. When a local gymnastics teacher was arrested and accused of sexually abusing students from his school, one student reported that she knew of him because her high school cheerleading team had held some practices at the gym he operated. A story about how local police handled an alleged hate-crime incident involving an attack on some gay individuals drew one student’s interest “because my friend was a victim in this event and I had a firsthand account from him.” When four teens died in a car crash, the story made it into one student’s report because “one of my rugby teammates was very good friends with two of the kids.” Two other students selected the same story because something similar had happened to high-school classmates. One wrote that it “was a nightmare” for the school and the other recalled that “I will never forget the feeling when I saw it on the news. My heart just sank. My town was so quiet and empty for a few weeks after.”

**Talkin’ ‘bout my generation.** Articles about college students and things that have a particular impact on college students also were popular selections. The previously mentioned situation involving a psychological helper dog at another college in the area was included by several students on different occasions (it was an ongoing story with numerous follow-ups during the time of the project). Tragedies that befell other students – including seven students who died in a fire in South Carolina and the death of a student at a school approximately 60 miles away who was killed in a hit-and-run accident on an interstate highway near the school – also were included by multiple students in their reports. Various stories involving financial aid regulations and student loans also were included. So were tuition hikes in the state system, even though their school is a private one not affected by the decision. One such report noted that “I wanted to read this article because being a college student anything that deals with tuition increase is relevant to me.” When their school did make the news because a new building was dedicated, several students made it a selection; as one noted “any time I see [our school] in the news I read that article.”

**Discussion**

This project entailed the collection and review of more than 1,500 self-selected articles by college students over an eight-week period to ascertain what news drew their attention. One thing that was apparent from both the quantitative and qualitative reviews was the strong influence of locality on news selection. Even though 75 percent of students reported that they did their news collection completely or mostly through the
Internet, meaning they could have picked articles from any newspaper they wanted, the local paper was the overwhelmingly preferred source, accounting for nearly 60 percent of all news selections submitted. When combined with other papers from around the state, which many students appeared to be reading because they came from the communities where those papers are published, approximately 70 percent of the news came from local sources. The numerous times that a location-based connection to the story was highlighted in the reports further underscores the importance of “place” in attracting these readers to particular stories.

This local interest, however, did not extend to government and politics. State/regional and local government and political stories accounted for a miniscule proportion of the stories selected by students, at slightly more than 5 percent for the two categories combined. (State/regional = 2.64%, n = 40; local = 2.77 %, n = 42). Somewhat more interest was demonstrated toward international conflicts and politics (10.1 %, n = 153) and national government and politics (10.0 %, n = 151). Still, all political categories combined barely reached 25 percent of the total stories submitted (n = 486). In this finding, the research backs up the conclusions reached by Patterson, Mindich and others that the contemporary college generation is not strongly drawn to the type of news that citizens should follow or pay attention to for effective participation in self governance,21 particularly at the local level. The numbers are a bit more hopeful for larger-scope political news which had higher (but still not overwhelmingly strong) readership; slightly more than 20 percent (n = 304) of the total selections covered international or national politics and conflicts.

The students, on the other hand, did demonstrate interest in another area of classic public affairs coverage – that of police, crime and courts. Almost 28 percent of all selections came from that category. And when that category is combined with one for disasters and accidents – which is, for instance, where the previously mentioned stories involving deaths to college students in a South Carolina fire and an interstate hit-and-run were coded – almost one third of the total selections (31.4 %, n = 476) are accounted for. Interest in this area may have been increased by several high-profile incidents at both the local and national level during two months of data collection. In the college’s home community, two murder cases with unusual circumstances less than a week apart right in the middle of the data-collection period garnered widespread local media coverage; at the national level events that received extensive attention included the fatal shootings at Delaware State University and O.J. Simpson’s arrest for armed robbery in Las Vegas. All of these events were subjects of ongoing coverage across multiple weeks, and many students selected related stories for their weekly reports multiple times as well.
Conclusion

Overall, the findings of this research indicate that student readers are drawn to news with which they have a “connection,” something that emerged vividly in many cases in the qualitative analysis but also is seen in the quantitative analysis through the importance attached to local news in general and news about public safety and police in particular. Student news consumers care about the safety of bridges they drive across and whether groundwater is polluted in the town where they live. When a middle-aged woman is beaten to death by a mob or an activist who had worked to improve the inner-city community is killed by two men mugging him during his walk home from a community meeting – the two high-profile murders mentioned earlier – students are drawn to the news because of what it means for the safety of the community they are living in, whether they are natives of the area or not. They go to the Web sites of their hometown papers to read (and include in school assignments) stories about police news back home for the same reason.

Things to which students find least attraction are those that are most remote, either figuratively – meaning only remotely relevant to their lives, like politics – or literally. On the other hand, a student who grew up in Alabama cares about what happened in Tuscaloosa; a student who once lived in New York City and plans to move back there after graduation selected several Manhattan-based stories. Many students were drawn to reports about other college students and to news that affects college students generally even when it didn’t affect them personally (e.g. tuition hikes at colleges they don’t attend).

In sum, news items that draw the attention of today’s generation of college students are ones that the students feel closeness with or attachment toward, a finding that in many ways is not surprising given that the current generation of students has been labeled as self-absorbed and even narcissistic. Their willingness to largely ignore the newspaper may be rooted in the fact that they find little content in it to which they have such attachments. In that sense this research echoes and reinforces the results of an experiment that showed young readers had greater interest in a newspaper that was built around their experiences than they showed toward traditional presentations.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide prescriptive conclusions – things newspapers either can or should be doing to offer news that readers from this age group might “connect with” and therefore find more appealing. But the findings offer a perspective that may provide a useful starting point in searching for such prescriptions.
### Table 1: Theme by Geography

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Local</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Nation</th>
<th>Int'l</th>
<th>Undet</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Row %</th>
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<td>113</td>
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<td>135</td>
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<td>153</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
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### Table 2: Theme by Source

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<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Local Paper</th>
<th>N.Y. Times</th>
<th>USA Today</th>
<th>Other in-state</th>
<th>Other non-state</th>
<th>Undet</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Row %</th>
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<td>Police/crime/courts</td>
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<td>26</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>15</td>
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<td>416</td>
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<td>52</td>
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<td>22</td>
<td>27</td>
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<td>153</td>
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### Table 3: Geography by Source

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<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>604</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>503</td>
<td>180</td>
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<td>11.9</td>
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References


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