

## WHAT "MISSING THE NEWSPAPER" MEANS

*By Bernard Berelson*



### I. INTRODUCTION

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IN THE late afternoon of Saturday, June 30, 1945, the deliverymen of eight major New York City newspapers went on strike. They remained on strike for over two weeks, and during that period most New Yorkers were effectively deprived of their regular newspaper reading. They were able to buy the newspaper *PM* and a few minor and specialized papers at newsstands, and they could buy copies over the counter at central offices of some newspapers. But the favorite papers of most readers were simply inaccessible to them for seventeen days.

These unusual circumstances presented a good opportunity for various interested parties—advertisers, newspaper publishers, radio executives, social scientists—to gauge public attitudes toward the newspaper, and at least three general polls of opinion were independently conducted during the strike. Some if not all findings of two polls have been made public, one by the Elmo Roper agency and the other by Fact Finders Associates, Inc. This article is a report on the third, an exploratory survey conducted for the Bureau of Applied Social Research, Columbia University.

According to the published findings, the Roper and Fact Finder organizations directed their efforts to determining what people had done in order to keep up with the news, what parts of the newspaper they particularly missed, and how much they missed the newspapers as the strike went on. On no specific question are their results strictly

comparable, but in three ways they aimed at the same general attitudes or behavior, although in quite different ways. Both agencies attempted to get at the nature of the substitute for the newspaper, and in both cases respondents stressed that they listened to news broadcasts over the radio. Both attempted, in quite different ways, to discover what parts of the newspaper were particularly missed, and in both cases respondents stressed news (national, local, and war news) and advertising. Finally, both attempted to get at the degree to which the newspapers were actually missed, and in both cases respondents indicated that they missed the papers intensely.

Because the questions used by the two polling agencies differed greatly, the results are not strictly comparable. Furthermore, neither poll is able to interpret its data, which consist altogether of "surface facts," relevant only to the specific question at hand. Saying that one "misses the newspaper," or a part of it, can cover a variety of psychological reactions. What does "missing the newspaper" mean? Why do people miss it? Do they really miss the parts they claim, to the extent they claim? Why do they miss one part as against another? The Roper and Fact Finders polls bring little or nothing to bear on such questions, which are at the core of the basic problem, namely, to understand the function of the modern newspaper for its readers. Neither poll succeeds in getting at the more complex attitudinal matters operating in the situation.<sup>1</sup>

It was to attack this problem that the present study was conducted. At the end of the first week of the strike, the Bureau of Applied Social Research of Columbia University sponsored a quite different kind of study of people's reactions to the loss of their newspapers. Where the Roper and Fact Finders surveys were extensive, the Bureau's was intensive, designed to secure psychological insight in order to determine just what not having the newspaper meant to people. It is an axiom in social research, of course, that such studies can most readily be done during a crisis period like that represented by the newspaper strike. People are not only more conscious of what the newspaper means to them during such a "shock" period than they are under

<sup>1</sup>On the necessity of "probes" to elicit the real "meaning" of straight replies, see Hadley Cantril and Research Associates, *Gauging Public Opinion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944). "Part One. Problems Involved in Setting the Issues."

normal conditions, but they also find it easier to be articulate about such matters.<sup>2</sup>

Accordingly, the Bureau conducted a small number (60) of intensive interviews.<sup>3</sup> The sample, stratified by rental areas in Manhattan, provided a good distribution by economic status although it was high in education. No attempt was made to secure statistically reliable data on poll questions of the Roper or Fact Finders sort (although for a few similar questions, such as what was missed in the papers, the results are the same as those from the Roper survey). Instead, the Bureau's interviews were designed to supply so-called qualitative data on the role of the newspaper for its readers, as that became evident at such a time. The results are not offered as scientific proof, but rather as a set of useful hypotheses.

In brief, then, the two polls on the subject present certain "surface facts," without knowing just what they mean. This study tries to suggest what "missing the newspaper" really means. Let us start with people's stereotyped responses to questions about missing the newspaper.

<sup>2</sup>For an experiment designed to test the intensity of news interest of people relying primarily on newspapers and of those relying primarily on radio, see Paul F. Lazarsfeld, *Radio and the Printed Page* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1940), pp. 246-50. In this experiment, each group of respondents was deprived of its main source of news and their reactions to this situation were studied.

<sup>3</sup>A copy of the questionnaire appears in Appendix F, p. 309.



## II. THE ROLE OF THE NEWSPAPER: WHAT PEOPLE SAY

BECAUSE of people's inclination to produce accepted slogans in answer to certain poll questions, there is always the danger that verbal response and actual behavior may not correspond. This danger was confirmed here. Intensive follow-up interviewing of the respondents demonstrated that practically everyone *pays tribute* to the value of the newspaper as a source of "serious" information about and interpretation of the world of public affairs, although not everyone uses it in that way. During the interview our respondents were asked whether they thought "it is very important that people read the newspapers or not." Almost everyone answered with a strong "Yes," and went on to specify that the importance of the newspaper lay in its informational and educational aspects. For most of the respondents, this specification referred to the newspaper as a source of news, narrowly defined, on public affairs.

However, not nearly so many people use the newspaper for this approved purpose, as several previous reading and information studies have shown. The general tribute without supporting behavior was evident in this study as well. When the respondents were given the opportunity to say spontaneously why they missed reading their regular newspapers, only a very few named a specific "serious" news event of the period (such as the Far Eastern war or the British elections) whereas many more answered with some variant of the "to-keep-informed" cliché or named another characteristic of the newspaper (e.g., its departmental features).

At another point in the interview, respondents were asked directly, "What news stories or events which happened last week (i.e., before

the strike) did you particularly miss not being able to follow up?" Almost half the respondents were unable to name any such story or event whereas others named such non-"serious" news stories as the then-current Stevens murder case. About a third of the respondents did cite a "serious" news event, most of them the Far Eastern war. Furthermore, directly following this question, the respondents were asked which of a list of six front-page stories of the week before they had missed "not being able to follow up in your regular paper."<sup>4</sup> Here, too, only a little more than a third of the respondents said that they had missed reading about the average serious event in this list. Thus, although almost all the respondents speak highly of the newspaper's value as a channel of "serious" information, only about a third of them seemed to miss it for that purpose.<sup>5</sup>

In brief, there seems to be an important difference between the respondents' *general* protestations of interest in the newspaper's "serious" purposes and their *specific* desires and practices in newspaper reading. The respondents' feeling that the newspaper "keeps me informed about the world" seems to be rather diffuse and amorphous, and not often attached to concrete news events of a "serious" nature. Again, for example, take the answer to our question, "Now that you don't read your regular newspaper, do you feel you know what's going on in the world?" Fully two-thirds of the respondents felt that they did not know what was going on although, as we have

<sup>4</sup> The six events were: Changes in President Truman's cabinet; developments in the Far Eastern War; the case of Mrs. Stevens; diplomatic events after the San Francisco Conference; the domestic food situation; the Langford murder case.

It should be mentioned in this connection that the strike occurred during a relatively quiescent news period. And this may have lowered the extent to which people missed reading about specific events.

<sup>5</sup> We attempted to get at the effect of the loss of newspapers upon the informational level of the respondents by asking them to identify a series of important news stories, pre-strike and intra-strike. On the whole, they were just as well informed about the intra-strike events as about the pre-strike events. However, this is inconclusive because it does not take into account either the fullness of information about such important stories or the extent of information about middle-sized and small news stories which do not get such extensive radio coverage.

Parenthetically, it is noteworthy that apparently no rumors gained currency during the newspaper strike. We tried to investigate the circulation of rumors by asking the respondents, "Have you heard from other people about any events or happenings which you haven't heard over the radio or read about?" This question drew a complete blank. Apparently access to the radio nipped any possible rumors in the bud.

seen, only about half that many had any notion of what in the world they wanted more information about. To miss the newspaper for its "serious" news value seems to be the accepted if not the automatic thing to say.

But this does not mean that the newspapers were not genuinely missed by their readers. There were many spontaneous mentions of the intensity with which the respondents missed their papers, and several of those who missed them a good deal at the beginning of the strike felt even more strongly about it as the week wore on. The question is, *why* did people miss the newspaper so keenly. However, let us first review the several uses to which readers typically put the newspaper. This is the next step in our effort to put content into a check mark on a poll questionnaire by suggesting what "missing the newspaper" really means.



### III. THE USES OF THE NEWSPAPER

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THE modern newspaper plays several roles for its readers. From the analysis of our intensive interviews, we have attempted to construct a typology of such roles, or functions, of the newspaper. Obviously the types enumerated here, while discrete, are not necessarily mutually exclusive for any one newspaper reader. Undoubtedly, different people read different parts of the newspaper for different reasons at different times. The major problem is to determine the conditions under which the newspaper fulfills such functions as those developed here—and perhaps others—for different kinds of people. In this connection, the special value of a small group of detailed interviews lies in the identification of hypotheses which can then be tested, one way or the other, by less intensive methods. In other words, such "qualitative" interviews suggest the proper questions which can then be asked, in lesser detail, for "quantitative" verification.

In this section we shall mention briefly several immediate uses of the newspaper which we found in the interviews. The illustrative quotations are typical of those appearing in the interviews. Some of these uses correspond to acknowledged purposes of the newspaper, others do not.

#### FOR INFORMATION ABOUT AND INTERPRETATION OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS

There is a core of readers who find the newspaper indispensable as a source of information about and interpretation of the "serious" world of public affairs. It is important to stress, in this connection,

that this interest is not limited simply to the provision of full information about news events. Many people are also concerned with commentaries on current events from both editorials and columnists, which they use as a touchstone for their own opinions. For example:

I don't have the details now, I just have the result. It's almost like reading the headlines of the newspaper without following up the story. I miss the detail and the explanation of events leading up to the news. I like to get the story behind and the development leading up to—it's more penetrating . . . I like to analyze for myself why things do happen and after getting the writers' opinions of it from the various newspapers, in which each one portrays the story in a different manner, I have a broader view and a more detailed view when I formulate my own opinion.

#### AS A TOOL FOR DAILY LIVING

For some people the newspaper was missed because it was used as direct aid in everyday life. The respondents were asked, "Since you haven't been able to get your regular newspaper, have you found some things that you can't do as well without it?" Fully half of them indicated that they had been handicapped in some way. Many people found it difficult if not impossible to follow radio programs without the radio log published in the newspaper. Others who might have gone to a motion picture did not like the bother of phoning or walking around to find out what was on. A few business people missed such merchandising comments as the arrival of buyers; others were concerned about financial and stock exchange information. Several women interested in shopping were handicapped by the lack of advertisements. A few close relatives of returning soldiers were afraid they would miss details of embarkation news. A couple of women who regularly followed the obituary notices were afraid that acquaintances might die without their knowing it. Finally, there were scattered mentions of recipes and fashion notes and even the daily weather forecast in this connection. In short, there are many ways in which many people use the newspaper as a daily instrument or guide and it was missed accordingly.

#### FOR RESPITE

Reading has respite value whenever it provides a vacation from personal care by transporting the reader outside his own immediate world. There is no question but that many newspaper stories with which people readily identify supply this "escape" function satisfactorily for large numbers of people. Exhibit A in this connection is the comics, which people report liking for their story and suspense value. Beyond this, however, the newspaper is able to refresh readers in other ways, by supplying them with appropriate psychological relaxation. The newspaper is particularly effective in fulfilling this need for relief from the boredom and dullness of everyday life not only because of the variety and richness of its "human interest" content or because of its inexpensive accessibility. In addition, the newspaper is a good vehicle for this purpose because it satisfies this need without much cost to the reader's conscience; the prestige value of the newspaper as an institution for "enlightening the citizenry" carries over to buttress this and other uses of the newspapers.

When you read it takes your mind off other things.

It [the strike] gave me nothing to do in between my work except to crochet, which does not take my mind off myself as much as reading.

I didn't know what to do with myself. I was depressed. There was nothing to read and pass the time. I got a paper on Wednesday and felt a whole lot better.

#### FOR SOCIAL PRESTIGE

Another group of readers seem to use the newspaper because it enables them to appear informed in social gatherings. Thus the newspaper has conversational value. Readers not only can learn what has happened and then report it to their associates but can also find opinions and interpretations for use in discussions on public affairs. It is obvious how this use of the newspaper serves to increase the reader's prestige among his fellows. It is not that the newspapers' content is

good in itself but rather that it is good *for* something—and that something is putting up an impressive front to one's associates.

You have to read in order to keep up a conversation with other people. It is embarrassing not to know if you are in company who discuss the news.

Not that I am uneasy about what's happening but I like to know about the country so when people ask you questions you don't feel dumb and silly.

It makes me furious, absolutely furious, because I don't know what's going on and all my friends who are getting the papers do know.

#### FOR SOCIAL CONTACT

The newspaper's human interest stories, personal advice column, gossip columns, and the like provide some readers with more than relief from their own cares and routine. They also supply guides to the prevailing morality, insight into private lives as well as opportunity for vicarious participation in them, and indirect "personal" contact with distinguished people.

One explanation of the role of the human interest story is that it provides a basis of common experience against which urban readers can check their own moral judgments and behavior (the "ethicizing" effect).<sup>6</sup> The requirements for such stories are that they shall be understandable in terms of the reader's own experience and that they shall be "interesting." (One respondent who read the tabloids although he disliked them remarked that "the *Times* isn't written interestingly enough" and that "PM is the most honest paper but should have more interesting stuff like the *Journal-American*.") From the comments of a few respondents, it appears that the human interest stories and the gossip columnists do serve something of this purpose. In fact, a few respondents indicated that they missed the newspaper because, so to speak, some of their friends resided in its pages. A few women who read the gossip columnists and the society pages inten-

<sup>6</sup> An extensive speculative analysis of this role of the newspaper's human interest story for the urban masses is reported by Helen MacGill Hughes, *News and the Human Interest Story* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1940).

sively seemed to take an intimate personal interest in their favorite newspaper characters and to think of them in congenial terms.

I miss Doris Blake's column [advice to the lovelorn]. You get the opinions in Doris Blake of the girls and boys and I find that exciting. It's like true life—a girl expressing her life. It's like everyday happenings.

I always used to condemn the mud-slinging in the *News* and *Mirror*, and many times I swore I'd never buy them if it weren't for the features I like. But just the other day I said to a friend of mine that I'd never, never talk like that about the papers again, because now I know what it is to be without them.

I missed them [favorite columnists] for their information, their news, their interviews with various people, their interaction with people. It is interesting to know people's reactions. If you read the background of individuals, you can analyze them a little better.

I like the *Daily News*. It's called the "scandal sheet" but I like it. It was the first paper that I bought when I came to New York. When you live in a small town and read the papers you know everybody who's mentioned in the papers. The *News* is the closest thing to them. The pictures are interesting and it makes up for the lack of knowing people . . . You get used to certain people; they become part of your family, like Dorothy Kilgallen. That lost feeling of being without papers increases as the days go on. You see, I don't socialize much. There's no place that you can get Dorothy Kilgallen—chit-chat and gossip and Louella Parsons with Hollywood news.



#### IV. THE DESIRABILITY OF READING

THIS brief review of some uses to which readers typically put the modern newspaper serves to introduce the following sections, in which we shall try to elaborate other (nonconscious) psychological reasons for the genuine interest in newspaper reading. Here again, we shall use material from our intensive interviews as illustrations.

There is some evidence in our interviews to indicate that *reading itself* regardless of content is a strongly and pleasurably motivated act in urban society. The major substitute followed during the period ordinarily given to the reading of the newspaper was some *other* form of reading, of a non-"news" character.<sup>7</sup> For the most part, the content of such substitute reading seemed to be quite immaterial to the respondents, so long as "at least it was something to read":

- I read some old magazines I had.
- I read whatever came to hand—books and magazines.
- I read up on all the old magazines around the house.
- I read whatever was lying around and others I hadn't had a chance to read before.
- I went back to older magazines and read some parts I didn't usually read.

From such quotations one gets an impression that reading itself, rather than *what* is read, provides an important gratification for the

<sup>7</sup>The data on substitute activities were secured by asking the respondent to reconstruct the *first* occasion on which he missed his regular newspaper, with these questions:

"How did you feel the very first time you weren't able to get your paper(s)?"

"When was it that you first missed the newspaper?"

"What did you do then instead of reading the paper?"

Such questions not only help the respondent to recall his feelings and actions but also locate them in concrete behavior. We followed up by asking about substitute activities for the rest of the week.

respondents. The fact is, of course, that the act of reading carries a prestige component in American life which has not been completely countered by the rise of "propaganditis." After all, important childhood rewards, from both parent and teacher, are occasioned by success in reading and thus the act has extremely pleasant associations. Not only do the people of this country support libraries to promote the practice of reading; they also give considerable deference to the "well-read" man. In fact, the act of reading is connected with such approved symbols as "education," "good literature," "the full man," "intellectuality," and thus takes on its own aura of respectability and value.<sup>8</sup> And largely because of this aura, it is "better" to read something, anything, than to do nothing. For example, an elderly salesman told us:

Life is more monotonous without the paper. I didn't know what to do with myself. There was nothing to do to pass the time. It just doesn't work, nothing to pass the time.

One might speculate that in addition to the apparent desire of such people not to be left alone with their thoughts—in itself another gratification of reading to which we shall return—the Puritan ethic is at work in such cases. That is, such people may feel that it is some-

<sup>8</sup>The idea of reading as a nonconscious pleasurable activity can be pushed one step further in our data. There are a few references in psychoanalytic literature which associate reading with oral activity. The fullest development of this hypothesis appears in an article by James Strachey, "Some Unconscious Factors in Reading," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, XI (1930), 322-31, which deals with some oral associations with reading, some possible oral origins of the associations, and some unconscious functions of reading. Similar references appear in Edward Glover, "Notes on Oral Character Formation," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, VI (1925), 139. Some notes on the association between sucking activity and eye attention in the first few months of life appear in Margaret A. Ribble, *The Rights of Infants: Early Psychological Needs and Their Satisfaction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), p. 29. In view of this hypothetical background, it is worth noting that one group of responses in the interviews seems to illustrate this notion. Occasionally, in their spontaneous answers to general questions about missing the newspapers, the respondents used a figure of speech in describing how much they missed the newspaper. In almost every such case, the figure was an oral one: "A glass of water . . . a cup of coffee . . . smoking . . . an appetizer to dinner (radio to the newspaper) . . . thirsty for news . . . I felt as though someone had taken candy away from me just as I was going to put it in my mouth." While these remarks are of course not conclusive, they do suggest that the act of reading may serve some persons as a socially acceptable source of oral pleasure. Thus reading material may serve the function of a pacifier for adults.

X how immoral to "waste" time and that this does not occur if one reads something, because of the "worthwhileness" of reading. In short, in explaining why people missed their regular newspapers, one must start by noting that the act of reading itself provides certain basic satisfaction, *without primary regard for the content of the reading matter.*



## V. ANOTHER USE OF THE NEWSPAPER

WITHIN this context, what of the newspaper? Of the major sources of reading matter, the newspaper is the most accessible. It is also cheap and its contents can be conveniently taken in capsules (unlike the lengthier reading units in magazines and books). All in all, the newspaper is the most readily available and most easily consumed source of whatever gratifications derive from reading itself. In addition, there are some other general bases for the *intensity* with which people missed the newspaper.

References by several people to "not knowing what's going on" and to "feeling completely lost" illustrate the sort of *insecurity* of the respondent which was intensified by the loss of the newspaper:

I am like a fish out of water . . . I am lost and nervous. I'm ashamed to admit it.

I feel awfully lost. I like the feeling of being in touch with the world at large.

If I don't know what's going on next door, it hurts me. It's like being in jail not to have a paper.

You feel put out and isolated from the rest of the world.

It practically means isolation. We're at a loss without our paper.

In some way, apparently, the newspaper represented something like a safeguard and gave the respondents an assurance with which to counter the feelings of insecurity and anomie pervasive in modern society.

This need for the newspaper is further documented by references to the *ritualistic and near-compulsive character* of newspaper reading. Many people read their newspapers at a particular time of the day and as a secondary activity, while they are engaged in doing some-



thing else, such as eating, traveling to work, etc. Being deprived of the time-filler made the void especially noticeable and especially effective. At least half the respondents referred to the habit nature of the newspaper: "It's a habit . . . when you're used to something, you miss it . . . I had gotten used to read it at certain times . . . It's been a habit of mine for several years . . . You can't understand it not being there any more because you took it for granted . . . The habit's so strong . . . It's just a habit and it's hard to break it . . ." Some respondents used even stronger terms:

Something is missing in my life.

I am suffering! Seriously! I could not sleep, I missed it so.

There's a place in anyone's life for that, whether they're busy or not.

I sat around in the subway, staring, feeling out of place.

The strength of this near-compulsion to read the newspaper was illustrated in other ways. Such diverse newspapers as the tabloid *News* and the *Times* sold thousands of copies daily over the counter at their central offices. One respondent "went from stand to stand until I decided that it was just no use trying to get one." Another walked ten blocks looking for a paper; another went to her newsstand every night during the first week of the strike, hoping to get a paper. One young man reread out-of-date newspapers more thoroughly, "as a resort." Still other respondents admitted to reading the paper regularly even though they believed that they could spend their time more profitably:

It replaces good literature.

I usually spend my spare time reading the papers and put off reading books and studying languages or something that would be better for me . . . [Most of the paper] is just escape trash, except possibly the classified ads and I'm beginning to waste time reading them now, too, when there's no reason for it, just habit.

In this connection, the notion that knowledge is power sometimes appears. One man reported that he felt uneasy "because I don't know what I am missing—and when I don't know I worry." A few people even seemed to suggest that their being informed about the world had something to do with the control of it. A private secretary, for

example, recognizing that she was "just a little cog in the wheel," remarked sadly that she "felt cut off" but that "things go on whether you know about it or not." Presumably, the regular contact with the world through the columns of the newspaper gave this person the feeling that she was participating in the running of the world. But when the newspaper was withdrawn, she realized that her little contribution was not being missed.

This sort of analysis throws a new light on the fact that about twice as many people missed the newspaper *more* as this week went on than missed it less. For such people, the absence of the daily ritual was only intensified as the week wore on. Something that had filled a place in their lives was gone, and the adjustment to the new state of affairs was difficult to make. They missed the newspaper in the same sense that they would have missed any other instrument around which they had built a daily routine.

Only a few respondents gave an affirmative answer to our question, "Are there any reasons why you were relieved at not having a newspaper?" But even they revealed the near-compulsive nature of newspaper reading. In some cases the fascinating attraction of "illicit" content seemed to constitute the compelling factor, e.g., in the case of the middle-aged housewife who reported:

It was rather a relief not to have my nerves upset by stories of murders, rape, divorce, and the war . . . I think I'd go out more [without the newspapers] which would be good for me. Papers and their news can upset my attitude for the whole day—one gruesome tale after the other. My nerves would be better without the paper.

The typical scrupulousness of the compulsive character is apparent in this case of a middle-aged waiter who went out of his way to read political comment with which he strongly disagreed:

I hate the policy of the *Mirror* [his only newspaper] . . . the editorial writer and also the columnist DeCasseres. It's a pleasure not to read him . . . I didn't have an opportunity of disagreeing with Winchell.

In still other cases, the compulsion resembled an atonement for guilt feelings about nonparticipation in the war; the comments of two women respondents suggest that they had forced themselves to read the war news, as the least they could do in prosecuting the war:

Under the stress and strain of wartime conditions, my health was beginning to fail and I enjoyed being able to relax a little.

I've been reading war news so much, I've had enough of it.

A young housewife felt that it was her duty to follow the developments of the war "for the boys—the spirit of it." And such respondents were gratified at the newspaper strike because it provided them with a morally acceptable justification for not reading the newspaper, as they felt compelled to do. Once the matter was taken out of their hands they were relieved.



## VI. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

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IN THIS article we have attempted to elaborate and "deepen" the answers to typical poll questions applied to a complex set of acts and feelings. We have tried to go beyond the general protestations of the newspaper's indispensability and seek out some basic reader-gratifications which the newspaper supplies. In doing so, we have noted certain typical uses of the modern newspaper—both "rational" (like the provision of news and information) and non-"rational" (like the provision of social contacts and, indirectly, social prestige). In addition, however, we have hypothesized that reading has value per se in our society, value in which the newspaper shares as the most convenient supplier of reading matter. In addition, the newspaper is missed because it serves as a (non-"rational") source of security in a disturbing world and, finally, because the reading of the newspaper has become a ceremonial or ritualistic or near-compulsive act for many people. In this way, we have progressively tried to define, in psychological and sociological terms, what missing the newspaper really means.

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