

# A Newspaper Without News

*Taiwan's Min Shun Bao is the only daily on the island that carries no hard news. Its features try to appeal to too varied an audience, this study shows.*

► Newspaper readership studies have clearly documented reader interest in features.<sup>1</sup> There is even the suggestion that features might be perceived as more important than news. However, relatively little has been done to find out what might happen if the news is absent from a newspaper, or how people perceive a newspaper with nothing but features. The case of *Min Shun Bao (MSB)*, or the *People's Living Daily* might provide some insights into this question.

*Min Shun Bao* is the only paper of its kind in Taiwan. It has no editorial section and does not carry straight news reports except for unusually important events, such as the breaking of diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Taiwan. Its major emphasis is on "diversion," including coverage of gossip and the entertainment world. It also carries articles on medicine, health care, modern living, and art and has a children's page. Miscellaneous items include crossword puzzles, weather reports, television schedules and advertisements. Occasionally, the paper sponsors workshops and gatherings such as an amateur photographers' day or seminar for potential tourists partly as service to the readers and partly as promotion.

Now the fourth newspaper published by the United Daily News, Inc., *MSB* began

as the feature section of the *United Daily News*, one of the most important dailies in Taiwan. It became a separate daily publication as a result of restrictions placed on the number of pages allowed to a newspaper<sup>2</sup> due to a shortage of newsprint. After the corporation bought the publication license of a less successful paper, *MSB* emerged as an independent paper with two distinct goals: entertainment and promotion of "quality modern living." Its motto, "the second paper in your home," indicates the intent of the publisher.

The paper started with a few distinct advantages. Due to solid financial backing, *MSB* was able to attract a group of highly qualified journalists as working staff. Advertising revenue was seldom a problem, since the company had a "package deal" which favored advertisers who patronized *MSB* as well as other company publications. Nonetheless, *MSB* had a difficult time establishing itself, as is indicated by its unstable and limited circulation during its first 18 months.

Trial subscriptions were sold, but many were dropped before the trial period was over. Newsstand sales, which usually constitute an insignificant portion of total circulation, were high, but also unstable compared with those of other newspapers in Taiwan.

To determine the reasons for this unpopularity, a survey was conducted to investigate factors such as content quality and editing style and how respondents perceived the nature and function of *MSB* as a publication.

<sup>1</sup> Several studies showed similar findings. Galen Rarick, *News Research for Better Newspapers*. (Washington, D.C.: American Newspaper Publishers Foundation, 1975), vol. 7; John B. Mauro and David H. Weaver, "Patterns of Newspaper Readership," ANPA News Research Report, No. 4, July 22, 1977; David H. Weaver and John B. Mauro, "Newspaper Readership Patterns," *Journalism Quarterly*, 55:84-91, 134 (Spring 1978).

<sup>2</sup> In Taiwan, a newspaper is limited to 12 pages.

► Dr. Wang is a research associate at the East-West Communication Institute in Hawaii. She wishes to extend appreciation to Dr. George Beal, Ms. Elizabeth Buck and Dr. Wilbur Schramm for their valuable comments on this study.

### Methodology

The survey was undertaken in the summer of 1979. Although *MSB* had an islandwide circulation, the survey was conducted only in Taipei which had a heavy concentration of *MSB* readers and where subscription lists were readily available. For purposes of comparison, respondents were systematically drawn from the lists of current and former subscribers.

Through personal interviews, open-ended questions were asked regarding the perceived strengths and weaknesses of *MSB*, the reasons for subscription or discontinuation, and the perceived differences between *MSB* and other newspapers to which the respondents subscribed.

Respondents rated on a five-point scale their satisfaction with *MSB*, its helpfulness, its general writing and editing style and the frequency with which they read its various sections. The interviews were carried out by trained college students.

### Results

A total of 160 subscribers and 142 former subscribers were interviewed. Of the former subscribers, 71 had discontinued their subscription before, or as soon as, the one-month trial period had elapsed. Of the current subscribers, 59% intended to keep subscribing to *MSB*, 39% planned to drop their subscriptions, and the rest were uncertain.

An effort had been made to promote circulation through salesmen, but without lasting success; 47% (143) of the total sample cited "salesman's insistence" as the reason for subscribing to *MSB*, but more than one-third of these cancelled their subscriptions within the trial period and one-fifth did the same later. On variables such as income, education, marital status and sex, no significant differences were found between current and former subscribers.

Because of a high rate of cancellation by subscribers, a negative evaluation of content was expected. However, when asked to rate the content of *MSB*, approximately one-half (48%, N=296) of the respondents said it was fair and one-third said it was quite good. The mean shows a slightly

favorable overall rating. The readers' evaluation of detailed aspects of the content was also mostly positive. Seventy-seven percent (N=225) of the respondents who answered the question considered the average length of the reports to be adequate, 69% (N=297) felt the writing style should not be changed, and 52% (N=260) reported satisfaction with the proportion of translated materials in the paper. A chi-square test on the above three variables between current and former subscribers showed no significant difference.

Similar results were reported regarding the editing style. Forty-eight percent of the respondents felt the make-up was "fair;" over one-third rated it "quite good." Only 7% (N=232) thought the headlines unsatisfactory, while others considered them "fair" or "quite good." The quality of cartoons and pictures tended to be given a middle rating; 2.7 and 2.5 were the respective means. (One was the highest possible rating.)

Both the content quality and the editing style of *MSB* seemed to be acceptable to the readers. The question then was, whether the unique nature of *MSB* made it a newspaper worth buying.

"Promotion of quality modern living" was one of the objectives of *MSB*. The publishers had originally hoped that a desire to subscribe to their publication could be stimulated by the entertainment and practical information it offered. From respondents' feedback, it seemed that both kinds of content were appreciated by the readers. When asked to name the greatest asset of *MSB*, 24% (N=227) mentioned "helpfulness," while 20% cited entertainment and relaxation. The many sports and entertainment items were considered an asset by 29% and 24% of readers, respectively. In fact, sports and entertainment were the most frequently read content (Table 1).

To determine the degree to which respondents found *MSB* of practical help, interviewers asked them to rate it on a five-point scale. Approximately 45% of the respondents who answered the question felt that *MSB* was at least of some help to them in their daily activities, 17% answered

TABLE I

Frequency of Reading (in Percentages)

	Front Page News	Children	Entertain- ment	Sports	Modern Living	Medicine	Feature Page
Every day	31.3	8.9	41.2	38.2	27.1	31.8	22.4
Often	24.2	11.3	23.5	28.2	32.4	23.5	21.8
Sometimes	27.8	14.9	18.8	16.5	23.5	23.5	25.3
Rarely	13.0	22.1	13.5	14.1	14.1	14.7	22.9
Never	3.5	42.5	2.9	2.9	2.9	6.5	7.6
Mean Score <sup>a</sup>	2.33	3.78	2.13	2.15	2.33	2.40	2.71

<sup>a</sup> On a 5-point scale with "Every day" = 1 and "Never" = 5

that it was very helpful, 18% did not think it was of much help, and one-fifth chose not to answer. The overall rating was slightly favorable.

Table 2 shows a significant difference between the ratings that subscribers and former subscribers gave to the helpfulness of *MSB* ( $\chi^2 = 24.6$ ,  $p < .01$ ); former subscribers placed a significantly lower value on the services and information provided by *MSB*. Additionally, helpfulness was found to be significantly, though weakly, correlated with the degree of satisfaction with the general content of the paper ( $r = .23$ ,  $p < .01$ ). In other words, those who found the content helpful tended to be more satisfied than others with *MSB*.

One indicator of the role that a mass medium plays in its readers' daily lives is the frequency with which they refer to the content material in their conversations. Of the 299 respondents who answered the question, 12% said they never mentioned *MSB* stories in their conversations with others, while 33% answered they sometimes did, and 32% replied they rarely did. The subjects most frequently discussed were entertainment (53%,  $N = 117$ ) and sports (43%).

*MSB* was intended to be a supplement to the *United Daily News*, another paper published by the same corporation. Survey results showed that only 2% out of the 302 interviewed did not subscribe to other newspapers. In fact, 48% of the respondents were subscribing to more than one regular newspaper, making *MSB* not only the second,

but in some cases, the third or even fourth newspaper received by a household. Compared with the national average of one newspaper per seven persons, respondents in this survey obviously were heavy newspaper readers<sup>3</sup> and thus were more likely to try out a new paper with a different style, even though they might later find it unappealing.

When asked what the most serious weakness was, more than one-third of those who answered (37%,  $N = 210$ ) mentioned the lack of straight news. The publishers, who thought that stories on sports events and celebrities in the entertainment world would be the major attraction to readers, were surprised when respondents named as weaknesses, "excessive reporting on the entertainment world" (27%), and "excessive reporting on sport events" (7%). While the stress on entertainment and sports was regarded as a strength of the paper by some, it was considered a weakness by others. The controversy over the emphasis on sports and entertainment, however, was not the only factor affecting the subscription sale.

As mentioned above, 65% ( $N = 160$ ) of the subscribers were either not planning to continue their subscription or were uncertain about continuing. The major reasons given included the following: lack of time, too many subscriptions to other newspapers, lack of interest in the particular content of *MSB*, displeasure with so many

<sup>3</sup> The average household in the survey consisted of four persons.

TABLE 2

Helpfulness Rating Comparing Subscribers and Non-Subscribers

	<i>Subscribers</i>		<i>Non-Subscribers</i>
Very helpful	1	39	13
	2	77	56
	3	25	32
	4	12	28
Not helpful at all	5	5	10
		158	139

stories on sports and entertainment, and too little news.

Former subscribers gave similar reasons for discontinuing their subscriptions. Thirty-eight percent of the 137 former subscribers who responded said they already had other newspapers, 24% told the interviewer that they did not have time to read *MSB*, and 12% complained about the delivery service. Except for those who were unhappy with the delivery service, responses seemed to indicate that these respondents were apathetic due to lack of interest, time and need to read *MSB*. When asked about the difference between *MSB* and the newspapers to which they were subscribing, 68% of the 124 former subscribers who responded mentioned the scope of news coverage.

### Implications

Publication of a daily newspaper without straight news was an unusual venture in the realm of journalism, but the publishers of the *MSB* were confident that readers would accept a publication containing only features. Therefore, no attempt was made to include any news or even news summaries.

The readers, however, did not respond

<sup>4</sup> Some Hong Kong newspapers are devoted exclusively to tips on horse and dog races and to pornography.

as the publishers believed they would. Although they generally approved of the writing and editing, and found the contents helpful and entertaining, when it came to renewing their subscriptions, two-fifths of the subscribers in the sample decided to drop. Many respondents had limited time in which to read the newspaper and *MSB* simply did not give them the news they needed to stay informed of major world events. Because *MSB* did not satisfy this need, they had no incentive to read it on a daily basis.

The absence of news brought the publishers of *MSB* another problem: conflicting interest among readers. As indicated in the findings, some respondents considered the emphasis on sports and entertainment an asset, but to others, it was a drawback. While the publishers were hoping sports and entertainment would be a major attraction of *MSB*, some readers decided to cancel their subscriptions because of excessive reporting of those two subjects.

Without straight news to satisfy the common needs of newspaper readers, *MSB* seemed to have a hard time pleasing the general population. The fact that most other feature publications (such as the entertainment newspapers<sup>4</sup> in Hong Kong and sport tabloids in the States) have a much narrower focus shows that great variety in the content may be a disadvantage to a publication such as *MSB*.

Undoubtedly, newspaper readers welcome items that provide entertainment and useful information. Readers may consider them to be the most readable part of a newspaper; nonetheless the findings of this survey seem to indicate that, however important and interesting such items may be, the attraction of the features depends on the usual newspaper format. A newspaper without features may not be a "real newspaper" to some readers, but a newspaper without news may not be a newspaper at all.

### Newspaper Circulation 61 Million in 1981

► The ANPA reports that daily newspaper circulation was 61,434,434 for 1981.

Copyright of Journalism Quarterly is the property of Association for Education in Journalism & Mass Communication and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.