

# Traditional and Nontraditional Radio News Formats: Comparing Retention, Involvement, Attention, and Perception of Credibility

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*Entertainment news, such as late-night talk shows, continues to gain the interest of consumers, while traditional news formats, such as newspapers, are slowly losing audience members. This study examines how participants perceive and retain news information presented in traditional versus nontraditional (quiz show) radio news formats. The research employs measures of recall and recognition of news content; attention to the news formats; and perceived credibility of the news formats. Results are discussed in the context of past research (Salmon, 1986) which indicates people's involvement with a medium influences their perceptions and retention of news information.*

## Introduction

People are continuing to draw away from traditional news media, such as newspapers, magazines, and radio news broadcasts. Daily circulation of newspapers, for example, has decreased by 2.6 percent, and Sunday readership has dropped by 3.1 percent since 2005 [Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ), 2006]. One factor contributing to the decrease is

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that younger adults are less likely than older adults to read a newspaper. Magazines have lost subscribers also, but in 2004, net circulation increased by 14,000. Radio continues to be used and its audience has had less of a decline than newspapers and magazines. The annual Radio Today report notes that 94 percent of people 12 years and older listen to traditional radio weekly (PEJ, 2006). While traditional formats are gradually losing audiences, nontraditional formats are becoming more popular.

### **Debate Over Traditional versus Nontraditional Political News**

Political events are one of the main coverage areas for the news media; traditionally, political coverage has taken the form of stories in news broadcasts. During the 1992 presidential campaign, however, nontraditional media such as television and radio talk shows, late-night television, and Music Television (MTV) were used by candidates, including Ross Perot and Bill Clinton, to advance their political platforms (Hollander, 1995). There is an ongoing debate among journalists regarding the validity of nontraditional or entertainment formats as news sources. Jon Stewart, the host of the “Daily Show,” accused journalists two years ago of contributing to propaganda by reporting information politicians’ representatives had given them after political speeches (Stone, 2005).

In a study on whether entertainment programs increase political knowledge, one scholar says that the real issue is whether or not entertainment programs actually inform viewers, specifically younger people who may get their news from late-night talk shows (Hollander, 2005). Hollander found that younger viewers used late-night and comedy programs as their main news source. Results, however, showed that most participants did not score well on a recall test for program news content. Hollander concludes that the recall of information correlated negatively with the late-night programs and comedy shows, but participants did have high scores on recognition testing. This means that participants were not able to recall the information but were familiar with the concepts. Thus, Hollander notes that late-night television increases what young people think they know about a political campaign, but the programming does not thoroughly inform viewers about the topic.

Another study involving political knowledge was conducted on the impact of traditional and nontraditional media forms in the 1992 presidential election. Researchers found that nontraditional media, such as talk shows and political advertisements, had the strongest influences on campaign interest but the weakest influences on informing people about the candidates’ views on political issues (McLeod, Guo, Daily, Steele,

Huang, Horowitz, & Chen 1996). Researchers concluded that traditional media are more effective than nontraditional media when presenting the public with news information. The results from both studies suggest entertainment media interest the public more than traditional media, but when it comes to obtaining information, traditional formats succeed over nontraditional formats.

### **Involvement and Entertainment Formats**

Although some researchers have found traditional formats to be more cognitively effective than nontraditional formats, perhaps the entertainment news format has a stronger impact on how much the public feels involved with the media. Nontraditional news is formatted in various ways, one of them being games. Games are designed to draw people in, thus keeping them engaged (Houser & DeLoach, 1998). If entertainment news encourages involvement, then it is possible that one may retain more information from an involving, interactive, nontraditional format than from a traditional format. Ample research has shown that active learning, that is, learning which involves the learner's active participation, is more effective for retention and recall than is passive learning (Garard, Hunt, Lippert, & Paynton, 1998).

In a study on using games to increase learning and motivation, interactive games promoted higher affective learning than traditional classroom lecturing (Garard, Hunt, Lippert, & Paynton, 1998). This finding may be applicable to news broadcasts. In a study on interactivity and memory on news websites, researchers found that consumers' memory of the news content on the website is associated with their perceived interactivity with the website (Chung & Zhao, 2004). In addition, interactivity has a positive effect on processing and storing information for recall and retention (Salmon, 1986). The more involved a person is with an issue, the more the individual will gain motivation to actually think about the issue, whether the person is for the issue or against it. Furthermore, involvement and entertainment formats may be closely linked, in that entertainment formats may trigger one's interest to become more involved.

### **Involvement and Comprehension**

For advertisers, communicating persuasive messages through the media is important. Researchers have studied the effects of advertisements on consumer behavior and have found involvement to be a significant factor in comprehension (Muehling, Laczniak, & Andrews, 1993).

Cohen's (1983) study (as cited in Muehling, Laczniak, & Andrews, 1993) on consumers' involvement in advertisements found that an involved person understands and is able to retrieve information as well as engage in the content of a message. In a similar study, researchers found that the less involved the individual, the less the person remembered information on brand-name items (Gardner, Mitchell, & Russo, 1978). In a study on radio advertising, scholars learned that consumers' involvement has an influence on retention of information from the ad and attitudes toward the product (Nelson, Duncan, & Frontczak, 1985). Hence, scholars have found in these studies that involvement helps one to comprehend and remember messages in advertisements.

The Elaboration Likelihood Model, proposed in 1980, explained how a persuasive message could change the attitude of a receiver (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). Subsequently, researchers found that when a person has a high amount of personal experience with the information that is being given, he or she will pay attention and become more involved in the message (Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983). This model supports the idea that a person's interest may contribute to how much he or she will be involved and consequently remember. The more involved a person is in an activity, the more mental energy the person will put into it, thus being able to remember information from it.

## **Research Focus**

Since there is little research on retention and perception of traditional and nontraditional radio news formats, the literature review focused on the concept of involvement and how it could possibly increase retention. The focus of this study is to examine how effective a radio news quiz show is as it relates to retaining news information. Other factors such as perception of credibility, attention, and involvement of both the traditional radio news broadcast and the news quiz show are also measured. The purpose of this study is to give news producers an idea of how effective radio broadcasts are with regard to news retention. This study also seeks to show how experimenting with different formats could contribute to creating a more diverse radio news audience.

This research investigates the following hypotheses:

1. People will perceive the news quiz show format to be more personally involving than the traditional radio news broadcast.

2. People who listen to the news quiz show format will have a higher level of attention than people who listen to the traditional radio news broadcast.
3. People who listen to the news quiz show format will be more likely to remember the content than people who listen to the traditional radio news broadcast.

This research examines the following questions:

1. Will people who listen to the news quiz show think what they are hearing is less credible information than people who listen to the traditional radio news broadcast?

The thesis of media logic suggests that audiences view more familiar formats as credible and are less confused by these formats than by an unfamiliar format (Altheide & Snow, 1979). For example, an individual who is accustomed to viewing traditional news may not take a late-night comedy show seriously but, rather, believe that the news presented on that show is not credible. Thus, perception of credibility could have an impact on responses to the news quiz show in this study.

2. Are heavy news users less likely to remember content from the news quiz show format than from the traditional news broadcast?

People who consume news from traditional formats, and who are more news savvy than others, are able to store information from an unfamiliar format. Schemas are mental constructs that put problems together with solutions and can be called into working memory to make mental processing easier. For example, if someone is familiar with a certain computer program, and that person has to learn how to use an unfamiliar program, the individual will be able to work the unfamiliar program by using similar methods he/she has learned from the familiar program. Therefore, those who are high news consumers should have well-developed schemas and should be able to obtain information from an unfamiliar format.

3. Will younger people be more likely than older people to remember the content from the news quiz show?

As mentioned in the literature review, it was found that many younger people rely on entertainment programs for news. Since younger people

are accustomed to the more interactive format, the thesis of media logic supports the idea that younger people should be more able than older people to recall content from the news quiz show.

## **Methodology**

### **Sampling**

Seventy-five participants were recruited from the University of Alabama campus and within the community. Participants varied in race and gender and were 19 or older. Recruiting flyers were posted and distributed, and potential participants were told that a raffle would be held in which six individuals would win \$50 each. All those individuals who participated in the experiment had the opportunity to have their names entered into the raffle. The drawing took place and payments were made after the study was completed. Upon arriving, participants were told that they would take part in a research experiment in which they would listen to a radio broadcast and answer questions about it. Next, they were given an informed consent sheet. Those who agreed to participate were randomly assigned to treatments.

### **Materials**

Participants were exposed to one of two different treatments. Group A listened to a 5-minute traditional radio news broadcast consisting of a single anchor reading six news stories. Group B listened to a 5-minute news quiz show in which a host read the first portion of each of the six news stories, posed a question about the news content, and then gave the participant alternative answer choices to consider. After the quiz show host presented the choices, a pause was given so that the participant would have time to think of the answer to the question, after which the host continued.

The news material was heard in both groups from a radio. The six news stories corresponded to the six quiz questions on the game show. The news content was kept the same in each treatment, but wording was somewhat different in order to reflect the different styles of presentation. Each radio broadcast was produced by staff of a local public radio station.

### **Procedure**

Experiments took place in two different classrooms in the College of Communication and Information Sciences at The University of Alabama. Participants in each group were given the same survey which was comprised

of two parts, a pre-test and a post-test. The pre-test included questions about frequency of news use and about knowledge and involvement with the six issues in the six news stories. In addition, there were questions on topics not addressed in the broadcasts, so it would not be obvious for participants to anticipate the news issues in the broadcasts. After the pre-test was completed, participants listened to the assigned broadcast. Next, each group began the post-test which measured participants' perceptions of involvement with the formats, attention paid to the news information, and credibility of the broadcast. The next part of the post-test included nineteen recall and recognition questions about the six news topics. The six questions posed by the host of the quiz show were also added, to total twenty-five questions. The quiz questions were reworded so that news quiz show participants would not automatically remember the answers. Participants were then debriefed about the purpose of the study. The experimental sessions were 30 minutes long.

**Variable Measurements**

The dependent variables were measured on the post-test. See Appendix A for the 25 retention (recall and recognition) items. Involvement, attention, and credibility were measured with a series of rating scales having phrases opposite in meaning at the extremes of each scale. Participants were asked to circle a number on a 7-point scale to reflect how they perceived the news information they heard previously (See Tables 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3 below).

**Table 1.1: Involvement Measures**

Interested	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Uninterested
Uninvolved	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Involved
Not stimulated	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Stimulated
Inspired	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Uninspired
Excited	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Not excited
Not fascinated	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Fascinated
Felt it was important	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Did not feel it was important
Not enthused	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Enthused

**Table 1.2: Attention Measures**

I paid close attention	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	I did not pay close attention
I was not very focused	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	I was very focused
I was able to concentrate	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	I was not able to concentrate
I was not alert	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	I was alert

**Table 1.3: Credibility Measures**

It is fair	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	It is unfair
Is unbiased	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Is biased
Tells the whole story	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Does not tell the whole story
Is not accurate	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Is accurate
Watches after readers' interests	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Does not watch after readers' interests
Does separate facts from opinions	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Does not separate fact from opinion
Cannot be trusted	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Can be trusted
Is factual	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Is opinionated

### Data Analyses

Data from the pre-test and post-test were entered into the SPSS program. A correct answer was scored as a 1 and a wrong answer as a 0. T-tests were then used to average and compare data. The test checked for significant differences between responses to the traditional and quiz show formats.

### Results

Retention between the two formats was examined from two angles in this study: retention of overall news content and retention of the answers to the six quiz questions asked by the host. Table 2.1 shows that findings lend support to a higher retention level for the quiz questions only, with  $p < .01$ .

**Table 2.1. Involvement, Attention, Retention, and Credibility Results**

Measurement	Traditional Radio News		Nontraditional Radio News		t statistic	p value
	Mean	(s.d.)	Mean	(s.d.)		
Involvement	31.45	(9.13)	33.14	(11.00)	-.73	.47
Attention	20.00	(5.14)	20.17	(6.15)	-.13	1.0
Retention (all news content)	15.32	(3.53)	16.00	(4.00)	-.78	.44
Retention (six quiz questions only)	5.00	(1.15)	5.47	(.74)	-2.7	*.01
Perceived credibility	42.53	(17.38)	41.56	(8.42)	.30	.76
Retention among heavy news users	15.16	(4.00)	15.56	(4.50)	-.29	.78

Thus, people who listened to the quiz show format were better able to recall the content addressed in the quiz questions posed by the host. However, retention of overall news content for the two shows did not differ significantly ( $p < .44$ ). This means that participants did not retain the news information the host read before and after the question he posed any better than did participants who listened to the same information provided in the traditional news show broadcast. In addition, there were no significant differences regarding perceived involvement ( $p < .47$ ), attention ( $p < 1.0$ ), or credibility ( $p < .76$ ) between the traditional news broadcast and the quiz show. Also, those who were heavy news users were equally likely to remember the news content regardless of treatment condition ( $p < .78$ ).

Age was also an important factor in the study, in that the literature suggests that younger people rely on nontraditional formats as news sources. In this study, the sample was divided into two age groups, 19-25 representing younger participants and 25-80 representing older participants. The age range between the groups did not vary much, although the oldest person was 80.

Table 2.2 shows that there was not a statistically significant difference in retention for quiz show content ( $p < .14$ ) between younger and older participants.

Table 2.2 Retention between Age Groups						
	Younger participants		Older participants			
	Mean	(s.d.)	Mean	(s.d.)	t statistic	p value
RQ3: Level of retention for quiz show only	15.25	(3.55)	17.26	(4.36)	-1.5	.14

## Discussion and Implications

### Retention

Although there were no statistically significant differences in overall retention between participants in the traditional and nontraditional news format conditions, the retention level was significantly higher among participants in the nontraditional format for the six specific quiz questions asked by the quiz show host. It is assumed that participants were able to recall the news information because of the mental interactivity that may have taken place during the posing of the questions by the host and the pause time participants were given to think of the correct answer. Overall,

subjects did not score particularly well on the retention section of the survey regarding news questions asked on the other parts of the stories. Also, participants in the quiz show treatment were not able to recall the news information the host gave before and after the questions he posed any better than did participants who heard comparable information in the traditional broadcast format. Perhaps participants were not as engaged during the news feed as during the posing of the questions and the thinking pause.

### **Involvement and Attention**

In this study, the quiz show format was slightly different from other news quiz shows, such as NPR's "Wait, Wait, Don't Tell Me." This particular format did not contain laughter, music, or a game show contestant. Instead, the traditional and nontraditional formats were similar, the only difference being the "question, pause, and answer" section between the beginning and end of each news story. Furthermore, since the literature suggests that entertainment fosters involvement, it is assumed that the quiz show format was not entertaining enough to enhance participants' involvement. This may be one of the reasons why there was not a statistically significant difference in younger and older participants' retention for the news quiz show. Also, the average age difference between the two groups was small. If entertainment and involvement help increase retention, using elements such as laughter and music might have made a difference in attention levels for the two formats.

### **Credibility**

There were no significant differences in perceived credibility for participants listening to the two different formats, and both formats were perceived to have high credibility. It appears that participants were equally comfortable with the news information they heard. The similarity of the formats could have been a factor, in that those who listened to the quiz show format were already accustomed to a traditional news broadcast and were able to recognize similarities in the two.

### **Future Study**

In the present study, we learned that participants who were in the quiz show group did retain the answers to the specific news questions asked by the quiz show host better than those who were in the traditional format

group. This research also showed that the nontraditional format did not decrease overall retention, thus adding support to previous findings that a nontraditional news format does not necessarily distract audiences from retaining news information. In future research, the effects of adding entertaining elements to a nontraditional format should be studied. This change would make the two formats more different from one another and might affect retention as well as attention, involvement, and perceived credibility. In the meantime, media producers could experiment more with fun, entertaining, and informative news formats.

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## Appendix A:

### Retention Questions

*The questions below ask you to remember information from the news stories you just heard. Some questions are multiple choice, and some ask you to fill in the blank. For multiple choice questions, please **circle the number** next to the answer you think is correct. For fill-in-the-blank questions, please **write your answer** in the blank provided.*

1. Which government department would oversee the proposed National Preparedness and Response Authority? *Please CIRCLE a NUMBER.*

- 1 The CIA
- 2 The Department of Homeland Security
- 3 The Department of Defense
- 4 The Department of Housing and Urban Development

2. What does the bipartisan report suggest should be done with FEMA? *Please CIRCLE a NUMBER.*

- 1 they should recruit more Red Cross workers
- 2 they should rebuild the organization
- 3 they should make visits to Iraq
- 4 they should remain active

3. What does FEMA stand for? *Please fill in the blank below.*
- 

4. Which government body spent seven months investigating the government's response to Katrina? *Please fill in the blank below.*
- 

5. In which city is Zacarias Moussaoui being tried? *Please CIRCLE a NUMBER.*

- 1 Alexandria, Va.
- 2 St. Louis, Mo.
- 3 Los Angeles, Calif.
- 4 Miami, Fla.

6. With which terrorist group is Moussaoui accused of conspiring?  
*Please CIRCLE a NUMBER.*

- 1 al-Qaeda
- 2 Hamas
- 3 Fatah Revolutionary Council
- 4 Party of Allah

7. What is Zacarias Moussaoui being accused of? *Please fill in the blank below.*

Please complete the sentence below.

8. The two sentences the jury is considering are death and\_\_\_\_\_.

9. Who is the founder of the company Enron? *Please CIRCLE a NUMBER.*

- 1 Henry McMillan
- 2 Kenneth Lay
- 3 Donald Trump
- 4 Larry Bilmore

10. What was the judge's complaint in the Enron case? *Please CIRCLE a NUMBER.*

- 1 Jury selection has not been handled appropriately.
- 2 Lawyers have been talking too much to the media.
- 3 Jurors have not been paying attention.
- 4 The trial is moving too slowly.

11. Name the city where the Enron case is being held. *Please fill in the blank below.*

12. Enron's founder said he tried to contact a\_\_\_\_\_.

Please complete the sentence below.

13. European investigators say the C-I-A conducted more than \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ flights over European territory.

14. About how many hours of testimony have been heard by European Parliamentary investigators? *Please CIRCLE a NUMBER.*

- 1 10
- 2 50
- 3 100
- 4 200

15. A recent report accuses the CIA of doing what? *Please CIRCLE a NUMBER.*

- 1 Spying on meetings of the European Union
- 2 Withholding names of suspected terrorists from European governments
- 3 Giving European military secrets to China
- 4 Violating an international treaty concerning airplane flights

Please complete the sentence below.

16. The testimony included individuals who said they had been kidnapped and

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17. European Parliament investigators also say the incidents in which terror suspects were handed over to the agents of **WHICH** country do not appear to be isolated? *Please fill in the blank below.*

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18. Name the Senate Majority Leader for the Republican Party. *Please fill in the blank below.*

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19. How much is the rebate the U.S. Senate wants to give to every American? *Please fill in the blank below.*

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20. Senate Democratic leader Harry Reid says Republicans are trying to protect what? *Please CIRCLE a NUMBER.*

- 1 The Republican majority in Congress
- 2 Oil companies
- 3 The president
- 4 The auto industry

21. There is a proposal in Congress to allow drilling where? *Please CIRCLE a NUMBER.*

- 1 Arctic National Wildlife Refuge
- 2 The Everglades
- 3 Yellowstone National Forest
- 4 Niagara Falls

22. The United Nation's nuclear watchdog agency has demanded Iran to stop enriching which material? *Please CIRCLE a NUMBER.*

- 1 Plutonium
- 2 Oil
- 3 Steel
- 4 Uranium

23. Ayatollah Ali Khomeini reportedly said that if the U.S. invaded Iran what would happen? *Please CIRCLE a NUMBER.*

- 1 Iran would attack U.S. interests abroad
- 2 Iran would boycott American products.
- 3 He would call a halt to Iranian oil production
- 4 He would request Syrian military support.

Please complete the sentences.

24. Iran has said its nuclear plans are for \_\_\_\_\_ purposes.

25. What is Iran's leader warning the U.S. not to attack?

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