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Who Consumes News Media in Latin America and the Caribbean?

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Executive Summary. This *Insights* report addresses the question of who in the Americas consumes more news. Drawing on literature in political psychology, I suggest that there is an important role for economic and security threats in stimulating information-seeking, and therefore raising the consumption of news. I assess this framework using the most recent round of the AmericasBarometer surveys and find, as expected, that these threats, particularly ones related to crime, are associated with news consumption. The more people perceive crime and economic crisis as threats, the more they consume news in the media. Finally, this report also shows that certain socioeconomic groups—the less educated, the poorer, those living in rural areas, younger people and women—consume less news while people with a particular personality trait, openness to experience, are more likely to follow the news.

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Mass media is increasingly being studied by scholars of politics because “politics has increasingly become mediated” (Strömbäck and Shehata 2010). Researchers have examined the effect of news consumption on political outcomes, with some arguing that the media exerts a corrosive effect on people’s political interest and partisanship (Strömbäck and Shehata 2010, Pérez-Liñán 2002) and others arguing the media informs and empowers individuals (Newton 1999). But before we determine what impact the media are having on politics, it is important to know who consumes the news. In this *Insights* report, I answer this question by showing average levels of daily media consumption in Latin America and the Caribbean.¹ I then develop a model of media consumption that includes individual characteristics, attitudes, and perceptions as explanatory factors.

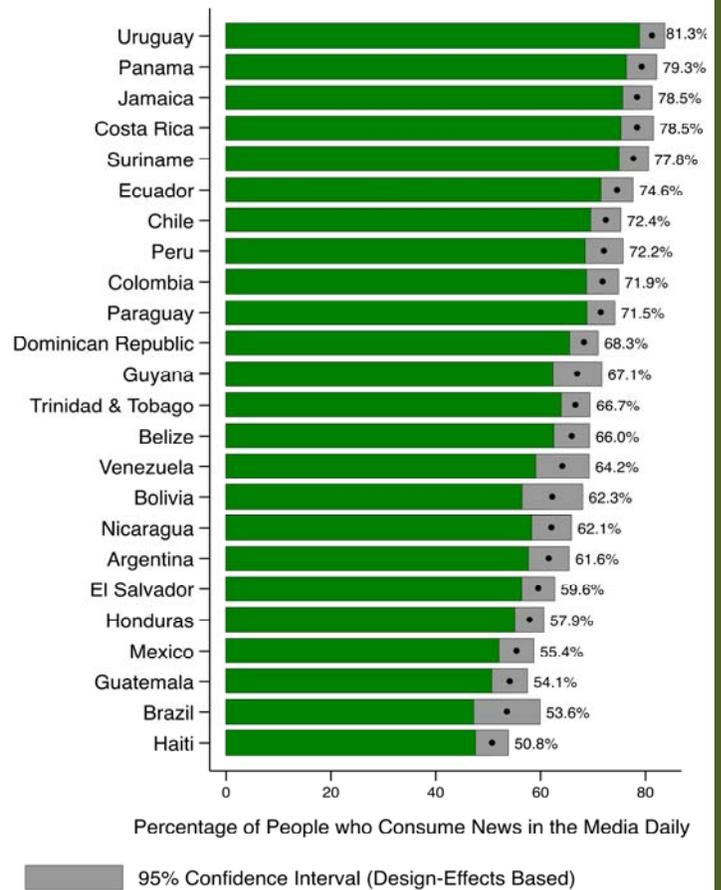
Two key findings emerge from this study. First, in accord with a growing body of research that connects threat to information-seeking behavior, I find a significant association between expressing concern about rates of crime in one’s neighborhood and levels of news consumption, controlling for other socio-demographic variables. Second, I find that certain sociodemographic groups consume less news, especially the poorer, the less well-educated, those living in rural areas, younger people and women.

This report focuses on the following question from the 2010 round of the AmericasBarometer survey by LAPOP:²

¹ Prior issues in the *Insights* Series can be found at: <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/insights.php>
The data on which they are based can be found at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/survey-data.php>

² Funding for the 2010 round mainly came from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Important sources of support were also the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and Vanderbilt University.

Figure 1. News Consumption in Latin America and the Caribbean



Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP, 2010

G10. “About how often do you pay attention to the news, whether on TV, the radio, newspapers, or the internet?”³

Figure 1 shows the percentage of people who respond that they consume news in the media daily (with confidence intervals) by country. Responses to the original question ran from daily, “1,” to never, “5,” and they were recalibrated to capture this percentage.⁴

³ The non-response rate for this question was 6.5%. This report excludes the USA and Canada in order to focus on Latin America and the Caribbean.

⁴ All analyses were conducted with STATA v11 and results were adjusted for the complex sample design employed.

There is considerable variation in the percentage of people who consume news daily across Latin America and the Caribbean. The difference between the country at the top—Uruguay—and the country at the bottom—Haiti—is 30.5%. It is important to highlight that many countries in the bottom tier are Central American and Caribbean countries, such as Haiti, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Belize. Thus, we see evidence that these regions register lower levels of media consumption than South America.

In the next section, I assess individual characteristics that may help to explain the differing levels of news consumption. In the last section, I will present my conclusions and provide ideas for avenues for future research.

Crime and Economic Threats as Triggers of News Consumption

Following prior research (Marcus and MacKuen 1993; Bucy 2003; Valentino et al. 2008), I propose that political threats boost citizens' anxiety, and in turn information seeking. Thus, people facing threats would be more likely to consume news media.

Here I test the association between media use and economic and security threats, arguably two main threats for Latin American citizens, while controlling for other factors that existing scholarship has associated with media consumption. To measure economic threat, I use perceptions of economic crisis.⁵ I expect that those who perceive a more serious economic crisis are more threatened, and consequently they are more likely to seek information in the media.

⁵ This variable is worded as: CRISIS1. Some say that our country is suffering a very serious economic crisis; others say that we are suffering a crisis but it is not very serious; while others say that there is not any economic crisis. What do you think? This variable was recalibrated to a 0-100 scale.

I use perceptions of crime to measure security threat.⁶ In this case the expectation is that those who perceive a higher level of threat from crime are more likely to feel anxiety, and therefore consume more news in the media.

I include as additional predictors age, gender, education level, and wealth because previous research shows that these variables explain different levels of newspaper reading (Elvestad and Blekesaune 2008; Salzman and Aloisi 2009). Strömbäck and Shehata (2010) find that political interest predicts levels of news consumption in Sweden.⁷ So, I expect that people who report being more interested in politics are likely to consume more news.

Salzman (2011) states that accessibility is a factor that explains media consumption. I include the size of the place of residence as an indicator of accessibility. I hypothesize that people living in urban areas are more able to consume news media than those living in rural areas because of the availability of news sources. Indeed, in a previous *Insights* report Batista Pereira (2011) finds that citizens living in rural areas tend to be less informed in part because of lack of access to media.

I also include trust in media as a control because, as Salzman (2011) affirms, people who have more trust in the media may perceive that media is achieving its societal role as a marketplace of ideas or as a 'watchdog,' and consequently may consume more news.⁸

⁶ This variable is worded as: AOJ11A. And speaking of the country in general, how much do you think that the level of crime that we have now represents a threat to our future well-being? It was original coded from, 1 'Very much' to 4 'None' and here was recalibrated from 0 to 100.

⁷ In this *Insights* this dimension is measured by POL1. How much interest do you have in politics: a lot, some, little or none? This variable was recalibrated to a 0-100 scale.

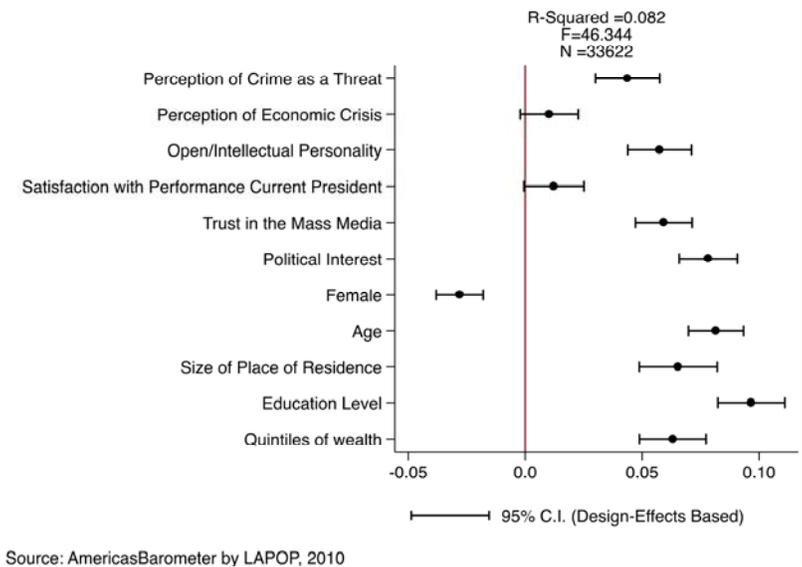
⁸ This variable is worded as: B37. To what extent do you trust the mass media? It is measured on a 1-7 scale recalibrated here into a 0-100 scale.

Further, I include a measure of satisfaction with the performance of the current president.⁹ Those who support the current president may be more likely to seek information in the news given that they are more interested in the policies implemented, or that they like the leader. Simply put, they are on the 'winning' side and have more incentives to follow news regarding the government.

Finally, I include a personality trait, *openness to experience*. This is measured using a question regarding whether a person considers herself to be open and intellectual.¹⁰ Following prior research (Gerber et al. 2010) I hypothesize that an open and intellectual person is more likely to consume news in the media.

Before discussing the results, it is important to recognize that the associations among threats, trust in the media, and news consumption may run in complex directions. The more people consume news in the media, the more they may feel threatened, the more they may be interested in politics, and the more they may trust the media. Given this potential problem, I do not make a claim for causation, but for association.¹¹ As an alternative measurement strategy, I test two other variables tapping economic and security threats: crime victimization and whether a respondent or family member lost a job; and I get the same

Figure 2. The Impacts of Threats and Individual Factors on News Consumption, 2010



results.¹² This supports the causal direction theorized in this report, since we cannot argue that news consumption has an impact on whether a person lost a job or was victim of a crime.

Figure 2 presents the results of this OLS regression analysis of news consumption. The dependent variable GI0, which runs from 1 to 5, was recalibrated on a 0-100 scale. Each independent variable included is listed on the vertical axis. The impact of each of these variables on levels of news consumption is shown by a dot, which if located to the right of the vertical "0" line indicates a positive effect, and if to the left a negative impact. The horizontal bars represent 95% confidence intervals for these effects. We can be at least 95% confident that a given effect is statistically significant if its confidence interval does not cross the vertical axis at 0. All coefficients are standardized for ease of comparison, and this model includes country-fixed effects not shown in this figure for ease of presentation.

⁹ This variable is worded as: M1. Speaking in general of the current administration/government, how would you rate the job performance of the president? This variable runs from 1 'Very good' to 5 'Very bad' and here was recalibrated to a 0-100 scale.

¹⁰ Unfortunately this variable was not asked in Honduras. Thus, this country is excluded in the following analysis. I run the same model excluding this variable (so, the model includes Honduran data) and get the same results.

¹¹ One possibility is to run a two-stage least square model or to include an instrumental variable. Given the intentionally limited scope of this *Insights* report, I do not run this sophisticated model.

¹² VIC1EXT asks people whether they have been victim of any type of crime in the past 12 months. I also use a variable that taps whether a family member has lost his or her job in the past two years.

The results support the main expectations. The coefficient for crime victimization is statistically significant, and in the expected direction. The more people perceive crime as a threat for their well-being, the more they seek information in the media. So, crime as a threat may trigger anxiety and therefore greater consumption of news in the media.

The perception of economic crisis is not statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level, but it is nearly so, and in the expected direction. Using a broader confidence interval, it becomes clear that the more serious people feel the economic crisis is, the more they seek information in the media.

In sum, in accord with recent studies in political psychology, I present some evidence that threats are associated with information seeking.

The variable for satisfaction with the performance of the president is not significant at the $p < .05$ level, but is in the expected direction. Using a broader confidence interval, the results indicate that those who support the president have more incentive to follow the news in the media to get information about expected policies or about their leader.

Further, I find that the more a person considers herself to be open and intellectual, the higher the level of news consumption.

Finally, the remaining variables are also statistically significant and coefficients are in the expected direction. The results indicate that the richer, the more educated, those who live in urban areas, those who are older, men, those who are more interested in politics, and those who trust the media more consume more news. Conversely, they also indicate that other individuals consume less news in the media. This may be because groups such as the poor or those living in rural areas face barriers to access the media; or it may be because they are not interested in or motivated to consume national and international events in the news. It is

noteworthy that similar results have been found in other regions in the world, such as Europe (Chan and Godthorpe 2007, Elvestad and Blekesaune 2008). Thus, this pattern is not exclusive to Latin America.

Conclusion

In sum, this *Insights* report shows, first, that there is a wide variation in average levels of daily news consumption, with South American countries generally being higher on the scale developed here than those in Central America and the Caribbean. Second, the report supports the argument that threats may trigger media consumption for Latin American citizens. As such, these findings support prior research done in political psychology on the role of threats, emotions, and behavior. This research emphasizes the role of a negative emotion, such as anxiety, in information seeking. Here, I assume that economic and security threats activate this negative emotion, which in turn triggers news consumption. Future research should directly assess the extent to which those who perceive an economic crisis or a security crisis develop negative emotions and, more interestingly, what kind of emotions, if any, distinguish between those who perceive and those who do not perceive threats.

Third, this report explores a personality trait related to news consumption. In a study of the US, Gerber et al. (2010) find that an open person is more likely to consume news, particularly through internet and television. They do not find evidence that this trait has an effect on levels of newspaper reading. This *Insights* report also finds the effect of this trait on news consumption, but I could not specify the effect of a specific medium. Next steps should focus on testing the specific impact of personality on consumption of each medium in Latin America, as well as the effect of other personality traits.

This report also shows that news consumption in Latin America follows the same patterns as

in other regions in the world: some particular groups consume less news in the media. It may be because they face barriers, such as lack of money to buy newspapers or time to watch news on television; or, it could be because those living in rural areas are unable to access media. More research is needed to identify as precisely as possible the factors that explain why these particular groups do not consume news in the media.

As I mentioned at the beginning, most research on news consumption has focused on the implications of news consumption for political outcomes such as political interest or participation. Here, I put the emphasis on the determinants of this consumption, a question

that has recently caught the attention of scholars. That threats trigger news consumption and that certain sociodemographic groups confront obstacles to becoming informed are important insights that can be used to address questions about the political outcomes of news consumption.

Other future avenues of research may include studies that focus on the differences in average consumption across countries. I find that Central American and Caribbean countries appear to have lower levels of news consumption than South American ones. What explains this regional difference? In short, there is more research that can be done to strengthen our understanding of this topic.

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Appendix

Appendix Table 1. Ordinary Least Squares Model of News Consumption (Design Effect Adjusted)¹³

	Coefficient	t-value
Perception of Crime as a Threat	0.044*	6.24
Perception of Economic Crisis	0.010	1.63
Open/Intellectual Personality	0.057*	9.58
Satisfaction with the Performance of the Current President	0.012	1.88
Trust in Mass Media	0.059*	9.58
Political Interest	0.078*	12.35
Female	-0.028*	-5.48
Age	0.082*	13.61
Size of Place of Residence	0.065*	7.69
Education Level	0.097*	13.25
Quintiles of Wealth	0.063*	8.69
Mexico	-0.052*	-6.27
Guatemala	-0.068*	-7.55
El Salvador	-0.064*	-8.32
Nicaragua	-0.081*	-6.78
Costa Rica	0.007	0.93
Panama	0.002	0.20
Colombia	-0.019*	-2.70
Ecuador	-0.010	-0.99
Bolivia	-0.045*	-3.74
Peru	-0.020*	-2.33
Paraguay	-0.000	-0.06
Chile	-0.023*	-3.02
Brazil	-0.104*	-6.89
Venezuela	-0.049*	-4.04
Argentina	-0.035*	-3.83
Dominican Republic	-0.023*	-3.53
Jamaica	0.008	1.13
Guyana	-0.024*	-2.08
Trinidad & Tobago	-0.019*	-2.64
Belize	-0.037*	-4.28
Suriname	-0.026*	-3.40
<i>Number of Observations</i>	33622	
<i>R-squared</i>	0.082	
<i>F</i>	46.34	

Note: Coefficients from weighted linear regression are significant at *p<0.05.

¹³ Uruguay is the country of reference.