

*A principal consequence of mass media coverage about national public affairs issues, particularly from print media, appears to be an increasing "knowledge gap" between various social strata. Previous data presented by the authors were concerned with issues largely external to the local community. More recent work raises the question whether social conflict about a community issue will tend to open the gap further, or close it. Survey data from fifteen Minnesota communities experiencing conflicts of varying magnitude indicate that as level of conflict about local issues increases, the knowledge gap actually tends to decline. Level of interpersonal communication about the issue appears to be a major intervening variable. Thus, it appears that the knowledge gap hypothesis needs to be modified according to the type of issue involved and the conflict dimensions of the issue within the community.*

## **MASS MEDIA AND THE KNOWLEDGE GAP**

### **A Hypothesis Reconsidered**

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A traditional viewpoint is that resolution of social problems is related to inputs of information. If a system is sufficiently saturated with information, according to this view, a general understanding of the topic will develop within the system.

Behind this viewpoint are two assumptions. One is that information itself contributes to problem resolution. A second one—which is the focal point of this paper—is that higher levels of information input lead to a general equalization of knowledge throughout the system.

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This second assumption, however, has been brought into question by several studies in mass communication. Self-exposure to information has frequently been found to be related to level of education. Furthermore, data in recent years indicate that the problem is not so much one of increasing knowledge, but, frequently, one of relative deprivation of knowledge. A gap in knowledge between segments within a total system is entirely possible, and since social power may be based on knowledge, relative deprivation of knowledge may lead to relative deprivation of power (see Tichenor, Donohue, and Olien, 1970; and for more recent discussions see Rogers, 1974, and Katzman, 1973).

Specifically, several studies support the hypothesis that as the flow of information into a social system increases, segments of the population with higher levels of education often tend to acquire this information at a faster rate than segments with lower levels of education. As a result, gaps in knowledge between these segments tend to increase rather than decrease. Knowledge of space research is an example; after several years of heavy media attention to space rocketry and satellites, the gap in knowledge about that research across educational status levels was greater than it had been before the space research program began. Similarly, knowledge gaps widened over time for the smoking and cancer issue.

As earlier statements of the knowledge gap hypothesis indicate, one way to conceptualize distribution and acquisition of knowledge is to view these processes within a social control framework. Within any total social system, some subsystems have patterns of behavior and values conducive to change, while others have patterns that are more resistant to change. Therefore, these predisposed subsystems tend to adopt and act upon information at a faster rate than more stagnant subsystems.

These patterns of differential acquisition of information have major consequences for maintenance of elite or special-

ized groups within the social structure and therefore may be viewed as social control through information control (Donohue, Tichenor, and Olien, 1973). Reinforcing these patterns are (a) mass media systems with characteristics (e.g., departmentalized newspapers, specialized magazines, consumer education programs) which tend to produce selective delivery of information to higher education segments; (b) higher existing levels of communication skills and knowledge among more highly educated segments, and (c) higher levels of relevant interpersonal contact among higher educational status segments.

### A NEW LOOK AT THE KNOWLEDGE GAP

While extensive data on knowledge of *national* issues support the knowledge gap hypothesis, the findings also raise a question of major theoretical and social significance. Under what conditions, if any, might this knowledge gap be reduced or eliminated?

Recent theoretical and empirical studies have led to consideration of social system variables that may affect either the existence of knowledge gaps or their magnitude. The purpose of this paper is to explore four of these variables, primarily as they pertain to the knowledge gap phenomenon in the community setting. These variables are:

- (1) the nature of the issue, particularly the extent to which it engages basic concerns in a social system;
- (2) the level of system conflict accompanying the general social definition of the issue in question;
- (3) the structure of the community, particularly the extent to which it is pluralistic or homogeneous;
- (4) the pattern of media coverage, in terms of the extent to which there is not only higher total frequency of message delivery, but also a higher level of repetitiveness, or redundancy of principal themes.

Data from a number of community studies in Minnesota, collected since 1969, will be analyzed according to these four independent variables, as they relate to the knowledge gap as a dependent variable.

#### BASIC CONCERN<sup>S</sup> AND SOCIAL CONFLICT

If knowledge gaps widen as a result of increasing the flow of information appealing to concerns of specialized groups, then that tendency to widen should be reduced to the extent that information appeals to more basic concerns in a social system. An example of a more basic social concern might be the general attachment to a community, and to its survival and maintenance.<sup>1</sup> Such concerns could be aroused where such issues as community modernization, urban renewal, or environmental restrictions on local industry are concerned. Arousal of basic concerns may be accompanied by varying levels of conflict, which may be defined as tension arising from awareness of differing public positions between groups, either within the community or between communities.<sup>2</sup>

Social conflict is regarded here as a variable which, within limits, may have positive functions for arousal and maintenance of citizen participation. Conflict within a system or subsystem about basic social concerns can lead to a revitalization of old norms or emergence of new ones (Coser, 1967).

Conflict may be related to total communicative activity in a number of ways, depending on the structure of the system (Tichenor, Rodenkirchen, Olien, and Donohue, 1973b). Under certain conditions the relationship between conflict and the knowledge gap might be linear and positive, while under other conditions it might be linear and negative or even curvilinear. A point might be reached where conflict is so intense and rancorous that conflict itself becomes the issue, rather than the original topic. Communication itself, in such cases, frequently shifts to interpersonal channels. A controversy over a local health issue, for example, might

become so explosive in a small community that formal communication ceases and negotiations to resolve it may continue on a personal, face-to-face basis. This point holds whether the conflict is within the community or between communities.

The point at which conflict produces a shift in communicative strategies (or what is often called a "communication breakdown") is a matter for empirical determination. Up to the point at which the breakdown occurs, to the extent that conflict draws attention to basic social concerns it should tend to direct attention to the issue throughout that community. The result is to overcome—at least partially—some of the selective dissemination and selective self-exposure patterns that contribute to knowledge-gap widening on topics of specialized interest.

An illustration might be a community faced with pressure from a state pollution control agency to restrict a local industry's release of pollutants in a way seen locally as detrimental to the community as a whole. The resulting tension would, theoretically, serve as a stimulant to communicative activity. This stimulant might be expected to reduce the knowledge gap, at least to a lower magnitude than it would reach if there were less conflict surrounding the issue. Presence of conflict then, increases the probability that the gap will be reduced, since there is likely to be a greater arousal of widespread concern than might occur without conflict.

#### **COMMUNITY STRUCTURE: TRADITIONAL VS. PLURALISTIC**

Community social structure, specifically the level of social pluralism in a community, would seem to be directly relevant to the knowledge gap hypothesis. A more "pluralistic" community is more highly differentiated in terms of occupational status, employment base, governmental services, religion, and other social institutions. Size is ordinarily an

indicator; the larger and more urban a community, the more pluralistic it is.

Since pluralism by definition involves differentiation and specialization of roles and functions, one would expect that the more pluralistic the community, the greater the possibilities for widening the knowledge gaps between different social strata within that community. A more pluralistic community contains more sources of information, both formal and informal, and requires more selective patterns of self-exposure among its members. In a more homogeneous community such as the small, traditional, rural service center, there are fewer specialized media of communication and more dependency upon common, informal, communication patterns. There is, consequently, a greater likelihood that in such a community, the "whole town will talk" about a topic of basic concern. Such universal discussion would, theoretically, tend to equalize information flow across status lines and narrow the knowledge gap.

Community structure and conflict are seen as interdependent variables which may have joint effects on patterns of acquisition of information. For example, in a single industry town conflict about employment issues would be heightened more rapidly than it would in a more diversified, pluralistic city (Olien, Donohue, and Tichenor, 1968). In the latter case a level of depression leading to unemployment would generally heighten such awareness.

#### **REDUNDANCY IN MEDIA COVERAGE**

If each message during a period of media publicity introduces a new theme or idea, there would be, theoretically, a greater likelihood that those already informed about the issue will be more likely to recognize, interpret, and assimilate the new message. On the other hand, greater repetition of a given theme would appear to increase the probability that less active segments of the population will eventually acquire that message. Therefore, one might expect

publicity which is more highly redundant (repeats certain themes more frequently during the period when it is publicized) to produce more equal distribution of knowledge across status levels. This pattern should hold in both high and low conflict situations.

### METHODS AND DATA SOURCES

The analysis to be presented here is based on data from several studies conducted as part of a long-term program on mass communication research at the University of Minnesota (Donohue, Olien, and Tichenor, 1974; Tichenor, Olien, and Donohue, 1973a). Most of the findings are from personal interviews conducted in sixteen different Minnesota communities since 1969. In eleven of these communities the interviews centered around issues with environmental and ecological implications—such as nuclear radiation from a power plant, release of smoke from a steel plant, mining or logging in a wilderness area, pollution of rivers or lakes, and sewage control. In the remaining four communities, the issue is political regionalization, which may be regarded as a political innovation at the time of the studies.

A major study criterion for selecting a community was the fact that the issue had been subjected to both local and regional mass media publicity. Issues were also selected to involve social conflict of varying levels.

While topics varied, issues in different communities had important features in common. Each issue had direct implications for at least one community under study. Also, each issue had arisen at least partly as a result of outside agency pressure, state or federal, and involved public decisions which would be considered or made to resolve the issue.

Adults 21 and over were selected by probability sampling methods in each community area and were interviewed in their homes by local persons trained for this project.

Knowledge in each community was measured through a two-part, open-ended item. An example: "Have you read or heard anything in recent months about a taconite plant in Silver Bay?" If the respondent answered "yes," the next question was "Can you recall the most important thing you have heard about it?" One additional probe was used with this item. Knowledge level is then determined according to the number of accurate statements which the respondent makes. Accuracy of respondent recall is based on judgments by persons who are experts on the particular topic of study.

Level of conflict is defined operationally as the extent to which respondents perceive the issue as containing tension. The measure is based on a single question, for example: "Would you say the question of the taconite plant is a touchy subject around here, or not?" The proportion saying "yes" is taken as an indicator of level of perceived conflict in the community. As a partial validity check, the open-ended knowledge responses were examined to determine whether any type of conflict among persons or groups was mentioned. The Spearman rank correlation between community scores on the open-ended conflict responses and community scores on the "touchy subject" responses is .65 ( $p < .01$ ).

Community size is used as a structural indicator of pluralism, or heterogeneity. The communities vary in size from under 1,000 to over 100,000.

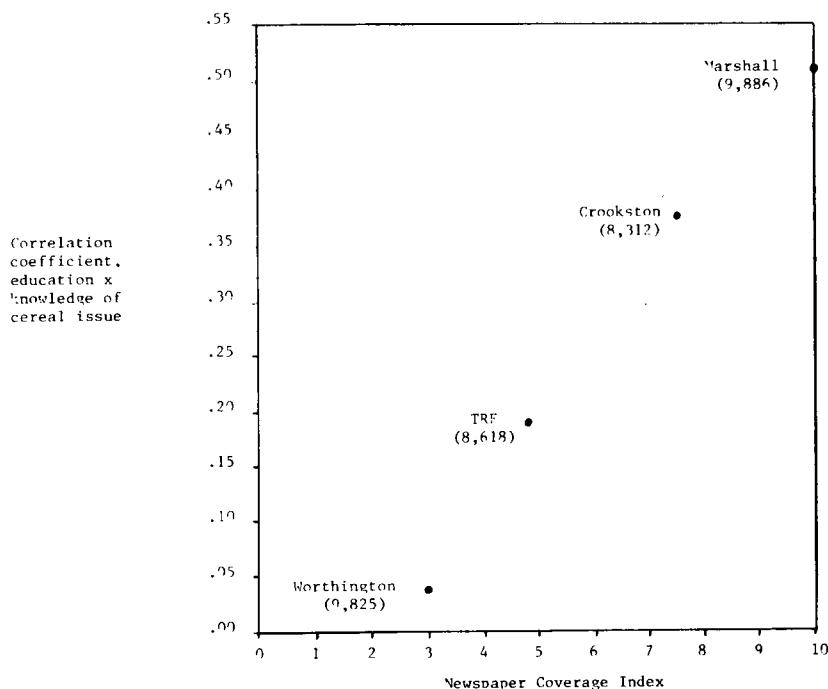
Level of education is used in these studies as an indicator of socioeconomic status. The specific measure is the number of years of formal schooling which have been completed by each individual. The knowledge gap for a given community is measured in one of two ways, depending upon the characteristics of the data. One measure is the Pearsonian correlation coefficient between level of education and level of knowledge about an issue. Another, in cases where knowledge distributions are highly skewed, is the differences, in proportion having a certain level of knowledge, between the college-educated group and those with less than college education.

Mass media coverage, for each issue, is estimated by a newspaper coverage index, based on a total of all news articles about a topic appearing in newspapers during the six months preceding a survey. The number of articles about an issue in a given newspaper is multiplied by the proportion of sample persons who report reading the newspaper in which the article appeared.

#### FINDINGS ON NONLOCAL ISSUES

According to the hypothesis, increasing information flow should be positively related to increasing knowledge gaps on issues which are nonlocal and do not arouse basic social concerns. In four of the communities studied a national issue had been in the news during the three months preceding the interviews. The issue was nutritive value of the breakfast cereals; the news had been directed almost entirely toward Congressional hearings and the breakfast food industry in general. There was virtually no implication for any individual community as such.

Data on the breakfast food issue support the basic knowledge gap hypothesis as originally stated (Figure 1). As newspaper attention to this issue increases, so does the magnitude of the positive correlation between education and knowledge. Differences in correlations are marked, ranging from a low of .05 in Worthington where the topic received the least coverage, to .51 in Marshall, where it received nearly three times as much coverage. As the population data in Figure 1 indicate, these four communities are very similar in size (between 8,300 and 9,900), and all are agricultural trade centers with similar characteristics, thus controlling pluralism in this particular case. These findings, then, lend further support to the proposition that on national issues that do not involve immediate consequences for communities, increasing media coverage leads to greater differentials in knowledge across educational status groups.



**Figure 1: NEWSPAPER COVERAGE INDEX AND STRENGTH OF CORRELATIONS BETWEEN EDUCATION AND KNOWLEDGE OF THE BREAKFAST CEREAL ISSUE IN FOUR COMMUNITIES**

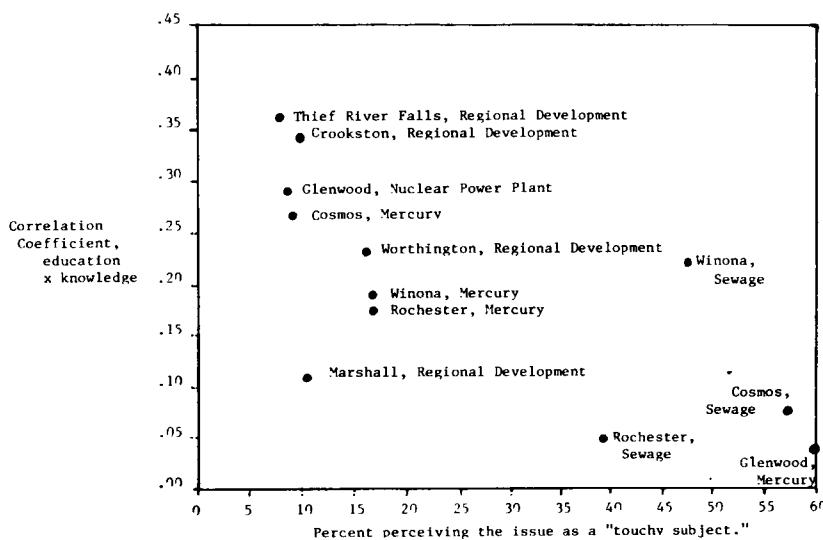
#### CONFFLICT, LOCAL ISSUES, AND THE KNOWLEDGE GAP

If data on national issues support the basic knowledge gap hypothesis, what about knowledge on local issues? Results of analyses of local issues portray a quite different pattern of relationship. For the sixteen Minnesota communities as a whole, the size of the knowledge gap was only weakly related to the newspaper coverage index and in a negative direction. The rank correlation between those two variables for the sixteen communities is  $-.29$  (n.s.). That is, there is a slight tendency for the knowledge gap between social status

segments to be narrower where there is heavier media input. These findings suggest that the original hypothesis, however well supported by previous data, may not hold for all situations. Under what conditions might the knowledge gap be lower in magnitude?

Among the variables that might contribute to a lower knowledge gap may be level of conflict. The relationship between perceived conflict and the magnitude of the knowledge gap is indicated by data in Figure 2. The correlation coefficients between education and knowledge tend to be of a higher magnitude in communities where the issues are associated with low perceived conflict. Among the six "low-perceived-conflict" communities, four have knowledge gap coefficients above .26; for the six "high-perceived-conflict" communities, four have knowledge gap coefficients below .14. The rank correlation between the conflict measure and the knowledge gap coefficient for the twelve communities and issues is  $-.72$  ( $p < .01$ ).

Data in Figure 2 reflect the importance of both the conflict dimension and the extent to which the issue arouses basic concerns. The knowledge gap has the greatest magnitude on the regional development issue, an issue of low general concern, in two similar communities of northwestern Minnesota. This issue arose with the 1969 Minnesota Regional Planning Act, which laid the ground work for establishing regional development areas. Less than a year before the survey was conducted, the state governor delineated the boundaries of eleven such regions in Minnesota. Formation of regional development commissions was to be accomplished voluntarily at the local level. The issue had received some publicity—at a level about average for the various issues in the study as a whole. Regional development, however, had not been viewed as a major issue by the population as a whole; in none of the four communities where it was studied did more than 17% view it as "very important."



**Figure 2: LEVEL OF PERCEIVED CONFLICT IN COMMUNITIES AND SIZE OF KNOWLEDGE GAP (correlation between education and knowledge) ON 12 COMMUNITY ISSUES**

In Glenwood respondents were asked about a nuclear power plant which had once been the center of a statewide controversy over safety standards. However, only a fourth of the Glenwood respondents regarded it as "very important"; it was a low conflict issue, and the knowledge gap on that issue is relatively high.

More critical in Glenwood is the issue of mercury pollution of Lake Minnewaska, a popular resort area adjoining the town. This lake has been put on a "mercury danger list" by a heavily publicized state-federal report several months before the study. A local weekly newspaper editorially claimed that the community had been treated unfairly in the report and stood to lose part of its resort business as a result.

Glenwood's mercury crisis is an almost classical example of informational consequences of an issue embodying a threat

to the entire local economic and social fabric. More than 98% in Glenwood knew about the issue—more than for any other single issue in all communities. “The whole town talked” about the issue and information distribution across educational levels was highly uniform; the knowledge gap correlation is only .04.

A similar high conflict issue, with a resulting low knowledge gap, is in Cosmos, where there had been a history of problems with sewage disposal and a bitter local dispute over how to finance a new disposal plant.

Except for Glenwood, the mercury issue was relatively remote and therefore generated low conflict. Sewage issues, however, tend to be associated with higher conflict and lower resultant knowledge gaps.

#### **COMMUNITY STRUCTURE AND THE KNOWLEDGE GAP**

One would expect, theoretically, a greater tendency for knowledge gaps to appear in more pluralistic communities than in more homogeneous ones. There are few opportunities to test this hypothesis directly, in view of the relative scarcity of community-level data on similar or identical issues. However, one set of data from the Minnesota community studies provides for at least a partial test of the effect of community structure on the conflict dimensions of the issues, and therefore, on the magnitude of the knowledge gap. These are data from two points in time in four different communities—Ely, Silver Bay, Grand Rapids, and Duluth, all in northeastern Minnesota. In 1970 and again in 1972 in these communities, surveys were made to measure knowledge level on three issues—the question of whether to mine in a federally designated wilderness area near Ely, the question of whether to place environmental restrictions on a taconite plant at Silver Bay, and the question of air pollution and closing of a steel plant at Duluth.

**TABLE 1**  
**Levels of Knowledge about Environmentally Related  
 Issues in Four Communities, 1970 and 1972**

Issues	Ely		Silver Bay		Grand Rapids		Duluth				
	1970 n = 109	1972 n = 102	1970 n = 98	1972 n = 96	1970 n = 119	1972 n = 117	Change	n = 102	1970 n = 131	1972 n = 131	Change
<b>Mining Issue</b>											
% any accurate knowledge	76%	64%	-12	45%	53%	+8	49%	36%	-13	51%	34%
<b>Taconite Issue</b>											
% any accurate knowledge	70%	59%	-11	88%	80%	-3	42%	39%	-3	69%	46%
<b>Steel Plant Issue</b>											
% any accurate knowledge	61%	36%	-25	86%	44%	-42	43%	44%	+1	79%	57%
											-22

NOTE: Boxes refer to community where the issue had the most immediate local impact.

Exploration for mining near Ely, and potential environmental consequences, had received heavy publicity shortly before the 1970 studies, but by 1972 the issue had shifted largely to the question of log harvesting in the same area. The original, specific question of mining in the wilderness area was before the courts and receiving relatively little media attention in 1972.

The steel plant in Duluth had been the city's largest employer until the late 1960s, although there had been frequent local discussion about its possible closing because of its growing obsolescence. Shortly before the 1970 study, the question of air pollution from the plant had been raised. Legislation to provide tax concessions for modernization of the plant was considered but rejected in 1971, and by 1972 when the second study was conducted, the plant had shut down its major operations and had laid off more than half its work force.

At Silver Bay one of the most widely and continuously publicized environmental issues in the Midwest concerns a taconite plant, and the question of whether "tailings"—residue left when taconite is produced from low grade ore—should continue to be released into Lake Superior. The plant employs about three-fourths of all working adults in Silver Bay, and some taconite workers commute to the plant from Ely, nearly forty miles away. The taconite issue remained highly controversial throughout the two-year period between studies. By the time of the 1972 survey the issue had been in court once and another trial was pending. The issue has significance for the entire mining industry, but is more specifically relevant to Silver Bay itself.

With the decline in media attention to the mining and steel plant issues the level of current knowledge of all three issues generally declined in the four communities between the first and second surveys (Table 1). The only exceptions are the steel issue in Grand Rapids, where familiarity was lowest among the four communities in 1970, and Silver Bay, where there was a slight increase in knowledge about the mining

issue and continuing high familiarity with the locally volatile taconite question. On each question familiarity tends to be highest in both years in the community where the issue has the most local significance. Knowledge on all issues tends to be lowest in both years in Grand Rapids, which is separated geographically from the site of the three issues, although it is in the same general "iron range" area of the state. It was included in the study for comparison purposes.

The two-year data from these communities allow for inspection of data relevant to three aspects of the knowledge gap hypothesis. One is the community structure question: given that Duluth is the most clearly pluralistic community, will the knowledge gap on nonlocal issues be greater than in the less pluralistic communities? A second is the question of local impact: will the knowledge gap be lower in a given issue in the community where that issue has the most immediate local impact? The third question concerns the general decline in publicity on two of the issues and the dropoff in familiarity (with the noted exceptions) on all three: as public attention to an issue declines, will there be a corresponding drop in the knowledge gap in cases where such gaps existed initially?

Methodological considerations lead to a different way of presenting knowledge gap data for this phase of the analysis. The high proportions having no knowledge of the issues in 1972 produced highly skewed distributions on this dimension which fail to meet the normality assumptions of Pearsonian correlation. Therefore, the data are presented in terms of the difference between proportion having any accurate knowledge between the high school and grade-school groups combined and the college-educated group. The findings are in Table 2.

First, the data in Table 2 are generally consistent with the expectation concerning community pluralism. On the two nonlocal issues in Duluth (mining and taconite) the 1970 gaps were greater than in any one of the other three communities at a time when the issues were most salient.

**TABLE 2**  
**Knowledge Differentials Between College-Educated and High School  
 or Grade School-Educated Segments, by Community, Topic and Year**

Issue	(4,904)		(3,504)		(7,247)		(100,578)	
	Ely	1970 1972	Silver Bay	1970 1972	Grand Rapids	1970 1972	Duluth	1970 1972
Mining	+5	+7	+17	-2	+12	+9	+24	+18
Taconite	+18	+28	0	-6	+22	+16	+32	-1
Steel	+25	-4	+10	+16	+35	+18	+15	-1

NOTE: Boxes refer to the community in which that issue had the most immediate local significance, in the sense that the question of mining pertained to an area near Ely, the taconite plant is at Silver Bay, and the steel plant was in Duluth itself. While differing measures of perceived importance were used in these studies, such perceptions in general corresponded with level of perceived conflict (see Tichenor, Rodenkirchen, Olien, and Donohue, 1973b).

a. The knowledge measure used in computing these differentials is based upon the proportion in the community sample having any accurate knowledge about current aspects of the issue. The figures in the table reflect the differential, in percentage points, between the college group and the high school and grade-school combined. Thus, a +5 on the mining issue in Ely in 1970 indicates that the college group was 5 percentage points higher in having any accurate knowledge on that issue than the group with less education.

Also, on the local issue, the 1970 knowledge gap in Duluth was greater than the corresponding gap for either of the smaller, more homogeneous communities. That is, the gap for steel knowledge in Duluth during 1970 was greater than the gap for taconite in Silver Bay or for mining in Ely. In spite of the fact that the steel plant issue was subjected to heavy publicity in both Duluth newspapers and in other media in the state, and had reached high conflict proportions, there was still a fifteen percentage-point differential between the two segments of the population. The pluralistic nature of this metropolitan community, with its greater diversity of social concerns and economic support, seems to be a major factor.

On the second question, these data suggest even more directly than those above that an issue with sharp local impact—presumably arousing general concern about community survival and maintenance—is likely to be accompanied by more equal distribution of knowledge. In Ely in

1970, for example, the gap was low (5 points) for the local mining issue and 18 and 25 points, respectively, for the taconite and steel issues. In Silver Bay the knowledge gap for the taconite issue was zero in 1970, whereas gaps did appear for each of the other two issues.

In Grand Rapids the 1970 pattern is consistent with the nature of the community. Grand Rapids, while more diversified than Ely, nevertheless is also a recreation area, and the potential impact of mining on tourism related more directly to Grand Rapids' concerns than would be true for either taconite or steel; well under 20% of the Grand Rapids respondents reported occupations related in any way to steel or taconite production, lowest of all four communities. Therefore, the lower knowledge gap in Grand Rapids on the mining issue in 1970, compared with the greater gaps on the other two issues, is consistent with general social and economic structure of that community.

Changes in the magnitude of the gaps from 1970 to 1972 are consistent with the basic knowledge gap hypothesis. Where gaps do exist as a result of media attention and other factors, a decline in attention to the issues from mass media and other social institutions will lead to a reduction of the gap as knowledge itself declines. There are only two cases in Table 2 where gaps, if relatively high initially, did not decline in 1972. One is on the steel issue in Silver Bay, where the increase is negligible. The other is the taconite issue in Ely. It should be pointed out that, with the continuing legal battle over the taconite plant, this issue remained in the news to a much greater extent than the other two issues did. Another special factor in Ely is that, during the months preceding the 1972 study, a second weekly newspaper began publication in the community in direct competition with an established one. This newspaper immediately gave heavy attention to both the mining and taconite issues, and its initial efforts to gain circulation may well have contributed to differential distribution of knowledge, assuming a possible tendency for a

new print medium to be acquired first by more highly educated segments.

#### **CONTENT REDUNDANCY**

One hypothesis under study was that greater repetition by mass media of certain themes would be negatively related to the magnitude of the knowledge gap. This hypothesis was not generally supported by the data, either for repetition by local media, by regional or statewide media, or both. There was a tendency for high repetition to be accompanied by lower gaps in situations where there is less community conflict, whereas in high conflict situations, the reverse tended to occur. In neither case were the patterns marked enough to meet conventionally accepted levels of statistical significance. The conflict nature of the issue, its immediate relevance to the community, and the nature of the community appear to be more fundamental factors.

#### **CONCLUSION**

Recent theoretical and empirical studies have provided support for several modifications of the general knowledge gap hypothesis:

- (1) Where the issue appears to arouse general concern for a community as a whole, knowledge about that issue is more likely to become evenly distributed across educational status levels.
- (2) This equalization is more likely to occur when the issue develops in a climate of social conflict.
- (3) Such equalization in knowledge is more likely to occur in a small, homogeneous community than in a large, pluralistic one.
- (4) Knowledge gaps on specific issues, if they appear initially, may tend to decline as public attention wanes.

This research has been focused deliberately on local crisis situations, which may reflect a minority of the public affairs topics which are being communicated regularly within a community. If conflict arousal is a major factor in equalizing information distribution, it may well be limited by the system's capacity to accommodate conflict. As other analyses indicate, the general tendency in the smaller, more homogeneous community is to avoid conflict to the extent possible in the interests of community maintenance (Olien, Donohue, and Tichenor, 1968). In larger systems conflict appears as a requirement for feedback within the system (Donohue, Tichenor, and Olien, 1973). Since greater differentiation itself tends to lead to more differential acquisition of knowledge, conflict in such systems may become crucial in determining or limiting the magnitude of that differential.

A fundamental variable here is the extent to which the issue arouses basic social concerns. Methodologically, this paper is confined to situations where such presumed concerns relate to community of residence and/or employment. A major question for further research is whether arousal of more individualistic concerns in society will lead to similar levels of conflict and equalization of information, or whether such consequences are limited to cases where the concerns themselves relate directly to social structure.

#### NOTES

1. Pride in the local community is frequently evenly distributed across socioeconomic segments (see Minneapolis *Star Metro Poll*, 1967).
2. The systems approach is a generalized analytical framework, and as such, is an abstraction. Identification of specific systems and subsystems depends upon the level of abstraction being applied in a given empirical setting. For example, a subsystem in a particular analysis might be an interest group in a community which is seen as part of a total system. In another analysis, a town might be viewed as a subsystem of a county or state; in still other cases, counties or states might be defined as subsystems of a total national system.

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