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ABSTRACT

Reporting on a group of class projects undertaken by a series of his college-level "Broadcasting and Society" courses, the author concludes that there is great value in encouraging undergraduates to do their own original research. Among the topics researched by the students are the effect of television on nuns, television news viewing habits of residents of Lafayette, Indiana, automated and non-automated radio stations, opinions on television soap operas, and effects of television advertisement, television violence, and radio commercials. (CH)

THE UNDERGRADUATE AS RESEARCHER: SELECTED STUDIES IN MASS COMMUNICATION

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Original research projects are seldom undertaken by undergraduates. It is generally assumed that these students lack the background, the methodology, and the ability to conceive and execute such research. More typically, the undergraduate is required to submit a term paper to satisfy course requirements.

Some professors, particularly those who teach large survey courses, have eliminated term paper requirements altogether. Others have modified their requirements to give their students a variety of ways to satisfy course requirements.

I have chosen this latter alternative for the ninety students who enroll in Broadcasting and Society, the introductory mass communication course I teach each semester at Purdue.

Around two years ago, I encouraged those students who wanted to do something different to determine the nature of their own projects. The majority still write term papers, book reviews, or viewing reports. But each semester about ten to twenty of my students engage in what I'd like to call "mini-research." With a certain amount of professorial supervision, they formulate their own research questions, design their data-gathering instruments, collect and analyze their data, and report their findings.

The topics these undergraduates pursue and the conclusions they reach are generally unique and creative. And frequently these topics have been overlooked by those of us who would like to call ourselves "sophisticated"

researchers. The balance of this paper will present some of these undergraduate research projects.

One of my students, Peggy Mahara, discovered that television had only recently entered the lives of seven nuns, aged 36 to 71, who lived in a cloistered convent. She interviewed each of the sisters including several who had entered the sisterhood before television was commonplace in American society. The nuns had had their set for about four years and, prior to that, their only source of news came from visiters.

The sisters now believe that their prayers are more authentic because of their greater knowledge of current events. Newscasts are their favorite programs and Walter Cronkite is their favorite newsman. The sisters even wrote Cronkite a fan letter -- and he replied.

Before acquiring their television set the nuns had neither registered nor voted in any election. They have since voted in the last two Presidential elections and they feel strongly about political and social issues which they previously did not know even existed.

TV commercials have introduced them to cake mixes and influenced their grocery buying. Situation comedies have given the sisters an understanding of teenage slang. The nuns were enthusiastic viewers of space shots and the recent Olympic games.

Despite their increased awareness of current events, however, the nuns do not subscribe to a newspaper. The only magazine they receive is TV Guide.

In another study, Kevin Kelley conducted a telephone survey to ask Lafayette residents about their TV news viewing habits. Only eight of the seventy-six people he phoned declined to answer his questions. Kelley

believes that people enjoy expressing their opinions -- even in student surveys -- because they rarely get an opportunity to tell anybody what they think.

Kelley's survey results and the Nielsen ratings for the same period were very similar. CBS and NBC had almost identical audience sizes for the dinnertime news with ABC a poor third. Kelley's data gave the dinnertime news and late night news the same rating while Nielsen's data indicated that more people view late night news. Maybe we Lafayette folk go to bed a little earlier than the subjects Nielsen polled.

One of the most ambitious projects, an analysis of KFIZ-AM and the community of Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, was completed by Maureen Merhoff during her spring vacation. Miss Merhoff examined the demographic composition of the community and the history and programming content of the station. She conducted extensive interviews with the station manager, several disc jockeys, the city manager, and numerous community leaders including a chamber of commerce vice president, the superintendent of schools, four businessmen, and the president of the community theater.

Miss Merhoff concluded with these words: "The people of Fond du Lac, the majority of whom have spent their last twenty years in the city, are "at home" with KFIZ. They can laugh at Doug McGrath's corny farm jokes when the non-resident driving through town would shake his head and change stations. The Wilma of "Wilma's World" may be the advertising manager's wife and a bit "un-cosmopolitan" but the Fond du Lac housewife who went to grade school with her can identify. Perhaps KFIZ should give up trying so hard to be

"with it" and simply be themselves. A bit corny, quite "small townish," and often downright unintelligible, the station provides a real source of entertainment for a community that's trying to hang on tightly to its small town way of life."

Automated radio programming was a topic of special interest to Richard Armstrong, a Purdue undergraduate with a broadcast engineering background. Armstrong mailed questionnaires to twenty Indiana radio stations, ten of which were known to be automated while the remainder were known to lack automated programming. Six stations from each group returned the questionnaires.

All six of the automated stations were pleased with their programming though one manager cautioned that automation was a good thing for FM but not for AM. The principal arguments against automation, as given by the non-automated station managers, included the high cost of the equipment, the lack of programming flexibility, and loss of personal touch.

Television soap operas was the subject of Helen McConnell's survey. She distributed 400 one-page questionnaires to residence hall coeds and received 186 returns. About forty-three percent of the girls who returned the questionnaires confessed to being frequent soap opera viewers. Another twenty-one percent admitted to occasional viewing, and all but six of the 186 subjects knew of mothers, sisters, grandmothers, and friends who viewed and enjoyed the soapers. Over fifty-eight percent of the subjects insisted that soap operas were not realistic but twenty-eight percent stated that they could relate to certain characters in the dramas.

Carolyne Jones distributed a one-week television viewing diary to twenty-four students and compared their viewing selections with similar ARB diary-generated ratings for the same time period. The student showed a marked preference for movies during prime time viewing. ARB's number one program, "Marcus Welby, M.D.," was number seventeen on the student poll. ARB's number two and three programs, "Cannon," and "All in the Family," didn't make the student top twenty. TV football was popular with students, as expected, while the most frequently viewed daytime programs were re-runs of "Hogan's Heroes," "Love--American Style," and "Superman."

Robin Steel employed telephone coincidental techniques to learn about the viewing habits of 101 randomly selected Lafayette families. All calls were made between 8:30 and 9:30 p.m. across seven consecutive evenings. The survey generated considerable data. One of the more interesting observations revealed that more television sets were tuned to NBC than the other two networks. But ABC shows attracted more viewers per set.

Several students conducted market surveys relating to television advertising. Allison Blaine interviewed shoppers near the dog food section of a Munster, Indiana supermarket on two successive days. She found that most shoppers could not relate specific television commercials to the products they purchased. Miss Blaine also collected some hard core evidence on non-verbal communication. One day she dressed quite carefully in "establishment" garb. The next day she wore a sweatshirt and jeans. Shoppers were quite willing to speak to the establishment interviewer but other shoppers tried to avoid her casual counterpart.

Kathi Elmore hypothesized that owners of color television sets would tend to buy detergent in boxes with intense colors such as blue, red, or green, while owners of black and white sets would buy detergent in light colored boxes such as yellow, pale orange, or light pink. Miss Elmore postulated that blue is bright and a favorite color of American women but that blue looks dark or dirty on a black and white set. Conversely, yellow appears light on a black and white set and, consequently, is thought to be clean, pure, even virginal.

Data was collected at the detergent counter of a Lafayette supermarket. Twenty-three or 60.5 percent of the people interviewed owned color sets which is identical with the 60 percent color penetration known to exist in Lafayette. Two-thirds of the color sets were owned by persons over forty years of age. Seventy-three percent of the black and white sets were owned by people under forty.

Of the seventeen light-colored boxes that were sold, fourteen or 82.4 percent were sold to owners of black and white sets. Sixteen or 76.2 percent of the twenty-one intensely colored boxes sold were purchased by owners of color television sets.

The implications of this "mini-research" project are profound. If the intended consumer of a product is a young buyer, he will probably view the commercial for that product on a black and white set and, consequently, show a preference to those products in lighter packages. Conversely, product s intended for older viewers will be viewed on color sets where more intense colors seem to have the marketing advantage.

Marketing specialists may not want to re-design their packaging on the strength of this limited study. They may, however, want to replicate this

study using a larger sample and controlling for extranious variables.

A very different type of study was conducted by Perry Hammock. He measured viewers perception of and reaction to TV violence. Two distinct samples of twenty-five subjects each were asked to complete a ten-item questionnaire. One sample included residents from Fairfield, Connecticut, a suburb of New York City. The second sample consisted of residents of Lebanon, Indiana, a rural-oriented Midwestern community of 15,000.

Hammock hypothesized that Easterners, because they were more liberal, would be more tolerant of TV violence than Midwesterners. His data disproved the hypothesis.

In all the questions on violence, Easterners voted for less violence, less glorification, and less emphasis than did Midwesterners. The Midwesterners indicated that TV in general affected them more, that violence on TV accounted for less air time, and that violence on TV affected them less than Easterners. Hammock rationalized his conclusions by citing the heavier saturation of violence in the East, where violence strikes closer to home, than in the Midwest where violence is something that "happens in the big city to other folks."

The most sophisticated study, at least from the standpoint of methodology, involved a measurement of audience reaction to demographically oriented radio commercials. Gerald Hanna, a senior with no background in statistics, utilized semantic differential scaling measures, two separate two-way analyses of variance, and a Newman-Keuls post hoc analysis to prove his hypothesis that young adult listeners respond more positively to commercials written for their age group than to commercials written for younger or older listeners.

In this study all subjects heard three different commercials for Choc-O-Flakes, an imaginary breakfast cereal. One of the commercials was written for

children, the second for young adults, and the third for mature adults. Three different groups of subjects, a 9:30 class, a 10:30 class, and a 4:30 class, were used and the order of the stimuli varied so that each group heard a different commercial first.

Analysis revealed that both the young adult and mature adult versions were rated more positively by the subjects than the child version. There was no significant difference between means for the young adult and mature adult versions, no significant order effect, and no significant interaction. But subjects in the 4:30 class rated all three commercials significantly lower than did subjects in the 9:30 and 10:30 classes.

Hanna received assistance in his computer programming and analysis but he was able to apply statistical methodology to his own data while still an undergraduate. I didn't get that opportunity until I had completed three graduate-level courses in statistics. Hanna has since indicated a desire to take graduate work in statistics and methodology and I can't help but think that this research project provided some of the encouragement that led to that decision.

These are only some of the research projects my students have completed in the last two years. And they are abbreviated summaries at best.

As I near the end of each semester, I peer over the top of a mountainous pile of term papers, book reviews, and special projects such as those which I've described today. Usually I mutter a profane oath or two and the words "never again." But then I find a couple papers that really turn me on and I'm inclined to say, "I'll do it one more semester."