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# Public Radio Listener Data Analysis: Mass Communication Research Course Student Projects

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# PUBLIC RADIO LISTENER DATA ANALYSIS:
## *Mass communication research course student projects*

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Faculty across the country are becoming increasingly aware of the usefulness of survey data in communication courses (Thorpe, 2000). Perhaps nowhere is this more important than in the quantitatively oriented research skills course (Bolding, 1996), particularly in the development of teaching models (Poindexter, 1998). The purpose of this article is to show how one public radio listener survey was used to instruct undergraduate mass communication students about the research process.

### Teaching Students about the Literature Review

Teaching public relations, advertising, broadcasting, and journalism students about conducting studies should "never begin...without first consulting available literature to learn what has been done, how it was done, and what results were generated" (Wimmer & Dominick, 2000, p. 27). Library research, thus, in the course was taught within the larger framework of Wimmer and Dominick's eight-step research process: 1. Selection of a problem; 2. Review of existing research and theory; 3. Statement of hypothesis or research question; 4. Determination of appropriate methodology and research design; 5. Data collection; 6. Analysis and interpretation of data; 7. Presentation of results; and 8. Replication (p. 20).

Students in the mass communication research course were given the problem of how to better understand motivations of public radio supporters. As such, students discussed the selection of the problem and were sent to the library to identify previous research on public radio. Students used electronic databases such as EBSCO to find: 1. Academic journals that had articles about public radio (*Journal of Radio Studies, Feedback*, and *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*); 2. Trade publication articles (*Broadcasting & Cable*); and 3. Government documents and publications. The focus of the library search was on articles on public radio audience research.

### Public Radio Research

It has been established that there is a need for research in the general area of public radio and the specific concern about fund raising and marketing (Piper-Aiken, 1997). The growth of audience research by public radio stations emerged during the 1980s as managers accepted the notion of "...market considerations over the industry's social and cultural imperatives" (Stavitsky, 1995, p. 177). The movement toward audience research has been called a "research revolution" in the public radio industry (Stavitsky, 1995, p. 177; Giovannoni, 1991). This occurred within a larger context of a weakening U.S. economy during the 1980s, the deregulation of broadcasting, and the battle for

funding from Congress (Hanson, 1999). Public radio has come to look more like commercial radio: "Public radio, which was created to have a diverse format that would appeal to the widest audience, has changed the most to reach the group that is most likely to support its service" (p. 353). As public radio stations were faced during the 1990s with the threat of federal funding cutbacks, they turned to their listeners to increase local support (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 1995; *Broadcasting & Cable*, 1995).

Piper-Aiken (1997) found that public radio listener-members had a positive attitude toward marketing strategies. Listeners appeared to understand the need to financially support the efforts of the public radio station. Previous research has offered only a general understanding of the factors behind a listener making a contribution and the motivations for it. The purpose of the present study is to focus on those factors and motivations, and to show how student-based research of public radio listening may make an important contribution. The research questions were:

RQ1: What factors influenced listeners to contribute to a public radio station? How important were those factors?

RQ2: How valuable was the use of public radio audience data in teaching undergraduates about research?

## Methodology

In Fall 1995, a Midwestern metropolitan university public radio station commissioned a study of its 3,000 member database. The consultant devised a three-page mail survey to study listener behavior and attitudes about financial support for the station, programming, contributions, and fund drives. Two sections of the survey focused on factors influencing recent contributions to the station and motivations for providing funding. One wave of mailings was completed in October 1995. Additionally, respondents were asked about their occupations and family income. An initial summary of the data was reported to the station, but no further analyses were conducted. The data collected were part of a larger study that included two focus group sessions in November 1994 (Dominowski, 1994)

The proprietary data were released to the research team in the Summer of 1999 for secondary analysis. As part of mass communication research courses taught by one of the authors of this article in Fall 1999 and Spring 2000, students conducted a thorough literature review, framed literature-based research questions, entered the data in SPSS, and conducted a secondary analysis. There were 361 usable responses (12.0 percent response rate).

The survey asked listeners to think about their most recent contribution to the station. A five-point Likert scale was employed to ask them if they agreed or disagreed with eleven possible factors for making a contribution. A second section of the survey used a five-point Likert scale to ask how important or unimportant were ten possible motivations.

## Results

The first research questions asked about the factors influencing listener support and the importance of those factors. There were four statements of agreement: I listen to Kxxx and feel an obligation to support it; A contribution to Kxxx supports programming I

like; I have always received the gifts or premiums I requested; and I have received these gifts or premiums promptly.

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**Table 1**

*Factors that Influenced Recent Contributions to a Public Radio Station*

Please indicate agreement with the following reasons:

| Item | Mean | S.D. |
|---|---|---|
| I listen to Kxxx and feel an obligation to support it. | 1.54 | 0.63 |
| A contribution to Kxxx supports programming I like. | 1.59 | 0.65 |
| I have always received the gifts or premiums I requested. | 1.85 | 0.76 |
| I have received these gifts or premiums promptly. | 1.94 | 0.83 |
| Kxxx thanked me for and appreciated my contribution. | 2.05 | 0.88 |
| Kxxx answers my letters or phone calls promptly and cordially. | 2.35 | 0.85 |
| Kxxx's fund-raising activities encourage me to contribute. | 2.72 | 0.95 |
| I can't receive Kxxx's signal clearly—it is difficult to listen. | 3.24 | 1.05 |
| I listen to Kxxx less than I used to. | 3.39 | 0.94 |
| I wanted the gift or premium which was offered, so I contributed. | 3.57 | 0.81 |
| I cannot afford to contribute to Kxxx. | 3.80 | 0.56 |

N's ranged from a low of 144 to a high of 329 out of the 363 survey respondents. In the Likert scale, 1=strongly agree, 2=agree, 3=not sure, 4=disagree, 5=strongly disagree.

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There were three statements of weaker agreement: Kxxx thanked me for and appreciated my contribution; Kxxx answers my letters or phone calls promptly and cordially; Kxxx's fund-raising activities encourage me to contribute. There were four statements

on which listeners leaned toward disagreement: I can't receive Kxxx's signal clearly—difficult to listen; I listen to Kxxx less than I used to; I wanted the gift or premium which was offered, so I contributed; and I cannot afford to contribute to Kxxx.

The second part of the first research question asked listeners to indicate the impotance of factors influencing their decision to contribute. None of the items were considered very important or important. Six of the statements were neutral or leaned toward neutral.

**Table 2**

*Importance of Factors Influencing Recent Contributions to a Public Radio Station*

Please indicate the importance as a contributor in renewing station membership:

| Item | Mean | S.D. |
|------|------|------|
| Knowing exactly when my membership expires. | 2.70 | 1.10 |
| Knowing the amount that Kxxx receives from state and federal taxes. | 2.74 | 1.11 |
| Receiving the quarterly newsletter, the Kxxx Voice. | 2.92 | 1.00 |
| Knowing how many people listen to or contribute to Kxxx. | 3.01 | 1.11 |
| Receiving the Kxxx membership card with special retail discounts. | 3.08 | 1.08 |
| Receiving a call or letter from Kxxx thanking me for my contribution. | 3.13 | 1.15 |
| Hearing testimonials from listeners about why they support Kxxx. | 3.27 | 1.16 |
| Hearing testimonials from local celebrities who support public radio. | 3.39 | 1.13 |
| Receiving a gift or premium when contributing to Kxxx. | 3.78 | 1.02 |
| Hearing my name on the air after contributing to Kxxx. | 4.10 | 0.92 |

N's ranged from a low of 339 to a high of 342 out of the 363 survey respondents. In the Likert scale, 1=very important, 2=important, 3=neither important nor unimportant, 4=unimportant, 5=very unimportant.

Two other statements leaned toward unimportant on the scale. The strongest opinions were on two statements considered unimportant: Receiving a gift or premium when contributing to Kxxx; and Hearing my name on the air after contributing to Kxxx.

The second research question asked about the value of using public radio audience data in teaching undergraduates about research. Although the students were able to enter the data, conduct a secondary analysis of it, write research papers, and present findings, the most important lessons were on the limitations in the use of secondary data (Wimmer & Dominick, 2000). The use of audience data was considered to be somewhat valuable in the teaching of research methods to undergraduates. Specifically, students applied textbook knowledge about research to: (1) learn how to conduct a comprehensive literature review; (2) be able to formulate research questions that could be tested by the data; (3) become competent in the use of SPSS software; (4) understand how to interpret data; (5) use a writing and editing process in the research paper context; and (6) be able to present their results to peers and defend challenges to interpretation of data.

The presentations were an opportunity for each student to report their results and interpret the data. Each student was given ten minutes to share with the class his or her focus of research. The paper presentation was a required, graded assignment. The formal presentations each lasted five to seven minutes, followed by questions from other students. Some of the students provided handouts of their data tables, while others used the Elmo projection system or PowerPoint slides. The students learned that research results were open to challenge.

## Conclusion

The audience data suggested that there may be groupings of factors influencing a contribution—the supportive relationship between the station and the listener; communication from the station; and a lack of problems in the station-listener relationship. Likewise, the importance of various factors may be reduced to a knowledge of details about the station; an emphasis on group membership; and the relative unimportance of testimonials and gifts. The most significant finding from the data appeared to be that although listeners received gifts and premiums, these perks were not important in the decision to renew membership. It is not known how honest respondents were in their devaluation of station gifts and other rewards.

The limitations of the data presented problems and opportunities for the students in the research course. First, they learned about the value of a literature review in aiding interpretation of data. However, question wording and design of the survey were problematic. The inclusion of untested items and the omission of other questions produced a limited view of public radio station members. It was clear that the consultant had not comprehensively reviewed the literature prior to design of the instrument, and new studies became available after collection of the data. In the end, students came to an understanding that the use of quantitative data does not always lead to substantively new knowledge. Thus, they came to a rather sophisticated realization about the importance of up-front time in conducting a research project. The conceptualization process should lead to collection of more useful data.

Future research should redesign the survey instrument to take into account the tations of the previous design. At the same time, the area of public radio research to become more specific in its conceptualization of the issues. Scholars and practi ers need to address whether the survey is the best way to tap into listener percepti about the station, the fund-raising process, and the motivations for membership.

In the end, undergraduate mass communication research courses provide fertil ground for expanding the value of academic studies. Opportunities exist to teach students about research issues in a broadcast industry setting. The use of real data only makes for a richer student experience, it also allows faculty members to expa the scope of research agendas. The integration of teaching and research at the unc graduate level is bound to promote interest in and understanding of the field of n communication research.

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