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ABSTRACT

Noting that the trend in the newspaper industry from the predictive-control model to the explanative-naturalistic model mirrors a trend in the communication discipline toward qualitative research and more meaningful connections between industry and academia, a study investigated Sedgwick County, Kansas residents' concerns regarding politics and politicians. Focused, personal interviews were conducted with residents served by the "The Wichita Eagle." The newspaper requested that a large, random sample be used so that results could serve for quantitative purposes as well as for qualitative interviews. Advantages and disadvantages of the personal interview method were discovered: for example, a large number of the interviewers reported a "therapeutic effect" of the study on the respondents; also, the face-to-face interview method allowed for an explanation of how and why citizens speak out on certain subjects. Conversely, the methods used tended to reduce the representation of certain groups--the elderly, the handicapped, the poor; and the presence of the interviewer may have affected how some subjects responded to questions. However, a composite picture emerged indicating that: (1) most respondents were registered voters who looked to the mass media for their information; (2) economic and moral problems pervaded their conversation; (3) they felt detached from government and alienated from their elected officials; (4) in order of importance, crime, education, taxes, economy, abortion, family, status of government leadership, and health care concerned the respondents; and (5) most respondents spoke confidently and definitively about how they viewed the paper's coverage and offered suggestions for improvement. Two of the most provocative findings were that the issues identified by respondents were often entwined with larger issues, and that "how" people talk about issues was more meaningful than "what" people identified as issues. (Contains 20 references.) (RS)

Helping Newspapers Become More Responsive To Community Concerns: An In-Depth Interview Research Project with Sedgwick County Residents

Funding Agency: Knight-Ridder, Inc.
Principle Investigators: Dr. Susan Schultz Huxman, Dr. Sharon Hartin Iorio.
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Background:

As newspaper readership has declined while the chain ownership of papers has flourished in the past two decades, many metropolitan papers are now confronted with a growing concern voiced by media consumers. Registered variously as, "my paper is out of touch with my concerns," and "I know my paper is not owned locally, so it doesn't care what I think"(Knight-Ridder research, 1991), these protests have reached the ears of executive editors and publishers. The loudest complaints by far, according to Patrick Scully, managing editor of the National Issues Forums, concern the media's coverage of elections. He writes: "People can't be bothered to vote, because there is little, if any, media discussion of substantive issues that are relevant to voters' lives. The reliance on superficial snippets of news and ubiquitous negative campaign advertisements have served to shut out American voters, to make them feel that the issues that dominate elections have little to do with their daily lives and concerns" (1992, 19). Journalists have admitted to this deficiency in coverage. Writes Carl Bernstein of *The Guardian*, "In the Reagan years we in the press rarely went outside Washington to look at the relationship between policy and legislation and judicial appointments to see how the administration's policies were affecting the people. . . "(Scully, 19).

The growing inability of the media to connect with their audiences on a personal level is especially troublesome in the newspaper industry. According to communication professor, Keith Stamm, "More than any other media of mass communication, the use of newspapers has been viewed within a community setting"(1985, 3). The sociologist Robert Park observed as early as the 1920's that newspaper circulation coincided most closely with the functional boundaries of an urban community and that newspapers were largely inventions for extending interpersonal channels of communication (1929).

Some editors have responded to the growing problem of detachment between their papers and their readers with such innovative ideas as "zoned editions"--special editions tailored specifically for a particular neighborhood. Zoned editions requires that newspapers invest more time and effort and money in covering neighborhood concerns (Smith, 1988). Others have experimented with special sections designed to induce reader participation directly. For example, *The Wichita Eagle*, a Knight-Ridder newspaper, started a "You Be The Editor" section wherein readers could write, call, or fax in their decision on what stories should be covered and what angle of coverage should be used. As a result of the research we conducted for Knight-Ridder, *The Eagle* launched a campaign entitled: "The People Project" which has run every Sunday for nine months. As Editor Davis Merritt Jr. explained in the anniversary issue of the campaign: "The People Project is a collaborative effort to give shape and momentum to your voices and ideas, with the goal of reasserting personal power and responsibility for what goes on around us. It breaks new ground in the relationship between a newspaper and its readers and community, which is why this column appears on the front page. It is not something that *The Eagle* is directing; rather, *The Eagle* --and our broadcast partners--are making available the space and time for an informed community discussion of crucial issues.

Recent interviews with dozens of you show a growing realization that the time has come to do just that, to regain control over our collective circumstances"(June 21, 1992). Efforts like these, while piecemeal, are beginning to address subscribers needs.

Marketing and research directors in the newspaper business who are charting sagging readership trends are beginning to recognize that more in-depth, meaning-oriented research must be conducted to ascertain the variety and depth of subscriber dissatisfaction. The form of research that newspaper marketers are now turning to is qualitative research--a sharp departure from the standard quantitative studies that have defined the industry for over a quarter of a century. Recognizing the limitations of quantitative studies conducted under the theoretical orientation of one-way communication models (i.e., audience effects, agenda-setting), the newspaper industry is beginning to fund studies that will help them view their constituency as "active" communicators and as participants in a communication model. In the words of a former research director for Knight-Ridder: Traditional news research is no longer regarded as a panacea for circulation problems. . .It has been difficult to make use of readership studies. . . For example, demographic analysis of readership located differences in readership behavior, but what did such differences mean?"(Stamm, xi).

The trend in the industry from the predictive-control model to the explanative-naturalistic model mirrors a trend in academia, especially in the communication discipline. Our field has witnessed a major shift since the 1980's from the quantitative to the qualitative study of media audiences (Lindloff, 1991, 23; Weaver, 1992, 4). The qualitative method has become in the words of J. A. Anderson: "a research paradigm which emphasizes inductive, interpretive methods applied to the everyday world which is seen as subjective and socially created"(1987, 384). The aim of qualitative research is as Thomas Lindloff notes

"to preserve the form, content, and context of social phenomena and analyze their qualities, rather than separate them from historical and institutional surroundings"(1991, 24). Especially germane to the newspaper industry, Lindloff explains that the value of the method is that researchers can now explain what the behavior or verbal expression of audiences mean and can show the meaningful coherence of these expressions, as it is experienced by the people who are studied (25). Of course, many researchers in the communication discipline have practiced the method for a decade and can rightly be called "pioneers" in qualitative research, including Philipsen (1975), Guba (1981), Douglas (1976), Lecompte and Goetz (1982), Jensen (1987), Lindlof (1987), Lull (1980) and others, but it has only been in the last several years that some scholars who have traditionally practiced quantitatively are now conducting qualitative studies or are at least triangulating their methods (Weaver, 1992).

The upsurge in the study of communication from a qualitative perspective has meant that more meaningful connections can be made between academia and industry. The special expertise required to conduct valid qualitative study has meant that industry must rely on trained communication specialists to conduct interviews and observe communication interaction in order to elicit the "how" and "why" answers they now seek. In the newspaper industry, where more in-depth information is needed to know how best newspapers can reconnect with their readership, and rekindle the essence of community, this method can be particularly fruitful. We engaged in just such a research project funded by Knight-Ridder for their Wichita paper, *The Wichita Eagle*, in the fall of 1991. The purpose, method, and findings of that research are detailed in this paper.

Research Questions:

In early September of 1991, the executive editor of *The Wichita Eagle* approached two faculty members who teach research methods in the Elliott School of Communication, Wichita State University about conducting a research study. Because the *Eagle's* research initiative was motivated by the need to know more about their subscribers, we suggested a qualitative study. Specifically, we discovered that the *Eagle* management team's interest in this research were threefold: 1) to help plan the newspaper's coverage of the 1992 elections by learning Sedgwick county citizens' concerns, presenting those concerns as specific questions to politicians, and providing information via the newspaper on candidates' positions on those issues, 2) to encourage voter registration, and 3) to elicit feedback on subscribers' opinions of their newspaper coverage. After a plenary session, the following interrelated research questions emerged:

I. What are Sedgwick county residents most worried about these days in their communities, neighborhoods, and day-to-day lives? In what ways do they voice these concerns?

II. How do these concerns translate to political action? How responsive are our elected officials and the media in publicizing these concerns?

Method:

The method chosen was a qualitative study centering on focused, personal interviews. However, the newspaper requested that we use a large, random sample for our population size so that the study could be used for quantitative purposes too. One hundred and ninety-two subjects out of a pool of two hundred

and seventy completed the interview process. Seventeen graduate student researchers conducted the interviews using open-ended questionnaire guides.

The rationale for choosing this interview method was that only through sustained and focussed personal contact could the research questions be ascertained fully and genuinely. ""How" individuals talk about their concerns and how those concerns are "linked" to one another cannot be elicited quantitatively or through more traditional questionnaire procedures (i.e., mail, telephone). In addition, the focused interview method provides detailed information from individuals that focus groups neglect and is more economical than longer, unstructured interviews both in terms of time and financial requirements. Merton et. al.(1990) characterizes the strengths of the personal interviews as a research technique uniquely situated to emphasize the range, depth, specificity, and personal context of people's messages (12). Frey et. al. (1992) assesses the value of personal interviews in terms of the rapport established between interviewer and respondent which encourages respondents to share significantly more information than they would when completing a questionnaire(126). Significantly for this study, the primary weakness of personal interviews for qualitative research---a lack of generalizability---was attenuated by the fact that the sample size was random and large.

Random digit dialing by *Eagle* employees identified two hundred seventy Sedgwick county residents willing to participate in the project. Some demographic data was taken at the time of the initial phone call: age, party affiliation, voter registration, gender, etc.

Those who agreed to be interviewed were mailed a letter explaining the project. Respondents were then contacted by telephone by one of seventeen graduate students working on the project. The telephone call reiterated

the purpose of the project and set up an interview date at one of five locations in the city.

The interview guide was prepared, pre-tested, and revised prior to conducting the first interview . Also, interviewers attended several training sessions and conducted practice interviews prior to the commencement of the interview process. Training was conducted by the principle investigators.The interview guide contained instructions outlining the manner in which the interviews were to be conducted. Materials on interpersonal skills involved in conducting interviews were duplicated and distributed to the interviewers as well.

A flexible interview guide was written which allowed for free discussion and allowed for questions to be asked by the respondent. The interviews consisted of in-depth discussions of citizens' concerns. Questions, except for the demographic ones, were open-ended. The goal was to elicit personal experiences, opinions, and attitudes. The interviews were tape recorded to allow the interviewer to engage the respondent more directly without the cumbersome interruption of note-taking.

Some structure was imposed on the interviews. After respondents identified their concerns, interviewers were instructed to probe for how respondents specifically talked about those concerns. Then, interviewers asked respondents to indicate at what level (personal, neighborhood, community, state, national, international) their concerns existed, categories used in a similar study by Smith (1988). This was followed by a question designed to establish the locus of responsibility of their concerns. The researchers sought to know "who" or "what" institutions respondents believed were responsible for addressing their concerns. Finally, interviewers asked respondents how they kept informed.If they were *Eagle* readers, respondents were asked about how they felt the newspaper addressed their concerns. Confirmation of previously obtained demographic

information on age, gender, voter registration, educational level, and length of residency in Sedgwick county completed the focussed interview. The interviews were scheduled to last thirty minutes. Respondents were assured confidentiality, but each was asked at the end of the interview whether he/she would be willing to be interviewed by the *Eagle* for a newspaper story. Interviewing began October 21, 1991 and ended December 17, 1991. Each of the seventeen interviewers conducted approximately twelve interviews.

Coding:

Interviewers participated in weekly discussion groups to determine the progress of the research. In one general debriefing session, findings were discussed and compared for verification. Each interviewer coded the interviews that he/she had conducted according to broad topical categories, with an eye to maintaining the narrative structure in which ideas were communicated.The fifteen coding categories were as follows:

What Issues Were Identified?
How Issues Were Discussed?
What Level(s) of Concern Were Discussed?
What Was the Defining Moment of the Interview?
Which Was the Most Important Issue?
Where Was the Locus of Responsibility Centered?
Were Issues Addressed in Topeka and/or Washington?
What Method of Keeping Informed Was Used?
Was the Respondent an *Eagle* Subscriber?
How Did the Eagle Cover Issues Identified?
Was the Respondent a Registered Voter?

What was the Respondent's Length of Residency in Sedgwick County?

What was the Respondent's Age?

What was the Respondent's Education Level?

What was the Respondent's Gender?

Validity and Reliability Assessment:

As the study got underway, the research team discovered several advantages to the personal interview method. First, using personal, in-depth interviews enabled researchers to obtain detailed and thorough information. Second, asking open-ended questions with the assurance of confidentiality encouraged respondents to talk freely and frankly about their personal experiences and opinions. The researchers were able to record first-person accounts of events and a large number of illustrative and anecdotal pieces of information. Third, using a uniform questionnaire guide enabled researchers to summarize and categorize the vast amount of data gathered from the interviews and articulate the results without total reliance on quantifying the data. Finally, using the personal interview method allowed for the retention of unique and unusual responses. In summary, the strength of the personal interview was the method's capacity to allow for a breadth and depth of data and to provide a vehicle for the condensation and analysis of the data.

To insure validity, the principle investigators conducted the initial interviews with respondents in order to establish a uniformly interpreted questionnaire. The principle investigators also trained interviewers to insure consistent administration of the questionnaire and held practice interview sessions. Finally, validity was enhanced by the fact that all interviews were tape-recorded. Comparisons between coding sheets and the actual interview transaction were conducted randomly by the principle investigators. To insure reliability,

weekly and general debriefing sessions on questionnaire implementation were held. Verification of findings was brought about through exchange and examination of preliminary findings. Broad representation of responses was ensured through a heterogeneous group of interviewers; both sexes and a variety of ages were represented. Two interviewers were internationals and four represented racial and ethnic minorities.

Unique Discoveries of the Method:

The first advantage of the personal interview method that we experienced was that a large number of interviewers reported a "therapeutic effect" of the study on respondents. With few exceptions, respondents wanted to exhaust their allotted interview time of thirty minutes. Further, respondents were intense in sharing their convictions. They expressed anger, hurt, frustration, humor, praise, gratitude, hope, and hopelessness. Respondents voiced appreciation for "hearing me out" and being "made to feel important." Interviewers reported feeling "mentally drained" as if they had conducted a "counseling session." One respondent, echoing the sentiment of many, said: "I didn't know the paper would want to hear from ordinary folk."

Secondly, the face-to-face interview method allowed for an explanation of how and why citizens speak out on certain subjects. The interviews exposed how people arrived at a concern they were willing to label "urgent" or "pressing." It allowed for an examination of how people conceptualize issues, how they connect issues, and how, ultimately, they make sense of their world. It enabled researchers to explain why people rank-order their concerns in the way they do.

Despite these methodological benefits, the method had drawbacks. First, respondents were not reimbursed for their time, so convenience played an

important role in garnering participation in the research project. This led to a substantial representation of middle-age to older respondents and of those with discretionary time or flexible schedules, such as housewives and professionals. The gender distribution, however, was close to equal. Because of the selection, method, and the logistics of the interview process, the young, the elderly, the handicapped, the homeless, and the poor may be underrepresented due to less discretionary time, transportation, and physical access to the interview sites. To be interviewed, one needed a telephone and transportation to the site.Mortality rates for this kind of study with its high "discomfort" level are always a concern. Still, this study witnessed only a twenty-two percent nonrespondent rate. Subjects who declined to participate in the study cited lack of time, or interest, or inconvenience.

Second, the presence of the interviewer may have affected how some subjects responded to questions. In a few cases, respondents apparently tailored their responses to conform to the personal attitudes of individual interviewers. For example, interviewers who were internationals reported a higher rate of discussions centering on global concerns than did the other interviewers. Interviewers who were African-American and Hispanic reported more discussions centering on minority and ethnic issues than did other interviewers whose appearance did not identify them as minorities. A few interviewers commented that some of the respondents appeared to try to "make a good impression" by voicing only positive statements or expressing only normative ideas. There were two separate incidents of verbal sexual harassment directed toward two female interviewers, and one instance of a racial slur directed toward a female African-American interviewer.

Third, given the length of the interview (30 min.) and the large number of respondents (192), results were difficult to summarize. Respondents voiced their

concerns in complex and detailed ways. Overall, the large number of issues raised and the disparate fashion in which respondents related them made for hundreds of pages of interview notes. Searching for patterns required keen interpretive skills and many collaborative work sessions.

Findings: An Overview:

The composite portrait that emerged from the random sample of Sedgwick county residents included the following characteristics: most respondents are registered voters who look to the mass media for their source of information, have lived in Sedgwick county for over five years, and have some college education. They are anxious about the well-being of their lives, their communities, and their country. Economic and moral problems pervade their conversations. They talk about self-preservation in a complicated world; they adopt a kind of "fortress mentality" as a buffer against what they say are the increasingly bad influences of American culture. They feel detached from government and alienated from their elected officials. Yet, they don't look to institutions (city hall, social services, the federal government, church) or politicians (President Bush is scarcely mentioned) for help. Rather, they look inward to the self and to the strength of their families and friends.

Respondents were asked at the end of the interview:: "Of all that you have discussed, which do you think is the most important concern?" Eight topics appeared repeatedly. The concerns, ranked in order of importance included: 1)crime, 2) education, 3) taxes, 4) economy, 5)abortion, 6)family, 7)status of government leadership, and 8)health care. For the most part, respondents addressed these concerns as topics that bear directly on their personal lives. Most were not able to offer any specific solutions to the problems they raised or suggest a locus of responsibility for the cause or the cure of the problems;

nevertheless, they thought their elected representatives needed to be concerned about the same issues they found important.

When respondents were asked how well they believed the newspaper covered concerns that were important to them, they tended to speak confidently and definitively about how they viewed the paper's coverage and offered pointed suggestions for how it should be improved. Based on the composite data drawn from this section, the principle investigators proposed twenty-six story ideas that might allow the Eagle to respond to the concerns expressed in the interviews. Many of these angles required non-traditional methods of reporting because, as an *Eagle* staff member has already told us, in reporting these stories a reporter could not rely on cultivating a single source or calling an established agency to get the "scoop." These stories require a different kind of investigating that involve networking of informants, many of whom do not qualify as credible sources in the traditional sense of that term.

Findings: In-Depth Probes:

One of the most prevalent and provocative findings was that the issues identified by respondents were often entwined with larger issues or more specific concerns. For many respondents, one issue was tied to another and another and another and at a variety of different levels: personal, local, state, etc. In short, the issues were perceived not as distinct, but as interconnected, interrelated, and overlapping. As one respondent said: "All of these problems are like peeling an onion; they're multi-layered." For example, when subjects were asked, "What are some major concerns?" a prototypical response was: "Crime is a major concern. If there were more jobs then crime wouldn't be such a problem, but with all the lay-offs over the past few years crime is becoming a way of life,

drugs are a big part of the crime problem too. People steal to feed their drug habit." Thus, crime as a primary issue was related to the economy and the drug problem. For other individuals the economy was the major issue to which drugs and crime were related. Another prototypical response that emphasized the economy was: "The problems of the economy are related basically to cheaters. In the Savings and Loans, on Wall Street, the big boys are out to get what they can and don't care how they get it. Drug dealing is big business too." Thus crime and drug problems are viewed as malignant artifacts of a failing economy . For a majority of respondents, the overriding concern was less tangible, for example, the degradation of moral values. Respondents who voiced their concern as the deterioration of morality often then went on to link moral decay with such issues as crime, gangs, the low repute of educators, abortion, mothers working outside the home, disrespectful children, voter apathy, and other issues.

Personal concerns did not appear to translate directly into political solutions, thereby making our second research question less attainable by this data base. In other words, when people talk about their everyday lives, their problems, their hopes for the future, they do not speak in terms of legislation, governmental policy, or party endorsements. They speak in terms of their own existence.They speak in private ways about public problems. They told researchers their individual hopes, expectations, and fears. What they didn't tell researchers was how their attitudes and opinions translated into political strategies or party platforms. In short, they did not tend to look to institutions (city hall, state government, capitol hill) for workable solutions, though they did expect politicians in Topeka and Washington to at least address the problems. The "what to do" question remained largely unanswered.

The exception to this was the topic of education. People felt more confident about suggesting solutions to our educational woes. These suggestions included:

design better teacher education, explore alternative teacher certification, increase teacher salaries, reduce the number of students in classes, extend the school year, concentrate on more basic skills courses, reduce the number of electives, encourage parental involvement, de-emphasize sports and slash athletic budgets, bring prayer back to the classroom, start more after-school programs to keep kids out of trouble, initiate better vocational-technical training and adopt national tests.

Theoretical Framework:

Many findings from the data base proved interesting, including: 1) the commonality of concerns, 2) people's willingness to share their concerns with an unfamiliar researcher, 3) the abandonment of a traditional post-FDR mindset (the state can solve our problems), and 4) the detailed way in which respondents addressed how well the *Eagle* covers issues.

But, most impressive to the investigators was the finding that "how" people talk about issues turns out to be much more meaningful than "what" people identify as the issues. We arrive at this conclusion for two reasons: 1) We learned that the mere identification of a topic was a hollow construct until respondents talked specifically as to how that topic affected them personally. This should make us wary of polls which identify popular topic categories without checking what those labels mean to individuals. 2) We learned that in probing how people process their news, they don't speak about concerns discretely. Their concerns are not isolated, nor do they speak of them in compartmentalized ways. Rather, their concerns are integrated and related, sometimes in surprising ways.

This method of conceptualizing is antithetical to the discrete, compartmentalized way in which news sources report the news. Agenda-setting

research may tell us that the media is responsible for telling audiences *what* to think, but we suggest from this research that the media does not tell audiences *how* to think. The media may set the parameters for our concerns, but audiences, ultimately, shape them and form linkages that are not made explicitly by news sources. We think that this may be useful data for newspaper organizations interested in finding ways to become more responsive to their audiences.

Further research utilizing the personal interview method to probe the concerns of media consumers is needed not only to help the media industry reconnect with their audiences, but to move in the communication discipline toward a more sophisticated understanding of the interactive relationship between media sources and receivers We need to expand the parameters of media uses and gratification research to include a theoretical model that probes the meaning of what Lindloff (1988) calls "the interpretive community," or what Stamm calls "community identification"(1985). Pursuing these initiatives, researchers in the communication discipline may be able to "sell our wares" to the media industry more frequently, and, ultimately, help solidify meaningful working relationships between academia and industry.

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