Beginning your Research Project

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San Jose State U
Dr. T.M. Coopman

This Workshop

This is the online component of a research skill workshop. Combined with the in class component, this workshop provides an overview and information references that supply critical knowledge to help you succeed in this course.

This workshop covers tips on designing your research project for this course.

Research What?

Academics tend to do research on things that they find interesting, either broadly or specifically based on their own experiences.

Also, researchers may choose a topic for which they have special access (eg. know someone who works for Google).

For example, my first formal research was based on my interest in radio and an article I read in a magazine about someone running an unlicensed station.

Be Pragmatic

Researchers, like everyone else, are constrained by geography, time, and resources. Rarely do researchers have the time and opportunity to fully investigate something as much as they would like.

You are never finished, just done.

For example, for my first research project, the person highlighted in that magazine article was in Berkeley CA - so it was easy to get access.

Pragmatics Checklist

Here are some things to consider when choosing a research topic and question:

1. Are you interested enough to spend many, many hours on this topic?

2. Is it possible to answer your research question in the time you have with data you can reasonable gather?

3. Do you have ready access to the people, places, information you need to address your research question?

Media!

Keep in mind this is a media course, so topics and questions must have a media "element." For example:

Semiotics is an analysis of visual and textual meaning.

Analysis of media messages, how people communicate their identity or culture via media, how people interact with each other around media, and comparing/contrasting media, are all good media questions.

Always ask:"Where is the media in my topic/ question?"

1. What to Research?

Researching something that you find interesting is crucial. Good research takes a lot of time and effort and it is important for your sanity and motivation that you find a topic and question that holds your interest.

Ask yourself: are you interested and curious enough to really dig deep into this topic?

What are you *really* interested in?

2. Can I Answer my Question?

Research questions tend to be broad in scope but narrow and specific in execution. Pick something that allows you to fully explore the topic, but can be narrowed so you actually have a chance to answer it.

For example, "What are the differences and similarities between the Republican and Democratic national committee websites?"

This question is broad "differences and similarities" but specific to these two websites.

2. Can I Answer my Question?

"What are the differences and similarities between the Republican and Democratic national committee websites?"

This example also gives you reasonable access so you can gather your data easily (by exploring these websites) and you can reasonably do so in the time you have to conduct the research (depending on your method, of course).

3. Access

Ease of access is key and you need to be pragmatic in what/who you can get your hands on for data collection.

For example, you may want to know how the iTunes impacts television, but you must realize that you are not going to get an interview with Steve Jobs. Actually, getting an interview with anyone at Apple may take more time and effort than you have.

3. Access

So, let's say you want to know:

"What is the impact of iTunes and similar online services on the television industry?"

You have a limited amount of time for this project and you want an interview, so what are your options?

If you have connections at Apple you could maybe get someone to interview.

If not, you could find a journalist who covers technology, or a professor in economics, or someone at at a network. Special expertise is the key (so, not your buddy who is an intern at KTVU).

3. Access

"What is the impact of iTunes and similar online services on the television industry?"

Keeping with the same question, let's say you have your interviewee lined up. Can you get other data?

Fortunately, this is a hot topic, so there are lots of people interested in this question. Good sources would be industry press, technology blogs, and Apple's or TV network's own press releases and Job's interviews with the media.

Example

Let's say you you noticed how students use the internet to watch TV programs and you want to know how it impacts their use of traditional TV. You think that most students don't really watch traditional TV anymore.

The problem is how do find out about their behavior? Do you just ask them? Observe them? Have them keep a log?

Example

There is a way to address your interests, you just might need to tweak your question to fit what you can reasonably get at.

First, of course, you need to look at existing research on students use of the media, technology, viewing habits and so forth. Look at what has been done. This will give you different ways to ask your question, define what you are looking for, and how to gather that data.

It is perfectly okay to simply replicate an existing study with your own data (just cite it!).

Workshop Tasks

To earn credit you need to post a substancive 100+ word comment on this workshop's wiki page and complete the following tasks and bring them to class.

1. Review the research assignment directions.

2. Come with 3 ideas for topics and/or questions you may want to explore for the assignment.

3. Be prepared to discuss your assignment options.