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Fit to print: A content analysis of the regent universities' student papers

Ivy A. Sprague
University of Northern Iowa

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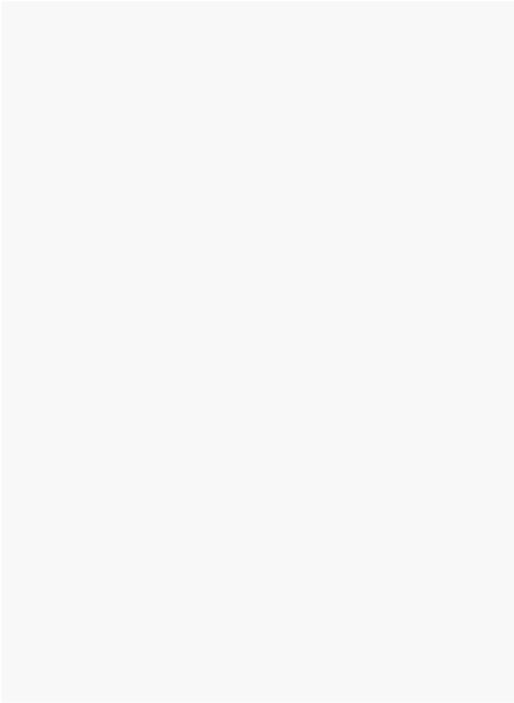
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IVY A. SPRAGUE
PRESIDENTIAL SCHOLARS
SENIOR THESIS

FIT TO PRINT

A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF THE REGENT
UNIVERSITIES' STUDENT NEWSPAPERS



FIT TO PRINT

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MY JOURNALISM ADDICTION

The Presidential Scholars Senior Thesis Project was designed, to the best of my understanding, to be the culmination of the four years of a Scholar's university experience. When reflecting on my own experiences here at the University of Northern Iowa, there has been one factor that has influenced nearly every interaction in which I have participated on this campus. My involvement with the student newspaper, the *Northern Iowan* or the *NI*, has colored nearly every aspect of my university experience.

I began working on the staff of the *NI* during the fall of my freshman year as a news and features writer. I have since worked as a news editor, associate news editor, copy editor and finally, the gem of newspaper jobs, an opinion columnist. Through all these experiences, I have gotten to meet some of the most influential leaders on this campus, both students and faculty, and have learned volumes about how this university functions. I have been able to present a unique perspective on various issues discussed in my classes because of the information to which I have had access because of my work at the *NI*. In terms of my future, my work at a newspaper has given me a perspective on public relations work that very few recent graduates have. I know what works and what does not work in terms of pitching stories to the media and how to most effectively provide information to media representatives. These experiences will allow me to provide future employers with insights and recommendations that other public relations practitioners of my experience level may not have.

A fellow reporter once likened our experiences in journalism to an addiction. Like many other addictive substances, journalism can drain you physically and financially. But most journalists just cannot seem to break the addiction and spend their whole careers searching for the rush that comes with finding the story.

However, for all the wonderful experiences I have had while working at the *NI*, there have been challenges to overcome. The most significant, and often most frustrating, is the attitude that many students and faculty members have towards the publication in general. Since my very first mass media class my freshman year, I have heard all manner of complaints against the newspaper. Students and faculty alike believe that the *NI* doesn't cover issues of real interest to the UNI population, that the *NI* doesn't produce "real" news stories, and that as a student newspaper it cannot withstand a comparison with the student publications at Iowa State University and the University of Iowa. I hope to prove, through a detailed content analysis, that the three publications are on equal footing in regards to the coverage they devote to student, local and national issues. Whether or not my hypothesis proves to be true, I hope these findings can be of use to the future staff members of the *Northern Iowan*.

CONTENT ANALYSIS

Content analysis as a research function has deep roots, reaching back to the eighteenth century. A group of Swedish clergy and scholars conducted the first recorded content analysis on a collection of 90 non-orthodox hymns collected in a book called *Songs of Zion* to determine whether the songs blasphemed the teachings of the Swedish church. One group

of researchers compared the religious symbols in the *Songs of Zion* with the symbols found in an established hymnbook. After they had found no differences between the two, they concluded that the songs were an acceptable alternative to traditional church music.¹

Content analysis in its modern form was developed during World War II. The United States government turned to communication scholars to analyze the content of German radio transmissions. All the Nazi broadcasts, from music to political speeches and commentary, were analyzed for both manifest (contained on the surface) and latent (contained in deeper layers of the communication) meanings. From this content analysis, the United States forces were able to correctly predict several major German military campaigns, new weaponry developments, changes in public morale, and shifts in political relationships between Axis countries.² After the war, content analysis became an important tool in communications research for assessing the nature, functions and effects of mass communication.

Content analysis performs the exact function in communication research that its name implies. It categorizes data, in this case data in the form of media content, for use in formative and/or evaluative processes.³ Content analysis has two critical functions: to provide a systematic and verifiable description of the manifest and latent content of narrative discourse, and to produce logically valid and replicable inferences about a narrative's context

¹ Mary John Smith, *Contemporary Communication Research Methods* (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1988) 263

² Smith 263.

³ Mary Anne Moffitt, *Campaign Strategies and Message Design: A Practitioner's Guide from Start to Finish* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1999) 57.

based on its descriptive content.⁴ Content analysis can also serve a variety of descriptive functions, including the identification of recurring thematic and structural patterns in messages, and the comparison of the content of messages delivered by different communicators, or alternately, messages presented by the same communicator in different contexts. Critical inferential tasks fulfilled by content analysis include drawing conclusions about the probable characteristics of message sources, audiences, and contexts; inferring conclusions about the likely effects of messages; and inferring cultural norms and social behaviors that a message appears to reflect.⁵

Six basic steps are contained within the framework of conducting a content analysis: identify the research problem, determine a suitable database, select a representative sample, collect contextual information, develop a measurement scheme, and analyze the data.⁶ In this particular content analysis the research problem, as mentioned above, is the public perception on the UNI campus that, in terms of content, the *Northern Iowan* is not equal to the student newspapers of the other two Iowa Regents' universities. In light of this research problem, therefore, the database would consist of several published editions of these three newspapers. The representative sample consisted of four editions of each publication from the last week of March 2000 and the first two weeks of April 2000. The measurement scheme created places each article featured in the news, features, sports and opinion section

⁴ Smith 263.

⁵ Smith 264.

⁶ Smith 274.

of each publication into the categories described in the “Research Findings” section following.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

When conducting a content analysis such as this one, the establishment of specific categories in which to place the individual articles is very important. Categories must be as specific as possible. To increase reliability of the research, categories also should be as mutually exclusive as possible. If an article fits into one established category, the remaining categories should be structured so that the article could not possibly be placed into any other category.⁷ The categories created for this analysis are as follows:

- ***Campus news*** – any article covering events on campus that were not part of an organized, planned effort by a particular group or individual.
- ***Campus events*** – any articles covering a planned event sponsored by a campus organization or a local group that took place on the university campus.
- ***Sports-related issues*** – any article covering a sports-related issue that appeared on any page of the publication not specifically devoted to sports coverage.
- ***National news*** – any article covering issues from any state except Iowa.
- ***International news*** – any article covering an issue from outside this nation.
- ***Local news*** – any article covering an issue from the community in which the university is located.

- *State news* – any article covering an issue that concerns only Iowans.
- *Editorial columns* – any regular feature in the “Opinion” section, include pieces written by the editorial staff and opinion columnists.
- *Letters to the Editor* – any letter from a reader published in the opinion section.
- *Book/film/music/theater/television reviews*
- *Health-related topics*
- *Collegiate sports teams* – any article covering any collegiate sports team, regardless of whether the team is representing that publication’s university.
- *Collegiate sports individuals* – any article covering any collegiate sports individual (student athlete, coach, athletic director, etc.)
- *National sports teams* – any article dealing with a national professional sports team or a sporting event of national prominence (i.e. the Master’s golf tournament).
- *National sports individuals* – any article dealing with a nationally known athlete or coach.

Each publication was analyzed to determine which percentage of its articles dealt with each topic listed above. Four issues of each publication were selected for study, with publication dates ranging from March 29, 2000 to April 14, 2000. Results were analyzed

⁷ Moffitt 59.

based on the ratio of total coverage devoted to each topic area to the total number of articles in the four issues of each publication. Tables of data from the analysis follow.

PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL ARTICLES DEVOTED TO EACH TOPIC

ARTICLE TOPICS	<i>DAILY IOWAN</i>	<i>IOWA STATE DAILY</i>	<i>NORTHERN IOWAN</i>
Campus news	12.2	11.1	15.4
Campus events	5.3	13.1	19.5
Sports-related issues	0.7	0.7	0.0
National news	16.0	16.6	7.3
International news	7.6	6.9	5.7
Local news	3.8	2.1	4.0
State news	1.5	0.6	1.6
Editorial columns	6.8	6.9	12.2
Letters to the Editor	7.6	15.2	11.4
Book reviews	0.7	0.6	0.0
Film reviews	0.0	3.4	1.6
Music reviews	1.5	4.8	1.6
Theater reviews	0.0	0.0	0.8
Television reviews	0.0	0.6	0.0
Health-related topics	0.0	0.6	0.0
Collegiate sports teams	9.9	8.3	17.0
Collegiate sports individuals	5.3	2.1	7.5
National sports teams	11.5	5.5	2.7
National sports individuals	9.2	0.6	4.8

ACTUAL NUMBER OF ARTICLES DEVOTED TO EACH TOPIC

ARTICLE TOPICS	<i>DAILY IOWAN</i>	<i>IOWA STATE DAILY</i>	<i>NORTHERN IOWAN</i>
Campus news	16	16	19
Campus events	7	19	24
Sports-related issues	1	1	0
National news	21	24	9
International news	10	10	7
Local news	5	3	5
State news	2	1	2
Editorial columns	9	10	15
Letters to the Editor	10	22	14
Book reviews	1	1	0
Film reviews	0	5	2
Music reviews	2	7	2
Theater reviews	0	0	1
Television reviews	0	1	0
Health-related topics	0	1	0
Collegiate sports teams	13	12	25
Collegiate sports individuals	7	3	11
National sports teams	15	8	4
National sports individuals	12	1	7
Total number of articles	131	145	147

As the tables above indicate, there are five topic areas where the differences in coverage become most obvious – campus news, campus events, national news, opinion coverage and sports coverage. The *NI*'s figure of 15.4 percent of coverage devoted to campus news is not significantly higher numerically than the other two, but the 3.2 percent difference is

significant to note in publications that are specifically devoted to covering campus news. The same holds true for the 14.2 percent difference between the *NI* and the *Daily Iowan* and the 6.4 percent difference between the *NI* and the *Iowa State Daily* figures for campus events.

The data concerning the campus news and campus events articles, however, does confirm a portion of the public perception at UNI – that the *Northern Iowan* is more campus-focused than the other two collegiate publications. The data concerning national news coverage supports this hypothesis – the figures for the *NI*'s coverage of national news are approximately half those of the other two publications (*NI* – 7.3 percent, *Daily Iowan* – 16 percent, *Iowa State Daily* – 16.6 percent).

The opinion section is another area of the publications that highlights the differences between the three. The figures for regular opinion columns, both by editorial staff members and individual opinion columnists, show that the *NI* devotes nearly twice the space to editorial columns than the other two publications do (*NI* – 12.2 percent, *Daily Iowan* – 6.8 percent, *Iowa State Daily* – 6.9 percent). The *NI* also shows a 3.8 percent increase over the *Daily Iowan* in the amount of space dedicated to letters from readers (11.4 percent versus 7.6 percent). This difference also reflects the idea that the *NI* is more campus-focused in that it devotes more space to letters from the campus community and columns written by university students.

The campus-centered philosophy is also evidenced by the figures concerning both collegiate and national sports coverage. The *NI*'s figures for collegiate sports team coverage (17 percent of total editorial space) far exceed those of the other two publications (*Daily Iowan* – 9.9 percent, *Iowa State Daily* – 8.3 percent). Conversely, the figures for national sports

coverage for the *Iowa State Daily* and the *Daily Iowan* are significantly higher than those of the *Northern Iowan*, reflecting the more national focus of these two publications (*Iowa State Daily* national sports team coverage – 5.5 percent, *Daily Iowan* national sports team coverage – 11.5 percent, *Northern Iowan* national sports team coverage – 2.7 percent; *Iowa State Daily* national sports individual coverage – 0.6 percent, *Daily Iowan* national sports individual coverage – 9.2 percent, *Northern Iowan* national sports individual coverage – 4.8 percent).

The remainder of the findings shows that the *NI* is not markedly different from the “real” newspapers in its coverage of other issues. The table of actual number of articles published shows that, even though the *Iowa State Daily* and the *Daily Iowan* are daily publications, the three publications have approximately the same number of individual articles published in the four editions included in this survey.

INTER-RELIABILITY RESULTS

Associate Professor of Communication Dr. Gayle Pohl replicated the content analysis described above to confirm the validity of its findings, a concept known in communication research as inter-reliability. She was given a listing of the categories above into which the data was categorized as a basis for her analysis. The following table represents the ratio of coverage devoted to each topic area to the total number of articles in the four issues of each publication. The data for the actual number of articles has been omitted, since the data was close enough to my original research that it did not merit separate consideration.

PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL ARTICLES DEVOTED TO EACH TOPIC

ARTICLE TOPICS	<i>DAILY IOWAN</i>	<i>IOWA STATE DAILY</i>	<i>NORTHERN IOWAN</i>
Campus news	7.9	14.7	19.7
Campus events	5.3	8.0	15.9
Sports-related issues	0.5	0.6	0.0
National news	12.6	12.7	6.4
International news	5.8	6.7	5.1
Local news	3.7	4.0	0.6
State news	2.6	1.3	0.6
Editorial columns	4.7	8.7	8.3
Letters to the Editor	5.3	12.0	8.9
Book reviews	0.5	0.6	0.0
Film reviews	0.0	4.7	1.3
Music reviews	1.1	7.3	1.3
Theater reviews	0.0	1.3	0.6
Television reviews	0.0	0.6	0.0
Health-related topics	0.0	0.6	0.0
Collegiate sports teams	15.3	6.7	19.7
Collegiate sports individuals	6.3	3.3	3.2
National sports teams	15.3	5.3	5.1
National sports individuals	13.2	0.6	3.2

The data is not identical in many respects, which is to be expected in an analysis of this sort. The data can be influenced by the researcher's experiences and knowledge to some extent. However, as evidenced by the table above, the same incongruence in the topic coverage statistics was found in the inter-reliability research as were found in the original study. The *NI*'s percentage for national news coverage is still roughly half that of the other two publications (6.4 percent versus 12.6 percent – *Daily Iowan*, 12.7 percent *Iowa State Daily*).

The figures for campus news and campus events also are much higher for the *Northern Iowan* than for the other two newspapers (campus news: 19.7 percent – *Northern Iowan*, 14.7 percent – *Iowa State Daily*, 7.9 percent – *Daily Iowan*; campus events: 15.9 percent – *Northern Iowan*, 8.0 percent – *Iowa State Daily*, 5.3 percent – *Daily Iowan*). The figures for the collegiate and national sports coverage also are very similar to the figures found in the original research (collegiate sports teams: 19.7 percent – *Northern Iowan*, 15.3 percent – *Daily Iowan*, 6.7 percent – *Iowa State Daily*; national sports teams: 5.1 percent – *Northern Iowan*, 5.3 percent – *Iowa State Daily*, 15.3 percent – *Daily Iowan*).

CONCLUSIONS

To the best of my knowledge, this is the first comparative study conducted regarding the student publications for the three Iowa Regents' universities. The data collected shows that the three publications are not as different in terms of content as many of their readers seem to believe. As the data reflects, the *Northern Iowan* is significantly more campus-centered in its coverage. However, the difference is not so significant that the staff of the *Northern Iowan* could not increase its national and international coverage to make it more comparable to the other two newspapers. I hope this research can be of use to the staff at the *Northern Iowan* in making the publication the best it can possibly be and in making it an informative, widely-read publication that can be of use to both the campus and the Cedar Falls community as a whole.