Library Research Award: Student Essay

My research paper, "An Analysis of Risk Communication Failures in the Domestic U.S. Ebola Response," sprang from a five-page policy analysis for my COMM330: Argumentation and Public Policy course last semester. I chose to write about the October U.S. Ebola cases because, based on my observation through media outlets, both news reporting and the political response had become exponentially alarmist and out of touch with reported scientific data. I wanted to identify a theoretical explanation for the phenomenon I was witnessing. My resulting research paper applies communication model-based risk communication theory to the governmental, media, and health industry response to the October 2014 U.S. Ebola cases. By examining the message, source, channel and receiver of communication messages about Ebola, I identified a number of organizational missteps that help explain the public's panicked response to an ultimately negligible risk.

My original course paper analyzed a deliberative policy episode; that is, the first congressional hearing about the Ebola response. My professor, Michael Steudeman, recommended I produce a longer research project on the same topic for submission to DePauw University's Undergraduate Honors Conference. He suggested I focus especially on expanding my paper's theoretical basis and engage in closer analysis of media and governmental sources, and was instrumental in helping me identify the kinds of resources I would need to improve the project. I am delighted to say that the resulting paper, which I am submitting for the library's undergraduate research award, has been accepted for presentation at DePauw's conference in mid-April. I am hoping to use the research award to cover my registration and travel expenses.

As I have mentioned, my research incorporates a number of watershed risk communication theories. While I had touched on these concepts in my original draft, my professor encouraged me to further explore existing explanations for the Ebola panic through a review of risk communication literature. I knew that, before expanding my research, I would need to narrow down a theoretical framework from which to analyze congressional hearings and media coverage. The library's search tools provided an essential means of accomplishing this.

For the initial class project, as well as in my preparations for the longer draft, I used the library website's online database search tool to locate peer-reviewed journal articles. Both a general search and the EBSCO Communication and Mass Media Complete databases proved useful in narrowing the scope of my project. While this gave me a great sense of how theory had been applied to previous health communication scenarios, I eventually found the online sources less effective in terms of finding a theory on which to build my research. However, through these resources I found a number of examples of applied content analysis, which gave me a good sense of the scholarship I was hoping to imitate.

At that point, I made use of print resources in the library, primarily printed collections of theoretical essays and conference proceedings. Most helpful was a conference brief from the 1986 National Conference on Risk Communication. These conference proceedings were the most widely cited scholarship available, based on my previously conducted online research. The proceedings were particularly superior to other resources I encountered because their theoretical background concerned itself with a communication model-based approach to risk

communication, incorporating a particular attention to media influence. Since I hoped to address both the political and the media response to Ebola, this resource was a great fit for my project. In addition, I consulted a few other theoretical texts found in McKeldin's library stacks. The rest of the sources necessary for my paper were available online; in particular, I was able to locate a number of news articles contemporary to the U.S. Ebola cases using Google News.

I have been thrilled and honored to see my research recognized by DePauw University this semester, and found the experience of preparing for the conference an especially valuable part of my undergraduate education, as I am preparing to apply to graduate school within the next few years. Having the chance to utilize this library's enormous databases and resources for my own scholarship has been an incredibly valuable experience and has helped me understand what continuing education in my field might look like. It was also, quite simply, a lot of fun to apply my education to a topic I find so fascinating.

While this university's databases and print resources were generally sufficient for my project, I would make one suggestion regarding news media for future researchers. During my research stage, I conducted my own Google searches for news media in order to produce examples of the overblown Ebola reporting that had first inspired my project. However, I felt that my examples may not have been as comprehensive or evenhanded as I would have preferred. I would have loved to perform a time-bound, keyword-based content search and analysis on all available media covering Ebola during October 2014 and incorporate the statistics I generated into my paper. I believe this search would have confirmed my suspicion that the media was not only exaggerating Ebola's threat through word choice, but also through sheer volume of coverage in comparison to other news topics. As far as I am aware, no such news content search is currently available through the university library system. However, I believe that developing that kind of search tool would make the library an even more invaluable resource for communication and journalism students.

I am very grateful for the opportunity to share my research with Maryland Libraries, and even more grateful for the quality resources I had access to while formulating my paper. Thank you very much for your time and consideration of my project.