The University of Oklahoma COLIECTE journalism | media arts | strategic communication

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This GIFT provides an overview of ways to stimulate discussions and debates in JMC research methods classes. We have had success integrating Freakonomics by S. D. Levitt and S. J. Dubner (2005) into undergraduate research methods courses. The book provides a macro perspective about the use of secondary data analysis in understanding highly relevant topics to students. The activity gives instructors a proven way to enhance class discussions and student understanding of how to interpret research findings.

Most research methods classes assign the traditional methods textbooks. These books provide background on qualitative and quantitative methods. They are a good source for the methodology of conducting primary research. Yet, many of our students will not devote large amounts of their time in the different media businesses (journalism, public relations, advertising) to collecting primary research. Rather, media practitioners in many fields will often be given data and asked to interpret it. This is a daunting task for even the most seasoned professionals.

One way to better prepare JMC students for their future tasks in data interpretation is to provide opportunities for thoughtful class discussions in research methods courses. The addition of the Freakonomics book as a supplement to any JMC research methods course will give students an opportunity to see how conclusions that sometimes influence organizational or public policy get drawn (both correctly and erroneously) from data.

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#### Chapter 3: Why do drug dealers still live with their moms?

#### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

- 1. How many questions did the Venkatesh's survey have?
- 2. What was the first question on the survey?
- 3. Why Venkatesh had problems with the first question on his survey?
- 4. How did Venkatesh decide to solve the problem with his survey? Which method did he choose? Why?
- 5. What do drug dealers, aspiring actors, editorial assistants at a Manhattan fashion magazine, high-school quarterbacks, and PR students wanting to work for NFL or NBA teams have in common?

The book "Freakonomics" provides several examples of using unique and unusual sources of data to resolve important social questions. Pick any one of the following examples from the book to answer questions below. Please respond to questions specifically and directly and always indicate which question you answer. Your grade will be based on the accuracy and detail with which you answer the questions and successfully include in your paper key elements from the book.

#### Homework: Data Analysis in Freakonomics (30 pts.)

- A) Were Chicago school teachers cheating?
- B) Does legalizing abortion affect the crime rate?
- C) What factors affect a child's performance in school?

#### **Questions:**

- Clearly state the social dilemma and/or social question that led to research and the research question.
- 2. State the null hypothesis and alternative hypothesis (or hypotheses) for the study.
- 3. Provide the following details on the nature of the dataset used:
  - a. What were dependent and independent variables in the data set?
  - b. What were the strengths of the data set in addressing the specific research question?
  - c. What were the weaknesses of the data set in answering the specific research questions? (bring in issues discussed in class related to study population, sampling, data reliability, overgeneralization, etc.)
  - d. What were the limitations of the data set in getting at the core research question at hand? (What important aspects of the question did the data set not address?) Here you may also identify the problems with the initial data set that were addressed with additional data or analyses.
- 4. Explain how the data set(s) were analyzed to answer the research questions (talk about the analysis that was used and why it was appropriate analysis).
- 5. Provide at least one alternative explanation for the results of the initial data analysis (what other factors could plausibly explain the results of the initial analysis?)
- 6. Provide a brief explanation of additional data or analyses that helped reject the alternative explanations. Make sure to discuss correlation vs. causation with respect to the analysis. Did the analysis demonstrate causation? If not, what additional analyses were undertaken to increase the confidence in the results?

#### The paper should be no more than five (5) double-spaced pages.

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