The Process of Researching “Beautiful Disease: The Story of Angelina Jolie’s Mastectomy in the American Media”

“Search MARQCAT-plus,” the Raynor Memorial Libraries website said. *Seek and explore, brainstorm, browse, and study.* “Search the library’s holdings for books, eBooks, digital records, periodicals, and more.” Find information on any given topic and embark on the library research process.

Search for “Angelina Jolie” and discover 30,000+ results. Wander among these journals, books, papers, and images, then refine. Narrow down the material—make the broad more specific, the overwhelming more manageable. Remember the project’s research question: What story did the American media tell about Angelina Jolie’s mastectomy and the *New York Times* editorial about it? Search MARQCAT again.

Enter “the story of Angelina Jolie’s mastectomy in the American media” and find nothing. Nada, zip, zero, zilch. The search statement was too complex, the input too specific. Learn from the mistake; trial and error is part of this process. Identify broad key concepts, search again and again. Persist.

My paper for the 2014 Maria Dittman Research Competition did include between 0 and 30,000 sources—75, to be exact—but the underlying research process was more complex than any given number. I relied on a recursive approach to research and write “Beautiful Disease: The Story of Angelina Jolie’s Mastectomy in the American Media” for Dr. Ana Garner’s Qualitative Research Methods (COMM 6100) class. According to this approach, research is an iterative process of finding, analyzing, and creating knowledge. It is a way to learn from and contribute to the academic community. As Dr. Bonnie Brennen, professor of our introductory qualitative research course said, it is a way to join a scholarly conversation.

In our advanced qualitative communication course, Dr. Garner reiterated Dr. Brennen’s message and reinforced the complexity of the research process. We students reflected on the interrelated stages of research as we proposed and developed our own projects. We revised, rethought, and rewrote our papers multiple times, incorporating feedback from our peers and Dr. Garner. *Add a source here, check the citation there. What evidence supports this argument…and that conclusion?* In my case, “Beautiful Disease” started as an unnamed, page-long research proposal and evolved gradually into a 34-page term paper complete with literature, methods, findings, discussion, and reference sections.
In the early stages of my library research, I sought information from previous work on similar topics. My paper about media coverage of Jolie’s mastectomy related to earlier research on breast cancer, celebrity influence, and the social construction of femininity, beauty, and illness. It also related to studies that used the same research method, fantasy theme analysis. To locate this research, I relied on Marquette’s online library catalog, MARQCAT-plus, and communication databases like Communication and Mass Complete (EBSCO), ProQuest Research Collections, and SAGE Journals. While MARQCAT provided general information about Jolie and her mastectomy news, the communication databases provided discipline-specific information about cultural understandings of illness and gender. MARQCAT, in other words, offered background knowledge of Jolie and her health announcement, while the databases offered sophisticated, scholarly insight about the culture of breast cancer, femininity, and beauty.

Once I retrieved several academic articles from the communication databases, I scanned their reference lists and footnotes for additional appropriate sources. I plugged article titles into the library’s databases and book titles into MARQCAT, noting the library location of any available books. Instead of requesting these books via the online system, I located the books myself on Memorial’s fourth and fifth floors. By doing so, I serendipitously discovered additional books each library visit. I also retrieved materials using the school’s Interlibrary Loan (ILL) service.

I relied on Marquette’s library not only to write my literature review, but also to locate my sample materials. Interested in the American media’s story about Jolie’s mastectomy, I analyzed print media coverage of her medical editorial in widely circulated newspapers and magazines. As discussed in my paper’s methods section, I chose to examine newspaper and magazine articles because of their relevance and perceived credibility. Then I examined popular magazines to explore breast cancer in the context of soft news and entertainment-based health messages. Given the scope of the semester-long project, I limited my selection to three news/entertainment magazines and five newspapers, each found on MARQCAT-plus. I cited these and other sources in APA style.

Writing “Beautiful Disease” taught me the importance of patience, flexibility, and commitment to the research process. Research requires more than a simple Google search or a quick library trip. It is built from a variety of sources—located at a variety of writing stages—using a variety of search terms, databases, and catalogs. Research requires dedication but comes with reward. It is an exploration of knowledge—an unearthing of new information, questions, observations, and connections. Research is a discovery process.