Communications Undergraduate Journal
2026, Vol. 4, No. 1, page range: 1 – 4
EDITORIAL |cujournal.ie

Editorial and preface to issue 4 – independent undergraduate research

Pat Brereton[1], Jim Rogers[2], Alexander Kouker[3]

[1] *DCU School of Communications*
[2] *DCU School of Communications*
[3] *DCU Library*

Editorial

Having supervised numerous theses over the years before retiring, I have always been impressed with both the range and quality of the projects produced by BA in Communications' students. The output of students from the class of 2026 is equally impressive, and of course it is a great honour to get your thesis published, serving as a model for 'best practice' in the field and for future students to read your work. Being a capstone project, the final thesis serves as a critical summation of all the theoretical and practical engagement with communication theories that an undergraduate student has followed over their three years of interconnecting modules.

As a film scholar with a particular leaning towards environmental communication, I was always lucky enough to assist students who were interested in these topics. Certainly, it was so great to witness the process of development, as students became researchers and honed the skills they had taken on board over the course of the programme. While always challenging – especially with so much literature to read and digest – students slowly learn to discover their 'voice' and a way through the multi-layered complexity of the communications field they choose to follow. The resultant output serves as a testament to the student's ability to draw on a wide range of critical scholarship and learn to synthesise material by producing a clear 'through line' argument. By all accounts, it is a major achievement when complete, and even more impressive when turned into a journal publication that serves to build confidence for future endeavours.

Undergraduate students can learn a lot from engaging in the publication process itself and in what is required to produce a scholarly article. Such publications can stand up against other academic output, including scholarly work by tutors and professors who learned their craft and began their own writing journey during their primary degrees. Consequently, a journal like this serves as a benchmark of both quality and academic rigour for the degree programme more generally. The aim is also to encourage greater collaboration between the academic department and DCU's library; a joint initiative between the BA in Communications and colleagues in the library. Scholarship cannot take place in a vacuum, and I would strongly encourage all students to spend time in the library, as well as sourcing material online.

Over my decades of academic writing, I have found many important sources simply by spending time leafing through the books on the shelves in the areas I was trying to understand. Often the physical act of looking through the books in sections of the library and noting the contents pages can afford a good overview of the core research available on a given topic. A process which can be more hit and miss with regard to online searching. The helpful library staff will be more than happy to assist you with your thesis queries, and this is essential to the development process in completing a thesis. Consequently, the journal remains a good example of a more meaningful way to help integrate the library (and everything that comes with it) into students' academic lives. Simply focusing on electronic databases lacks the human and tactile benefits of the physical library and can leave out important aspects of a student's learning journey towards an original and critical thesis.

Recalling, for instance, some key theories and concepts I used to teach 'textual analysis' over the years, I continued to develop and rework such concepts, following the publication of my Continuum Guide to Media Education (2001). Some techniques deployed to critically assess audio-visual media include the following markers:

Address: (how does a film/media product address its audience) as in 'mode of address' adapted by a news programme. For instance, how does the style, assumptions, and approach of the programme construct a relationship to its content and between its context and audience?

Semiotics: encoding/decoding is constantly used in communications studies. For instance, words are encoded onto a newspaper (or any text) and subsequently decoded by its readers. This is also true for analysis of audio/visual imagery.

Mystification/demystification: process of obscuring or effacing the marks of production. For instance, media tends to hide the fact that it is manufactured and produced. The latter is a key concept in media studies, which serves to reveal practices or processes which are normally hidden.

Stereotyping: process whereby certain features or characteristics of one social group are represented, usually in the interest of another more powerful group, as being the central or defining feature. Of course, they need not always be negative and depend upon the power relationship behind the practice.

All types of communication theses, alongside media-based ones, serve as a bridge for future post-graduate research and help develop essential transferable research skills, which will serve the student no matter what job or profession they end up doing. The theses highlighted in this and earlier volumes speak to the broad range of communications studies addressed and provide a good template for future students.

As is often said with regard to the unique selling points of the BA in Communications degree, by remaining broad it thereby remains agile, while always thinking of the future and constantly promoting flexibility and adaptability. These attributes remain essential for an uncertain future, where new means of communication and working are always in play. I hope you all have enjoyed your studies and wish you well into the future, and I hope some of you will come back to carry out further research at DCU.

–Emeritus Professor Pat Brereton.

Preface

The thesis is the most ambitious and demanding part of the BA in Communications programme at DCU, and that is by design. The project requires students to bring everything they have learned across the three years of their degree programme to bear on a single, sustained piece of research they have chosen and shaped themselves. It is the point where the programme as a whole comes into focus.

In all this, the library is an indispensable ingredient in independent undergraduate research. Without it, students and their research projects cannot succeed. Libraries not only offer comprehensive access to research materials in print and digital formats. Students tap into librarians' knowledge and expertise to navigate complex information environments, such as interdisciplinary databases, and design and refine information-search strategies. In this sense, libraries and their staff operate as trusted partners in the research process.

The information-literate student knows how to critically evaluate information resources, a key skill for developing independent scholarship and successful thesis outcomes. Students liaise with subject librarians to locate their research topic in the broader literature, develop advanced research skills, narrow and refine preliminary research questions, and identify potential research methodologies to discuss and fine-tune with mentors.

What sets the thesis apart is that it asks students to do more than engage with existing knowledge. They must produce something new. Students must show they know the relevant literature, choose and apply a research methodology that suits their topic, and carry out a substantial piece of independent research. The theories and frameworks they have encountered throughout the degree stop being things to study and become tools they can actively use to explore a question of their own choosing.

The thesis process also teaches students how to run a serious research project from beginning to end. It builds on the Thesis preparation module completed in Semester 1 of the final year, where students developed their proposal. Across the final months of the degree programme, they put that proposal into action, checking in with their mentor each week and reporting on their progress. This regular rhythm of reflection and progress reporting is not incidental. It teaches students how to plan, stay organised and take ownership of their work as it develops. The thesis module's structure reinforces that sense of personal responsibility. Students are expected to drive the work themselves. The thesis is ultimately where the degree shifts from something that happens to the student to something the student makes happen.

The four theses featured in this issue exemplify that journey from proposal to finished research, each reflecting a student's individual curiosity carried through to rigorous, independent inquiry. Together, they offer a glimpse of the diverse subjects and methodological approaches pursued by BA in Communications students at DCU.

In the first article, Yanna Quinn compares how Irish political leaders Mary Lou McDonald and Simon Harris framed themselves on TikTok and X during the 2024 General Election. Quinn finds that Harris favoured a neutral, image-focused approach centred on TikTok, while McDonald adopted a more confrontational tone on X, achieving higher engagement despite Harris's 'TikTok Taoiseach' reputation. The study contributes new insight to the limited literature on Irish digital political communication and how platform dynamics shape political self-presentation.

Then, staying within the social media/platform studies domain, but shifting the emphasis to fandom and celebrity culture, Aaron examines how the live-streaming platform Twitch shapes parasocial relationships (PSRs) between fans and Formula One driver Max Verstappen. Comparing Twitch users with non-users, Ingram introduces the concept of 'parasocial extension' to show how fans' attachment to Verstappen extends to affiliated figures such as his esports team, Team Redline. The study finds that Twitch's interactive features transform traditional one-sided fan relationships into 'one-and-a-half-sided' ones, deepening intimacy through perceived authenticity and community.

The Alyson Stewart article analyses how Deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals are portrayed in five twenty-first-century films, using Gerbner's Cultivation Theory alongside symbolic annihilation and the burden of representation. Stewart evaluates each film's casting, character portrayal, and narrative to assess progress in authentic representation. While the study finds meaningful gains, particularly through increased casting of Deaf actors and use of sign language, it argues that Deaf-led, agency-focused storytelling is still needed to move beyond tokenism.

Finally, Helen Nora takes the deep dive into a niche digital subculture, with an article that investigates the online ‘femcel’ community, women who identify as involuntarily celibate, and how they construct identity through discussions of beauty standards, gender roles, and disillusionment with heterosexual relationships. Drawing on subcultural theory, Nora distinguishes ‘traditional’ from ‘aesthetic’ femcels, and traces concepts such as the ‘pink pill’ and ‘femcelcore’. Using survey data and content analysis from Reddit, Discord, and TikTok, the study situates femcels within broader debates on intimacy, desirability, and digital subcultures.

–Jim Rogers and Alexander Kouker.