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Project Seminar

Lisa Simpson and Celebrity:

How Famous Persons Serve a Purpose

When the final project was announced at the beginning of the semester, I was excited by the prospect of having complete control over a larger assignment and being granted the time and space to do something interesting. When the time came to select a research topic, I was overwhelmed by the extensive data available. The opportunity to work on an independently driven endeavor was refreshing, but the options were vast and almost completely open-ended. With eight tags to choose from and countless categories and connections to consider within each, determining my focus was a several-step process in itself.

After months of viewing and annotation, I found myself intrigued by the gender tag in particular. I had noticed a degree of gender stereotyping and was prepared to investigate the significance behind such creative decisions. As *The Simpsons* is an animated program that provides extensive social, political, and economic commentary, I thought about gender representation especially in correspondence with relevant movements. Comparing the development of gender commentary on the show with that of germane news sources seemed like an interesting prospect. With that in mind, I considered what forms of media might illuminate a sort of movement timeline and deemed *The New York Times* a legitimate and reliable resource. After days of slow, steady manual data extraction, I

decided the process wouldn't be feasible—the method took far too long, and even in two months I wouldn't be able to derive the quantity of data I needed in order to answer a significant question, complete notable analysis, or come to a justifiable conclusion. I looked into other extraction options, particularly via a coding program, but resolved that pursuing the project would not lead to fruitful results.

Following a rough start—raising my hopes, working hard, and eventually having to set aside days of progress—I realized I'd need to conjure a novel question and devise a new, practical plan. During a class discussion regarding a specific *Simpson's* episode, a few classmates mentioned instances in which Lisa was the focal point of celebrity appearances on the show. I, too, had viewed episodes of this nature and was intrigued by the notion of a possible parallel between a single character and a larger program pattern. This research question seemed more sensible than my preceding, and far more ambitious, inquiry. With this topic, the annotation information was already accessible and relatively exhaustive, so I would be able to focus on examples and analysis rather than data mining.

At this point, I was still somewhat nervous about coming to a similar dead end in research, but felt that even if my findings didn't support the initial hypothesis—that Lisa *did* have some special relationship with visiting celebrities and that those correlations were more noteworthy than other characters' celebrity encounters—I would find something else of value. That is, whether or not my postulation was verified, the research question left room for new discoveries and uncovering other interesting patterns.

Once I got started reviewing episode tags, however, I was quickly reassured of my initial suspicion that Lisa held more weight in celebrity interaction than other characters. Out of the 471 celebrity tags in the data spreadsheet, 83 of them mentioned Lisa specifically—that is, 17.6%. While not the degree of correlation I was expecting (I had assumed a percentage much higher), the number still seemed significant enough to merit exploration. I reviewed annotations again, looking closely for distinctly Lisa-centered instances of celebrity encounter—that is, her character as the focal point of the interaction, rather than solely present or a bystander. This was relatively complicated in itself, as I had to determine what "significant" implied. Was it a celebrity encounter exclusively between Lisa and a specific celebrity? How long did the interaction need to last? After much consideration, I decided on something a bit broader—if Lisa interacted directly with a celebrity to any degree, the tag was "significant." That is, scenes in which Lisa is present but Bart, Homer, Marge, or another character communicates with the celebrity and Lisa remains nonparticipatory, the tag was not included. Out of the 83 tags, only 23 fell under this umbrella of significance—23 out of 471 tags being considered "significant" mentions means that just 4.88% of celebrity encounters were Lisa-focused. When put into percentage form, I was more surprised by the number than I had expected to be; it seems so small, while the pattern had appeared so significant to me. Still, I realized that in some ways I should focus on a number of episodes rather than a percentage: this was critical, because 23 out of 471 episodes had still been devoted to Lisa's relationships with celebrities. While 4.88% isn't

huge, to dedicate 23 episodes to such a specific situation, while there are so many other issues at hand and characters to consider, is a consequential decision.

When reviewing the episode annotations the first and second times, I realized that individuals had varying concepts of the "celebrity" tag, and several people had tagged the word differently. That is, some students had noted celebrity mentions, some cameos via telecom tags, and others only appearances. I was curious in particular about Lisa's direct celebrity interactions, so probed the data again, this time considering only tangible celebrity appearances. I scanned a first time for total appearances, which totaled 77, and a second for direct communication with Lisa, which totaled 11. This number was higher, then—out of the total celebrity appearances, Lisa-focused instances amounted to 14.28% of the whole.

After completing a decent amount of quantitative data, I felt ready to dive into qualitative analysis. I *again* scrutinized the episode annotations, now concentrating on finding patterns. I wanted to understand what purpose the celebrity appearances served, expressly in relation to Lisa. After reviewing the 83 tags once more and reflecting on my observations, I noticed a certain degree of variation on forms of tagging, and so again pared my focus down to the main 23 Lisa tags. With just these annotations on my radar, I pinpointed four striking schemes for celebrity presence: they stood as agents for raising Lisa's spirits and offering encouragement, providing mentorship and advice, aiding Lisa in her philanthropic endeavors, and supplying archetypes for career trajectory. In an attempt to organize the tags into a palatable format, I reviewed each annotation and placed it within the appropriate category. In order to prove the categories' validity, I researched

particular episodes and watched certain installments. This technique cleared up any concern I had for misreading annotations, as the tags and scenes corresponded plainly. Still, there is room for misreading correlation between annotations and reality for those episodes I did not have time to watch myself.

My experience of both processes—qualitative and quantitative analysis—were intriguing, but I thought it necessary to represent some of my findings in a more visual format. As I was aware other students would be viewing my work, I wanted to ensure an engaging and relatively interactive experience. With that in mind, I elected to complete a Prezi in order to introduce my discoveries. To provide justification for and examples of my category titles, I selected clips from several episodes and embedded them into the presentation. That way, individuals can view the clips as they click through the path and grasp a greater understanding of the category title's implications. I inserted, too, bubbles to include visual representation of my qualitative research, including a graph and chart that illustrate Lisa-celebrity percentages compared to total tags and episodes, as well as category selections for the 23 more significant Lisa-celebrity episodes.

If given the time, I would be especially interested in looking into other possible patterns regarding specific characters and tags; that is, whether or not other characters display patterns concerning the celebrity tag, but also any of the other seven annotation sets. There is always more work to be done and countless other categories to examine, but only so much time in one semester. I am truly curious about my peers' projects and am very much looking forward not only to class presentations, but also gaining access to the course website and having the

opportunity to poke around in their research. I'm excited to see, too, if there is any overlap in students' studies, and whether or not some of our projects parallel or intersect.