

People really do believe these things!

Streb shows why enquiring minds are believing minds

By Judy Finman

Are you one of those people who publicly sneers at the supermarket tabloids, but when no one is looking, sneaks a quick read? Let's face it, educated people are not supposed to take an interest in UFO landings and parents who eat their babies.

Unless you are Edward J. Streb, associate professor of communications at Rowan University. Also known as Mr. Persuasion, Streb is an expert on the subjects of persuasion and social influence. The influence supermarket tabloids exert on their readers fascinates him. For the last 17 years, he has studied articles like "Mom Boiled Her Baby and Ate Her," "Cooks Her Boyfriend, Feeds Him to Pigeons" and "Invisible Aliens From Space Live Among Us."

How did Streb get started on this off-beat scholarly path? He wondered, as many of us do, "Why would anyone read this? Do they believe it, and why?" He decided it was worth finding out. Except for his investigations, there has been little academic inquiry into the persuasive nature of supermarket tabloids and none into their credibility.

Funded by a research grant from Rowan to do intensive research on the tabloids and the *National Enquirer* in particular, he addressed such questions

as: What rhetorical devices have they used to enhance their credibility with readers? How have they adapted their message to remain competitive with television's "tabloid" programs? What is the impact of libel suits on tabloid credibility?

What Streb concluded is that "many regular readers of the *National Enquirer* do believe what they read in the pages of the oldest and most successful of the tabloids [and that] tabloid readers—especially those who peruse the *National Enquirer*—find such papers credible."

Why do they believe? According to Streb, there are quite a few reasons. First, the content of the *Enquirer* has become less bizarre and more mainstream over the years. In fact, the San Francisco bureau chief of the *New York Times* commended the *Enquirer* for its "aggressiveness and accuracy" in covering the O.J. Simpson trial and deemed its trial articles "required reading." Lawsuits brought against it by celebrities also may have boosted its credibility. Further, the American Heart Association and the American Cancer Society have cited the *Enquirer* for excellent reporting. With all this praise, the *Enquirer* now boldly calls itself the "tabloid of record," imitating the *New York Times*, the "newspaper of record."

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After studying several hundred issues of the *National Enquirer* dating from the 1970s and 1980s, Streb found the major reason for the paper's credibility with its regular readers: it made them feel good about themselves. The *Enquirer*, which has been publishing since 1952, made a directional change in 1968 to become a "good news" family entertainment newspaper. "The *Enquirer* made it clear to its readers that their value system made sense, that there were simple solutions to their problems, and that they were basically nice people," Streb says. "What the habitual reader is apparently seeking, and what the *Enquirer* is primarily supplying, are massive doses of hope and reassurance."

This is not what regular readers might tell you if asked. "Most people would say, 'I read it because it's funny, it's mindless entertainment,'" says Streb. He adds, "The cover gets you to buy, but why do you come back? It makes you feel good about yourself!"

The newspaper's readership is mainly "blue collar," according to Streb, and, in the 1970s and 1980s, "its depiction of the world... revolved around God, motherhood, and apple pie." It stirred its readers' patriotism, belief in the sacredness of marriage, and uneasiness about the women's liberation movement. Headlines from that period reflected these values: "America Is Still No. 1 in the World," "Marriage Is More Popular Than Ever," "It's Bad To Live Together Before Marriage."

Besides reinforcing their values, Streb found the *National Enquirer* offered its readers personal advice—while cautioning against self-help books and "experts" on television talk shows. Articles such as "How To Become More Charming," "12 Minutes to a Better Marriage" and "How To Achieve Peace of Mind" were frequent.

Articles that proclaimed "What You

Wear to Bed Reveals Your Personality" and "How Your Salad Reveals Your Personality" gave readers a chance to choose from a list of habits or preferences to determine their personality. The end result was always flattering. "Though they may have chosen what seem like the dullest, most outrageous, or most despicable options available, every reader was still described in glowing terms," Streb says. "If their favorite president was Richard Nixon, for example, they were told 'a forgiving nature is one of your strong points.'"

By doling out weekly doses of reassuring articles, the *Enquirer* generated a "feel good" context which made its outlandish "news" more plausible. "It would be hard to accept the 'reassuring' articles as truthful without at least recognizing some element of truth in the far-fetched stories that appeared in the same publication, Streb notes.

Today the *Enquirer* places less emphasis on behavioral psychology, blue-collar values, Bigfoot and UFOs. Its credibility is at an all-time high, but sales are declining. Streb ties its decline with its abandonment of the "feel good" theme, and competition from television tabloids and the mainstream press. "Gossip, or 'personality journalism' as it is frequently called," he says, "has become commonplace."

Of course the *Enquirer* and the other five tabloids—though damned as a group—are not all the same. Streb says, "While it may be clear to *Enquirer* readers and other observers that there are significant differences between the *Enquirer* and its more bizarre counterparts, this may not be apparent to non-readers," who lump them all together. The *Enquirer* is intent upon separating itself from the rest, and in the early 1980s, it started *Weekly World News* as the repository for UFO and other more "far-out" stories.

Weekly World News, like the *Sun*, the

Globe, the *National Examiner* and the *Star* are more likely than the *Enquirer* to print "top of head"—or fictitious—stories. In a recent lawsuit, the *Sun's* defense team argued that its stories are "fiction and fantasy and not meant to be taken as news."

Streb is surely not a typical subscriber to the *National Enquirer* and *Weekly World News*, but he takes it in stride. "There's a serious side to this research," he says. "We need to understand how these things work. I'm certainly not doing research that's going to change the world, [but] it gives an insight into human behavior."

Streb teaches a course on Persuasion and Social Influence which is a pop-culturist's dream. He talks about soap operas, *Playboy*, confessional magazines, wrestling, comic books and, of course, supermarket tabloids. Some students may not read these publications, but he tells them, "If you're going to be experts in the art of persuasion, you need to know about these."

Streb reads the six tabloids on a regular basis. His desk is piled high with them. He is now focusing his research on recent issues and analyzing them with the same thoroughness he brought to his historical study of the *National Enquirer*.

"I am grateful to Rowan for the research grant," he says. "It gave me a respite from having to stand in check-out lines—and pay for the tabloids. Now the only person who wonders what I'm doing is the person who delivers my *National Enquirer* and *Weekly World News*." ■