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Sub-Topic

Communication Research

Scope of Communication Research

Objectives and Significance of Communication Research

Process of Communication Research

Problem formulation

Conceptualization

Hypothesis Building

Research design

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Communication Research

Let us now discuss the meaning of the communication research. Zeam Folkerts and Stephen Lacy in their book “The Media in your Life- An Introduction to Mass Communication” has defined the mass communication research in these words: “Mass communication research involve the systematic study of media content, the forces that shape its creation, how and why people use media, and the impact of media content and media institutions on individuals and society”. The researchers of the discipline have developed a systematic study of media contents. The reason for conducting communication research varies with the researcher and the funding organization of the research.

Mass communication research basically is an art of scientific investigation or an in-depth academic activity that lays stress on the various aspects of mass communication. It includes not only an in-depth investigation of theoretical aspects of mass communication but also a wide ranging inter-disciplines such as television, radio, newspaper, folk and traditional communication forms, advertising, public relations campaign, effectiveness of programmes, audience behavior and so on.

In a broad sense communication experts and theorists engage themselves in research to find out certain behavioural patterns of human beings and to explore the relationship between the people and the society. This is to see how the effects of one on the other can be studied for the betterment of the communication efforts and the processes in future.

Mass media and the media research organizations need such research findings for shaping the news products to be launched, programmes or software to be introduced, so that the popularity can be gauged effectively to make it a profitable proposition. Now-a-days a new trend has come into mass media, especially TV news bulletins. That is, the same person is required to perform as a newscaster or newsreader, researcher, correspondent or reporter etc. on a continuously changing basis. In the same way, research departments in news as well as programme organizations are assuming more and more importance these days. So, you can understand the importance of background research in mass media.

Scope of Communication Research

Communication Research undertakes the scientific study of communication process. Being scientific it is objective and deterministic. It is interdisciplinary in nature as it borrows heavily both in terms of theory and methods from social and other sciences. In essence it involves application of social behavioural and scientific method to the study of communication issues and problems.

It has got a wide scope because it helps in building relations which eventually leads us to the process and path of progress & development, otherwise we will be self centered, self contained which will ultimately lead us nowhere. The exchange of idea motivates us to brainstorm, leading to research in related aspect.

1. Message Analysis: A message is not only about the advertising slogan or a marketing line; a message is an easy and clear idea that describes about the entire project as a whole. It should function as a guiding standard for every type of communications, from the contents of leaflets, brochures and websites and also for media interviews or conversations with important people. The main point is that messages must be simple and steady across all kinds of communications. Without clear and simple messages, a communication agenda requires clarity and focus and hence the agenda is at risk of becoming weak. “

Analyzing Messages provides a complete and easy guide to carry out content analysis research. It set up a formal definition of quantitative content analysis; which provides gradual instructions on designing a content analysis study; and explores in depth research questions that recur in content analysis, in areas of measurement, sampling, reliability, data analysis, validity, and technology.

2. Channel Analysis: A channel analysis is an evaluation of how and where a product should be sold. It starts with an assessment of the options for getting a specific product or service into the hands of the end user.

3. Audience Analysis: Audience analysis is about gathering and analysing information about the receivers of oral, written, or visual communication. There are many methods that a communication researcher can use to conduct the analysis. Because the task of completing an audience analysis is huge, therefore using a multi-pronged approach to conduct the analysis is recommended by most of the researchers, often resulting in improved precision and efficiency. Michael Albers suggests that, “An analysis uses several independent dimensions that work together, such as readers’ knowledge of the topic and readers cognitive ability.”

Objectives and Significance of Communication Research

What do you want from communications? All strategies must start with an understanding of objectives. Communications can be resource and time intensive, so the more precisely you can state your reasons for communicating, the better you will be able to spend those resources. Your institute may state your main objective as seeking to influence or change a particular policy. Or you may merely want people to understand the significance of your research. There may be a variety of more specific reasons for communicating, but ultimately, influence is typically the central objective of most research institutions.

The SMART acronym is useful here. Your objective should be:

Specific

Measurable

Attainable

Results – oriented and

Time-limited

The more SMART your objectives are, the easier it will be to assess progress and adjust activities accordingly.

Media stands for the tools or channels of communication. We have different types of media such as traditional forms, print, electronic etc. The main purpose of this media is to provide education information and entertainment to the target audience. To know the likings and disliking, needs and requirements of the target audience research is of much importance for media of mass communication. Except the public sector media, we know that almost all other media organizations are owned by private organization and profit making is the guiding principle of the private media organizations. For offering different media content to a heterogeneous audience, the media organizations always lay their stress on innovative ideas and improvised ways for providing better programme presentation that requires research. From determining the topics and issues for reporting in the print media, selection of scoops from the electronic news gathering, treatment of the stories of a film, use of public relations tools, preparation and campaigning of an advertisement, markets survey etc. in all the fields of mass communication, communication research plays a significant role.

A democratic government cannot take any decision in a large scale or formulate policies and programmes without conducting a research. Because the result of the policies may affect crores of the people. Likewise, as it is popularly known as the fourth pillar of democracy, media cannot bring the attention of an audience to a specific issue without conducting a research among the target audience. For an investigative report a reporter must pursue a research on the issue. For development journalism also the media organizations must conduct some research. The relationship between public opinion and mass media on the one hand and the democratic Government on the other should be such that the unrepresented and underrepresented people or issues can be brought to the attention of the government or of the society to that they can be addressed properly.

Along with the practical aspects of the role of communication research on mass media, the theoretical aspect is also equally important. Media theory involves generalizing about the relationship between people or the society and the media. Different types of media theories and research models have been evolved from time to time. You may remember that there is a media theory which is known as cultivation theory and it was developed by George Garbner. It states that heavy television viewing influences people to adopt values, role and world views that are based on television content they watch. The media managers use research to understand what their audiences want. To decide to change their advertisers and to develop news and information Harold

Laswell's magic bullet theory has led to the conclusion that media has universal and powerful effects.

From the limited effects research, Carl Hoveland and his colleagues found evidence for a limited effect model at the beginning of the Second World War. According to them, media effects is specific and limited. Pluralism was a concept ushered in by the works of Charles Horton Cooley, John Dewey and Robert E. Park. It espoused the coexistence and cooperation among the different elements of a power structure. They believed that a modern media could make possible a truly democratic community. Moderate effects research started in US in 1970's wherein it was found that media content had a greater impact on people's behavior than limited effects studies suggested, but the impact was not as great as was found by the powerful effects researchers.

Process of Communication Research

Communication is not a new area of research. It has been studied for centuries. The earliest study of communication can be traced back to the fifth century B.C., during the classical period of communication inquiry. Philosophers like Plato and Aristotle studied the public-speaking strategies of Greek orators. Later during the Roman Empire, statesmen like Cicero and Quintilian studied the role of public communication in Roman society.

Communication Research is influenced by two basic scholarly research processes, viz., behaviorism and phenomenology.

Behaviorism is based on the belief that objective knowledge is obtained through the careful and systematic observation and measurement of what people do. Behavioural research method relies on operationalism, transforming abstract concept into behaviours that can precisely be quantified. The goal of behavioural research is to identify and test laws that can explain, predict and lead to the control of behaviour.

Phenomenology is based on the belief that what people do depends on what they perceive is what goes on in their mind. Phenomenologists thus focus on how internal, psychological meaning guides behaviour. Phenomenological methods of research rely on discovering how individuals construct meaning and believing that objective observation is not sufficient. The goal of Phenomenological research is to describe how people understand their lived experience.

Both behaviourism and phenomenology form the study of communication. Communication certainly is a behaviour that can be studied using behavioural methods in an individualistic or an integrated manner.

Stages of Communication Research

The communication research process can be divided into five interrelated phases of research activity:

1. Conceptualization: Conceptualization is the first phase of communication research. In this phase the researcher invites formulation of an idea about what needs to be studied. The researcher begins communication inquiry by engaging in such conceptualizing activities as identifying a topic worth studying, defining the primary concepts relevant to the topic and reviewing the literature to learn what is already known about the topic, and phrasing the topic as a formal research problem.

2. Planning and Designing: Moving from the conceptualization stage to planning and to designing research demands that the researcher transforms abstract concepts into operational or measurable terms. Operationalization involves determining the observable attributes, or characteristics of the concepts of interest. In this stage researcher must develop strategies for measuring those observable concepts. Communication researchers usually rely on three general techniques for measuring research concepts: questionnaire, interviews and observations. These three measurement techniques produce different types of information.

Planning and designing communication research involves number of ethical decisions. Ethics affects each stage of the research process: how researcher chooses the research topic and frames questions; how the literature is reviewed and how research is designed and conducted; how the data is analyzed and how the findings are interpreted and used.

3. Methodology: Once the topic has been chosen and the research questions have been determined and the review of literature has been conducted and research has been designed, then the researchers are ready to conduct their studies. Conducting research carefully demands understanding and adhering to the specific assumption and requirements of the methodology chosen. These methods guide the researchers to what evidence to look for and how to look for it.

4. Analyzing and Interpreting Data: Once data or evidence has been gathered through the use of the methodology, it needs to be analyzed and interpreted. For methods like experimental, survey and sometimes textual analysis it means processing quantitative data through the use of appropriate statistical procedures.

5. Reconceptualizing: In this stage the researcher rethinks on the topic of enquiry. As a result of the systematic process associated with conceptualization, planning and designing of research, using methodology to conduct research, and analyzing the data acquired through research. Once data has been collected and analyzed, the findings need to be interpreted within the broader context of the research process.

Reconceptualization involves explaining the significance of the findings. In this stage the researcher explains how the findings answer the research questions posed, and confirm or disconfirm the predictions made and, support or refute previous theory and research. Researchers are also able to identify the problem with the research and how these problems may limit the validity and usage of the findings.

Problem formulation

A research problem is a statement about an area of concern, a condition to be improved, a difficulty to be eliminated, or a troubling question that exists in scholarly literature, in theory, or in practice that points to the need for meaningful understanding and deliberate investigation. In some social science disciplines the research problem is typically posed in the form of a question. A research problem does not state how to do something, offer a vague or broad proposition, or present a value question.

The purpose of a problem statement is to:

1. Introduce the reader to the importance of the topic being studied. The reader is oriented to the significance of the study and the research questions or hypotheses to follow.
2. Places the problem into a particular context that defines the parameters of what is to be investigated.
3. Provides the framework for reporting the results and indicates what is probably necessary to conduct the study and explain how the findings will present this information.

How to identify a research problem?

After choosing a specific topic for your academic paper, you need to state it as a clear research problem that identifies all the issues that you'll address. It's not always simple for students to formulate it. In some fields, they may end up spending a lot of time thinking, exploring, and studying before getting a clear idea of what research questions to answer.

Some topics are too broad to give a researchable issue. For example, if you decide to study certain social issues, like child poverty, remember that they don't provide any researchable question. These are very broad to address and take a lot of time and resources to become unfeasible so that your study will lack enough focus and depth.

What is a statement of a research problem?

An adequate statement of your research problem plays an important role in the success of your academic paper and study. It's possible to generate a number of researchable issues from the same subject because there are many issues that may arise out of it. Your study should pursue only one in detail.

Conceptualization

Conceptualization is the first phase of communication research. In this phase the researcher invites formulation of an idea about what needs to be studied. The researcher begins communication inquiry by engaging in such conceptualizing activities as identifying a topic worth studying, defining the primary concepts relevant to the topic and reviewing the literature to learn what is already known about the topic, and phrasing the topic as a formal research problem.

Basic characteristics of research problem

For your research problem to be effective, make sure that it has these basic characteristics:

- Reflecting on important issues or needs;
- Basing on factual evidence (it's non-hypothetical);
- Being manageable and relevant;
- Suggesting a testable and meaningful hypothesis (avoiding useless answers).

Formulating your research problem with ease

Formulating your research problem enables you to make a purpose of your study clear to yourself and target readers. Focus your paper on providing relevant data to address it. A problem statement is an effective and essential tool to keep you on track with research and evaluate it. How can you formulate a powerful research problem? Consider 5 ways to formulate the research problem:

- Specify your research objectives;
- Review its context or environment;
- Explore its nature;
- Determine variable relationships;
- Anticipate the possible consequences of alternative approaches.

Specific research objectives

A clear statement that defines all objectives can help you conduct and develop effective and meaningful research. They should be manageable to bring you success. A few goals will help you keep your study relevant. This statement also helps professors evaluation the questions your research project answers and different methods that you use to address them.

Review the context of your research problem

It's necessary to work hard to define and test all kinds of environmental variables to make your project successful. Why do you need to do that? This step can help you define if the important findings of your study will deliver enough data to be worth considering. Identify specific environmental variables that may potentially affect your research and start formulating effective methods to control all of them.

Why explore the nature of your research problem?

Research problems may range from simple to complex, and everything depends on a range of variables and their relationships. Some of them can be directly relevant to specific research questions, while others are completely unimportant for your project.

Why should you understand their nature? This knowledge enables you to develop effective solutions. To get a deep understanding of all dimensions, think about focus groups and other relevant details to provide the necessary insight into a particular question.

Determine variable relationships

Scientific, social, and other studies often focus on creating a certain sequence of repeating behaviors over time. What does your project entail? Completing the entire process involves:

- Identifying the variables that affect possible solutions to your research problem;
- Deciding on the degree to which you can use and control all of them for study purposes;
- Determining functional relationships between existing variables;
- Choose the most critical variables for a solution of your research problem.

During the formulation stage, it's necessary to consider and generate as many potential approaches and variable relationships as you can.

What are the consequences of alternative approaches?

There are different consequences that each course of action or approach can bring, and that's why you need to anticipate them. Why communicate possible outcomes? It's a primary goal of any research process.

Structuring your research problem

Look at scientific papers to notice their research questions because they are crucial for determining the quality of answers, methods, and findings. Quantitative designs use deductive reasoning to state a testable hypothesis. Qualitative methods use inductive reasoning to make a strong statement of your future thesis.

Tips for defining your research problem

You need to formulate it during the initial stage of a scientific process or study. For instance, literature reviews, research, and studies of previous experiments are likely to provide you with vague areas of interest. Look at the area that brings interesting results. Make sure that it has a potential for exploring. Think about reviewing a successful experiment and try to disagree with its results, methodology, and tests, define the entire process, and retest its hypothesis.

Hypothesis Building

After extensive literature review or after finding the knowledge gap a researcher should state in clear terms the objectives of the study and the working hypothesis or hypotheses. A working hypothesis is a logical assumption made to test its feasibility in the given context of the research problem. In most types of research, the development of working hypothesis plays an important role. Hypothesis should be very specific and limited to the piece of research in hand because it has to be tested. The role of the hypothesis is to guide the researcher by delimiting the area of research and to keep him on the right track. It sharpens the thinking and focuses attention on the more important facets of the problem. It also indicates the type and quality of data required along with the method of data analysis to be used. It is not compulsory to have hypothesis in every type of research. For example, exploratory researches do not need to prove hypotheses. Thus, hypotheses arise because of a deductive reasoning about the subject, examination of the available data and materials including related studies and the opinion of the counsel of experts and interested parties. But in principle the hypotheses help in clarifying the research objectives in specific term

Research design

Research design refers to the blueprint or the conceptual structure within which research would be conducted. The preparation of such a design facilitates research to be as efficient as possible yielding maximal information. In other words, the function of research design is to provide the collection of relevant evidence with minimal expenditure of effort, time and money. But how all these can be achieved depends mainly on the research purpose.

Types of research design

There are three basic research designs adopted by researchers in various fields. They are:

- i. **Exploratory research design** Such research design aims to generate basic knowledge and clarify relevant issues to uncover variables associated with a problem. It also uncovers information needs, and/or define alternatives for addressing research objectives. It is very flexible and open-ended.
- ii. **Descriptive Research (who, what, where, how)** This design provides further insight into the research problem by describing the variables of interest. It can be used for profiling, defining, segmentation, estimating, predicting and examining associative relationships.

- iii.** Causal Research (If-then) Designed to provide information on potential cause-and-effect relationships. Most practical in determining to find out the associations or impact of one variable on another.
- iv.** The preparation of the research design, appropriate for a research problem, involves usually the consideration of the following:
- The sources and the means of data collection
 - The availability and skills of the researcher and others associated
 - The time, budget and other resources available for research
 - The explanation of the entire process and approach to be followed in order to fulfil the research objectives or to find logical solutions to the identified research problem.

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