
UNIT 1 RESEARCH: CONCEPT, NATURE AND SCOPE

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Research in mass communication has developed into a full-fledged area of academic activity. Today it is multi-faceted and covers a wide variety of topics. Often, it is a product of inter-disciplinary research drawing upon research methods adopted by different social sciences like sociology, political science, psychology and others. From effects research to textual analysis to critical discourse analysis to semiotics, a wide spectrum of research methods are applied to various communication situations.

At this stage it is important for you to understand that research is a way of thinking as well as a skill which can be acquired. Research involves a holistic critical examination of an issue; identification and explanation of the principles that govern a given process; a search for solutions; and a statement of predictions. This is done for promoting knowledge and building theory and it is also done to find solutions to real life issues and problems in industry and society.

Sometimes we are asked to conduct research by an organisation. The first question that comes to mind is Why? And How? What is the purpose for which we are undertaking this extensive exercise? Is it to build on the theories or to address a specific problem that an organisation is facing? These questions are important and to address them, it is important to know that research is a logical process, which makes it necessary that we understand the broad concepts, and the nature and purpose of research. This block is an introduction to a complex field of communication research, and is designed to set you on an exciting journey in mass communication research.

1.1 LEARNING OUTCOMES

After working through this unit, you should be able to:

- discuss the concept, role and importance of research;
- describe the nature and characteristics of research;
- differentiate between Pure and Applied Research; and
- outline the purpose and scope of mass communication research.

1.2 RESEARCH: CONCEPT AND ROLE

In this section, we will focus on the core issues that characterise research. We will also trace its growth trajectory driven by various socio-political factors. Constant Research is even more important to enhance development communication.

1.2.1 Definition

Research can be defined as a careful investigation or inquiry especially through search for new facts in any branch of knowledge. Here, the term ‘search’ is important as researchers are looking for answers and can never be sure where they will find them or what they will find. In fact, the word ‘research’ can be seen as a composition of two syllables, *re* and *search*, suggestive of a continuous search for truth and disrespect for the status quo.

Within social sciences, we find the same emphasis in research on inquiry for theory building and on testing out of and verification of existing theories. In the past century, communication as a subject has drawn its theoretical basis from both physical and social sciences and has emerged as a discipline that is both multi and interdisciplinary. Communication research draws from the definitions of social scientists but focuses on any “research discipline that can shed new light on mass communication processes, effects, institutions and institutional change” (Westley and Stempel, 1981).

1.2.1 The Central Concept

Research is characterised by dynamism and the central concept is that of ‘tentative truth’. A researcher aims to explore or uncover something that is, in some way, unnoticed, hidden, secret or problematic.

There is also a symbiotic relationship between theory and research; each is part of the process as also the result of the other. Findings from research feed into theory; which in turn forms the basis for further enquiry. Every theory in communication that has been propounded till date is a result of numerous revisions and refinements, many at the hands of the original author him/herself. Some theories have stood the test of time while others have not- thus have been rejected. For instance, as discussed in Course MJM-030, the Bullet theory of the early 1900s made way for the Two-step Flow hypothesis of the 1940s; Everett M. Rogers’ Diffusion of Innovations theory of 1971 saw a reversal barely five years later making the original premise of the theory irrelevant. Other theories of media importance in development were also set aside when repeated results showed

that this was not the case. Thus, both theory and research are necessary to validate or refute each other.

1.2.3 Growth and Development

Historically, four major social forces were responsible for the development of research in mass communication - World War I revealed the power of media as a tool of propaganda. The Hypodermic needle (Bullet) theory of the early 1900s suggested that whatever message was pushed through the media was received as it is; by the audience who seem to exercise little or no choice about the content.

The second major force was the Manufacturers' /Advertisers' Lobby. Mass production of goods had taken place during the wars and once the wars were over, manufacturers were looking for buyers. In a market scenario, where supply exceeded the demand, they recognised the importance of message effectiveness and media planning in reaching out to the target buyers. They demanded hard facts regarding circulation figures, demographics of readers etc. from the publishers so that they could tailor and place the advertising messages accordingly. So research began to be conducted on the science and art of communication.

The third force was that of the Publishers' Lobby. From an earlier time, when the printer was also the publisher, the one-man printing establishments grew into an industry. Publishers recognised the profit in selling newsprint space to advertisers. They also realised that more readers meant more advertisers. Research began to be conducted into, 'who the readers were and what they wanted' - resulting in extensive readership and audience surveys.

The fourth social force was Public Concern. As media became more and more powerful and intrusive, people began to be more concerned about media impact on their personal and professional lives as well as on society. Thus began institutional and public policy research in communications.

Phases of Development: R.D. Wimmer and J.R. Dominick in Mass Media Research have identified four phases into which research in a particular medium is divided. These phases are not so much chronological but they are interlinked.

In Phase 1 there is an interest in the medium itself. What is it, how does it work, what technology does it involve, how is it similar to or different from what we already have, what functions or services does it provide, who will have access to the new medium, how much will it cost? All these questions can be asked of the Internet, Mobile Telephony and other forms of New Media.

Phase 2 begins once the medium is developed. Here the focus is on the uses and users of the medium. For instance, what are the extent and nature of activities possible with the use of New Media by different users? What is the demographic profile of the user? Are the young using it more? Do women use the Internet more for socio-communicative purposes as compared to men who use it more for informative purposes? Is the Internet a functional alternative to traditional media? Is it being used in ways that were not originally intended?

Phase 3 investigates the social, psychological and physical effects of the medium. How much time is spent in using the medium? When does the use become abuse/misuse? How much does it help? Do the shy take advantage of online anonymity

to express themselves more freely? Does it reduce the necessity of physical activity? Can it be combined with other media to make it more useful? Does it change people’s perspective? Does it enable a level playing ground in business?

Does it bring in more players with different agendas? And so on.

Phase 4 focuses on how the medium can be improved - either in terms of usage or technology, for instance, by improving transmission and reception, by increasing the penetration, by making it more valuable through improvement in content etc. This phase has been largely driven by the private sector. Intra and inter-media competition for a larger profit share has ensured that the focus remains on how to retain audience share and increase it by attracting it away from the competition. Consumer comfort becomes the business mantra for success.

1.2.4 Importance of Research

As discussed above, for us the importance of research lies in its implications - whether it is meant for knowledge creation or solving real world problems.

- Research is a critical input into the development, design, production, delivery and evaluation of courses and content; while on the other hand, findings from research must feed into the theory of this multidisciplinary and even epistemological enquiry. The perspective must then become total and each element must be examined in association with each other, rather than in isolation at each stage of the process.
- Research is an important prerequisite for understanding social order. Social phenomena are complex. There is constant interaction of diverse influences environmental, psychological and social; on human beings, as individuals, members of a social group, and as a society at large. Therefore, research is needed to investigate both isolated patterns of behaviour as also to identify set patterns of behaviour exhibited by social groups and societies.
- Through a systematic interrelation between disparate facts, research allows us to understand, generalise, predict, and manage social behaviour.
- Research generates voluminous social data which help the formulation of social policies, planning and priorities. In a culturally diverse country like India, such data are critically important for judicious use of resources and coherent development of a rapidly changing society.
- Research is both cumulative and a self-correcting process. Its importance lies in the fact that, if done well, it can be trusted. The conclusions arrived at in a research study are firmly tied to reality as they are based on a logic born out of observation and measurement.

Check Your Progress: 1

Note: 1) Use the space below for your answers.

2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.

1) Define Research.

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2) What is the central concept of Research?

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3) List four reasons for the growth of research.

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4) What is the importance of research?

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1.3 RESEARCH: NATURE AND CHARACTERISTICS

After an overview of the concept, role and importance of research, let us understand the nature and characteristics of research.

1.3.1 Nature of Research

As mentioned earlier, the basic nature of research is to advance knowledge and seek solutions to problems. To do this, we start with simple questions. For instance, in journalistic practice, the basic questions are: who, what, why, where, when and how. In research, these questions are addressed in a more systematic, reliable, testable, and replicable manner.

In practice, all the questions are mixed together and it is difficult to isolate one from the other when dealing with human behaviour and social phenomenon. In research, these are isolated and studied in depth - separately as well as together.

The basic premise is that any issue/event/phenomenon can be studied, subjected to appropriate systematic, objective scientific procedures and conclusions can be arrived at that can preferably be generalised to the population. Such results and conclusions should also be amenable to replication as the search for knowledge is conducted with a defined set of rules and procedures that are commonly understood and shared by all sciences.

1.3.2 Characteristics of Scientific Research

Research needs to be done in a systematic and logical way, following a series of steps and sets of protocols. Without such procedures, research cannot be considered scientific. Let us look at the basic tenets of research:

Research is empirical

The word 'empirical' comes from the Greek word 'empiricism' which means experience. Researchers are concerned with what is observable and potentially measurable. For instance, the problem of declining circulation figures can be investigated, identified and measured in numerical terms. With the findings, solutions to address declining circulation can be suggested.

Since research depends on observations, the factors or variables under study are defined in operational terms (as operational definitions) so as to be either observed or measured i.e. observable behaviour patterns that can be connected to represent abstract (covert) concepts. For instance, if we argue that modernity in an individual is associated to educational levels, the variable of education can be easily measured in terms of the educational degree possessed such as matriculate, graduate etc. The variable of modernity, being more abstract and complex, can be measured in terms of how the respondent tests on a readily available scale, such as K.S. Yang's Multiple Modernity Scale or on a scale created by the researcher to measure the responses on concepts related to modernity.

The basic aim of research is to arrive at an understanding of why a phenomenon occurs or is likely to occur. Therefore, we use concepts to organise and make sense of things. In many ways they are like labels that help us in structuring our observations. They also enable us to measure the associations and correlations between and among various concepts. For instance, to study the relationship between violent behaviour and viewing of violent TV content we may ask- Does televised violence 'cause' violent behavior? This is a very complicated issue and researchers have been arguing for decades on how to define violence and how to determine whether the effect of watching televised violence is 'significant'. Depending on how the researcher operationally defines terms, the respondent behaviour can be observed, measured, and results and conclusions arrived at.

Research is objective

All human beings have their own attitudes and perspectives on different aspects of life. The attitudes and perspectives are a result of the educational and socialisation process in the culture in which we have grown up. Such attitudes can affect the way in which we conduct research. Therefore, in order to be accurate in research, it is important that the research process be objective and as free as possible of biases and pre-conceived notions, following the scientific method.

The scientific method presupposes ethical neutrality on the part of the researcher and tries to rule out personal biases and judgments by laying down explicit rules and procedures in place for the study. Each approach or method of research may have different ways of reducing bias and prejudice, but at the basic level, rules and procedures exist. Among the most important is that the data collected during the course of a research study should speak for itself - rather than be tilted in favour of a researcher's opinions. Results are often not as we expected them to be, but the facts must stand on their own and reflect an objective finding which is as free of bias as possible. As the noted psychologist B.F. Skinner wrote in *Science and Human Behaviour*, "Research projects do not always come out as one expects, but the facts must stand and the expectations fall. The subject matter, not the scientist, knows best."

The 'creative' part of research is usually limited to the identification and formulation of the research problem. But once the methodology is framed, its implementation should be as per the laid down procedures as the methodology of a study determines the reliability and validity of the findings and in turn contributes in knowledge generation. For instance, a researcher, based on his observation, that majority of people discuss the stories covered by a specific newspaper may hypothesise that it is the largest selling newspaper, but it is only the collection of primary or secondary data that will support or reject the hypothesis.

Objectivity is also ensured by framing operational definitions as mentioned earlier. This, not only establishes that the researcher has used logic and reason to study a particular phenomenon but also facilitates replication of the study by other researchers on the same or different parameters. Operational definitions also help in defining the meaning of a term for the specific purpose of the given research effort. For instance, a researcher may define violence as a physical act resulting in bloodshed and then analyse a particular programme to determine how violent it is. Another researcher may define violence as verbal abuse and analyse the programme accordingly. Still other researchers have the choice to replicate the studies of these two researchers by using the same parameters or conduct independent studies using their own definitions. The end result will contribute to enhancement of knowledge and a holistic study of violence along various dimensions. You will read more about defining operational definitions in subsequent units.

Another method to ensure objectivity is through 'triangulation' - when more than one researcher observes the same phenomena for the same study or when more than one set of data are compared to determine the final result. This ensures that individual biases are ruled out and a consensus is arrived at. Triangulation can also be incorporated into research by using more than one data collection tool to observe/measure the same phenomenon for cross verification.

Research is systematic and cumulative

Not only is research systematic, it also builds on existing knowledge. No research study stands alone, nor does it rise or fall by itself. Previous studies are always used as building blocks or launch pads for current research. The idea is to strengthen existing theory or to revise it by focusing on the gaps or shortcomings of previous research. The examination of previous research, also called "Review of Literature" comes before the formulation of the terms of enquiry and the framing of appropriate methodology for the collection and analysis of data.

Research may start with a single, carefully observed event and progress ultimately to the formulation of theories and laws. These theories, in turn are applied to other single carefully observed events and compared with previous results. Following a constant cycle of testing and verification, theories are built, tested, rejected, and rebuilt.

Research is predictive

Science is concerned with relating the past/present to the future. Research strives to develop theories because they are useful in not just understanding the past/present, but in predicting future behaviour in different situations.

Research is public

Researchers, especially those in the academic sector, work publicly. Research in the public domain helps to build theory and is necessary for academic peers to compare, test, retest, and validate findings. Even private sector research, if it has implications for the public, as for instance in pharmaceuticals, has to be publicly available.

The public nature of academic research implies responsibility in publication. The published report should include all pertinent details so that the readers are in a position to judge whether the findings are reliable and valid enough to be used as a building block for further research or as the justification for a policy decision. Even where research findings are not made public but used in-house, the researchers involved have to reveal the methodology used in data collection and analysis, as too much hinges on the reliability and validity of the findings.

Check Your Progress: 2

Note: 1) Use the space below for your answers.

2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.

1) What are the characteristics of scientific research method?

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2) What is empiricism?

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3) How is objectivity achieved in research?

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1.4 PURPOSE OF RESEARCH

Earlier in the unit, we touched upon the symbiotic relationship between theory and application. On the one hand, research is a critical input into the development, design, production, delivery and evaluation of content; while on the other hand, findings from research feed into the theory of this multidisciplinary field of communication. The perspective then becomes total and each element is examined in association with each other, rather than in isolation at each stage of the processes.

If research has no implication for theory, if it lacks even a minimum of *scientific method* and explanatory power, it should not be undertaken. At the same time, if research in the context of national social and economic development cannot provide a clear, direct, and unambiguous line between results and decision alternatives, it lacks *pragmatic validity* and similarly should not be undertaken.

Research can be classified into pure and applied research:

Pure Research

Pure research is when knowledge is pursued purely for intellectual curiosity. It is undertaken for the satisfaction of knowing or understanding, regardless of whether they have any practical application for the present or the future. The emphasis here is on discovering, developing and testing theories. For instance, a set of propositions that showed how and why audiences considered some news stories more significant than others was eventually termed as the Agenda Setting Theory. Pure research is also concerned with the development and refinement of research procedures, techniques and other aspects of research methodology. For instance, the development of a standardised scale to measure Internet addiction or the development of a more sensitive instrument to measure Emotional Quotient (EQ) would help the research community conduct comparable research across different groups in different cultures.

Applied Research

Applied research is conducted to solve practical problems of efficiency and profit. In print media, applied research comprises of readership studies - the demographic and psychographic profiling of readers and non-readers. Need gratification studies are conducted to determine who is reading what and why. Other kinds of studies are done to determine how variation in presentation (typography, makeup etc.) influences understanding of content; management studies. These are some examples of applied research in mass communication.

In electronic media, ratings and non-ratings research is conducted to determine the popularity of a programme, demographics and psychographics of its audience, formulation and implementation of creative strategy, programme scheduling, host/anchor popularity, etc.

Applied research is also conducted in the areas of advertising and public relations. In the former case, research is conducted along cognitive, affective and behavioural dimensions i.e. how advertising copy should be crafted so that it provides both information and entertainment while at the same time prompting action in the form of product purchase/attitude change. Research is also conducted to determine the right media mix - markets, budget allocations, choice of media channels, message distribution and advertising mechanics such as purchase of time units, print space etc.

In Public Relations, environmental monitoring programmes are conducted to observe trends in public opinion and socio-political events that could have significant impact on an organisation. Public relations audits are conducted to determine and assess image management activities; communication audits are done to assess the impact of internal and external communication tools such as press releases, in-house publications. Further, social audits are conducted to measure an organisation's social performance i.e. how well is it living up to its public responsibilities in a society.

It is important to mention here that it is not always possible to classify a given study neatly as one or the other. Pure research itself is an application of knowledge garnered from previous research and/or the researcher's own thought processes. Similarly, applied research is basic in the sense that it is true to a particular problem being currently studied. It is also difficult to make a distinction based on that one searches for knowledge and the other applies it or that one comes before the other. It is true that basic research often yields knowledge that has immediate practical utility but applied research may also yield the discovery of basic principles. For example, when the application of the Bullet Theory could not predict the outcome of the 1948 American Presidential elections, it was studied again and eventually paved the way for Two-Step Flow theory.

1.5 SCOPE OF COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

As we have already seen, communication research extensively borrows from anthropology, sociology, political science, economics, psychology and other disciplines. Communication research is about researching communication - human and technology mediated communication. Media and communication studies are one of the parts of human communication which includes media message creation, design of those messages, distribution of those messages, and consumption of media messages.

Media messages inevitably include use of technology. For example, you read newspaper, watch television, listen to radio, use mobile phone or see film in a cinema hall. All these activities consist of areas of research within communication research. Anything and everything about communication can be researched; who is creating communication, what is being communicated, how the communication is being sent and how is it being received, which communication is reaching the receiver and what are the effects of communication - all these are within the purview of communication research.

In the previous section, we have seen how communication research encompasses market research, film studies, media research, audience research, content research, and advertising research and so on. The basic elements of communication sender-message-channel-receiver-feedback can be researched individually or in combination with each other. Communication research includes researching each of them individually using suitable methods or examining the effects on each other. However, what specific aspects of each of these areas do communication researchers study?

Communication researchers study three things: Firstly, communication production, transmission and meaning making. Secondly they study content or form of communicative messages. Thirdly, communication researchers study functions and effects of communication messages. There are multiple branches of communication research.

When we link communication research to other social sciences, new areas or branches of communication studies emerge. Some of these are:

- Communication policy and law
- Organisational communication
- Cross-cultural systems

- Intra-personal communication
- Family communication
- Development communication
- Marketing communication
- Persuasive communication
- Political communication
- Health communication
- Instructional communication
- Public Relations

Within each of these sectors, like any other methods of research, communication research can be further viewed from quantitative and qualitative methods perspective. Quantitative methods encompass surveys, content analysis, experiments whereas qualitative analysis includes discourse analysis, ethnographies, case studies, semiotics, and rhetoric analysis and so on. You will read about them in detail in Block 2 and 3 of this course.

Check Your Progress: 3

Note: 1) Use the space below for your answers.

2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.

1) Name the disciplines from which communication draws its methods.

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2) What are the three things communication research studies?

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3) Mention some research methods used in communication.

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1.6 LET US SUM UP

The central concepts, broad perspectives and purposes, and the various fields in which communication research is carried out were introduced in this unit. The importance of communication research, either for expanding our knowledge or for solving specific problems was also discussed.

The relationship of communication research to other disciplines was explored at some length. We also discussed specific areas in the media industry where communication research has helped organisations to expand readerships, improve their product image and credibility. What communication researchers study in terms of the medium, the content and the meaning was explained.

This is the introductory unit of the course. Subsequent units will take you through a logical sequence of how to carry out communication research in much greater detail. Therefore, understanding the basic concepts presented in this unit is essential and you may read through the unit again, if you need to, so that you understand the full background of the subject.

1.7 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READINGS

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1.8 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE ANSWERS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Research is a “systematic, controlled, empirical and critical investigation of hypothetical propositions about the presumed relations among natural phenomena.”
- 2) The central concept of research is ‘tentative truth’. The word ‘research’ can be seen as a composition of two syllables, *re* and *search*, suggestive of a continuous search for truth and disrespect for the status quo.
- 3) The four major reasons for the growth of research are the World Wars, Manufacturers’/Advertisers’ Lobby, Publishers’ Lobby and Public Concern.
- 4) The four phases of development in research are the medium, uses and users of the medium, effects of the medium and improvements of the medium.
- 5) Research is important for the evolution of civilisation, for promoting a dynamic social order that is free of myth and superstition. It enables us to exercise control of our environment by increasing our ability to predict our future. It also helps us to put our past into perspective as well as understand our present.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) The scientific research method is empirical, objective, systematic and cumulative, predictive and public.
- 2) Empiricism is derived from 'experience' - something that can be observed and measured.
- 3) Objectivity in research is ensured by focusing on method which should be detailed and logically defensible.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Anthropology, Psychology, Political Science, and Sociology.
- 2) Communication researchers study the following:
 - Communication production, transmission and meaning making
 - Content or form of communicative messages
 - Functions and effects of communication messages.
- 3) Some methods used in communication research are surveys, content analysis, experiments whereas qualitative analysis includes ethnographies, case studies, semiotics, and rhetoric analysis.



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