Research in the Field

OBJECTIVES

After studying this chapter, you should be able to:

1. Identify some researchable problems in mass media.
2. Distinguish between applied and theoretical research.
3. Explain the need for "research literacy."
4. Explain the importance of research for society.
5. Describe several data-collection methods.

A CASE STUDY: USING RESEARCH IN PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

In a recent presidential election, news editors of a Charlotte, N.C., newspaper and a TV station felt frustration with routine coverage of political news. Too often, they said, coverage of the news was managed or manipulated by political interests. For example, a politician would call a news conference and reporters would dutifully report what they were told, and little else. The news executives feared this kind of news reporting would not sufficiently inform the public. They reasoned that voters, to some extent, should lead politicians as well as be led by them.

The editors asked: If a politician says the most important issues of the day are X and Y, does the typical person on the street agree? In other words, does the political agenda of those who make the news match the political agenda of those who read or view the news? And if the person on the street agrees that the important issues are X and Y, is that person satisfied with the quantity and quality of information about the issues?
The editors of the Charlotte, N.C., Observer and the news director of Charlotte’s WSOC-TV decided to do a little research. More precisely, they called on KPC Research, a subsidiary of the Knight Publishing Company, the parent company of the Observer, to do the research. They invited the Florida-based Poynter Institute, an academic institute for continuing journalism education, to lend a hand. The sponsors then initiated an impressive effort to improve the coverage of news in the Charlotte market.

The pairing of a newspaper and a TV station might seem strange because the two are sometimes viewed as competitors, but in this case it was not strange at all. Both wanted to know what the public felt were the issues, and how the issues were being covered. The news executives saw their roles in the news business as different enough to justify cooperation, and the joint effort also reduced the cost of the project for each sponsor.

KPC Research designed a questionnaire to identify the issues of the day and to measure the level of public satisfaction with political news in the market. They then conducted a telephone survey of 1,003 persons in the multicounty metro area. The survey provided baseline data on attitudes about political news.

During the interviews, respondents were asked if they would be willing to serve as part of an ongoing panel that could be contacted later about specific political issues. A panel is a sample of people who are surveyed at several different times. About 530 persons volunteered, and they were interviewed periodically during the 1992 political election. The results of the initial survey and the subsequent panel surveys led to many headlines and thousands of words of copy for the citizens of Charlotte.

Aside from serving an informational function, the Observer–WSOC-TV–Poynter research also served a promotional function. Promotion is important to media because, even when competition is minimal, media are entirely dependent on public support of their product. On the basis of this research, the sponsors were able to promote themselves to the audience as “going the extra mile,” so to speak, to provide the best political information for the 1992 election.

For example, the Observer explained that its political coverage would be deeper than the usual “horse race” story in which candidate A leads candidate B by some number of percentage points. And the news would “go beyond political schemes and symbols” to focus on the facts underlying the issues. “We will seek to reduce the coverage of campaign strategy and candidates’ manipulations, and increase the focus on voters’ concerns. We will seek to distinguish between issues that merely influence an election’s outcome, and those of governance that will be relevant after the election. We will link our coverage to the voters’ agenda, and initiate more questions on behalf of the voters,” the newspaper wrote under the headline: “We’ll help you regain control of the issues” (Jan. 12, 1992).

The survey revealed that people in the market were “more and more upset with politics” and with politicians. They felt that politicians, once elected, tended to ignore constituents and that citizens had little ability to turn things around. The Observer noted that 58 percent of North Carolina adults failed to vote in the important Jesse Helms/Harvey Gantt Senate election of 1990 (Jan. 12, 1992). The survey further revealed that the leading issues in the community were the economy and taxes, followed by education, family values, crime, health care, and the environment.

Armed with the knowledge of what the Charlotte citizens felt was important,
the Observer began to feature stories that addressed the issues. For example, on Jan. 23, 1992, the Observer juxtaposed survey results on health issues with a story about the U.S. Senate's consideration of a health insurance bill. From this, it was easy for the reader to see whether the Senate's direction was consonant with local wishes. Similarly, survey results were woven into stories on the economy (Jan. 26, 27), the State-of-the-Union speech (Jan. 28), college/university costs (Jan. 28), crime/drugs (Feb. 2), and other stories.

Although the most common kind of mass media research involves audience measurement and advertising, the Observer-WSOC-Poynter project is a good example of how research can be brought into other day-to-day workplace concerns of the mass media. Just 20 years ago, such a project was much less likely to happen. But today, managers, marketers, public relations personnel, and others are increasingly reliant on research to help in making decisions, and indications are that research will be used even more widely in the future. Moreover it will be used in a wide range of applications. Below are just a few more examples.

**SOME OTHER RESEARCHABLE MASS MEDIA PROBLEMS**

- Your news director assures you, the station manager, that the station’s news team is “the best in the market,” but you are unsure whether the news director’s perception is shared by the audience. This is important, because the broadcaster who misjudges the audience risks losing big bucks in the ratings wars. How will you decide?
- You open a weekly newspaper in a small town in your state, and the paper becomes very successful. Now you want convert to a triweekly or even a five-day newspaper. You cannot afford to botch the expansion. How will you decide which move to make?
- You manage a radio station in a crowded market. Your station consistently ranks several places below the top rating. Should you lobby for a change in format (i.e., should you abandon your present playlist and adopt a new one)? Will your present audience stay on your frequency? How will you decide what to do?
- You are a public relations professional charged with maximizing public support for the work of a corporation. What is the present level of public support, and what are the corporation’s strengths and weaknesses in the public’s perception? How can you use research to improve the situation?
- You feel that your newspaper’s penetration (defined as the proportion of subscribers to potential subscribers, or subscriber homes to total homes) is insufficient. Suppose there is a large audience that you are not reaching. Why are they not reading your newspaper, and what can you do to attract them?

Those are some problems the mass communication manager might face. Is research also relevant to the staffer (i.e., the reporter, advertising representative, or public relations person)? Consider these possibilities:

- The news reporter (any medium) wants to know if minorities and whites convicted of the same crime, are treated equally in the criminal court system of a
city. How would the reporter decide? Would it be sufficient simply to look at raw percentages of the convicted or time sentenced? Social research methods give specific criteria and techniques for such decisions.

- The layout person for a magazine or a newspaper wants to know whether the color photograph that will sell the most copies of the periodical is of a pair of happy coeds washing a car on a sunny day, or an action/violence scene from the latest international crisis. This is a decision that can either support or damage a medium’s competitiveness. How would one decide?

- The advertising representative needs to know which of several measures gives the best prediction of market success; or perhaps which kind of advertisement—"celebrity" or "slice-of-life"—will do the best job of moving customers to a product.

**THEORETICAL RESEARCH**

Although the most common kind of research in communication is applied research, especially audience studies, another kind of research is also very important to the field. It is called pure research, basic research, or theoretical research, and it typically is aimed at understanding and predicting communication behavior rather than at business issues. This is not to say that theoretical research is irrelevant to business, but that it usually has less urgency and more generality than applied research. Indeed, a theory of news readership, for instance, should be highly relevant to the business side of the media.

Applied research is sometimes called administrative research because it is used for administrative purposes. Theoretical research explores the relationships among phenomena, issues such as whether A causes B or whether B is largely explained by C, D, and E.

**A Research Example**

For example, Potter (1992, 392–405) conducted a study of how adolescents’ perceptions of “television reality” change with maturity. “Television reality,” or “TV reality” refers to the degree to which a viewer perceives what is seen on television as being the same as “real life.” The nature of youthful “TV reality” is important if we are to study the kinds of things that children learn from television. It is important to know what and how they learn from television because these things sometimes are expressed in subsequent behavior. For example, children who are not taught otherwise might be more willing to resort to violence to solve real-life problems if that is the TV model they see.

Participants in Potter’s research were students of a middle and high school affiliated with a large state university. The students were surveyed in 1983, 1985, and 1987. Four types of measures were obtained: the “reality” of television, the amount of TV viewing, some psychological measures, and some demographic (descriptive) measures. The plan was to compare levels of viewing and reality across age groups in order to track the changes in perceived reality that accompany maturity.
Although the interpretation was complex, Potter found, as expected, that the degree of reality attributed to television decreased as students moved through high school. Furthermore, he concluded that perceptions of reality have more than one dimension. For example, very young children tend to see television as a "magic window" with high correspondence to their life; but by the sixth grade, students begin to add a probability dimension. They say that certain things are possible, if not likely.

Potter suggested two other dimensions: utility and identity. Identity is the extent to which the person identifies with a TV character, and utility is the extent to which a TV presentation relates to the viewer's life.

What are the benefits of knowing the dimensions of reality for subsequent research? If you wanted to know, for example, whether persons who thought TV fiction was lifelike were more likely to be fearful of going outdoors, it would be important to study the fear in all of its aspects. This line of thought (measurement of dimensions) will be resumed in Chapter 5.

### LEARN BY DOING

With the permission of your instructor, study the research practices of a local radio station, newspaper, TV station, or cable outlet. Learn how or whether the mass medium makes use of research, and the kind of research and the purpose of the research. Write a two-page report of what you find. Include a discussion of research that might be useful to the medium but that is not being conducted, if any. Describe management's attitude or orientation toward the use of research: Is research incidental, essential, a publicity gimmick, or a bona fide management tool? What research should the medium pursue?

### Academicians and Theory

Most theoretical research, partly because it is slower to produce financial dividends, is conducted by academicians. Although complex and sometimes arduous, it nevertheless can be exciting as well as profound. Imagine the excitement, for example, when a researcher identifies an important relationship between variables that previously might not have been apparent to an observer; imagine creating a new and persuasive explanation for an aspect of behavior.

This kind of research amounts to discovery, and the social researchers are the Colombuses and Boones of the discipline. They blaze new trails and find new territories. The purpose of the discovery, of course, is to understand communication behavior.

### On Research Literacy

The pages and chapters that follow describe research techniques that will help you to analyze problems of theory and practice. If media managers of the future are to compete successfully in an arena of intense competition, then they must learn to use the resources, such as the massive databases that are available today, and the
techniques, such as social science research, that are available to them. They must learn to distinguish between good data and poor data, good research and bad research, and to recognize a research opportunity when they see one. In a phrase, they must become research literate.

For example, when a newspaper or broadcast station uses a sample of a few hundred, or even as many as 2,000, to represent a market that numbers in six, seven, or even eight figures, can the sample be trusted? Under certain conditions it can, as will be discussed in Chapter 4, and the critic will need to know those conditions. And what about how the survey questions are asked? Will the outcome of the research depend on the way the questions are written or presented? Will another researcher obtain the same results if two studies were conducted simultaneously? Many questions can be asked, and indeed they must be asked if a mass media person is to make good use of research.

Research as Management Style

Research should be part of the ongoing management style, not limited to miracle-cure applications introduced only at the eleventh hour of a management crisis. For example, if a newspaper or a radio station has suffered decline over a number of years and now has reached the crisis stage, then it is possible that the hour might be past when research would be useful. This is not an absolute, but a possibility. The insights from research might not reverse a decline that has been years in the making. A better management plan would be to keep a research finger on the pulse of the medium, and to make adjustments in the product as the pulse indicates.

THE Importance of Research for Society

Social research is important at three levels: the personal level, wherein we try to understand complex events and behaviors; the economic level, in which business decisions are made on the basis of data; and the institutional level, especially involving the interaction of mass media, individuals, and society.

Reliance on Media

The three levels probably overlap. DeFleur (1970) pointed out that in our society, where individuals may not have the support of an extended family to guide them, we are increasingly dependent on media sources of information. We rely on media for knowledge of current events and to prepare for business, education, entertainment, shopping, and so on. We rely on media to help us resolve political issues through public debate so that we don't have to resolve them by fighting in the streets. Donahue, Tichenor, and Olien (1972, 41–69), in an inspired essay on gatekeeping, discussed this function of the media in terms of "conflict resolution."
Media as Agenda Setters

But are the mass media passive and objective purveyors of information, or are they leading us as individuals and as societies? If they are leading us, then to where? and is their leadership proper and optimal? This line of inquiry implies a popular research area: agenda setting (McCombs and Shaw, 1972, 176–187). The principle of agenda setting is that the media may not be successful in telling us what to think, but they are quite successful in telling us what to think about (Cohen, 1963, 13). In other words, the media tend to set our agenda. Numerous research studies have examined and generally documented this tendency.

Agenda setting is an important issue. If the media tell us the recent fire, or hurricane, or explosion, or conflict is salient (as evidenced by placement and frequency of news stories)—but do not tell us about the nature, extent, and implications of water pollution, indigent care, education quality, or some other issue that lacks audience appeal—then it is possible that the media have not done us a proper service. Social research helps to explain who we are and where we are going. Research can help the media to function as surveyors of the environment.

The point here is that social research is important not just to administrative decision making, but even to survival of the species. Research provides a mirror with which we can see ourselves, and understand behaviors and events, and with which we can test the assumptions that drive society. Social research provides the power to correct the trajectory of the “Spaceship Earth.”

WHO CAN DO RESEARCH?

- Who Is a Researcher?

Writing survey questions and gathering data are easy; writing good questions and collecting useful data are not. Almost anyone can gather information and call it research, and a researcher might actually be self-trained, but a certain amount of formal training is desirable. Once trained in the general social science method and in data interpretation, the researcher might apply the method to any appropriate field, whether epidemiology, sociology, or mass communication.

Training in Research

How much training is required? For many research positions, the only hard rule is that the training be sufficient. This probably requires several university courses in research methods and research design, and several in statistics.

Also required is familiarity with statistical computer “packages,” especially SAS, formerly known as the Statistical Analysis System, and SPSS, formerly known as the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences. For some research jobs, knowledge of formal computer languages is required. In general, the more extensive the person’s training, the greater the research opportunity. Licensure of researchers is not required.