1

GETTING STARTED

Possibilities and Decisions

"Hey Luke! How was your break?"

"Great, Sofia, except now it's back to reality. I need coffee already to get me through the semester. Want to get some?"

"Sure! We're both doing Comm. Research this semester, right?"

"Looks like it. Who else is doing it? Carlos maybe?"

"Jada I know for sure, James, maybe Charlotte. Carlos did it last semester."

"What about Eric? Think he's hiding from all the math?"

"Why would he? It's not a math course."

"Well, it's got that reputation."

"We'll get some statistics I hear, but Carlos said we'll do a lot of comm. research without going anywhere near stats."

"So the whole 'research equals math' thing is wrong?"

"Not wrong; math is a tool. You pick the tool for the job, is how Carlos explained it."

"OK—that I can handle, but how do I pick a research topic? I heard you had to do that."

"Keep your eyes open, I suppose. Look around. Like, how come everyone here in the coffee bar has to watch CNN and not Fox or MSNBC or whatever? How do they know what we want to watch? Did someone run a survey? Who decided and how? Who watches network TV anyway? Come to think of it, what does anyone watch?"

"I've got some answers to those questions. First of all, just look around. You can see who's watching TV . . . and you can guess at their ages, occupations, maybe majors even. And there you have it. Those are the people that watch TV."

"Doesn't sound very scientific."

"Well, you have to start somewhere. Now, as to what everyone else is looking at, why not just walk around casually and try to see what each person's looking at?"

"That's spying on people. You can't do that."

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"Why not? You can walk around campus recording how many people wear baseball caps backwards, so why can't you record what's on people's screens—like text messages or movies? Should be easy with laptops and big-screen phones like the one Joe bought."

"That's just not ethical."

"Sure it is. You're just observing what's public. You'd have no problem recording what people were looking at in a newspaper would you? Lee says he's going to record campus traffic this semester to get some evidence for more parking spaces. How's that different from walking around looking at what's on people's screens?"

"It's different because there's no personal information in a newspaper, and because parking lots are public. Mobile devices have personal information, and they're not public. You're intruding on private discussions when you look at peoples' messages."

"If it's posted, it's public I say."

"Hey speaking of Joe! Welcome back. How was your break? Where are you going?"

"Hi back at ya—and in question order—lousy and library."

"Lousy and library???"

"Yeah . . . my laptop crashed over the break. No backup, so there was the whole recovery thing, and now I'm in debt to Mom until I pay her off for a new one. This semester I'm backing up everything and booking a study space in the library. That way I'm handy to real books and journals and a library computer if I crash again. You know what they say. Crash once, maybe it's someone else's fault. Crash twice, it's on you."

"Sounds from what Carlos said, we'll be seeing you at the library while we're all trying to get our heads around comm. research."

"Guess so. Don't know why we can't all stay home and do research. Everyone and everything is online."

"Except when your laptop crashes, Joe! Plus face-to-face with library staff is good. They're credible at helping you sort out stuff you need from all the stuff you don't need. Who on line is credible—and how would you know?

ASA Comments

ASA—your All-Seeing Authors—will drop into this discussion from time to time to make a few brief points. Communication research topics are all around us. From the preceding discussion, we can identify several. For example, what are students' preferred news sources? How are decisions about campus media made? Joe's arrival suggests additional questions. Luke and Sofia were getting into the ethics of accessing online content, but Joe seems to have redirected the conversation to laptops and libraries. How did that shift happen, and what might explain it?

Outside of specific research questions, there are broader issues framing research: for example, ethics, or the standards of behavior expected of researchers; the question of whether human communication is best understood through numbers (quantitative) or words (qualitative); and research

standards, or the methods and processes that make a research study credible. We'll delve into these issues in more detail in Chapters 1 through 4, after we meet Mike . . .

"Hey it's wonder boy—Mike. Heard you got straight A's last semester! You're treating us all to lunch, right?"

"Nah, just had breakfast. Actually, I'm embarrassed about those A's. I mean, I got a "93" in two courses; if they were "92s"—just one point less—I would have had two A minuses. It's more random luck than capturing my abilities. And Caroline, who was truly running straight A's, blew one question in one test, that took one course grade down, that took her GPA down, that knocked her out of the honor society when she should have been in it more than me. I don't know what they think they're measuring with this GPA stuff. "

"Sort of like the mystery muffins you're about to treat us to, if you're not treating lunch?"

"Nice try . . . maybe I will. Wouldn't you think they'd have upgraded the menu in all the time we've been here?"

"Yeah, you'd think they'd be responsive to all the vegan-vegetarian-paleo-whatever palates on campus—not to mention all the religious do's and don'ts. The food's so 'yesterday.' It's like farm-to-table doesn't exist. They should run a survey and get a read on what we like."

"And you would be the one to survey, Mike? You think the four major food groups are cappuccino, latte, Americano, and espresso!"

"OK. So who would they ask? We'd all be graduated by the time they got around to asking the entire campus."

"Right, but let's agree that not asking you would be a good idea if they want to capture some majority opinions!"

"Fine. Don't ask me. But you can't revamp an entire campus food plan based on what a handful of volunteers like you think."

"I bet you can if you pick the right people."

ASA Comments

Hello again. Our student group has now raised two further important topics. The first is measurement, in this case, of academic excellence. How do we define and measure it? Communication research faces similar problems. For example, how might we define and measure an attitude?

The second topic is sampling. If we want an accurate survey of student food preferences, whom exactly would we survey? This is not just a theoretical question. The survey industry spends time and effort trying to get representative samples of people at a time when most people are not interested in responding to surveys. As we will see, sampling techniques combined with some knowledge of statistics can let us make generalizations about large numbers of people from a smaller sample of them.

We discuss measurement, sampling, and statistics more fully in Chapters 5 through 8. In Chapter 6, Elizabeth begins the first of some campus-based research examples when she plans her own survey of student food preferences. Right now, Lee has his own problem—parking.

"Hey, Lee! Haven't seen you in a while?"

"Right! I've been looking for a parking space."

"I sort of meant over the last few months, but I hear you on the parking problem. I don't know why commuter students even come here—the parking's so bad."

"I heard some good news though; they're bulldozing the old Hunter building to put in a car park."

"About time too. It *is* an ugly damn thing. And we need a car park."

"Hold on. Hunter's got historic value, for starters. And even if it hasn't, I can't see that bulldozing it guarantees more parking space."

"I thought we were supposed to be going all green? A car park just encourages more cars. They don't want to do that do they?"

"Sounds as if nobody knows what they want."

"Pull it down and see who shows up to protest. That'll tell you a lot about who's really committed to saving it."

"Or just read all the campus graffiti and bumper stickers. Those'll tell you. Count up all the "Save Hunter" and all the "More Parking on Campus" and there's your vote one way or the other."

"Yeah, from everyone that gets a charge out of defacing buildings . . . or likes bumper stickers."

"Beats the hassle of interviewing. Why go around interviewing people when you can just sit back and let public opinion come to you?"

"Yeah . . . well. Hey Charlotte . . . we're just talking about parking. But you're more into clubbing tonight. Right?"

"Yep! Anyone interested? There's a new dive downtown doing lo-fi hip-hop—I think."

"Now there's a communication experience, Charlotte. Maybe you can write all that up for your comm. research project."

"Too much writing. I'd have books full of stuff. Plus I'd be a part of it. So it wouldn't be good research, right? Not objective."

"Who says you have to be objective?"

"Who says you don't?"

ASA Comments

In this third discussion, we discover what many people think of as the basics of communication research—method. There are many methods to think about. Surveys (Chapter 9) and experiments (Chapter 10) are two classic quantitative methods. Campus interest groups presumably would be surveyed on the future of the Hunter building. Pulling the building down does provide a low-level "natural" (albeit impractical) experiment in that it sets up a condition and then looks to see how people respond to it. Graffiti, bumper stickers, and social media postings pertaining to the proposed demolition can be analyzed quantitatively by categorizing and counting them as either for or against the demolition (Chapter 11). A qualitative approach (Chapter 12) would be to analyze the arguments in such content for insights on why people favor or oppose the demolition.

Human interaction can of course be analyzed qualitatively, as we will see in Chapter 13 when Bonnie considers ways to research students' uses of social media.

Finally, Charlotte's thoughts about clubbing raise the important issue of objectivity. Charlotte's not sure she can be objective. Isn't research supposed to be objective? Or does it always carry the biases and assumptions of the researcher? Plus, how can she possibly report every interaction she observes at her research location. As she says . . .

"Write up everything that happened? I don't think so! Write up all that 'who said what to whom' stuff, plus what they did, what they wore, and who danced with whom, and I'll still be writing 800 pages later!"

"That's what's great about statistics. You can just write up that the average score was 42—or something like that—and you're done. Right?"

"Why not just submit a video of the whole thing and let people draw their own conclusions?

"But that doesn't explain anything. Print or video, people want to know who you researched, why you researched them, how you did it, why you did it, where you did it . . . and like that. You've got to justify yourself; got to address that big "so what" question, right?"

ASA Comments

The discussion about reporting research raises some valid questions. Why does everything have to be reported in print format? The short answer is, it doesn't. Conventionally, though, scholarly research reporting is "print heavy" and detailed so that readers can understand exactly how you did your research. Why not submit a video of the whole thing? Technology makes that possible, but what else would any researcher viewing your video want? And what about objectivity? Over time, communication research has seen a shift from striving for objectivity to recognizing that subjectivity will not go away— and addressing that fact. We'll discuss these topics and others in Chapter 14, by which time you should have your own answer to the objectivity question.

In the meantime, as Carlos might have advised, drink some coffee and read Chapter 1.

The coffee is optional.

Chapter 1 is not. It begins here.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Welcome to communication research. This chapter introduces some of the many ways scholars of human communication think about research, their main interest areas, and some of their research methods. It will help you with the often-difficult process of getting started and getting focused on a research project, and introduce you to some of the assumptions and decisions that every researcher makes, consciously or unconsciously.

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter will help you

- Identify basic assumptions behind human communication research.

- Identify research questions that might be asked about communication.

- Describe some of the decisions required when planning communication research.

GETTING STARTED IN RESEARCH

Any day or any journey requires that you first wake up and then make a series of decisions to get started. Stay in bed or get up? Gym first and then breakfast? Or breakfast first and hang out with friends? Bike, bus, or walk to work, or work online from home? Each day requires that you get oriented in some direction and decide on the priorities for that day. Similarly, any research project requires that you start by getting yourself oriented toward an area of interest. Then you will need to decide what questions, assumptions, and methods will best get you the answers to your interest questions.

Communication researchers have interests ranging from interpersonal communication on up to web media reaching millions of people worldwide. Researchers often specialize in areas defined by the numbers of people they are studying, as in interpersonal communication, groups, organizations, or social media. But many research interests transcend such categories. For example, rhetoricians, those who study the use of language and argumentation, may do so in all of these areas.

Potential topics for research are all around us. Why do people prefer some music genres over others? What is the best way to deliver instructional content—the web, readings, seminars, lectures, or hands-on experience? What websites are seen as the most credible sources of advice for students downloading new "apps"? Do student behaviors in class influence instructor behavior? Do blockbuster movies shape public opinion or follow it? What can we say about the effects of violent or sexually explicit media content on people exposed to such content? What predicts whether an online video will "go viral"?

The next step after finding questions of interest is deciding how best to get answers to these questions. You will find from the scholarly literature that this can be a hotly contested issue. Choosing a research method or methods unavoidably requires making assumptions and decisions about the nature of human behavior, such as whether people are basically all alike or are unique individuals. These assumptions and decisions will help you prefer some methods to others, but you may well find that for every researcher going down your road, there is another researcher opting for a different route to answering essentially the same question.

Every research question has assumptions behind it that reflect the researcher's view of communication and how to study it. These are discussed below and in Chapter 2.

BASIC ASSUMPTIONS BEHIND COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

Several basic assumptions underpin all communication research. Consciously or implicitly, researchers bring these assumptions to their research. Several major assumptions—each of which can be contested—are outlined below.

Observations Capture/Do Not Capture an Underlying Reality

One assumption is that what we choose to look at—dress or language, for example—tells us something about an underlying reality we cannot see but assume exists. For example, "power" is not something we can actually see. When you think about it, what we see is not power as such but rather someone behaving in a particular way and other people responding. Nonetheless, "power" seems like a useful concept in our efforts to understand human communication, and generally we elect to study it by looking at behaviors that we assume represent power.

Similarly, no one has ever actually seen an attitude. What people have seen is someone behaving in a particular way or responding to a set of survey questions designed to capture this thing called "attitude." Once again, "attitude" seems too useful a concept to discard, and so we research attitudes on the assumption that they exist or at least that the concept of attitude provides a useful tool for thinking about communication processes.

Theories About Human Behavior Can/Cannot Be Generalized

A second assumption is that theories about human behavior can be generalized. It may be insightful to discover that your grandfather has a LinkedIn account and that your little sister has a Twitter account. But your research would be much more useful and rewarding if you were able to make a general statement such as "Young people are more likely than older people to have a Twitter account." If true, this statement would be of interest to advertisers, educators, and disaster management agencies, the last of which might need to reach large numbers of people rapidly in an emergency. However, to make this statement, you basically have to assume that your grandfather is like other grandfathers and your little sister is like other little sisters, at least with respect to social media use.

Probably, though—and correctly—your grandfather and sister regard themselves as unique individuals, so to what extent can we assume people are basically like other people? It is an important question because if our world is full of unique individuals, we are not entitled to make any generalizations about them (except, of course, that each of them is unique!). Nonetheless, researchers using survey or experimental methods typically will want to assume that the results of their research will apply to people who are similar to the study participants but not in the study. That is, there is an assumption that people are similar in the way they behave.

Researchers Should/Should Not Distance Themselves From Their Research Participants

A third assumption relates to the researchers' level of engagement with their research participants. As researchers, we could get more involved with the students in the discussions at the beginning of this chapter—perhaps by sitting in on the conversations or by interviewing some of them. This brings up a fundamental decision. The more distant the observer becomes, the more neutral or dispassionate she can be in reporting a group's behavior, but she will be unable to get the insights she would get if she were closer to the group. On the other hand, moving closer to the group will provide her with insight, but she then becomes open to influencing the group dynamics or to seeing only the group's view of the world and becoming biased in her reporting as a result.

Research Should/Should Not Be Done for a Specific Purpose

A fourth assumption is about the purpose or reason that should underlie research. Most scholarly researchers probably began their careers with a simple curiosity about human behavior,

and it is that curiosity, plus the pleasure of discovery for its own sake, that continues to drive them. Scratch the surface of that interest, though, and we will find other purposes or motivations that come into play. At a personal level, it may be need for fame or funding. At another level, researchers may see their research as helping to solve society's problems or refining a highly theoretical model of human interaction. As we will see in Chapter 2, researchers may be content if their studies lead to accurate descriptions or an understanding of human behavior, but they are more likely to see their research as worthwhile if it explains or predicts that behavior.

Researchers whose work is funded by a corporation or foundation looking for specific answers to a question as quickly as possible may find that their personal motivations for research and their preferred direction for the research take second place relative to the needs and motivations of the funding agency.

There Is/Is Not One Best Position From Which to Observe Human Behavior

A fifth assumption is simply that some aspects of a question are more important to look at than others and, related, that there is one best standpoint from which to observe human communication. A simple way to understand this is to consider an early telecommunications-based model of communication (Shannon & Weaver, 1949). Given the complexities of human communication, it is an overly simplistic model, but it does identify major components in any human interaction as follows:

- Source—the provider or initiator of content

- Message or messages—the content of communication

- Channel or medium—the vehicle for communication content; for example, social media

- Receiver(s)—the recipient(s) or consumer(s) of information

- Noise—extraneous information or distractions that can disrupt an interaction

- Context—the relationships between individuals, the situation in which the interaction occurs, and the cultural norms around that interaction

In human interaction, communication gets more complicated. Source and receiver may swap roles as a discussion proceeds. What is noise to one party may be useful information to another. Nevertheless, this basic model does indicate some possible major entry points into the study of human interaction.

For example, a major area of research on the first component of the model is source credibility. Why do some news consumers find the *Huffington Post* more credible than, say, the *New York Times*, or the *New York Times* more credible than *Al Jazeera* or vice versa? The "message" component raises any number of questions about communication content—how best to present complex scientific information to a lay public, for example. The "channel" component raises questions about the impact of process on human behavior. For example, what are the circumstances in which personal, face-to-face instruction should be preferred to online learning? Or what happens to a recipient's understanding of a complex issue when message content is reduced to 140-character tweets? The "receiver" component often raises questions about

how the demographic, cultural, and psychological characteristics of people influence their comprehension of messages or receptiveness to persuasive messages.

You will likely have already decided that none of these components can be studied in isolation. Receiver and sender interact and swap roles in many interactions. In the case of advertising research, receiver characteristics affect message content and channel selection. But researchers will typically find one of these components of the communication process more interesting than others and will give that component priority in their investigations.

By way of example, let's look at how researchers might approach a specific piece of communication content—an advertisement. We shall see that there are many possible approaches to studying such content.

SOME RESEARCH POSSIBILITIES: WHAT CAN WE DO WITH AN AD?

Let's explore how a single situation can lend itself to many research questions, using public service advertisements (PSAs) as the basis for our discussion. PSAs are targeted communications designed specifically to promote positive attitudes and behaviors. They focus on public interest topics such as health, education, safety, the environment, and other social causes. Many of them are likely to be familiar to you. Most PSAs are produced under the auspices of the Ad Council, a body that links nonprofit organizations with professional agencies that produce advertisements as a public service. For this discussion, we will focus on recent PSAs that tackle the problem of impaired or distracted driving. You can find the ads mentioned in this section, as well as many others, at www.adcouncil.org.

PSAs are typically based on, and address, a strong, often alarming fact or statistic, such as "Every 51 minutes, someone is killed in an alcohol-related car accident," or "In 2016, 3,450 people were killed in motor vehicle crashes involving distracted drivers." The creative challenge is to relate these often "remote," "happens-to-other-people" statistics to individual members of a target audience. This relevance is usually achieved by a tagline that makes the message personal, encourages a behavior or attitude change, and may become the overall campaign theme.

For example, the first statistic mentioned above resulted in the following anti–drunk driving campaign themes, which you will likely find familiar:

"Friends don't let friends drive drunk."

"Drinking and driving can kill a friendship."

"Buzzed driving is drunk driving."

And the problem of distracted driving inspired this texting and driving prevention campaign:

"Stop the Texts, Stop the Wrecks."

The second statistic inspired the themes of two anti–texting-while-driving messages.

The Ad Council's anti-texting print PSA features the image of an ambulance with the message "You don't want them responding to your text." Its television PSAs show the consequences of texting while driving—social opprobrium, missing a once-in-a-lifetime sighting,

and, yes, death. You can view these ads at www.psacentral.org/campaign/texting-and-driving-prevention.

You can view a further series of messages aimed at distracted driving at AT&T's "It Can Wait" campaign website: www.itcanwait.com.

Many of these ads are hard-hitting, "pull-no-punches" messages that have the potential to grab attention and, perhaps, shock the target audience into a behavior change. Others rely more on social appeals or on recruiting individuals to join the campaign and providing the resources they will need to become advocates in their own right.

Communication researchers may have a number of questions about any of these PSAs. Does it work or doesn't it? How or why does it work? Whose interests are advanced by the ad? Does the medium itself (radio, magazine, television, newspaper, Internet) have an effect on how the content is understood? The following sections introduce several approaches to researching advertising using these PSAs as examples.

Does the Ad Work?

This is a question that, essentially, focuses on the receivers of the message. We want to know what they did or how they felt as a result of exposure to the message. Applied communication researchers, and certainly advertising executives and their clients, want to know how many people adopted the recommended behavior or at least changed their attitudes as a result of exposure to this ad. The question is not that readily answered.

If statistics show that accidents associated with texting have decreased, we could assume that the anti-texting advertisement was effective. Correct? Not necessarily. There could be many other explanations for such a decrease, and these would need to be ruled out before we could conclude that the ad had a significant effect.

One way to assess the effectiveness of these advertisements is to take a scientific approach. Two characteristics of scientific method are observation or empiricism and the attempt to rule out alternative explanations. From a scientific point of view, we might measure how much advertising time or space the campaign received and the number of texting citations issued and then look for a relationship between the two. We would hope to discover that as the amount of advertising increased, the number of citations decreased. But we would also need to be sure that any observed decrease was related to our advertising and not to an increase in the number of police on the highways or to a new ad that was launched before assessing whether the old one was working effectively. All possible causes would need to be identified and ruled out before we could assume that the anti-texting advertisement and *only* the advertisement caused the decrease.

What Can Readers and Viewers Tell Us?

This question also focuses on the receivers of the message, but with a shift in emphasis toward understanding the "whys" of human behavior. Establishing that the advertisement did influence behavior or attitudes provides no insight on why it did so. One way to answer this question would be to conduct a survey, asking questions based on what you suspect made the advertisement effective—the celebrity spokesperson, the animation showing how distractions affect reaction time, or the real-life story of an "innocent victim" of a texting-related crash, for example.

It is likely that an advertising agency would ask such questions before the advertisement was released in order to make the ad as effective as possible. Of course, the audience could

have totally different perceptions of what is important about the ad; for example, viewers may decide that the catchy soundtrack is really what grabbed their attention. It is important, therefore, to capture what people have to say in their own words as well as to ask the questions that you think are important.

For such public opinion research, surveys are typically used to ask questions the researcher thinks are important, and focus groups are used to capture opinions that the audience thinks are important. Historically, surveys have used mail, phone, or personal interviews to present a series of specific, predetermined questions to a predetermined group of respondents, but today, the Internet and social media are equally likely vehicles, depending on the target audience. Focus groups involve bringing together maybe 6 to 12 people in person or online and asking them to discuss their reactions to an advertisement, issue, or product. The essential focus-group strategy is listening to people in order to capture their responses in their own words.

Surveys generally produce quantitative results (48% did not like the spokesperson); focus groups generally produce qualitative results in that they capture people talking ("I really did not like the spokesperson because . . ."). Surveys and focus groups both have their advantages and limitations, as we will see in later chapters.

What Can the Content Tell Us?

This question clearly focuses on message content. So far we have analyzed the texting campaign largely in terms of audience response, but what could we learn from the ad content itself? There are many angles from which to study media content, including rhetoric, content analysis, and critical theory. These angles share an interest in media content but take different approaches for different reasons.

Rhetoricians are essentially interested in the **appeals** or persuasive tactics used to persuade an audience to adopt the behavior. For example, if you look at the Ad Council's anti-texting campaign, two appeals are apparent: the appeal of the ambulance EMTs as authority figures (in the print ad) and the real-life experience of being in the car with a driver who cannot resist just a quick look at a text (in the TV ad). As with many commercial ads, this TV ad shows a "typical" teenager in a "typical" texting situation, leading to a further appeal that "people just like us" can be guilty of dangerous texting behavior.

Rhetoricians using theory developed by Aristotle (384–322 BCE) might search for appeals based on *logos* (logic), in this case the logic of "texting + driving = crash"; *ethos* (character), in this case the use of a typical teenager with typical reactions to a text; or *pathos* (emotion), in this case the tragic consequences of a crash.

Kenneth Burke, a 20th-century theorist who analyzed human communication in terms of drama, offered a set of analytical questions that ask, essentially, "What is the act, the scene, the people, and the purpose of the act?" We could analyze our ad using Burke's questions. Looking at the ad content, we could describe the setting, the driver, and the mini-drama of a person becoming absorbed in a text, losing control, and crashing.

Rhetorical approaches to researching advertising content are essentially qualitative; they analyze the use of language.

Content analysis, by contrast, is primarily a quantitative method for assessing media content. For example, looking at ads for distracted driving, including drunk driving, buzzed driving, and texting and driving, a content analyst might set up categories of content based on his interest in representations of gender in advertising. The analyst counts the number of appearances in the ads of men and women and compares them. He could also compare his

results to a known distribution of these categories in accident records. He might then be able to conclude that the advertisements overrepresent women as buzzed drivers and underrepresent them as texting drivers, for example. He would be comparing advertising's world with what we know of the real world.

Critical analysis works from a basic assumption that communication maintains and promotes power structures in society. Essentially, the focus is on the relationship, explicit or implicit, between message source and recipient rather than on just one component of the communication process. With that as a basis, the critical researcher asks "Whose interests are served by the advertising, and more specifically, how exactly do language and representations maintain the interests of such entities as corporations, colleges, or governments?" Unlike the content analyst, who looks for what is explicit and observable, the researcher may look as much for what is implicit or unsaid.

For example, the AT&T "It Can Wait" campaign referenced above is a sophisticated web-based campaign that offers a virtual reality experience, a video gallery, a social networking hub, and ways in which the visitor to the site can take action against distracted driving. A critical analyst would want to know how AT&T—at time of this chapter's writing, the second largest provider of mobile phone services in the United States—benefits from this campaign. Do the company's messages distance it from the problem, and if so, how? How are the company's interests maintained and promoted by this campaign?

What Can the Creators of the Ad Tell Us?

This question focuses on the source of the message rather than on the recipient, message, or communication medium. Our understanding of the advertisement would, of course, be enhanced if we could talk with the client and with the producers, directors, and writers in the agencies that produced the ads. In this case, we would probably be interested in finding out how and why decisions about content and production were made. For example, might a truly hard-hitting PSA have been "watered down" because the sponsor wished to avoid controversy?

Researchers interested in organizational dynamics and decision making might want to know whether the basic creative approach was worked out over the course of extended meetings involving large numbers of people or if it came about as a directive from a client or creative director. Researchers interested in decision making would want to interview members of the creative team individually so that each member feels free to talk. They might also want to interview the team as a group and probably would want to get permission to record the creative meetings as they take place. Such research could give us insight on how communication facilitates or discourages creativity, decision making, and client-agency relationships, or on the process by which professional communicators build an image of the consumers they are trying to reach.

SOME RESEARCH POSSIBILITIES: BEYOND THE AD

The previous discussion centers on advertising by way of example, but analogous questions can also be asked of interpersonal, group, or organizational communication. For example, your academic department presumably uses social media to keep its student community apprised of relevant news such as new course offerings, faculty changes, and scholarship opportunities.

We might, again, ask the "Did it work?" question. For example, can we observe that the social media messages triggered additional numbers of students to register for new course offerings or apply for scholarships? We might, by using surveys, interviews, or focus groups, determine how students feel about this use of social media to provide them with departmental information. We could analyze this social media content to see what appeals are used to promote new courses and scholarships. We might even take the perspective of a critical organizational theorist and examine how such social media content encourages student compliance with the departmental "way of doing things."

If interpersonal communication were our field, we might be interested in tracking how communication changes as two people move from acquaintances to friends to romantic partners. Again, similar questions apply. The "Did it work?" question might be reframed in terms of trying to observe what vocabulary or behaviors work to strengthen or weaken the relationship, or we could interview the two individuals themselves to see what they have to say about their communication and why it works, or doesn't. Similarly, we could examine the content of their text messages or transcripts of their phone calls to relate the content to key events in the relationship.

A SERIES OF UNAVOIDABLE DECISIONS

"Communication researchers have different agendas and assumptions that underpin the methods they use. This is explained by the complexity of human communication. Because it is almost impossible to examine and explain a communication event in its totality, researchers focus on a part of that totality and choose a method for investigating it with which they have a comfort level, be it methodological or ideological.

For example, even though the research approaches outlined above share a common focus on understanding public service advertising, researchers clearly differ in what exactly they choose to research and the reasons for doing their research.

In addition to their theoretical priorities, all researchers face the reality of limited time, limited resources, and an inability to be in more than one place at a time (web conferencing excepted). Following are some of the choices that are almost inevitable for all types of researchers, based on their theoretical predispositions and resources.

The Field of Study—Wide or Narrow?

Time is short, the topic vast, and, realistically, we must research the available and the achievable. Methodological preferences aside, a communication researcher typically focuses on one of the many specific interest areas shown in Exhibit 1.1. This list is compiled from the names of the divisions and interest groups of the National Communication Association, the International Communication Association, and the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication.

The Researcher—Dispassionate or Involved?

To what extent should researchers get involved with their human "subjects"? The scientific tradition values objectivity and dispassionate observation. The "reward" to the researcher is the satisfaction of a new finding, the development of a new theory, or the confirmation or disconfirmation of an existing theory.

EXHIBIT 1.1 ■ Communication Research Interest Areas

Activism, Communication, and Social Justice	Human Communication and Technology
Advertising	Information Systems
African American Communication and Culture	Instructional Development
American Studies	Intergroup Communication
Applied Communication	International and Intercultural Communication
Argumentation and Forensics	Interpersonal Communication
Asian/Pacific American Communication Studies	Journalism Studies
Children, Adolescents, and the Media	Language and Social Interaction
Communicating Science, Health, Environment, and Risk	Latino/Latina Communication Studies
Communication and Aging	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies
Communication and Law	Mass Communication
Communication and Social Cognition	Media Ethics
Communication and Technology	Media Industry Studies
Communication Apprehension and Avoidance	Mobile Communication
Communication Assessment	Newspaper and Online News
Communication Ethics	Nonverbal Communication
Communication History	Organizational Communication
Communication Law and Policy	Peace and Conflict Communication
Communication Science and Biology	Performance Studies
Community Journalism	Philosophy of Communication
Critical and Cultural Studies	Political Communication
Economics, Communication, and Society	Popular Communication
Entertainment Studies	Public Address
Environmental Communication	Public Diplomacy
Ethnicity and Race	Public Relations
Ethnography	Rhetorical and Communication Theory
Family Communication	Semiotics
Feminist and Women's Studies	Spiritual Communication
Freedom of Expression	Sports Communication
Game Studies	Theatre, Film, and New Multimedia
Global Communication and Social Change	Training and Development
Group Communication	Visual Communication
Health Communication	

Sources: National Communication Association (NCA), International Communication Association (ICA) and Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC).

By contrast, **action research** engages in research specifically to improve people's lives. The action research tradition is to be closely involved with people in order to better their lives. One school sees research as a quest for knowledge, and the other sees research as an engaged contribution to bettering society. In both cases, the researcher's behavior has ethical implications, as we shall see in Chapter 3.

The Approach—Objective or Subjective?

Can research be objective? **Social scientists** often bring the assumption of an external "real" world that can be observed, understood, and agreed on to the study of human interaction. For example, they assume that concepts such as intelligence or loyalty can be found across all people and measured objectively with an "instrument" that will apply universally and perhaps even predict human behavior.

By contrast, phenomenologists and ethnographers try to understand people's subjective worlds. They have an interpretive perspective in that they seek to understand how humans interpret or make sense of events in their lives. They assume that concepts such as intelligence or loyalty are indeed just concepts and are defined subjectively by the people they are researching, not to mention by researchers themselves. Such concepts vary from culture to culture, and from individual to individual. For example, simple interpersonal behaviors such as holding hands, kissing, or embracing may have widely different interpretations from culture to culture. The phenomenologist may observe a behavior such as kissing but really want to know what that action means for the individuals involved. There is no assumption that such behavior has a universal meaning.

The Perspective—Your Questions or Their Answers?

All researchers have a fundamental perspective that frames their research. Imagine, for example, that this is your research question: "Do men and women view social media differently?" To get an answer to such a question, researchers have two basic options. The first is to ask men and women a series of specific questions that will provide an answer to the researcher's question. Often, these might be survey-type questions such as "On a scale of 1 through 10, where 1 is not at all important and 10 is extremely important, how would you rate the importance of social media in your life?" Typically, this would be one of many such questions aimed at assessing how or why social media is used, how many hours a day participants spend on social media, and so on.

This approach may well answer the researcher's question but completely fail to capture how users feel about social media. For example, if users see social media primarily as entertainment, it may never occur to them to describe social media as "important." A second option, then, is to elicit respondents' views of social media in their own words—typically a qualitative process.

Another basic research decision, then, is whether to get answers to specific questions you have or whether to elicit people's views in their own language—not quite knowing what you might get.

The Sample—Large or Small?

How many people do you need to talk to in order to know that you have "an accurate picture" of a communication phenomenon? Public opinion researchers can answer that question: For an accurate view of adult public opinion in the United States, you need about 1,200 randomly selected people—as long as you can live with something like plus or minus 3% error.

"True enough," the small-sample people might reply, "but counting gives you only numbers and knowledge, not understanding. Will a survey of the thousands of people affected by weather, hunger, or a down-sliding economy give us any more understanding of how people communicate about such events than an in-depth interview with one family? You know what's going on, but you don't know why or how people feel about it or explain it. That is why one solid series of interviews with a few people can give a better grasp on a situation than all of the thousand-people surveys that the big-sample people can conduct."

The Data—Quantitative or Qualitative?

Are humans storytelling animals, counting animals, or both?

Numbers are important; they are how democracies and committees make decisions. Count the vote; the majority wins. Numbers and counting are an important component of scientific methods, and the number of research findings in agreement with each other helps to suggest the current "truth" of the findings.

Researchers with interests in human subjectivity respond that the complexities and subtleties of interpersonal attraction or use of social media cannot be captured in mere numbers. The "truth" can best be understood by listening to what research participants and researchers themselves have to tell us. By extension, there may well be more than one "truth" or understanding of an issue or situation.

Few of the above "either-or" distinctions are clear-cut. For example, a passionately involved action researcher could use objective social science methods to study a problem. Or the survey questions that a numbers-oriented methodologist asks could be based on extensive initial qualitative interviewing. The storytelling or counting ideas have been presented here as "either-or" to help you think about where you stand on such issues. In practice, many of the seeming opposites blend together. The most obvious blending is in the approach called **triangulation** in which researchers use multiple methods providing multiple perspectives to ensure that they have a good "fix" on a problem.

For example, in trying to understand how family life interacts with television viewing, a researcher might survey several families on their use of and attitudes toward television, interview a few family members in depth, live with one family as members watch television, and conduct a content analysis of television content to determine how content shapes the family's interactions and vice versa. Advertising executives will frequently pretest or pilot a commercial with a focus group before running the advertisement and then assessing results with a large-scale survey.

Approaches such as **Q methodology** assume that it is respondents' subjective views of the world that are of interest but combine that research focus with quantitative, computational approaches to recording and assessing these views.

In Chapter 2, we will argue that "Quantitative or qualitative?" should not be an initial decision about your research but rather one that comes after you have decided on the purpose of your research and the assumptions behind it.

The Report—Subjective or Objective?

Just as there are different ways of doing research, there are different ways of writing research. Researchers interested in interpreting the subjective world of their informants may use the primarily qualitative languages of ethnomethodology and phenomenology and report what their informants have to tell them in their informants' own words. By contrast, social science researchers typically use statistics to report and interpret the data they have collected.

The involved researcher may unabashedly use "I" writing as in "I lived with Thomas and his two children for three months, and we formed a warm social bond that had us eating together, watching movies together, and exchanging seasonal gifts." Dispassionate researchers will report in a language that strives for neutrality and that removes them from the narrative altogether—thus, "Subjects were recorded on video and their facial expressions analyzed for changes in response to visual stimuli." Critics of this style will point out that such a dispassionate style is in itself a persuasive strategy aimed at convincing the reader of the author's credibility as a researcher.

The subjectively involved researcher believes that credibility and reporting are enhanced by including personal experiences and reactions. We are getting "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." The dispassionate researcher believes credibility is maximized by objective reporting "uncontaminated" by sentiment and value judgments (ignoring perhaps the idea that to adopt this style of writing is in itself a value judgment).

Research and research reporting both are communication activities framed by disciplinary standards and expectations, ethical decisions, and personal motivations. As critical theorists would point out, published and topical research carries a "metamessage" about what research topics are "hot," what approaches are in vogue, and who the current "stars" are.

The fact that research has an argumentative component does not necessarily mean it is adversarial. The academic journals in which research is published reflect ongoing discussions about research. A research study may be followed by responses, critiques, and other studies that change our thinking about it. You can think of articles in the scholarly communication journals (some listed at the end of this chapter) as a considered, continuing worldwide conversation among researchers on how best to understand human communication.

As we will see in Chapter 2, communication research has many different starting points, purposes, and basic assumptions. It inescapably involves ethical decisions. The following ethics panel and the ones in each chapter will give you a sense of the ethical decisions you may face as a researcher. You should try to reason through to a decision for each of the ethics problems, as they are typical of the decisions you may face when doing your own research. For help with these ethics panels, read Chapter 3, "Ethics: What Are My Responsibilities as a Researcher?"

ETHICS PANEL
A HEALTH COMMUNICATION DILEMMA

Suppose that a public health agency wants to determine the best way to help people identify the symptoms of diabetes, so they can take preventive measures and better deal with the condition if they are diagnosed as diabetic.

To do this, the agency hires your research firm to find out how best to get messages about diabetes to the public. You decide to run a three-group experiment in which people in county A will receive messages about diabetes by traditional mass media (newspapers, television, and radio) and social media. People in county B will receive intensive interpersonal communication about diabetes through neighborhood meetings, counseling, and their workplaces. People in county C will receive no messages because you need a "baseline" against which to measure whether your interventions in counties A and B have any effect. As a result of this study, you will be able to develop effective communication programs for your region.

What are the ethical implications, if any, of not providing people in county C with information that might save a life?

Chapter Summary

This chapter introduced the ways scholars think about communication research, their main areas of research, and the methods they use. In summary:

- Communication research is a process of posing questions about human communication and designing and implementing research that will answer those questions.

- Communication researchers typically specialize in one aspect of communication.

- Researchers may use qualitative methods, quantitative methods, or both.

- Researchers have empirical, interpretive, or critical perspectives on communication.

- Human communication research inescapably involves ethical decisions.

Key Terms

action research 15

appeals 11

Q methodology 16

social scientists 15

triangulation 16

Application Exercises

The application exercises you will find at the end of each chapter are warm-up exercises or mental experiments you can do to help you translate the chapter principles into research practice. For example, the following application exercises will help you identify and refine your thinking about your own research interests.

Research is much more than simply finding a topic area and questions that interest you. You must also, for example, choose a research method or methods that will give you the data you need to answer your research questions.

For example, observing people, interviewing them, and analyzing message content are all valid research methods, but we must also consider the positives and negatives of each method in order to choose the one most likely to provide credible data. For example, in relation to the student conversations earlier in this chapter, you might consider such issues as these:

- If you interview a group, won't each member tell you only what he or she wants the rest of the group to hear? Would you be better off interviewing each member separately?

- Would questionnaires give you more honest answers because you are not interviewing face to face? Or could the time and effort required to complete a questionnaire mean that you would get less than full answers?

- Does listening in on a private conversation raise ethical issues? If so, shouldn't you introduce yourself and ask permission to listen in? Might your presence then change the nature of the conversation?

Exercise 1: Finding Research Questions

This chapter begins with interactions among students in a campus coffee bar. Based on these interactions, comments from the "ASA," and your reading of this chapter, identify as many research questions as you can about human communication behavior. Think freely and broadly. No question is irrelevant at this stage of your thinking, and one may well be the spark that ignites a long-term research interest for you.

Exercise 2: Exploring Communication Interest Areas

One way to develop your own interests is to go to the websites of two of the major communication research associations—the National Communication Association (NCA) and the International Communication Association (ICA)—listed in this chapter's recommended web resources. At the NCA site, on the "About NCA" menu, look for "What is Communication?" Then expand the "Areas of Specialization" section. At the ICA site, look for "Divisions" and "Interest Groups" under the "Groups" menu item. In both cases, you will find a list of the specific interest groups for each association. The interest areas that overlap will give you a sense of the "mainstream" fields of research, and either list may spark your interest in an area that perhaps you were not previously aware of.

Exercise 3: The Internet and American Life

Access the website for the Pew Research Center's Internet & Technology division, listed below under "Recommended Web Resources." Locate a March 2018 survey report titled *Social Media Use in 2018*. At the report site you will find the full report, the questionnaire, and the data from which the report was compiled. From the questionnaire, select two questions that interest you, ask the same questions of 10 people you know, convert your answers into percentages, and compare your results with the Pew Center results. For example, questions 1 and 2 in the survey ask respondents which social media they use and the frequency of use of those media. The third question asks respondents how difficult it would be to give up their televisions, smart phones, Internet, and social media.

Do your results differ from those reported by the Pew Center? If so, how? Why do you think your results differ? What might you do to improve the credibility of your results?

Exercise 4: Improving the Effectiveness of Health and Safety Messages

The Ad Council reports that its "Friends Don't Let Friends Drive Drunk" campaign began in 1983 and that alcohol-related traffic fatalities dropped to an all-time low in 1998, after which they began to rise again.

From a communication perspective, what research would you suggest would be needed to establish with confidence a relationship between anti–drunk-driving campaigns and alcohol-related traffic statistics?

The Ad Council's strategy, as of 2017, regarding "buzzed driving" is to prompt viewers to examine their own warning signs of impairment and take responsibility for their decisions behind the wheel. The focus shifts from "friends" to the driver, with the tagline "Probably Okay isn't Okay" intended to plant a seed of doubt and to remind drivers to find a safe way home if they've been drinking.

What research might you do to find out how likely it is that this message strategy will work? What alternate message strategies might be more effective?

For both questions, you can get additional information at https://www.adcouncil.org/Our-Campaigns/Safety/Buzzed-Driving-Prevention.

Recommended Reading

There are many books and journals available on communication research, as a visit to your campus library will indicate. Many journals, ranging in focus from administrative theory to women's studies, may also report on human communication. A few key journal titles are listed below. Chapter 4, "You Could Look It Up: Reading, Recording, and Reviewing Research," will move us on to developing more relevant, targeted lists of readings.

General

Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies
Communication Monographs
Communication Research
Human Communication Research
Journal of Applied Communication Research
Quarterly Journal of Speech

Mass Communication

Critical Studies in Media Communication
Journal of Public Relations Research
Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly
Quarterly Review of Film and Video
Television & New Media

Organizational Communication

Academy of Management Review
Administrative Science Quarterly
Business and Professional Communication Quarterly
Journal of Organizational Culture, Communications and Conflict
Management Communication Quarterly

Group Communication

Group Analysis
Group & Organization Management

Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice
Group Processes & Intergroup Relations
Small Group Research

Interpersonal Communication

Human Relations
Journal of Applied Psychology
Journal of Family Communication
Journal of Research in Personality
Journal of Social and Personal Relationships

Social Media

Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies
Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking
Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication
Journal of Magazine and New Media Research
New Media & Society

Recommended Web Resources

Note: The websites recommended in this and subsequent chapters are a mix of scholarly and commercial sites. They may or may not require a fee or membership for access. Inclusion does not imply endorsement, and no criticism of similar resources not listed is intended or implied.

Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC)...........www.aejmc.org
Canadian Communication Association...........www.acc-cca.ca
Human Communication Research Centre (HCRC), University of Edinburgh...........www.hcrc.ed.ac.uk
International Communication Association (ICA)...........www.icahdq.org
National Communication Association (NCA)...........www.natcom.org

Defining the boundaries of human communication studies is difficult and a debate in its own right. The ICA, NCA, and AEJMC are three of several U.S. academic associations devoted to the study of communication. Looking at their websites will give you an idea of the many areas of research specialization under the "communication umbrella." By contrast, the HCRC site shows one of many institutions in which communication studies are being reconceptualized by bringing together such fields as computing, philosophy, psychology, and language studies.

Pew Research Center, Internet & Technology...........www.pewinternet.org
The Pew Research Center's Internet & Technology division studies how Americans use the Internet and how their online activities affect their lives. The project uses nationwide random phone surveys, online surveys, and qualitative research, along with data from government agencies, technology firms, academia, and other expert venues. You should become familiar with this site, and with the Pew Research Center more generally, as we will refer to it throughout this book.

References

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