SEARCH STRATEGIES in MASS COMMUNICATION

Jean Ward
Kathleen A. Hansen

Search Strategies in Mass Communication

Jean Ward
Kathleen A. Hansen
University of Minnesota

Longman
New York & London

Executive Editor: Gordon T. R. Anderson
Production Editor: Halley Gatenby
Text Art: J & R Services, Inc.
Production Supervisor: Judith Stern
Compositor: TC Systems

Search Strategies in Mass Communication

Longman
95 Church Street
White Plains, N.Y. 10601

Associated companies:
Longman Group Ltd., London
Longman Cheshire Pty., Melbourne
Longman Paul Pty., Auckland
Copp Clark Pitman, Toronto
Pitman Publishing Inc., New York

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ward, Jean.
Search strategies in mass communication.

Includes indexes.
1. Mass media—Methodology. I. Hansen, Kathleen.
II. Title.
P91.W29 1987 070.4'3 86-18527
ISBN 0-582-99851-4
ISBN 0-582-28596-8 (pbk.)

DEFGHIJ-AL-959493929190

FOR OUR FAMILIES

Preface

Mass communicators and their audiences are facing the problems and opportunities that accompany the development of any new technology. Just as the microwave oven, the VCR, and cable TV have changed our daily lives, the new methods of gathering, storing, and sending information are changing the way communicators do their work and the way audiences receive their messages. The links between computers, telephones, satellites, and printing and TV display devices are changing all mass communication processes. News reporters can now take their portable computers anywhere in the world and can send stories to their newsrooms via satellite. While preparing their stories, they can tap into remote computerized files of information about their topics. When the stories are prepared, audiences can receive them in many forms. Further, these same stories are available in files for use by other mass communicators.

While the term *information age* may be overused, it does describe contemporary society. Half the payroll dollars in the United States goes to workers who manipulate symbols in the information economy. These workers are university professors and students, entertainers, bankers, computer programmers, and virtually all mass communication professionals. These people still eat bread and drive cars, and other people continue to grow and market wheat and to manufacture and sell cars. However, the information available to assist these processes is more elaborate and powerful than earlier farmers and manufacturers could have imagined. The information age thus dominates all facets of contemporary life.

Several technological developments have come together at a critical time to make this new age possible. Most influential have been the advances in the microelectronics industry. The miniaturization of electronic components has made computers possible, along with a vast variety of communication and information storage and retrieval equipment. The transition from the old-style vacuum tube to the transistor to integrated circuits to the ubiquitous silicon chip as the transmitting device for a current of electrons has taken a mere 30 years. A single chip can now contain the equivalent of the central processing unit of a small computer.

The combination of many chips and the appropriate software—that is, instructions to the computer—makes possible the storage, retrieval, and manipulation of thousands of bits of data.

At the same time, communication systems have kept pace with developments in the electronics industries. More than voices can be sent over the telephone systems' communication lines. The sending of digitized information—information represented as electronic pulses—over telephone lines and via satellite links has permitted phenomenal growth in the information industries. Instead of single computers operating in isolation with only their own stores of information, it is now possible for many computers to communicate, or for a single terminal to communicate with a large number of computer systems. The linking of computers and information systems through both land-based telephone lines and satellite connections is a major contributor to the information-age developments. The mass communication industries have tapped into these new systems as a way to increase access to varied information sources. Information once housed in an out-of-the-way location in a newspaper or television station library may not have been used to good advantage. The advent of quickly accessible information storage systems has increased the usefulness of such information sources for mass communicators.

Information consumers also have access to a wider range of information sources. Cable TV companies, satellite movie services, electronic mail services for home computer users, newspapers and specialized magazines, direct mail solicitors, and many other services compete for the attention of individual information consumers. Just as new technologies are changing personal and private lives, they have changed the way work is organized and carried out. Almost no work has been left unchanged by developments in miniaturization, telephone technology, computers, and satellites.

No revolution as compelling as the information revolution could fail to change the way communicators work or the demands society places on them. When the pace of life is fast and rapidly accelerating, when the production of information is growing rapidly, the challenge for mass communicators is magnified. The clear need at this point is for a fundamental rethinking of the critical role information plays in communication. In this book, we introduce the major concepts required for a new approach to information gathering and use. We take a generic approach, treating the information needs of all mass communicators from a common perspective. For example, a news reporter, an advertising copywriter, and a public-relations specialist may require the same census figure on the percentage of the American population over 50 years of age. The subsequent use of this information by these media professionals will vary, but the process for getting the information is the same.

We take a process approach. The communicator needs a clear, simple path that will lead to whatever can be found to meet his or her needs. No

matter what information is sought, a process for finding it is available. The process can be used repeatedly and with confidence. No matter what the topic or the purpose, the process will work to locate the best material available.

We have tested the generic, process approach to finding information for mass communication. More than 1200 novices have learned to follow the information-seeking path we have set and have successfully applied the principles in their mass communication work.

Among many debts of gratitude, those to our students stand out. We are also grateful to the following associates, whose assistance has been invaluable: Mary Achartz, Tren Anderson, Mary Farrell Bednarowski, Antoinette Brumbaugh, John C. Busterna, Colleen Coghlan, Hazel Dicken-Garcia, James Ettema, Halley Gatenby, Donald M. Gillmor, Roberta K. Gladowski, Theodore Glasser, Sheila Hickey, Robert L. Jones, John Lavine, Marion T. Marzolf, John McHugh, Elizabeth Murad, Jan Nyberg, Cerise Oberman, Jean T. Olson, Irene Pavitt, Keith Tessen, Phillip J. Tichenor, and Robert Van Horn.

Jean Ward
Kathleen A. Hansen

Contents

CHAPTER 1

Communicators as Information Seekers

The news assignment: an article or a series of articles on gentrification, or the displacement of the urban poor from old neighborhoods that are undergoing rehabilitation. The reporter: a generalist who must begin by recognizing her own lack of knowledge about this subject. The challenge: to do a rapid study of gentrification. The sources: knowledgeable people and reputable books and articles. In conducting her survey of what is known about the subject, the well-prepared reporter will range widely and consult experts in such fields as economics, architecture, insurance, banking, housing, city planning, demographics, race relations, urban affairs, and tax policy. Her choice of people to be interviewed will be influenced by what she learns in her overview of the subject. Her questions to interviewees will be shaped partly by a need to expand on and to update what she learns in her first study of the subject.

The advertising assignment: an ad campaign to introduce a new running suit for teen-agers of both genders. The advertising professional: an account executive who has no experience with sports-apparel accounts and who must recognize his need for background information. The challenge: to do a rapid study of the market for sports apparel, the likely methods for reaching the teen-agers for whom the suit is designed, and the advertising trends in the sports-apparel industry. The sources: demographic studies on teen interests, incomes, and media preferences; articles about the sports-apparel industry and sports-apparel advertising; and tools to identify the costs for the best media in which to place the ads. The creative elements of the advertising campaign will be shaped by the information gathered in the first stages of campaign preparation.

The public-relations assignment: the contribution of the president of an insulation-manufacturing firm to a panel discussion on the safety and effectiveness of home-insulation materials. The practitioner: a public-relations specialist in a fully computerized office. The challenge: to provide the firm's president with comprehensive information on the insulation industry, the safety of insulation materials, and company liability for

damages stemming from exposure to chemicals used in the insulation. The sources: reference works in the agency library, electronic-data-base searches, and interviews with company officials. The public-relations practitioner will have to know something about the viewpoints of the moderator, panelists, and audience; the credentials and reputability of sources to be used; the contents of news reports about home-insulation safety; and the setting of the discussion. The information that comes from this background study will be critical to the president's success in representing the firm.

These three communicators pursue essentially similar routines in the information-gathering portion of their work. Information technologies that have developed rapidly in the past decade emphasize the commonality of these tasks. Each communicator has ready access to information and to information-gathering methods once available only to a few specialists. At any moment, all three professionals could be reaching into the same electronic file looking for information on the same topic, despite the different uses they will make of that information. As they search for information, the reporter, the account executive, and the public-relations expert understand what their predecessors always knew: a mass-media message is no better than the information in it.

All messages consist of information and expression. *Expression* is the arrangement of words and images that sends the information to the audience, while *information* consists of the facts that support the expression. The challenge to communicators—be they reporters, advertising specialists, or film or photo editors—is to gather information, to select the relevant portions of it, and to express the information in a way that engages the audience.

In order to produce messages that engage the audience, communicators become expert at gathering material that meets their requirements—accuracy, timeliness, human interest, completeness, and legal and ethical standards. Such material must be gathered quickly and efficiently and assessed for its accuracy against increasingly stringent standards. For example, news reporters, who must cite the sources of facts they present and must present the most recent material available on their subjects, are no longer limited to clips of stories published in their own newspapers. Now they can, by way of a link among electronic files and their computers and telephones, collect information from hundreds of magazines, newspapers, scholarly journals, and government reports.[1] These electronic files are called *data bases*. All data bases contain references to the articles in published sources, and many also contain brief summaries or complete texts of articles.

Information can be found in data bases fast enough to satisfy the deadline demands of the newsroom. For instance, in preparing to write an article about a controversial plan to demolish an old post office building, a reporter quickly learned, through a search in an electronic data base, of

many similar proposed demolitions throughout the country. A data base called "America: History and Life" yielded 19 references to articles about objections to demolition of historic buildings in the United States and Canada. Another data base called the "Magazine Index" produced 18 additional references.

Even many topics that a communicator may assume are unique have been studied, thought about, and experienced by others. Data-base searching helps communicators discover the background of such unusual topics. For instance, a reporter tackled the subject of differences in male and female leadership styles, a topic that she thought was too offbeat to have been studied by others. However, in addition to many scholarly books and articles found in the library, the reporter used data-base searching to locate 10 additional articles that illuminated the subject.

Advertising specialists not only must learn about the product or service advertised, the product industry as a whole, and the potential audience for the ad, but also must have information that backs up the claims they make for the product or service. For example, for a motorcycle ad, an advertiser had to know what other companies make motorcycles, how the products compare with one another, what other motorcycle ads look like, who is likely to buy motorcycles, and how motorcycles are marketed and sold. In addition, the advertiser had to decide where to place ads so that they would reach the audience of motorcycle buyers. Much of this information gathering is done using electronic data bases.

The "Thomas Register" data base lists motorcycle manufacturers in the United States and gives market-research information on how the products compare with one another. By using a data base called "PTS Marketing and Advertising Reference Service (MARS)," the advertiser located references to articles about motorcycle companies and motorcycle advertising campaigns that appeared in 70 major advertising publications, business journals, newspapers, and annual reports. In addition, the data base also allowed the advertiser to find out the advertising slogans and the spokespersons for competing motorcycle companies. Using some of the data bases that include information about the life styles, purchase habits, and demographic characteristics of motorcycle buyers helped the advertiser identify likely audiences for the ads. With these new technologies, the advertiser can afford a thorough investigation and do a comprehensive job in the available time.

In public relations, new information-gathering methods play a similar role. Public-relations practitioners promote knowledge of industries and institutions, using established media channels, with the goal of influencing public opinion. This work is carried out in many settings and for widely varying clients. Institutions may have their own staffs of public-relations professionals or may use the services of a public-relations agency. The work of the practitioner may end up on a desk in a newsroom or may be used to brief participants in a legislative hearing. Information

needed for such tasks involves background on a firm or an institution, public-opinion data on relevant issues, and broad understanding of the events that affect the climate of opinion.

For example, when a public-relations firm needed comprehensive and current information about the safety of tin cans for storing foods, it assigned a staff member to the task. The firm needed information on possible food poisoning in canned foods in order to assist its client, a can-manufacturing firm. The staff member went directly to the Chicago Public Library, where she used current periodical and newspaper indexes to locate news stories about studies on the subject. She also requested that the library use its data-base service to locate articles not listed in the indexes. She quickly found the material to meet the firm's needs.

The new systems for locating and gathering information supplement the traditional methods in use for the past century. Interviews, clipping files, library reference works, and other conventional methods have not been replaced. They remain important in the communicator's repertoire of information-gathering devices. However, the new methods enhance the depth, breadth, and speed with which communicators work.

THE SEARCH STRATEGY: AN INTELLECTUAL TOOL FOR COMMUNICATORS

The essence of the information age is that there is a constantly rising quantity of information, matched by methods for making that information available. Communicators need a conceptual tool that can help them learn where information is located and that offers them a routine that can be used to collect it. A *conceptual tool* is an intellectual device that allows a thinker to apply and use abstractions at a practical, specific level. For example, in the familiar periodic table, the chemical elements, arranged according to their atomic numbers, are shown in related groups. Thus the periodic table is a conceptual tool. Similarly, the search strategy as a conceptual tool provides a coherent overview of information sources. *Search strategy* is a systematic means for acquiring and appraising information that will illuminate a subject. The conceptual tool that represents the search strategy is shown in Figure 1.1.

The model presents the major steps in the mass-communication search process. These steps are linked by lines and arrows that indicate the paths between the steps. That is to say, the interview step follows the search that begins in the three major sources of information. But as the two-way arrows illustrate, the search process may include some backtracking in the course of verifying information or raising additional questions.

The search-strategy model is discussed in detail in Chapter 2. Here we present just an outline of the model.

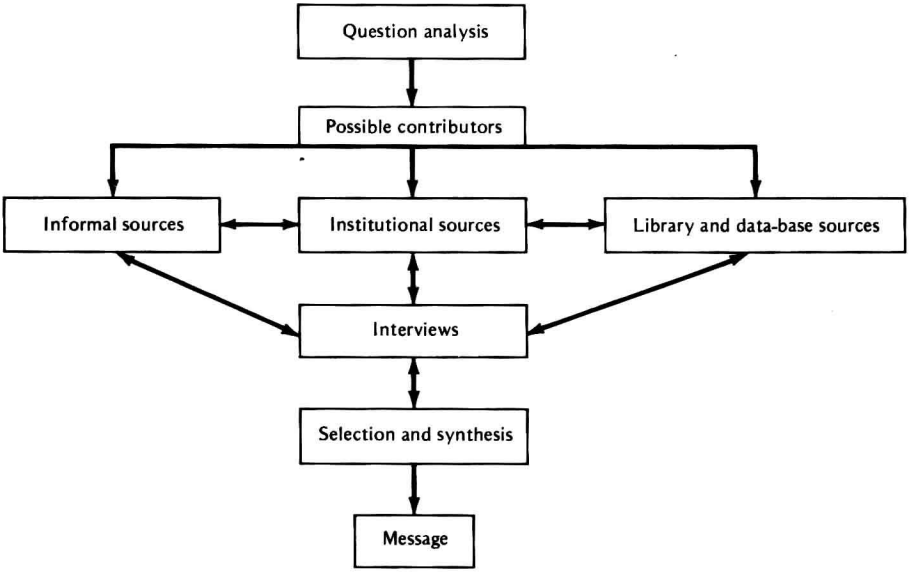

Figure 1.1 Simple search-strategy model

Question Analysis

Question analysis refers to the communicator's approach to narrowing and defining the information need.[2] It is at this point that decisions are made about the scope and focus of the topic. A reporter, for instance, uses question analysis to decide whether information for a news story should be gathered on the metropolitan, state, or national level. An example of how question analysis works involves preparing to report on an epidemic of encephalitis. The editor and reporter might ask if the story concerns an outbreak of the disease in Detroit, in Michigan, in the United States, or in the United States and Canada.

Information Sources

There are three major repositories of information. *Informal sources* are the many important, but often unrecognized, sources available to communicators: their own knowledge about a subject, casual reading, chats with colleagues and neighbors, and observations about what is going on. *Institutional sources* include all the information developed by the society's institutions: governments, corporations, churches, voluntary associations, schools, and trade unions. These institutions produce a paper trail recording their activities and a corps of knowledgeable people to be called on by communicators. *Library and data-base sources* encompass the formally organized collections that are the storehouse of human wisdom.

Traditional print sources, such as books and periodicals, have been joined by data-base services.

Interviews

The *interview* step in the model represents a traditional mass-communication method that is widely recognized and used. Getting information by talking to people remains a primary method, but this search strategy emphasizes that preparation for interviews is essential. By preceding interviews with a preliminary information search, the communicator selects the best interviewees and asks the most important questions.

Selection and Synthesis

The *selection and synthesis* routine includes opportunities to appraise the quality and relevance of all material that has been collected for a message. In this step, the communicator identifies the information that is appropriate for the message and pinpoints gaps and inconsistencies that must be pursued.

THE ORIGIN AND STRENGTHS OF THE SEARCH STRATEGY

For the past 25 years, library science has been using the concept of the formal search strategy as a way to organize thought about the information-search process.[3] Into the standard library-science models for the search process, we have incorporated the major information-search methods employed in news gathering, advertising, and public relations. While the communicator may have worked out a search method that is comfortable and familiar, new technologies that introduce additional possible sources require new research skills. A conceptual tool such as the search strategy provides a powerful way to synthesize both new and traditional methods of information gathering.

All information originates in human activity. Understanding how and where information is developed and who the developers are is the critical key as the communicator works to unlock potential sources. Much information originates in social institutions, as mentioned in the outline of the search-strategy model. Information from these institutions has long been a traditional source for communicators. Birth certificates and tax records are familiar, but the search-strategy model also leads to a rich vein of less familiar but valuable material. For instance, the nonprofit institutions in a community produce position papers and newsletters on issues that concern them. The communicator can mine these records for an additional point of view on a topic.

The academic disciplines are another rich source of information for