# MASS MEDIA *research*

## AN INTRODUCTION

5TH EDITION

ROGER D. WIMMER / JOSEPH R. DOMINICK

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ROGER D. WIMMER
The Eagle Group

JOSEPH R. DOMINICK
University of Georgia

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**To Fran and Meaghan—neither wrote a word, but both provided the incentive.**

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# Preface

In the preface to the fourth edition in 1994, we stated that "Writing this book over the past decade has been both exciting and frustrating: It is exciting to be able to publish ideas about topics and procedures we teach and use every day, but it is frustrating that many of the things we write about become outdated as soon as the edition is published." The statement continues to be true.

Since the fourth edition was published, several fundamental changes have impacted mass media and mass media research: new Arbitron and Nielsen ratings' procedures, on-line newspaper delivery systems, a proliferation of talk shows on radio and television, database marketing to allow the print media and others to produce materials for specifically targeted audiences, satellite delivery of radio and television to homes, intriguing public relations campaigns (related to the O. J. Simpson trial witnesses), and a tremendous increase in the use of research by mass media decision makers.

Many of these changes are attributable to rapid developments in the high tech field, especially computers. Almost every day brings an announcement of a new computer, new software, or a new peripheral device. While new products, services, and enhancements make mass media research easier to conduct, the problem is staying abreast of all the changes. Although we include a chapter about using the computer in mass media research, we know that it will be out of date by the time you read this book. But that's what makes this field fun—there aren't many days that are the same.

Our goal in this edition is the same as it has always been: introduce the reader to mass media research using a minimum of technical terms and a maximum of practical guidelines. Drawing on comments from reviewers, teachers, students, and professional media people who have used our book in the past, we have updated all of the chapters.

We would like to thank the following people who were involved in the production of this fifth edition: Betty Blosser, San Francisco State University; Jennings Bryant, University of Houston; Joanne Cantor, University of Wisconsin–Madison; Fiona Chew, Syracuse University; David Clark, Christian Broadcast Network; Susan Tyler Eastman, Indiana University; Edward A. Johnson, University of Alabama; Jack McLeod, University of Wisconsin–Madison; L. John Martin, University of Maryland; Allan Mussehl, Middle Tennessee State University; Joseph Philport, The Arbitron Company; John Robinson, Cox Enterprises, Inc.; Alan Rubin, Kent State University; Barry Sherman, University of Georgia; Dilnawaz A. Siddiqui, Clarion University of Pennsylvania; James Smith, SUNY–New Paltz; Linda Steiner, Rutgers University; Robert L. Stevenson, University of North Carolina; William Todd-Mancillas, California State University–Chico; Edward P. Trotter, California State University–Fullerton; Lauren Tucker, University of South Carolina; Charles Whitney, University of Texas–Austin.

And as we have stated in the previous editions, if you find a serious error in the text, please call one of the authors—he will be happy to give you the other author's home telephone number. If you access the Internet, you can reach us at our e-mail addresses.

Have fun with the book. The mass media research field is a great place to be!

Roger Wimmer
Denver, Colorado
E-mail: Roger_Wimmer@prodigy.com

Joseph Dominick
Athens, Georgia
E-mail: joedom@uga.cc.uga.edu

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# SCIENCE AND RESEARCH

At some point in our lives we have heard someone say, "Some things never change." This statement is particularly appropriate to the average person's perception of mass media research. It is the authors' experience that the perception of research is the same today as it was in 1979, when the first edition of this book was published. What is the perception of mass media research?

In the introduction to their book, *No Way: The Nature of the Impossible,* Davis and Park (1987) state:

- It is impossible to translate a poem.
- It is impossible for the president of the United States to be less than 35 years old.
- It is impossible to send a message into the past.
- It is impossible for a door to be open and closed simultaneously.

In reference to research, some people would add:

- It is impossible to learn how to conduct mass media research.

Davis and Park address the nature of the impossible in several areas. Their book is a collection of essays by authors who explain how some seemingly impossible statements and situations are not what they appear to be. For example, they say that the last item in their list (the open/closed door) sounds like pure logic, but it isn't. A revolving door is evidence that the "pure logic" is incorrect. The authors of this book contend that "it is impossible to learn how to conduct mass media research" may sound like pure logic, but isn't. What is required is an understanding of the basics of research.

## The "Meaning" of Research

Many years ago Richard Weaver (1953), a communications scholar, identified the differences between "god" terms and "devil" terms. A god term is positive and has connotations of strength, goodness, and significance. For example, *knowledge, democracy, innovation,* and *freedom* are god terms in the United States. A devil term, on the other hand, represents a negative image and connotes weakness, evil, or impending doom, such as *disease, drug cartel, loser,* and *inferior.*

One term that transcends both categories is **research.** For example, advertisers use research as a god term to communicate a message to consumers about products, services, and ideas. Broadcast commercials and print advertisements include statements such as "Research shows that 6 out of 10 doctors . . ." and "According to a recent survey of Harley-Davidson owners, 95 out of 100 preferred . . ." The intent of these types of statements is to associate with the product a degree of importance based only on research; the research results alone should convince consumers of the need for a product.

Research can also be a devil term, especially to those mass media students who consider statistics and research as detours on the road to receiving a college degree. This book may help dispel the "devil" connotation of the term *research* and demonstrate that mass media research is not impossible. Indeed,

research is an important part of the mass media field and should be viewed positively. As Tom McClendon, Vice-President of Cox Broadcasting, states:

> Proper research is essential in business today in order to maintain or gain a competitive edge. Unless business operators know what the customer wants, then failure is predictable. Research is the tool to enable success. Many business people feel that they know what their customers want without research, and they are left wondering what happened when a competitor steals their customers with the use of research. Research alone cannot guarantee success, but it is a necessary tool to aid in proper decision-making.

Research is an essential tool in all areas of mass media. Virtually all departments and positions in mass media are involved in research of some kind.

## Getting Started

This chapter contains discussions of the development of mass media research during the past several decades and the methods used to collect and analyze information; it also includes an expanded discussion of the scientific method of research. The intent of this chapter is to provide a foundation for the topics discussed in greater detail in later chapters.

Two basic questions a beginning researcher must learn to answer are *how* and *when* to use research methods and statistical procedures. Although developing methods and procedures are valuable tasks, the focus for most research students should be on applications. This book supports the approach of the applied data analyst (researcher), not the statistician; it is not intended to help the reader become a statistician because the "real world" of mass media research does not require specific knowledge of high-level statistics. After conducting thousands of mass media research projects over almost 25 years, the authors have concluded that those who wish to become mass media researchers should spend time learning *what to do* with the research methods, not *how they work.*

Although both statisticians and researchers are involved in producing research results, their functions are quite different. (Keep in mind that one person sometimes serves in both capacities.)

Among other complex activities, statisticians generate statistical procedures, or formulas, called **algorithms**; researchers use these algorithms to investigate research questions and hypotheses. The results of this cooperative effort are used to advance our understanding of the mass media.

For example, users of radio and television ratings (mainly produced by Arbitron and A. C. Nielsen) continually complain about the instability of ratings information. The ratings and shares (Chapter 14) for radio and television stations in a given market often vary dramatically from one survey period to the next without any logical explanation. Users of ratings periodically ask statisticians and the ratings companies to help determine why this problem occurs and to offer suggestions for making syndicated media audience information more reliable. As recently as the spring of 1996, media statisticians recommended larger samples and more refined methods of selecting respondents to correct the instability. Although the problems have not been solved, it is clear that statisticians and researchers can work together.

Since the early part of the 20th century, when there was no interest in the size of an audience or in the types of people that comprised the audience, mass media leaders have come to rely on research results for nearly every major decision they make. As stated in the first edition of this book, the increased demand for information has created a need for more researchers, both public and private. And within the research field are many specializations.

There are research directors who plan and supervise studies and act as liaisons to management; methodological specialists who provide statistical support; research analysts who design and interpret studies; and computer specialists who provide hardware and software support in data analysis.

Research in mass media can be used to verify or nullify gut feelings or intuition when making decisions. Although common sense is often accurate, media decision makers need additional objective information to evaluate problems, especially when significant decisions are made (which usually involve large sums of money). The past 50 years have witnessed the evolution of a decision-making approach that combines research and intuition to produce a higher probability of success.

Research, however, is not limited only to decision-making situations. It is also widely used in theoretical areas to attempt to describe the media, to analyze media effects on consumers, to understand audience behavior, and so on. No day goes by without some reference in the media to audience surveys, public opinion polls, growth projections or status reports of one medium or another, or advertising or public relations campaigns. As philosopher Suzanne Langer (1967) said, "Most new discoveries are suddenly-seen things that were always there." As stated in previous editions of this book, mass media researchers still have a great deal to "see."

There is absolutely no question that media research and the need for qualified researchers will continue to grow at a phenomenal rate. However, it is becoming more and more difficult to find qualified researchers who can work in both the public and private sectors.

## The Development of Mass Media Research

Mass media research has evolved in definable steps, and similar patterns have been followed in each medium's needs for research (see Figure 1.1).* In Phase 1 of the research, there is an interest in the medium itself. What is it? How does it work? What technology does it involve? How is it similar to or different from what we already have? What functions or services does it provide? Who will have access to the new medium? How much will it cost?

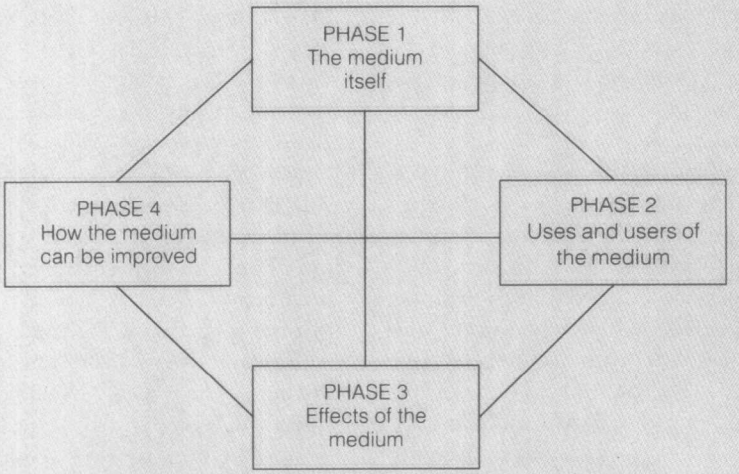
Phase 2 research begins once the medium is developed. In this phase, specific information about the uses and the users of the medium is accumulated. How do people use the medium in real life? Do they use it for information only, to save time, for entertainment, or for some other reason? Do children use it? Do adults use it? Why? What gratifications does the new medium provide? What other types of information and entertainment does the new medium replace? Were original projections about the use of the medium correct? What uses are evident other than those that were projected in initial research?

Phase 3 includes investigations of the social, psychological, and physical effects of the medium. How much time do people spend with the medium? Does it change people's perspectives about anything? What do the users of the medium want and expect to hear or see? Are there any harmful effects related to using the medium? Does the technology cause any harm? How does the medium help in people's lives? Can the medium be combined with other media or technology to make it even more useful?

Phase 4 includes research related to how the medium can be improved, either in its use or through technological developments. Can the medium provide information or entertainment to more types of people? How can new technology be used to perfect or enhance the sight or sound of the medium? Is there a way to change the content (programming) to be more valuable or entertaining?

*Note how research concerning the Internet is following these phases.

FIGURE 1.1 Research Phases in Mass Media




The design of Figure 1.1 is not intended to suggest that the research phases are linear—that when one phase is over, it is never considered again. In reality, once a medium is developed and established, research may be conducted simultaneously in all four phases. For example, though television has been around for over 50 years, researchers are still investigating the medium itself (satellite-delivered digital audio and video), the uses of TV (pay-per-view programming), effects (violent programming), and improvements (flat-screen TV).

Research is a never-ending process. In most instances a research project designed to answer one series of questions merely produces a new set of questions no one thought of before. This failure to produce a closure may be troublesome to some people, yet it is the essential nature of research.

Figure 1.1 depicts four phases of research. However, in some instances, as in private sector research, an additional element permeates every phase: How can the medium make money? The largest percentage of research conducted in the private sector relates in some way to money—how to save it, make more of it, or take it away from others. This may not "sit well" with people who view the media as products of artistic endeavor, but this is how the "real world" operates.

At least four major events or social forces have contributed to the growth of mass media research. The first was World War I, which prompted a need to further understand the nature of propaganda. Researchers working from a stimulus-response point of view attempted to uncover the effects of the media on people (Lasswell, 1927). The media at that time were thought to exert a very powerful influence over their audiences, and several assumptions were made about what the media could and could not do. One theory of mass media, later named the "hypodermic needle" model of communication, basically suggested that mass communicators need only "shoot" messages at an audience and that those messages would produce preplanned and almost universal effects. The belief was that all people behave in very similar ways when they encounter media messages, though we know now that individual differences among people rule out this rather