Communication Theory & Research Applications

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Preface

The first course in communication theory and research can be both a memorable and an exasperating experience for students. On the one hand, it is an eye-opening revelation that so much thought and research has been done by such a wide variety of scholars. On the other hand, it is extremely difficult to try to synthesize the material--to link the multitude of concepts and make any sense of the whole. Making matters worse for students is the lack of opportunity to work with the vast quantity of material presented. Learning is more difficult and less enjoyable if it involves a lot of memorization.

The authors have been teaching communication theory and research for more than 20 years. They have watched the perplexed stares and heard the querulous "but what good is it?" enough times to appreciate the need for a hands-on approach. In fact, there is a strong suspicion that anyone teaching an effective course in mass communication theory or research has already discovered how much more learning takes place if students can be shown, rather than just told, some of the concepts they are being taught. Even a weak example, if it furthers student participation and involvement with the concept, is superior to no example.

This text approaches theory and research with both the teacher and the student in mind. For the student, there are important readings, supplemented by understandable narratives, supplemented in turn by (and this is a key point) hands-on opportunities to work with theory. Each chapter includes a research project or some other activity designed to drive home and clarify the topic being discussed. For the teacher, this approach allows the flexibility to expand a section to any depth. This will be very important to instructors who build their courses around readings and lectures. For instructors who use a survey text, our book may serve as a supplement.

These hands-on examples of theory and research concepts have proven themselves in class at the undergraduate and graduate levels. They have been evaluated by students based on the ability of the exercises to clarify the concept and have received rave reviews. They work. They will add the practical dimension to the subject of mass communication theory and research. And, most important, they will enhance the learning experience.

A teachers' manual is available, which provides instructional background for using some of the exercises. While students will have in this book the pages they need to work from, the manual will help instructors present these lessons in a step-by-step manner, pointing out potential pitfalls that might occur along the way. The teachers' manual also offers many more in-class exercises that the instructors may want to present--

examples that support the concepts in the text but that will be most effective if instructors present them in class without having the students follow along in their own books.

The authors are indebted to their teaching colleagues who have suggested some of these examples through the years. They are most indebted to their students who have unknowingly served as test-market subjects for these lessons and through whose feedback the lessons have been improved to the extent that they are now being shared with others.

Readers are invited to write to the authors with suggestions for improving or expanding these exercises or the suggested readings.

Contents

PART ONE

Relating Theory to Media Practice

UNIT 1

Media Use: A Questionnaire

READING:
Shearon A. Lowery and Melvin L. De Fleur. "The People's Choice: The Media in a Political Campaign." *Milestones in Mass Communication Research*, 2d ed. New York: Longman, 1988, pp. 79-103.

This unit involves completion of a media-use questionnaire. Turn to the questionnaire at the end of this unit and answer the questions on both pages. Do that before reading further; the questionnaire should require only about 5 to 8 minutes to complete.

Now we can begin to consider what the media-use questionnaire shows about people's use of media as reported through this self-administered device. We can first consider the source of many of these questions and why they were selected for use in charting your media habits.

Most of the items were used similarly by political science researchers Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet more than 40 years ago in a classic study of what influences a person's decision to vote for a particular candidate. Although it now seems difficult to imagine, it was not until the 1940 presidential election that researchers first thought to include the mass media as a possible influence on people's voting decisions. In fact, the three researchers just tossed a few media-use questions into a questionnaire that was going to be used in yet another survey of election influences, perhaps one better designed than those that had preceded it.

But the outcome was spectacular. Not only did the study result in an exceptional book, *The People's Choice*, which had several printings, but the three researchers became leaders in a newly established scientific discipline, mass communication research. Beyond these outcomes, the study provided the first real theory of mass communication, "The Two-Step Flow Theory," in which information disseminated by the mass media was received by opinion leaders in the general population who related the information to others in their social groups. Opinion leaders were the direct receivers of the message, and they shared certain demographic characteristics such as being better educated, in a slightly higher income category, and more gregarious than others in their social group. The "others" were classified as followers or "indirect receivers" who relied on their opinion leaders not only to provide information on a certain topic area but to interpret that information for them as well.

Naturally, some questions on media use have been added to this unit's questionnaire. There was no television in 1940; magazines were not available at grocery counter checkouts because there were no chain grocery stores as we know them now. Also, there is more detail on our media-use questionnaire because we include a question that seeks to determine levels of interest in a variety of news categories in a daily newspaper (question 2).

Our questionnaire also contains items (questions 17 to 21) that go beyond media use. The entire section on interaction with others is designed to elicit responses that could tap a person's general position in a social setting: opinion leader vs. follower. If you were asked this question, "Which kind of 'information person' would you say you are in relation to your group of friends: a leader or follower?" you would probably have a tough time deciding. Most people would. We can all think of topics on which we are the opinion leaders and of others on which we are followers. You might be the one in the group who decides which movie to see, but you might rely on the others for decisions on the best-fitting fashion jeans to purchase. Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet didn't find that out in their survey, but later communication researchers who probed the topic further did.

Why did it take five different questions to tap the concept of opinion leader vs. follower? Unit 2 offers some answers.

EXERCISE

MEDIA-USE QUESTIONNAIRE

General Media Use:

1. How many days a week do you read a daily newspaper? _2_____

2. Which of the following items do you generally read when you do read
   a daily newspaper? (Check all that apply.)

   ____international news   __✓_sports   __✓_horoscopes, games,
   __✓_national news   ____editorials   or puzzles
   __✓_local news   ____letters to   ____fashion or food
   ____advertisements   editor   ____classifieds
   ____comics   __✓_columnists   ____other: weather,
                                                     socials, etc.

3. Do you read a weekly newspaper? yes   no

4. How many days a week do you watch a local TV news show? ___5____

5. How many days a week do you watch a national TV news show? __4___

6. Do you regularly read a weekly newsmagazine? yes   no

7. How much time per day do you spend listening to radio? _3_hr;
   ___min.

8. How much time do you spend daily listening to tapes, disks, and
   records? _1_hr; ___min.

9. About how much time per day do you spend watching TV, including
   news? _4 hrs._

10. How many times a month do you go out to a movie? _1___
    a. Please list the last three movies you have seen _____
    _____

11. Do you receive cable TV? yes   no

12. Do you regularly watch a weekly TV "magazine" format program?
    yes   no

13. Not counting textbooks, how many books have you read in the past
    year? _8___

14. To how many magazines, of any type, do you subscribe? _2_____
    a. Please list them: _____
    _____

15. List the last several magazines that you remember scanning at a newsstand or grocery counter to which you do not subscribe:

   _____

   _____

16. Generally, compared with other Americans, would you say your media use is:

   more than average /___/___/___/___/___/___/ less than average

Interaction with Others:

17. To how many clubs or organizations do you now belong? _____

18. Excluding relatives, about how many people do you talk with per day, on average? ("Talk with" means more than casual greeting.) _____

19. Approximately how many times per day do you discuss current events or politics with others? _____

20. If you and friends disagree during a conversation, which of the following outcomes usually occurs? (Check only one.)

   ___You maintain your position until others agree with you.
   ___You continue your position and others maintain theirs.
   ___You give in but really aren't convinced.
   ___You begin to accept their arguments as valid.

21. Check your position under each of the following headings:

	Mostly You Advise Others	Mostly Others Advise You	Usually Goes Both Ways
a. On topics about new styles and fashion:	_____	_____	_____
b. On consumer matters such as food or auto repair products, etc., and where to shop:	_____	_____	_____
c. On political topics:	_____	_____	_____
d. On personal relationship topics:	_____	_____	_____
e. On current events:	_____	_____	_____

Media Use: Measuring "Use"

Communication research is a difficult business. This is true
because human beings are complex, probably the most complex research
subject of all. Each of us is a mass of interwoven influences (bio-
logical, physiological, environmental, etc.). Most of us could not
possibly say, based on a single question, whether we are information
leaders or followers. There are a host of things about ourselves we
probably couldn't or wouldn't answer if asked directly. So when a
researcher is dealing with people and trying to gather information
on some complex aspect of human nature, the best one can do is try
to estimate the right answer.
  One way to do that is through indexes. An index is a series of
questions or scales that, when combined appropriately, form a continuum
along which a person can be placed with regard to others who have
completed the same items. An example is needed. Let's say you are
asked simply, "Are you a good sleeper?" If you are an insomniac, you
know you are a bad sleeper. But do the rest of us know what kind of
sleepers we are? What constitutes an "average" sleeper? The way to go
about determining if an individual should be placed in the good or bad
sleeper category (and perhaps rank each along a continuum of sleeping
habits) is to ask a series of questions each person can answer, which
taken together would classify the person as a good or a bad sleeper:

    1. About how many hours a night do you sleep, on average?
    2. About how long does it take you to get to sleep?
    3. Do you wake up during the night?
    4. If you awaken, about how many times do you do so on an average
night?
    5. Do you occasionally take pills to help you sleep?
    6. Do you often feel tired during the day?

The list of questions could be longer, or we might be able to
correctly estimate sleeping habits by using only a few of the above.
However, we would all agree that using all or most of the above questions
would provide a more reliable answer than using only one. And the im-
portant thing here is that we all can answer the six questions without
any difficulty.

Now, when we are satisfied that our series of questions is long enough, but not too long, and that the list is germane to the topic, we can feel fairly confident that the individual's series of responses to our scale will correctly classify the person as either a good or a bad sleeper. The way to continue is to convert the answer to these questions into numbers. If we get a "yes" to question 3, we could translate that to a zero, while a "no" can equal one. We would use that particular classification because we would probably want to designate the person scoring highest on the scale (the sum of scores) as the best sleeper. Maybe we would decide to award a point on the scale for every hour given as an answer to question 1: a person who sleeps eight hours would get eight more points on the scale; one who sleeps only six hours would get six points, etc. For question 2, "How long does it take you to get to sleep?" we would deduct a point for every 15 minutes above the first 15 because we might decide that an "average" person might require about that long to get to sleep.

We would continue on the above procedure of adding or deducting points based on our decisions of how the questions best identify sleeping habits, that is, how the questions might discriminate good from bad sleepers. All this sounds reasonable and proper. But remember, we are dealing with people. Consider the following:

1. Not everyone needs the same amount of sleep; six hours might be sufficient for many, but we are docking our six-hour sleepers two whole points.
2. If a person feels tired during the day on a regular basis, is it a lack of sleep, a lack of exercise, a dietary problem, a medical problem, or unrequited love?
3. If you awaken once during the night and we dock you a point for that, should we dock you only two points for awakening twice? Awakening once may be necessary for people with a small bladder, while twice may be a real sign of difficulty in sleeping. Perhaps you should be docked 10 points if you awaken more than twice during the night.

These are some of the difficulties we have when our subjects are human beings. We can never assume that people can be measured as if they are ounces of lead or rats in a maze. Our measuring instruments aren't that good, and human beings can't be trusted to react in exactly the same way a second time.

Although we have looked at ways to attempt to measure complex concepts (for example, "Are you a good sleeper?"), we have learned that when it comes to measuring people's behavior, including communications, we can only approximate. We have seen how to go about constructing an index from a series of questions and how the index may differentiate people along a continuum.

EXERCISE

Go back to the media-use questionnaire. List in the space provided below the concepts that are being scaled and identify the *scale items* (questions) that relate to each concept. Using the kind of point system we have suggested, compute scores for yourself on each of the concepts. If feasible, compare scores with another member of the class. If comparisons are to be made, be certain you and your partner have used the same point system! And notice also that the point system has to be persuasive to the critic. Discuss with your partner the degree to which the scores probably are an accurate reflection of communications behavior or to what extent the scales are inaccurate.

Concept 1. Example: Broadcast Media Use

    Item   4 _____

    Item   5 _____

    Item   7 _____

    Item   9 _____

    Item 12 _____

(Note: It is not necessary to list every question relevant to a concept.)

Concept 2. _____

    Item _____ _____

    Item _____ _____

    Item _____ _____

    Item _____ _____

    Item _____ _____

Concept 3. _____

    Item _____ _____

    Item _____ _____

    Item _____ _____

    Item _____ _____

    Item _____ _____