

**COMMUNICATION RESEARCH TRAINING:  
A PLACE IN THE SUN**

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**Abstract**

*Although research methods and analytical procedures are usually not part of the curriculum in the established western schools of communication at undergraduate level, we find that many of the departments of communication in Asia have compulsory courses in these subjects. This because BA (Honours) graduates often will have responsibilities that necessitate a facility with at least basic research techniques and interpretation of data. This paper includes proposed content for research courses at the undergraduate level, and, a research direction which should lead to the development of a body of knowledge on communication and locally relevant theory.*

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## Communication Research and its place in The Curriculum Abroad

The history of communication research begins in the late 1920's with the first studies conducted by the theorist Harold Lasswell and the great methodologist Paul Lazarsfeld. Following the work of these pioneers, Wilbur Schramm became the principal researcher of the field and a guiding influence for hundreds of scholars who came out of the first great institutes of communication research at Iowa, Illinois, and Stanford University. All this began to happen during the mid 1940's.

At this time, there were a great many universities offering specialised communication courses in journalism, advertising, and broadcasting. The focus for undergraduate study was, during the 40's and 50's, toward the development of skills in the student's area of interest coupled with courses which represent the liberal university-based system. Over the years this focus has not changed except that the curriculum is continually enhanced to reflect changes in technology, the practice, and the social environment.

The first priority in nearly all communication departments — and this is shared throughout the world — remains today the emphasis on skills courses and the broad based liberal education for a professional career in each sequence (Lindsay, 1978).

### The Malaysian/Asian Situation

Across Asia at many of the fine schools where communication has been taught for as long as 20 years in some cases, we find course content and the overall curriculum similar to that of schools in the rest of the world — of course with amendments based on local needs and the availability of teaching talent. We also notice that several schools teach at least one formal course in communication research methods and another in quantitative analysis. These subjects are often compulsory and form a large part of the student's effort in the last two years of study at undergraduate level. (See the curriculum of Chulalongkorn University,

Thammasat University, National Cheng Chi University and others).

At first glance one might see a ready opportunity to accuse lecturers of heaping their highly abstract graduate course materials upon the poor undergraduate who sees it as totally irrelevant. Rather, it is quite clear that communication departments are responding to needs expressed in the job market. In Malaysia we find our graduates with a BA. (Honours) employed as editors and senior reporters, account executives, programme directors, and research coordinators for communication efforts in governmental bodies. To send these students into the real world without the tools of policy — making would invite criticism from outside that students are ill-prepared to fulfill the status of "graduates."

In developing nations where only a small percentage of the population receives tertiary education, more is expected of these nation-builders. They should have the competence to synthesize empirical research into conclusions which form the basis for development planning. This implies that they also have the skill to generate empirical data.

The current problem of information imbalance between the rich and poor countries provides an opportunity to support this need for research capacity as well as enhanced skills. The trend toward investigation and interpretation in the Asian press, a practice which adds considerable credibility and competitive ability to Asian journalists, is, in part, founded in a writer's ability to engage in research which is at least scientific in the sense that results are verifiable and representative. The interpretive reporter is likely to spend a good deal of time analyzing and explaining empirical data generated locally and sent for international consumption. Without an ability to discriminate between *straw polls* and representative sampling the reporter risks perpetuating platitudes that seriously affect local and international credibility and affect the country's image on many fronts.

The advantage of offering research methods and analysis training at tertiary level to all communication students is that we reduce the chances that "studies" based on purposive samples, using invalid questions, generating unreliable data shall be used in making the serious policies that affect the lives of all.

#### **Priorities for Research Training**

Firstly, research training ought to be predicated on an understanding of the nature of research to be done and the ultimate uses of empirical data. Those of us who have been engaged in research of various kinds in the "third world" will find that our efforts are in large part devoted to research which will have *policy implication*. That is, what can we do with the results that will help improve something? We can, if we are careful and have a generous funding agency, incorporate theoretically valuable variables, but the primary focus remains — practical significance. Most of us would probably agree that this is understandable in light of the amount of fundamental data needed for development policy.

This practice means that our direction in communication research will be primarily toward the study of *effects* rather than the *process* of communication, the latter being roughly equivalent to studies of greater theoretical significance leading to model building and ultimately to theory.

Our students who enter the real world find themselves in the situation of doing *effects* research and this helps us to decide how they ought to be prepared. A curriculum which includes the basis components of:

- i. Problem definition
- ii. Research design
- iii. Literature review
- iv. Data collection methods
  - a. Sampling methods
  - b. Instrument design
  - c. Measurement techniques
- v. Analytical procedures
  - a. Descriptive statistics
  - b. Inferential statistics
- vi. Interpretation and report writing

should form the basis for course structure. These essential elements will have to be packaged to fit the time frame available to undergraduates while they pursue the basic skills subjects and related disciplines.

While implementing research training at this level we must guard against the possibility of creating an imbalance between the empirical and theoretical. By stressing the value of generating higher level of abstractions from basic data, it is possible that we create a feeling of irrelevance of the material among students. Theory building and hypothesis generating studies are best left to graduate level studies when the time and opportunity allow for fuller attention.

*Process* research, essential to the creation of locally relevant theory, will benefit from a growing body of empirical studies — studies founded in the scientific method and linked with internationally acceptable theory. Eventually academics will not be alone in conducting research of theoretical importance but will be acting in collaboration with policy-making bodies thereby widening the scope and significance of research.

#### **Summary**

Everett Rogers, at the 1980 ICA conference, spoke poignantly about the growth of the research literature in communication. From a few papers circulated privately in the 1950's we have come to see more than 1,000 published research reports each year. The important implication of this is that, the value of research in planning and decision-making is greater than ever before. If we and our students are to make sense out of the hundreds of studies about a particular phenomenon, it is necessary that we acquire a capacity to synthesize primary research results — a practice now called meta-research (Rogers, 1980). Guidelines for this practice are now appearing and the successful conduct of the synthesis requires an understanding and a discriminating analysis of the methods used in conducting primary research (Glass, McGraw, Smith, 1981). Meta-research should not long remain the domain of

academics alone but should be within the capacity of practitioners of development.

In conclusion, until such a time that graduate study in communication research methods and quantitative analysis becomes more widely available, we have no recourse but to offer research methods and statistics training at the

undergraduate level with the intent that these courses will act in concert with skills subjects to produce a functional and well-rounded communicator. This panel, hopefully, will design the parameters for research training so that our students will arrive on the job market with abilities commensurate with their responsibilities.

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