

Foundation of Communication Research

VII Semester (Major)

Notes by

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Introduction to Communication Research

Communication is a fundamental human skill and an integral part of social living, making it essential to understand how it functions within society. With the proliferation of mass media and the transition into an information society, communication research has emerged as a crucial academic pursuit.

Meaning of Communication Research

Communication research generally refers to the attempt to discover trends or facts in the field of communication and mass media.

- *Investigative Approach:* It is an investigative approach and methodology that falls within the broader realm of social science research.
- *Systematic Exploration:* It goes beyond simply asking questions; it systematically explores phenomena using well-defined questions to produce new information and refine existing knowledge.
- *Process Analysis:* It explains the production, reception, and content of information exchanged in a communication process.
- *Core Purpose:* It is central to understanding what communication is, how human relations exist and develop, and how communicative behaviours shape social organizations.

Nature of Communication Research

The nature of communication research is defined by its adherence to the scientific method and its interdisciplinary roots.

- *Interdisciplinary:* It draws its broad principles, concepts, and techniques from foundational social science disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, psychology, and political science.
- *Systematic and Logical:* It follows a procedure that is well-defined, orderly, and capable of being repeated for further verification.

- *Objective*: It relies on an objective evaluation of data, looking at evidence from the perspective of the phenomenon itself while minimizing personal bias and prejudice.
- *Empirical*: The research is evidence-based, relying on observable facts and real-life experiences rather than speculative knowledge.
- *Verifiable and Self-Correcting*: The findings are designed to be correct and capable of yielding similar results if retested by others under similar conditions, allowing the scientific community to correct inconsistencies over time.

Scope of Communication Research

The scope of communication research is vast, having gained significant momentum during the Second World War and expanding continuously with the advent of new media technologies.

- *Media Effects and Influence*: A major focus is exploring the power of mass media and identifying its influence on society. This includes studying behavioural, attitudinal, cognitive, emotional, and physiological effects on audiences.
- *Audience Measurement and Readership*: It heavily involves discovering who consumes media and why. This encompasses broadcast audience research (like television and radio ratings), newspaper and magazine readership profiles, and online readership trends.
- *Elements of the Communication Process*: The scope covers all elements of communication, allowing researchers to examine the content, the medium, the settings of presentation, the motives of the communicants (speakers and listeners), and the process itself.
- *Media as a Social Institution*: It investigates how media institutions operate and how they shape the beliefs, attitudes, cultures, and economies of the societies they serve.
- *Development Communication*: In developing nations, the scope extends to analyzing the role of mass media in development contexts. It examines communication as a catalyst for social change, focusing on issues like national integrity, poverty alleviation, and social mobility.

Mass communication research can be defined as the study of the underlying causative factors that help to explain the relationship of the mass media with the behaviour patterns of the masses. These relations delve deeply into the experiences as well as into the plausible future experiences with the mass

media. In the Indian context, communication research has been conducted to assess this vital relationship in the societal, not the commercial, context. After the SITE phase (1975) was over, the communication research activities included commercial research exercises within their gamut. In the West, communication research has a tilt towards commercialism; it takes a market-oriented approach, although researchers in this field also pay due attention to pressing issues such as content analysis, media effects research, and cultural studies.

In India, the focus of mass communication research had social and political objectives. Commercialism became the chief guiding force of the economic processes during the fag end of the seventies (i.e., after the end of the SITE phase). Today, mass communication research has sound reasons to include the impact of the mass media in a commercial context. Hence, we feel that this branch of research is following almost a similar pattern in India as is being followed in the West. The state is, however, keen to view this specialized set of knowledge from a sociopolitical angle, though the corporate sector views it as a tool for measuring the impact of various mass media on its markets.

Historical Development of Communication Research

Before AD 1950

In 1890, Mark introduced survey techniques in a study of French workers.

1900–1950

* In 1914–18, the First World War was fought. Posters were distributed during the war to encourage Americans to grow more vegetables.

* In 1920, the interest of American researchers developed in the field of mass communication. Radio broadcasts were initiated in the USA during that period.

* In 1927, Casswell published *Propaganda Techniques in World War*. The popular notion during the 1920s and 1950s was that the mass media had powerful effects on individual behaviour.

* During the 1920s, the Frankfurt School of thought emerged in the research scenario.

- * In 1929–32, Payne Fund studies were conducted. These studies tried to determine the effects of movies on children. These studies and their conclusions are discussed separately under Mass Media Effects Studies.
- * From 1940 onwards, the popular notion was that the effects of the mass media on audiences were quite limited.
- * From the 1930s to the 1940s, professional pollsters developed survey techniques.
- * From 1942 to 1945, Hovland studied attitude change for the U.S. Army.
- * From 1939 to 1945, the Second World War was fought. Radio and wireless were used during the war.
- * On October 26, 1945, the United Nations Organization was formed. It aimed to bring peace, harmony, and prosperity to its member nations. The world was divided into two blocs—the Communist Bloc and the Capitalist Bloc. The former was led by the USSR while the latter by the USA and her allies.
- * In 1948, Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet published *The People's Choice*.
- * In 1947, India became a free nation. She adopted a mixed economic system for ensuring socio-economic growth. The media became free. Research in the field of mass communication was not in vogue during the formative phase of independent India.
- * In 1950, White published the first gatekeeping study. The early fifties also saw the rise of Elvis Presley, an icon of music and dance, in the Big Apple.

AD 1950 – New Millennium

- * In 1954, Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee published *Voting*.
- * In 1955, Breed published *Social Control in the Newsroom*.
- * In 1959, Katz suggested the Uses and Gratifications genre of research.
- * During the early fifties, the era of rock 'n' roll began. The Beatles ruled the hearts of millions during the sixties. Social scientists were keen to study how music affected mass audiences, especially the youth. This era spilt into the seventies and created mass hysteria among the youth of the West.
- * In 1970, Tichenor, Donohue, and Olien published *Knowledge Gap Research*.
- * In 1971, the Surgeon General of the USA released a report on the violent impact of TV. During the 1970s, Carey revived the community orientation of American cultural studies.
- * In 1972, McCombs and Shaw started *Agenda Research*.

- * In 1973, Noelle-Neumann propounded the hypothesis of **Spiral of Silence**.
- * During the 1970s, Gerbner and his cohorts developed **Cultivation Theory**. Social scientists worked hard in the field of Uses and Gratifications research.
- * In 1975, the USA gave its ATS-6 satellite to the Indian government. As a result of this collaboration, 2,330 villages of India were connected through the ATS-6, and educational programmes were beamed to the community centres of these villages. The idea was to determine the impact of satellite communication on the rural (Indian) masses. The programme continued for one year. It yielded good results but was not encouraging enough to continue the programme.
- * In 1976, Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur published **Dependency Theory**.
- * In 1979, TV stations were set up across the length and breadth of India. Some of them were HPTs while others were LPTs. Doordarshan became the only broadcaster in India with a high audience reach. It also set up the Audio Visual Research Cell (AVRC), which was associated with different universities of India. These universities produced educational software and gave it to the AVRC. This software was telecast under the joint aegis of Doordarshan and the University Grants Commission (UGC). This project aimed to educate the masses by conducting research in various fields, which chiefly included Physics, Chemistry, Space Research, Biology, Mathematics, etc. It was academic research and audiovisual presentation of the curricula of various classes. It was not mass communication research.
- * During the late eighties, communication research concentrated on media economics.
- * In 1989, the USSR released its grip on its states. The Cold War came to an end between 1989–91. The USSR was divided into twenty independent nations. The press became free in all these countries. With the arrival of democracy in these states, their people became more open to Western media and ideologies.
- * In 1991, Shoemaker and Reeves published **Mediating the Message**. FM radio arrived in India.
- * In 1992, P. V. Narasimha Rao started implementing the economic reform policies initiated by the late Rajiv Gandhi. Cable TV, which had arrived in the beginning of the nineties in India, grew at a phenomenal pace in the metropolitan and large cities of India.
- * During 1993–95, research firms like IMRB, ORG, and MARG set up their infrastructure in the major cities of India. They started collecting data for and

on behalf of various corporate firms. A large part of this data was related to media habits and preferences of the targeted subjects.

* During 1993–98, the marketing research firms stepped up their activities to find out the moods of the audiences. Their research efforts chiefly focused on FMCGs, white goods, cellular phones, apparel, cars, jewellery, and children's confectionery. Some of these research activities were devoted to communication research too.

* In 1995, the Internet arrived in India. The data exchange processes were slow during that phase. The bandwidth of the VSNL was too low to accommodate growing global Internet traffic.

* By the end of the 1990s, there were many new Internet Service Providers (ISPs) in the Indian market. Examples include Dishnet, Satyam, and Spectranet.

* Several organisations showed interest in mass communication research in India. TV was the dominant medium for measuring audience response (viewers). In 1996, the Telecommunication Act was passed in the USA.

Role of Research in Media and Communication Industries

In the modern media and communication landscape, research is not just an academic exercise—it is the strategic backbone of the industry. From broadcast television and digital streaming to print journalism, advertising, and corporate public relations, media companies rely heavily on systematic data collection and analysis to minimize risk, maximize audience engagement, and drive profitability.

The role of research in media and communication industries can be categorized into four primary areas: audience understanding, content strategy, commercial/advertising operations, and strategic management.

1. Audience Measurement and Profiling

Understanding who the audience is, what they want, and how they behave is fundamental to any media organization.

- *Demographic & Psychographic Mapping:* Industry research creates detailed profiles of consumers based on age, gender, location, income, and educational background, as well as lifestyle, values, and media consumption habits.
- *Ratings and Reach:* In television, radio, and digital streaming, ratings research (using tools like Nielsen meters, People's Meters, and digital telemetry) measures audience size and viewing behaviours. These

ratings determine a show's longevity and directly dictate advertising rates.

- *Readership & Circulation Studies:* Print and digital news media rely on readership profiles and circulation data to determine geographic reach, frequency of reading, and target audience priorities.

2. Content Strategy and Program Development

Media content requires significant financial investment. Research helps creative and production teams predict what will resonate before full-scale production or release.

- *Item-Selection & Concept Testing:* Focus groups and surveys are used to test potential show concepts, movie scripts, headlines, or article formats to see which elements generate interest.
- *Aided Recall and Engagement:* In journalism and print media, item-selection studies measure what specific stories readers engage with most, guiding editorial focus and page allocation.
- *Uses and Gratifications Analysis:* Research identifies *why* audiences seek out specific media—whether for entertainment, education, escape, or social connection—allowing creators to tailor content to meet those specific psychological and social needs.

3. Commercial Growth, Advertising, and Sponsorship

Advertising is the economic driver for most media channels. Research provides the hard metrics that justify advertising spend.

- *Targeting and Ad Placement:* Media research shows advertisers exactly when, where, and how to reach their target market, identifying prime-time slots and high-traffic online zones.
- *Campaign Effectiveness & Reception:* Post-campaign evaluation measures how well an advertisement altered consumer behaviour, brand perception, or purchasing intent.
- *Cross-Platform Metrics:* As audiences fragment across television, social media, and mobile apps, research tracks consumer cross-platform habits, enabling cross-media advertising strategies.

4. Strategic Management and Decision-Making

For executive teams, research provides evidence-based data for making major organizational, operational, and policy decisions.

- *Evaluating New Technologies and Platforms:* Research tracks the adoption of emerging platforms—such as streaming services, podcasts, or online news—helping traditional media adapt through digital convergence.
- *Management & Ownership Strategy:* Industry research evaluates how management practices, pricing, and distribution logistics impact brand sustainability and market share.
- *Crisis and Reputation Management:* Public relations teams use media research to monitor public sentiment, track media framing, and evaluate the effectiveness of strategic messaging during organizational crises.

Media Sectors & Research Roles

Sector	Primary Research Focus	Typical Research Tools/Methods
Broadcast (TV & Radio)	Ratings, time-slot performance, audience retention.	People's Meters, viewing diaries, automated analytics.
Journalism & Publishing	Readership habits, circulation, story interest.	Reader profiles, item-selection studies, digital analytics.
Advertising & PR	Target audience behaviour, message effectiveness, brand sentiment.	Focus groups, surveys, A/B testing, sentiment analysis.
Digital & Social Media	User engagement, click-through rates, platform trends.	Web analytics, online polls, behavioural tracking.

Communication Theories and Their Relevance to Research

Communication theories serve as the conceptual foundation for scientific research in media and communication studies. They provide the theoretical framework, conceptual definitions, and logical models necessary to explain, predict, and understand communication phenomena.

Without theory, research remains a collection of isolated facts; with theory, research contributes to a structured, verifiable body of knowledge.

1. The Role and Relevance of Theory in Research

Theory and research exist in a continuous, interdependent relationship:

- Delimitation of Study: Theory narrows the scope of facts to be examined, selecting relevant aspects of a phenomenon so the research remains manageable.
- Conceptual Framework: Theory provides the definitions, constructs, and logical schemata needed to formulate hypotheses and operationalize variables.
- Prediction and Explanation: Theoretical generalizations allow researchers to extrapolate from known observations to unknown situations, predicting future outcomes.
- Identifying Knowledge Gaps: Theory highlights unexplored areas, pointing out contradictions or missing links in current understanding.
- Guide for Data Interpretation: Theories provide the lens through which empirical findings are interpreted, organized, and synthesized into broader social contexts.

2. Key Communication Theories & Their Research Relevance

Below are major mass communication theories, their core premises, and how researchers apply them in empirical studies.

A. Magic Bullet / Hypodermic Needle Theory

- Core Premise: Formulated in the early 20th century (e.g., Harold Lasswell), this linear model assumes media messages are directly injected into a passive audience, producing immediate and uniform effects.
- Relevance to Research: Historically served as the starting point for media effects research, prompting early direct-effects studies like the Payne Fund Studies examining movie effects on youth. Though largely discredited as an oversimplification, it remains highly relevant for baseline stimulus-response experiments and modern research analyzing public panics, misinformation surges, or immediate political propaganda influences. By treating audience exposure as a direct input, researchers can establish basic cause-and-effect frameworks to determine whether high-intensity media messages trigger immediate psychological or behavioural shifts before complex social variables intervene.

B. Two-Step & Multi-Step Flow Theory

- Core Premise: Developed by Paul Lazarsfeld, Elihu Katz, and colleagues, this theory posits that media messages flow from mass media to opinion leaders, who then interpret and pass information to less active sections of the public through interpersonal channels.
- Relevance to Research: Shifted research focuses away from direct media effects toward the interplay between mass communication and interpersonal influence. It provides a critical theoretical foundation for social network analysis, public health communication campaigns, and studies investigating how political information diffuses through communities. In modern digital media research, this framework is indispensable for examining how algorithmic recommendations interact with social media influencers and peer dynamics to shape voter behaviour and consumer choice.

C. Agenda-Setting Theory

- Core Premise: Coined by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw (1972), this theory states that media may not tell people *what to think*, but they are remarkably successful in telling people *what to think about*. The priorities given to issues by news media become public priorities over time.
- Relevance to Research: Provides the theoretical framework for quantitative content analysis paired with public opinion surveys. It enables empirical researchers to systematically map press coverage against public concern, allowing for longitudinal designs that track issue priority shifts over time. Furthermore, it offers essential tools for media framing analysis, helping researchers evaluate how news outlet emphasis influences public policy agendas, election coverage, and online newsfeed algorithms.

D. Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT)

- Core Premise: Pioneered by Elihu Katz and colleagues, UGT flipped traditional research by asking: "*What do people do with media?*" instead of "*What does media do to people?*" It views audiences as active consumers who intentionally select specific media to satisfy personal, psychological, or social needs.
- Relevance to Research: Forms the basis for audience research, readership studies, and media choice analysis. By framing the audience as active agents, it allows researchers to construct survey scales and

qualitative interviews that measure user motivations, psychological rewards, and personal agency. This makes it uniquely adaptable for studying emerging interactive technologies, helping scholars investigate why users engage in video gaming, binge-watching, or daily social media platform consumption.

E. Cultivation Theory

- Core Premise: Developed by George Gerbner, Cultivation Theory posits that long-term, persistent exposure to media (originally television) cultivates common beliefs, worldviews, and dominant cultural images that do not necessarily reflect reality. High exposure can lead to phenomena like the "*Mean World Syndrome*".
- Relevance to Research: Guides longitudinal studies and survey research examining long-term attitudinal, emotional, and cognitive impacts of media consumption. It offers researchers a structured methodology to compare heavy and light media consumers across demographic variables, isolating cumulative social effects from immediate message reactions. Consequently, it is profoundly utilized in media psychology and clinical studies measuring long-term perceptions of crime, body image disturbances, and systemic cultural stereotypes.

Ethical Issues in Communication Research

Ethics in communication research involves adhering to moral principles, scientific standards, and legal guidelines to protect participants, maintain data integrity, and ensure the public trust. Because communication research frequently involves direct interaction with human subjects—or analyzing their personal, social, and digital behaviours—researchers must navigate several critical ethical issues throughout every stage of the research process.

1. Ethical Treatment of Human Participants

When conducting surveys, experiments, interviews, or focus groups, protecting the rights and well-being of participants is paramount.

- Informed Consent: Participants must be fully informed about the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits before agreeing to participate. Consent must be voluntary, and subjects should be explicitly informed that they can withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.
- Protection from Harm: Researchers must ensure that participation does not cause physical, psychological, social, or legal harm. In media psychology studies (e.g., exposing subjects to violent media or triggering

content), safeguards must be in place, including post-experiment debriefings.

- *Avoiding Deception:* Deception should be avoided whenever possible. If temporary deception is necessary to prevent response bias (such as in certain experimental designs), researchers must conduct a thorough debriefing immediately afterward to explain the true nature of the study and address any distress.
- *Vulnerable Populations:* Special ethical care and legal permissions (such as parental consent) are required when researching children, economically marginalized communities, elderly individuals, or institutionalized populations.

2. Privacy, Anonymity, and Confidentiality

Respecting a participant's right to privacy is a fundamental ethical standard in social science and media research.

- *Anonymity:* A participant is anonymous when even the researcher cannot link a given response to a specific individual (e.g., mail-in or online surveys with no IP/identity tracking).
- *Confidentiality:* When a researcher can identify a participant's responses (e.g., in face-to-face interviews or longitudinal panel studies), the researcher is ethically bound to keep that identity secret and secure, ensuring personal data is never publicly disclosed or leaked.
- *Observational and Fieldwork Privacy:* In ethnographic field studies or naturalistic observations, researchers must balance the need to observe behaviour in natural settings with respect for individuals' reasonable expectations of privacy.

3. Objectivity, Data Integrity, and Reporting Standards

Ethics extends beyond participant interaction to how data is collected, processed, and reported.

- *Accuracy and Honesty:* Researchers must record and report facts truthfully without exaggerating, falsifying, or selectively manipulating data to prove a personal hunch or desired outcome.
- *Plagiarism and Proper Citation:* Giving credit to original authors and acknowledging all primary/secondary sources through proper citation formats (APA, MLA, etc.) is mandatory. Presenting another scholar's work, concepts, or verbatim phrasing as one's own is a severe ethical violation.

- Reporting Limitations: Honest reporting requires researchers to explicitly state the boundaries, methodological flaws, and limitations of their study so that readers do not draw false generalizations.
- Avoiding Selective Reporting: Researchers must not hide or discard findings simply because they contradict their original hypotheses or personal beliefs.

4. Digital, Social Media, and Emerging Tech Ethics

The rise of online communication, social media, and digital research tools has introduced modern ethical challenges.

- Mining Online Data: Collecting user posts, forum comments, or public profile data raises questions regarding public vs. private spaces. Even if data is publicly available online, users may not have consented to having their content harvested for academic research.
- Algorithmic and Digital Deception: Using automated bots, fake profiles, or disguised identities to collect field data online can violate terms of service and breach informed consent standards.
- Long-Term Data Storage: Digital data must be stored securely (often encrypted) for a reasonable period (typically 5–10 years) to allow for academic verification while protecting participant identity from cybersecurity breaches.

Core Ethical Guidelines

Ethical Domain	Primary Requirement	Key Action / Mechanism
Participant Autonomy	Voluntary involvement without coercion.	Signed Informed Consent forms, rights of withdrawal.
Identity Protection	Safeguarding respondent identities.	Anonymizing names, secure data encryption, confidential reporting.
Scientific Integrity	Unbiased data collection and reporting.	Avoiding falsification, reporting study limitations, non-selective data analysis.

Academic Attribution	Respecting intellectual property.	Rigorous referencing, avoiding plagiarism, clear citations.
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