

Trends in Mass Communication Research in Nigeria: A Guerrilla Warfare Dissertation

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Abstract - Investigated are the research trends in mass communication programs in Nigerian universities. The focus is on the methodological orientation of the lecturers who teach mass communication research method courses. Course outlines were sourced from five typical but purposively selected universities where mass communication is taught. The contents of the course outlines and the comments made by the lecturers who designed them were subjected to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The result shows that the methodological orientation of lecturers who teach research method courses in mass communication programs gravitate almost exclusively towards the quantitative research method. Conclusion is that either bad faith or ignorance or a combination of the two is responsible for preventing Nigerian universities from joining the community of global universities where methodological pluralism in social research has been the norm.

Keywords: *Methodological trends, quantitative, qualitative, mass communication research,*

I. INTRODUCTION

There is a growing consensus among social scientists that the nature of a phenomenon under investigation determines the method for studying the phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013; Jankowski & Wester, 1991; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Flyvebjerg writes that “good social science is problem driven and not methodology driven in the sense that it employs those methods that for a given problematic best help answer the research question at hand” (2006). Despite these views, there are research traditions that privilege only the quantitative research method. This flaw is traceable to the pioneers of mass communication research in the United States. The American pioneers were pre-occupied with studies that focused on the effect of mass communication on the audience (O’Shaughnessy & Stadler, 2005). As a result, early tradition in American mass communication research descended into the anomaly of “defining research problem in a manner that yielded desired result when quantitative survey studies were conducted” (Gitlin, 1978). The privileging of only the quantitative method by pioneer communication scholars in the United States links the American communication research tradition with the flaw that Jensen (1991)

decried when he wrote that “too often in American communication studies, it appears that methodological choices are made long before the issues and ends of enquiry have been posed, so that the methodologies become solution in search of problems”.

The notion that the “media are just one component of an indefinite complex chain of causal factors” (O’Shaughnessy & Stadler, 2005) later emerged to render unnecessary, the quest to pinpoint the direct effect of the media on the audience. But before communication researchers recognized the futility of the direct effect effort, the quantitative tradition which construes research in terms of “dependent and independent variables and the measurement of hypothesized relationship between them” had taken adventitious roots (Smith, 1996). These roots now feed the prescriptive research movements like “Science Based Research (SBR), National Research Council (NRC)” and the “American Educational Research Association or AERA” (Denzin, 2013).

The prescriptive research movements are encouraged by beliefs like “there is a stable, unchanging reality that can be studied, captured, understood with empirical methods of objective social science” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Further to these beliefs, the

prescriptive research movements seek “cumulative knowledge that could be replicated and generalized across studies” (St. Pierre, 2013). For the prescriptive movements, the essence of knowledge lies where science is construed as “systematic procedures and protocols, mechanistic in technique, statistically manipulated and causal in structure” (St. Pierre, 2013).

The Stance of Qualitative Research Practitioners

To qualitative research practitioners, the belief that there is no “uniform way of knowing” (Denzin, 2013; Watson, 2003; Hesmondhalgh, 2006) provides the ground to refute positivists’ “scientific gold-standards” like claims that “multiple observers can agree on what they see” (St. Pierre, 2013). Leading the refutation is the view that “in nature everything is entangled and always overlapping, dynamic and contested” (St. Pierre, 2013). Rather than uphold the contested research canons, qualitative researchers encourage a mentality of “guerilla warfare against the status quo in research” (Finley, 2013; Ellingson, 2013). The mentality of guerilla warfare seeks to re-articulate such research concepts like “rigor” and “deconstruct” to make them mean “thinking the unthought in a way that will do away with such research concepts like data, data collection, and data analysis” (St. Pierre, 2013). In major parts of the academic world, the qualitative research tradition now commands attention (Shalva, 2005; Cousik, 2014). The American Educational Research Association now recognizes as empirical “forms and methods of humanities-oriented research in areas of film, drama and dance” (Denzin, 2013). Denzin further writes that AERA acknowledges such works as “inextricably empirical” because “humanities-based research like its empirical counterpart uses evidence that justifies its conclusions”.

What Communication Research Method Should be

There are conceptualizations of communication that implicitly suggest how communication research ought to be conducted. In their effort to sidestep the challenges that dog the creation of an acceptable definition, scholars try to explain communication from two schools of thought – “the meaning transmission school” and the “meaning production and exchange school” (Beck, Bennett & Wall, 2004; Anderson & Ross, 2002). The meaning transmission school, known also as the “Mercury” or “conduit metaphor” model, is rooted in the “Western culture” of communication (Anderson and Ross, 2002). In the Western culture of communication, it is believed that when person X communicates with

person Y, what happens is that X transmits meaning, information, facts and ideas to the mind of person Y (Redding 1968 as cited in Anderson & Ross, 2002). In this model, if Y fails to be influenced in the manner intended by X, talk of “communication failure” crops up (Beck, Bennett, & Wall, 2004).

Contrarily, the meaning production and exchange school explains communication as a study of how “people interact with messages/texts in order to produce meaning” (Beck, Bennett & Wall, 2004). The meaning production school does not consider misunderstanding an evidence of communication failure. Rather, it emphasizes a robust conceptualization which does not prize encoder’s intention to form an overt message above decoder’s intention to gain a new and different meaning by interpreting the encoder’s message/text (Anderson & Ross, 2002). From this standpoint therefore, communication is akin to “rational discourse” (Gouldner, 1976). As rational discourse, communication demands that a speaker or a writer’s statement be challenged so that communication becomes a systematic argument that makes a special appeal to a speaker/writer to demonstrate the validity of a claim made. In this view, according to Gouldner, communication entails a kind of rotating division of labor where the speaker/writer of the moment has a vested interest in their assumptions while the listener/decoder challenges in a manner showing that the listener/decoder has a vested interest to challenge the assumptions made by the speaker/encoder and so on. This view agrees with the idea that communication is an interactional encounter where the most important intention is not “what an encoder intends to accomplish with a particular message or what attributions a decoder makes but how the interactants ultimately negotiate the two perspectives” (Stamp & Knapp, 1990 as cited by Anderson & Ross 2002).

Stamp & Knapp’s insight highlights the subtleties that underpin communication and what its research method should be. Among the subtleties is the notion that the meaning of “representation/communication” is never given but is always “constructed, slippery and contestable” (Branston & Stafford, 2007). More instructive is the fact that “what is said in a communication/text rests upon unsaid assumptions” in a manner that often necessitates the need to deploy qualitative textual analysis in order to “identify what is assumed” (Fairclough, 2006). Fairclough’s observation might have prompted Toynbee (2006) to advocate for qualitative textual analysis-based social research. According to Toynbee, the world is imperfect and the

texts generated in it carry the imperfections in a way that requires “textually based social research paradigm to fix the imperfections”. In a similar vein, Gripsrud (2002) writes that “...speakers, writers and newsmakers are hardly aware of the implications of their words, actions/inactions”. McQuail (2010) takes the view that “concealed latent meanings of texts/communication are the most significant and cannot be read from numerical data”. McQuail’s view finds resonance where Jensen (1991) stated that “many social realities, objects and events are opaque, therefore compelling the type of inquiry that quantitative research cannot handle”.

Mass Communication Research in Nigeria

In Nigeria, the formal study of (mass) communication at the university level started after the second half of the last century. By then, the reverberations from the first wave of debates over the best method – quantitative or qualitative – of conducting social research had waned (Henwood, 1996). Unfortunately, communication research commenced in Nigeria after the quantitative research method has gained wide recognition. The first crop of Nigerian communication researchers were mentored by the American communication scholars/researchers. In the early 1960s when the pioneers of Nigerian communication research were being mentored in the United States, majority of American communication researchers were nothing more than “corporate intellectuals” or “company men” (Gouldner, 1976). Corporate intellectuals’ commitment to research is not much to the advancement of knowledge and social progress as it is to outcomes that are intended to satisfy the corporate interest of sponsors of social research (Gitlin, 1978). Corporate sponsors of social research are often satisfied when a research endeavor pinpoints causal variables. The research method that pinpoints causal variable is the quantitative research method.

II. THE PROBLEM

Like everywhere else, communication problems in Nigeria manifest in ways requiring that either the quantitative or the qualitative or a combination of the two methods be used when researching a problem. When a communication researcher identifies a problem, a thorough grasp of the basics of the two methods helps the researcher decide which of the two methods would be appropriate to investigate the problem. Communication students acquire research skills when research method courses are taught in communication

programs/departments. In the Nigerian university system, lecturers design and make available to students the course outlines/contents before the commencement of lectures. In a course outline, a lecturer describes what she or he intends to impart as the course is taught. This fact makes the mass communication research method course outline a resource for ascertaining the methodological orientation of research method lecturers. To investigate the orientation, the following questions are asked:

- (a) What comments capture lecturers’ methodological orientation in social research?
- (b) What trends can be identified in Nigeria’s mass communication research method course outlines?
- (c) What trends can be identified in mass communication dissertations in Nigeria?

III. METHODS

Because I uphold the view that “research could be adjudged valid not based on how much objective truth it reveals but by how much it contributes to understanding the world in historical moments and in a manner that is subjective and relative,” I chose the qualitative research method in this paper (Ang, 2001; Peredaryenko & Krauss, 2013). The qualitative researcher, as noted in Denzin & Lincoln (2013), is like a quilt maker who deploys whatever strategies, methods or empirical material at hand and who is ever ready to invent whatever tools the research requires so long as the researcher bears in mind that the “choice of research practice depends upon the questions that are asked, and the questions depend on their context”.

Procedure for Gathering Empirical Material

I purposively sampled five Nigerian universities that have a strong antecedence in mass communication research. The choice is based on my conviction that the “most relevant empirical materials about the phenomenon” investigated would not only be found in the universities but that the data would be relevant to my “theoretical position” as well as critical to the “account and explanation” developed in this paper (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Silverman & Marvasti, 2008). Three of the universities are federally-funded, one is owned by a state government while the other is a private university. One of the federal universities is located in the Northern part of Nigeria; the other is in Southern Nigeria while the third is the Open University of Nigeria. The private university is in the Western part

of Nigeria; the state-owned university is in the South-Eastern part of Nigeria.

In view of the fact that anything like a “one-world quotation or lengthy story-like description counts as data in qualitative research,” (Keyton, 2001.; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002), I tapped mass communication research method course outlines as data. Given that qualitative data gathered during “chance encounters” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) free such data from “subject reactivity” and “dissimulation” (Lang & Lang, 1991; McQuail, 2010), I sought for and used comments that portray the methodological orientation of some of the lecturers who teach method courses.

Perceptions that Guided Data Analysis

Data analysis is performed with the awareness that research is “politically revolutionary and never neutral” (Ellingson, 2013) – a fact that prompts a call on researchers to choose between “research that is engaged or complicit” Conquergood, (1995) According to Conquergood, a researcher is engaged when she/he refuses to remain uninvolved but chooses to resist existing power relations in research practices. Aware that researchers who resist the status quo are labeled “rebel, radical or rogue” Wodak (2006), Fiske asks such researchers to find solace in the fact that resistance itself is power (2006). In the light of the foregoing, the data analysis is tailored with “researcher construction” and “subjective valuing” (Keyton, 2001) by attributing some “class of phenomenon to segments of the data” (Fielding & Lee, 1998). I made such attribution by taking a leap of interpretation. Taking a leap of interpretation enabled me to provide information regarding what I considered hidden meaning in the data (Ruiz Ruiz cited in Merlino, 2014). To uphold the ethical imperative of “anonymity” (Prosser, 2013) I decided not to identify some of the universities I studied. The same imperative prevented me from mentioning the names of the participants who volunteered comments.

Data Display, Interpretation and Analysis

Realizing that there is no ready-made approach to qualitative data presentation and analysis, I adopted the standard practice of allowing the “task in hand and the nature of the data to determine” my approach to data analysis (Creswell, 2007). Since the comments made by research participants are laden with meanings that would be lost if subjected to quantification, I used words in place of numbers for the analysis (Okeke and Ume, 2004).

Eliciting comments from research participants was a challenge. This challenge arose from the fact that lecturers often consider disrespectful asking them to comment on how they teach a course. Conscious of this challenge, I looked out for a “chance meeting” where comments that could shed light on lecturers’ methodological orientation could come naturally (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). An opportunity came during a board meeting in one of the studied universities. During the board meeting, there were deliberations concerning a house-style for writing Master’s Degree dissertation and PhD thesis for Management, Social Sciences and Mass Communication programs. During the deliberations, only quantitative sequences were favored. For instance, the board resolved that to be accepted, every dissertation and thesis must state and test hypothesis. I called the attention of the board to a possibility that some postgraduate students of mass communication may be interested in studies that might not require the quantitative approach. Upon this observation, a chorus of voices echoed in opposition. A particular strident voice addressed me thus:

...look Fred; I’ll ... invite you to my library ...you’ll see arrays of qualitative research books... all recognize the qualitative approach as a mere exploratory adjunct of the scientific method. Noneed dwelling on this ...it’s better you realize early ... no postgraduate student gets a degree here with a dissertation that’s not scientific.

To ascertain whether the comment was a mere sentiment that does not reflect how research method courses are designed and taught in Nigerian universities, I decided to focus my data gathering effort on mass communication research method course outlines. The mass communication course outline for Open University of Nigeria is presented thus:

Mass Communication Course Outline from Open University of Nigerian

Module 1: Introduction

Unit 1: The Meaning of research and the Scientific Method

Unit 2: Characteristics of Scientific Research

Unit 3: Development of Media Research

Unit 4: The Methods of Knowing

Unit 5: Classification of Research

Module 2: The Elements of Research

Unit 1: Concepts and Constructs

Unit 2: Research Questions and Hypotheses

Unit 3: Instrumentation

Unit 4: Variables

Unit 5: Measurement

Module 3: Major Research Methods Used in Communication Studies

Unit 1: Overview of Qualitative Research Methods

Unit 2: Survey Research

Unit 3: Content Analysis

Unit 4: Longitudinal Research

Unit 5: Experimental Research

Module 4: Sampling

Unit 1: Meaning, Population, and Sample

Unit 2: Types of Sampling: Probability Sampling Methods

Unit 3: Types of Sampling: Non-Probability Sampling Methods

Unit 4: Sample Size

Unit 5: Sampling Error

Module 5: The Research Procedure

Unit 1: The Research Proposal

Unit 2: Data Analysis in Communication Research

Unit 3: Documentation in Communication Research

Unit 4: Steps in the Development of a Research Project

A Mass Communication research Method Course Outline from a Nigerian Private University

MODULE 1: THE RESEARCH PROCESS

1: (i) What is research?

(ii) The development of mass media research

(iii) The role of mass media research

(iv) The methods of knowing

(v) Characteristics of the Scientific Method

(vi) Research Procedures

(vii) Research Procedures (Contd.)

(viii) Elements of Research

MODULE 2: STUDY POPULATION AND SAMPLING TECHNIQUES

(i) Sampling Methods

(ii) Mid-Semester Test

MODULE 3: RESEARCH APPROACHES

(i) Research Design-Survey

(ii) Content Analysis

(iii) Qualitative Research

(iv) Longitudinal/Experimental Research

A Mass Communication Course Outline from a Federal University in Northern Nigeria

Communication Research Topics

a. What is Communication Research?

b. Importance of Communication Research

c. Statement of the Problem

d. Review of Related Literature

e. Meaning of hypotheses

f. How to state hypotheses

g. Types of Research design

h. Research Population

i. Sample size determination

j. Sampling techniques

k. What is data?

l. Data presentation formats – tables, graphs, charts, etc

m. Quantitative data analysis

n. Discussion of findings

o. Interpretation of results and inferences

p. Answering Research Questions

q. Testing Hypotheses

r. Using descriptive statistics

s. Using inferential statistics

t. Parametric tests significance

u. Non-parametric Tests of Significance

v. Qualitative Data Analysis

Course Outline for Advance Mass Communication Research Method from a Federal University in South-South Nigeria

i. An overview of research as an essential academic exercise

ii. Qualities of a good research

iii. Kinds of Research: Seminal/explanatory, replicative, cause-effect, descriptive, historical, comparative

iv. Types of research design: Survey, case study, content analysis, participant observation, experiment, library research

v. The execution of project: research questions, hypotheses (Null & Alternative forms, validity and reliability of instrument, method of data analysis, qualitative and quantitative.

Undergraduate Mass Communication Research Method Course Outline from South-East Nigeria

MODULES:

i. Types of Research, survey, historical research, correlation research, case study, experimental research

ii. Research Design, survey research, experiment, observational studies

- iii. Variables and statement of research hypotheses
- iv. Measurement and scaling
- v. Hypotheses testing

IV. ANALYTIC INTERPRETATION

The course outlines presented above show that the designers did not hide their disdain and/or ignorance for the qualitative research method. In the Open University course outline for instance, concepts like hypothesis, variables and measurement in module 2, units 2, 4 and 5 are concepts that are exclusively associated with the quantitative research method. So are concepts like probability, non-probability and sampling error in module 4, units 2, 3 and 5. In the private university outline, all outlined concepts are quantitative method concepts except in module 3 where qualitative research is hinted at. The rest of the outlines from the other universities focus exclusively on quantitative research concepts – with the outline from a federal university from the Northern part of Nigeria as the most disdainful/ignorant of the potentials of qualitative research method. If the imbalance in the course outlines does not result from the ignorance of the fact that there are social problems that cannot be investigated in terms of “quantity, amount, intensity or frequency” (Okeke & Ume, 2004, p. 326), then a wrong understanding of what science actually means in social research might be the culprit. To understand which of the factors contributed more to the imbalance, I asked the lecturer who designed the Open University course outline to explain what he means in module 1, units 1 & 2 where he outlined the following:

Unit 1: The meaning of Research and the Scientific Method

Unit 2: Characteristics of Scientific Research

His explanation came in as follows:

I see research as simply a thorough, systematic organized and purpose-driven search for knowledge and facts to support a position or argue a phenomenon. The scientific method is a process of deliberate and controlled observation with the distinctive criterion of objectivity. It emphasizes quantification, logical exposition, controlled empirical testing, replicability of findings and inter-subjectivity...

Characteristics of research include:

- 1. Research is systematic and procedural
- 2. Research is logical
- 3. Research is reductive

- 4. A research activity is purposeful and well-planned
- 5. Research is empirical
- 6. Research is replicable and generalizable

V. DISCUSSION

In the above explanation, every word and sentence but more so the underlined phrases betray the sympathy the explainer, wittingly or otherwise, has for “nomothetic or etic science-based” way of knowing (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). In the nomothetic way of knowing, researchers embrace the deductive logic which seeks to accumulate causal laws by “moving from a pattern that might be logically theoretical, to observations that test whether the expected pattern actually occurs” (Babbie, 2005). The nomothetic or deductive approach seeks knowledge only through “canonize version of science” by pursuing “progressive linear accretion of findings” (Woolgar, 1996).

The quest for canonized version of science, derided as “men-in-white coats-posturing” (Woolgar, 1996) has always been decried in the qualitative research community. Aspects of the posturing that draws most criticism are generalizability and/or repeatability of research findings. Writing from the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Gill (1996) reminds upholders of the canonized view of science that the version of the world research participants and respondents give in social research are versions of the world/reality that are inscribed with ideology. Gill argues that since ideology practices are “situated in nature” (p. 149), the situatedness of such practices means that such practices could not repeat in two or more places in exact way. As argued by Gill, this fact renders misplaced nomothetic researchers’ frantic pursuit of repeatability and generalizability. Sloman (1976) contributes to the denunciation of the pursuit of what always occurs by advising social science researchers to learn from the field of History and Literature where research thrives on that which occurs once. Sloman emphasizes the importance of what occurs once by stating “if a phenomenon occurs only once, then it is possible and its possibility needs explaining”.

The nonchalance of Nigerian social science researchers to these insights prompts Okeke & Ume (2004) to wonder whether Nigerian universities can afford to continue with the production of researchers who are only knowledgeable in one research paradigm. Okeke & Ume’s worry sprang me into verifying whether the privileging of only the quantitative research method in Nigerian universities results in situations where students use methods that are incongruous with

the nature of a phenomenon to study the phenomenon. A viva voce session in the state university studied for this paper provided the opportunity for verification. During the viva voce session, many of the dissertations examined have in their methodology chapters, sentences like these ones that I selected from a particular dissertation titled:

“A Comparative Analysis of Three Local Tabloids and their Coverage of the 2011 Gubernatorial Elections in Rivers State”

The sentences of interest are:

- (i) Research design is a plan structured to answer research questions and to control variance (p. 18)
- (ii) Research design also refers to variables and research hypotheses and the control of unwanted variables (p. 18)
- (iii) Method used: the survey technique was used (p. 24)
- (iv) Population of study: The population of the study was based on three major local tabloids; namely *The Tide*, *National Network* and *The Beacon* (p. 24)
- (v) Sample Size: Two hundred copies of questionnaire were distributed to people of diverse backgrounds (p. 25)

The author’s attempt at explaining what s/he thinks is the definition of research design might not be faulted. What everybody, more so, qualitative researchers will fault is the attempt by the author to make it look as if the concept of research design is exclusively a quantitative research method concept. A more neutral definition like “research design is a plan which aims at presenting a small picture of how a researcher intends to conduct his/her research” (Creswell, 2007, p. 5; Yin, 2003, p. 20) would have captured the equal relevance of the concept in both the quantitative and the qualitative paradigms of social research.

Another absurdity in the dissertation under review is that a dissertation titled ‘A Comparative Analysis of Three Local Tabloids and their Coverage of the 2011 Gubernatorial Election in Rivers State’ was carried out using a survey method with a sample size of 200 respondents drawn from persons of diverse backgrounds. Furthermore, the incongruence between the topic, the population of the study and the sample size highlights the chaos that results when the drive to quantify every dissertation becomes an obsession. A fundamental anomaly is that a topic that purported to conduct a comparative analysis of three tabloids went

ahead with a sample of 200 respondents of diverse backgrounds drawn outside the newspapers it claimed to have studied. When I sought explanation from the author as to why the survey design must be used, the response was:

...I don’t want to fail ...what I did is what I was taught ... if I go against it ...I’ll suffer extra year...

This response affirms the fact that the emphasis on only the quantitative research method “deskills students” (Okeke & Ume, 2004, p.331), and also afflicts them with “epistemic violence” (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013, p. 314) – epistemic violence being a situation where students are intimidated into using a method that is inconsistent with the topic to run a research.

VI. CONCLUSION

Up to this point, data analysis has emphasized that nomothetic monomania persists as a problem in Nigeria’s social science research tradition. In a study that investigated how this problem afflicts research practices in faculties of education in Nigerian universities, the finding was that the pride to flaunt their statistical skill tricks researchers into quantifying and measuring human behavior in untenable circumstances (Okeke & Ume, 2004). Motivated by a need to investigate the extent of this problem in communication studies departments of Nigeria’s universities, I raised the following questions:

- a) What comments capture lecturers’ methodological orientation in social research?
- b) What trends can be identified in Nigeria’s mass communication research method course outlines?
- c) What trends can be identified in mass communication dissertations in Nigeria?

The data that have been presented and discussed brim with evidence showing that methodological orientation of lecturers does not only favor a quantitative mono-method but that such orientation compels students into making wrong methodological choices as they write their dissertations. The epistemological danger in this trend heightens when it is recalled that Amadi (2011) links the mono-method tradition in Nigeria’s mass communication scholarship to the much-decried reactionary tradition in Nigerian journalism. As is the case in Amadi (2011), I propose that the bias against and/or ignorance over the qualitative research method in Nigerian should stop. Sociology is more aligned to the quantitative research

method than mass communication. But if up to 2/3 of sociology dissertations in the United Kingdom uses the qualitative research method, (Economic and Social, Research Council, 2010), it will be nothing more than “bad faith” (Jean-Paul Sartre as cited in Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013) that still keeps mass communication lecturers from embracing methodological pluralism in Nigeria’s mass communication research.

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