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Emerging Trends in Communication Research in the New Normal

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Abstract

The paper seeks to establish the emerging trends in methods and theories in communication research in the new normal and to determine factors leading to change in communication research methods in the new normal. The qualitative research method was applied. The researchers searched for relevant materials on Google Scholar, with 300 valuable results produced. However, 15 papers, including journal articles, web pieces, and others, were ultimately chosen for the study. The report discusses the transition theories to the effects of interaction theories and the transition in methodology and investigation approach from positivism to naturalism, as well as the use of research in micro and cultural approaches as the emerging trends. It also sees ICT studies, such as internet media, social media, and digital media, that produce pictures more immediately, impulsively, concurrently, and effectively as other trends in communication research. The study also identifies e-mail interviews, instant messaging interviews, online focus groups and forums, Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP), and Social Media as the emerging tools of the Media Research Approach. The paper also shows that the changing media environment, differences in national and international orientation, the quality of the research, affirming the institutional status of the discipline, and attempts to improve relationships between academia and industry are the factors that lead to the change in communication research**.** The paper concludes that the pace of new technologies in the new normal may find many communication researchers lagging and recommends that communication researchers need to adequately respond and adjust themselves to the new innovative approaches to communication research, especially in data collection.

Keywords: Emerging, Trends, Communication, Research, Methodology, New normal.

Introduction

Research is a general term for an activity involving finding out in a systematic way things one did not know. The literary interpretation of research involves discovering things that no one else knew. It is about advancing the frontiers of knowledge (Walliman, 2011). Research is as necessary and helpful to the study of mass media as it is to that of Natural Sciences. Any discipline which claims intellectual attention and has demonstrated its ability and potency will flourish and be practical and purposive only if research is conducted in it (Kaula, 1999). Research methods represent the tools of the trade and provide researchers with ways to collect, sort, and analyze information to come to conclusions (Walliman, 2011). Supposing researchers use suitable methods for their particular type of research, they ought to be able to persuade others that their findings have some reliability, so the new information they have produced is well-grounded (Walliman, 2011). Without a research method, the depth of communication research will not be increased by the discovery of new facts or by a new interpretation of the existing known facts in the light of fresh discovery, new approaches, new methodology, and experience (Kaula, 1999).

A new normal may be the situation that an economic system or society reaches after an emergency, which is different from the one before the crisis started. The COVID-19 pandemic, World War I, the September 11 attacks, the economic collapse of 2007–2008, the fallout of the 2008–2012 global economic downturn, and other events have all been discussed using this phrase. The new normal in the communication discipline has seen researchers embracing different methods. Primary methods deployed in communication research have always been the conventional quantitative and qualitative methods and recently mixed (combination of both quantitative and qualitative) methods. According to Olasinde and Ojebuyi (2017, p.18), "diverse perspectives on the study of the media have arisen which changed beliefs about how people respond to the media, but also, and more frequently and significantly, as a result of paradigm shifts within social science research more broadly".

He continued by saying that the shift in people's attitudes toward media-based information consumption has also necessitated new perspectives and paradigm shifts in communication and media studies, as well as the use of cutting-edge research methodologies. This paradigm shift is referred to as 'self-reflection' (Olasinde & Ojebuyi, 2017). Self-reflection is a process whereby communication scholars retrospectively evaluate and progressively project into the future in communication/media studies (Shelley, 2015, cited in Olasinde & Ojebuyi, 2017). This endeavor at critically assessing the new issues in communication studies is reasonable as it will enable academics to delve deeper and learn more in the area of communication/media scholarship.

The purpose of this study is to provide an overview by reviewing major research trends relating to communication research in the new normal. In other words, this paper seeks to draw a larger picture of communication research trends. This special issue, then, is to showcase current projects using digital media research methods, describe some of the processes and techniques available to researchers, and highlight the problems and difficulties that large-scale digital research presents.

Theoretical Framework

The Diffusion of Innovation theory is thought to apply to this research. Everett Rogers created the hypothesis in 1962. It was named after Gabriel Tarde's study, The Laws of Limitation, published in France in the 19th century. According to the notion of the diffusion of innovations, an innovation (i.e., a concept, new method, or modern technology) propagates or predictably travels in a community. Several people will instantly adopt a new idea after hearing about it. Other people will take much longer, and others will take longer. A new media technology or other innovation is said to explode into existence when it is quickly embraced by a large number of people (Bryant & Thompson, 2002). Even though technology (the "new normal") is continuously transforming the manner communication research is conducted, and some people are still hesitant to adopt or use them, the hypothesis stated above is consistent with the study's findings.

Methodology

The qualitative research approach was used to produce the necessary information for emerging trends in communication research in the new normal. The approach is a type of research that entails carefully examining documents for information about the subject topic, subfield, or other pertinent information (Ahmed, 2010). It necessitates a thorough and methodical examination and analysis of documentation, including textual text, visual data, and graphical data (Agbo, Lenshie & Boye, 2018). According to Apuke and Omar (2020), documentary research entails a procedure in which the researcher thoroughly searches for pertinent materials or data containing facts and proof.

As a result, the researchers started looking for pertinent materials on Google Scholar, a search engine that facilitates the discovery of scholarly literature on various topics or disciplines. The search was not limited by publication date or year by the researchers. The search produced 300 beneficial results that, when looked at broadly, may be regarded as related to the subject. Accordingly, to classify and then choose the final data set that was afterward used for this study owing to their relevance, the researchers carefully analyzed the substance of the articles based on their abstracts, research findings, and conclusions. Additionally, several items were omitted since they had no bearing on the subject matter. As a result, 15 papers—including journal articles, web pieces, and others—were ultimately chosen based on the exercise.

Emerging Trends in Media Research in the New Normal

In the recent decade, the new normal (changes in media structure and relations) have resulted in numerous types, substance, and forms of communication study or trend research. According to Levine's (2013) research, the direction of communication research changed between

1988–1991 and 2008–2011. He lists five subjects for inquiry that are prevalent in both periods. These include organizational, health, Internet/social media, and interpersonal-group communication.

It should be emphasized that between 1988 and 1991, studies on interpersonal and group communication accounted for 46% of all papers published. Media research came in second with 38% of the articles, followed by research organizations with 13% and health communication with 4%. Also disliked was the use of technology for communication (Levine, 2013). However, the study between 2008 and 2011 reveals that the study on communication technology and emerging media ranked as one of the most popular at 25%, followed by 21% for health communication. In contrast, studies on interpersonal-group communication declined, though they still occupied the highest position, with their shares falling to 29% and 25%, respectively. However, this section focuses on the various trends in communication research in the new normal (digital era).

1. Digital Media Research Approach

Digital methods can be described as a term that seeks to capture recent Internet-related research developments (Rogers, 2015, p.1). Digital media approaches are methodological approaches that incorporate Internet-based data and other social media and communication platforms, including Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, LinkedIn, Twitch, and others (Hutchinson, 2016). Hutchinson (2016) further explains that Digital media methods extend to database research and data generated by sensors, drones, and autonomous automobiles. This research moment is built upon the 'computational turn' where 'computational approaches are increasingly reflected across several disciplines, including the arts, humanities and social sciences, which use technologies to shift the critical ground of their concepts and theories' (Berry, 2011). Digital technologies are progressively mediating the epistemologies and ontologies which support a research program in our field of study of media and communication (Berry, 2011, p. 1). This special issue then attempts to build on the earlier efforts of Burgess, Bruns, and Hjorth (2013) and the collective effort of the Digital Methods Initiative, particularly Marres and Gerlitz (2015), by methodologically bringing the field up to date and aligning the compass for the next iteration of research with new and emerging communication technologies.

Communication technologies continue to emerge in today's society, bringing innovative outcomes between humans and 'things.' From increased possibilities in social networking, social media platforms, and connected devices, especially the internet of things, increasingly new forms of data are generated from technological communication-associated activities. These new forms of data provide a unique opportunity for media and communication researchers to use new technologies to understand the human condition by developing new research questions, constructing new research methodologies, and exploring previously inaccessible research sites. The emerging problem is developing digital tools, ontologies, and methodologies that keep pace with connected devices and connect emerging research practices with a media and communication perspective. Further, the marketplace has seen new and emerging start-ups that operate in and around new media data. At the same time, policymakers are unsure how to govern and regulate this emerging activity area. By asking new questions about once-exhausted research sites and making sense of research data in new and exploratory ways, opportunities and challenges manifest for those working and researching in this field.

2. Use of Mobile Devices for Data Collection

The internet, computers, and social networks have all revolutionized how people interact with one another, changing their habits, routines, and social hierarchies. Wimmer and Dominic (2006) assert that social media and the internet have permeated many facets of local life, in particular:

i. Policy making;
ii. Internet use and opinion;
iii. Economic;
iv. Political, democratic, and development;
v. Societal and cultural;

vi. Instructional and teaching tools; and
vii. Internet site rating.

Mobile devices have become multifunctional tools integrating many functions that previously required several separate devices. These functions include digital cameras to capture visual media, audio recorders and players, and laptops for processing data and reading e-mails. These functions and others are now integrated into Social Mobile Devices (SMDs) such as Smartphones and Tablets (Redlich-Amirav & Higginbottom, 2014). The introduction of Social Mobile Devices has created a new dimension to communication research (Evans, Elford, & Wiggins, 2008). Participants can now talk, text, and send videos while commuting to work, making dinner in the kitchen, or shopping. Social Mobile Devices provide an easy way to capture thoughts that can be followed up later using personal or online methods to capture deeper insight. While the mobile device may be a solitary research tool for primary data collection (e.g., interview), it can also serve as a secondary tool due to the wide range of functionality of Smartphones and tablets (e.g., diary for further discussion or as part of a community or bulletin board, and maybe a home assignment prior to a focus group meeting) (Evans, Elford, & Wiggins, 2008). Researchers are beginning to consider the promise of their own Social Mobile Devices as research tools; due to their portability and affordability, Social Mobile Devices are appealing for the storage and development of research, mainly outdoor and on-the-move research (Redlich-Amirav & Higginbottom, 2014).

Van't Hooft (2007) suggests that mobile devices can be used to collect information on different learning research data, such as spatial and temporal data, patterns of use, learner data (such as context-created or accessed), and connectivity data (e.g., whom the learners share and connect with). Beddall-Hill, Jabbar, and Al Shehri (2011) described using a head-mounted internet camera with a voice recorder and GPS tracker to stay in touch with participants and their field notes. Later on, during the study, all of these devices were replaced by an iPhone, which proved to be a much more valuable tool. The iPhone's camera captured photos and video and was much easier to handle than the digital camera. Field notes were also captured by audio recording, which was quicker and easier than typing them later, given the nature and length of the observations (spanning the whole day). As quoted recently by Kuhagen (2013), "Information gathered at the spur of the moment provides the researcher with the emotions as experienced and not memorized. Take advantage of it" (para. 8).

Table 1. Software programs (Apps) for SMDs

Name Purpose		Notes
Safari or Google Chrome	Literature searches	
Mendeley or RefWorks	Manage references, quickly review portable document format (PDF) files	Create a reference list in different styles
PDFExpert or iAnnotatePDF	Read and annotate PDFs.	
Dropbox -"cloud storage."	Store and backup PDFs	A network of virtual servers is generally hosted by third parties, allowing access to and from multiple devices at any given time.
Evernote	Create memoing, journaling, notetaking, and capturing textual, aural, visual, and temporal data	
Dragon	Create memoing and journaling	Voice recorder

Source: Redlich-Amirav and Higginbottom (2014)

Mobile Devices allow for the capture of multiple data types, provide access to wider networks, and can make a backup of data more accessible and faster. Mobile devices help preserve research data in an efficient and timely manner. Many special designated software programs (Apps) have been developed to facilitate the use of Mobile Devices. Among the popular apps, Safari or Google Chrome, for example, can assist researchers in literature searches. Mendeley can be used to manage references and quickly review portable document format (pdf) files. Other software programs are outlined in the Table above.

Beddall-Hill, Jabbar, and Al Shehri (2011) describe how the Apps in Digital Research methods can be used to get real-life experiences of academics working in higher education and how these experiences may affect pedagogy for ethnic minorities. The authors used an iPhone 3GS to record the interviews and an iPad for memoing and collecting non-standard data such as body language and eye contact. Both technologies were underpinned by Apps like Dropbox for cloud storage and Evernote for digital writing and automatic synchronization on multiple devices. The use of Evernote in this study facilitated flexible storage of multiple data types, which could then be tagged and stored for convenient searching later. Cloud storage eliminated the problem of relying on the physical device's storage capacity. Using Evernote and Dropbox alongside the devices significantly reduced backup and confidentiality issues.

3. Paradigm Shift

According to Yin (2011), the social research methodology has several scientific truths depending on the approach and methodology. A disagreement about how to define scientific truth arose in several studies, which sparked a debate on the various research methodologies. Both quantitative and qualitative research are the methodologies used.

The paradigm argument over the many approaches to research techniques has never been resolved. It depends on the presumptions created by both strategies during the scientific thinking process. Gudykunst and Kim, for instance, provide illustrations of the stark contrasts between the etic and emic cultural orientations. The first refers to qualitative research and is known as subjectivist-naturalistic, whereas the second refers to quantitative research and is known as objectivist-positivistic.

The quantitative method emphasizes objective measurements and statistical data analysis (Babbie, 2010). Quantitative studies allow researchers to write their observations in numerical terms. Quantitative research is explanatory and mainly involves experiments. Such studies attempt to use precise statistical models to comprehensively understand communication behavior and phenomena (Babbie, 2010). The best examples are surveys and opinion polls which often try to interpret the present behavior or predict future behavior in various communication situations. In quantitative studies, statistical methods and numerical data are used as a means to an end. Quantitative methods help provide a precise explanation of processes and help measure communication behavior (Babbie, 2010).

On the other hand, qualitative methods do not emphasize numerical data. Instead, these methods depend on the description and interpretation of meanings of communication messages by way of subjective treatment (Patton & Cochran, 2002). Instead of going for a large number of examples, qualitative research concentrates on individual examples. Qualitative research does not try to find patterns. It makes intensive inquiries about single events, individuals, and social or communication units (Patton & Cochran, 2002).

Since qualitative research explains the singular event of social communication behaviour, it has become more prevalent in communication research due to the paradigm change (digital shift). Qualitative research has gained ground in communication (Bajari & Gemiharto, 2010). Such trends include:

i. Shift theories to the effect of interactive theories (ontology communications);
ii. Approach and research strategy, from positivism to naturalism (epistemology);
iii. The object of research, using research in micro

and cultural approaches (groups of the unique subculture);

iv. Research of information and communication technology (ICT), such as online media, social networking, and virtual media, form images more directly, spontaneously, simultaneously, and personally.

The debate over methodologies ultimately leads to a consideration that is applied to these methods. Both methodologies are viewed as complimentary by methodological-pragmatic experts. They can be combined for the best outcomes in practice.

Yin (2011) concurs that the mixed technique provides a practical alternative. Quantitative and qualitative methods have parallels and differences that can be tapped into using various mixed method techniques. The mixed method is a practical solution that makes it possible to carry out more studies without worrying about viewpoint conflicts. As a result, progenitors of the modern method (mixed method) have done their best to describe, record, and categorize different sorts of research.

The following assumptions listed by Yin (2011) can be used to understand the desire to build a mixed method:

a. Much previous research in anthropological and sociological fields mixed some sort of fieldwork with the collection of statistical data from surveys or psychological tests given to participants.
b. Mixed methods research is a long-established practice in communication and media studies.

Emerging Tools of the Media Research Approach in the New Normal

Most internet research is still quantitative: online surveys, Web-based questionnaires, or Internet experiments (Berg, 2011). However, qualitative research on the Web is also expanding (Berg, 2011). There are many tools of digital research methods available for researchers on Internet research. These include online interviewing, focus groups, participant observation, and virtual ethnography. Some of these methods can be easily applied in Internet research; some of the principles of qualitative research can be transferred to the Web only with modification (Walliman, 2011).

1. E-mail Interview

E-mail interviews are asynchronous and are considered semi-private. E-mail interviews succeed most when the interviewer and participant are comfortable communicating via e-mail (Redlich-Amirav & Higginbottom, 2014). Researchers who need facial and body language expressions to be part of their interview data may find that E-mail interviews cannot address this need.

Cook (2012) recently described the advantages of e-mail interviewing as a method when face-to-face interviewing is difficult. The author suggests that e-mail interviews enable one to recruit people who would otherwise be excluded from research because of geographical distance, different time zones, or want to keep their anonymity for various reasons. The benefits of this method are particularly evident in the recruitment of people who are vulnerable and marginalized. Because of the asynchronous nature of this method, researchers need to know the speed at which they should reply and at which they can expect replies from respondents (Cook, 2012).

Holge Hazelton (2002) used e-mail for two years to understand how a chronic illness such as diabetes is expressed in the everyday lives of youth. The study was performed over a decade ago, long before social media evolved. The author developed very intimate relationships with the participants through this asynchronous technique. She describes that some of her participants would not have shared their experiences if it was not for the internet. According to her findings, the participants did not experience any personal or technical difficulties. However, she emphasized the importance of being sensitive and empathic to the issues raised, trying to answer each e-mail within 24 hours.

2. Instant Messaging Interview

Instant messaging (or instant messenger; in either case, IM) can be used for interviewing and, like e-mail, has some features that affect the research process (Callaghan, Barber, Cusik & Buchanan,

2010). For example, IM allows synchronous and semi-private interaction and can automatically record the interaction text. The ad hoc conversational nature of IM interviews lets them resemble oral interviews. Callaghan, Barber, Cusik & Buchanan (2010) argue that IM offers an exciting opportunity to explore what happens when research participants can express themselves in writing while at the same time engaging in real-time dialogue.

3. Online Focus Groups and Forums

Traditional focus groups are organized group discussions around a given topic, monitored, guided if necessary, and recorded by a researcher (Moderator). They are distinguished by their explicit use of group interaction to produce data. While most traditional, face-to-face research methods developed telephone equivalents before the development of computer-mediated communications, the "technologization" of the focus group evaded the inherently one-to-one nature of the telephone and, therefore, may seem an innately "terrestrial" method (Redlich-Amirav & Higginbottom, 2014). Robson and Robson's (1999) early attempts with online focus groups, studying the employment experiences of inflammatory bowel disease sufferers, exemplify the use of asynchronous (non-real-time) online focus groups, identifying vital practical issues such as online moderation and the analysis of digital data. In contrast, Williams's (2012) study of deviance within online communities provides examples of how synchronous (real-time) forms of online focus groups, using 3D graphical environments, further challenge researchers, highlighting the unique ethical considerations of online fieldwork. William (2012) recommends asynchronous online forums as being observable, relatively easy to use, accessible, and safe.

Im and Chee (2006) described the practical issues encountered in implementing an online forum as a qualitative component of a more extensive study on cancer pain experience. They reviewed the practical issues that emerge both technically and ethically. Interestingly, they discussed various aspects of rigor in qualitative research using the internet. For example, they pointed out that some participants were not consistent in their scheduled forum discussion because they frequently forgot their passwords and usernames. The participants ascribed this "forgetfulness" to their chemotherapy. This shed doubts on the credibility of the data. The asynchronous nature of the study over six months further interfered with achieving saturation, another component of study rigor. During forum interactions, people often use many symbols, signs, and abbreviations. The authors raised concerns that if there is no pre-determined agreement about language and jargon used in such forums, this may result in misunderstanding among participants and researchers, which is another threat to the study's rigor.

4. Voice Over Internet Protocol (VoIP) and Social Media

One of the most recent internet applications in research is using VoIP to conduct interviews. Modern technologies of VoIP further advance the internet as a medium to create the most feasible alternative to face-to-face interviews. Among these newer technologies are:

1. Skype: video conferencing and text messaging with time response in real time
2. Facebook: text chatting and posting of images or media
3. Twitter chat: text messaging

These newer technologies provide synchronous interaction between the researcher and their participants. Furthermore, they overcome the problems of losing the visual and interpersonal aspects of the interaction (Evans, Elford, & Wiggins, 2008). Using these technologies, the researcher can easily record both the visual and audio interactions of the interview through simple software downloaded onto their computer. This overcomes the often impractical use of battery-powered dictaphones, through which recordings were often difficult to hear during later transcriptions, and the researcher was constantly worried about battery life. In addition, the researcher and the participants can remain in a "safe

location" without imposing on each other's personal space (Redlich-Amirav & Higginbottom, 2014). For example, the interviewee can remain in a comfortable location of his/her home while being interviewed without the sense that the researcher is encroaching on his/her personal space, and the researcher avoids the feeling of imposing himself/herself physically on the participant's personal space. Thus, a neutral yet personal location is maintained for both parties throughout the process.

Through this additional visual element offered by Skype (and alternative Webchat Software), the interview can remain, to a certain extent, a "face-to-face" experience while preserving the flexibility and private space elements offered via telephone interviews. Hay-Gibson (2009) used VoIP to connect with businesses during her doctoral research and claims the following advantages:

1. Expense: calls made PC-to-PC were free.
2. Time: the time taken to set up the VoIP interview was considerably less than the travel time usually taken to reach the business location
3. Availability and flexibility in scheduling the interview (i.e., the flexibility of choosing to take the call at home or one's business)
4. Practicality: The Skype VoIP system was already available within the business setting, required no training on the part of the researcher or participant, and provided good quality audio for recording and later transcription
5. Acceptability: Participants conversed with VoIP technology, and the Skype system was a conventional and familiar program in frequent daily use within the business.

On the other hand, she also points out some disadvantages, such as when the participants are not familiar with holding a conversation over VoIP services, when the participants show an aversion to technology, and when participants are visually or hearing impaired. The process may be more stressful than a telephone interview for elderly or infirm participants unfamiliar with these technologies.

Conclusion

The pace of new technologies may find many communication researchers lagging. However, there is a strong suggestion that the communication researchers adequately respond and adjust themselves appropriately. The new technologies open the way for new innovative approaches to communication research, especially qualitative methods, for example, in data collection. It may be possible for future research participants to select the most appropriate data collection tool for themselves (e.g., SMDs, Skype, e-mail) without decreasing the quality of the research. Furthermore, using multiple and simultaneous methods for different participants addressing a similar research question is a new exciting possibility to be studied.

There are still some critical questions that will need to be addressed in future communication research. Because of the rapid growth in new technologies, it may be challenging for communication researchers to be fully aware of all the qualitative data tools available. In the case of a single device, challenges may be encountered in recognizing and developing expertise in the full range of functionality. All these emerging technologies introduce a whole new continent, culture, and language to the research community and call upon us to respect the many places we still do not know about.

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