Book Reviews

Communication research methods

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The past 20 years has witnessed a dramatic flourishing of communication studies on a global scale, which is partly reflected through the co-existence of abundant research methods originating from different theoretical or methodological traditions. However, a large repertoire of methods, while offering various and beneficial perspectives into communication practices, actually makes it more difficult for researchers to choose the appropriate ones, given that each method is often only valid in certain cultural and situational settings. As such, researchers should not only be informed about what communication methods are used and internationally recognized but also know how to wisely localize those methods. In view of this, the newly published Communication Research Methods came in time for Asian researchers, as it provides an overall picture of research methods in communication studies worldwide, as well as application of these methods in the Asian cultural context. In what follows, we shall first give a brief overview of this book and then discuss its major merits and limitations.

In Communication Research Methods, 14 chapters are categorized into four parts: Foundation, Design, Method, and Statistics. “Foundation,” the first part of this book, is mainly devoted to a group of basic concepts and general principles in communication studies, in which connotations, types, theories, research process, and research ethics of communication study are critically introduced and clarified. The authors hold that communication research generally consists of three circulatory stages, namely observation, interpretation, and proof, which can be further divided into such four procedures as conceptualization, operationalization, analysis and reconceptualization (pp. 36–45). It is evident, though not overtly indicated by the authors, that what methods are adopted in those stages and procedures makes much difference to the research results. Another noteworthy point of view in this part is the five general methodological trends of communication research, that is, integration of scientific and humanistic methods, wide acceptance of the innovative methods put forward by communication researchers, priority of naturalistic research over experimental research, emergence of longitudinal designs, and the development of multivariate analyses. Along with the five trends, three epistemological paradigms—discovery paradigm, interpretative paradigm, and critical paradigm—find their way to be dominant in communication studies (pp. 17–18). Besides, to inform readers where to find the most recent research in communication studies, this part
also introduces dozens of international journals of communication studies and several useful web links to the major communication associations.

The second part of “Design” discusses three indispensable components of a quantitative communication research design: measurement, sampling, and reliability and validity. At the outset of this part, the authors argue, through two interesting examples (a Chinese song and a Chinese proverb), that “it is not impossible to quantify everything, as long as all the relevant factors are taken into consideration” (p. 95). In specifying measurement which is “central in a quantitative research” (p. 166), the authors first introduce two interrelated approaches, semantic analysis, and empirical analysis, respectively, to “concept explication,” which intends to transform a research question into several concepts and in turn into measurable hypotheses. Then, four types of variable measurements are briefly discussed and exemplified. After that, two types of sampling, random sampling and nonprobability sampling, and their subtypes are introduced with local examples. At the end of this part, the authors discuss reliability and validity, two crucial requirements of a “correct” or “precise” (bordering on “zhun” in Chinese, as is claimed by the authors) quantitative research. Apart from a full illustration on examining reliability and validity, the authors also shed light on how to enhance both in explicating concepts, designing questionnaires, sampling, surveying, and verifying hypothesis.

The third part of “Method” contributes to a systematic introduction of four dominant methods widely used in current communication studies: survey, experiment, naturalistic method, and textual analysis. When introducing the survey method, typically used in quantitative research, the authors do not stop at an exhaustive list of its objectives, functions, designs, types, characteristics, process, as most books commonly do, but continue to discuss its new trends in the age of computer and the Internet, such as the creative and effective applications of ratings survey, e-commerce analysis, and Internet video/audio interviewing (IVI). Another quantitative method introduced in this part is the experimental method, which is often employed to establish causal relationships between certain variables. The authors first elucidate merits and defects of experimental method, and then detail the procedures, design, and external validity of it. Different from the “laboratory-made” and “objectivity-oriented” experimental method, naturalistic method, commonly used in qualitative researches, focuses on human’s realistic behavior in natural settings and stresses the codependence and subjective interaction between researchers and the researched. The authors offer us a very clear and insightful understanding of the definition, types, characteristics, procedures, and requirements of naturalistic method in a general term.

Besides, two major approaches in the naturalistic fashion are emphatically elaborated: observation and interview. At the end of this part, text analysis is introduced with a central focus on its subtype content analysis. According to the authors, text analysis in nature is a method to “narrate and interpret the characteristics of written records and visual message, the process of which is always inevitably extended to
a criticism and examination of the text (written records and visual message)” (p. 259). Content analysis is one of the few types of text analysis that can be done both qualitatively and quantitatively. As is indicated by the authors, what content analysis explores in a qualitative research is the meanings constructed through a text, while revealing the frequency and mechanism of certain variables in a text is the prime goal in a quantitative research (pp. 273–274).

The fourth part of the textbook addresses “Statistics,” which is indispensible in processing the preliminary research findings from survey, experiments, naturalistic method, or text analysis. It is warned at the beginning of this part that statistics is nothing more than a research tool and thus unable to cover defects of research methods. In other words, a valid statistic tool makes a research better only if each step before statistics has been done wisely. Besides, like any other research tool in scientific research, a certain statistic tool can never be universally valid or effective. Instead, data of different levels of measurement requires different statistic tools (pp. 277–278). As is well known, statistical methods consist of two general strands: descriptive and inferential. In descriptive statistics, the authors first clarify several key concepts like data set, normal distribution, skewness, kurtosis, and then elaborate on two index measurements frequently used in descriptive statistics: central tendency and tendency of dispersion. In inferential statistics, approaches to parameter evaluate (with its subtypes point estimate and interval estimate) and hypothesis testing are introduced. The last section of this part discusses variation analysis (including z analysis, $\chi^2$ analysis, t analysis, and analysis of variance) and relational analysis (including regression analysis and correlation analysis).

Generally speaking, Communication Research Methods written by Guoming Chen, Wenzheng Peng, Yinjiao Ye, and Ran An gains its status as a very valuable guidebook for Chinese communication and discourse researchers due to the following three salient merits: to begin with, it does not only introduce major methods, and practical tools widely used in communication studies, but also illustrates how to apply these methods in the Asian cultural context with many specific examples. The latter part actually makes much more sense, given that many other books on communication research methods published in Asian countries (especially China) in the past 10 years often bewilder readers with little consideration of what really happens in Asian communication practice. As is critically pointed out by Chen (2002), the leading author of the book, and Mei (2006), Asian communication research has long indulged in “importing” western theories and method while neglecting localization and innovation to a large extent. There is no doubt that this new book set a good example in this regard. Second, four dominant methods in communication studies, survey, experiment, naturalistic method, and text analysis, are more systematically and profoundly introduced in this book with in-depth discussion of their theoretical and methodological foundations, which makes it easy for readers to understand how each method came into being and why it is valid in today’s academic context. In this sense,
for those who are often confused about the distinction and correlation between theory and method, this book is what they need. Last but not least, with fewer jargons and more interesting examples, this book is much easier to understand and more reader-friendly compared with other similar books.

In spite of the outstanding merits mentioned above, this book still has its notable limitations: first, most of the methods introduced in the book are from the west, although most examples are cited from the Asian cultural context. In fact, Guoming Chen himself is among the few international communication researchers who strongly advocate an Asian-specific or Chinese-specific way of understanding communication. Most of all, Chen (2002, 2006) has proposed general principles and possible ways to do so, which could have been further elucidated in this volume designed for Asian scholars and research students. Second, far more space of this book is dedicated to quantitative methods and testing while few qualitative methods and tools for communication research are introduced, which seems a bit unbalanced in terms of the book’s structure. After all, these limitations cannot obscure the merits of this book and it is surely a highly recommended book for Asian researchers of communication studies, media studies, and discourse research.

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References