History and Present Patterns of Media and Communication Research Orientation in Nigeria

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Abstract

The researcher traced the historical precedents that shape media and communication scholars' adherence to a research orientation. Questionnaire and in-depth interview guides were administered to Nigerian media and communication scholars through mail, WhatsApp and face-to-face methods. It was found that Nigerian media and communication research has transitioned between three paradigms: interpretivism/critical, empiricism and pragmatism. Factors such as prioritising craft over research at the beginning, American influence and domiciliation of mass communication departments under the faculty of arts contributed a lot to the patterns of research orientation in Nigeria. The findings showed that quantitative research is dominant while qualitative research, either as a mono-method or mixed-method is gaining ground.

Keywords: Research Orientation, Paradigm, Media and Communication Research, History

Introduction

Media research, communication research, mass media research, mass communication research and most recently, media and communication research, are very few of the labels given to the scientific and nonscientific research conducted to discover, confirm and discard ideas, practices, solutions and explanations in the media and communication disciplines. Media and communication research started in German as Press Science (Zeitungswissenschaft) much later than it started in America, but American scholars take the lead for "founding principles of 'communication science' and the continuing influence wielded through literature and the dominance of international scientific publication". Until the 1980s, most European countries did not give much concern to media and communication research. It was largely done by private organisations for practical purposes, not academic ones (McQuil, 2005).

Media and communication research developed and still works within four dominant phases, depending on the condition and context. The first dominant themes of media and communication research were understanding the medium, followed by uses and users of the medium, then the effects of the medium and how the medium will be improved (Wimmer & Dominick, 2010). However, a key fundamental issue that got hot debate among media and communication scholars was the appropriate set of commitments that guide knowledge production and expansion in media and communication studies (Kuhn, cited in Potter, Cooper & Dupagne, 1993). In other words, which paradigm suits media and communication studies?

This study aims to trace the historical antecedents that shaped the research orientations of media and communication in Nigeria and also identify the dominant research orientation of media and communication researchers in Nigeria.

Research Questions
The following research questions guided the study:
1.   What is the dominant research orientation among media and communication researchers in Nigeria?
2.   What are the historical antecedents that shaped how media and communication research is being practised in Nigeria?

Epistemological Issues in the Media and Communication
Issues such as identity and epistemological crisis have been in media and communication for ages. The epistemological crisis comes from within and outside. From within, the debate about a clear, and true approach to scientific knowledge remains an unresolved issue. And from the outside, every layman becomes a self-proclaimed expert, thinking he can explain communication issues due to the "closeness of its object to everybody's reality and experience" (Donsbach, 2006).

The bedrock of every scientific field of study is paradigm which is defined as a "set of model problems and solutions for a community of researchers" (Kuhn, cited in Jensen & Neuman, 2013, p.231) or simply a set of conventions guiding knowledge creation and problem-solving for a particular field of study. However, a critical review of literature on media and communication research paradigms and philosophies reveals dissensus among scholars in terms of the number of paradigms in the field; for instance, Baran & Davis (2012); Gunter (2000) and Zukauskas, Vveinhardt & Andriukaitienė (2018) postulated four paradigms. Lowery, DeFleur & Hall stated three paradigms and Giddens recognised only one paradigm (Potters *et al* 1993). On the contrary, Rosengren & Krippendorff (cited in Potters *et al* 1993) believed that there is no research paradigm in media and communication studies at all. To them, media and communication was preparadigmatic.

This lack of consensus on the focus of studies in the field, what questions will be asked, which data are relevant to the field and how we make meaning out of the data is an indication that the field is still preparadigmatic. Lang (2013) reviewed the three basic Kuhnian guides of paradigm to scientists: (a) an understanding of the research object; (b) devising novel ways of studying the object and (c) getting a universal set of questions and commitments about the research objects. After analysing these guides, he described media and communication research as "paradigms in crisis."

However, going by the scholars that view the field as paradigmatic, the dominant paradigm, regardless of their labelling, can be grouped into four: empiricism (scientific, positivism, quantitative), interpretivism, (normative, phenomenological, hermeneutic, qualitative), critical paradigm (structuralism, feminism, cultural studies), and pragmatism (multiparadigm, mixed methods, triangulation). Empiricism employs empirical tools to search, explain and predict phenomena. Interpretivism searches for meaning in human actions and texts. The critical paradigm seeks to trigger social change through critical

analysis of media-related practices. Pragmatism balanced the discussion by filling the gap with the strength of another paradigm.

Each research paradigm is guided by "taken-for-granted assumptions" as a yardstick for deciding on the research topics, objectives to be set, questions to be asked, methods to be used, sampling technique and sample, criteria for accepting data as valid (Potter *et al* 1993). The main concern about the paradigm issue is the extremism of some scholars toward the other paradigms. Some scholars are one-sided to the extent that they do not consider other paradigms as "legitimate" means of knowledge production. For instance, in Germany, critical scholars were very few and their intellectual works did not find their way into mainstream scholarship. In fact, some critical scholars suffered some form of discrimination from their colleagues and teachers. Manfred Knoche, one of the few critical scholars in Germany, started his graduate study in Mainz, but his supervisor did not allow him to graduate due to his critical perspective (Loblich & Scheu, 2011).

Another important issue is the "statistical relevance syndrome." In search of becoming more scientific and professional distinction, "we are shifting into a direction with too much petty number crunching and too little really important research questions, that is, research with state-of-the-art methodology and validity but with little relevance and significance." Ideally, empirical research should be guided by public interest, normative and development goals; otherwise it can "easily become arbitrary, random and irrelevant" (Donsbach 2006, p. 447).

Moreover, an additional burning issue related to knowledge production and expansion in the field is theory. Media and communication studies in the early development period largely borrowed theories from other fields of study such as sociology, linguistics and political science. This, to some extent, makes them reluctant to develop theories that would expand the theoretical assumptions of the field. This behaviour affects the maturity of the field and the vastness of the theoretical guide (Kalbfleisch, 2002).

It is very obvious that changes in media technologies have expanded the scope of media and communication research. However, the media and communication research framework, concepts and theories do not change at the same pace to accommodate the accelerated expansion of knowledge and the challenges. This compels researchers to recycle outdated means of inquiry used for decades to test the effects of the old technologies. Some of the factors that contributed to this negative development are the failure of our research to add new knowledge to the literature, the scarcity of longitudinal research and the brain drain within academia (Wang, 2018).

Recently, new media technologies have challenged the existing media and communication epistemologies. In place of manageable data that media scholars collect and analyse, new media brings big data, requiring highly sophisticated computer skills and techniques for analysis. Issues about information disorder (disinformation, misinformation, malinformation and dilinformation) could not be controlled by conventional journalism practice which led to the emergence of fact-checking and data-driven journalism as new genres. Fuchs & Qui (2018, p. 22) note that "ever-newer sub-domains have emerged that claim status as new interdisciplinary fields but behave like

new disciplines that deepen the old disciplinary power structures: Internet research, information society studies, surveillance studies, digital humanities, social media studies, computational social science, big data research, mobile media studies, information and communication technologies for development (ICT4D) and so on.

One common feature among the "newer subdomains" is interdisciplinary. That is to say, media and communication scholarship need other disciplines' assistance to understand, explain, and predict certain issues. To avoid being overpowered by other disciplines, media scholarship should be expanded to "integrate data, methods, tools, concepts or theories from other disciplines" (Zhu & Fu, 2019, p. 275).

Empirical Studies on Media and Communication Studies in Nigeria

Amadi (2014, p. 78) conducted critical discourse analysis using course outlines of mass communication research courses from five Nigerian universities (purposely selected) to understand the research orientation of the lecturers teaching media and communication research courses. The result shows that the course outlines are predominantly quantitative. This indicated a lack of pluralism in the research orientation, from which he concluded, "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" In the same vein, Amadi (2015) analysed the challenges facing media and communication research in Nigeria.

Ogundoyin & Soola (2014) focused their trend study on studies specifically conducted on interpersonal health communication from 1991 to 2010 in Nigeria. They quantitatively analysed one hundred and five journal articles. The research outcomes show that 51.4% of the articles employed qualitative methods, 18.1% adopted quantitative methods, and 30.5% adopted a combination of both quantitative and qualitative methods. Under quantitative research methods, the survey (30.97%) was the most frequently used approach.

Akpan (2023) looked at students' projects to understand students' preferences for research methodology in their final year projects. Content analysis was used to analyse 155 undergraduate projects. The result shows that 78% of the research method was the survey method, and 59% used the Social Responsibility theory as a theoretical framework. Similarly, Okunu, Wogu, Anyadike & Ajala (2018) extended their study to cover undergraduate and postgraduate theses conducted in mass communication and used 400 works selected from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, the University of Lagos, Lagos State University and Ajayi Crowther University, which are based in southern Nigeria. The researchers used content analysis to understand students' preferences and usage of research methods and areas of specialisation. Survey (70.3%) and content analysis (29.7%) were the dominant quantitative research methods employed by the student. However, none of the 400 students at these universities employed quantitative research methods such as experimental and meta-analysis methods. Moreover, the students used qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews, FGD and textual analysis to complement either survey or content analysis. Similarly, qualitative methods like ethnography, historiography, case study and action research received zero attention from the students.

Furthermore, the findings showed that the research orientations of the four universities resemble one another. There are not many differences in their choice of

research methods, subject matter areas, type of variables studied and analytical tools. The study recommends, among other issues, encouraging students to use qualitative methods as primary design and segmenting research methods courses into quantitative research, qualitative research and data analysis to widen their horizons while selecting research methods.

Another critical study on media and communication research in Nigeria was conducted by Ojebode, Ojebuyi, Oladapo & Oyedele (2018). Ojebode *et al* 's research reviewed the works of mass communication researchers (lecturers and students) published in four Nigerian journals and a book of readings. They analysed eighty-seven articles using content analysis. The study found that most of the articles (72%) used the monomethod, indicating a dearth of use for the mixed method. Moreover, the majority of the studies (82%) are not policy-related or engaged studies.

Regarding the current status of mass communication education in Nigeria, Oyewole & Olisa (2017) found that mass communication education in Nigeria is growing, however, the quality of the learning outcome is declining. A lot of factors, such as lack of up-to-date facilities, scarcity of journalism research institutes, the doctorate syndrome, insufficient funding, and absence of opportunities such as research grants among others contributed to the decline in quality. Fayomia, Okokpujiea, Fayom & Okolieb (2019) and Ngozi, Malachy, Christy, Ngozi & Patricia (2016) also found similar problems in physical sciences and social sciences research.

Recently, the National University Commission (NUC) updated the mass communication curriculum in Nigeria by introducing the Core Curriculum Minimum Standards (CCMAS). Guanah (2019) carried out research to find out the level of implementation in the Midwest region of Nigeria, with a specific focus on new media journalism training. The results showed a significant improvement in the curriculum and the instructional facilities. Interestingly, none of these studies employed survey or in-depth interview methods to investigate this issue. That was the gap identified and attempted in this study.

Methodology
The researcher employed survey and in-depth interview methods. A sample size of 326 was determined from the sampling frame of 2,120 registered members of the Association of Communication Scholars and Professionals of Nigeria (ACSPN) and the African Council of Communication Education (ACCE) Nigeria branch. Random sampling and qualified volunteer sampling techniques were used to distribute online survey questionnaires through emails and Whatsapp. The researcher purposely selected eight media and communication scholars for the in-depth interviews. The survey data was analysed using a univariate method of data analysis while thematic analysis was employed for the in-depth interview data using SPSS and Atlas ti. software.

Data Presentation and Analysis
The demographic data of the survey respondents were 73.8 % male and 26.2% female. The majority (52.3%) have PhDs, 37.2% have master's degrees, 10.3% have first degrees and 2.2% did not respond to the question.

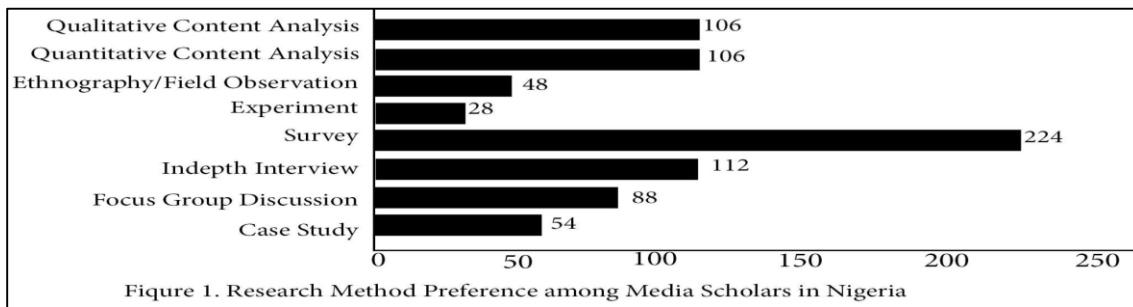Fiqure 1. Research Method Preference among Media Scholars in Nigeria

Figure 1 shows that the survey method is the most preferred research method among media and communication researchers in Nigeria. The qualitative and quantitative content analysis took the second position, while the experiment was the least preferred method.

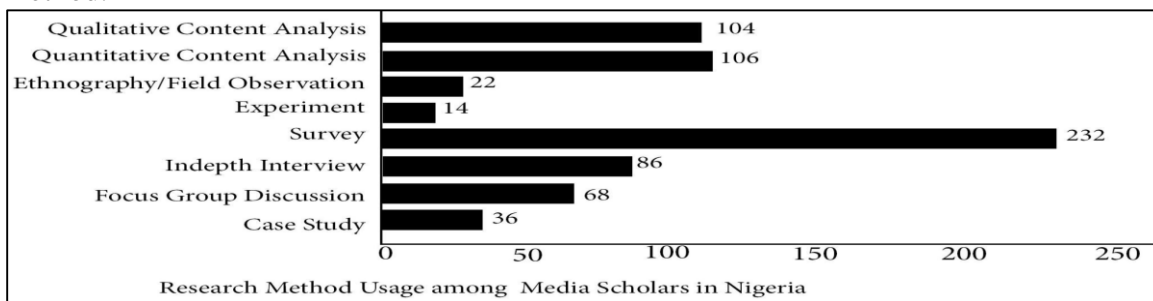Research Method Usage among Media Scholars in Nigeria

Figure 2 indicates gaps between preference and use of research methods, as some of the respondents preferred another method but ended up using a different method. Survey methods remain the most used method, followed by quantitative content analysis. It can be deduced from Figures 1 and 2 that the majority of media and communication researchers preferred quantitative research methods and also used them more frequently. However, considering the percentage of respondents using qualitative methods, either mono-method or mixed-method is appreciable. Moreover, another important revelation from these figures is the emergence of the experiment as the least preferred and least used method of research among media and communication researchers.

Thematic Analysis
The major themes that emerged from the in-depth interview data conducted with eight media and communication scholars can be classified as early research practices and paradigm shifts.

Early research practices
Under the theme of early practices, the participants discussed how media and communication research was founded in Nigeria and how American influence in terms of pioneer academic staff, curriculum and reading materials shaped current practices.

      ''To be candid, media research in Nigeria came as part of the curriculum of Mass Communication from the US, just like the program itself. Most of the research approaches are empirical. That is market research using statistics, surveys and what have you'' (Respondent G).

      However, the American research tradition did not materialise at this early stage because the primary concern of the journalism training in Nigeria then focused on

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producing manpower for the media industry. Respondent E pointed out another factor that influenced the early media and communication research orientation in Nigeria.

> ''Mass communication belongs to social science, by whatever yardstick you measure it. But its placement under Art influences its research orientation. However, after some time, it begins to reclaim its initial social science orientation and that is why you see a shift in the conduct of its research'' (Respondent E).

Paradigm Shifts

The adoption of quantitative research came later when real academic programmes such as postgraduate degrees started.

> ''If you look at the early journals, most of the articles were interpretative and discursive. I remember when I started publishing, in the late 1980s to early 1990s, it was more of a discussion about the field. I'm not sure, fieldwork was very robust. But, it began to grow. I remember when I started my PhD at the University of Lagos; by then, fieldwork was established'' (Respondent C).

However, the global paradigm shift to mixed methods due to the inherent weaknesses of using mono-method design is the current trend in media and communication research in Nigeria.

> ''Quantitative research is dominant now and qualitative research is also gaining ground. Both are required to produce sound research and supplement the weak points of one another. That is, the mixed method is the best'' (Respondent C).

Discussion

The media and communication research in Nigeria passes through three major phases: Interpretivism/critical paradigm, empiricism paradigm and pragmatism paradigm. The early mass communication departments did not prioritise carrying out rigorous academic research. The curriculum put a strong emphasis on journalism skills to produce qualified personnel who could oversee the media industry. For example, the University of Nigeria, Nsukka placed a strong emphasis on print journalism, the University of Ibadan prioritised human communication skills like speech writing and Bayero University, Kano concentrated more on broadcast journalism. According to Frere & Agbobli (2018), some Francophones in Africa continue to operate under a market-driven paradigm that prioritises craft over research.

The research conducted at the early stage was largely interpretative and critical. Rigorous fieldwork, theoretical background and other systematic protocols for conducting scientific researches were not robust at this stage. Okigbo (1987, p.19) described this period thus: "Today (late 1980s), even after more than three decades of teaching mass communication, the discipline has not made the mark expected of it. African communication scholars have not yet developed authentic theories of African communication nor has a veritable research tradition been established."

The second phase started in the 1990s, which saw the widespread adoption of systematic protocols and field research techniques for scientific research. Researchers investigating media and communication favour quantitative research techniques like quantitative content analysis and surveys. This finding is consistent with Amadi's (2014) observation that the majority of Nigerian lecturers on communication research

methodology place a strong emphasis on quantitative methods. Similarly, Obiaje *et al*'s (2023) content analysis of research conducted by Nigerian media and communication researchers yielded similar findings. Why is the predominant research orientation in Nigeria quantitative research? The in-depth interview data revealed historical precedents, such as the influence of American expatriates, who served as pioneers academic staff. Similarly, the majority of the early indigenous scholar cohorts received their training at American universities. In a similar vein, American textbooks dominate the research methodology curriculum in Nigerian universities.

Another factor that influenced media and communication research orientation in its early stages was the domestication of mass communication departments under the faculty of arts. Before the National University Commission (NUC) mandated that universities move their departments to the faculty of social sciences, the field had lost its social science roots. The dominance of quantitative research as a tactic for regaining and establishing the discipline as a legitimate member of the social science family has also been made possible by this movement; the third phase, which is pragmatism, witnessed a shift towards accepting and employing qualitative research methods as sole design or complimentary design in Nigeria. Some respondents select a mixture of qualitative and quantitative research methods as their most preferred and most used research design.

The shift was due to exposure to other research traditions and the shortcomings of using a mono-methodic design. Media and communication researchers began to explore more qualitative designs that would complement the existential gaps in the conduct of media and communication research in Nigeria, whose mono-methodical approach (largely quantitative) failed to provide workable solutions. This kind of rethinking and exploration may likely lead to identifying more weaknesses of Western methodologies in the African context and pave the way for developing research techniques and tools that will suit the African context.

Conclusion

The research orientation of communication research in Nigeria is becoming pluralistic unlike some years back when there was a dearth of pluralism and high stringent and dogmatic loyalty toward a singularised orientation. This paints a brighter future for media and communication research, however, more needs to be done on capacity building and creating awareness on the need for rigour and standard.

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