

## The Importance of Choosing a Right Tool

Yung-Ho Im\*

Professor, Department of Communication, Pusan National University, Busan 609-735, South Korea

Most aspiring scholars are fascinated by the pure, rigorous and neatly interwoven system of theoretical concepts, especially when clad with esoteric methodology. A acquaintance with sophisticated research methodology constitutes a significant part of job qualification. Also, to the non-Westerners, just like French wine or a Swiss-Army knife, the lofty prestige of their expertise considerably depends on imports from the more advanced part of the globe, especially from the United State in the case of communication study.

Personally, I must confess that I have learnt most of research tools from my education in the United States and still keep absorbing them from new books and journals produced there. Yet it took some time to realize that such an apparently innocuous and beautiful cabinet of expensive tools prove to be useless occasionally in the real field work in my homeland. Why is it that? What am I supposed to do in order to survive as a professional and produce a meaningful research to the country where I live? From my own experience, thus, I devised a temporary 'solution' that I need to be more creative in a view of tools, and conceive ways to choose wisely tools suitable for local needs.

Once, I played with issues related to professional communicator at large media organizations. I experimented with both quantitative [1,2] and qualitative methods [3-5] and unfortunately ended up with uneven degree of success and, once in a while, a complete disaster. The first problem was that, in some cases, even the secondary data was either unavailable or unreliable. For example, in Korea, in the 1990s, serious concerns for newspaper market concentration emerged and talks proceeded for initiatives to mitigate the problem. Nonetheless, the industry *as a whole* furiously opposed the disclosure of circulation data for decades. Not to mention any policy proposal, the idea of counting total circulation itself turned into an object for furious dispute. No wonder that any systematic economic analysis was infeasible without reliable data such attempts include [6,7].

Another difficulty lies in require accessing the media organization. One of my former students conducted an in-house survey as a staff researcher for a television broadcasting company. Despite some modest material reward and the privilege of an insider, she managed to collect a meager rate of response, i.e., less than 10%. Still, there was another promising option, this time in qualitative research method. Journalism researchers may recollect the excitement when they first met Gaye Tuchman' [8] *Making News* amid the vast file of fragmentary and boring literature on news. It was refreshing and illuminating that careful observation's and interviews may produce such an elaborative and systematic analysis of news organizations. Textbooks on qualitative methodology also kindly offered step-by-step advices to ambitious researchers. But I quickly realized that, in Korea, even a simple textbook type of participant observation presents a daunting challenge to an outsider; I heard an amusing, yet horrifying, story that once a whole organization conspired to proceed a 'fake meeting' in the presence of an outsider researcher.

To obtain some form of primary data on organizations in Korea, you need to mobilize certain connections, occasional arm-twisting, as well as the willingness to clear a variety of hindrances, neither of which may be what young scholars have expected from their job description.

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And the painful thing is that such hardship might be related to what we call 'cultural differences,' meaning that it might be insurmountable in the near future.

Of course, the inaccessibility of data, be it primary or secondary, collection may not be a critical factor for serious researchers, as far as obviously there may turn to other subjects, such as audience surveys. However, such a frustrating experience, as I have already gone through, may discourage young scholars to avoid certain research topics subconsciously. The ensuing disparity in the choice of research topics and strategies may bring about potentially serious holes and weak points in the development of the research field as a whole.

Nevertheless, there are always modest solutions and alternatives, which are not necessarily written in detail in the textbooks. For instance, I experimented with 'oral history/life narrative' method which is less ambitious than participant observation but offers some opportunities to understand the organizational culture [4]. Together with my students, I made a series of extended interviews and finished successfully couple of papers on the occupational culture in a marginal genre of popular culture. I am currently investigating the possibility of 'case study' methods for inaccessible research topics. They represent some attempts to find 'detours' to get at the inside knowledge, instead of more straight-forward research methods as mentioned above. Thereby, I wish to find some general patterns and insights from limited cases.

Not surprisingly, the decades-old field of communication study is now equipped with sufficient inventory of sophisticated methodology. The entire wisdom of the past breed of researchers is well summarized either in textbooks or journal articles and apparently ready for use for the next generation. Nevertheless, especially those in the non-Western countries need to be careful in mobilizing the tools. While seemingly written in general terms, just like concepts and theories, each methodology was arguably crafted piece by piece through scores of laborious painful works among hordes of empirical researcher, be it qualitative or quantitative. The specific features and know-how's of each empirical dirty work are *abstracted (or tossed away)* during the process of conceptualization. While young scholars now enjoy the

\*Corresponding Author: Dr. Yung-Ho Im, Professor, Department of Communication, Pusan National University, Busan 609-735, South Korea, E-mail: [yhoim@pusan.ac.kr](mailto:yhoim@pusan.ac.kr)

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benefit of skipping the dirty work and learning from books short-cut knowledge in the form of dictums and statements, they are likely to forget how and in what context they were formulated. In the sense that research methods are concerned with dealing with people and human relations, the secrets and wisdom of their field work are culturally imbedded. I think that is why I had encountered enormous, unexpected troubles in the application of the seemingly harmless tools to the practical situation.

After a couple of decades in this field as a researcher, I have my own stories on trials-and-errors which I think are invaluable asset for devising future research. That experience is not always written in the textbook. In particular, researchers in the non-Western countries should not expect manual-like prescription from research method books, but instead keep groping for ways to adapt, revise, and invent them for the practical use in their indigenous context. Research methods are not just neutral tools, but something to be naturalized into the local ecology of knowledge production.

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