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Five blind men were introduced for the first time to an elephant.
They ran their hands over it, and gave their verdict.

‘Ah,’ said the first man: ‘An elephant is solid and flat, like a wall.’

‘Not so,’ said the second man: ‘An elephant is like the trunk of a young tree, reaching towards the heavens.’

‘No, indeed,’ said the third man: ‘An elephant is like a palm leaf, round and soft and waving in the breeze.’

‘You are all wrong,’ said the fourth: ‘An elephant is like a flexible pipe. The air moves along it with a rushing sound.’

‘No, no,’ said the fifth man: ‘An elephant is like a rope. When you pull on it the heavens open up with rain.’

The lessons to be learned from this parable, which we first heard on a Pete Seeger record from the 1950s and have since come across many times in slightly different written and oral forms, are:

- People are curious: they want to understand their world (what an elephant is).
- They create new understandings in terms of what they already know (elephants in terms of trees or ropes).
- They do not necessarily agree about these new understandings, even after empirical research (evidence of the senses).
- It is unwise to jump to conclusions from incomplete data. Even if truth were possible (and not everyone agrees that it is), it is never possible to know with certainty whether you have found it.
- Research is an inherently risky business: you might not like what you find.
- Old stories are inherently sexist: women may have reached different conclusions.
Starting a serious text on research methods with a frivolous story also makes
the point that research can be intriguing and enjoyable, a mix of dull routine
with the excitement and satisfaction of exploring your world and perhaps
finding new knowledge.

But it is not only curiosity that takes us to media research. A profound
change is occurring in the world: there has been a shift in the developed
economies from the manufacture of physical products to the production and
exchange of information, a shift from an industrial society to a post-industrial
society (Bell 1976; Castells 1997; Meikle and Young 2012). A series of alli-
ances is being forged between industry and commerce on one hand and the
traditional repositories of information on the other: universities are seek-
ing alliances with media companies (Barber et al. 2012, 2013; Bokor 2012),
libraries are going ‘online’, software companies are buying the rights to the
electronic dissemination of artworks. We can recognise the post-industrial
economy in the dominance of Hollywood products in our lives; in the fact
that some of the world’s richest men (Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg) made
their money, not from producing cars and heavy machinery, but from lines
of computer code; and from the increasing pace of convergence in the tel-
ecommunications and entertainment industries. The Trans-Pacific Trade
Agreement proposed in 2015 (later called the Trans-Pacific Partnership) had
a complete chapter on trade in intellectual property (Department of Foreign
Affairs and Trade 2015). At the time the first edition of this book was written,
Google had just become a public company, Facebook had just been launched,
and the iPhone was two years away. The emergence of a new ‘mediascape’
was well under way. Now Google and Facebook are major corporations and
‘smart phones’ are everywhere. Interestingly, in something of a return to the
older industrial economy, Elon Musk (founder of PayPal) now has a com-
pany producing electric cars (Tesla), and Google and perhaps Apple are likely
to follow.

As an indication of the shifts that are occurring, in 2015 one of us (Hughes)
was offered a new plan by his telephone company, which provided 10 giga-
bytes of data for his mobile phone, with a similar amount for each of the
phones in the family, amounting to 30 gigabytes of data to be shared among
the three members of the family – for A$10 less than the previous plan. This
is a manifestation that many users routinely watch video on mobile devices in
2015 and serves as a measure of the changing media environment.

In relation to media and communications this can be characterised as a
shift from a broadcast or mass media environment to a post-broadcast, or dis-
tributed environment, featuring changes to our experience of time and space
(think of being able to speak in real time to someone on the opposite side of
the world using Skype). Media are now distributed and dispersed with no
geographic centre (many of you will regularly use Hola! or similar Virtual Private Networks to watch television from other regions of the world).

Some key features of this new media environment are:

- increased fragmentation of the audience;
- a slow but steady decline in the audience for broadcast television;
- a slow but steady decline in the readership of print newspapers (Schwartz 2014);
- significant penetration of mobile devices and social media (Lenhart et al. 2010);
- a reduction in the strength of national boundaries (a trend the Trans-Pacific Partnership sought to resist in relation to intellectual property);
- a promise of untold information, always available (think of the 30 gigabytes of data on a mobile phone plan);
- claims of the breakdown of distinctions between audience and producer (discussed more fully in Section 3.6) and the development of citizen journalism (Allan 2007; Flew 2005; Goode 2009; Gowing 2009).

The crucial skills in this post-industrial ‘information economy’ (Barr 2000; Castells 1997; Bruns 2006) are those of research and writing: the ability to find information, the ability to synthesise information, and the ability to present that information for other people. Such research skills are used in a range of careers: stockbrokers in preparing advice for clients, journalists in writing stories, and civil servants in preparing briefs for ministers or in writing reports. In the media there are broadly three areas of research that all use these skills:

- Professional research for the media: specialist researchers prepare background material for current affairs and documentary programs on television and radio or do historical research for drama (getting the details right for characters, settings, costumes).
- Commercial research about the media: market research companies conduct audience research for advertisers and producers of television, newspapers, or radio or devise audience measurement applications for web content.
- Academic research about the media: students and staff of educational institutions research media audiences, institutions, and texts.

So while this book, intended for the novice researcher, primarily speaks within an academic context, the advice it gives has wider applications. We try not to assume knowledge or experience, and we offer far more alternative methods than any one researcher will ever need. The presentation of the book parallels how we think of the research process – in phases, rather than stages, allowing
the various aspects of the research to occur simultaneously, or the researcher to circle back on earlier ideas and aspects of the process. However, we discuss these phases separately and sequentially, merely for convenience.

For the first-year undergraduate this book is a resource which will be carried with you through your later studies. For postgraduate students, particularly those new to media, communications, and journalism, it will provide an overview of potential research methods and their intellectual context, to which you will refer from time to time into your working life after study.

We begin, in this chapter, with definitions of the foundation terms (each of which is also defined in the glossary) and models of research concepts, inviting readers to locate themselves so that they can make informed choices from the alternatives offered in later chapters. Chapter 2 offers advice on developing your research topic and reading around your subject, constantly refining the topic as you go. Then there are three parts, each organised around one of the major streams of media research: audiences, institutions, and texts.

Each of these parts begins with an introduction, followed by a chapter reviewing the research on one topic within that research stream: soap opera within audience research (Chapter 3), censorship within institutional research (Chapter 6), news within textual research (Chapter 9). Because our focus in this book is on research methodology, the readings we discuss are selected to illustrate different methodological approaches: we do not aim to present a full coverage of the topics by which we hope to illustrate these methods. Our intention is that the novice researcher may be able to locate the research approach that seems most appropriate to them. For Parts I and II, the literature review is followed by chapters (4 and 7 respectively) on gathering data. In each of these, the methods most commonly found in that research stream are given the most detailed treatment: other methods are covered more cursorily and readers referred to other sections of this book or to other reference works. These parts conclude with a chapter (5 and 8 respectively) on the analysis and interpretation of the data gathered. In the analysis section of these chapters, advice is given on how to systematise data and to start to make inferences from it. In the interpretation section, we discuss the major intellectual frameworks through which projects have been built, from the initial selection of a topic, through the search for the ‘meaning’ of the systematised data, and eventually to the conclusions, leaving you to decide what is useful, appropriate, or both in your own case. In Part III, data gathering and analysis are dealt with in Chapter 10 and interpretation in Chapter 11. A final chapter (Chapter 12) discusses how conclusions are reached, how the researcher presents the results, and how the success of the completed project is judged.
In all of these, you will find us using models — conceptual tools that help us to make sense of complex data, by sorting and creating hierarchies. For us, the best models are those that cover the most possibilities and are the most helpful in representing relationships, but a model remains always an abstract representation:

• fallible, because it is based upon assumptions which may be wrong and will certainly shift over time;
• incomplete, because no one model can ever do it all;
• always context specific, so it will not necessarily remain useful in a different context (though it may be adaptable to other contexts, as you will see from the examples we use).

1.1 Definitions

So, let us move on to consider some of the general concepts that construct both the title to this book and its basic purposes.

1.1.1 Communication

Like most of the important terms we discuss in this section, the meanings of ‘communication’ are complex and vary with the field in which it is being used, whether this is media and communication studies, cybernetics, information technology studies, or psychology, and so any definition is merely a beginning of the process of understanding the term. At the simplest level, communication is the act of imparting information. This imparting may be conscious and deliberate, or unconscious and accidental. There are two main models of communication: one that addresses primarily the act of imparting (the transmission of messages) and one that addresses primarily the nature of the information being imparted (the circulation of meaning/s).

The earliest theoretical models of how human communication operates were by analogy to technology, to telegraphy: A (the transmitter) presses the Morse button to send signals (a medium) along a wire (a channel) to B (a receiver). This model demonstrates that the information must be organised: codes (such as Morse) are sets of information organised in another form (in this case into dots and dashes) to enable brevity and security of transmission. The problem with codes is that only those who share them can communicate. If I say to you: ‘Setzen Sie sich’, you will not understand me unless you speak German, so we cannot share meanings while you are outside the code.
Those who wish to communicate have to negotiate meaning. If I add gestures (patting the chair where I wish you to sit) I can use a shared (gestural) code to initiate you into the unshared (linguistic) code. This is how we learn most language, by translating codes we do not know into those we do (often visual to verbal).

We are surrounded by coded systems, using visual cues: examples are traffic signals (international symbols for go, stop, etc.) and tourist symbols (toilets, bus shelters, train stations, etc.). When we misread a signal, we may get ‘feedback’ (for instance, the reaction of other people if we go into the wrong toilet), and that helps us to understand the code and to adjust our next behaviour. When we receive communication from others we also give feedback – asking questions, looking puzzled or pleased or angry, doing what is asked of us or not doing it. All these aspects of communication fit together, and can be explained systematically, by constructing a model of communication.

The examples so far given come from the process (or linear) school of communication theory. Here the word ‘school’ refers to a group of people (not necessarily formally related to one another) who share a common approach or way of understanding the world. The process school speaks of the flow of communication, of messages passing between senders (encoders) and receivers (decoders), producing feedback, which may influence the transmission of the next message. Within this model, ‘noise’ is whatever interferes between the sender and the receiver, which may be actual sound (for instance a jack hammer in the street below, drowning out speech) or semantic noise (for instance an unfamiliar dialect being spoken). If such interference occurs, then the message may be misread (the decoder may misunderstand the encoded meaning), and communication has failed.

The process school of communication theory operates on a model that can be represented (rather simplistically) as shown in Figure 1.1.

There are many variants on this model, and these have changed over time, becoming much more sophisticated: some allow for stages in the relay of messages, for the influence of opinion leaders, or for the complex effects of feedback. The major process school models were developed in quite a short period, from Lasswell in 1948 to Gerbner in 1956 (summarised in Foulger 2004). These models are still mutating, taking account of the interactivity of the Internet.

Bruns (2006) considers that the industrial production model of producer – distributor – user is inadequate to the post-industrial age of interactive media.
Instead he proposes the concept of ‘produsage’, recognising audiences’ increasing involvement in the production of media content. He lists (Bruns 2006: 101) the identifying features of produsage as:

- a shift from dedicated producers to distributed participants;
- the ‘fluid movement of produsers among roles as leaders, participants and users of content’;
- artefacts that are ‘always unfinished and continually under development’;
- ‘permissive regimes of engagement’ between produsers over intellectual property rights.

He also offers a diagram of this process (Bruns 2006: Figure 1).

Despite sharing some terminology with the semiotic school of communication theory (see below), this is still a process theory: Bruns is still concerned with the circulation of messages, though this may now be happening through many relays, similar to repeated and complex feedback loops, and with no single version of a message dominating the process.

By the 1960s, the semiotic school of communication theory was developing, using a different vocabulary and conceptual model. ‘Semiotics’ was originally a medical term for the systematic study of symptoms. However, it now has much wider currency, including within communication theory, where it refers to the construction of textual meaning by the process of signification, that is the interaction of signs with their referents and with the readers–producers who use them.

This school would say that any meaning extracted from a text is never objective or final: it does exist in the text or it could not be read, so there are theoretically a finite number of potential meanings, but these are always dependent on the reader and so never objective or predictable.

Drawing on the model proposed by Fiske (1982: 4), this can be represented (again simplistically) as shown in Figure 1.2.

![Figure 1.2 Semiotic model of communication](image-url)
From the semiotic perspective, the communication process involves three elements. The people involved in the communication event are at the same time both producers (the encoders of the process school) and readers (the decoders of the process school). Every human participant in such an event is both producer (speaker, writer, television camera operator, web site contributor) and reader (of the signs that she produces), and every reader also produces (meaning/s). As these people create or read texts or messages, they draw on their experience of the real world, on ‘referents’ from that world. Signification (the creation and exchange of sign/s and their meaning/s) arises from this complex and interactive process. We discuss all this more fully in Section 10.3, where we are concerned with the analysis of texts.

So the semiotic model of communication is already based on interactivity: it does not need a new model to cope with the way communication operates on the Internet. It does need, however, to accommodate within its model multiple readers, multiple producers, multiple referents, and an explosion of potential meaning/s. It is just as difficult to represent this as a diagram as it is to represent produsage.

As we write, the debate around models of interactive communication continues: the concept is increasingly seen as a tautology, as communication is always, necessarily ‘interactive’. So, in this book we will continue to refer to the two basic schools of communication theory.

To sum up, the process school:

• is concerned primarily with acts of communication (the transmission of messages), as they occur within the process of communicating;
• assumes that meaning is fixed, and inherent in the message, put there by the sender (encoder), and decoded by the receiver (with the possibility of multiple stages along the route, and of feedback from the decoder to the encoder); and
• considers that communication can fail as a result of noise (for instance when there is no shared code).

The semiotic school:

• is concerned primarily with works of communication (texts), and with how (as well as what) they mean;
• assumes that meaning is constructed in the process of signification, by the interaction of text and reader–producer within a context, so is always negotiated and never absolute; and
• considers that communication always happens and that signification produces meanings, even when the meanings generated are not shared by participants in the communication event.
Definitions of communication affect how individual researchers do communication research. For instance, Hawkins and Pingree (1982) assume a process (linear) model, that television produces certain effects in viewers (see their diagram p. 244). Lull (1980) discusses similar questions of the relation between media and social reality, but from a semiotic model of communication. This division continues into the world of new media such as the Internet. The concepts of ‘feminist empiricism’ (Leckenby 2007) or of ‘produsage’ (Bruns 2006) are both based on the process school of communication, while Livingstone (2004) continues to seek ways of understanding communication semiotically.

These alternative communication models have been around for a long time. In later chapters, we will refer repeatedly to the models of communication in operation as we discuss examples of research.

The model of communication affects not only how the research is conducted (the kind of question chosen and the methods used to address this) but also how researchers reach conclusions and frame their reports. A report that aims at truth (even if it also acknowledges that reaching objective truth may not be possible) probably comes from within the process school. A report that acknowledges that conclusions are tentative and contingent is probably speaking from a semiotic perspective.

1.1.2 Culture

Communication always takes place within a context, often called ‘culture’.

Unlike most other animals, humans construct their world by living in it. We have the power to physically change our world (to build houses, to cook food, to create and use weapons), and also human thought operates upon the world outside our individual minds to create an understanding of it, which we share with other humans through language, the arts and sciences, education, the media – broadly speaking, culture. Carey (1989: 23) depends on the role of communication when he defines culture as ‘a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired and transformed’.

This view of culture comes out of the social sciences: the humanities (particularly aesthetics) often use the term much more selectively. What has been called the ‘mass culture critique’ (Gans 1974: 3) proposes that popular culture (including – among other things – newspapers, film, radio, television, and the World Wide Web) is a debased form of culture, because it is mass-produced and aimed at the lowest common denominator – the public as ‘mass’. From this position, true ‘culture’ is high culture: musical and literary classics and the sort of art that is found in public galleries.
In this book we prefer the broader definition of culture, as a whole way of life. It is, however, no longer possible to speak of a single coherent culture – it is more accurate to speak of multiple overlapping cultures (sometimes called subcultures), based on gender or sexual preference, ethnic background, class positioning, physical location, and many other things. All mass media operate within the context of these multiple (sub-)cultures and are themselves significant sites of cultural activity, operating as communication systems.

1.1.3 Media

So, how do we define ‘the media’? In the process theory of communication, a medium is, broadly speaking, an intermediary enabling or enhancing communication across time and space. Even between two individual people, communication may require the intervention of a medium – another person (a go-between) or a technology (telephone, letter, fax, email). Usually, however, we think of the media as those technologies that link many people, that is, the mass media of radio, television, newspapers, films. These are known as the ‘mass media’, because they address many people at once. The World Wide Web began as just such a mass medium, but interactivity has changed all that. The Internet is no longer sending communication only on the model of one-to-many (as the definition of mass media requires). Though it can do that, too (for instance life-logging), the Internet has also been recognised as sending relays of messages many-to-many (for instance Wikis). We try to use these terms precisely: for us ‘mass media’ will refer to those media forms that speak one-to-many; ‘interactive media’ will refer to those media forms that can speak many-to-many; if we mean to cover both, we will speak simply of ‘media’.

All these media are also institutions, which are currently undergoing significant structural change.

The academic tradition which studies all these forms has a number of names. In the United States, it is likely to be known as ‘communication studies’ or ‘media literacy’; in the United Kingdom and Australia, it may be called ‘communication studies’ or ‘media studies’. Nightingale (2012: 99) asserts that ‘the distinctions between media studies, cultural studies, audience research and anthropology had virtually disappeared during the 1990s.’ Though courses labelled ‘media studies’ may not be as prolific as they once were, the media are still studied systematically in other academic contexts, so in this book we will continue to use the term ‘media research’.

The research methods we discuss in this book apply across all these traditions – to texts, the audiences that consume or make sense of texts, and...
the institutional contexts within which they are produced and meaning is constructed. Which brings us to the third term in our title – ‘research’.

1.1.4 Research

Although research is central to media studies, the term is absent from most specialist media dictionaries. Simply put, ‘research’ is the process of asking questions and finding answers. However, research is more than this. It involves systematic exploration, guided by well-constructed questions, producing new information or reassessing old information. Through the application of critical analytical skills to information, the researcher is able to transform it into knowledge, so the researcher needs a way to understand what ‘knowledge’ is, how to recognise and assess knowledge, and to fit new knowledge into old knowledge. Research has become more central to the work of modern universities and to a growing number of institutions beyond the universities, such as ‘think tanks’ and the major accounting firms. Of the reports on the future of universities cited earlier one was written by a major transnational accounting firm (Bokor 2012) and one by a team from a think tank (Barber et al. 2013).

Within universities, definitions of research such as that of the Australian Research Council (2015) are common and include such phrases as:

- creation of new knowledge; and/or
- use of existing knowledge in a new and creative way to generate new concepts, methodologies, understandings (may include synthesis and analysis of previous research to the extent that it is new and creative).

They usually require some level of originality, evidence of scholarly activity, and awareness of the history and antecedents of the work. This book sets out to assist you to undertake and evaluate research in these terms.

In the chapters in which we review the literature (Chapters 3, 6, and 9), we spend a great deal of time evaluating other people’s research, deciding what the strengths and weaknesses are in each case, and hoping to provide readers with standards to apply both to their own reading and to the procedures they follow in their research. Our own value systems must inevitably come into play in such an exercise: though our intellectual frameworks are not always identical, the present writers would both deny that objectivity is ever possible and would certainly not claim it for ourselves. But we still try to be fair to those other researchers, no matter how different their approaches and methods are from our own. To do so is an important value for us. For us, everything we read, from whatever perspective or intellectual framework it emerges, is grist to the
mill: we may well learn something from it, and at the very least, it can help us to decide that we prefer our own ways of doing things. We consider it is foolish to close our minds to other possibilities – elephants may, after all, be like trees or walls. At the same time, we need to look carefully at the claims of others, judging for ourselves whether they are convincing. To do that we need to understand the process by which other researchers have come to their conclusions, and this means understanding both their methodologies and the intellectual frameworks within which they have operated. Part of what we want you to take away from this book is enough knowledge of the debates about research to judge what you read for yourselves – including how far you wish to trust or agree with the writers of this book. So it is important both that you understand what a ‘framework’ is, and that you have at least a nodding acquaintance with the major frameworks that you will come across in your reading.

This is because what we do and what we know are inextricably intertwined. It is not a matter of having a theory and putting it into practice, nor of doing something and deriving a theory from it, but of both theory and practice happening simultaneously and interactively and continuously. Ways of doing depend upon what we know and believe about the things we do, but we can only find out (can only reach the stage of knowing and believing) by doing. Understanding the range of possible frameworks, and how others have used them, is the first step to understanding your own processes of thought, as well as the material to which you wish to apply the thought.

The Internet has irrevocably changed the concept of research. Some of this change is within current definitions of research:

- The Internet provides new sources of information at the ‘reading around’ stage, and new versions of old methods of data collection and analysis.
- Considered as a communication medium, the Internet provides new subjects for research: Internet consumers are a new audience, Internet content provides new texts, Internet structures provide new sites for institutional research.

All these developments are considered in later chapters of this book. What we do not cover is the changes the Internet has already wrought and is still making, in the concept of research itself. The Internet has fundamentally changed how human beings think. It has produced interdisciplinary connections, new fields of research, and new ways of imagining knowledge production (see, for instance, Berry 2011). There are now new models of research itself, not just new ways to perform familiar research tasks. Media researchers need to be aware of these developments, but the current authors do not have a crystal ball to predict where these developments will take research in the future.
1.2 Models

The terms ‘paradigm’ and ‘framework’ are often used interchangeably, but not in this book. We see the research process as taking place within one or more research paradigms (i.e. ways of doing research) and at the same time within one or more intellectual frameworks (i.e. collections of ideas of more or less coherence, which enable knowing and understanding of the world).

Even if you are unable to articulate it, you already have an intellectual framework, which governs the way you conceive your world and your own place within it. This framework pre-exists your research, so it will shape that research from beginning to end, providing the structure within which your choices (including the initial choice of a research subject) are made. Your framework comes partly from the institutional setting within which your research takes place – the position taken by your employers or those who commissioned the research, or by your teachers, by the department within which they work, and by the university or college which employs them. Part of it will come from your personal position, shaped by your previous education, your political and religious beliefs, your gender, sexual preference, race and class affiliations, your personal style. Even if you are already aware of the position from which you think and speak, you may find this book helpful in locating where you fit within a wider intellectual community. This book is also intended for people who either are not yet committed to a position or do not understand what their own position is.

For us, a (research) paradigm is a more narrow concept than an (intellectual) framework, but they are still very close and usually mutually supportive.

A research paradigm allows some questions to be asked and some methods to be applied to research questions, while at the same time denying the validity of other questions and other methods. Denzin and Lincoln (2000: 157) offer the following useful explanation of how a paradigm shapes our thinking within the research process:

A paradigm encompasses four concepts: ethics …, epistemology, ontology and methodology. Ethics asks, How will I be as a moral person in the world? Epistemology asks, How do I know the world? What is the relationship between the inquirer and the known? Ontology raises basic questions about the nature of reality and the nature of the human being in the world. Methodology focuses on the best means for gaining knowledge about the world.

The paradigm categories proposed for qualitative research by Lincoln and Guba (2000:168, reproduced as Figure 6.3 in Lincoln et al. 2011) provide a useful model across all forms of media research. The categories they propose
are positivism, post-positivism, critical theory, constructivism, and participatory action research. In the first edition of this book we reproduced and recommended this model; for this new edition, while keeping their five categories, we have developed our own model (Figure, Intro 1.3).

Positivism was probably the most powerful research paradigm of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, across all disciplines. It is built upon a realist assumption that the world is out there waiting to be known. It has faith in the scientific method, which it sees as leading to the growth of objective and verifiable knowledge (rather than mere superstition and guesswork).

The French writer Auguste Comte (1798–1857) was largely responsible for the extension of the term ‘positivism’ to cover more than the physical sciences: he proposed that all forms of knowledge (both physical and social) had passed through three stages over the course of human history – theological, metaphysical, and scientific. The logical positivists of the Vienna Circle in the 1920s and 1930s required the scientist (including the social scientist) to seek invariable natural laws, which were to be discovered by subjecting empirical data to logical analysis, ideally by a combination of operationalising (turning into quantitative statements) and verification (testing on all possible samples), though they acknowledged that perfect verification is not possible on data from human subjects (Potter 1996: 31). Since then, the definition of positivism has been further expanded, until it may include any sociological approach that operates on the general assumption that the methods of the physical sciences (such as measurement or the search for general laws) can be carried over into the social sciences (Jary and Jary 1991: 485). Positivism also influences the humanities: there is, for instance, a strand of historiography that conceives of history as a science, with covering laws and the capacity to predict from these.

The grip of positivism on the research world across many disciplines was weakened in the late twentieth century, making space for the other paradigms discussed below. Even in the scientific world, research methodology has had to find ways to deal with concepts such as ‘uncertainty’ and ‘chaos’, and there have been moves in some sections of science away from the goal of absolute truth, based on claims to objectivity, generalization, and prediction. As an indication of this, there is one issue of The Journal of Communication (LI, no. 3, September 2001) devoted to ‘Uncertainty, evaluation and communication’.

However, positivism is experiencing a resurgence in the twenty-first century. In social science and the humanities, there is currently a growing trend towards positivist research, which seems to be preferred by academic and governmental funding bodies. This has led to a resurgence of quantitative methods in the social sciences and to the related ‘computational turn’ (Berry 2011) in the humanities. Feminists who endorse positivism have developed a research thread that they call ‘feminist empiricism’ (see Chafez 2004, or Leckenby 2007).
The post-positivist position begins in the middle of the twentieth century, with Karl Popper (1902–1994), who demonstrated that falsifiability (finding the case that does not fit, and so requires a change in the theory) is a more logically achievable goal than verification. But the term ‘post-positivism’ is harder to define than positivism. There are, broadly speaking, two families of definition:

- The more limited definition is represented by Lincoln et al. (2011). They attribute to post-positivism an ontology of critical realism, an epistemology that still seeks knowledge (but admits that verification is not achievable and judges success on Popper’s principles and the search for relative objectivity through the critical community of scholars), and a methodology more open to qualitative methods and the grounded theory arising from these. This is a relatively precise definition, making post-positivism a slightly softer, revised, version of positivism. It places positivism and post-positivism on one side of the debate (seeking objectivity, even though, in the case of post-positivists, acknowledging that it is out of reach), and critical theory, constructivism, and participatory action research on the opposite side of the debate (acknowledging, and to different degrees celebrating, the inherent subjectivity of research and relativity of knowledge).

- A more inclusive definition proposes post-positivism as the covering term for all the intellectual frameworks that have positioned themselves against positivism. Lather (1991: 7) breaks this field, not in relation to attitudes to objectivity–subjectivity, but in relation to goals (to understand, to emancipate, to deconstruct). This allows her to acknowledge that all the categories positioned against positivism (including Lincoln et al.’s post-positivism) see the research process to some degree as circular or spiral or cumulative (rather than linear and sequential), prefer qualitative over quantitative methods of research, and apply hermeneutic and contextual explanatory systems within a constructivist epistemology.

Because positivism was more openly acknowledged within the social sciences than within the humanities, it is primarily in these fields (particularly sociology, education, and psychology) that the debate between positivism and post-positivism has developed: within the humanities (literary studies, history), opposition to positivism tends to use a slightly different vocabulary (see Chapters 8 and 11). Such debates about terminology clearly demonstrate how important definitions are in the research process. In this book we will (as we would advise you to do in your own research) adopt the terminology that is most useful to us: we will limit the use of post-positivism as Lincoln et al. do, and use ‘non-positivist’ when we wish to refer to all those categories positioned against positivism.
If you feel as if you are now drowning in terminology, be reassured. Most of these terms will become clearer as you read on, and part of the confusion is not your responsibility – it arises because research theorists (and practitioners) are still struggling with the definitions, redefining them in use, while the categories themselves are shifting as a result of such struggles.

That is why it is so difficult to distinguish among those non-positivist categories: though they clearly differ, they might also intersect. We accept the argument of Herron and Reason (2011) that participatory action is a legitimate paradigm in its own right; however, it is also clear that some researchers subscribe to both participatory action and to critical theory (for instance, Kemmis 2008), or to participatory action and to constructivism (for instance, Gergen and Gergen 2008).

One way to start to understand these non-positivist paradigms is to watch them in action: for instance, for critical theory see Kincheloe and McLaren (2000), for constructivism see Charmaz (2000), for participatory action research see Kemmis and McTaggart (2000). There are also specialist texts on each that can give more detail: Strydom (2011) on critical theory, Gubrium and Harper (2013) or Reason and Bradbury (2008) on participatory action research, Rodwell and Byers (1997) on constructivism.

Another way is to look at the history of the categories and the changing relations among them. Much of this history and controversy is covered in the various chapters of Denzin and Lincoln’s impressive *Handbook of Qualitative Methodology* (2011a). Denzin and Lincoln themselves propose dividing the history of qualitative research into eight ‘moments’:


Our simpler version of this history (remembering that a ‘history’ implies change across time, but not necessarily progress) proposes a continuum, with overlapping categories of research (both quantitative and qualitative), which can be divided roughly as follows:

- the unchallenged dominance of positivism;
- the challenges to positivism:
  - from within (producing post-positivism);
  - from outside (from various non-positivist interpretive perspectives);
• the challenge of post-modernism (producing a breaking down of boundaries and an interest in alternative forms, both of enquiry and of writing);
• the resurgence of positivism within social science and the emergence of ‘computational’ or ‘digital’ humanities.

In such a terminological quicksand, a model such as Figure 1.3 can be a useful lifeline. We also repeat the warning that models are heuristic devices, not exact representations of any reality.

All these paradigms can be found in media and communications research, as we will demonstrate in later chapters. Ratings research comes straight out of the positivist paradigm, as do some of the effects studies, some uses and gratifications studies, and some early content analyses of texts. But more recent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GOAL</th>
<th>ONTOLOGY</th>
<th>EPISTEMOLOGY</th>
<th>METHODOLOGY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positivism:</td>
<td>Absolutely true knowledge</td>
<td>Realist: The world exists, and can be known</td>
<td>Objectivist: Objectivity is both possible and necessary and can lead to verifiable truth; Linear model of communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-positivism</td>
<td>Probably true knowledge</td>
<td>Qualified realist: The world exists, but we cannot know if we have fully apprehended it</td>
<td>Qualified objectivist: Objective truth remains a goal, but probable truth is the best we can expect; Usually linear model of communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical theory</td>
<td>Knowledge in the service of social progress through advocacy</td>
<td>Dialectical realist: Our knowledge of the world is constantly in flux</td>
<td>Subjectivist: Our experience of the world shapes the way we think and act; Usually semiotic model of communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constructivism</td>
<td>Understanding of our world</td>
<td>Relativist: Our perception and understanding of the world is shaped by language</td>
<td>Subjectivist: Language is context-specific so meanings are always negotiated and contingent; Semiotic model of communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participatory enquiry</td>
<td>Democratisation of knowledge through collaborative enquiry, leading to social advocacy</td>
<td>Usually relativist: Our perception and understanding of the world is created collaboratively</td>
<td>Subjectivist: Meaning is created collaboratively; Usually semiotic model of communication</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 1.3** Research paradigms
research into both audiences and texts have sometimes been post-positivist, and certainly ethnomethodology and other cultural studies approaches to media research have come from a perspective beyond or even hostile to positivist assumptions, exemplifying constructivism or critical theory or participatory action research.

It was once possible to define each academic ‘discipline’ in terms of its research paradigm, built upon a specific ontology and epistemology: the fields of ‘mathematics’ or ‘physics’ or ‘biology’ or ‘history’ or ‘literature’ or ‘classics’ recognised boundaries not only of what was appropriate for the discipline to know but of how the appropriate knowledge could be obtained. Media and Communication Studies have never been among these ‘pure’ disciplines: they have always drawn aspects of their ontology, epistemology, and methodology from both the social sciences and the humanities. This means that it has always been easier for Media and Communication researchers than for those from traditional disciplines to adapt to changing research paradigms and intellectual frameworks.

We agree with Denzin and Lincoln’s proposition that ‘the borders and boundary lines separating these paradigms and perspectives have begun to blur’ (2000: 157). If you espouse positivism rigidly (and there are currently moves back towards this) the boundaries are absolute: there is ‘real’ science, producing ‘real’ knowledge, and there is ‘woolly thinking’, which cannot enrich the pool of human knowledge at all. Beyond that positivist paradigm, all kinds of possibilities open up. In this book, we propose that there is no need to choose between a social science and a humanities approach, or between quantitative and qualitative methods: once you have decided what your question or hypothesis is, any method appropriate to that question is acceptable. This approach, of mixing methods from different paradigms and frameworks, is not uncontroversial: you can follow some of these arguments in Creswell (2011). It has become even more controversial in the era of ‘post-truth’, discussed more fully in Section 11.2.

A model like Figure 1.3 acknowledges the necessary connection between our processes of thought and our actions. It also allows us to see not only that methods can cross discipline boundaries, but that both the social sciences and the humanities share common paradigms and frameworks. Though some variants of each may be incompatible with some variants of another, it is not uncommon to find that individual researchers subscribe to more than one paradigm or framework at a time, and move about among them (and among variants within them) over the course of their research careers.

Till quite recently, it was considered both unwise and unprofessional to articulate your paradigm or framework in a research report. This is still true for most positivist researchers, who would claim objectivity and assume that
research must be value-free. Some positivists, however, now feel comfortable announcing their affiliations: Chafez (2004), for instance, identifies as both a positivist and a feminist, denying any contradiction between these.

Non-positivist researchers now feel free, or even obliged, to express their position openly. Lincoln et al. (2011: 97) explain that their own research has been ‘heavily influenced by action research practitioners and postmodern and poststructural critical theorists.’ Henry Jenkins (2006b) writes his whole book explicitly from within his own subjective experience of being a fan, though he does not make his research paradigm or intellectual framework equally explicit.

These examples demonstrate how attitudes to objectivity–subjectivity within the research community are shifting, acknowledging that research paradigms and intellectual frameworks both contribute to a researcher’s speaking position or ‘voice’.

Despite controversies, many paradigms and frameworks are currently operating simultaneously and across disciplines. That is where this book positions itself – on the boundary between the humanities and the social sciences. Though we have both come from (very different) humanities backgrounds, we believe that good media and communications research can come out of both academic traditions and from all research paradigms and intellectual frameworks past rigid positivism.

We cannot be completely comprehensive in this book – there is not enough space, and we do not claim sufficient expertise across all the alternatives. In each section we discuss only some of the research paradigms and intellectual frameworks that have contributed significantly to that stream of research, and in some cases the same paradigm or framework will appear again later. We do not propose that all these are equal or even equally valid: only that all are currently in use, so you are likely to find them represented in your reading, and you are likely to have absorbed some at least of this into your own ways of thinking. We hope here to provide you with a map of the terrain – a way of understanding how all these various elements (the general philosophical frameworks, the fundamental methodological paradigms, and the practical methods within each) relate to each other. With this knowledge, we hope you will be empowered to understand your own intellectual framework/s and so to select your research paradigm wisely – choosing those methods that are appropriate for your project and understanding the implications of your choices. We give you enough information to structure a research plan, some advice on the more commonly used methods, and information on where to find other texts that will provide you with the detail to carry your project through to a successful conclusion. The novice researcher can expect to be engaged in small-scale research at first, but the principles you learn there can be applied later to larger-scale research.
In the above discussion of research we have not explored one of the terms used by Lincoln et al. in their grid – ethics. They may be correct to link ethics with spirituality, which they suggest will in future be increasingly recognised within the research process, but we are taking a more pragmatic approach to ethics, as the moral judgments that allow researchers to evaluate their behaviour within their own work as well as to judge the moral aspects of the research of others.

1.3 Ethics

Lincoln and Guba (2000: 170) note on their grid that the positivist sees ethical problems as extrinsic to (outside) the research process, leaving the researcher to decide what is ethical, for instance whether or not to deceive participants: if the goal is a worthy one (the increase of human knowledge) then the end justifies the means (deception is acceptable). The post-positivist will probably agree with the positivist in principle, though she may in practice accept more responsibility for the effects of the research on subjects.

Other non-positivists, however, take a fundamentally different position, seeing the moral dimension of the research as intrinsic – a necessary part of the decisions they must make. Lincoln and Guba suggest that the critical theorist and the constructivist will always try to act morally (so protecting the participants from harm), while the participatory researcher will have involved participants all along, so moral decisions will have become a necessary aspect of the process itself.

1.3.1 Ethical Responsibilities

This model makes clear that ethical issues are a part of the research from beginning to end, shaped by the research paradigm through which the researcher is operating. But ethical decisions may not be entirely up to you. Universities and colleges usually have an ethics policy and standard procedures to protect all parties:

• to protect the right of the researcher to conduct the research;
• to ensure that the research subjects are not placed at any risk of physical, emotional, or financial harm; and
• to reduce the likelihood of legal action by research subjects against researchers or their institution.

The ethics policy of your institution should be scrupulously adhered to, for your own protection as well as for the protection of your research subjects.
This will probably involve making an application to an ethical standards committee, which should be seen as an opportunity to be taken advantage of rather than as a burden, to be circumvented. It is important both to your own peace of mind and to the quality of your research that you have confidence in your moral position and your capacity to put it into practice. Before you begin, it is worth reading some of the thoughtful approaches to complex ethical issues provided in (for instance) Mertens and Ginsberg (2008), Love (2012) or Christians (2000, 2010).

You can start to work out your own position, by considering the ethical–moral dimension of the web of relationships in which you are enmeshed:

**Relationship to the Profession**

As a media and communications researcher (or aspiring researcher), you have a responsibility to your colleagues, to uphold the good name of the profession. This will require you to:

- meet high standards, both in your behaviour during the research and in the quality of the work you produce; and
- behave in such a fashion that others will have no difficulty in entering the field after you.

Professional organisations now have voluntary codes of conduct that help to protect ethical standards within the profession, but such organisations are distant and impersonal. You would be wise to have someone (a lecturer; your thesis supervisor; a departmental head) to whom you can immediately turn, if ethical problems arise.

**Relationship to Funding and Commissioning Bodies**

This raises ethical issues that are not likely to concern students but that remain significant for the field as a whole. Is it possible to accept funding for media and communications research without:

- losing credibility with your peers: can you, for instance, ethically accept money from advertising agencies for research on the effects of products advertised, such as cigarettes; or
- compromising your own moral position, for instance, seeing your research used to justify selling cigarettes to minors?
Relationship to Sources

Whether your sources are real people, or just the documents and other evidence they leave behind, relationships with sources produce more ethical dilemmas than other relationships. You need to decide both how far you wish to protect your sources and how strictly you will implement your policy. If you consider that the end justifies the means, then you have no problem. Anything less than this will involve accepting responsibility for (in ascending order):

- protecting subjects from physical, financial, or emotional harm;
- protecting subjects from invasion of privacy (new laws to protect privacy have been introduced in recent decades in many jurisdictions);
- providing subjects with information about the research process;
- providing subjects with access to the research process and its results; and
- involving subjects in the research process and its results.

Once again, how far you go will depend upon your research paradigm and intellectual framework. The post-positivist will certainly accept the first of these responsibilities and probably the first three; the participatory action researcher will accept at least the fourth of these and probably the fifth.

Once you have decided what your ethical goals are, you can decide how to implement them. Clearly, doing this will take time, but no matter how irritating it all is, there is no excuse for researchers not behaving ethically. If you are in a position to reward participants (either by gifts or outright payment for their time and effort), your ethical responsibility is not diminished.

1.3.2 Ethical Procedure

Use of Documents and Images

You need first to decide who ‘owns’ the information you turn up – you or your sources? This is of particular sensitivity when you are studying a culture different from your own, with different standards concerning the ‘ownership’ and use of information. Some cultures are particularly sensitive about the use of images: for instance, in Australian indigenous culture it is unacceptable to show an image of a deceased person.

You will always need to be sensitive to the feelings of the subject of any text and to use the text in ways that do not hurt or offend. Library and archival research may turn up incriminating or embarrassing private documents
or institutional records. If these have caveats in place on their use, you must obey these (no matter how disappointing this is), and if they do not you still have the responsibility of dealing fairly and honestly (that is, ethically) with them. Fair dealing provides considerable leeway but does not absolve you from considering the feelings of the person/s implicated, or (if the person is already dead) of their family. Perhaps you may feel that you have a larger responsibility to the community, particularly when disclosure might result in re-shaping public opinion or future action. If so, consider first the legal implications, and take legal advice if there is the slightest possibility of action against you for slander or libel.

Selection of Human Subjects (for instance, for interview)

- Some subjects may be more vulnerable than others: for instance it would be unfair to test the effect of road safety advertisements on people who have been recently bereaved as the result of a road accident.
- Some subjects may not be capable of fully understanding the implications of your project: for instance, you may need to use interpreters when explaining to people of different linguistic background to your own or to use advocates or counsellors if you wish to interview people with intellectual disabilities.
- Children are a special case. You will need to get the cooperation of parents, and you should consider carefully both how vulnerable children are (to suggestion or manipulation) and that they may not fully understand what you plan to do.

Deception

This was recognised as an ethical minefield from very early in the history of social research, and a great deal has been written about it, for instance about whether covert research (research on subjects without their knowledge or consent) is ever ethical. There are, for instance, those areas of institutional research that might expose institutions or individuals to public criticism or be interpreted as commercial espionage. Internet research also raises significant privacy issues: in most jurisdictions the law is still coming to grips with these and may even shift while your research is in progress. You should take specialist advice on Internet ethics, starting with texts such as Burbulcs (2008) but possibly also from the legal department of your university or college.

A researcher must also be aware that subjects may deceive in questionnaires and interviews. This problem has special relevance to the Internet, but still
applies even in the most traditional of research fields. For a post-positivist, this is a problem requiring the development of strategies, both in the data-gathering phase and in interpretation. For a constructivist, it is simply a part of the research process: if all knowledge is constructed through interpretation, then lies (once recognised) are simply another form of data, requiring appropriate interpretation and inviting attention to the phenomenon of lying itself.

Informed Consent

This is the process (within all non-positivist paradigms) of informing research subjects of their rights and obtaining their consent to the research. If you are administering a questionnaire, it is enough that the questionnaire contain a statement of the intentions of the research and the level of confidentiality that is promised: provided this gives sufficient information, simply filling in the form can be taken to constitute consent.

Signing an ‘informed consent’ document (most institutions have standard forms) protects research subjects. The document should include all the following:

• provision to withdraw (up to an agreed final date) at any time, even if that inconveniences the researcher. There should be information on the format in which data will be collected (for instance, by written questionnaire on paper or on the web, or orally, by telephone or personal interview) and recorded (for instance on audiotape, videotape, or mobile phone);
• information about how and where the research data will be stored, for how long this will be kept, and who will have access to it;
• information about the use to which the research will be put, to whom and when the research report will be made, and where and when it is likely to be published;
• a guarantee of confidentiality and option for the subject to remain anonymous at all times; and
• information about the procedure to follow if the subject wishes to make a complaint.

Involving the Subjects in the Research

From some positions (obviously positivism, but also possibly post-positivism, critical theory, and constructivism), it is unwise for the researcher to get personally involved. This does not necessarily entail a claim to objectivity of research position (which would be unacceptable to some of the above
positions), but is rather a practical matter of protecting yourself from claims against you (emotional, financial, or legal), and of protecting those who are contributing to your research from any bad advice you might give or interference you may attempt.

However, from all the non-positivist positions, it may be advisable (and in the case of participatory action research it is obligatory) that you involve research subjects actively in the research. This can take many forms (again, in ascending order):

- written feedback questionnaires at various stages within the research and/or at the end;
- formal and informal consultation in person, at various stages and/or at the end;
- providing the subjects with an active role within the research (for instance, administering questionnaires, interviewing other subjects); and
- setting up the project in such a way as to make the subjects also the researchers.

These strategies all acknowledge that the research process sets up power relationships, which have ethical aspects. It is in the attempt to redress power imbalances that some writers advise that an interviewer should be of the same gender and similar age to the interviewee. However, this is not always practicable, and, even when it is possible, a power imbalance will still remain, while one is in the position of providing information and the other of soliciting it.

Each research project has its own particular ethical dilemmas. For instance, case studies are often done on media institutions, sometimes with the knowledge and co-operation of the institution, even perhaps commissioned, and therefore funded, by them. This means that the researcher may well have freer access to documents and people but might also have more constraints on using the information in any report. Some of these constraints are formal, for instance, the commissioning institution requiring that it approve any report before publication. Sometimes ethical problems arise informally out of the relationship that develops between a researcher and the people with whom she is working over an extended period of time. If your ethical position is clear before you start, you will be able to deal with any such problems quickly and consistently, as they arise.

All of the above may require adaptation for the special circumstances of Internet research, which has its own unique ethical and legal challenges. Consult specialist texts for advice on this, for instance Eynan et al. (2008) and Charlesworth (2008).
To sum up: develop and implement your own ethical position, making sure you treat all research subjects with respect.

1.4 Conclusion

In this chapter we have provided alternative definitions of key terms (‘communication’, ‘culture’, ‘media’, ‘research’) and an introduction to some of the major research paradigms that have shaped media research. In later chapters we also provide an introduction to the many intellectual frameworks that have informed media research. As you engage in the process of research, you will be locating yourself within these alternatives: over time, you may find your position/s changing as your own ideas develop and as the field mutates around you. This process of locating yourself begins with the selection of a topic and ‘reading around’ it: as you read what others have done and said you can make judgments about which other researchers see the world as you do. If you can find a position you can comfortably share (with an individual or a group or a school of thought), you can ease yourself into the field by initially modelling your own research on other research from that position. Fortunately, no two people are identical, and no two research projects are ever quite the same: you will soon find yourself branching off on your own, developing your own unique approach.

Research is exciting! Like a good detective story, it confronts you with the unknown and constantly challenges you with problems needing solutions. Though the procedural detail of research may be tedious and repetitive, the outcomes can be very satisfying. But, let us begin at the beginning, by discussing the selection of a research topic and the reading that shapes your thinking about this.
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