

Communication Research and Research Communication in the Digital Era: What has Changed?

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Abstract

Background: The digital age has not just changed, but transformed the field of communication. It has revolutionized how research is conducted and how research results are communicated to the general public. Therefore, up-to-date empirical information is crucial to grasp the current state of research communication as well as communication research.

Objective: This study aims to understand how digital media platforms have affected communication research and research communication.

Methodology: The researchers used a qualitative approach with a structured interview as the data collection instrument. Overall, 32 communication researchers were interviewed through Google Meet. The results were analysed using thematic analysis and presented qualitatively.

Results: The result of the study showed that digital media platforms have changed the face of communication research in four ways. First, research conducting is now significantly influenced by digital media. Digital media now influence stages like data gathering, analysis and reporting. Secondly, manuscript submission processes have also changed from what they used to be with the use of more interactive platforms that allow researchers to track the progress of their submissions to journals. Thirdly, communication research output has also been influenced by digital media. In the fourth place, people can track the impact of their research efforts in the digital era more than ever.

Contribution: This study has not only provided empirical evidence regarding the current state of research communication and communication research in the digital era, but also shed light on the profound impact of digital media on these fields.

Conclusion: The influence of digital media platforms on communication research and research communication is not limited to developed countries. This study has shown that digital media has significantly affected these fields, even in developing countries like Nigeria, highlighting its global impact.

Recommendation: The study recommends, among other things, that researchers should improve their skills to leverage the opportunities available in digital tools for research purposes.

Keywords: communication; digital media; research communication; data collection

Introduction

Research is, at best, the meeting point among academics of different disciplines. In the research world, the walls of race, culture, geographical location, language, ethnicity and discipline are broken. It is in research that scholars whose countries are not in the best diplomatic relationships rob shoulders, form groups and reason together. Gauffin and Dunlavy (2021) affirm that research is a critical factor that unites people from different backgrounds. Research has its unique language that people from different disciplines speak. It is the universality of research that makes some universities invite examiners from different disciplines to examine postgraduate students. For example, until recently, the internal examiner for doctoral students in the Department of Mass Communication, University of Nigeria, was from the Sociology Department of the same University. According to Kyvik and Reymert (2017), collaboration is an essential component of research, and people across disciplines and with different cultural and religious persuasions engage in collaborative research work.

In research, someone with a mass communication background could co-author a journal article with another from the medical sciences, and the article will be useful for researchers from both disciplines. For example, an article titled ‘Determinants of doctor-patient communication’ could be useful for medical scholars and their mass communication counterparts. Also, an article titled ‘The changing nature of political communication’ could be useful for both political science and mass communication scholars. Even though this study acknowledges that research is universal, each discipline has some peculiarities in the manner in which research is conducted. For example, a person conducting research in fine and applied arts will be required to use more pictures and illustrations than his counterparts in statistics, who will place more premium on figures and statistical models. Perhaps this is why we hear of expressions like psychology, education, and communication research, among others. In all these, research findings must be communicated to the general public, hence the expression research communication.

Different aspects of research, such as the research conducting stage, the publication process and the research communication, have undergone changes as a result of the emergence of new media. According to Gunter et al. (2002), digital media platforms have substantially changed the face of research in the 21st century. Okereka et al. (2023) say that digital media platforms have affected research, especially data collection. Considering the impact that digital media platforms have on people and society, empirical evidence is needed to understand how communication research has been affected.

Objective of the Study

The aim of this study was to understand the impact of digital media on research communication. The specific objectives of the study were to:

1. Determine the impact of digital media on the research communication process.
2. Ascertain the impact of digital media on the article submission process among communication scholars.
3. Determine the impact of digital media on communicating research findings.

Literature Review

The Concept of Research

This study paid more attention to how digital media has affected the research world. Babbie (2013), in his book entitled *The Practice of Social Research*, opened with a chapter

captioned: 'Human Inquiry and Science' Babbie's book, which is in its 14th edition, is one of the globally read books in research. Other books (e.g. Anol, 2012; Cochran, 1963; Nworgu, 2006) have all defined research in different ways, but such definitions still fall within the ambit of research as a scientific inquiry. The point to note is that in research, a researcher attempts to find out about a phenomenon, an issue, or a subject using scientific procedures. The scientific procedure here means that such an inquiry follows a step-by-step approach. It has to be procedural. There is no room for haphazard movements in research. This partly explains why this study argues that a good researcher is as good, if not better, as a logician (an expert in logic). Sound reasoning, coherence and organisation of thought, and logical expressions are critical requirements of scientific inquiry. Researchers must dedicate valuable time to meditate about their research engagements. Dedicating time to think about one's research is as important as the time to conduct the research. A person must see things differently; ask questions until every question is answered. It would be best if a researcher always separates emotions from facts, sees things, and analyses them as they are. Researchers must ignore their religious beliefs because the religion of good research is science. Forget their cultural beliefs because the culture of a good researcher is science. Forget their family relations and friends because a researcher needs research more than he or she needs them. Forget tradition and norms because the only tradition and norms a good research needs is science. A good researcher is a slave to facts and a strict respecter of science and procedure.

Research Communication

Research communication describes disseminating research findings to those who need such research output. Research communication is a severe stage of any research. When studies are conducted, and the findings are not made public to benefit the general public, then an important aspect of research must have been neglected. This is because the final consumers must have been neglected. This situation is similar to what is obtainable in marketing, where production is said not to be complete until it reaches the final consumers. Unfortunately, in less developed countries like Nigeria, research communication is treated with less seriousness as most researchers engage in research to attract academic promotions at their places of work. The media in Nigeria have also paid less attention to reporting studies conducted by Nigerian researchers. The few studies that often appear in Nigerian media are those from outside of the country. The Tertiary Education Trust Fund takes the issue of research communication seriously. That is why when TETFUND sponsors institutional-based research, the researcher is mandated to publish the results in at least one Q1-ranked journal or two Q2-ranked journals. In addition, the researcher (s) are required to present their findings at an academic conference. Simply put, the implication is that research communication is an integral part of the research process. It is essential to add that Q stands for Quartile, a journal citation ranking and Quartile Scores (Q1-Q4) based on impact factor (IF) data. Q1 journals have a higher impact than Q2, while Q2 have a higher impact than Q3 and Q4 is the least. The research process itself begins with conceptualisation of the idea, preliminary research, main research, research communication and research utilisation. This chain is presented in Figure 1 below:

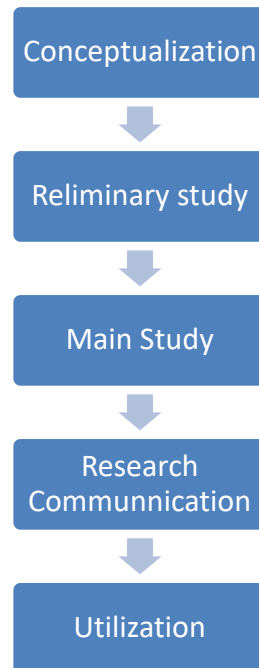


Figure 1 The chain of research

The figure above shows the chain of research. The items in the chain are explained in the following ways:

Conceptualisation: This is the incubation period for the overall research. At this stage of the chain, issues like topic and objectives are considered. After a researcher has decided on what to do, the research flows to the next level of the chain.

Preliminary research: This level of the chain requires that the researcher (s) get involved in pre-research activities like where best to conduct the study, what has been done in the past and how the current study will move further and expand on the previous. It is at this level that a research plan is developed.

Main research: This is where the main scientific inquiry takes place. It is the stage where the researcher (s) get involved in implementing what has been planned.

Research communication: This is a stage where findings from research are passed to the general public. For example, if a study shows that less sleep is dangerous to human health, then people must get to know so that they can take precautions. If the result shows that communicating rumours is deadly, then people need to know so that they can take measures to prevent it. The media of research communication could include traditional media like radio, TV, newspapers and magazines and new media like Facebook, Gmail, and Twitter, among others. The screenshot below is an example of a research communication platform.

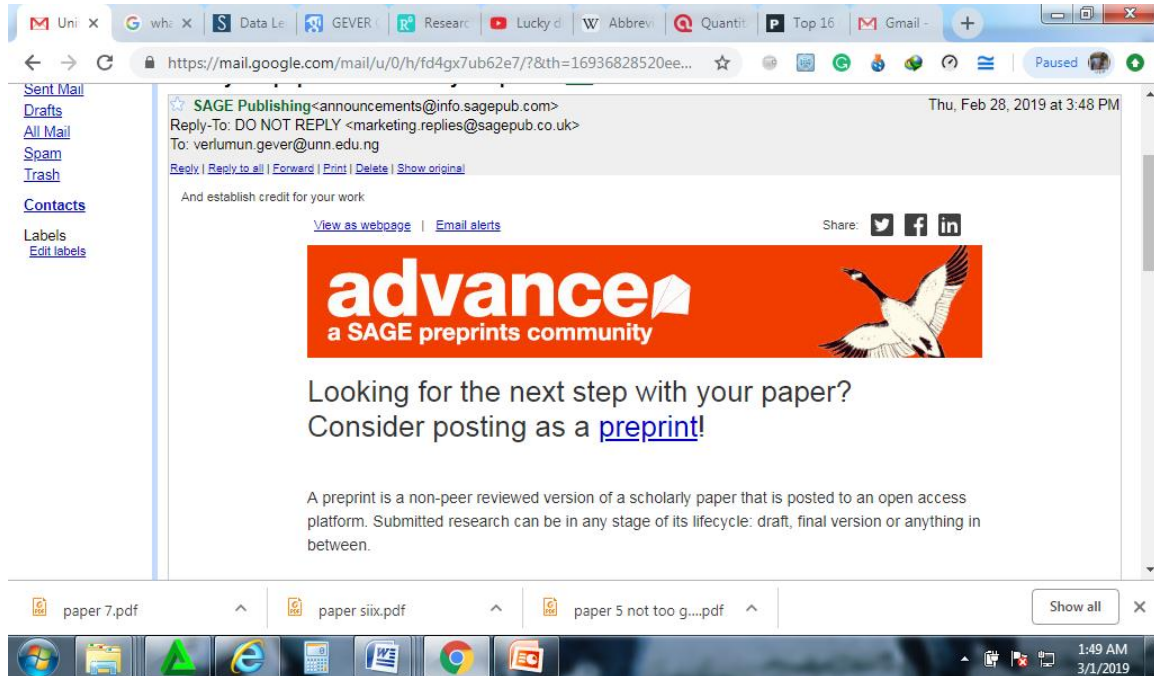


Figure 2 A Screenshot of the research communication platform

Research utilisation: This is the final stage in a research chain. It is the stage where people make use of results of research. It is the final stage in a research chain.

Theoretical framework

The researchers used the technological determinism theory to articulate this study. Marshall McLuhan suggested the theory in 1964 to articulate the impact of new technologies on a social system. The theory holds that introducing new technologies into a social system influences activities in the social system (Hauer, 2017; Jan et al., 2021). It says that man introduces new technologies into society, and the technology, in turn, influences how man conducts his activities. Roncallo-Dow and Scolari (2016) note that the theory is a useful framework for understanding information flow among people in social systems. Scholars (e.g. Ogunleye et al., 2011; Nwosu & Soola, 2007; Nwanwene, 2010) believe that the digital era has significantly changed the manner and scope of communication. This change is also applicable to research communication. In today's digital world, research communication has completely changed from only hard copies of research reports to using digital media options to communicate soft copies and other formats to the audience.

Methodology

The researchers used content analysis as the design of this study. The choice of content analysis ensured that the manifest content was examined for analysis. The type of content analysis was qualitative content analysis. The study's target population was communication researchers who had published at least one article in a peer-reviewed journal in the last 12 months and were the corresponding authors. This was to ensure that the participants had adequate experience in publication in standard journals. This means that the population of the study was not definite. The researchers sampled 32 communication scholars. The sampling procedure was a snowball sampling procedure, which usually begins by identifying potential participants who recommend other participants. The initial

participants were recruited through social media announcements posted on Facebook. To be included in the sample, a participant must be a communication researcher and have published at least one article in a journal indexed in either Scopus or Web of Science, where they are the corresponding author. The instrument of data collection was a semi-structured interview guide. The interviewing process began with an explanation of the study's objective, after which the participants were asked a general question- "Tell me about what they think of the impact of digital media on communication research." Follow-up questions were asked, and notes were taken. The researchers also recorded the interview. After the interview, the interview transcripts were documented for analysis. The researchers used thematic analysis to analyse the results of the study.

Results and discussion

The result of the study is presented here under four broad themes thus:

Impact of digital media on conducting communication research

The participants believed that digital media have significantly impacted the processes of conducting communication research. They noted that processes like data collection, analysis, and intervention delivery have changed. One of the participants (male) said, "In this era of digital media, it is now possible to conduct an intervention online. This was not the case before." Another participant (female) said, "Content analysis has moved from assessing hardcopies of newspapers to just visiting the websites of newspapers, and the job is done. I have noticed that conducting content analysis using online versions is far easier than printed copies." Another participant (male) said, "Data collection has moved from printed questionnaire copies to online platforms. The landscape has changed." Data analysis has also changed from manual computation to software-supported analysis, said one of the participants. This result is consistent with that of Okereka et al. (2024), who found that digital media platforms have significantly affected the data collection process. Based on the result from the interview, the following are specific ways communication research has been affected by the new media.

1. *Data gathering*: The gathering of primary and secondary data sources has been made easier by the revolution in new media. In the contemporary world, getting archival data without travelling is easier. A researcher could be in the comfort of his or her room or office and get secondary data from faraway countries. Also, online surveys have become very fashionable. Communication researchers now get their respondents to fill out questionnaires online. They also could hold focus group discussions with people from different countries using teleconferencing. All these were not possible in the pre-digital age.

2. *Data Analysis*: Data analysis is a very important aspect of communication research, just as it is to other research. With technological advancements, sophisticated software could be used to analyse quantitative and qualitative data. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) is among the software used for quantitative analysis. Note that researchers in core sciences, in an attempt to separate themselves from those from the social sciences, call the SPSS Statistical Package for Product Solution. Other software for quantitative analysis include Stata (syllabic abbreviation of the words statistics and data- A syllabic abbreviation is usually formed from the initial syllables of several words) and MATLAB (matrix laboratory), among others. The software for qualitative analysis

include, Nvivo, Atlas.ti, Qualcoder, KH coder, CLAN (Child Language Analysis), among others. All these were not possible in the pre-digital era. These computer-assisted tools for data analysis have been widely embraced as reliable tools for data analysis. In fact, some journals do not accept manual analysis because they are more prone to errors than computer-assisted versions.

3. *Digital-assisted information Search and dissemination:* The digital world has completely changed the ways in which communication researchers search for information. Institutional repositories, journal archives, and other online platforms are now available options for communication researchers. Online platforms also exist through which communication researchers share their materials for better visibility and enhanced citations.

Manuscript submission processes

The participants also reported that digital media platforms have changed the article submission process to a more interactive format, unlike what was obtainable. One of the participants (male) said, “Digital media platforms have led to the development and use of platforms for article submission and processing. Examples are Editorial manager, manuscript Central, and Open Journal System (OJS).” Another participant (female) said, “Authors are now able to track the progress of their manuscript to know if reviewers have been invited, when they accept to review and when they return their reports.” Overall, the participants agreed that digital media platforms have changed the face of article submission and the peer-reviewed process. Before the digital age, manuscripts were submitted by sending such hard copies to the editor. Such manuscripts were also typeset using the typewriter. However, manuscripts are typeset using the computer in the digital era and sent to editors as email attachments. The editors and the reviewers review such manuscripts using the computer, and the report is communicated to the contributors electronically. It is fast and less expensive. More advanced manuscript submission and review processes use what is called manuscript central. It is an online platform that allows contributors to submit their manuscripts and track their manuscripts' progress. To submit a manuscript to a journal that uses Manuscript Central, a contributor must first create an account with the journal.

The changes in research communication are presented as follows:

The participants equally reported that communicating research findings has also changed with the use of digital tools to communicate research outputs. One of the participants (male) said, “The methods of communicating research findings to the general public have changed. Digital media platforms are essential for communicating findings to the general public.” Below is a summation of the key points on the impact of digital media on communicating research findings:

1. *Use of Video to Communicate Research Report:* In contemporary research communication, scholars can communicate their research report to the audience in a manner that the TV presenters cast news. The researcher must create a YouTube account, video-record what is to be said, and post it on the Internet. Some journals, especially those published by SAGE, now give authors the option to do a video of their abstract so that the video link is attached to the online text version of the published manuscript.
2. *Online visibility platforms:* With the emergence of digital media, online platforms for communicating research have also sprang up. These platforms allow users to

- create accounts and upload their published research for wider coverage and reach. Examples of such platforms include kudos, (<https://www.growkudos.com>) researchgate (<https://solutions.researchgate.net/advertising>) among others.
3. *Research Communication Feedback*: Just like in conventional communication, digital media provide platforms through which researchers keep track of the success rate of their research communication. That is the number of people who have viewed, downloaded and used their research work. A good example here is Google Scholar. With a Google Scholar profile, a researcher keeps track of their articles' citations and provide an online presence for their scholarly work. Google Scholar plots a graph of such citations for scholars every year.

Conclusion and recommendation

This study concludes that the digital age has significantly impacted communication research and research communication. Therefore, researchers who hope to be relevant must also keep up with the changing trends in the research world. Despite the contribution of this study, it has some limitations. First, the researchers examined only communication scholars. The impact of digital is vast and could affect other disciplines. However, the current study examined only those from communication. Additionally, the study used only a qualitative approach, thus making it difficult to test the impact of the level of career in research on the participants' responses based on the stages of their careers. Finally, the current study did not examine the limitations of the use of digital media for research among the sample examined. It is suggested that further studies should examine the identified limitations.

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