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<th>Issues for consideration in survey research methodology.</th>
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Issues For Consideration In Survey Research Methodology

By

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ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION IN SURVEY RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

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This is not intended as a comprehensive paper on applicability of Survey Research Methodology. The main purpose is to raise some points and issues for consideration so that provisions are made to take into account certain country related aspects. The paper discusses these issues by means of a few examples/case studies and illustrates the need to take into account the varying needs in survey research.

Views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the organisation he works for.
INTRODUCTION

Survey research methodology is one of the most widely methodologies used in India especially in the field of communication research. A variety of surveys are conducted. To name just a few, there are surveys to find out the viewership and popularity of television programmes, surveys to find out the viewing patterns and habits of different segments of the society, to determine the effectiveness or impact of a particular television programme or a series of programmes, market research, pretesting of television programmes etc.

In this presentation I wish to share some of our experiences in the application of survey research methodology for different purposes. The main idea of this presentation is to focus on the problems that the researcher face and to emphasize the processes which take place in conducting of a survey research and to raise some of the questions and provide possible solutions.

BACKGROUND

Before that let us examine some of the background information about India and about the communication scenario found in the country.

Some of the facts and figures distributed along with this presentation clearly bring out some salient features about India.

1. **Size:** It hardly needs to be said that India with a population of over 800 Million people is one of the most populous countries in the world. It is not only very populous but it is marked by great
diversity. It is a multi-religious and a multi-lingual society. There is enormous cultural diversity. This country has many levels and degrees of development. On the one hand, it has third largest scientific and technical manpower in the world and it has nearly 60% of the population which is totally illiterate. Between these two extreme ranges of education there is are too many levels to be elaborated.

2. Television Scenario: As the separate paper on this subject indicates, there is an enormous expansion of television in the last few years. Whether it is coverage or the number of transmitters or the number of television sets or the number in the audiences, it is an unprecedented explosion. Along with that also there has been an explosion in terms of the variety of the programmes produced. The number of languages in which television programmes are produced has also gone up a great deal. Television has really spread to different nooks and corners and has gone even into very remote areas.

But the television scenario is also not without its quota of contradictions. While it is true that the absolute number of audience and the coverage area has increased enormously in the last five years or so, there is still a much large number of population which has no access to television programmes. Commercialisation in television has also increased a great deal, at the same time there is also an increase in the extent of developmental and educational programmes. For example, almost three hours everyday are earmarked for higher or primary education. The television is subjected to great many political pulls and pres-
sures. But at the same time there are clear trends towards making television an autonomous medium.

3. Data Availability: A large number of data about Indian life are gathered and made public. These include data on the economic situation, health education, mass media, employment, demographic data etc. But very often there are no data bases of certain types, for example, the number of television sets in the country since the abolition of the licensing system is very difficult to judge. There are estimates which vary. At a more difficult level some other statistics, for example, it is extremely difficult to judge the number of people who may be watching the programme at a given moment of time. The practical usage of certain data is also of a very doubtful nature. For example, when it is said that a particular village is electrified, it does not imply that the school building in that village has electricity connection. If one took the stand since the village is electrified the school building also will be electrified, for taking some decisions it would lead to some wrong decisions. There would hardly be any way of knowing the number of schools which are connected by electricity without conducting primary research.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

In the above paragraphs some background information is provided, not with a view to give a comprehensive view of the country, but to bring out certain facts which have a bearing on the work of the researcher. In this presentation, I propose to take up two cases and indicate how the research process is influenced by some of
the above mentioned factors. The first case study is about the Kheda Communications Project research. The respondents in this case are the rural population. The second case study is about pretesting of a series of programmes of the History of Indian Science and Technology. Here the respondents are educated urban people.

THE CASE OF KHEDA COMMUNICATIONS PROJECT

Details regarding the Kheda Communications Project are available in some of the documents circulated separately. It is important to stress here that the Kheda Communications Project’s major audience is rural audiences. A large number of which is illiterate or semi-literate. This presents certain limitation on the data collection tools which have to be employed in a survey methodology. The mailed questionnaire very often becomes a useless tool and by the same token the self administered questionnaire is also not of much use. The main reasons for this are the factors of illiteracy and even with the literate audience the response rate especially for the mailed questionnaire is very low. With the semi-literate groups also it has been found that the self-administered questionnaire does not work too well.

However, if the sample population for the study consists of literate sections who are in a controlled situation, for example, students in primary or secondary schools, the self-administered questionnaire works fairly well. The data gathering, however, has to be done in one session so that attrition is made almost negligible.
Compared to questionnaire, the interview method seems to be more efficient. This method is able to overcome the barrier of illiteracy though this data gathering tool is rather slow and requires considerable skill and know of local language on the part of the interviewer.

On many occasions, we have to use the questionnaire method in the form of interview. If we employ a closed questionnaire with fixed alternatives or trying to administering a scale to literate or illiterate people we read out verbatim the questions or the scale statement and the options given therein. The respondent indicates his/her response orally which is noted by the concerned researcher on the spot. All this introduces an element of variability and the scope of error is increased.

There are certain cultural factors which need to be taken into account before selecting a particular data collection tool or technique. The rural populations by and large find it very difficult to respond to very structured questionnaire or interview. The rural population seems to come out better when they are in a position to give a rather long winded replies often with plenty of digressions than giving monosyllabic or very short and precise answer.

It has been our experience found that in rural areas even the interview method is restricted by certain cultural norms and conditions. In a rural environment it is difficult to conduct an interview with one single individual. Very often there is a great deal of group participation and it becomes difficult to say whether the given re-
sponses are genuine responses of the individual or they are given because of the social circumstances in which the respondents find himself/herself.

This kind of social supervision can lead to vitiating the quality of data in certain cases. For example, it has been found on several occasions that when the respondent is a woman, the leaders in the family, usually the husband or the mother-in-law want to make sure that the woman gives certain types of responses only. Efforts are made not to let the woman have a free hand in the matter. Very often there would be interjections on the part of the husband or the mother-in-law. The discussion is there taken over from the main respondent to some other members of the family usually the men. Similarly things may happen when the landless labourer or a scheduled caste person is interviewed.

All this means that it would require enormous skill and experience on the part of the researcher to create conditions for interview in which the influence of such social factors is minimum.

Cross questioning and probing in several ways also becomes necessary. The validity of the data gathered would depend on many of the factors mentioned above.

The validity of the data gathered would also depend on the subject under consideration. There is not only the factor of social desirability which influences the responses the factor of what may be termed convenient answers also influences the responses. The respondents very often try to test out the researcher. If the respondent can
get away non-committal answers or the answers which he or she thinks is going to please the researcher then they try to get away with those kinds of answers.

* The purpose is not to say that the rural audience is basically very different from the urban audience but the purpose is to underline some of the factors and variables which have a bearing on the quality of data gathering. Undoubtedly several of these factors are common to both urban and rural, literate and illiterate sections. However, it is important for the researcher to remember some of these factors when she/he enters the rural environment.

THE CASE OF PRETESTING A TELEVISION SERIES

BACKGROUND TO THE SERIES

National Council of Science and Technology Communication (NCSTC), Department of Science and Technology (DST) sponsored a communication project called the COMET PROJECT regarding the history of Indian science and technology. The project constitutes a 13 part series, with each episode having a duration of about 50 minutes. The programmes were shot on 16 mm film. The programmes were in Hindi and they were meant for national telecast. The intended primary target audiences were students of Higher Secondary level and above, and educated adults interested in science. Considering its scope and importance pretesting of the prototypes was essential.
OBJECTIVES OF THE PROGRAMMES

1. Generating interest and understanding of indigenous science and technology, its historical development and the importance of this heritage.

2. Highlighting its present day significance.

3. Promotion of rational and scientific outlook among the people.

The series had a very wide sweep in terms of time and space. It encompassed large chunks of ‘periods’ of history and a large number of subjects and topics.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The pretesting exercise was mainly directed to find out the following:

1. Whether the programmes including the format are found interesting or not.

2. Whether the contents are properly understood or not.

3. What the immediate impact was and particularly whether there was anything in the content or the format which causes hostility or which introduces any element which may turn off the viewers.
More specifically the following variables were kept in mind during pretesting:

1. Information content: overload/underload, simple/complex, interesting/pedestrian.

2. Information dissemination: too slow/too fast.

3. If the process of moving from specific data to broad generalisation is clearly understood or not.

4. Is there a balance between abstract concepts, ideas and artifacts and locales.

5. Is there proper integration of different sequences.

6. Whether it is able to hold the interest and the attention of audience.

7. Whether the characters achieve rapport and credibility.

8. Is there anything jarring or inappropriate which hampers communication.

PRETESTING GROUPS

There were two groups with whom the programmes were pretested:

A. Students
B. General Adults
A. **Students**

The Students were in the +2 category, mostly from colleges and a few from schools. Efforts were made to ensure adequate representation to both males and females. They were drawn from different disciplines like arts, science, commerce, engineering, medicine etc.

B. The adults also had a minimum education of up to college, and the group comprised of both women and men. They also had different backgrounds in terms of levels of education and disciplines like arts, commerce, science, engineering etc. Their occupations were varied: service, self employed, business, professionals, homemakers etc.

**INSTRUMENTS OF PRETESTING**

There were two major instruments of pretesting:

A. **Questionnaire**

B. **Group Discussion**

**QUESTIONNAIRE**

A self-administered questionnaire was constructed. It was a mix of close-ended and open-ended questions.

The questionnaire aimed at finding out the responses to the following: Interest, duration, pace and amount of information, familiarity with subject matter, difficulty level of language used in the programme, style and format of presentation, use of different techniques like songs, animation, coherence and sequencing of information, content, likes and dislikes vis-a-vis characters, credibility, the strengths and weaknesses of the pro-
grammes etc. There were also questions to find out the respondents' level of comprehension of the programmes.

GROUP DISCUSSION

Even though the questionnaire was exhaustive, it was decided to hold group discussion pertaining to interest, duration, content, format etc. We, however, kept it more unstructured so that free flow of communication could take place. The group discussions were recorded on audio tape recorder.

* We had to use the questionnaire in three languages. The group discussion were held in 4 or 5 languages. Very often the discussion was in a mix of different languages.

* It has been our experience that the Indian audiences are not most comfortable if the responses are given only in a written form. It is the mix of both written and spoken form.

* Many experiences described in the earlier example of Kheda Communications Project hold for this example also and hence are not repeated once again.

* As can be seen from the above examples, the methodology of data collection has to be varied keeping in mind the specific needs of the audiences and the local conditions.
CONCLUDING REMARKS

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize the following points:

1. The study should be able to take into account the variations which are found in different countries. These variations pertain to population-size, languages spoken, levels of education, social, political, cultural variations etc.

2. The study design, data collection tools etc. should be viable and flexible and should be so designed that it is not superficial and that it brings out the complexity of the situation.

3. The benchmark or pre-study data availability varies from country to country. It varies from one state or region to another within the country. It varies from subject to subject. It may therefore be necessary to make efforts to gather several types of data before the main study by means of secondary research. If secondary data are not available additional primary research might have to be done.

4. Training and orientation of the researchers is of crucial importance and we should not compromise on this count.

5. Detailed written guidelines should be given to the researchers regarding the way research is to be conducted.

6. The research should be fluent in the language of the respondent.
7. The structures of the media set-ups should be taken into account while designing the study e.g. local, regional, national.

8. The local condition, cultural norms, behavioural patterns should be taken into account in the conduct of the study as they often determine the quality of data.