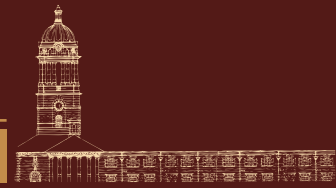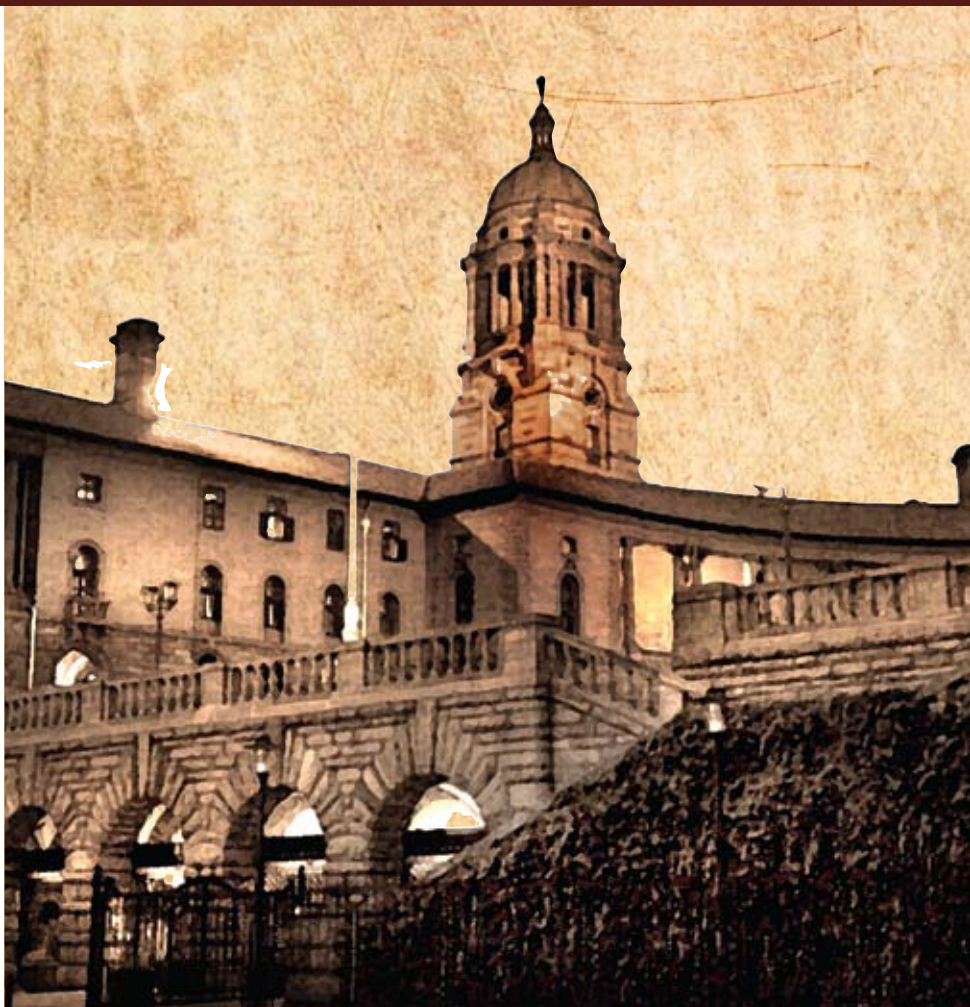# CHAPTER 6
COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

**government
communications**

Department:
Government Communication and Information System
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

Government communicators need to inform the public about government's policies and programmes to implement its mandate, including opportunities available to better their lives. In South Africa, the Government is using communication research to a growing extend. The effectiveness of government communication and the dissemination of government information can be enhanced through the application of appropriate scientific research processes and methodologies.

A former chief executive officer of the Government Communication and Information System (Joel Netshitenzhe) argues that: *In working out campaigns and programmes, there should be a deliberate effort to understand the communication environment, including target groups, appropriate media platforms, messages and forms of interaction. In this regard, communication research is a critical element of the trade: communication is an art form, but it should be based on science.*

Benefits for conducting communication research include the following:
- helping to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of communication campaigns
- allowing for the needs of the target groups to be assessed
- assisting in the identification of appropriate messages and strategies to effectively communicate with the target audience
- evaluating the effectiveness of campaigns
- helping to meet accountability requirements
- assisting in the development of future campaigns through pre- and post-testing of campaigns and material.

6.1. Approaches to research
There are different ways to categorise the various ways in which communication research can be conducted – e.g. empirical- and desk research, personal and telephonic interviews, and interviewing individuals or groups. Most often though, researchers distinguish between quantitative and qualitative research.

6.1.1. Quantitative research
Quantitative research involves the collection of data in a valid and reliable manner. Statistical procedures are used in the design, conduct and analysis of that research. Quantitative research is appropriate when we want to answer questions such as: How many? How much? How often? When? By whom? Questions like these require precise and quantifiable answers. Quantitative research can also be defined as research that aims to measure or put a number to a response. Quantitative research tends to emphasise relatively large-scale and representative sets of data. It is research that is indirect and abstract and treats experiences as similar, adding or multiplying them together, or quantifying them (Blaxter *et al*, 1996).
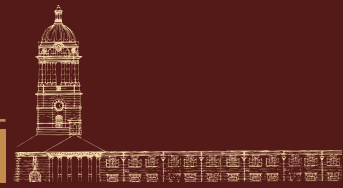
Quantitative data collection primarily involves conducting surveys and mostly uses face-to-face interviews, telephonic interviews, self-completion questionnaires or Web-based questionnaires.

6.1.2. Qualitative research

Qualitative research is often more challenging and time-consuming than quantitative research. It is concerned with collecting and analysing information in various forms, mainly non-numeric. Qualitative research also tends to focus on exploring, in as much detail as possible, smaller numbers of instances or examples that are seen as being interesting or illuminating, and aims to achieve "depth" rather than breadth (Blaxter *et al*, 1996).

"Qualitative" implies a direct concern with experience as it is "lived" or "felt" or "undergone". Qualitative research aims at understanding experiences as nearly as possible as its participants feel it or live it (Blaxter *et al*, 1996).

Qualitative research aims at getting beneath the surface of verbal responses to explore the real dimension of a problem and the range of attitude to it. This type of information is particularly helpful to communicators and creative agencies as it allows for the development and evaluation of messages and products based on the target audience's motivations. This is why qualitative research is usually recommended for pre- and post-testing communication campaigns or material.
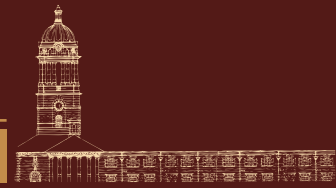
Qualitative researchers mostly use focus-group discussions and personal in-depth interviews for data collection.

6.2. Data analysis

It is important to understand the data after collection and capturing. Data analysis is an activity that permeates all stages of a study. Concern with analysis should begin during the design of a study, continue as detailed plans are made to collect data in different forms, and become the focus of attention after data is collected. Data analysis may not necessarily be completed only during the report writing, and data can be reviewed and analysed again and again depending on how one wants to utilise the findings.

Successful data analysis (quantitative or qualitative) requires understanding of a variety of data-analysis methods and different software packages that can be used for analysis (e.g. Excel, SPSS, Atlas ti, Nvivo). Data analysis needs to be planned early in a project. Researchers need to understand which methods will be best to attend to the aim and objectives of the research project. Researchers need to understand the questions posed to respondents and recognise how weaknesses in the data or the analysis can potentially affect the conclusions.

The dataset is often large (especially for quantitative research) and it is therefore not always easy to make connections between the various pieces of information. To make sense of the data, it is necessary to summarise it by

following a set of procedures (Struwig and Stead, 2001). Such procedures for data analysis may be classified in three dimensions as suggested by Bush (2005):

- *classification*: aggregating and organising data (e.g. through tables)
- *comparison*: comparing two or more datasets
- *interpretation*: using a conceptual framework to explain findings.

Analysis provides a basis for organising findings and for explaining its significance. When presenting findings, the main method is likely to be classification. This provides the basis for organising a complex dataset in a way that makes the meaning clear to the reader. There are different ways of analysing qualitative and quantitative data.

Quantitative data analysis is the process of presenting and interpreting numerical data. Quantitative data analysis often contains descriptive statistics and inferential statistics. Different software packages could be useful in the analysis of quantitative data (e.g. SPSS, Excel, etc.) However, the use of such software needs knowledge and understanding of the software.

Qualitative data analysis is less precise (compared to quantitative data) because the data-collection process rarely provides an easy basis for straightforward comparison. Qualitative research relates to the personal (or "subjective") experience of individuals and requires an approach to data analysis that acknowledges this emphasis. The main issue is to seek understanding of the way in which individuals create, modify and interpret the social world that they inhabit. It is concerned with meanings as much as with facts (Bush, 2005).

The emphasis on subjective views has implications for the mode of analysis to be adopted in dealing with qualitative data. Watling (2002) points out the problematic nature of findings based on people's interpretation of events:
The qualitative research … is likely to be searching for understanding, rather than knowledge; for interpretations rather than measurements; for values rather than facts; … you move away from the analysis of given, measurable, and objectively verifiable facts, to analysis of thoughts, feelings, expressions and opinions which are open to debate (Watling 2002:267).
Qualitative data may be subjected to both quantitative and qualitative analysis.

6.3.   Content analysis
The main purpose of content analysis is to apply quantitative techniques to qualitative data.
The basic goal of content analysis is to take a verbal, non-quantitative document and transform it into quantitative data (Cohen and Manion 1994:55).

Content analysis involves certain key phrases or words being counted, and the frequencies analysed. The selection of these would depend on the hypothesis the researcher wished to prove or disprove (Easterby-Smith *et al* 1994:345).
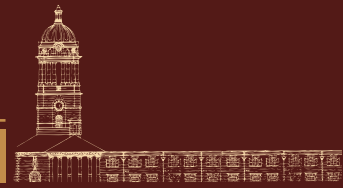
Content analysis typically involves frequency analysis but may also include identification of categories and units of analysis. These categories may be pre-coded or emerge from initial scrutiny of the data. Depending on the availability of skills and human resources, it is advisable to outsource data analysis.

6.4. Research tips

- Have a clear understanding of why you want to conduct research (referred to as the research aim).
- Make sure that you have clear and measurable objectives.
- Make sure that the deliverables and their format are clearly stated.
- Get good advice on the best research strategy/method to assist you to attain your objectives.
- Scan the market to determine the best possible price for your project.
- Conduct a background-check of the potential service-provider before appointment (previous research experience of clients).
- Check the experience of individual team members.
- Once the service has been outsourced, you must be involved in every step of the research process.
- Make sure that the service-provider and the research team are given a proper brief before the commencement of the project and throughout the course of the project cycle.
- Monitoring and quality assurance of field work (recruitment, transcripts, report, etc.) are important for the quality of the research output.
- Provide feedback to the service-provider throughout the research process.

6.5. Elements for research specifications/terms of reference

Before embarking on a research project, you need to develop the project specifications/terms of reference. The following are essential elements for research specifications:

- introduction/background
- main aim and objectives
- research design
- target market
- briefing and debriefing session
- profile of the research team
- data-collection instruments
- project plan
- time frames
- cost
- deliverables
- bid evaluation process (including evaluation criteria).