

Three Crucial Questions about Target Audience Analysis

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Abstract

Most soft power and influence solutions are based on Target Audience Analysis (TAA) research, and rightly so. Effective influence solutions require, therefore, effective research for decision making. Our understanding of TAA needs to improve drastically in order to achieve this, and this article attempts to provide practical, policy-relevant answers to three crucial issues: . (1) Why is everyone explaining TAA in different ways? (2) What kind of research is right for my TAA? and (3) How do I know if the contractor I am about to commission for TAA is any good?

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Introduction

This article is the result of a series of discussions with those charged with making decisions about governmental soft power and influence; it addresses their frequent confusion, or exasperation, at the disconnect between the promises of TAA-led behavioural change, and the realities of costly programmes that seem to change little.

Here we aim to discuss the following three recurring – and crucial – questions that are in desperate need of practical answers:

- 1. Why is everyone explaining TAA in different ways?**
How to differentiate between approaches
- 2. What kind of research is right for my TAA?**
Solving the endless qualitative versus quantitative (and then some) research debate
- 3. How do I know if the contractor I am about to commission for TAA is any good?**
Five questions you must ask your Stratcomms contractor

In this discussion we will not delve into the specifics of research design; there is no one right answer, and the field has seen quite enough dogmatic arguments. Instead, we would like to draw attention to a few facets of research design that are often overlooked but that are crucial to doing good research. First, though, let us interrogate what we mean by good research: it is, in our opinion, more than mere accuracy. It must also have utility; TAA research must provide the maximum possible amount of help to the user, who must make decisions about their strategic communication efforts. These two – accuracy and utility – are separate problems in research.

Indeed, we would note that very often field research for strategic communication usually takes place in a hurry, and in challenging or outright dangerous environments, and consequently often falls short of academic standards. It deals with likelihood rather than certainty. Readers should keep in mind this tension between accuracy and utility.

We are, we believe, in a unique position to comment on this subject, because the Behavioural Dynamics Institute assists its commercial partner, SCL, in the design and analysis of field research that directly informs strategic communication efforts by militaries, NGOs or political parties. So not only do we have experience designing research across the globe, but we also aid in forming recommendations, and see the decisions which must be made based on our findings.

Question 1: Why is everyone explaining TAA in different ways?

What is TAA, and how do you differentiate between approaches?

There is much confusion in the field of strategic communication about Target Audience Analysis. There is some level of agreement on TAA being ‘the process of formally analysing a population or an audience’, yet for some TAA means ‘insight into a population’ in the broadest sense, for others it means research into an audience directly linked to making strategic communication recommendations. For yet another group of people, including policy makers, TAA can serve as a strategic level decision making tool.

That means that for some, TAA equates to researching people at a cultural level, whilst for others it means researching an audience with regard to a specific behavioural problem, using scientific hypothesis testing to investigate those parameters that have been identified as critical for influencing designated groups. The key difference lies in whether research is designed to increase understanding, or to choose between possible options; we favour the latter.

Another often-ignored debate, and cause of much confusion, is the level at which TAA ought to sit. TAA can be used in a whole range of scenarios; it is a matter of scale and a matter of design. For example, TAA can be used to:

- Research the population of a country with the aim of informing which grievances may erupt into conflict (we might call this strategic level TAA)
- Research teenagers in a specific city to target an anti-drugs campaign (operational level TAA)
- Research employees of a specific company to inform the design of a new bonus scheme (tactical TAA)

It is this question of the level of specificity at which TAA sits that also creates the vast differences in the costs of conducting TAA.

At BDI, this is a question that has kept us busy for over a decade, and in our work we use different terminology for the various uses of the research described above (the first scenario for example would be called a ‘country sweep’ in the BDI methodology). However the point we are making here is that when designing TAA research, a number of decisions are crucial:

- The level at which the TAA sits (with the rule of thumb that higher is better: if your policy is wrong for the population to begin with, TAA to design the campaign for its acceptance is an expensive waste)¹
- The scope of the enquiry (the broader the more expensive, and not necessarily the better)
- The type of recommendations required (if you just want to understand a population, then don’t commission TAA – hire an anthropologist. But if you want to change people’s attitudes and behaviours, TAA is essential)

¹ In this regard, TAA sits alongside the wider evidence-based policy movement.

TAA requires bespoke instruments that have been designed for specific groups or audiences to uncover solutions to specific (often behavioural) problems, and therefore need to be centred on a specific structuring of the problem.

TAA at its best is the pivot around which all else swings, and the key to doing TAA properly is good quality research: not polling, but research that is built round carefully constructed instruments using appropriate measures, that analyse key aspects of an audience, and aid building causal models and mapping features of audiences that contribute effectively to influence. The remainder of this article examines that research, and suggests how to differentiate between different research proposals.

Question 2: What kind of Research is right for my TAA?

Qualitative data, or quantitative? The debate is as old as numbers, and the answer is often that a mixed-methods approach is best. Yet with budgets always tight, we often have to choose. Too often, that choice defaults to quantitative research.

Let's start with the traditional reasoning as to why this is the case. Quantitative data seems to offer hard numbers; crunchy, reliable facts to headline a PowerPoint slide and win over one's boss. Qualitative data, critics note, is open to interpretation ad infinitum, with no one answer 'true' or 'certain'. Conclusions drawn from qualitative data cannot be proven; they rely on judgment, and their validity relies on the trust others place in their analyst's judgment. That can be difficult to handle, but it is essential to grasp.

Qualitative data's value lies in its humanity. An experienced qualitative analyst (and this is not a game for amateurs) can make links and capture nuance from even the tersest transcript. A brief discussion, carefully recorded, can reveal a wealth of information about a person's values, life, and behaviour. Meanwhile, for all that computers improve, they remain bad at spotting the unforeseen; a human with a pile of paper transcripts has time to do just that.

Humans are more fallible and more biased. That can be a flaw of qualitative analysis; certainly a prejudiced analyst can hunt for evidence for their case. Yet those fallibilities and biases are present too when they write algorithms. When the answer is spat out by machine, it may be equally filled with assumptions; the numbers merely mask that. In the process of qualitative analysis, such errors can be identified, reviewed and corrected.

Some years ago, analysts from a major research company were in Kabul to present some fresh research to a senior ISAF commander. These highly paid consultants explained, with a straight face, that their survey revealed that *trash collection* was the thing – a top priority among their respondents. Who knows? Perhaps they really did care about that. More likely, they had a biased sample, or their respondents didn't understand the question, or in a dangerous environment were giving the blandest answer they could imagine. Of course, that company is not particularly to blame – those are problems that can happen to anyone, in a place as challenging as Helmand. The problem lies in the blind faith in the number, and the lack of nuanced data to explain and query it.

As a result of reasoning such as the above, many conclude that the 'right' answer, therefore, must be a mixed-methods approach (let's do both qualitative and quantitative research). That way a little more time and money, and a little less certainty, are surely traded for true understanding?

Yes and no.

In reality, the whole debate over research methods boils down to one often-overlooked fact:

Your relationship with “the truth” is what really informs your preference for research methods, and an understanding of your own viewpoints can help solve most debates about research.

What do we mean by this?

A fact that many people who have not had formal training in research design often do not know (and one that many who do tend to ignore or forget) is that the worldview of the people designing or instructing the research to a large degree determines the choices they make in research methods, and in the way data is collected, analysed and presented.

Do you believe there is an objective truth out there that can be measured and quantified? Or do you believe that truth is ‘what works at the time’? Or perhaps you believe that truth is perception, or that reality is always shaped in interaction with others?

There are four main worldviews to consider, and each worldview impacts the research design you will favour. For the sake of brevity they are only mentioned here and not thoroughly explained, but if you are interested then the best available discussion of these worldviews and how they shape research design is one by John W. Creswell².

1. Postpositivism (also sometimes called the scientific method, positivist/postpositivist research, and empirical science). This essentially is the traditional form of research, and its assumptions hold true more for quantitative research than qualitative research.
2. Constructivism. Social constructivism, in contrast to Postpositivism, is often seen as an approach to qualitative research, since one of its key assumptions is that people seek to understand the world they live in and create meaning through their engagement with the world they are interpreting. Research based on this worldview is therefore well suited for theory generation and understanding.
3. Pragmatism. Pragmatists are problem-centered and real-world practice oriented. Pluralistic methods are employed in this problem- (rather than methods-) oriented form of research. A core belief pragmatists hold is that what is most true is what works at the time, and that truth is not based in a duality between reality independent of the mind or within the mind.
4. Advocacy / Participatory Research. In short, supporters of this type of research believe that no other research stance advocates enough for an action agenda to help marginalized peoples. Their research contains an action agenda (often political) for reform to address important social issues such as empowerment and inequality, and the research design most often centers on such an issue.

Analysing your worldview allows you to properly interrogate your assumptions, and thereby to design your research more effectively.

² Creswell, John W. (2009) *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, Sage Publications Ltd, California. The excerpt from the book relevant to this discussion can be downloaded here: http://www.sagepub.com/upm-data/22780_Chapter_1.pdf

Question 3: How do I know if the contractor I am about to commission for TAA is any good?

You've seen the slick presentation and heard the roll call of past successes. They promise to do Target Audience Analysis like nobody else can, and quicker and cheaper too. But any company could say all that. This is taxpayer's money and you need to be sure.

Since it has been widely accepted that strategic communications and influence solutions should be based on Target Audience Analysis research; it follows that your campaigns will be better, if your TAA is better.

Yet decision makers are not research experts, and they sometimes struggle to tell the difference between one TAA report and another. Too often, when only the best will do, the lowest bidder wins through, or the firm that got the job last time round. The Influence Advisory Panel aims to set standards for influence research, helping decision makers get the highest quality research – research that is accurate, and that allows them to make those decisions.

Writing Requests for Proposals for TAA and research for strategic communications is not easy, and differentiating between contractors on the level that really matters is even harder. Of course you should ask the standard questions, about cost and experience, but the items outlined below will give you a little more insight. Compare contractor's answers to the following questions, and you will understand their true capability.

1. Describe your methodology for influence research, including the theories it is based on and how your methodology differs from these theories.
2. Which worldview is instructing your research design?
3. Describe your process or methodology for defining research questions and research objectives.
4. Which research methods do you intend to use and why?
5. Describe a typical recommendation for strategic communication and how it is derived from research.

Below, we show you how to tell a good answer from a bad one.

1. Describe your methodology for influence research, including the theories it is based on and how your methodology differs from these theories.

Research isn't just a case of going out and asking questions, and influence research isn't like other types of research. You need a contractor who has thought deeply about their approach and who has based it on the relevant science. They are claiming to be among the world's experts in this field; if they can't give a good answer to this, then you have to ask yourself why not.

A good contractor will show an awareness of the current science and relevant authorities, and have access to critiques and reviews of leading theories. Using those, they will outline a model for Target Audience Analysis which is comprehensive, rather than claiming that measuring a single parameter (or two or three) is sufficient.

Finally, they will demonstrate how their model will result in useful recommendations, rather than merely enhanced understanding. (You want research which is *diagnostic*, rather than descriptive or explanatory, which probably means they will describe several phases of research).

If they can't do these things, then perhaps they're not the firm for you.

2. Which worldview is instructing your research design?

Research design by companies or contractors who are unaware of their worldview is like a travel route in London based only on the tube map; taking a bus or walking could have been a lot quicker, more scenic, and cheaper, but you wouldn't know this if you weren't aware of the existence of roadmaps, train maps, and bus maps in addition to the tube map.

You want contractors who understand how to interrogate their own assumptions. Their description of their worldview will tell you how they approach their work, as well as show you whether they have thought about it and considered all the options.

As described above (see question 2), there are four major types of worldview: postpositivism, constructivism, pragmatism and advocacy/participatory research.

A good contractor will have thought about their worldview and rigorously reflected on their assumptions (even if they don't use the exact terms above).

3. Describe your process or methodology for defining research questions and research objectives.

You know you can't research everything, but you also want to know everything you need to know. Where is that sweet spot?

Here, a good contractor will describe a detailed scoping exercise, which is the first and one of the most difficult steps in research design. Client discussions, expert interviews and secondary research are an absolute minimum. Details on the research questions that are distilled will help the client understand the limitations of the research upfront and will demonstrate the rigour of the proposed approach.

As every General knows, time spent planning is rarely time wasted.

4. Which research methods do you intend to use, how and why?

Qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods, secondary research? The contractor should provide more than just a statement; they should present a rationale for their choice, taking into consideration the strengths and weaknesses of the approaches, as well as the reason for the research – different kinds of research questions call for different approaches.

As a general rule of thumb, unless it is a census, a poll, or designed to answer a very specific question (i.e. hypothesis testing or questions such as 'which percentage of the population lives below the poverty line?') you should be suspicious of purely

quantitative approaches, which rarely yield a deep enough understanding for influence solutions.

5. Describe a typical recommendation for strategic communication and how it is derived from research.

This final question will help to evaluate the level of detail in the recommendations, and how they link to the data.

Often recommendations will be quite obvious (70% of people are upset about the rubbish collection therefore we suggest better rubbish collection services), and will provide little detail on how such a change might be effected.

Another common problem is recommendations which seem like a good idea, but which aren't rooted in the evidence of the research. This is your chance to review the kind of output that you will receive upfront. You will want recommendations that go beyond the obvious, which you haven't already thought of, which are closely linked to the data, and which are practical, given your current capabilities.

Ask these five questions, and you greatly raise your chances of a good contractor conducting good work. It will save you time and money, and it might just save lives too.

Conclusion

Influence campaigns are too often expensive failures. We believe that at the heart of that failure are many misunderstandings surrounding Target Audience Analysis, and we hope that this article helps clear up some of that confusion.