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Research Methods  
9 February 2015

### Research Technique Analysis

Going into this Research Methods class, I knew that the topic for my terminal research would have something to do with the circus world, one that I not only participate in as a practitioner but also interests me academically. The problem is that the circus world is so vast, not only in what counts as circus arts, but also in its huge international presence, long history, and modern manifestations. So, to align myself more with the context of circus, both modern and historical, I am going to investigate two different research methods to deepen my understanding: mapping the current field of circus practice using surveys, and reviewing literature to gain historical understanding.

To better understand how “mapping the field” works, I analyzed two projects that did that for different fields. This first project relates directly to my research interest: a survey done by a circus advocacy nonprofit, Circus Now, entitled “State of the Circus.” Judging by the data collected, Circus Now sought to see what kind of person was participating in the circus arts, how they were participating, and why they were participating. Their sample size of 710 people was small, compared with the conservative estimate of about 10,000 people participating in circus in the United States (Woolley, 2014). Still, there is interesting and surprising data to be collected from this study (like the income distribution of participants being evenly spread from the lowest category to the highest). Even though the information from the survey is interesting, there doesn’t seem to be much of a purpose behind it; it

looked like they were collecting information just to collect information.

Furthermore, some of their survey methodology didn't serve them as well as it could. From what I can gather, they asked a final question of "How would you like to see the circus industry evolve in the next five to ten years?" There were nine mostly equally legitimate responses (better funded productions; more circus festivals; more circus education; etc.), but they let people rate all of the options however they wanted. This resulted in many people rating most of the possible responses as "very important," which made the resulting percentage breakdown not all that revealing. This was the first time that Circus Now conducted this survey, though, and they are already planning on improving it for future iterations including more outreach to other circus associations and more focused questions ranging a larger cross section of the circus community.

The second example of mapping the field comes from the National Alliance for Media and Culture (NAMAC). Their survey was similar to the Circus Now survey except it tracked Media Arts organizations as opposed to individual artists. The questions they asked included operating budget, income sources, number of staff members and demographic makeup, media art form focus area, and primary area of organizational activity. Unlike the Circus Now survey, this one seems to have a very clear goal in mind and uses its specificity to approach mapping its field more effectively. The questions they asked fell into clear categories and the resultant information gave me a good cross section of the media arts world. From this I feel like I get a better sense of what the field of media arts organizations looks like than I did from the Circus Now survey.

The second research method, the historical analysis through literature review could be more passive than the mapping the field surveys. To analyze this method, I started looking at books about circus history including Stoddard's *Rings of Desire: Circus History and Representation* (2000) and Speaight's *A History of the Circus* (1980). Depending on the subject matter, a historical scan could be easy and well contained or complicated and hard to define. Circus, somewhat predictably, falls into the latter category. These two authors don't even agree on what falls under the purview of the word "circus." Stoddard (2000) says that, "the glorious and diverse array of acts...we may find on vaudeville stages, street corners or country fairs, can be argued to belong to the circus because their performance in some way embodies a characteristic circus energy or aesthetic" (p. 4). Speaight (1980), on the other hand says that, "entertainment of human bodily skills and trained animals that is presented in a ring of approximately 13 metres in diameter...is the essence of Circus" (p. 8). It becomes immediately apparent, then, that in approaching circus history I have to first define what circus is going to mean for me. Should I include both the "traditional" circus in the round as well as more modern iterations like Cirque du Soleil? What about branches off like carnivals or Vaudeville? What is ultimately important, though, is that I define my terms clearly from the beginning so the reader and I can both stay focused on whatever path I end up choosing.

Another somewhat unexpected roadblock that both Stoddard and Speaight point out in studying circus history is the lack of confirmable facts due to many circuses functioning illegally or using exaggeration in their marketing. Speaight (1980) summarizes the issue well: "The archives of Circus are so sparse and

scattered, those bills and advertisements that survive are so packed with exaggeration and lies, that an authoritative history of the early Circus is an impossibility" (p. 7). Now, I don't believe that it is an impossibility, but the point that he does bring up points out why a literature review as opposed to a document review would be a better path for this topic. In the 35 years since Speaight published his circus history a lot has happened not only in the circus world, but also in the world of literature about circus, and some common histories have been agreed upon. Stoddard (2000) even says, "there already exist many volumes which are more extensive scope and more historically detailed than [*Rings of Desire*]" (p.2). Still, this goes to show that because circus is a more amorphous art form than many others in its boundaries, I should approach the history with a clear idea of where my boundaries are (while keeping an open mind), so to not lose focus.

Right now, using surveys to map the field is the most compelling data collection method for me. While I still don't know specifically what I want to research, getting a sense of what kind of circus organizations exist either in the United States or in a smaller region (the Pacific Northwest) would provide good context not only for my interests but also for organizations like Circus Now. In crafting a survey for this map, I would want to combine the questions that NAMAC asked with the general audience that Circus Now surveyed. I would want to get a sense of the size of these organizations, how many performers/staff members they have, their budget, where money comes from

(even if out of pocket), how many performances they put on, what kinds of acts are included in their performances, etc. This will give a better sense than the Circus Now survey how “organized” circus is functioning and where. One thing that I will have to keep in mind as I approach this is what I’m going to count as a circus organization. From personal experience I know that five people can get together and put on a successful circus show just like a 501(c)(3) or a circus school with an attached performing company could. For now, though, I should approach my definitions openly and see what is out in the field.

### References

- NAMAC (2014). *Mapping the Field*. Retrieved from the NAMAC web site: <http://www.namac.org/mapping>
- Speaight, G. (1980). *A History of the Circus*. London: The Tantivy Press
- Stoddard, H. (2000). *Rings of Desire: Circus History and Representation*. Manchester: Manchester University Press
- Woolley, A. (2014). *2014 State of the Circus Survey*. Retrieved from the Circus Now web site: <http://circusnow.org/results-are-in-from-the-2014-state-of-circus-survey/>

### Process notes

- Start off with the circus world and go from there. What interests me about circus?
  - Lack of definition of art form
  - International reach and interpretation
  - Seeming immunity to regular performing arts woes (old and declining audience, waning interest etc.)
  - Performance practice

- Diversity of organizations doing circus (small like mine to giant like Cirque)
- Before I can refine a question, I need more context
  - Historical
  - Current landscape
  - What are scholars saying? Are they saying anything?
  - What are people working in the circus world saying? Are there associations, conferences, or professional groups?
- My passions lie in performance and show construction. Is there something there?
- In case I don't continue down the circus path professionally, I could find a "circus model" that is making circus organizations more successful (are they actually more successful? It seems like it, but is the data there?) and see if that model could apply to other organizations
  - Innovations on and off stage
  - Redefining the art
  - Fresh and new
  - Accessible to any audience