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Content Analysis: A Reevaluation Of Known Parameters

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ABSTRACT

In Nigeria, the majority of content analysis research tends to tilt towards the dominant quantitative method. This technique now seems overly used, overspent, and unoriginal. This paper reviews content analysis as an empirical research method that is used to study the content of text in order to make inferences that are based on findings. The plethora of quantitative content analysis research writings are predominantly on the study of newspapers with research objectives that rotate around depth, direction, frequency and prominence. This paper in a bid to critique this overly used method of writing, provided description of Content Analysis as a research method, explained the goals/objectives of content analysis as well as underscored the various qualitative methodological types. Furthermore, the uses of content analysis in relation to text were explained. This paper concluded that the content analysis research method is under-used and that there is an abundance of communication branches where the research method needs to be applied.

KEYWORDS

Content analysis, text, research, quantitative, qualitative, concepts

INTRODUCTION

In the field of Management, Mass communication and other social science disciplines, content analysis is a vital research tool that is used to dissect texts in order to

determine the presence (or lack thereof) of certain words, phrases, images, themes, concepts, etc. within the text. Text is any medium of communication and could be in the

form of pictures, video recordings, sound recordings, music, film, books, newspapers, magazines, etc. As explicitly described in Writing@CSU (2004, p.1), “texts can be defined broadly as books, book chapters, essays, interviews, discussions, newspaper headlines and articles, historical documents, speeches, conversations, advertising, theater, informal conversation, or really any occurrence of communicative language” Contents of the texts are grouped, quantified, interpreted and analyzed to form a pattern and establish a relationship with the set of the texts, after which inferences are drawn about the messages within said text. Thus, content analysis enables in-depth investigation about an event, a culture, an individual/group of persons, a story of series of stories (real or fiction) that would lead to an understanding or conclusion that answers research question. In Nigeria, content analysis is mostly used in mass communication to analyze printed texts, especially newspapers by scrutinizingly evaluating the words that fall within the purview of the research scope. content analysis has been defined by a host of scholars since its emergence in the 1950s when researchers of mass communication emphasized on making inferences based on “quantified analysis of recurring, easily identifiable aspects of text content, sometimes referred to as manifest content” (White & Marsh 2014, p.23). In Berelson, (1952, p.33) content analysis is described as a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication”. According to Neuendorf (2002) content analysis is an analytical means of studying the remarkable existence of some concepts or words that are present in textual or visual or audio forms. Texts here include various written forms like documents, books, newspaper articles, etc. Visuals include telecommunication systems like advertising, theater, movies, etc. Audio are usually in the form of drama, newscast, songs, etc. Analyses can also be done on any communication

source which occurs. Krippendorff (2004, p.1) “defines content analysis as the systematic objective, quantitative analysis of message characteristics”. For him, messages are imbedded in human interactions; character portrayals in television commercials, films, novels and the words within news releases and political speeches and so much more. The careful examination of these messages is content analysis. Also worthy of note is Neuendorf and Skalski (2009, p.7) elaborate description of content analysis as “a summarizing, quantitative analysis of messages that relies on the scientific method (including attention to objectivity-intersubjectivity, a priori design, reliability, validity, generalizability, replicability, and hypothesis testing) and is not limited as to the types of variables that may be measured or the context in which the messages are created or presented”.

Content analysis as deduced from the above definitions is procedural and systematic and moves from the unknown or semi-known to the known through evaluation and investigation of texts that could be in written, audio or video forms for the purpose of gaining better understanding and arriving at a conclusion that provides answers to research questions. Neuendorf (2002) highlights two basic types of content analysis: conceptual and relational. Conceptual content analysis is used to determine the existence and frequency of occurrences in a text, whereas relational content analysis is an extension of the conceptual content analysis because the relational content analysis examines the relationship between concepts in a text. The conceptual analysis is a positivist approach to research because it involves quantifying and counting elements within a text. “The main goal is to examine the occurrence of selected terms in the data. Terms may be explicit or implicit. Explicit terms are easy to identify” (Columbia Public Health 2019, p.2) and are counted, coded into manageable and identifiable categories and then analysed to

find answers to a research question. This process is known as selective reduction (Krippendorff, 2004) as it involves actively reducing a large amount of texts to categories by sifting the text and extracting specific words, concepts or patterns for inferential purposes. In utilizing the implicit conceptual analysis, the researcher basically constructs objectives that center on frequency of occurrence, depth of discussion, prominence of topic of discussion and direction of analysis. For example, a researcher who wants to find out the level of news reportage that the two national dailies – The Punch and the Guardian newspapers – allotted to a gubernatorial election in Rivers State, Nigeria (e.g. before, during and after the election), may cast her objectives thus:

- i. Ascertain the frequency of coverage given to the Rivers State governorship election by The Punch and Guardian newspapers.
- ii. Evaluate the depth of coverage of the Rivers State governorship election by The Punch and Guardian newspapers.
- iii. Determine the level of prominence given to the Rivers State governorship election by The Punch and Guardian newspapers.
- iv. Find out the direction of coverage of the Rivers State governorship election by The Punch and Guardian newspapers.

Understandably, this type of content analysis is mostly used by Nigerian Researchers to bring to the fore the level of importance that the Nigerian dailies assign to an event as the mass media is saddled with the responsibility of informing the audience and sensitizing the public on vital environmental, socio-economic and political issues that affect them. Arguably, the critics may review such study and ask the question “so what”? Constantly revolving within and around a loop of research objectives that do no more than count words and identify patterns, also makes the study

research be at a risk of portraying a boring, staged and unimaginative outlook. More so, the newspaper is only a type of text. There are several other texts that researchers may choose from to study and contribute to knowledge and development advancements. Content analysis on its part can be largely subdivided into quantitative and qualitative methods although, most of the analysis that are conducted conceptually are quantitatively done. The thrust of this paper therefore, is to critically examine other kinds of texts that could be apt for a content analysis research and to discuss other means of analyzing content beyond the dominant quantitative method.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES OF CONTENT ANALYSIS

Generally, the goal of the content analysis research is to look deeply at a text content and ‘read between the lines’ so that an implied-but-not-explicitly-spelled-out meaning can be found which would be used to answer ‘what’, ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions. This means that the data may be quantified or qualified and analysis may be done statistically or interpretively. In describing the scenario, Neuendorf (2002, p.10) posits that the a goal of content analysis is to qualitatively summarize qualitative text, quantitatively analyse messages – relying on the scientific methods of research that pay attention to “objectivity, intersubjectivity, a priori design, reliability, validity, generalizability, replicability and hypothesis testing and is not limited as to the types of variables that maybe measured or the context in which the message is recreated or presented”

Other goals as pinpointed in Clooktrack (2020, p:3): and AllAssignmentHelp (2019, p.2) include:

- i. Reduce huge amounts of disorganized contents.
- ii. Explain the characteristics of the contents.

- iii. Identify and showcase important parts of the content.
- iv. Support some kind or arguments.
- v. Study relationships and trends in multimedia and text.
- vi. Identify the communication trends or intentions of an individual institution or group.
- vii. Explain behavioral and attitudinal responses to communication.
- viii. Determine emotional and psychological state of groups or even an individual person.
- ix. Identify the implied aspects of the content
- x. Sketch the characteristics of the content
- xi. Analyze and present significant findings of content, clearly and effectively
- xii. Simplify unstructured content
- xiii. Identify trends and relationships
- xiv. Spot the intentions of individuals or groups of people or an institution
- xv. Describe attitudinal and behavioral responses to communications
- xvi. Determine the psychological or emotional state of a group of people
- xvii. Justify an argument
- xviii. Yield inferences from different kinds of content that could be printed materials, pictures, audio, videos, live speeches and social media data.

QUANTITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS

Quantitative content analysis is an empirical framework that applies a deductive approach to research and is mostly used to test formulated hypotheses (Palmer & Boettger, 2010). Krippendorff (2004) explains that quantitative content analysis refers to that “which includes identifying meaning through valid measurement rules and making relational inferences with statistical method (p.4). He further argues that the quantitative content analysis is unobstructive in nature and is neither concerned nor bound by

subjectivities because the method includes a series of fixed characteristics that are employed to test for validity and reliability of the coding instrument and inter-coders agreement which is then examined logically and statistically. Because the findings of a good quantitative content analysis do not rely on the authority and judgements of an individual researcher alone, they allow for replication.

QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS

Qualitative content analysis is defined as an interpretive and naturalistic approach to research (Holsti 1968). It incorporates both the observational and narrative techniques of research writing rather than the statistical and numeric nature of scientific research. Thus unlike the quantitative content analysis that adhere to strict rules for validity and reliability tests in which findings could be replicated and generalized, the qualitative content analysis acknowledges the polysemic nature of texts, looks out for the inter-subjectivity of researcher and coders and embraces the transferability of findings. It is important to note however, that there is an overlap between quantification and qualification in qualitative content analysis because sometimes the significant words or concepts are rounded up in their numbers and it is on the basis of this that a detailed analysis is done using specific qualitative analytical tools such as hermeneutics. In qualitative content analysis, hermeneutics is applied to texts to give room for the syntagmatic, pragmatic, semantic and semiotic aspects of text. Titscher, Meyer, Wodak, and Vetter (2000, p.55) note that:

the range of procedures in content analysis is enormous, in terms of both analytical goals and the means or processes developed to pursue them. The variants include, for example, besides content analysis, conversational analysis, discourse analysis, ethnographic analysis, functional pragmatics, rhetorical analysis, and narrative semiotics.

Although these approaches are alike in their reliance on communicative material as the raw material for analysis, they vary in the kinds of questions they address and in their methods.

QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS TYPOLOGY

There are various forms of qualitative content analysis that may be used to understand, explain and interpret messages of a text. According to Gunter (2000) the types of qualitative content analysis are as follows:

i. Rhetorical Analysis

The uniqueness of the rhetorical analysis lies in the fact that the technique is used to analyse both words and images. Paying attention to the message's construction, form, argumentation and choice of aesthetics and layout, the researcher engages in a reconstruction of manifest characteristics of text or image or both. The emphasis is on how the message is presented rather than what the message says. Fragments and its inherent meaning when put together or taken apart is vital and usually done in detail. Rhetorical analysis can be applied to news content, political speeches, advertising, and other forms of communication (McCroskey, 1993).

ii. Narrative Analysis

Narrative analysis is a qualitative content analysis technique that involves the description of formal narrative structure which particular attention is paid to the characters and their journey – challenges, choices, conflicts, resolutions, complications, achievements and overall developments. The primary concern of the researcher is in the characters of the story, their portrayals and representation. The little pieces and their meaning as presented in the text about the characters is what the researcher looks out for and narrates to form a pattern or theme. Narrative analysis can be used to analyse films, plays, stories, etc.

iii. Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis is a process that involves the application of the characteristics of manifest language that use words to describe text through consistency, coherence, connection and logic. This would lead to the identification of themes and establishment of central ideas and terms that show a meaningful pattern. "The technique aims at typifying media representations (e.g. communicator's motives and ideology) (Neuendorf 2002, p. 9). The researcher's competence in language use is vital for discourse analysis because analysis could range from microscopic to macroscopic levels, depending on the text. Examples of text that the discourse analysis technique could be applied to include political speeches, public addresses, debates, etc.

iv. Structuralist or Semiotic Analysis

For the structuralist and semiotic qualitative content analysis, the focus is on the deeper meaning of messages. For Krippendorff, (2004), this technique aims at taking a dive at deep structures, latent meanings and the signifying processes of signs, codes and binary oppositions. Because this technique is mostly used to provide concealed meaning within signs and symbols, the researcher is expected to have a wealth of knowledge of the culture. Interpretations are mostly theoretical assertions are linked with and based on the central themes in culture and society. Semiotic analysis is apt for studying the content of cultural artefacts, signs and symbols, etc.

v. Interpretive Analysis

Interpretive analysis according to Neuendorf (2002) is a social scientific inquiry that leads to the formation of theory from the observation and coding of messages. The interpretive analysis follows laid down rules of theoretical sampling, analytical categories, cumulative and comparative analysis and the formation of types or conceptual categories (p.10). As with quantitative techniques of content analysis, the methodology of interpretive analysis is

clearly spelled out and validity and reliability is looked out for via inter-subjectivity, audit trails, and negative case analysis and peer review. This technique can be applied to nearly all facets of communication.

vi. Conversation Analysis

As with most qualitative research methods, conversation analysis is a technique that inductively arrives at findings that answer research questions. This technique avoids premature theory construction and allows the text to throw up themes that would lead to theory formation. As the name implies, conversation analysis is used to study conversations and dialogues within text in order to understand how language is used and the meaning that users of the language ascribe to it in a content-specific manner. This technique is mostly used in ethno-methodological studies with the subjectivity and involvement of the researcher duly acknowledged.

vii. Critical Analysis

Critical analysis is a qualitative technique that is widely used for the study of media messages. Critical analysis, which is often conducted in a tradition of cultural studies is often applied as a means of asking tough questions and challenging the dominant ideology that has been naturalized as the norm. Critical analysis is a technique that begins as an eye-opener and ends in a proffering emancipatory, elevating and life-changing solutions to oppressive ideological tenets. Cultural representations within the rubric of gender studies, films, etc. are examples of media text that researchers may use the critical analysis for.

Qualquant Content Analysis Overview

Quantitatively or qualitatively, content analysis can be expanded to cover different categories of texts and other areas of the text besides counting words and patterning concepts. According to Neuendorff and

Skalski, (2009) here are other aspects of a text set that scholars have delved into in the past. For instance, in order to measure the degree of violence that children aged 12 and younger are exposed to in children's television programming, Wilson, Smith, Potter, Kunkel, Linz, Colvin and Donnerstein (2002) conducted a research to analyse the content of television. The objective of the study laid within the message content. Similarly, Copenhaver (2002) in a bid to decipher the gender dominance in role distribution and characterization, charted a course that led to the qualitative content analysis of gender roles, representations and portrayals in American modern and postmodern plays. Schreer and Strichartz (1997) explored a content analysis of the content categories of restroom graffiti on American campuses and found out that when compared to residence halls, libraries across the college campuses under study contained more inflammatory graffiti that discussed sensitive social issues. Interestingly, Gottschalk (1995) used content analysis to study naturally occurring speech to pinpoint indications of psychological pathologies. The focus from the examples given is on the content and the messages that are passed through the texts. Researchers conducted content analysis quantitatively or qualitatively by digging deeper into the content of the text to find out how what is intended in the message by the producer/sender and how the audience/recipient of the message perceive the text. Some of the messages were studied to understand deeper meanings that individuals may either not comprehend or miss out on upon first encounter – especially on a live broadcast – which certain analytical tools were used to dissect and uncover. Thus, the content of a text can be analysed to reveal a different angle but significant aspect of the message. For instance, a photograph or series of photos may be analysed to determine the story that the position of the camera tells, or the angle of the lighting denotes. Furthermore, a series of noodles advertisements may be studied not to predict

or determine their effects on sales or the deliciousness of the noodles, but to make inferences about the social relationships that are reflected in them.

Imbalance in Content Analysis

Content Analysis on What?

Kaplan (1943, p.239) postulates that content analysis emerged out of the development need to scrutinize political speeches wrapped up in a façade of hidden truths when he stated that: “content analysis, as at present developed, is directed toward the analysis of political discourse, not of discourse in general, nor of the various types of discourse ... with propaganda, public opinion, ideologies, and related matters.” Things have changed since then and ‘content’ is now applied to articles, speeches (political or apolitical), displays, plays, films, audio recordings, live broadcasts, books, magazines, newspapers, interview transcripts, internet blogs and posts, cartoons, websites, pictures, paintings symbolic images and materials, etc. because the fundamental aim is to use the content analysis research method to make inferences based on findings that would enhance the society.

CONCLUSION

The oscillation around a particular type of content analysis can be halted when researchers understand there are types and subtypes of content analysis from which they can choose. More so, there exist a plethora of text that researchers of mass communication can study, taking into consideration the fact that analyzing content does not always have to begin and end with the counting of words or patterning concepts. Relational analysis may be applied in the study to advance the findings of a conceptual analysis which would assist in giving a study depth and relevance. Content analysis is a research method that can also be descriptive, explanatory and exploratory which can be used to answer ‘why’ and ‘how’ questions and establish correlations

patterns and differences among concepts. Examples could include:

- i. Find out how news stories of Covid-19 were described by the Punch and Guardian newspapers
- ii. Find out the difference in communication content in terms of writing style, choice of words and analysis between the Punch and Guardian newspapers

A variety of branches of communication abound and conditioning the study of content analysis to newspapers and films alone, is nothing more than scratching the surface of the research method. Oscillating around a particular style of couching objectives, not only limits the researcher but also limits the heuristic value of research that could advance the wealth of knowledge.

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