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Qualitative Content Analysis Of Television News: Systematic Techniques

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ABSTRACT: A television news message is conveyed in words, voice, facial expression, visual symbols and camera techniques. The qualitative analysis of a news videotape begins with choosing analytical units that meet one's theoretical goals but which do not do violence to the nature of the content at hand. After a transcription of the verbal content is done, patterns in the script and in journalist-news source interactions can be identified. The analyst then listens for "tunes" in news speech which may, for instance, convey humor or skepticism. Television news relies on a visual symbolic code consisting of objects that suggest the topic at hand, of conventions for camera angle and distance, and of journalists' facial expressions. A complete qualitative analysis of the news message produces an exhaustive data matrix showing the juxtaposition of all message elements. This becomes the foundation for a rigorous, wholistic "account of accounts."

Introduction

Techniques for the qualitative analysis of media content have yet to be clearly defined. Alexander George (1959) contrasted qualitative, "nonfrequency," with quantitative, "frequency" analysis. Quantitative content analysts base analytical decisions on tests for statistical significance while qualitative approaches are more concerned with developing data that can be interpreted for theoretical significance. But while quantitative analysis has been exhaustively described (e.g. Krippendorff, 1980), qualitative techniques have not. In the following, I offer a strategy for doing qualitative analysis of one particularly complex form of media content—television news.

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Techniques of Verbal, Vocal, and Visual Analysis

The process of qualitative content analysis of videotaped television news broadcasts¹ can be broken down into eight stages, although the actual research process will not be so tidily linear:

1. Unitizing content
2. Transcription
3. Developing and using categories
4. Verbal analysis
5. Vocal and expressive analysis
6. Scene composition analysis
7. Describing interplay of components
8. Explanation

Unitizing. As with quantitative content analysis, the qualitative researcher must clearly specify units of analysis. Traditionally, quantitative content analysis requires that the units be standardized and countable regardless of the questions one is trying to answer. The qualitative approach outlined here relies instead on an understanding of the specific structure of whatever content is being examined and on one's theoretical goals. A "unit" will thus vary depending on the nature of the media product, the kinds of questions being asked and amount of content to be analyzed. A unit can be defined as a portion of content conveying a structurally unified meaning within a larger message. In print, that portion may be a sentence, paragraph, or an exchange in dialogue. In broadcast media, the units may consist of an entire broadcast, a story within that broadcast, and/or combinations of speech and/or dialogue, vocalizations, and visual images within a segment.

In the case of television news, units must be identified for both verbal and visual content. A convenient unit for verbal content is change of speaker within a story (see Figure 1 below). Visually, each change of camera shot can be designated as the unit of analysis. A brief report might begin with a shot of a news anchor introducing the piece, followed by a shot of the correspondent introducing the report, then several shots of locales and news sources, ending with a shot of the reporter summing up or analyzing events.

Transcribing In the case of television news, the script constitutes the reporter's primary output and sets the agenda for the film used in the report (Gans, 1980:158). Doing a transcription of the verbal content enhances the researcher's ability to "observe," not merely "watch" or

"hear," television news. Indeed, the researcher will probably be surprised at how differently a television news report "reads" than it "sounds" or "looks." A page of script in the final form will contain:

1. What each identified speaker said
2. Vocal inflection/facial expression coding
3. Brief descriptions of scene composition and changes
4. Applications of analytical categories to all relevant elements of the message.

Figure 1 provides an example of transcription format.

Figure 1
Sample Transcript of a Television News Broadcast
(excerpt taken from ABC "World News Tonight,"
September 25, 1980)

<i>Visuals</i>	<i>Text Categories</i>	<i>Script</i>	<i>Speaker I.D.</i>
[1] standard anchor introduction. At desk, CSD		[1] Tonight in the final part of our special assignment report on politics and the pulpit correspondent James Wooten looks at the evangelical movement's involvement in Congressional races and a question of credibility concerning one of the movement's leaders.	(Max Robinson)
[2] Robison at pulpit. From below, FPD to CPD and freeze frame: DRAMA/ suggests EXTREMISM	Extrmsm.	[2] We the people of God make a commitment to God and bring our nation back to GOD or this nation is finished. This is James Robison. He's a preacher	(James Robison) (James Wooten)

Figure 1 (continued)
Sample Transcript of a Television News Broadcast
 (excerpt taken from ABC "World News Tonight,"
 September 25, 1980)

<i>Visuals</i>	<i>Text Categories</i>	<i>Script</i>	<i>Speaker I.D.</i>
[3] Reagan seated on podium, listening and smiling. FSD. EFFEC-TIVENESS	Activism	[3] I thank God Mr. Reagan was willing to come here tonight. And he's also a politician, one of the leaders of the evangelical right	(Robison)
[4] Pans audience, sea of uplifted arms. PD. HOMOGENEITY, EFFECTIVENESS	Power Polarizatn. Hedge Hedge	wing, calling millions of the faithful to the polls to vote its way, the moral way. But they really aren't all that new, these pulpit politicians.	(Wooten)

Keys to symbols:

[1] Scene change and number
 ID Intimate distance
 CPD Close personal distance
 FPD Far personal distance

CSD Close social distance
 FSD Far social distance
 PD Public distance

Prosodic coding symbols (from Bennett, 1982:211-212)

| Minor tone group boundary

|| Major tone group boundary

Vocal pitch "tunes"

falling from high to low	word
falling from low to lower	word
rising from high to higher	word
rising from low to high	word
rising then falling	word
falling then rising	word
rising then falling then rising	word

Figure 1 (continued)
Sample Transcript of a Television News Broadcast
 (excerpt taken from ABC "World News Tonight,"
 September 25, 1980)

Upward vocal register shift	Now is the time for people
Downward vocal register shift	Now is the time for people
Increased speech tempo	acc. (accelerando)
Decreased speech tempo	rall. (rallentando)
Very high stress	WORD
High stress	WORD
Low stress	word

Developing and using categories. Once units of analysis have been specified and a usable transcript done, the examination of each element of the news message can proceed. One will probably have a rudimentary set of categories in mind. These categories can be "pre-tested" on unstructured viewings of the broadcasts. These early viewings are much like early days in the field for participant observers. One's reactions to choices of words, scene composition, inflection, or expression should be noted. Later in the research, these early "field notes" can be valuable when considering the addition of new categories or the modification of old ones.

Considerable patience is required as a category which seemed "finished" at one stage turns out to be in need of modification later. Evolving, emergent categories must be systematically applied, thus requiring considerable backtracking through work done prior to a category's modification. For instance, the definitions of the categories shown in Fig. 1 were revised on several occasions requiring a review of all previously analyzed data.

Verbal analysis. Analysis of transcribed verbal content is relatively straightforward. After speakers are identified by name, status, gender, age, or whatever characteristics are relevant to the central research question, the structure of the discourse can be examined. Who controls what is said? Do speakers interrupt each other? One should pay attention to recurring themes in journalists' analytical statements or in question-and-answer routines with sources. The development of "buzz words" and stock phrases over the life cycle of a story may, for in-

stance, reveal the nature of contemporary political conflict. In Fig. 1, the emphasis on the word "moral" contributed to an image of political polarization and was present in much of the coverage.

Imagining other ways of stating a point or describing a scene can promote the recognition of patterns in the script. Reading multiple news sources or reports of the same events from the foreign press may also be useful as an exercise in purposeful lateral thinking.

Vocal and expressive analysis. The transcribed script can then be marked with symbols indicating changes in vocal inflection and facial expression. Television journalists try to minimize both inflection and expression which may carry "editorial" connotations. However, reporters frequently deliver "analytical" statements in their reports. Local news is often laced with blatantly expressive "happy talk." News subjects, of course, may be quite intentionally managing the impressions they present to the camera. Thus, television news is like a fugue, consisting of a main theme of words and simultaneous variations in both vocal inflection and facial expression.²

In broadcast news, vocal inflection takes the place of punctuation marks. What Bennett (1982:196) has called "prosody" comes into play. Speech is characterized by pitch, loudness and rhythm.³ The prosodic features of news speech are distinctive. Reporters speak in readily distinguishable "tone groups," "a stretch of speech which lasts, on average, for about seven or eight syllables, and which contains only one very prominent syllable, on which a major change in pitch occurs in intonation" (Laver, cited in Bennett, 1982:199). In the speech of broadcast journalists, these tone groups are often characterized by changes in pitch and stress which signal impartiality or benign skepticism—i.e., "objectivity." This speech pattern is one kind of "disclaimer" indicating that the report does not uncritically accept a person's account of his/her own situation (cf. Hewitt & Stokes, 1975:4). The use of terms like "so-called," "supposedly," or "claims" embedded in such tone groups are clear-cut examples of such hedges. In print media, quotation marks suggest the same skepticism and "tune" (cf. Goffman, 1974:12).

The usual hedging inflection pattern, using Bennett's notation system, consists of a pause denoting a tone group boundary, followed by a word pronounced on a higher relative pitch, then falling to a lower pitch. Often, this sequence will be accompanied by a decreased tempo and increased stress. For instance, in Figure 1 above, the pattern occurs at the end of the excerpt, with the words "moral" and "pulpit politicians" clearly hedged. The reporter implies that the viewer

should be uncertain about the meaning of such terms, and that terms other than "moral" could be attached to the "pulpit politicians" behavior.

Television news also permits the observation of reporters' expressions. Since typical news demeanor attempts expressive neutrality, deviations from that neutrality may also be indications of disclaimers and hedges. At appropriate points in the script such facial expression changes can be indicated using the following symbols:

For instance, in reporting Rev. Jerry Falwell's 1981 lawsuit against Penthouse magazine,⁴ NBC anchor John Chancellor openly smiled, nearly chuckled in amusement. Chancellor's report of Falwell's legal action can be notated in Figure 3.

Scene composition analysis. News film relies on a discernible stock of symbols evident in, for example, "establishing shots." When a news segment is constructed, the correspondent will be filmed standing in front of locales—often buildings—which evoke the theme of the piece and which "establish" that the reporter was at the scene of the covered events (Epstein, 1974:162-163; Tuchman, 1978:121). Thus, stories about national political issues often will include a shot of the reporter standing in front of the White House or Capitol—architectural symbols of mainstream political institutions and power.

Figure 2
Facial Expression Notation

1)	: raised eyebrows
2)	: smile
3)	: chuckle, laughter
4)	: frown
5)	: head tilt—left, right, down

Figure 3
Sample Facial Expression Analysis
 (excerpt from "Nightly News," January 29, 1981)

Visuals	Text Categories	Script	Speaker I.D.
[1] Anchor story format. J.C. reads to camera, photo of Falwell matted in behind. Smiles and irony. FPD.	Celebrity	[1] Reverend Jerry Falwell, founder of Moral Majority, recently was interviewed by two freelance writers and in the interview he attacked former President Jimmy Carter for giving an interview to Playboy magazine. Well, the Falwell interview has turned up in all things, in Penthouse magazine.	(John Chancellor)
	Inconsistency		
	Trivializatn.		

Analysis of on-going coverage of a social trend can reveal the development of a stock of symbols. For instance, coverage of right-wing Christian fundamentalists in 1980 repeatedly contained shots of reporters standing in front of some combination of church windows, American flags, the White House, and large congregations at church services (Fields, 1984). The juxtaposition of these symbols conveyed the message that fundamentalists were seeking political power.

The distance of the camera from the subject and the camera angle (straight on, from above, or from the side) are also parts of the news film symbology. Gaye Tuchman (1978:116-121) has identified six ways journalists frame subjects on film. The camera may be held at intimate, close personal, far personal, close social, far social or public distance. Each framing convention carries connotations about the social role of the subject or significance of the event.

Two framing devices are seldom used in television news. At "intimate distance," the subject's face fills the screen, so that the viewer is looking into the subject's eyes. At "close personal distance," the subject's neck and shoulders are visible. Tuchman (1978:119) suggests that the use of these techniques may indicate a breach in journalistic neutrality. In my own research, these techniques were used in one case to give the viewer an apparent chance to look into Rev. Jerry Falwell's

eyes as he made a claim that fundamentalists would follow the political lead of their pastors (NBC "Nightly News," August 19, 1980). The camera distance signaled that something unusual, dramatic, and possibly dangerous was transpiring.

In sum, the researcher will continuously ask: What does the constitution of this particular image signify? Why might this image have been chosen in the filming and editing process? Who is filmed at what distance and in what context? Do subjects filmed at conventional or atypical distances and angles have some characteristic in common, e.g., high/low social status, gender, age, et cetera?⁵

Describing the interplay of message elements. In this final stage of the study, the annotated transcript is a type of data "matrix" (Miles & Huberman, 1984). It shows the incidence or nonincidence of themes and patterns and the interrelations between them. All the elements of a news segment can then be considered as a whole. Do certain juxtapositions of camera distance, visual image, vocal inflection, facial expression, and verbal content appear, recur, and/or disappear? A final viewing of tapes at this point is useful. It should be done without the script in hand and with as open a perspective as possible. Is anything new, not covered by one's analytical framework? If so, there is more work to be done. If not, one is ready to proceed with an explanation of findings.

Toward explanation. The final product is an account of accounts of events. An event occurs. Witnesses to the event develop accounts of what happened. Journalists collect those accounts and construct another account based on them. Content analysts then come along and do an "account of accounts." One usually does not have access to the event or to people who generated the account nor direct knowledge of their intentions or the factors that influenced their selective perception of the matter at hand. Thus, the fruit of one's analysis is not the "truth" of events, only a plausible description of a narrative based upon them.

One's ultimate goal is an explanation of the mode of coverage in itself. The analyst can show how the structure of the coverage is grounded in the social processes of doing newswork (see, for instance, Epstein, 1974; Tuchman, 1978, Fishman, 1980; Sigal, 1973) as well as in the social, political, and economic forces at a certain moment in history (see for instance, Parsons & White, [1960] 1969; Alexander, 1981; Gitlin, 1981; Westergaard, 1979). One might also focus on the "codes" in a body of content as indicators of cultural or political trends (see for instance, Gerbner, 1969; Gibson, 1980; Fields, 1984; Hall, 1979).

Such an "account of accounts" will show all the levels of meaning in a televised message and explain that content in terms of the social milieu in which it was produced. Qualitative analysis can thus achieve a level of rigor beyond the apparently impressionistic.

Reference Notes

1. The Vanderbilt Television News Archive has been building a collection of the three major networks' evening news broadcasts since 1968.
2. Hearing this tune can be aided by either turning off the picture or by listening to an audio tape of the report alone, eliminating visual "clutter."
3. A key of the prosodic symbols used here is given at the end of Figure 1. For a complete presentation, see Bennett, 1982:211-212.
4. In January 1981, Penthouse magazine announced it would publish an interview Falwell had given to two freelance journalists. The journalists had sold the piece to Penthouse apparently without Falwell's knowledge, and much to his chagrin, Falwell sued the magazine and attempted to have distribution of the March issue halted. He did not win the case.
5. Watching the tape without sound sharpens one's ability to discern patterns and symbols in the visual content. Also, photographs from the TV screen help to focus one's attention on the visuals. Set the screen contrast slightly higher than usual to enhance details. Turn off other lights in the room to avoid reflections on the screen. Use a 35mm camera and black and white film with an ASA 400 or higher and a slow shutter—no more than 1/8 of a second. A tripod is useful but not necessary. Take shots of a scene at a slightly faster, than a slightly slower shutter speed. Even the sharpest photos will contain a diagonal "shadow" on the screen, due to the line-by-line projection of the image on the picture tube.

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