**The Beauty And The Concerns Of Content Analysis In Communication Research**

Yuxiao Zhang

University of Maryland

JOUR 689 Content Analysis

Professor Rob Wells

March 9, 2025

Content analysis has long been recognized as a valuable method in media and communication research. Downe‐Wamboldt (1992) defined content analysis as “a research method that provides a systematic and objective means to make valid inferences from verbal, visual, or written data in order to describe and quantify specific phenomena.” Similarly, Berelson (1952) described content analysis as a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication. In Berelson’s framework, objectivity requires that every step in the research process be conducted according to clearly defined rules; systematicity means that the inclusion or exclusion of content or categories must adhere to consistent principles; and quantification involves measuring content according to predetermined categories and analysis units, thereby allowing numerical comparisons of symbols and words.

Manning and Cullum-Swan (1994) also characterized content analysis as a quantitative research technique that employs standardized measurement units to reveal and compare the characteristics of documents. According to Downe‐Wamboldt (1992), the primary goals of content analysis are to uncover the focal points of individual, group, or societal attention; reflect cultural patterns and beliefs; describe themes, trends, and objectives in news or communication content; and characterize both the attributes of the message sender and the attitudinal or behavioral responses of the audience. This method is utilized by social scientists, communication scholars, journalists, and others interested in understanding the nuances of how information is transmitted throughout society.

The content analysis process involves several key steps. First, researchers must select an appropriate unit of analysis. Common units include words, sentences, paragraphs, or entire texts—essentially any strings or characters within the sample. Next, depending on the research question, researchers select, create, and define the categories to be studied and measured. Typical elements measured in content analysis may include story headlines, sizes, placements, sources, officials, citizens, gender or race, victims, perpetrators, languages, attributions, and tones. The theoretical framework further guides the identification of relevant categories, helping to determine the independent variables (the presumed causes or predictors) and the dependent variables (the presumed outcomes or effects).

A critical concept in category development is operationalization—that is, making abstract concepts measurable. Given that content analysis is inherently quantitative, researchers must consider whether each concept or variable can be quantified, and whether these variables are independent, exhaustive, and mutually exclusive. Measures should align with the conceptualizations and be pretested to ensure internal validity.

In research, a clear and detailed exposition of the conceptualization and operationalization of relevant constructs—along with the underlying rationale for categorization—enhances the methodological foundation and overall value of the study. In this regard, Durrheim and Mokeki (1997) provided a detailed codebook in their content analysis of South African psychology journals, explaining how theoretical distinctions were transformed into empirical categories for subsequent quantitative analysis.

Once the categories have been determined and the reliability and validity of the measures have been assessed, researchers can develop a codebook and code the data. The codebook should comprehensively explain all variables and measures, including the unit of data collection and the unit of analysis. For instance, messages may serve as the unit of analysis, the unit of data collection, or both. The codebook must also specify how each variable is measured. In a study of violence, for example, researchers might measure violence by counting the frequency of the word “violence”, with 0 indicating no violence, 1 indicating low violence, 2 indicating medium violence, and 3 indicating high violence. Following the completion of the codebook, training coders and assessing inter-coder reliability are essential steps to ensure consistency and accuracy in the coding process.

Despite its widespread use, content analysis has faced several challenges and criticisms. Some scholars have questioned the definition of “content.” Content might lose its meaning if we break it into words in order to analyze it. Jankowski and Jensen (1991) argue that when researchers attempt to deconstruct a text by treating it as a measurable unit (e.g., words, expressions, or statements) to establish its meaning, they may inadvertently “destroy” the very subject they intend to study. Another significant issue concerns the meaningfulness of quantification. Because content analysis primarily employs categorization and statistical methods, researchers focus on categories that are both identifiable and have sufficient frequency to support effective statistical analysis. Although this characteristic is a strength of quantitative content analysis, it can also lead researchers to overlook contextual factors that are critical for producing persuasive and coherent interpretations (Manning & Cullum-Swan, 1994).

Overall, content analysis remains a valuable and important quantitative analytical tool. Harold D. Lasswell, a founding figure in communications studies, introduced media content analysis as a systematic method for studying propaganda. He described media content analysis as a means to investigate “who says what through which channel to whom with what effect” (Lasswell, 1948). This fundamental question continues to guide communication and journalism scholars in their efforts to understand the complexities of information dissemination.

**References**

Berelson, B. (1952). *Content analysis in communication research.* The Free Press.

Downe‐Wamboldt, B. (1992). Content analysis: Method, applications, and issues. *Health Care for Women International, 13*(3), 313–321. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07399339209516003>

Durrheim, K., & Mokeki, S. (1997). Race and relevance: A content analysis of the *South African Journal of Psychology.* *South African Journal of Psychology, 27*(4), 206–214. <https://doi.org/10.1177/008124639702700403>

Jankowski, N. W., & Jensen, K. B. (Eds.). (1991). *A handbook of qualitative methodologies for mass communication research* (1st ed.). Routledge.<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203409800>

Lasswell, H. D. (1948). The structure and function of communication in society. In L. Bryson (Ed.), *The communication of ideas* (pp. 37–51). Harper & Row.

Manning, P. K., & Cullum-Swan, B. (1994). Narrative, content, and semiotic analysis. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 464–477). Sage.