

The Content Analysis of Communication: Some General Guidelines

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1. ***Divisions or Sections for the Analysis.*** Are there natural divisions in your object of analysis: for example, scenes portrayed in an advertising campaign; the introduction, body, and conclusion of a speech; topics in a conversation; a hierarchy of issues according to importance in a meeting, etc.? If there are no natural divisions like these, can you make an argument for creating some divisions, largely for the purpose of making your analysis more manageable? What sections would make the most sense?
2. ***Units of Analysis.*** Given the nature of your object of analysis and your interest in it, what units of analysis seem the most reasonable for you? For example, should you examine several editorials by the same writer or on the same topic (say, on the role of labor unions in the contemporary U.S.)? As another example, should you consider one episode from each of several TV programs or several episodes from the same program--in order to consider the portrayal of careers associated with people of color? This decision depends chiefly on the kinds of claims or arguments you'd like to make from your analysis. Consider, for instance, if you want to assess the amount and types of violence on TV programming. What might you do to structure your analysis?
3. ***Sampling.*** Assuming there is too much total communication to analyze--take the cases of violence of television, values in contemporary political speeches, the uses of power in all of the board meetings of a clinic or hospital--what is your method for assuring a reasonably representative sample of the discourse? And, if representativeness is not at issue, can you explain? For example, it may be that you are looking at exceptional and not at typical cases.
4. ***Observations.*** What are the kinds of things to look for in analyzing your object of analysis? Are you interested, for example, in word choice, types of visual images, co-occurrence of certain symbols, the prevalence of certain metaphors, the frequency of an archetypal story, etc.? For instance, you may want to know how the war metaphor is expressed in popular books about global business. At the same time, you might compare and contrast this metaphor with others that appear in the same discourse. The key issue is validity: Does your analysis do what you say that it does, in terms of revealing something about your object of study?
5. ***Counting.*** Assuming that you want to draw at least some conclusions about frequency, you will count certain units. What are these units: words, images, metaphors, topics/themes, stories, etc.? How will you know them when you see or hear them? For example, you might count the number of times the term "diversity" is paired with "ethnic" in videos used to socialize and train new organizational members. Or, you might count the uses of "we" in a meeting, recognizing that it is used in variety of ways. Or, you might count the frequency of "success" stories told around the office.
6. ***Categories for Recording.*** These refer to the actual ways you list what you find in a "text" or any type of object of analysis. For example, you might record values found in political speeches under a list of 25 categories that you infer as relevant from your reading before you even conduct the study. Further, you might group these values (and value-related terms) according such topics as family, work, money/property, politics, religion, business, etc., given the context in which the value is discussed in the discourse. At the same time, you might be open to the emergence of unexpected categories of analysis--ones you didn't consider beforehand.

7. ***Richly Illustrative Examples.*** In reporting your analysis, can you offer some compelling examples to support your conclusions? For example, if your emerging conclusion from a study is that most corporate logos today emphasize power and prestige, can you offer some good illustrations of this claim as well as supplying some quantitative data?
8. ***Evidence.*** Do your quantitative and qualitative data together support the claims you are making? Would other reasonable and careful observers arrive at basically the same conclusions (the issue of inter-coder reliability) [Explain the term]? Or, does your analysis offer some special insight because of speculative or inferential leaps you are making from the data to your conclusions? For example, suppose you observe that the human body is portrayed in a severe, strong, and domineering manner in much of contemporary advertising (as one report recently did). [cite it!] What other cultural trends might be related to this finding? In all cases, be sure to reveal how you arrived at your conclusions.
9. ***Contexts for Observations.*** These refer to the larger contexts for the data from which you draw your conclusions. That is, every observation you make and every unit you count comes from a larger context or matrix that may be important for understanding any conclusions that are drawn from your analysis. So, for example, if you find that a series of conversations between an employee and his or manager includes a number of references to “competition” it would be important to note as part of the larger context that “competitiveness” is in the motto or slogan of the corporation in which both persons work and that the same theme was stressed in a recent, well-publicized speech by the CEO.
10. ***The “Person-on-the-Street Test.”*** Given your style of analysis, would it be important that laypersons (that is, anyone who does not spend time analyzing communication) be able to nod in understanding and agreement after reading your research report? That is, should your analysis be consistent with the experiences of everyday social actors in the relevant situation? Or, does your style of analysis actually privilege your position as an observer-analyst-researcher such that you hope to see things that people in the relevant situation cannot see?