

## Content Analysis

### What is content analysis?

Content analysis is the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the content of documents, including print media and broadcast media coverage.

In content analysis we attempt to objectively code and describe the content of communication. Content analysis involves selecting a unit of analysis, defining categories, sampling, and coding.

### Ways to use Content Analysis:

1. Simply to describe the contents of a message.
2. To compare media, such as television with newspapers.
3. Study trends or changes in content of a medium over time.
4. Analyze international differences in communication content.

### How to do it:

- ▶ *First:* Select the **unit of analysis**, or portions of the message which are to be analyzed.

The most commonly used unit is the item itself, or the whole natural unit used by the producers of the material. Examples of items are newspaper stories, magazine articles, radio newscasts, and television programs. The entire item may be analyzed, such as a news story, or only portions of it, such as television program segments.

- ▶ *Second:* Decide whether to sample from all units to be studied (the **population**) or to study the entire population.

When studying in depth the contents of messages which may be affected by outside events occurring over short periods of time, then it is best to study the entire population. For example, a study of news coverage of the events in Iraq in 2002 by the *New York Times* would require analysis of all issues of the newspaper in 2002.

As the purpose of the study becomes more general and broader in scope, and as the time period and number of messages increase, then sampling may be useful. For example, if we wished to describe the types of news items (news categories) reported in the *New York Times* over the last five years, we would sample issues from each year rather than analyzing all issues. As with surveys, sample size will depend on margin of error, confidence level, and variability of the contents being studied.

- ▶ *Third:* Define the **categories of analysis**, or the categories which will be used to describe the contents.

Some categories often used are subject matter (what is said, as, for example, news categories of crime, economics, weather), direction (whether a particular item is pro, con, or neutral, as in analysis of news coverage of a political candidate), values (whether certain values are

found in the contents, such as achievement motivation, fatalism, materialism), and theme (whether certain themes are found in the communication content, such as prejudice, violence, and stereotypes).

Categories should be clearly defined before the study. They should fit the needs of the study, be exhaustive (describe all of the material being considered) and be mutually exclusive (a coded item should be placed in only *one* category). We usually pretest categories to determine whether they fulfill all of these requirements.

- ▶ *Fourth:* After categories have been defined, **begin** the analysis.

We will need at least three coders working independently. We can not be sure that ratings by only one coder were objective -- that they were not affected by his or her values, experiences, and needs. With three coders, we can check on the objectivity of the ratings by computing a coefficient of agreement. This is the degree to which coders agree on assignment of items to categories, or on their ratings of the items.

Generally, we require 80 percent or more agreement. If there is high agreement, then we can say that our procedures and the categories were valid

- ▶ *Fifth:* Data reduction and analysis of **results**.

We often present results using descriptive statistics such as means and percentages, and cross tabulations. We should always relate our results back to the study's original hypotheses or objectives.

The main criteria in evaluating content analysis studies are the adequacy and clarity of the categories and the degree of agreement among coders. As in any study, we should also be concerned with internal and external validity and whether the objectives were met.