The SAGE Handbook of Public Opinion Research

32 Content Analyses and Public Opinion Research

[p. 348 ↓]

32 Content Analyses and Public Opinion Research

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A lasting question of public opinion research concerns the relationship between public opinion and media messages: Do news media mould or mirror public opinion? Generations of scholars speculated about the direction of a hypothetical link and called for valid empirical evidence. As a matter of fact, the methodology is available for answering this question. Numerous studies have demonstrated how the relationship between public opinion and communications can be examined and specified.

This chapter begins with some examples of research settings and theoretical approaches combining public opinion research with analyses of communication content. Thereafter, the basics of content analysis methodology are briefly described. In this context, the instrumental use of the content analysis method for analyzing open-ended survey questions will also be addressed. The next section gives an outline of different methodologies for measuring message exposure as one of the necessary links between communication content and public opinion. The final section of the chapter discusses linkage analysis designs that can establish evidence of the relationship between news media and public opinion. This is illustrated by examples from empirical research representing different procedures of integrating public opinion data with content analysis results.

Tracing Public Opinion to Communications: Research Approaches

Relating public opinion to media content on both the individual and the macro or system levels is a core element of a number of research approaches. Inquiries into the impact of *election campaign communications* on the voters' opinion formation are a typical example. Already the pioneer study in this field, the legendary Erie County Study conducted by Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues, comprised an extensive content analysis of the campaign messages of newspapers, magazines, radio speeches, and newscasts. **[p. 349 ↓]** On this basis, the authors devoted two chapters of their report to analyzing 'what the voters were told' and to specifying the influences of the radio and the print media (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944, chaps. XIII and XIV). Since then, it has become almost routine to supplement studies of opinion formation during election campaigns with analyses of campaign communications such as advertising, debates, and news coverage (see, e.g., Kaid, 2004, chaps. 7, 8, and 9).

Agenda-setting, as one of the most intensively researched concepts of media influence in election campaigns and beyond, relates issue coverage in the media to issue salience in the public. A typical agenda-setting study combines survey questions asking people to name the most important problems facing the country with a media analysis focusing on the frequency of issues reported in the news (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; → *Agenda-Setting, Framing and Priming*). Cultivation theory is another widely recognized approach in modern communication research that may be mentioned as an example. The basic hypothesis in this context posits a relationship between specific content features of television programs (e.g., an emphasis on violence) and beliefs of the public (e.g., the belief that most people cannot be trusted). Atypical cultivation study establishes such a relationship by comparing results of population surveys with content analyses of television programs (Gerbner & Gross, 1976).

Outside academic research, a number of commercial research institutions are continuously monitoring the media coverage of a broad range of topics, organizations, and elite persons, quite often in comparison with public opinion data focusing—for example, on agenda-setting processes and on media influences in election campaigns.

In addition to serving their clients, who range from companies to interest groups to government agencies, political parties and politicians, the institutes publish some of their results in newsletters and on their websites.[1]

There are different logical and operational strategies for linking communication content data to public opinion results. The most common—yet weakest—strategy is a conjectural interpretation of aggregated data. The conjectures can go in two directions, either tracing public opinion back to communication content as a stimulus, or inferring from messages in the news media (or other sources) to their impact on public opinion. If either part of the relationship remains unobserved or based on only impressionistic observations instead of systematic research, this strategy is good for generating hypotheses, but not for causal proof.

More valid results will be obtained by measuring and *operationally* integrating both communication content and public opinion. This chapter concentrates on operational strategies including, in addition to public opinion data, three elements: (1) an analysis of communication content, (2) measures of message exposure, and (3) a rationale for connecting public opinion to communication content and establishing the evidence through operational and statistical procedures. Since these methods as well as the relevant studies primarily relate to the news media, the focus here will be on relationships between media messages and public opinion.

Characterizing Communications by Content Analysis

Content analysis is a research technique for systematically identifying characteristics of communications. Most frequently, content analysis is used as a method for making replicable and valid inferences to unobserved elements of the communication process, such as the communicator or the audience. Berelson (1952), in his classical content analysis text book emphasized this purpose, and several other authors agreed (e.g., Holsti, 1969; Krippendorff, 2004). However, in addition to such a 'stand-alone' function, it became increasingly common to implement content analysis as one element of a

multi-method design observing—and not just inferring—relationships between different elements of the communication process (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, chap. 10).

[p. 350 ↓]

Content analysis procedures aim to transform selected features of messages into data that can be processed by statistical analysis and related to data from other sources like public opinion surveys. This requires, at first, deciding which are the relevant media, messages, or message elements to be included in the analysis. Sampling strategies may be applied for selecting the relevant material on systematic grounds. Second, based on these decisions, the units of analysis have to be defined with reference to semantic or syntactic message features. Typical units of analysis are stories from newspapers or broadcast bulletins, actors or speakers and their utterances ('sound bites'), sentences, and pictures. Third, the researcher has to decide which characteristics of messages—that is, which variables—should be studied. Examples of message variables are *topics* of news stories, *institutional affiliations* of speakers in the news, *evaluations* in utterances, *emotional appeals* of pictures, *space* given to news stories, and *length* of 'sound bites' or of sentences. As a fourth step, the values of each variable are defined. This includes defining the level of measurement of each variable. Content variables are mostly measured on a nominal level (a typical example is a list of topics) or on an ordinal level (e.g., three levels of evaluative direction: positive—neutral —negative). Some formal variables, such as length of the item (in column inches or seconds), can be measured by an interval scale.

The researcher creates a codebook containing the operational definitions of units, variables and values. The codebook provides the instructions for coding the material to be analyzed. The set of variables and values are often called categories (or the coding scheme). For the process of coding—that is, for applying the coding scheme to the media material and thus transforming message features into data—quite often a group of research assistants is employed and trained. In this case, the inter-coder agreement has to be checked by special tests (reliability tests). If verbal messages are analyzed and the text material is available in computer-readable form, it is possible to employ special software in a computer-assisted coding process.

Full-text archives accessible online, such as the Lexis-Nexis database, are convenient sources particularly for computer-assisted text analysis (see, e.g., Fan, 1988). Likewise, material on the World Wide Web can be exploited for content analysis purposes, also by employing search engines and filtering devices. Useful resources for conventional content analyses are audiovisual media archives holding a great amount of film, television and radio material.

In addition to analyzing already available messages of mass media and other sources such as political documents, speeches, letters and the like, it is also possible to generate messages especially for research purposes and to submit these messages to a content analysis. In public opinion research, responses to open-ended questions serve this function. Mostly, these questions elicit simple and brief answers that can be noted by the interviewer on the spot. Agenda-setting studies, for example, pose an open-ended question asking respondents to name 'the two or three main things which you think the government should concentrate on doing something about,' as in the classical study by McCombs and Shaw (1972). In this case, the answers were coded into 15 categories representing issues and other aspects of the election campaign. Another example is a study by Shah and colleagues examining the cognitive complexity of individuals' responses to radio broadcasts framing the issue of urban growth differently. The authors asked respondents to 'explain the issue of urban growth' and analyzed the answers by using a highly elaborate coding scheme including topics, causes, solutions, actors, as well as relationships between these categories (Shah, Kwak, Schmierbach, & Zubric, 2004). Especially if open-ended questions evoke a bulk of verbal material by a large number of respondents, it will be useful to generate a text file and submit the verbal material to a computer-assisted analysis (see, e.g., Mohler & Zuell, 2001; **[p. 351 ↓]** West, 2001). In addition to handling vast amounts of material, computer content analysis has the advantage of being highly reliable.

By all means, the definitions and the coding procedures have to meet the basic requirements of empirical research; that is, they have to be valid, precise and reliable (reproducible). There are a number of textbooks providing detailed information about the content analysis methodology and its various applications, including computer-assisted coding (e.g., Neuendorf, 2002; Krippendorff, 2004; see also http://academic.csuohio.edu/kneuendorf/content/).

SSAGE research**methods**

Measuring Message Exposure

When public opinion data are related to mass media content, it will increase the validity of the study if, in addition to content analysis results, information is available about the public's exposure to media and/or messages. There are different ways to access such information.

Audience ratings research is one convenient source providing comprehensive and up-to-date information about the reach and usage of print and electronic media, including the Internet. Routine measures of audiences for television and other media provide specific information, for example, about exposure to content categories such as news or advertising, exposure to specific media outlets (channels, print products or the like), to programs aired at a certain day and time slots, or to specific websites, to single issues of a newspaper or magazine, and even to particular sections or items within an issue. Audience research based on standardized instruments (such as surveys, people meters, and diaries) is mostly commissioned by the media industry and continuously produced by commercial institutes. The data are easily available and quite often exploited for scholarly studies. However, when relating these data to media content, the researcher is usually constrained to comparisons on the aggregate level, which limits the evidence of the study, as will be explained below. If researchers want to examine relationships on the individual level, they inevitably have to measure the respondents' media use in the very survey sample generating the public opinion data for the comparison with the media content.

Recurring measures of media use are included in the General Social Surveys (GSS) of the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago and in the American National Election Surveys (ANES), now co-directed by the Institute for Social Research (ISR) at the University of Michigan and the Institute for Research in the Social Sciences (IRiSS) at Stanford University.[2] The GSS has posed identical media questions since the early 1970s, so it is possible to trace long-term trends. In Europe, the Standard Eurobarometer surveys, commissioned by the European Commission and fielded in the member states of the European Community (EC) since the 1980s, regularly include questions about people's use of the media for news on television, in

daily papers, on the radio, and about their exposure to media coverage of the EC.[3] In addition, commercial survey organizations, like Gallup, Roper, and others, frequently produce data about media use that may be instrumental in relating public opinion to mass media content.

Since the commercial surveys and also the GSS and ANES studies cover a broad range of topics, there is only room for a few simple questions about the respondent's media exposure. Sample standard versions are: *How often do you read the newspaper —every day, a few times a week, once a week, less than once a week, or never? or On an average day, about how many hours do you personally watch television?* (NORC). In addition to inquiries about the frequency of exposure, a number of instruments have been designed for probing various dimensions of media use, for example, asking for reliance on, attention to, and assessment of different media sources. Sample standard versions are: *Where would you say you get most of your news—from newspapers, television, radio, magazines, or somewhere else?* (Roper) or *In general, how much attention did you pay to news about the campaign for President—a great deal, quite a bit, some, very little, or none?* (ANES). Unlike standard surveys, special studies focusing on communication behavior employ more elaborate measures of exposure to and reception of particular messages such as election campaign advertising, televised debates, specific issues, or particular news stories.

One problem with most measures of communication behavior is that they have to rely on the respondent's self-reports. Thus, the validity of the methodology may be questioned (see, e.g., Bartels, 1993). As a study by Shoemaker, Breen, and Wrigley (1998) demonstrates, the results of measuring newspaper exposure may differ considerably depending on how exposure is operationalized. The authors compared two ways of measuring the amount of time spent with reading.[4] Several authors advocate combining questions of exposure with indicators of motivation (like, e.g., message attention, information seeking, media involvement) in order to improve the validity of media use measures (Chaffee & Schleuder, 1986; Shoemaker, Schooler, & Danielson, 1989; Drew & Weaver, 1990; Gantz, Fitzmaurice, & Fink, 1991).

Obviously, the more specifically and the more precisely people's encounters with messages are measured, the more conclusive is the evidence derived from connecting

public opinion to communication content. However, elaborate exposure measures require much interview time, so that it is often a question of finding a reasonable compromise between what would be desirable and what is affordable.

Figure 32.1 The full-model linkage design

Establishing Evidence: Linkage Analysis

Measuring people's message exposure and analyzing the messages people are exposed to are only first steps in drawing relationships between communications and public opinion. Following up on the suggestions of Shoemaker and Reese (1996, chap. 10) for integrating diverse domains of communications research, Neuendorf (2002, pp. 61ff.) distinguishes different levels of interlinking message and audience data. The strongest linkage is established if there is a one-to-one correspondence of the units of analysis of content and audience data. Neuendorf calls this a *first-order linkage*. In this case, the study design comprises all elements of the linkage model illustrated by Figure 32.1.

Relationships between public opinion and communications can be studied on both the micro- and the macro-levels, that is, based on individual-level data or on aggregated data. A typical *micro-level* approach assumes that a person's exposure to a specific message, or a series of messages, may impact on his or her opinions or attitudes. Most studies of election campaign effects on opinion formation take such an approach as it was pioneered by Lazarsfeld *et al.* (1944). *Macro-level* explanations usually attribute the formation or change of public opinion to the societal dissemination of media messages. The 'classical' agenda-setting approach ($_\rightarrow$ *Agenda-Setting, Framing and Priming*) may be mentioned as one example (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Another good illustration is a study on 'what moves public opinion' by Page, Shapiro, and Dempsey (1987), which regresses US citizens' policy preferences upon aggregated media content. In all cases the hypothesized **[p. 353 ↓]** relationships are implicitly or explicitly causal in nature.

But the perspective may also be turned around, pursuing, on the micro-level, selection or reception processes by individual audience members when, for example, the research question is how people make sense of media messages (e.g., Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992). Macro-level approaches of this type hypothesize that media messages reflect the prevailing mood or the mainstream opinion of the population or of specific population segments ($_{\rightarrow}$ *The News as a Reflection of Public Opinion*).[5]

Full Model Designs with Individual Level Data

Linking message content to public opinion on the individual level may be based on different units of analysis, as there are: (1) the survey respondent as unit, (2) a message unit, or (3) a hybrid unit. Donsbach (1991a) subsumes the two former strategies under the heading 'index model,' since both are characterized by adding the aggregated data of one data set as a new variable to the units of the second data set. In contrast to this, the latter strategy, which Donsbach labels 'the individual data model,' merges individual-level data from both data sets into a new unit of analysis (ibid.). The following examples will illustrate the difference in these procedures.

(1) The Respondent as Unit of Analysis

A groundbreaking agenda-setting study by Erbring, Goldenberg, and Miller (1980) is an example of a full-model design using the survey respondent as the linkage unit. The authors measured the public agenda of the US population with the familiar open-ended question about the most important problems facing the country posed in the 1974 National Election Study. In addition, they asked the respondents which local newspapers they read. The front-page news of the newspapers the respondents actually read was content analyzed in order to specify the relevant media agenda to which they had been exposed. Finally, the authors matched each respondent with the particular paper he or she had read and merged the (individual-level) survey data

SAGE researchmethods

with the respective (aggregated) content analysis results (ibid.; Miller, Goldenberg, & Erbring, 1979).[6]

A similar, more recent example is a study by Beck, Dalton, Greene, and Huckfeldt (2002) on the influence of news media and other intermediaries on voting choices. The authors merged four different data sources with a representative survey of the American electorate using the individual respondent as the central unit of analysis. The data sources included content analyses of the respondents' main newspapers and the television networks the respondents watched for news. The content analysis focused on the *actual* bias in both news reporting and editorials, while the interviews investigated the media bias as *perceived* by the respondents.

Other studies make even greater efforts to specify the messages supposed to impact public opinion. For example, a study of public opinion formation on three controversial issues by Kepplinger, Brosius and Staab (1991) included analyses of a broad range of news media outlets such as dailies and weeklies, as well as radio and television programs. These results were merged with the data from a survey of citizens of the German Rhine-Main-Area by assigning to each respondent his/her individual dose of information received on the issues under study.

(2) A Message Element as Unit of Analysis

A study by McCombs and Mauro (1977) illustrates the full-model design using a message element for the linkage. The authors examined which characteristics of news stories most strongly influence the level of newspaper readership. The study comprised two parts, a content analysis of a local newspaper and a survey among the readers of that newspaper. The authors measured the readership of each of the 199 items in one day's paper by asking respondents which stories they had noticed, whether they had read some portion of the text, and how much they had read of it. **[p. 354 ↓]** In addition, the newspaper copy was content analyzed by classifying each story on different content and format characteristics. Finally, the authors assessed each story characteristic as a predictor of the three indicators of readership. In this linkage analysis, the unit of

$SAGE researchmethods**

analysis was the single news item with its characteristics as independent variables and the aggregated readership figures per item as dependent variables.

Another example is a study by Naccarato and Neuendorf (1998) who content analyzed magazine advertisements and attributed to each message unit (i.e., advertisement) data about audience responses (e.g., readership and recall measures) from a survey among readers of the magazine. The purpose of this study was to predict readership from the particular form and content attributes of print ads.

(3) A Hybrid Unit of Analysis

Donsbach (1991a, 1991b) constructed a hybrid unit for studying, with a highly elaborate design, how consonance and dissonance between media content and the readers' political predispositions guide audience selectivity. He surveyed readers of two national and two regional German dailies and specified their exposure to political articles in three consecutive issues of the newspapers. The survey included also questions on readers' opinions toward leading politicians covered in the news. In addition, he content analyzed all newspaper articles to which readers had been exposed for a number of format and content characteristics. A crucial content characteristic was the role played by certain political leaders in the news story classified as favorable, unfavorable, or neutral. Donsbach (1991a) created a new unit of analysis defined as 'each potential contact between one reader and one article' (p. 162) in order to merge the information from the news stories with the information from the readership survey. The newly created data set served to investigate how readership behavior was influenced by consonant and dissonant relationships between media content and the readers' political predispositions (ibid.).

Alternatives to the Full-Model Design

Studies operationally relating public opinion to communication content with a full-model design are quite rare, whereas studies missing either or both the content analysis and the exposure measure can be found quite frequently. If the linkage analysis model is incomplete we may speak, in Neuendorf's (2002) terminology, of a *second-order* or a

third-order linkage.[7] The linkage analysis may be restrained not only due to missing elements but also because it is based on aggregated data. In such cases, the lack of strong empirical evidence at the individual level has to be compensated (or substituted) for with logical reasoning and interpretation.

Very often researchers are content with measuring only people's media exposure in addition to their opinions but not the media content; thus they are leaving the characteristics of the messages people are exposed to unspecified. Moreover, media usage is normally measured only by rough indicators unable to determine exactly which messages people have received (see above section on measuring message exposure). As these studies apply an incomplete model, their evidence of a message-opinion-linkage is limited. Usually, the weakness of the design is compensated for by implying a certain correspondence between media and message content and by taking for granted that people's (self-reported) media contacts result in a specific impact (Maurer, 2003, p. 171).

A more sophisticated reasoning characterizes studies committed to the media dependency hypothesis as defined by Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1976). For example, the 'classical' cultivation study relates media content characteristics to audience's beliefs about the 'facts of life,' presupposing that the messages assumed to exert a cultivation effect have been received by the audience. Even if the messages are content analyzed and the study includes measures of media usage (e.g., for identifying heavy television viewers) the design does not conform to the full model as long as the content analysis results are not operationally linked to individual audience members and **[p. 355]** their respective media exposure.[8] Hence, the evidence has to be supported by ancillary assumptions, for example, that television is a 'common symbolic environment' people cannot elude (Gerbner & Gross, 1976) or—as other authors put it—that 'nearly everyone is exposed either directly or indirectly to what the media broadcast' (Page *et al.*, 1987).

Agenda-setting research is another case in point. If an agenda-setting study relating survey results to the issue agenda of the media is missing a measure of media exposure, the relevant messages that are hypothesized to influence public opinion cannot be specified adequately. In this case the study does not conform to a full-model

design.[9] Yet, similar to the 'classical' cultivation approach, it is often presupposed that all media in the respondents' environment present roughly the same issue agenda. Such a situation of *consonant coverage* prevents selective media exposure so that uniform media effects may be expected (Noelle-Neumann, 1973; Peter, 2004).

In principle, studies relying on aggregate-level data for either or both communication content and public opinion are unable to establish a one-to-one correspondence of linkage analysis units. In this case the precise nature of the relationship between individual opinions and aggregate message structures (or of single messages and aggregate public opinion) remains obscure. Unless there is strong evidence for a unique situation such as consonant media coverage, inferences about sub-units within an aggregate population are vulnerable to the *ecological fallacy*.

Linking communication content and public opinion by a time-series design is an operational strategy increasingly used to compensate for the weaknesses of aggregate level data. Statistical methods permitting causal inferences serve to trace changes in media content to changes in public opinion, or vice versa (see, e.g., Fan, 1988; Brosius & Kepplinger, 1990). As Neuendorf (2002, p. 61) argues, a time series study may be considered a 'Type B' *first-order linkage* design since the time unit (such as a week or a month) serves as the operational linkage.[10]

However, only if the time series is set up as a *panel study*—that is, if *identical* persons are interviewed at different time points—does it qualify as a true (or 'Type A') first-order linkage, provided it satisfies all other elements of the full-model design. The specific advantage of a panel study is that it enables tracing changes over time on the individual level and thus examining linkages of individual respondents' opinions and their message exposure. A study by Maurer (2003) is a rare example of a panel study meeting all these conditions.

Conclusion

Since the early 1970s Noelle-Neumann has stressed over and again that progress in communication research will be reached by combining and systematically interlinking

$SAGE research**methods**

public opinion data and content analysis results (see, e.g., Noelle-Neumann, 1973; Noelle-Neumann, 1979; see also Shoemaker & Reese, 1990). In the meantime, it has become increasingly common to extend research designs to multi-level and multi-method approaches. The development has been spurred by advancements in statistical methods and data processing techniques. It is especially the complex theoretical models explaining media influences on the individual or on society that call for elaborate research designs integrating different methods of data collection. Due to the theoretical and methodological progress that has been achieved over decades of communication research, the seemingly crucial question of whether the media mold or rather mirror public opinion has turned out to be an ill-defined problem. Depending on the situation, influences going into one direction or the other may prevail, and quite often they go into both directions at the same time, making it more appropriate to speak of an interaction —or even a dynamic transaction—rather than a causal relation (see Part II of this Handbook).

As has been shown, different methodological strategies based on different rationales are instrumental in relating public opinion **[p. 356 ↓]** to communications. Most valid evidence, however, can be compiled only if the study analyzes the message content as well as the message exposure and if there is a one-to-one correspondence of the units of analysis. Yet, studies meeting these conditions are still quite rare.

Notes

1 This field of applied research was pioneered by Robert and Linda Lichter who founded the Center for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA) in Washington D.C. in 1985 (see http://www.cmpa.com/). In the meantime, institutes with a similar mission are operating in several countries worldwide, for example the Media Tenor institute in Bonn (see http://www.mediatenor.com/).

2 See http://www.umich.edu/~nes/.

3 See http://europa.eu.int/comm/public_opinion/index_en.htm and http://www.gesis.org/en/data_service/eurobarometer/.

SAGE researchmethods

4 See also Price (1993) who examined the consequences of varying reference periods in survey question wordings.

5 Macro-level explanations may incorporate micro-level processes (Price, 1988). The spiral of silence theory is a prominent example (Noelle-Neumann, 1984, $\rightarrow$ *Spiral of Silence Theory*).

6 As an additional feature of the study 'real world' data, such as unemployment and crime rates, relating to the local contexts of the respondents were collected and merged with the survey and newspaper content data.

7 According to Neuendorf (2002, p. 62) a study should be classified as second-order linkage if it fails to match units with a one-to-one correspondence so that the links may be anecdotal or occasional. From this she distinguishes a third-order linkage characterized by merely assuming a logical relationship between data from different studies.

8 This is, of course, a simplified picture of cultivation research which has, in the meantime, developed quite many facets, including much more elaborate study designs (see Shanahan & Morgan, 1999).

9 There are, of course, variants of agenda-setting research based on individual-level data and a full-model design, like, for example, the study by Erbring *et al.* (1980) referred to above; see also, for example, Rössler (1999).

10 A study by Schulz (1982) using events as linkage unit may be considered as another example of this type. The author identified 555 different events covered by at least two of four selected mass media (TV programs and newspapers) over a three-month period. A content analysis of the media coverage served to characterize these events by their news factors as well as their newsworthiness (indicated by prominence of coverage). These event variables were statistically related to different measures of event awareness investigated by a population survey.

$SAGE research**methods**

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⑤SAGE researchmethods

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[p. 358 ↓]

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