Why study media content?

Barrie Gunter

For as long as communications media have existed, there have been debates about their influences on individuals, groups and societies. However, unless we know how to research media content, we cannot address effectively the questions these debates raise.

In the early twentieth century, there was a widespread belief that the mass media could exert powerful effects on people, especially when used for propaganda purposes. Theorists back then discussed such concepts as the 'hypodermic needle' or 'magic bullet' effects, which maintained that the media only needed to present a persuasive message and the audience would accept it and act upon it in exactly the way the message-sender desired.

However, this view was challenged in the years following the Second World War.

Scholars observed that such direct effects were not always measurable and that media consumers would not routinely accept, without question, everything the media told them. The belief in the powerful effects of the media was therefore superseded by the idea that the media had only limited effects on audiences.

Audiences and media effects

With advances in theories about the media and in research methodologies about media effects, there was growing recognition that specific types of media influence depended upon certain conditions being in place. Among the most important of these 'mediating' conditions is the nature of media messages:

■ What kind of things do different media tell people?
■ How are media messages constructed and presented?
■ Which production techniques are used to embellish messages?
■ What forms of language and images are used?

■ Who are the sources of messages, and how authoritative and credible are they?

In sum, what is the nature of media *content*? To deal with questions of this sort, it is necessary to adopt research techniques that allow us to assess and evaluate media content systematically.

The significance of this content analysis stems from empirical evidence showing that how audiences respond to a media message often depends upon the attributes of the message's content. Sometimes, media influences are immediate and dramatic. For example, an advertisement could have an instant effect on the popularity of a product, especially if a celebrity is involved in promoting it. On other occasions, media influences are subtle but build cumulatively over time. Exposure to individual advertisements showing men promoting cars and women promoting washing-up liquids might not be regarded as particularly noteworthy. However, repeated over time, such depictions could cultivate the idea that decisions about cars are the preserve of men and decisions about washing-up liquids are best taken by women.

Furthermore, if we want to make general statements about the potential of advertising to trigger specific emotional reactions or to condition stereotypes, we need to establish, methodically, whether critical features are present or absent, and to what extent they are normal or unusual practice. In other words, we need to *describe* media content.

Media content and production

Research into media content was also acknowledged as important in the context of understanding the production of media. In the news, for example, a number of decisions are taken each day by producers and editors about which stories to cover, how they should be presented, and where they should be located in the newspaper or bulletin. These decisions are not made randomly. Content analysis can shed light on whether the presentation of news adopts regular patterns or follows standardised routines and practices. This then allows us to ask questions about why these patterns exist.

For example, if we were told that newspaper A supports the government and newspaper B supports an opposition party, and we wished to obtain empirical evidence in support of this position, we could investigate whether newspaper A gave more coverage to government policies, or whether newspaper B was more critical of the government. We would need to compile a sample of both newspapers and analyse systematically their political news coverage to determine whether such differences actually exist.

Media content analysis

The primary methodology used by researchers to examine and describe media content is content analysis. It is a *quantitative* approach that catalogues media content using a numerical coding system.

The other defining principles of content analysis are that it should be objective and replicable. This means that the quantitative measures we apply to media content must be defined clearly, so that another person could identify what is to be coded and produce identical findings from analysing the same information.

What to describe

Any aspect of media content can be described, so long as it can be numerically scored in a clear and consistent manner. Hence, we can describe texts or pictures in newspapers, magazines, books and pamphlets; television or radio content (programmes or advertisements); films or DVDs; and internet content (websites, blogs, social networking sites etc.) At its simplest, this form of analysis counts the frequencies of particular features in media outputs. Box 1 suggests what this counting might comprise.

At a more subtle level, specific features might be described, such as:

■ audio features (the use of sound effects and music)
■ linguistic features (words that are known to evoke specific emotional reactions or contain cultural meanings for the audience)
■ narrative features (emphasis given to specific arguments or perspectives that could shape public opinions)
■ pictorial features (types of images involving different camera angles, scene cuts and varying amounts of graphic detail that could trigger emotional responses or distract attention from information conveyed by the narrative)

How to describe

Once we have decided *what* we want to describe, certain rules must be followed as to how we carry out this description. We can begin by identifying the broad nature of the content on which our study will focus.

Let us take the example of media violence. Here, we must start by defining what is meant by 'violence'. Although we

may have our own ideas about what this entails, when undertaking content analysis we must be *objective*. We therefore need to produce a standard definition of violence that would enable us (and anyone else using our system of analysis) to identify the same actions as 'violent'. This definition will allow us to recognise when relevant material has appeared that qualifies for analysis. The outcome should be that any two people could take that definition and consistently identify relevant incidences of violence. An example of a standard definition of violence on television is shown in Box 2.

Next, we must devise a measurement scheme for quantifying content. Once we have identified that 'violence' has occurred in a television programme, how do we measure it? In this context, most researchers have adopted the currency of the 'violent act'. This means that a distinct unit of behaviour is measured that has a beginning and an end. A simple method is to quantify in time units when a violent action sequence starts and finishes. However, within a sequence of behaviour, a number of distinctive actions may occur that we would wish to distinguish between.

If character A punches character B, that action sequence might be regarded as a single violent act. If character A punches character B five times, most researchers would not count this as five separate acts, because it might not add much meaning to the overall investigation. Hence, we might adopt the rule that if the nature of the violence stays the same and is uninterrupted, it counts as a single act.

If character A punches character B and then character B retaliates by punching

Chesney is attacked by Kenzie on popular television soap Coronation Street. *How would you produce a standard definition of violence, and how would you measure it?*

back, we might count this as two separate acts because there is a change of perpetrator. If character A punches character B and then shoots him, that would also count as two separate acts because, although the perpetrator is unchanged, he performs two qualitatively different violent behaviours.

In each of the latter two cases, the *change* of behaviour or perpetrator adds new meaning. Hence, in content analysis we must define not only what we wish to describe (e.g. violence) but also our 'units of analysis' (i.e. the measurement units used to quantify the content being studied).

These principles are applied regardless of the nature of behaviour that is being coded.

Box 2 Definition of violence on television

The definition of violence is as follows:
- Any overt depiction of a credible threat of physical force or the actual use of physical force
- With or without a weapon
- Which is intended to harm or intimidate an animate being or a group of animate beings or inanimate objects (i.e. property)
- Whether carried out or merely attempted
- Whether the action causes injury or not
- The acts of violence may be intentional or accidental (in the context of an intentional violent event — e.g. a car crash during a car chase)
- Violent accidents and catastrophes (if caused by human agents — e.g. a terrorist bomb explodes on a plane causing the plane to crash)

Source: Gunter, B. and Harrison, J. (1998) *Violence on Television: An Analysis of Amount, Nature, Location and Origin of Violence in British Programmes*, Routledge.

It also applies when we are describing and measuring non-behavioural features — for example, a study of news coverage might use 'news reports' as units of analysis. Coding instructions would be devised to define what constitutes a 'report' in a newspaper/magazine or in a television/radio news bulletin. These units would then be quantified in terms of simple frequency counts or measured in terms of the amount of page space or airtime they occupy.

If our interest centres on the way specific types of people are covered by the media, references to qualifying individuals would be counted. A good example here is media coverage of politicians. In this case, we would note each time a political figure is mentioned in a newspaper or in television/radio news bulletins.

What else to describe

Content analysis is not simply concerned with quantifying units of analysis. It is often important to identify and catalogue different attributes of those units.

In the case of violence, for example, we might wish to record the different settings in which violence is depicted (e.g. civil disturbance, crime, war), the physical nature of the behaviour itself (i.e. different forms of armed or unarmed aggression), the nature of the perpetrator and victim (e.g. gender, age, ethnicity), the consequences for victims (e.g. death, injury, no observable harm) and so on. These features could be important in determining whether the violence has the potential to trigger a strong emotional or behavioural response among viewers.

In the case of the news, we might wish to assess the extent to which certain types of stories are covered more often than others, and whether such stories are characterised by particular features that render them more 'newsworthy'. For example, are certain production techniques used routinely for stories that are seen as more 'entertaining' for the audience?

How to select it

Another key objective of content analysis is to investigate the wider nature of media output. We might seek to answer such questions as: do magazine advertisements disproportionately use models with very thin body shapes; or do television news bulletins usually start with stories about politics?

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Studies of time-limited events such as a general election campaign might allow researchers to examine coverage exhaustively because there is a manageable amount of it to look at. However, in most content analysis studies researchers tend to explore broad aspects of general media coverage because the total amount of content available is too large for all of it to be studied. In such cases, samples of media content must be selected. These should be sufficiently *representative*, to allow conclusions to be drawn about the wider media content from which the samples were drawn.

The big question about sampling is *how much* content should be described? The principles of sampling are the same as those that apply with opinion polling:
- Random sampling generally yields the best results.
- Non-random sampling is less robust scientifically but might still provide useful insights, especially in content analysis.

With random sampling, each item selected for analysis is no more likely to have been selected than any other item in the wider content from which it was drawn. For example, a study could look at 10,000 hours or 1,000 hours of television programming. The larger sample would not necessarily produce more representative findings than the smaller sample if it had been selected in a non-random way.

In practice, however, many researchers who conduct content analysis studies find that non-random procedures are more useful. This is because the content they wish to examine must be carefully sought out. For example, a study designed to track the nature of specific types of newspaper crime-reporting (e.g. stories about female murderers) over the past 100 years might use a non-random method to pinpoint time periods and publications that offer a wealth of relevant material. A random method might sample news material from a time when no such events were being reported.

Conclusion

Content analysis of media outputs represents a cornerstone of our knowledge about the impact of the media. Although this form of analysis is restricted to the description of media content, it is often essential to audit the way the media represent topics, people, institutions and events before we can begin to understand the potential of the media to influence their audiences.

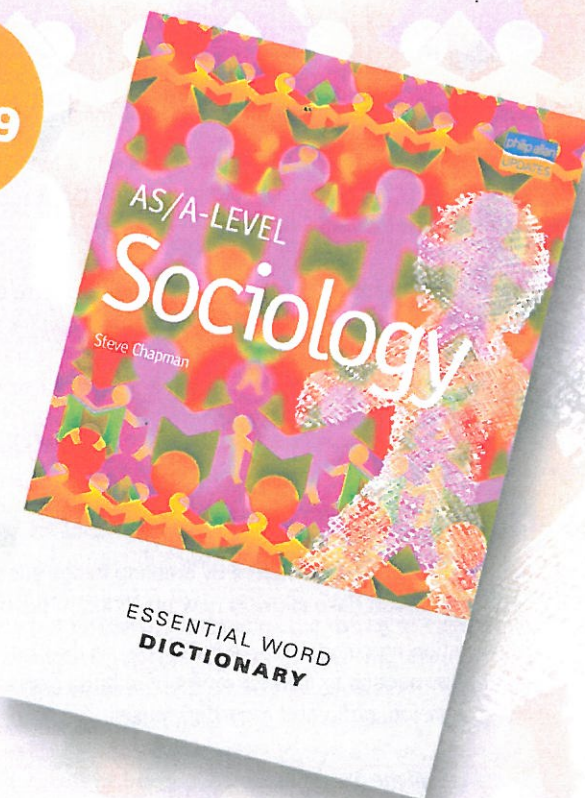**Barrie Gunter** is Professor of Mass Communication and Head of the Department of Media and Communication at the University of Leicester.