

A CONTENT ANALYSIS METHOD - PRACTICAL EXPERIENCES IN PRESS ANALYSIS

Review article

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Abstract:

The essential aspects of content analysis are epistemological characteristics, a categorical apparatus and a sample. Creating a categorical apparatus, due to its specificity, is a kind of challenge since the researcher's methodological expertise determines if the utilized framework will be adequate for the subject and the aim of the research. The researcher's competence comes to the fore, when using a content analysis method, because the objectivity of gained research results depends on the researcher's capability to create a methodological procedure according to a concrete subject of research. A categorical apparatus can be created on two basic principles. One refers to "vertical" and the other to "horizontal" structural elements of the subject of research, so the mentioned elements are crossed through various aspects in the tables, depending on the research aim. Basically, a categorical apparatus is considered as adjustment of methods to the aim and the subject of the research. A content analysis method sample is more accessible and it is easier to create it, compared to researches where other methods are used. Given the fact that content analysis aims at communication, the sample should contain a specific number of communication means (magazines, newspapers, news, reports, documents, etc.).

Keywords: *epistemological principles, categorical apparatus, press, sample, objectivity, researcher.*

INTRODUCTION

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This paper intends to indicate practical experiences of a content analysis method usage in quantitative and qualitative press analyses. A content analysis, as a method of social phenomena research, is specific for its epistemological and practical reasons, and is irreplaceable in collecting and processing of scientific data. In every public communication, a sender of a message has as an aim to achieve a desired outcome with a message receiver, and for that reason, it is methodologically justified to observe the process *sender – message – receiver* in terms of causal relations. According to Tatić (1976, p. 5) “sometimes, the cause of a phenomenon, a process, is not noticed directly or indirectly, but that only means that the cause is unknown, it does not mean that it does not exist.” A content analysis is an analytical method and two aspects are primarily operationalized by it, according to Milosavljević and Radosavljević (2008, p. 5–6) “a genetic analysis, by which the origin and the development of the subject of research is determined, which includes movement and change in quantity and quality in time and space and causal analysis by which certain regularities and laws are determined” (Milosavljević & Radosavljević, 2008, p. 206).

The specificity of the content analysis method is in its elasticity, so it can be adjusted to specificities of particular researches, which is of great importance in press analysis. On the other hand, elasticity can be expressed as a disadvantage of this method, since there is no normative pattern of content analysis, suitable for various research topics. In theoretical science, there is a common custom to observe methodological problems from the aspects of philosophy, ideologies, paradigms and other theories. Having no intention to deny the significance of the mentioned philosophic approach, this paper intends to point out the need for observing methodological problems from the aspect of concrete research practice. The paper argues one of the practical models of content analysis use in press research.

1. EPISTEMOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF CONTENT ANALYSIS

The content analysis method, in terms of social phenomena research, primarily communication, comprises a few elementary epistemological characteristics.

Exactness as an essential element of objectivity. Even though used by natural sciences as a basis for all researches, social sciences tend to include this element into the research process. The content analysis enables the possibility to collect, systematize, classify and analyze communication contents.

Systematicity is always an irreplaceable methodological principle regardless of the type of research. According to the public opinion, through the use of methods of attitude measurement (polls, diaries, interviews, scales), it is harder to systematize research material compared to the content analysis. Creating categorical apparatus establishes the bases for further upgrading data systematicity.

Preciseness as a methodological principle can be achieved by the content analysis, because a model can be constructed adjusting it to a concrete research, especially in the phase of data collecting.

Objectivity as a fundamental principle of all researches and overall scientific activity is possible in social sciences, using the content analysis, especially within the following aspects:

- elimination of voluntarism and subjective ideological attitude of the researcher, since they are inclined to hold on to advance compatible methodological parameters,
- possibility of collecting exact and authentic data as they exist in reality and reflect the essence of a phenomenon or a problem,
- possibility of objectively selecting collected data which is a basis for objective explanation of research material.

Work Publicity is a significant principle of scientific activity as well, and is realizable within the content analysis method, since research material is available to other researchers, and the subject of research can be studied from various aspects and by various researchers.

Adjustability applied is a valuable practical skill of the content analysis method, since it is one of the major methodological problems in practical research. We can adjust models and categorical apparatus to different specific needs, therewith not endangering epistemological essence of the method. Depending on the concrete theme and the subject of the research, a special categorical apparatus is created, by means of which, the researcher collects and systematizes collected data.

Possibility of widespread use is also an advantage of the content analysis, because it can be used in analyzing the press, radio and television programs, political communication, political parties' programs and other types of public communication.

There are a few important elements of the media and especially the press content analysis method such as: *categorical apparatus, objectivity and sample*.

2. CATEGORICAL APPARATUS

It is about a classificational and conceptual framework consisted of two basic aspects: 1) it represents a unique and precise form within which research data are uniformly entered and 2) it represents a basis for classification and comparison of research data for the reason of establishing their cause and effect relationships. Methodological quality of a categorical apparatus depends on the creation of a research team and is specific for every research. According to Milić (1965, p. 594) “the structure of classificational system depends on a character of basic units chosen.” In press analysis, as exact categorical apparatus as possible, is necessary, to obtain objectivity and overcome subjective problems in media analysis. It is about a psychological problem, where journalists do not like to be analyzed and criticized for their work, and a kind of professional “disease”, where journalists deny others the right they conferred to themselves. Placing themselves above the society, overvaluing their own impact and impact of the media they work for, journalists often announce monopoly on criticism which gives them the right to criticize everything and everyone but they must not be criticized by anyone. In this respect, they refer to public interest which they seemingly express, although public opinion representatives have not got authorized journalists to represent them. For the reason stated above, media content analysis results, the journalists are not pleased with, will be treated as incorrect and non-scientific, subjective, as a political pressure on profession, etc. When we say “journalists” we do not refer to journalists literally, as employees of the media, but to

a group of journalists at editorial positions making decisions on media editorial policy. However, the mentioned practice difficulty should not be generalized as a common situation, but it is necessary for the researcher to be aware of obstacles coming from subjectivity of the media management personnel. In order to avoid or diminish an obstacle, the researcher has to develop as precise categorical apparatus as possible and to reach the highest degree of objectivity in the process of data collecting and analysis.

Content analysis of a daily newspaper can be examined through the following elements: *social field of the text, event actors, event level, journalistic form, directionality of expressed attitudes, text objectivity*. Generally, the tables are construed by crossing two elements, where the variations of one are entered into rows and the variations of the second into columns. Crossing one element with another requires a more general table which is further operationalized into more tables. In the first phase, *social field* is crossed with *journalistic form* and then, except the general table, more individual tables within one social field should be created.

Table 1. JOURNALISTIC FORM

| SOCIAL FIELD | NEWS | INFORMATION | REPORT | REPORTAGE | ANALYSIS | COMMENT |
|-------------------------------------|------|-------------|--------|-----------|----------|---------|
| POLITICS P1..... P2..... | | | | | | |
| ECONOMICS EC1... EC2.... etc. | | | | | | |
| CULTURE | | | | | | |
| CIVIL SOCIETY | | | | | | |

Types of journalistic forms are in a standard manner classified as news, information, report, interview, comment, reportage, etc. Considering a large amount of variations created by concretization of rows and columns, table (1) is split into more tables comprising particular elements more precisely. *For instance, if we just analyze the field of Politics and classify it into elements (internal, foreign, social, economic, etc.), individually every element of horizontal row is crossed with a journalistic form.*

Crossing a social field and a journalistic form shows newspaper orientation, quantity of the texts in specific fields and the importance given to certain events in journalistic form by the newspaper.

After crossing concrete elements of social fields and a journalistic form of text, in the second phase, social fields are crossed with forms of expressed attitudes.

The example in table 2; Concept of social field should be classified into more concrete elements, then texts in the press should be identified and crossed with expressed attitudes. Based on the table 1 we can find out the importance the newspaper gives to certain fields of social life (quantitative data) and table 2 shows the manner of valuation by the newspaper of particular fields and events (qualitative data).

Table 2. EXPRESSED ATTITUDES

| SOCIAL FIELD | AFFIRMATIVE | CRITICAL | COMBINED | NEUTRAL |
|---|-------------|----------|----------|---------|
| POLITICS P1... P2... | | | | |
| ECONOMICS EC1... EC2.... etc. | | | | |
| CULTURE CUL 1... CUL 2... etc. | | | | |

In the third phase we can cross the elements *event actors* and *journalistic form* and *expressed attitudes*. In this phase, we obtain qualitative data about professional importance the newspaper gives to the particular actors of events. Whether the newspaper equally observes all happenings or selectively particular events are chosen, whether priority is given to political parties and state institutions in comparison with other actors. Whether the press in editorial policy follows the trace of events, observing an actor which appears in an event or the press follows the trace of activities of government institutions, political personalities or political parties or institutions, so events are examined one-sidedly, only from the aspect of state – political government. By analyzing this aspect, we can come to a conclusion whether the print media is analytical and in the interest of the public, or is selectively aimed at and in the interest of state government and other influential groups. We can reach more complete conclusion if we compare event actors to expressed attitudes in the texts referring to those events.

Table 3. JOURNALISTIC FORM

| EVENT ACTORS | | | | | | |
|----------------|------|-------------|--------|-----------|----------|---------|
| | News | Information | Report | Reportage | Analysis | Comment |
| STATE INST. | | | | | | |
| POL.PART. | | | | | | |
| NGO | | | | | | |
| EDUC.INST. | | | | | | |
| INST.CULT. | | | | | | |
| RELIG.COMM. | | | | | | |
| ASSOCIATIONS | | | | | | |
| ECON. SUBJECTS | | | | | | |
| SOC.ORG. | | | | | | |
| INDIVIDUALS | | | | | | |
| GROUPS etc. | | | | | | |

After discovering a journalistic form the press utilizes to examine particular event actors, we gain data about how the newspaper values events in relation to their actors by which we recognize the qualitative element of editorial policy.

In the fourth phase of the analysis we can cross the elements *event level* with *journalistic form* and *expressed attitudes*. It is important for the analysis, how and in which journalistic form the events are observed by the newspaper at particular social levels. For instance, whether the newspaper observes only the state level but neglects the local and the regional one. From this point of view, we get the structure which is necessary to understand whether the editorial press policy is overwhelmed by events on state or entity level or local level, i.e. whether the newspaper is more oriented toward problems and happenings in the base, places where people live, or toward more generalized levels.

Table 4. JOURNALISTIC FORM

| EVENT LEVEL | NEWS | INFORMATION | REPORT | REPORTAGE | ANALYSIS | COMMENT |
|---------------|------|-------------|--------|-----------|----------|---------|
| LOCAL | | | | | | |
| REGIONAL | | | | | | |
| ENTITY | | | | | | |
| BIH LEVEL | | | | | | |
| BALKANS LEVEL | | | | | | |
| EUROPE | | | | | | |
| WORLD | | | | | | |

In the fifth phase we can cross *event level* and *expressed attitudes*.

Table 5. EXPRESSED ATTITUDES

| EVENT LEVEL | AFFIRMATIVE | CRITICAL | COMBINED | NEUTRAL |
|---------------|-------------|----------|----------|---------|
| LOCAL | | | | |
| REGIONAL | | | | |
| BIH LEVEL | | | | |
| BALKANS LEVEL | | | | |
| EUROPE | | | | |
| WORLD | | | | |

In the sixth phase of the analysis, the above named elements of categorical apparatus such as *social field*, *event actors*, *event level*, *expressed attitudes* are crossed with the element of *objectivity*, operationalized in more concrete ones.

Credibility or believability is actually a response to the question how much viewers, listeners, readers believe to what they consume through the media. Credibility cannot be examined only by the content analysis method, since for the research of the same we need the methods of an interview, a survey, scaling, etc.

Convergence is included as a consolidating principle when important elements of objectivity are respected. It is about convergence of information content and objective

reality. Information convergence represents its total effect on the audience. Objective reality refers to the state where the public has pre-acquired knowledge of events and phenomena from other sources. If the information content is conceptualized in the manner that matches already acquired knowledge of people, we will not be interesting, we will not release anything new. Furthermore, if the information content is conceptualized in too professional, awkward and unfamiliar way, then it will not be understood. In both cases, our informing effect will be poor and the media will lose its credibility. The content should be conceptualized as close and understandable to people, offering at the same time new information, unknown to the public. Therefore, we supplement their knowledge, and that is the point of effective impact on shaping attitudes and public opinion. The public or the audience, addressed by the media, differs in various elements. It is not the same in the West, the Balkans or the Middle East. In the Balkans, it is not the same in Serbia, Macedonia, Bosnia and Slovenia, and again, in Bosnia it is not the same in the Republic of Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and then, in the Republic of Srpska it is not the same in Krajina and Herzegovina, etc. It is about a multi-layered and complex reality at a relatively small geographical area. One of the basic specificities, in a broader context, is that readers, listeners, spectators do not create their attitudes on a primary information, i.e. when it is heard or read. The first impressions are usually additionally discussed and opinions exchanged among different people in offices, cafes, at homes, etc. Through attitude socialization in a broader group, a new opinion is adopted, which can impact the change of an attitude consentingly and non-consentingly. The convergence element, in a narrow sense, can be observed as an element of credibility, for if information is to be accepted it needs to be believable. Analyzing this aspect of information objectivity, the content analysis as a method can provide one part of the data, and the other we need to find out by means of methods measuring viewership, readership, listenership and credibility. The list of information objectivity measurement means is not depleted by the latter, especially when there are more significant electronic media elements, pointing out the complexity of this crucial concept in public communication.

3. SAMPLE

A sample is the most complex issue in methodology, because collected data and complete analysis, as well as research results, depend on the quality of the sample. A qualitative knowledge of basic set characteristics is necessary, in sample creation, because, according to Supek (1968, p. 202) "basic conception of choosing and the use of a sample rests on indicative procedure: ...c) on the basis of the established data of this part of the examined mass we draw a conclusion for the whole mass or a set". The point is to achieve representativeness of a sample so it reflects the entirety in terms of all key attributes.

In content analysis, a sample is accessible and appropriate for conceptualizing, in the content analysis, especially in terms of the press analysis. Depending on the aim and the subject of research, sampling of the press analysis can be realized in many models. Sampling comprises all issues of a particular newspaper or newspapers of any other month, so half of the newspapers published are analyzed in that way. This sample is used when we need overall and precise data of immense research projects such as master, doctoral theses, etc. Sampling examines newspaper issues of the first week of the month, the second week of the second

month, the third week of the third month and the fourth week of the fourth month, and so on until the end of the calendar year. This sample is created when the research aim is the process of understanding, trends, creation of editorial policies, impact factors on editorial policies.

A press analysis sample can also be created comprising issues from 1 to 15 in one month and in the second month another half of issues from 15 to 30. The content analysis is a method with a full epistemological validity and due to its elasticity it has a specific advantage compared to other methods. Depending on the subject of the analysis, the method can be created and adjusted to various forms, by which it will not lose methodological values. Availability of the sample is another benefit of the content analysis which has a positive impact on the objectivity of research. Comparing it to other methods, the content analysis is the most appropriate for researches where a theoretical approach and empirically-researching activity are integrated into one entirety.

CONCLUSION

A content analysis method is an unavoidable procedure in press research, which enables us to achieve an adequate epistemological level within majority of its essential aspects. Advantages of a content analysis are observed through the following aspects:

1. the researcher can be focused on concrete elements of the aim and the subject of research
2. the researcher can adjust a categorical apparatus to the subject of research
3. collected data can be related with concrete elements of the research aim which makes data processing easier
4. a sample is more accessible when using a content analysis method and it is easier to create it, compared to researches, where other methods are used (polls, interviews, etc.)

Disadvantages of a content analysis method are in its limitedness, since it is focused on concrete elements and cannot comprise the entirety of the research subject, so it is necessary to simultaneously use other methods, which in combination with a content analysis method, can comprise the entirety of the research subject.

A content analysis, by virtue of the key role of the researcher-methodologist, requires a team work and exchange of experiences among methodologists in the phase of creating its categorical apparatus.

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