

REVIEW OF PROFESSIONAL RESOURCES

Content Analysis for Communication and Forensics Researchers: A Summary of Current Methodological Treatments

Holsti, Ole. *Content Analysis for the Social Sciences and Humanities*. Menlo Park, CA: Addison Wesley, 1969.

Krippendorff, Klaus. *Content Analysis: An Introduction to its Methodology*. Beverly Hills, CA: SAGE, 1980.

Weber, Robert. *Basic Content Analysis*, Beverly Hills, CA: SAGE, 1985.

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A survey of recent publications of interest to communication and, more specifically, forensics educators reveals an increasing number of research projects employing content analysis methodology. Whether research interests involve political debates, cross-media studies, rhetorical criticism, survey research, or communication education, the ease of experimental design, and simplicity of interpretation afforded by content analysis methods, may yield positive results in a short period of time.

Content analysis is a flexible means of obtaining information. While traditionally applied to large volumes of data, and focused rather broadly for such purposes as discerning the grammatical patterns or key words employed by a speaker; the method is also quite useful in gleaning specific information about a limited data pool.¹ Communication professionals have turned to content analysis because it is easy to use with students or lay-people as coders; it yields results which are frequently replicable across numerous rhetorical artifacts; it enables cross-media comparison; and because the statistical methods required for the interpretation of inter-coder reliability and the assessment of results are not complicated.

Despite the increasing popularity of content analysis as a methodological construct, many communication professionals are unfamiliar

¹For instance, content analysis methods have been utilized to develop ratings systems for the evaluation of student speeches, to analyze academic and political debates, to perform retrospective studies of great speakers, and even to identify common strategies in successful competitive speeches.

with its use. This review surveys three major theoretical treatments of content analysis in the social sciences, and suggests ways in which any educator could utilize this method to enhance his or her research effectiveness.

One of the more useful books ever written about content analysis is Ole Holsti's, *Content Analysis for the Social Sciences and Humanities*, (Menlo Park, CA: Addison Wesley). Published in 1969, the book is no longer in print, but may be obtained in any major research facility or quality used book store. The first chapter of Holsti's book provides a useful overview of the purpose of content analysis and major trends in the development of the methodology. This overview, as well as chapter two (which outlines basic experimental designs employing content analysis) are an essential starting point for anyone unfamiliar with this technique. A lengthy bibliography and a very detailed subject index make Holsti's book easy to use.

Later chapters discuss validity and reliability issues. A careful researcher, however, would want to consult more recent sources in order to be state-of-the-art (particularly Krippendorff, which will be discussed later). Far and away the most useful information contained in Holsti are his simple, straightforward methods of calculating inter-coder reliability. The formulas he presents require little by way of statistical expertise, and meet, if not surpass more recently developed procedures. The one drawback of Holsti's book is his dated discussion of computer-aided analysis. Fortunately, this is one area in which more recent books have concentrated heavily.

Klaus Krippendorff's *Content Analysis: An Introduction to its Methodology*, (Beverly Hills, CA: SAGE Publications, 1980), is a very popular book in research methods courses. Krippendorff is particularly useful for his up-to-date survey of the field, and his extensive glossary of content analysis terminology. The book takes the reader through experimental design in a step-by-step fashion which connects theory and practice. This book contains an excellent description of coding and recording units; a thorough treatment of unitizing and sampling procedures; and useful warnings for researchers concerned with avoiding common internal and external validity threats.

Krippendorff may be criticized for two insufficiencies. Initially, his treatment of computer-aided design is not adequate for most large projects; and is more appropriate for those interested in creating their own statistical programs rather than taking advantage of SPSS, or other common statistical packages. The second problem with Krippendorff's book is its tendency to dwell on philosophical issues concerning content analysis research. Four chapters, for instance, are devoted to such issues as the history, conceptual foundations, and constructs and uses

of inference. The average researcher will find these chapters superfluous.

The brief and very inexpensive SAGE publication, *Basic Content Analysis*, (SAGE University Paper, 1985), written by Robert Weber, would be a useful second source in print for anyone engaging in content analysis research. The book assumes that the reader has completed introductory courses in research methods and statistics. An effective review of the literature is provided topically, as each issue is discussed. Summaries and suggestions for further reading are included in each chapter, and the book is also replete with miniature case studies to demonstrate the methods reviewed.

The greatest strength of this publication is its modern treatment of computer-aided research design, with its attendant emphasis upon specific statistical packages which may be available to the reader. At only seventy-nine pages, *Basic Content Analysis* is unlikely to serve as your primary source, but is a worthwhile purchase for anyone considering a computer-based research project.

These three publications contain additional source information concerning content analysis and experimental design for those who may require further assistance. Holsti and Krippendorff provide enough detail for even a beginner to perform simple content analysis research. Anyone interested in a more sophisticated inquiry will also want to consult D. T. Campbell and J. C. Stanley, *Experimental and Quasi-experimental Designs for Research*, (Chicago, IL: Rand McNally, 1963) for questions regarding research design; Marlija Norusis, *The SPSS Guide to Data Analysis*, (Chicago, IL: SPSS Inc., 1987), for programming information regarding the SPSS statistical package; and Frederick Williams, *Reasoning With Statistics*, (New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1986), for methods of statistical interpretation. Each of these books are excellent for those who are beginners as well as those who may be returning to the field after an absence of several years.