

Steps for Applying Content Analysis Technique in Sociological Research

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Abstract:

The issue of choosing the appropriate technique for collecting data related to the chosen topic of study is one of the important challenges facing researchers in sociology during fieldwork. At this stage, the researcher must verify the validity or invalidity of hypotheses and choose the suitable method among others, depending on the nature of the topic, research objectives, and the type of methodology used (quantitative or qualitative). The researcher's ability to apply the chosen technique or a set of techniques in the research also plays a crucial role. Researchers might opt for a technique they believe will be easy to apply, sometimes disregarding the selection criteria.

Content analysis is considered one of the techniques that researchers rely on to obtain data on the subject. The purpose of using content analysis in the field of social sciences is to analyze the data collected through techniques such as interviews, observations, and the analysis of open-ended survey questions. It is also used to analyze various types of media materials, including books, articles, images, drawings, films, forms, theatrical presentations, conversations, and statements, among others. The importance of content analysis in the social sciences lies in enabling the researcher to decode symbols and understand the true meanings of the content, especially in media materials. This understanding helps the researcher determine the usefulness of the gathered information for their research.

Keywords: Content Analysis, Codification, Analysis Units, Qualitative Analysis, Quantitative Analysis.

Introduction:

The phase of selecting the appropriate technique in sociological research is a fundamental stage in scientific research. Various techniques and methods are employed in collecting field data due to the diversity and differences in the topics studied in the field of sociology. Content analysis is one of the scientific study methods aimed at researching social phenomena, providing a precise description, and analyzing them sociologically. It primarily relies on the study of data derived from observing reality, analyzing events, situations, documents, and various verbal and non-verbal communications. It is based on data and facts analyzed through the perspectives of individuals and

groups, as well as quantitative methods essential for categorizing and organizing the obtained data, often by applying this data quantitatively (numerically).

Content analysis goes beyond describing the apparent content or surface of a phenomenon to uncover its hidden meanings. It requires a selective approach to a substantial amount of content and substance. However, it does not address content in its singular and isolated form since it represents the integration of what is visible and what is concealed and implicit.

For a researcher in the field of social sciences to apply the content analysis technique in their sociological studies, they must be familiar with certain conditions, adhere to a set of skills, and understand the various steps involved in applying this technique and the stages it goes through.

On this basis, the following elements will be addressed:

1. Definition of content analysis and its characteristics.
2. Skills required for using content analysis and its conditions.
3. Methodological and technical steps for content analysis.

Definition of content analysis Technique:

The origins of content analysis date back to ancient times, but it evolved into an independent intellectual activity, especially within the field of communication sciences, around the early 20th century. It was precisely in the School of Journalism at Columbia University in the United States that content analysis gained prominence, pioneered by "Mathews," who began his studies in 1910. Subsequently, "Tenny" in 1912 and "Garth" in 1916 contributed to the growing recognition of the need for systematic and objective studies of various newspapers of the time. These studies aimed to benefit from the strengths of some publications while avoiding the shortcomings of others (1).

Furthermore, researcher "Lasswell" specialized in the study of propaganda during wartime and political content for communication. He published a book in 1926 titled "Propaganda During the World War".

Content analysis then expanded into the fields of social sciences, notably through the contributions of "Bernard Berrelson," who laid the foundations of what is known as the descriptive approach to content analysis between 1946 and 1960. Following this, there emerged: (2)

A- The "deductive approach" in content analysis led by "Greimas," "Stone," "Krippendorf," and others.

B- The connection between content analysis and artificial intelligence, notably advocated by "Stone".

Content analysis can be defined as a "research method used to make specific inferences from media material by objectively and systematically defining that material both quantitatively and qualitatively" (3). In other words, content analysis aims to uncover hidden and implicit meanings within content and material, which can only be understood through analysis and segmentation into elements. By doing so, it reveals the underlying content and the interrelated meanings within it (4).

Content analysis, or "content analysis" in its essence, seeks to "research the information present within it, extract the latent meaning or meanings, and formulate and organize everything contained in the document or communication" (5). It is accomplished through scientific research based on objectivity and organization to identify the characteristics of the phenomenon under study. Content analysis is considered one of the research methods used in analyzing media material to arrive at valid and consistent inferences and conclusions in case of re-research or re-analysis (6). In other words, content analysis is a method, tool, and technique for scientific research used in various fields, especially in media research. Its purpose is to collect data and use it "to describe or discover the intellectual, cultural, political, or ideological background from which the media message emanates and to understand the objectives of those involved in the communication process through words, sentences, symbols, and all expressive methods, both in form and content. However, this analysis process must be organized according to methodological foundations and objective criteria that primarily rely on quantitative methods in data collection, tabulation, and analysis" (7). Thus, its areas of application have expanded because it aims to "decode and analyze what is mysterious and ambiguous, turning it into something clear. It is, therefore, a technique that uses inductive inference" (8).

Based on this foundation, it can be said that content analysis is a process in which we objectively search for and extract existing information, formulate, and categorize all that is contained in the document or media material. Every written or spoken document contains a quantity of information for its owner and for the group to which this information belongs. It is a research method that aims for quantitative, objective, and systematic description of the apparent content of communication.

Characteristics of Content Analysis:

It can be concluded that content analysis is characterized by four main features:

- Its use in general social sciences.
- Its primary use in identifying the effects of communication.
- Its application in understanding sentence structure and word connotations.
- The necessity for it to be objective, systematic, and quantitative.

Conditions for Content Analysis:

Specialists in content analysis have identified six fundamental conditions, which we mention as follows:

1- Objectivity:

Analysis should be conducted impartially, free from personal biases, and in accordance with scientific principles. It should adhere to clear and precise instructions, allowing various analysts to study the same content and obtain the same results. This necessitates agreement on the aspects to be analyzed, the necessary categories to be used, and the procedural definition for each category (9).

2- Organization or Methodology:

This entails reliance on rigorous scientific rules. The work and analysis should follow a clear and organized plan in line with the intended goal. Procedures should align with the "rules of scientific research to test hypotheses or answer posed questions." Attention should be given to methodological procedures that help achieve reliability and validity, avoiding partial perspectives and factors that may lead to bias or a departure from objectivity (10).

3- Comprehensiveness and Generalization:

This means not leaving any aspect or dimension of the subject matter unexamined after its identification, and it should be related to the study's objectives. The results should be interpreted in the light of existing theories, which hold great value in advancing knowledge. It underscores that merely describing the content is insufficient; it must also be interpreted by considering its relationship to other variables in the media process (11).

4- Quantification (Quantitative Use or Count Condition):

This refers to relying on "quantitative estimation in describing the content – the subject of analysis – as a criterion for judgment. This is done in numerical form and quantitative repetitions, where the recurrence of each phenomenon is observed(12). This element is one of the prominent characteristics of content analysis. Through statistical methods and techniques, the researcher classifies and tabulates specific categories, measures them, and expresses the results in numerical values defining the range within which these units fall. The quantitative requirement is essential in the analysis process. When results require a high degree of accuracy and clarity, when the analytical materials are sufficiently representative, when the scope of data is extensive, and when counting establishes a relationship between content data and other data (13).

5- Scientific:

Content analysis reveals various relationships between phenomena, making it one of the methods

and techniques of scientific research. It is characterized by objectivity in studying phenomena and relies on scientific methodological steps.

6- Addresses Content and Form:

Content refers to "knowledge, facts, and ideas conveyed by the communication tool to the message receiver with the aim of changing their opinion, providing them with information, imparting certain values, or developing specific attitudes... It is not concerned solely with the analysis of the content (contenu) conveyed by the communication tool but also with the analysis of the form (forme) through which opinions, information, and values are conveyed... Form and content are two sides of the same coin, and both cannot be separated from each other" (14).

Skills for Using Content Analysis:

1- Methodological Skill:

"Methodological and systematic conditions are important requirements of content analysis, requiring the researcher to have a comprehensive understanding of all methodological aspects and problems of analysis" (15).

2- Linguistic Skill:

The content of the media message consists of a set of linguistic symbols that carry the intended meanings to the audience through linguistic constructs at various levels. "However, analyzing these linguistic symbols often encounters the richness of the Arabic language, with its multiple meanings and synonyms for a single word, as well as different sentence structures conveying the same meaning. Since analysis deals with these symbols, a lack of the researcher's understanding of linguistic aspects can pose significant challenges in the analysis process at its various stages. Therefore, the researcher must possess a minimum level of linguistic skills that enable them to easily handle language-related challenges" (16).

3- Statistical Skill:

Statistical skills are also a primary requirement for content analysis. It involves quantitative or statistical handling of data and results. This requires the researcher to use statistical methods in reporting transactions, presenting results, consulting values, and mathematical and statistical relationships that align with the nature and objectives of the research.

The objectives of using content analysis in social research:

The uses of content analysis in various social and humanitarian research have diversified, and these studies have adopted a framework for classifying its areas of use. Both "Berelson" and "Lasswell" agreed on posing questions related to the analysis of the material under study to achieve the

research objectives of the researcher. These questions are as follows:

1- Who is speaking? (Who produces the content?):

This question leads us to identify the sender of the message and its source, which is usually prominent. It can also be present at the time of sending the message, meaning that the sender is still alive, indicated by the content of the message itself, such as speeches or memoirs. Alternatively, the sender may be non-existent, as the message itself can be traced back to a distant past where the sender no longer exists. The aim of this question is to identify the sender of the message, their attitudes, and values. Ultimately, this provides personal data about the message sender (17).

2 - To say what? (Identifying the subject):

Through this question, the nature and content of the message are determined. This is what "Lasswell" expressed as "the strength, durability, and media value of the message" (18). This enables the researcher to identify the sender's attitudes and to understand their ideological behaviors, which they either consciously or subconsciously reflect in the message(19).

3- To whom? (Message Recipient):

This question leads us to identify the recipient of the message, that is, who it is being sent to (the audience), and to understand their characteristics.

4- How?

This question helps the researcher understand the structure of the message or material under analysis. However, the answer to it relies on personal variables because the influence varies from one individual to another depending on factors determined by the recipient(20).

5- What is the intended goal?

Through this question, the desired goal of sending the message is determined. It can be related to apparent and clear objectives that can be extracted by simply reading the material under analysis (whether written, auditory, audio-visual, or in a parallel language). It can also be related to hidden and concealed goals that are only revealed after careful and thorough scrutiny of the material (21).

6- What results are expected, and what impact (with the least impact being understanding the message)?

This question helps in researching the impact of the message and understanding its implicit objectives.

These six objectives are integrated and interrelated since the communication process assumes the presence of two parties: the sender and the recipient who interact with the message's content.

Therefore, these questions are essential elements for understanding the dynamics and the flow of communication (22).

The Methodological Steps for Content Analysis:

Methodological steps for content analysis can be defined in three stages, each involving a series of processes and procedures as illustrated in the following table:

Steps of Content Analysis	Processes and Procedures
Theoretical Preparation	A- Formulating the research problem. B- Developing hypotheses. C- Selecting the sample. D- Defining the categories.
Practical Implementation of Content Analysis	A - Reading the Documents or Sample Content and Encoding Them B - Transferring or Transcribing the Relevant Content into Special Forms C - Counting the Units Classified under Each Category while Calculating the Repetitions or Indicators
Interpreting the Results in the Theoretical Framework	Choosing the Research Content - Selecting the Research Community - Choosing the Research Sample - Defining Research Categories - Determining Analysis Units - Developing an Analysis Form - Transcribing the Content - Encoding the Analysis Content - Analyzing and Interpreting the Results - Answering the Initial Questions.

Source: Professor Bouzida Abdelrahman, Lectures in Advanced Methodology, pp. 7-8.

Two fundamental stages can be added to these processes, as follows (23):

A- Exploratory Research Stage:

This stage occurs before the final sample is selected. During this stage, the first step is to categorize the content, and the necessary data and criteria are chosen for sample selection.

B- Transcription Verification Stage:

This stage involves transcribing the same content by different researchers to assess the objectivity of the coding and categories. If the differences exceed 20%, the transcription is invalidated.

The Technical Stages of Content Analysis:**The first stage: Categorization:**

The stage of selecting categories, also known as "categorization," is the first and crucial stage in content analysis. According to Pearson, "the value of content analysis equals the value of its categories"(24). A category is defined as "a theoretical object at an abstract level that forms a theoretical and conceptual framework comprising elements with the same characteristics, qualities, and weights. It may sometimes be called a class, and its role is to break down and deconstruct the text in a meaningful way regarding the research problem's new structure"(25) .This is a coding process itself by placing "meaningful categories that are used to classify and code the content."(26)

The process of "categorization stops at the elements that are significant for the research hypotheses. It is essential to remember that the researcher wants to test their hypotheses by extracting elements that are relevant to these research hypotheses. If the content analysis technique is used to test hypotheses, the analysis must be related to the research hypotheses (27). Categories play this role by producing messages related directly to the research hypotheses. Categorization, therefore, involves reduction, eliminating information in messages to allow implicit information in these messages to emerge"(28).

A category serves as a meaningful label for common characteristics in the message text, determined based on research hypotheses and study variables that will be confirmed through the reduction of this text in line with the hypotheses. Therefore, the selection of categories is a fundamental stage in content analysis due to its utmost importance. The success of content analysis is closely linked to the accurate determination and identification of categories.

Conditions for Formulating Categories:

The researcher must follow precise methodological criteria to successfully apply content analysis as an effective technique. This involves the ability to choose the most appropriate categories in terms of their objectivity, balance, comprehensiveness, exclusivity, and compatibility with the hypotheses. These are fundamental conditions that ensure the effectiveness of content analysis.

These conditions are as follows:

1. Appropriateness and Suitability:

The selected category must be suitable for the characteristics of the communicative message being analyzed. Its determination should not be arbitrary but based on a direct and close relationship with each hypothesis, providing temporary answers to research questions. Choosing suitable categories means that their selection aligns with the characteristics of the message, which can vary from one message to another and from one period to another(29). Therefore, the categories formulated by the researcher are closely related to the research objectives. The condition of suitability measures the ability of categories to ensure a balance between a strict reflection of the text on the problem(30).

2. Balance or Relevance:

Categories should be relevant to the text or content, meaning they take into account most of the text's elements. They should consider the requirements of the research problem and hypotheses(31). There is no fixed model for the number of categories used in content analysis studies, as it depends on the nature of the subject, its variables, and indicators. Therefore, the number of categories should be balanced according to the nature and objectives of the research. Excessive categories, motivated by not forgetting any issue, often lead to presenting the message or document as it is, while reducing their number, claiming that the researcher has done comprehensive and complex work, will only result in selecting some of them, which does not serve the purpose of the research(32).

3- Inclusiveness:

It means that the categories should encompass various aspects studied by the researcher when analyzing the communication message. These categories should include all the variables and indicators used in the study, "and they should be able to classify all the content elements, or at least 80% of them" (33).

4- Exclusivity or Selectivity:

This means that each category assigned should contain elements and analysis criteria specific to it, which cannot be placed in another category. For example, if we are dealing with the categories "male" and "female" related to the gender variable, these two categories are mutually exclusive. You cannot place both of them in the same category because a man cannot be a woman, and a woman cannot be a man (34).

5- Objectivity or Clarity:

Categories must be clear and precise. If there are multiple codes for the same content, the results should be the same(35). This is achieved by following research steps based on clear and precise principles and rules. Other researchers should be able to arrive at the same results as the researcher, using the same research methods and procedures for the same communicative (66) material.

These conditions are fundamental in ensuring that content analysis is carried out effectively and that

the categories formulated are appropriate, balanced, comprehensive, exclusive, and aligned with the research objectives. They contribute to the accuracy and objectivity of the analysis process.

Setting and Defining Categories:

By setting categories, the researcher classifies and organizes the content of communication, allowing them to formulate headings that contribute to condensing the text into essential parts. Despite the ongoing debate in content analysis methodology regarding the issues of categories and codification, and the question of whether it is necessary to definitively determine the major categories, or leave the matter open for producing specific and varied categories for each researcher (36), the classification model adopted for categories is Pearson's model, which consists of two fundamental categories:

1- Content or Substance Categories:

These categories aim to answer the question: What was said? They include the following categories:

1-1 Subject Categories:

These categories focus on identifying the various subjects presented in the document or content.

1-2 Direction Category:

This category reveals the stance expressed in the text (supportive, opposing, neutral). It examines the overall direction of the text, whether it leans towards acceptance or rejection, especially regarding the central topics presented in the communication document.

1-3 Criteria Category:

This category seeks to identify the highest-performing example embraced by the content(37). It is linked to the Direction Category and answers the question: How does the researcher classify the subject into different aspects or conflicting directions (38) The criteria used to determine points of interest in the document are defined, whether they rely on repetition as a criterion or utilize other standards such as space, location, or the size of the title, points of interest, etc"(39).

1-4 Category of Values:

"This category focuses on monitoring various judgments present in the content and their reasons"(40) .It aims to understand how social values are determined in the content (especially latent values that are not explicitly stated). This category holds great importance because it serves as a gauge used by "people to organize their diverse desires, whether they are material (41) related to social relationships, general ideas, or societal requirements. It regulates individuals' behavior in their interactions with one another." Due to its importance, it is fundamental for planning media

policies or inferring them through content analysis (42).

1-5 Category of Objectives:

This category is linked to the category of values, focusing on "the purposes intended by the author of the text"(43). It answers the question: To whom is the message directed, or who is the concerned party? For example, "the purpose of traffic incident advertisements broadcast on non-traffic radio stations is to raise awareness among listeners about road hazards and warn them against excessive speeding"(44).

1-6 Category of Means:

This category deals with the various means used in the content to achieve objectives. It answers the question: What are the methods employed to achieve the desired (material and moral) goals?

1-7 Category of Features:

This category is concerned with "the personalities present in the content and their most prominent physical, social, economic, psychological, and other characteristics"(45). It helps identify certain personal traits present in the communication text, such as age, gender, social characteristics, and psychological traits, which are used to determine some personal qualities found in communication texts like drama, fiction, and common myths in societies (46).

1-8 Category of Actors:

This category is concerned with the most important actors and influencers in the content. It is used to "identify individuals and groups appearing in the content as having played a role in performing specific actions"(47). For example, when a famous athlete endorses a soft drink in an advertisement, "to convince the audience that this beverage is effective and has benefits related to refreshment and vitality, the communicator invites a well-known athlete to participate in the advertisement. Anyone cannot participate in such an advertisement until the desired goal is achieved. Therefore, this athlete becomes an actor in the content because certain physical characteristics make them distinctive and influential in it"(48).

1-9 Reference or Source Category:

This category is concerned with "the major theories or fundamental approaches from which the content draws its elements, either directly or indirectly"(49). It answers the question: Who is the author of the communication text, and what is the source of the communication document? It relates to knowing the temporal and spatial context of the communication text, i.e., the time period in which it was issued and its place of publication.

1-10 Target Audience Category:

This category focuses on individuals or the audience to whom the content is directed.

1-11 Origin or Entity Category:

"It deals with the geographical origin of the content and the unique context resulting from it, shaping the content in its form"(50).

2- Form Categories:

These refer to the primary means of expression used and answer the question: "How was it said?" They are represented by the following categories:

2-1 Form of Content Category:

This involves identifying the template that distinguishes the text and specifying the medium used in the communication text (written, radio, article, interview, etc.).

2-2 Expression Form Category:

This reveals the form adopted by expressions in the content (expression of the past, present, anticipation of the future), considering the grammatical and structural aspects.

2-3 Intensity of Expression or Density Category:

Also known as the emotional category, it is "used to determine the direction of the content, targeting the reading, listening, or viewing audience by creating enthusiasm." The researcher extracts preferences, reinforcement meanings, or the connection of meanings with human and social necessities (51).

3-3 Persuasion Medium Category:

Also known as the support category, it illustrates how the message is used to reinforce various messages to the audience through the ideas it conveys.

Second Stage: Identifying Analysis Units:

When the researcher goes through the process of categorization, they classify and organize the communication text into comprehensive headings. After this, there comes the stage of filling these headings with corresponding indicators (in the corresponding fields). These indicators are the units used to dissect the text for analysis. These units are determined by selecting (52) "the smallest element that will be studied; it could be a word, symbol, image, theme, or scene." This enables the identification of underlying and implicit meanings. These units include:

1- Registration Unit:

This is the category designated by the researcher when segmenting the communication text. It

represents the smallest part of the content, and "(53) its presence, absence, and repetition express a specific meaning in drawing the analysis results." Examples include words or phrases related to hypotheses, placed in the corresponding category, or sentences and paragraphs, or even the entire text carrying a specific meaning. It is primarily concerned with meaning. For example: "I always want to rely on myself to purchase something, and I don't want to ask anyone to buy what I want. The meaning extracted from this sentence is financial independence"(54).

2- Context Unit:

This refers to "linguistic units within the content that help in accurately defining the meanings of registration units, which are being measured. They give a clear meaning within the document under analysis. Context units are larger than registration units. For instance, if we consider a word as a registration unit, a sentence becomes a context unit. If a sentence is the registration unit, a paragraph turns into a context unit, and if a paragraph is the registration unit, the idea becomes the context unit"(55). It allows us to understand where the registration unit is located and categorize the communication text based on sentences or paragraphs, and so on.

3- Unit of Counting and Measurement:

It refers to how the content is quantitatively divided for the purpose of comparison and analysis. This unit has two fundamental forms:

3-1- Unit of Numerical Counting:

This unit allows for counting the number of times a word or meaning appears in written or spoken communication, or the number of images in a visual message, or the duration in minutes of an audio message. For example, how many times the word "protesters" was repeated in a newspaper article (56). This numerical counting unit is often used in the analysis of open-ended questions and interviews.

3-2- Unit of Geometric Counting and Measurement:

This unit is concerned with determining the space occupied by a particular subject within the communication text, typically measured in cubic centimeters (cm³) (89).

Third Stage: Building the Content Analysis Table:

After the categorization process and the identification of analysis units, the next step is to aggregate these procedures and operations, arranging and classifying them into a comprehensive table. This table serves as an organized framework that provides a clear overview of the content of the communication text. It includes the following information:

-Initial Data: If the communication text (i.e., the content) is obtained from interviews or open-

ended questionnaires, the initial data is related to the sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents, such as gender, age, educational level, marital status, etc. However, if the analysis involves content like interviews in newspapers or magazines, the initial data might include the document's name, date of publication (year, month, day), and its size (number of pages) (58).

- **Analysis Categories:** This includes categories related to form and content (substance).

-**Analysis Units:** These are the units of analysis, which consist of the registration unit, context unit, and count and measurement unit.

- **Count and Measurement Unit:** This encompasses both the arithmetic and geometric measurement units.

Conclusion:

Content analysis as a technique is fundamentally based on the collection and sociological analysis of information, whether quantitatively or qualitatively. It is used to determine the effects of communication and understand the structure, semantics, and meanings of words in line with the nature of the subject under study. The conditions for its application and usage include objectivity, organization, methodology, comprehensiveness, quantification (i.e., quantitative use in describing the material to be analyzed), as well as a scientific foundation addressing both form and substance.

The application of content analysis requires several skills from the sociological researcher to effectively employ it in their social studies and master its steps. These skills include methodological expertise, linguistic skills at various levels (written, oral, and parallel languages), as well as statistical proficiency. These skills empower the researcher to follow the steps of its application, both methodological (theoretical preparation, practical execution of content analysis, interpretation of results within the theoretical framework) and technical (categorization of form and content, determination of analysis units: registration unit, context unit, and count and measurement units, and the construction of the content analysis table).

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