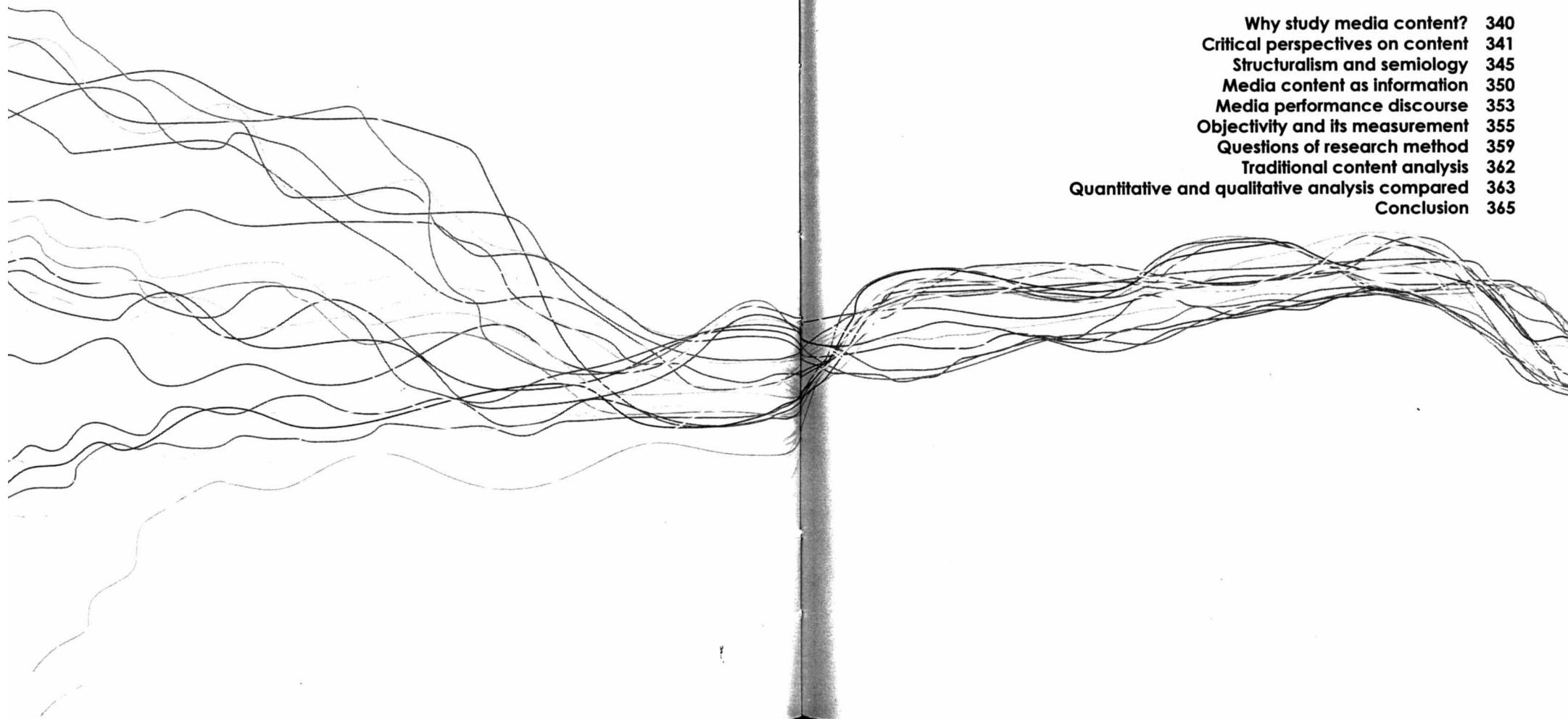


13

Media Content: Issues, Concepts and Methods of Analysis

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The most accessible evidence of how mass communication works is provided by its content. In a very literal sense we can equate the media with the message, although it would be extremely misleading to do so. In this respect, the distinction between message and meaning is a significant one. The physical text of the message in print, sound or pictorial image is what we can directly observe and is in a sense 'fixed'. But we cannot simply 'read off' the meanings that are somehow 'embedded' in the texts or transmitted to audiences. These meanings are not self-evident and certainly not fixed. They are also multiple and often ambiguous.

Theory and research concerning mass media content are fissured by this distinction between message and meaning, which largely parallels the choice between a 'transport' and a 'ritual' (or cultural) model of communication (see p. 71). This remark exposes the difficulty in speaking about content at all with any certainty. Even so, we often encounter generalizations about the content of mass media as a whole, or a particular type of content, especially with reference to matters of media intention, 'bias', or probable effect. Our ability to generalize about these matters has been helped by the patterned and standardized forms which media content often takes.

The main purpose of this chapter is to review the alternative approaches to media content and the methods available. However, the choice of both approach and method depends on the purpose that we have in mind, of which there is some diversity. We mainly deal with three aspects of content analysis: content as information; content as hidden meaning (semiology); and 'traditional' quantitative content analysis. There is no coherent theory of media content and no consensus on the best method of analysis since alternative methods are needed for different purposes and kinds of content and for a variety of media genres. Consequently, we begin with the question of purpose.

Why Study Media Content?

The first reasons for studying media content in a systematic way stemmed either from an interest in the potential effects of mass communication, whether intended or unintended, or from a wish to understand the appeal of content for the audience. Both perspectives have a practical basis, from the point of view of mass communicators, but they have gradually been widened and supplemented to embrace a larger range of theoretical issues. Early studies of content reflected a concern about social problems with which the media were linked. Attention focused in particular on the portrayal of crime, violence and sex in popular entertainment, the use of media as propaganda and the performance of media in respect of racial or other kinds of prejudice. The range of purposes was gradually extended to cover news, information and much entertainment content.

Most early research was based on the assumption that content reflected the purposes and values of its originators, more or less directly; that 'meaning' could be discovered or inferred from messages; and that receivers would understand messages more or less as intended by producers. It was even thought that 'effects' could be discovered by inference from the seeming 'message' built into content. More plausibly, the content of mass media has often been regarded as more or less reliable evidence about the culture

and society in which it is produced. All of these assumptions, except perhaps the last, have been called into question, and the study of content has become correspondingly more complex and challenging. It may not go too far to say that the most interesting aspects of media content are often not the overt messages, but the many more or less concealed and uncertain meanings that are present in media texts.

Despite these various complications, it is useful at this point to review the main motives that have guided the study of media content, as follows:

- *Describing and comparing media output.* For many purposes of analysis of mass communication (for instance, assessing change or making comparisons), we need to be able to characterize the content of particular media and channels.
- *Comparing media with 'social reality.'* A recurrent issue in media research has been the relation between media messages and 'reality'. The most basic question is whether media content does, or should, reflect the social reality, and if so, which or whose reality.
- *Media content as reflection of social and cultural values and beliefs.* Historians, anthropologists and sociologists are interested in media content as evidence of values and beliefs of a particular time and place or social group.
- *Hypothesizing functions and effects of media.* We can interpret content in terms of its potential consequences, whether good or bad, intended or unintended. Although content on its own cannot be taken as evidence of effect, it is difficult to study effects without intelligent reference to content (as cause).
- *Evaluating media performance.* Krippendorf (2004) uses the term 'performance analysis' to refer to research designed to find answers about the quality of the media as judged by certain criteria (see Chapter 8 and pp. 355–8).
- *The study of media bias.* Much media content has either a clear direction of evaluation in relation to matters of dispute or is open to the perception of favouring one side over another, even if unintentionally or unconsciously.
- *Audience analysis.* Since audiences are always defined at least in part by media content, we cannot study audiences without studying content.
- *Tackling questions of genre, textual and discourse analysis, narrative and other formats.* In this context, the text itself is the object of study, with a view to understanding how it 'works' to produce effects desired by authors and readers.
- *Rating and classification of content.* Regulation or media responsibility often requires that certain kinds of content are classified according to potential harm or offence, especially in matters of violence, sex, language, etc. The development of rating systems requires prior analysis of content.

Critical Perspectives on Content

The main grounds of criticism of mass media have already been introduced in earlier chapters. Here we look specifically at situations where the transmitted content is the main focus of attention. At issue are possible failings, omissions and bad intentions, especially in the way social life is represented, with particular reference to groupings based on social class, ethnicity, gender or similar differentiating factors. Another set of

concerns relates to potential harm from content that is perceived as violent or otherwise offensive or dangerous. The cultural quality of media is also sometimes at issue, for example in debates about mass culture or the matter of cultural and national identity.

Marxist approaches

One main critical tradition has been based on a Marxist theory of ideology which relates mainly to class inequality but can also deal with some other issues. Grossberg (1991) has pointed to several variations of Marxist cultural interpretation that deal with the 'politics of textuality'. He identifies three 'classical' Marxist approaches, of which the most relevant derive from the Frankfurt School and ideas concerning 'false consciousness' (see Chapter 5). Two later approaches distinguished by Grossberg are 'hermeneutic' (interpretative) and 'discursive' in character, and again there are several variants. Compared with classical approaches, however, the main differences are, first, that 'decoding' is recognized as problematic and, secondly, that texts are seen as not just 'mediating' reality but actually constructing experience and shaping identity.

The Marxist tradition has paid most attention to news and actuality because of its capacity to define the social world and the world of events. Drawing on various sources, including Barthes and Althusser, Stuart Hall (1977) argued that the practice of signification through language establishes maps of cultural meaning which promote the dominance of a ruling-class ideology, especially by establishing a hegemonic view of the world, within which accounts of reality are framed. News contributes to this task in several ways. One is by 'masking' aspects of reality – especially by ignoring the exploitative nature of class society or by taking it for granted as 'natural'. Secondly, news produces a 'fragmentation' of interests, which undermines the solidarity of subordinate classes. Thirdly, news imposes an 'imaginary unity or coherence' – for instance, by invoking concepts of community, nation, public opinion and consensus as well as by various forms of symbolic exclusion.

Critique of advertising and commercialism

There is a long tradition of critical attention to advertising that sometimes adopts the Marxist approach as described, but also derives from other cultural or humanistic values. Williamson (1978), in her study of advertising, applies the familiar concept of 'ideology', which is defined by Althusser (1971) as representing 'the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence'. Althusser also says that 'All ideology has the function (which defines it) of "constituting" individuals as subjects.' For Williamson, the ideological work of advertising is accomplished (with the active co-operation of the 'reader' of the advertisement) by transferring significant meanings and ideas (sometimes myths) from experience (such as beauty, success, happiness, nature and science) to commercial products and by that route to ourselves.

The commercial product becomes a way to achieve the desired social or cultural state and to be the kind of person we would like to be. We are 'reconstituted' by advertising but end up with an imaginary (and thus false) sense of our real selves and of our relation to the real conditions of our life. This has the same ideological tendency as that attributed to news in critical theory – masking real exploitation and fragmenting solidarity. A very similar process is described by Williamson (1978) in terms of 'commodification', referring to the way advertising converts the 'use value' of products into an 'exchange value', allowing us (in our aspiration) to acquire (buy) happiness or other ideal states.

The ideological work of advertising is essentially achieved by constituting our environment for us and telling us who we are and what we really want (see Mills, 1951). In the critical perspective, all this is illusory and diversionary. What the effect of advertising might actually be is beyond the scope of any analysis of content, but it is possible to work back from content to intention, and the critical terminology of 'manipulation' and 'exploitation' is easier to justify than is the case with ideology in news.

On the question of cultural quality

Both the Marxist critique of mass culture and the elitist and moralistic critique that it replaced are out of fashion. Neither provided a clear definition of mass culture or offered subjective criteria for evaluating cultural quality. Even so, the issue is still a matter for public debate and even policy.

There have been a number of attempts to assess the quality of television in particular in recent years and in different countries, especially in response to the expansion and privatization of media. One example is the Quality Assessment of Broadcasting project of the Japanese public broadcaster NHK (Ishikawa, 1996). Notable in this project is the attempt to evaluate quality of output from different perspectives, namely that of 'society', of the professional broadcasters and of the audience. Of most interest is the assessment made by programme makers themselves. We find a number of criteria being applied. These relate especially to: degree and type of craft skill, resources and production values, originality, relevance and cultural authenticity, values expressed, integrity of purpose and audience appeal. There are other criteria and other ways of assessing quality because the range of content is so wide.

It has been suggested (Schroder, 1992) that there are essentially three kinds of cultural standards to be applied: the aesthetic (there are many dimensions), the ethical (questions of values, integrity, intended meaning, etc.) and the 'ecstatic' (measured by popularity, pleasure and performative value, essentially aspects of consumption). Developments of cultural theory have significantly extended the scope for estimating the quality of cultural output according to stated criteria. Even so, such assessments are bound to remain subjective, based on approximate criteria and varied perception. Intrinsic quality cannot be measured.

Violence in the mass media

In terms of sheer volume of words written and salience in the public mind, the foremost critical perspective on mass media would probably belong under this heading. Despite the difficulty of establishing direct causal connections, critics have focused on the *content* of popular media. It has always been much easier to demonstrate that media portray violence and aggression in news and fiction to a degree quite disproportionate to real-life experience than to show any effects. Many studies have produced seemingly shocking statistics of average exposure to mediated violence. The argument of critics has been not just that it might cause violence and crime, especially by the young, but that it is often intrinsically undesirable, producing emotional disturbance, fear, anxiety and deviant tastes.

Accepting that thrills and action are a staple part of popular entertainment that cannot simply be banned (although some degree of censorship has been widely legitimated in this matter), content research has often been devoted to understanding the more or less harmful ways in which violence can be depicted (see Chapter 14, pp. 383–4). The scope of criticism was widened to include not only the questions of socialization of children, but also the issue of violent aggression directed at women. This occurs frequently, even in non-pornographic content.

Gender-based critique

There are several other varieties of critical *feminist* perspective on media content (see Chapter 5, pp. 120–3). Initially, these were mainly concerned with the stereotyping, neglect and marginalization of women that was common in the 1970s (see, for example, Tuchman et al., 1978). As Rakow (1986) points out, media content can never be a true account of reality, and it is less important to change media representations (such as having more female characters) than to challenge the underlying sexist ideology of much media content. Most central to critical feminist analysis is probably the broad question (going beyond stereotypes) of how texts 'position' the female subject in narratives and textual interactions and in so doing contribute to a definition of femininity in collaboration with the 'reader'. Essentially the same applies to masculinity, and both fall under the heading of 'gender construction' (Goffman, 1976).

For the feminist critique, two issues necessarily arise. The first is the extent to which media texts intended for the entertainment of women (such as soap operas or romances) can ever be liberating when they embody the realities of patriarchal society and family institutions (Radway, 1984; Ang, 1985). The second is the degree to which new kinds of mass media texts which challenge gender stereotyping and try to introduce positive role models can have any 'empowering' effect for women (while remaining within the dominant commercial media system).

Ultimately, the answers to these questions depend on how the texts are received by their audiences. Radway's (1984) study of romantic fiction argued that there is some element of liberation, if not empowerment, through what is essentially a woman's (own) genre, but she also acknowledged the patriarchal ideology of the form:

the romance also provides a symbolic portrait of the womanly sensibility that is created and required by patriarchal marriage and its sexual division of labour ... [It] underscores and shores up the very psychological structure that guarantees women's commitment to marriage and motherhood. (1984: 149)

A variety of literary, discourse and psychoanalytic methods have been used in the critical feminist study of content, but there has been a strong emphasis on interpretation rather than quantification. The 'false consciousness' model, implying a more or less automatic 'transfer' of gender positioning, has also been discarded.

Structuralism and Semiology

One influential way of thinking about media content has origins in the general study of language. Basically, *structuralism* refers to the way meaning is constructed in texts, the term applying to certain 'structures of language', consisting of signs, narrative or myths. Generally, languages have been said to work because of inbuilt structures. The term 'structure' implies a constant and ordered relation of elements, although this may not be apparent on the surface and requires decoding. It has been assumed that such structures are located in and governed by particular cultures – much wider systems of meaning, reference and signification. *Semiology* is a more specific version of the general structuralist approach. There are several classic explications of the structuralist or semiological approach to media content (e.g. Barthes, 1967, 1977; Eco, 1977) plus numerous useful introductions and commentaries (such as Burgelin, 1972; Hawkes, 1977; Fiske, 1982).

Structuralism is a development of the linguistics of de Saussure (1915/1960) and combines with it some principles from structural anthropology. It differs from linguistics in two main ways. First, it is concerned not only with conventional verbal languages but also with any sign system that has language-like properties. Secondly, it directs attention less to the sign system itself than to chosen texts and the meaning of texts in the light of the 'host' culture. It is thus concerned with the elucidation of cultural as well as linguistic meaning, an activity for which a knowledge of the sign system is instrumental but insufficient on its own. Although semiology has declined in popularity as a method, the underlying principles are still very relevant to other varieties of discourse analysis.

Towards a science of signs

North American (Peirce, 1931–5) and British (Ogden and Richards, 1923) scholars subsequently worked towards the goal of establishing a 'general science of signs' (semiology or semiotics). This field was to encompass structuralism and other things besides, and thus all things to do with *signification* (the giving of meaning by means of language), however loosely structured, diverse and fragmentary. The concepts of 'sign system' and 'signification' common to linguistics, structuralism and semiology derive mainly from de Saussure. The same basic concepts were used in somewhat different ways by the three theorists mentioned, but the following are the essentials.

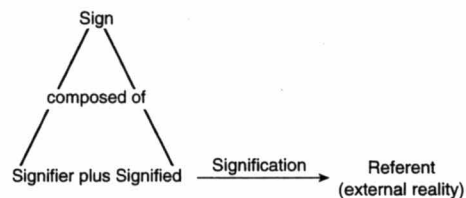


Figure 13.1 Elements of semiology. Signs in meaning systems have two elements: physical plus associated meanings in the culture and in use

A *sign* is the basic physical vehicle of meaning in a language; it is any 'sound image' that we can hear or see and which usually *refers* to some object or aspect of reality about which we wish to communicate, which is known as the *referent*. In human communication, we use signs to convey meanings about objects in the world of experience to others, who interpret the signs we use on the basis of sharing the same language or knowledge of the sign system we are using (for instance, **non-verbal communication**). According to de Saussure, the process of signification is accomplished by two elements of the sign. He called the physical element (word, image, sound) the *signifier* and used the term *signified* to refer to the mental concept invoked by a physical sign in a given language code (Figure 13.1).

Normally in (western) language systems, the connection between a physical signifier (such as a word) and a particular referent is arbitrary, but the relation between signifier and signified (meaning or concept conveyed) is governed by the rules of culture and has to be learned by the particular '**interpretative community**'. In principle, anything that can make a sense impression can act as a sign, and this sense impression has no necessary correspondence with the sense impression made by the thing signified (for instance, the word 'tree' does not look at all like a representation of an actual tree). What matters is the sign system or 'referent system' that governs and interrelates the whole process of signification.

Generally, the separate signs gain their meaning from the systematic differences, contrasts and choices which are regulated in the linguistic or sign-system code and from the values (positive or negative valence) which are given by the rules of the culture and the sign system. Semiology has sought to explore the nature of sign systems that go beyond the rules of grammar and syntax and regulate complex, latent and culturally dependent meanings of texts that can only be understood by reference to the culture in which they are embedded and the precise context in which they appear.

Connotation and denotation

This has led to a concern with *connotative* as well as *denotative* meaning – the associations and images invoked and expressed by certain usages and combinations of signs. **Denotation** has been described as the 'first order of signification' (Barthes, 1967) because it describes the relationship within a sign between the signifier (physical aspect) and

signified (mental concept). The obvious straightforward meaning of a sign is its denotation. Williamson (1978) gives an example of an advertisement in which a photo of the film star Catherine Deneuve is used to advertise a French brand of perfume. The photo denotes Catherine Deneuve.

Connotation relates to a second order of signification, referring to the associated meaning that may be conjured up by the object signified. In the example of the advertisement, Catherine Deneuve is generally associated by members of the relevant language (and cultural) community with French 'chicness'. The relevance of this to advertisers is that the connotation of the chosen model (here a film star) is transferred by association to a perfume which she uses or recommends.

A seminal demonstration of this approach to text analysis was provided by Barthes (1977) in his analysis of a magazine advertisement for Panzani foods. This showed an image of a shopping bag containing groceries (the physical signifier), but these in turn were expected to invoke positive images of freshness and domesticity (the level of connotation). In addition, the red and green colours also signified 'Italianness' and could invoke a myth of culinary tradition and excellence. Thus, signification commonly works at two levels (or orders) of meaning: the surface level of literal meaning, and the second level of associated or connoted meaning. The activation of the second level requires some deeper knowledge or familiarity with the culture on the part of the reader.

Barthes extended this basic idea by introducing the concept of a *myth*. Often the thing signified by a sign will have a place in a larger discrete system of meaning, which is also available to the member of a particular culture. Myths are pre-existing and value-laden sets of ideas derived from the culture and transmitted by communication. For instance, there are likely to be myths about national character or national greatness, or concerning science or nature (its purity and goodness), that can be invoked for communicative purposes (as they often are in advertising).

Denotative meaning has the characteristics of universality (the same fixed meaning for all) and objectivity (references are true and do not imply evaluation), while connotation involves both variable meaning according to the culture of the recipient and elements of evaluation (positive or negative direction). The relevance of all this for the study of mass communication should be evident. Media content consists of a large number of 'texts' (in the physical sense), often of a standardized and repetitive kind, that are composed on the basis of certain stylized conventions and codes. These often draw on familiar or latent myths and images present in the culture of the makers and receivers of texts (Barthes, 1972).

Visual language

The visual image cannot be treated in the same way as the sign in Saussurian terminology (p. 345). There is no equivalent of the system of rules of a natural written language which enables us to interpret word signs more or less accurately. As Evans (1999: 12) explains it, a still image, such as a photograph of a woman, is 'less the equivalent of "woman" than it is a series of disconnected descriptions: "an older woman, seen in the distance wearing a green coat, watching the traffic, as she

crosses the road". She also tells us that pictures have no tense, and thus no clear location in time. For these and other reasons, Barthes famously described the photograph as a 'picture without a code'. It presents us, says Evans, with an object as a *fait accompli*.

* Visual images are inevitably ambiguous and polysemic, but they also have certain advantages over words. One is their greater denotative power when used deliberately and effectively. Another is their capacity to become **icons** – directly representing some concept with clarity, impact and wide recognition. An example of the power of visual language is provided by the case of the photographs of torture and abuse at Abu Ghraib prison that were published worldwide in May 2004. Anden-Papadopolous (2008) describes these as iconic images that had the power to shape both news and public perceptions, beyond the power of the authorities to counter or control. They have also been transformed into sites of protest and opposition to the deeds they represent. Despite the lack of the equivalent of a true language, visual images, still or moving, can acquire a range of known meanings within the conventions and traditions of an art form (such as cinema or portrait painting) or a particular genre. This gives them considerable potential for skilful communication in certain contexts. Advertising is a primary example.

Given all that has happened by way of change in mass media, there is an even more pressing need to develop better concepts and methods for the analysis of many new formats and forms of expression, especially those that mix and innovate the codes employed. The initial outlook for progress is not very good.

Uses of semiology

The application of semiological analysis opens the possibility of revealing more of the underlying meaning of a text, taken as a whole, than would be possible by simply following the grammatical rules of the language or consulting the dictionary meaning of separate words. It has the special advantage of being applicable to 'texts' that involve more than one sign system and to signs (such as visual images and sounds) for which there is no established 'grammar' and no available dictionary. Without semiology, for instance, it would hardly have been possible for Williamson (1978) to have carried out her seminal study of advertisements.

However, semiological analysis presupposes a thorough knowledge of the originating culture and of the particular genre at issue. According to Burgelin (1972: 317), 'the mass media clearly do not form a complete culture on their own ... but simply a fraction of such a system which is, of necessity, the culture to which they belong'. Moreover, it follows from the theory summarized above that a text has its own immanent, intrinsic, more or less given and thus objective meaning, apart from the overt intention of the sender or the selective interpretation of the receiver. As Burgelin also comments (1972: 316), 'there is nobody, and nothing, outside the message which can supply us with the meaning of one of its elements'.

This body of theory supplies us with an approach, if not exactly a method, for helping to establish the 'cultural meaning' of media content. It certainly offers a way of

describing content: it can shed light on those who produce and transmit a set of messages. It has a special application in opening up layers of meaning which lie beneath the surface of texts and deny simple description at the 'first level' of signification. It is also useful in certain kinds of evaluative research, especially as directed at uncovering the latent ideology and 'bias' of media content. The main tenets of these approaches are summarized in Box 13.1.

Structuralism/semiology: main tenets 13.1

- Texts have meanings built in by way of language
- Meanings depend on a wider cultural and linguistic frame of reference
- Texts represent processes of signification
- Sign systems can be 'decoded' on the basis of knowledge of culture and sign system
- Meanings of texts are connotative, denotative or mythical

Critical discourse analysis

The general term 'discourse analysis' has gradually become preferred to the expression 'qualitative content analysis', although there is not much specific meaning to the term that differentiates it. It may be simply that the latter expression was too closely identified with the content of mass media, while the term 'discourse' has a broader connotation and covers all 'texts', in whatever form or language they are encoded and also specifically implies that a text is constructed by those who read and decipher it as much as those who formulate it. Scheufele (2008) names four features shared by all discourses, as meant in the present context. First, discourses refer to political or social issues which are relevant for society, or at least for a major grouping of people. For instance, we can speak of a 'nuclear energy discourse' or a 'drug' discourse. Secondly, the elements of a discourse are called speech acts, emphasizing that they are a form of social interaction and wider patterns of social behaviour. Thirdly, discourse can be analysed by studying bodies of text of all kinds, including documents, transcripts of debates, media content. Fourthly, discourses are processes of collectively constructing social reality, often in the form of frames and schemata, which allow generalization. As to the purposes of discourse analysis, Scheufele reminds us that the primary aim is to uncover the substance or quality of a particular discourse, rather than to quantify the occurrence of different discourses.

According to Smith and Bell (2007), it is hard to give a precise definition of discourse analysis, but they say it is more common to find it referred to as 'critical discourse analysis' because of its attention to the role of power. This is in line with Scheufele's point about it usually being connected with some current significant social issue. Wodak and Meyer (2001: 2–3) define critical discourse analysis as

being 'fundamentally concerned with analysing opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language'. This definition sounds as if it would cover, if not the theory, at least many of the applications of earlier and more formal structuralism and semiology, as described.

Media Content as Information

A completely different discourse around media content originates in the information theory approaches popularized by the work of Shannon and Weaver (1949). The roots are intermingled with the basic transmission model (see pp. 69–70), which conceives communication as essentially the intentional transfer of information from sender to receiver by way of (physical) channels which are subject to noise and interference. According to this model, communication is judged by the efficiency (volume and cost) and effectiveness in achieving the planned 'transfer'. The concept of information has proved difficult to define because it can be viewed in different ways, for instance as an object or a commodity, an agency, a resource, and so on. For present purposes, the central element is probably the capacity to 'reduce uncertainty'. Information is thus defined by its opposite (randomness or chaos).

Information theory

According to Frick (1959), the insight that led to the development of information theory was the realization that 'all the processes that might be said to convey information are basically selection processes'. The mathematical theory of communication provided an objective approach to the analysis of communication texts. The basis for objectivity (quantification) is the binary (yes/no) coding system, which forms the basis for digital computing. All problems of uncertainty can ultimately be reduced to a series of either/or questions; the number of questions required to solve a problem of meaning equals the number of items of information and is a measure of information quantity.

This line of thinking provides a tool for the analysis of the informative content of texts and opens up several lines of research. There is an inbuilt bias towards a view of communication content as embodying rational purposes of the producers and to an instrumental view of media messages (the transmission model again). The approach is also fundamentally *behaviourist* in its assumptions. For obvious reasons, most application of this kind of theory has been to 'informative' kinds of content (such as news). Nevertheless, all media texts that are systematically encoded in known 'languages' are open in principle to analysis in terms of information and uncertainty reduction. Photographs, for instance, at the level of denotation often present a series of 'iconic' items of information, signs that can be read as references to objects in the 'real world'.

Up to a point, iconic images are as informative as words, sometimes more so, and can also indicate certain kinds of relations between objects (such as relative distance) and give detailed information about colour, size, texture, and so on. Fictional narratives can also be treated as informational texts, by assuming what they represent to be informative. For purposes of quantifying the amount of information that is sent or received and for measuring some aspects of the quality of messages, it need not matter which type of media content is at issue.

Applications of information theory in the study of content

Examples of how the assumptions of information theory can be used in the analysis of media content can be found in certain measures of *informativeness*, *readability*, *diversity* and *information flow*. There are a number of different ways of measuring the *information value* (in the sense of capacity to reduce uncertainty) of media texts. The simplest approach is to count the number of 'facts' in a text, with alternative possibilities for defining what constitutes a fact (often it is conceived as a basic verifiable unit of objective information).

Research by Asp (1981) involved a measure of information value (or informativity) of news on certain controversial issues, based on three different indicators of news content, having first established a universe of relevant factual points in all news reports. One measure was of *density*: the proportion of all relevant points in a given report. A second was of *breadth*: the number of different points as a proportion of the total possible. The third was *depth*: the number of facts and reported motives helping to explain the basic points (some subjective judgement may be involved here). An *information value index* was calculated by multiplying the density score by the breadth score. While factualness can be formally measured in this and similar ways, it cannot be assumed that information density or richness will make communication any more effective, although it may represent (good) intentions on the part of the reporters and a potential for being informative.

An alternative is to measure *readability*, another valued quality of journalistic texts. Approaches to measurement have mainly followed the idea that news is more readable when there is more *redundancy* (the reverse of information density). The simple idea is that an 'information-rich' text packed full of factual information which has a high potential for reducing uncertainty is also likely to be very challenging to a (not very highly motivated) reader. This is also related to the variable of being closed or open: information-rich texts are generally closed, not leaving much room for interpretation.

There is experimental support for the view that the less information in a text, the easier it generally is to read and understand. The main (experimental) tool for measuring readability is called the *cloze procedure* (Taylor, 1953) and involves a process whereby a reader has to substitute words for systematically omitted words. The ease of substitution is the measure of ease of reading since texts with many redundant words give rise to fewer problems. This is not the only measure of readability, since measures of *sensationalism* achieve much the same result though without the same basis in information theory (Tannenbaum and Lynch, 1960).

If we can measure the information in media content, and if we can categorize items of information in a relevant way, it follows that we can also measure the (internal) *diversity* of texts. A typical diversity question (see below) might be the degree to which news gave equal or proportionate attention to the views of several different political parties or candidates. Chaffee (1981), for instance, suggested using Schramm's (1955) measure of *entropy*, which involved calculating the number of categories and the evenness of distribution of media space/time between categories (of information or opinion). There is more diversity where we find more categories (a wide range of opinion) and less diversity where there is very unequal attention to different categories (one opinion tends to dominate news coverage).

The evaluative dimension of information

From the examples given of the informational approach, it looks as if it is very one-dimensional and hard to apply to non-factual aspects of content. It seems insensitive to the different levels of meaning that have already been mentioned and offers no place for alternative interpretations of a message. From the informational perspective, ambiguous or open texts are simply more redundant or chaotic. It is also unclear how this kind of objective analysis can cope with the *evaluative* dimension of information (which is always present in news).

While this critique is valid, there are possibilities for the objective analysis of the value direction of texts. These depend on the assumption (which can be empirically supported) that signs often carry positive or negative loadings in their own natural languages or code systems, certainly for those who are members of the relevant 'interpretative community'. It follows that references to people, objects or events can objectively embody values.

The work of Osgood et al. (1957) on the evaluative structure of meaning in a language laid the basis for developing objective measures of value direction in texts. The essence of the approach (see van Cuilenburg et al., 1986) is to identify frequently occurring words according to their 'common meaning' (their relative positive or negative weight in everyday use). Next, we record the extent to which words of different value direction are (semantically) connected with relevant attitude objects in the news (such as political leaders, policies, countries and events). In principle, by such procedures, it is possible to quantify the 'inscribed' evaluative direction of attitude in media content.

Moreover, it is possible to uncover *networks* of semantically associated 'attitude objects', and this sheds further light on value patterns (implied by association) in texts. This method does have the potential to allocate an evaluative meaning to whole texts, as well as to 'facts' or items of information, within a particular culture and society. Contextual knowledge is, however, a necessary condition, and the method departs from the purity of information theory. Box 13.2 summarizes the main points made above in relation to information.

Communication as information 13.2

- Communication is to be defined as transfer of information from sender to individual receiver
- Media texts are bodies of information
- The essence of information is the reduction of uncertainty
- Information quality and the informativeness of texts are measurable
- The evaluative direction of information is measurable

Media Performance Discourse

There is an extensive body of research into mass media content according to a number of normative criteria, especially those discussed in Chapter 8. This tradition of research is usually based on some conception of the public interest (or good of society) that provides the point of reference and the relevant content criteria (McQuail, 1992). Although a given set of values provide the starting point for analysis of media, the *procedures* adopted are those of a neutral scientific observer, and the aim is to find independent evidence which will be relevant to public debate about the role of media in society (Stone, 1987; Lemert, 1989). The basic assumption of this tradition of work is that although quality cannot be directly measured, many relevant dimensions can be reliably assessed (Bogart, 2004). The NHK Quality Assessment project mentioned earlier (Ishikawa, 1996) is a good example of such work. The evidence sought should relate to particular media but needs also to have a general character.

It could be said that this particular discourse is about the politics of media content. It adjoins and occasionally overlaps with the critical tradition discussed earlier, but differs in that it stays within the boundaries of the system itself, accepting the goals of the media in society more or less on their own terms (or at least the more idealistic goals). The normative background and the general nature of the principles have already been sketched (Chapter 8). What follows are some examples of the testable expectations about the quality of media provision which are implied in the various performance principles.

Freedom and independence

Perhaps the foremost expectation about media content is that it should reflect or embody the spirit of free expression, despite the many institutional and organizational pressures that have already been described. It is not easy to see how the quality of freedom (and here the reference is primarily to news, information and opinion functions of media) can be recognized in content. Several general aspects

of content can, even so, be identified as indicating more or less freedom (from commercial, political or social pressure). For example, there is the general question of editorial 'vigour' or activity, which should be a sign of using freedom and shows itself in a number of ways. These include: actually expressing opinions, especially on controversial issues; willingness to report conflict and controversy; following a 'proactive' policy in relation to sources (thus not relying on press handouts and public relations, or being too cosy with the powerful); and giving background and interpretation as well as facts.

The concept of 'editorial vigour' was coined by Thrift (1977) to refer to several related aspects of content, especially dealing with *relevant* and significant local matters, adopting an argumentative form and providing 'mobilizing information', which refers to information which helps people to *act* on their opinions (Lemert, 1989). Some critics and commentators also look for a measure of advocacy and of support for 'underdogs' as evidence of free media (Entman, 1989). Investigative reporting may also be regarded as a sign of news media using their freedom (see Ettema and Glasser, 1998).

In one way or another, most mass media content can be assessed in terms of the 'degree of freedom' exhibited. Outside the sphere of news, one would look for innovation and unexpectedness, non-conformity and experimentation in cultural matters. The most free media are also likely to deviate from conformity in matters of taste and be willing to be unpopular with audiences as well as with authorities. However, if so, they are not likely to remain mass media.

Content diversity

After freedom, probably the most frequently encountered term in the 'performance discourse' is diversity. It refers essentially to three main features of content:

- a wide range of choice for audiences, on all conceivable dimensions of interest and preference;
- many and different opportunities for access by voices and sources in society;
- a true or sufficient reflection in media of the varied reality of experience in society.

Each of these concepts is open to measurement (McQuail, 1992; Hellman, 2001; McDonald and Dimmick, 2003). In this context, we can really only speak of content diversity if we apply some external standard to media texts, whether of audience preference, social reality or (would-be) sources in society. Lack of diversity can be established only by identifying sources, references, events, types of content, and so on, which are missing or under-represented. In themselves, media texts cannot be said to be diverse in any absolute sense.

Essentially, diversity is another word for differentiation and is, in itself, rather empty of meaning, since everything we can distinguish is different, in some minimal sense of not being the very same thing, from everything else. The diversity value as applied to media content depends on some criteria of significant difference. These

criteria are sometimes provided by the media themselves in the form of different formats, genres and types of culture. So, the same or different media channels can offer a changing supply of music, news, information, entertainment, comedy, drama, quiz shows, etc. External critics applying standards of social significance are usually more interested in differences of level and quality as well as format and genre. There are further criteria relating to the society in respect of representation of the whole range of social groupings, or providing for key minorities. The choice of criteria has to be made and justified by and according to the purpose at hand and the possibilities are virtually unlimited. However, the purpose is usually decided by reference to one or other of the three points made above – the matter of audience choice and preference; the access given to social groups and voices; the fair representation of social reality. Many questions about the effects of the media depend on having the concepts and means for measuring content diversity.

Objectivity and its Measurement

The standard of news objectivity has given rise to much discussion of journalistic media content, under various headings, especially in relation to some form of bias, which is the reverse of objectivity. As indicated already (Chapter 8), the ruling norms of most western media call for a certain practice of neutral, informative reporting of events, and it is against this positive expectation that much news has been found deficient. However, objectivity is a relatively complex notion when one goes beyond the simple idea that news should reliably (and therefore honestly) report what is really going on in the world.

The simplest version of the idea that news tells us about the real world can be referred to as *factuality*. This refers to texts made up of distinct units of information that are necessary for understanding or acting upon a news 'event'. In journalistic terms it means at least providing dependable (correct) answers to the questions 'Who?', 'What?', 'Where?', 'When?', and maybe 'Why?', and going on from there. A systematic approach to the assessment of factuality in the sense of 'information value' has already been discussed. News can be more or less 'information rich' in terms of the number of facts offered.

For analysing news quality, however, one needs more refined criteria. In particular, one asks if the facts given are *accurate* and whether they are sufficient to constitute an adequate account, on the criterion of *completeness*. Accuracy itself can mean several things, since it cannot be directly 'read' or 'measured' from inspection of texts alone. One meaning of accuracy is conformity to independent records of events, whether in documents, other media or eyewitness accounts. Another meaning is more subjective: accuracy is conformity of reports to the perception of the source of the news or the subject of the news (object of reporting). Accuracy may also be a matter of internal consistency within news texts.

Completeness is equally difficult to pin down or measure since complete accounts of even simple events are not possible or necessary. Although one can

always make assessments and comparisons of news in terms of more or less information, the question really turns on how much information is needed or can reasonably be expected, which is a subjective matter. We are quickly into another dimension of factuality – that of the *relevance* of the facts offered. Again, it is a simple notion that news information is relevant only if it is interesting and useful (and vice versa), but there are competing notions and criteria of what counts as relevant. One source of criteria is what *theory* says news ought to be like; another is what professional *journalists* decide is most relevant; and a third is what an *audience* actually finds interesting and useful. These three perspectives are unlikely to coincide on the same criteria or on the same assessment of content.

Theory tends to equate relevance with what is *really* significant in the longer perspective of history and what contributes to the working of society (for instance, informed democracy). From this point of view, a good deal of news, such as that about personalities, 'human interest', sport or entertainment, is not regarded as relevant. Journalists tend to apply professional criteria and a feel for news values that balance the longer-term significance with what they think their public is interested in.

One study of US journalists (Burgoon, quoted in McQuail, 1992: 218) showed a decided split between perceptions of 'significance' and of 'interest' as factors in news judgement. Relevance was seen as having to do first with things 'which affect people's lives', secondly with things which are interesting or unusual, and thirdly with facts which are timely or relate to nearby or large-scale happenings. In the end, it is the audience that decides what is relevant, and there are too many different audiences for a generalization to be useful. Even so, it is clear that much of what theory says is relevant is not perceived as such by much of the audience much of the time.

The issue of what counts as *impartiality* in news seems relatively simple but can also be complex in practice, not least because there is little chance of achieving a value-free assessment of value freedom. Impartiality is appreciated mainly because many events involve conflict and are open to alternative interpretations and evaluations (this is most obviously true of political news, but much the same can be said of sports). Most generally, the normal standard of impartiality calls for balance in the choice and use of sources, so as to reflect different points of view, and also the presentation of two (or more) sides where judgements or facts are contested.

A summary example is given in Box 13.3 of the findings of research into whether a newspaper was biased or not in its reporting of a permanently contested situation – that of Israel and Palestine (Wu et al., 2002). It was concluded that the paper was reporting objectively, on the grounds that the assessed direction of reports was almost identical for the main parties (there was other evidence). The newspaper could claim to be balanced in respect of evaluative tendency. However, this might not satisfy someone convinced that one 'side' was clearly in the wrong for reasons outside the immediate events being reported. In many circumstances of conflict, one or other party is defined as at fault or with bad intentions and bad faith.

An example of news judged as impartial: findings of a general reading of the direction of news reports (N = 280) in the Philadelphia Inquirer dealing with the Israel and Palestine conflict, January to October 1998 (Wu et al., 2002)

13.3

eg

Entity	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Mixed	Total
Israel	17%	39%	39%	5%	100%
Palestine	14%	44%	39%	4%	100%
Other Middle East	21%	41%	35%	3%	100%
USA	34%	59%	7%		100%
UN	18%	82%			100%

Another aspect of impartiality is neutrality in the presentation of news: separating facts from opinion, avoiding value judgements or emotive language or pictures. The term 'sensationalism' has been used to refer to forms of presentation which depart from the objectivity ideal, and measures of news text sensationalism have been developed (e.g. Tannenbaum and Lynch, 1960). Methods have also been tested for application to visual content in news (Grabe et al., 2000, 2001).

There is also evidence to show that the choice of words can reflect and imply value judgements in reporting on sensitive matters, for instance relating to patriotism (Glasgow Media Group, 1985) or race (Hartman and Husband, 1974; van Dijk, 1991). There are also indications that particular uses of visuals and camera shots can lead the viewer in certain evaluative directions (Tuchman, 1978; Kepplinger, 1983). Impartiality often comes down in the end simply to the absence of intentional or avoidable 'bias' and 'sensationalism'. Unfortunately, it is never that simple since bias is as much, if not more, a matter of perception as of measurable dimensions of content (D'Alessio and Allen, 2000; D'Alessio, 2003).

Reality reflection or distortion: the question of bias

Bias in news content can refer, especially, to distorting reality, giving a negative picture of minority groups of many kinds, neglecting or misconstruing the role of women in society, or differentially favouring a particular political party or philosophy (see Shoemaker and Reese, 1991). There are many such kinds of news bias which stop short of lies, propaganda or ideology, but often overlap with and reinforce similar tendencies in fictional content. In general, this category can be classified as 'unwitting bias', arising from the context of production, as explored in Chapter 12. While the territory of media bias is now almost boundless and still extending (American Behavioral

Scientist, 2003), we can summarize the most significant and best-documented generalizations in the following statements about news content, derived from numerous sources and examples:

- Media news over-represents the social 'top' and official voices in its sources.
- News attention is differentially bestowed on members of political and social elites.
- The social values which are most emphasized are consensual and supportive of the status quo.
- Foreign news concentrates on nearer, richer and more powerful nations.
- News has a nationalistic (patriotic) and ethnocentric bias in the choice of topics and opinions expressed and in the view of the world assumed or portrayed.
- More attention and more prominence are given to men than to women in the news.
- Ethnic minorities and immigrant groups are differentially marginalized, stereotyped or stigmatized.
- News about crime over-represents violent and personal crime and neglects many of the realities of risk in society.
- Health news gives most attention to the most feared medical conditions and to new cures rather than prevention.
- Business leaders and employers receive more favoured treatment than unions and workers.
- The poor and those on welfare are neglected and/or stigmatized.
- War news typically avoids images of death or personal injury - sanitizing the reality.
- Well-resourced and well-organized news sources have more chance of defining news on their own terms.

Content analysis of fiction and drama has showed up similar systematic tendencies to allocate attention and esteem to the same groups who benefit from prominence in the news. Correlatively, the same minorities and outgroups tend to be stereotyped and stigmatized. Similar tendencies to give an unrealistic representation of crime, health and other risks and rewards are to be found. The evidence has normally been derived by applying methods of quantitative analysis to the overt content of texts, on the assumption that relative frequency of references will be taken as reflecting the 'real world'.

A critique of the reality reflection norm

It is striking how much the evaluation of media content comes down to the question of relation to reality, as if media ought to reflect more or less proportionately some empirical reality and ought always be 'fair' as between the advantaged and the disadvantaged. This is referred to by Kepplinger and Habermeier (1995) as the 'correspondence assumption' often attributed to the audience. The assumption that media ought to reflect reality in some direct and proportional way has been the basis for much criticism of media performance and has often been a key ingredient in research on media effects (for instance, in **cultivation analysis**) but is itself open to question. According to Schulz (1988), it derives from an antiquated 'mechanistic' view of the relationship

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between media and society, more or less akin to the 'transportation model' of communication effects. It fails to recognize the essential specificity, arbitrariness and, sometimes, autonomy of media texts and neglects the active participation of the audience in the making of meaning. Perhaps most telling is the absence of evidence that the audience does actually assume any statistical correspondence between media content and reality.

Apart from this fundamental doubt about the expectation of proportional reality reflection, there are several reasons why media content should *not* normally be expected to 'reflect' reality in any literal (statistically representative) way. Functionalist theory of media as agents of social control, for instance, would lead us to expect that media content would over-represent the dominant social and economic values of the society. We would also expect social elites and authorities to have more visibility and access. Indeed, the media do reflect the social reality of inequality when they tip the scales of attention towards the powerful in society and towards powerful nations in the world. The complaint is really that in so doing they may reinforce it.

The analysis of media organizations has shown how unlikely it is that news will match some 'average' of reality. The need for authoritative news sources and the requirements of 'news values' are obvious sources of statistical 'distortion'. Drama, celebrity, novelty and conflict are, by definition, abnormal. In addition, fictional media often deliberately seek to attract an audience by over-populating their stories with characters who lead more exciting lives and are richer, younger, more fashionable and more beautiful than the typical audience member (Martel and McCall, 1964). The study of 'key events' and 'framing' of news makes it both clear and understandable that 'reality' cannot be treated as if all happenings were of equal significance, even within the same category.

The simple fact that mass media are generally oriented to the interests of their audiences as 'consumers' of information and entertainment can easily account for most of the evidence of reality distortion summarized above. It is clear that audiences like many things which are inconsistent with reality reflection, especially fiction, fantasy, the unusual and bizarre, myths, nostalgia and amusement. The media are often sought out precisely as an alternative to and an escape from reality. When people look for models to follow or for objects of identification, they are as likely to seek an idealized as a realistic object or model. From this point of view, the reality 'distortions' observed in content are not in themselves surprising or necessarily regrettable. However, a significant determinant is also the efforts of interested agents to shape their own image and dominate the flow of communication.

Questions of Research Method

The various frameworks and perspectives for theorizing about media content that have been discussed often imply sharp divergences of methods of research. The full range of alternatives cannot be discussed here since there are many different methods for different purposes (several have already been introduced). Methods range from simple and extensive classifications of types of content for organizational or

descriptive purposes to deeply interpretative enquiries into specific examples of content, designed to uncover subtle and hidden potential meanings. Following the line of theoretical demarcation introduced in Chapter 3, we can broadly distinguish between quantitative and descriptive enquiry into overt meaning on the one hand, and more qualitative, deeper and more interpretative enquiry on the other. There are also enquiries directed to understanding the very nature of the various 'media languages' and how they work, especially in relation to visual imagery and sounds.

Where is meaning?

Theory has been perennially preoccupied with the question of the 'location' of meaning. Does meaning coincide with the intention of the sender, or is it embedded in the language, or is it primarily a matter of the receiver's interpretation (Jensen, 1991)? As we have seen from the previous chapters, mass communicated information and culture are produced by complex organizations whose purposes are usually not very specific and yet often predominate over the aims of individual communicators. This makes it hard to know what the 'sender's' intention really is: who can say, for instance, what the purpose of news is, or whose purpose it is? The option of concentrating on the message itself as the source of meaning has been the most attractive one, partly for reasons of practicality. The physical texts themselves are always available for direct analysis, and they have the advantage (compared with human respondents) of being 'non-reactive' to the investigator. They do not decay with time, although their context does decay and with it the possibility of really knowing what they originally meant to senders or to receivers.

It is impossible to 'extract' meaning from media content texts without also making assumptions which themselves shape the meaning extracted – for instance, the assumption that the amount or frequency of attention to something is a reliable guide to message meaning, intention and effect. The findings of content analysis can never 'speak for themselves'. In addition, the 'languages' of media are far from simple and are still only partially understood, especially where they involve music and visual images (both still and moving) in many combinations, drawing on numerous and varied codes and conventions.

Dominant versus alternative paradigms again

The choices of research method generally follow the division between a dominant empirically oriented paradigm and a more qualitative (and often critical) variant (see Chapter 3). The former is mainly represented by traditional content analysis, which was defined by Berelson (1952: 18) as 'a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication' (see pp. 362–3). This assumes that the surface meaning of a text is fairly unambiguous and can be read by the investigator and expressed in quantitative terms. In fact, it is assumed that the numerical balance of elements in the text (such as the number of

words or the space/time allocated to a set of topics) is a reliable guide to the overall meaning. Several relatively sophisticated forms of quantitative content analysis have been developed which go well beyond the simple counting and classifying of units of content that were characteristic of early research. There remains, even so, a fundamental assumption that media content is encoded according to the same language as the reality to which it refers.

The alternative approach is based on precisely the reverse assumption – that the concealed or latent meanings are the most significant, and these cannot be directly read from the numerical data. In particular, we have to take account not just of relative frequency but of links and relationships between elements in the text, and also to take note of what is missing or taken for granted. We need to identify and understand the particular discourse in which a text is encoded. In general, we need to be aware of the conventions and codes of any genre that we study since these indicate at a higher level what is going on in the text (Jensen and Jankowski, 1991). In contrast, content analysis may permit the conflation of several different kinds of media text, ignoring discursive variety.

Both varieties of analysis can claim some measure of scientific reliability. They deploy methods which can, in principle, be replicated by different people, and the 'findings' should be open to challenge according to some (not always the same) canons of scientific procedure. Secondly, they are both designed to deal with regularity and recurrence in cultural artefacts rather than with the unique and non-reproducible. They are thus more appropriate for application to the symbolic products of the culture industries than to those of the 'cultural elite' (such as 'works of art'). Thirdly, they avoid judgements of moral or aesthetic value (another sense of being objective). Fourthly, all such methods are, in principle, instrumental means to other ends. They can be used to answer questions about the links between content, creators, social context and receivers (Barker, 2003).

Non-verbal communication

Some attention has already been given in this chapter to the problems and possibilities for analysing non-verbal text. In fact, the analysis of media content has concentrated overwhelmingly on verbal texts or on verbal descriptions of visual elements (e.g. in relation to representations of violence). The objective representation of non-verbal communication in formal analysis has proved extraordinarily difficult. As noted above, semiological methods have been applied to photographs and moving images, but as Barthes observed, a photo is a message without a code and by definition cannot be coded. Film and television can only be coded in so far as film-makers consciously employ some conventions of visual symbolism that are little different from clichés (see Monaco, 1981; Newbold, 2002). Music has proved even harder to code and few have attempted it (Middleton, 2000).

Some features of television news have been interpreted in terms of meaning and direction, especially the use of certain kinds of shots and framing (Tuchman, 1978; Kepplinger, 1983, 1999). There is some experimental evidence to validate ideas of

how visual framing works, but no established method of analysis. Many visual and aural aspects of communication can be recorded (for instance, the dimensions of sensationism: Grabe et al., 2001), but the problem of imputing meaning on the part of the sender or receiver remains.

Traditional Content Analysis

Basics

'Traditional' content analysis, following Berelson's (1952) definition (see above), is the earliest, most central and still most widely practised method of research. Its use goes back to the early decades of the century (see Kingsbury and Hart, 1937). The basic sequence in applying the technique is set out as follows:

- Choose a universe or sample of content.
- Establish a category frame of external referents relevant to the purpose of the enquiry (such as a set of political parties or countries which may be referred to in content).
- Choose a 'unit of analysis' from the content (this could be a word, a sentence, an item, a whole news story, a picture, a sequence, etc.).
- Seek to match the content to the category frame by counting the frequency of the references to relevant items in the category frame, per chosen unit of content.
- Express the results as an overall distribution of the complete universe or chosen content sample in terms of the frequency of occurrence of the sought-for referents.

The procedure is based on two main assumptions. The first is that the link between the external object of reference and the reference to it in the text will be reasonably clear and unambiguous. The second is that the frequency of occurrence of chosen references will validly express the predominant 'meaning' of the text in an objective way. The approach is, in principle, no different from that adopted in surveys of people. One chooses a population (here a media type or subset), draws a sample from it of respondents representative of the whole (the units of analysis), collects data about individuals according to variables and assigns values to these variables. As with the survey, content analysis is held to be reliable (reproducible) and not unique to the investigator. The method produces a statistical summary of a much larger media reality. It has been used for many purposes but especially for comparing media content with a known frequency distribution in 'social reality'.

Limits to content analysis

The traditional approach has many limitations and pitfalls, which are of some theoretical interest as well as practical relevance. The usual practice of constructing a category system before applying it involves the risk of an investigator imposing a

meaning system rather than discovering it in the content. Even when care is taken to avoid this, any such category system must be selective and potentially distorting. The outcome of content analysis is itself a new text, the meaning of which may, or even must, diverge from the original source material. This result is also based on a form of 'reading' of content that no actual 'reader' would ever, under natural circumstances, undertake. The new 'meaning' is neither that of the original sender, nor that of the text itself, nor that of the audience, but a fourth construct, one particular interpretation. Account cannot easily be taken of the context of a reference within a text or of the text as a whole. Internal relationships between references in texts may also be neglected in the process of abstraction. There is an assumption that 'coders' can be trained to make reliable judgements about categories and meanings.

The boundaries of the kind of content analysis described are, in fact, rather elastic, and many variants can be accommodated within the same basic framework. The more one relaxes requirements of reliability, the easier it is to introduce categories and variables that will be useful for interpretation but 'low' in 'objectivity' and somewhat ambiguous. This is especially true of attempts to capture references to values, themes, settings, style and interpretative frameworks. Content analyses often display a wide range of reliability because of attempts to include some more subjective indicators of meaning.

The extensive digitization of current and past media content (especially print media such as newspapers) has opened up many new possibilities for computer-assisted quantitative analysis of very large quantities of material. It has even become the normal method of analysing newspapers. However, there are serious pitfalls, as Deacon (2007) has pointed out, on the basis of an exploratory testing. Aside from defects in particular databases (for example, gaps or duplications in the archives) that are unintended but also often unknown, there are several intrinsic obstacles that are not easy to overcome. For instance, it is not easy to capture complex thematic issues by way of key words. Large bodies of text have to be divided up for counting purposes, but the choice of unit is not fixed. Visuals are generally not included in analyses. The specific context of verbal references cannot easily be recovered. All in all, Deacon concludes that content should wherever possible be studied in its original form.

Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis Compared

The contrast between traditional content analysis and interpretative approaches can now be summarized. Some differences are self-evident. First, structuralism and semiology (the main interpretative approaches: see pp. 345–8) do not involve quantification, and there is even an antipathy to counting as a way of arriving at significance, since meaning derives from textual relationships, oppositions and context rather than from number and balance of references. Secondly, attention is directed to latent rather than to manifest content, and latent (thus deeper) meaning is regarded as actually more essential. Thirdly, structuralism is systematic in a different way from content analysis, giving no weight to procedures of sampling and rejecting the notion that all 'units' of content should be treated equally.

Fourthly, structuralism does not allow the assumption that the world of social and cultural 'reality', the message and the receiver, all involve the same basic system of meanings. Social reality consists of numerous more or less discrete universes of meaning, each requiring separate elucidation. The 'audience' also divides up into 'interpretative communities', each possessing some unique possibilities for attributing meaning. Media content, as we have seen, is also composed on the basis of more than one code, language or sign system. All this makes it impossible, even absurd, to assume that any category system of references can be constructed in which a given element is likely to mean precisely the same in the 'reality', in the content, to the audience member and to the media analyst. It follows from structuralist theory that it is very difficult to carry out research that relates findings in one of these 'spheres' to findings in another.

Mixed methods are possible

This comparison does not indicate the superiority of one approach over the other, since, despite the claim at the outset that these methods have something in common, they are essentially good for different purposes. Structuralism does not offer a systematic method and is not accountable in its results according to normal standards of reliability. Neither is it easy to generalize from the results to other texts, except perhaps in relation to form (for instance, comparing one genre with another). It is certainly not a way of summarizing content, as content analysis often can be.

For some purposes, it may be permissible and necessary to depart from the pure form of either 'Berelsonian' or 'Barthian' analysis, and a number of studies have used combinations of both approaches, despite their divergent assumptions. An example of such a hybrid approach is the work on British television news by the Glasgow Media Group (1976, 1980, 1985), which combined rigorous and detailed quantitative analysis of industrial news with an attempt to 'unpack' the deeper cultural meaning of specific news stories. The school of 'cultural indicators', as represented by Gerbner and colleagues, has also sought to arrive at the 'meaning structure' of dominant forms of television output by way of systematic quantitative analysis of overt elements of television representation.

There are methods that do not easily belong to either of the main approaches described. One is the psychoanalytic approach favoured at an early stage of content study. This focuses on the motivation of 'characters' and the underlying meaning of dominant themes in the popular (or less so) culture of a given society or period (e.g. Wolfenstein and Leites, 1947; McGranahan and Wayne, 1948; Kracauer, 1949). It was also taken up for studying gender issues and the meaning and influence of advertising (e.g. Williamson, 1978).

Other variants of analysis method have already been noted – for instance, the analysis of narrative structure (Radway, 1984) or the study of content functions. Thus, Graber (1976a) named the following set of functions in political communication: to gain attention; to establish linkages and define situations; to make commitments; to create policy-relevant moods; to stimulate action (mobilize); to act directly (words as actions); and to use words as symbolic rewards for actual or potential supporters.

Such possibilities are a reminder of the *relative* character of most analysis of content, in that there has always to be some outside point of reference or purpose according to which one chooses one form of classification rather than another. Even semiology can supply meaning only in terms of a much larger system of cultural meanings and sense-making practices. The main differences between essentially quantitative and qualitative approaches are given in Box 13.4. Whether these differences are advantages or not depends on the purpose.

Types of media content analysis compared 13.4

Message content analysis
Quantitative
Fragmentary
Systematic
Generalizing, extensive
Manifest meaning
Objective

Structural analysis of texts
Qualitative
Holistic
Selective
Illustrative, specific
Latent meaning
Relative to reader

One recurrent problem with all methods and approaches is the gap that often exists between the outcome of content analysis and the perceptions of the creators or the audience. The creators tend to think of what is unique and distinctive in what they do, while the audience is inclined to think of content in terms of a mixture of conventional genre or type labels and a set of satisfactions which have been experienced or are expected. The version extracted by the content analyst is thus not very recognizable to the two main sets of participants in the mass communication enterprise (producers and receivers) and often remains a scientific or literary abstraction.

Conclusion

The future of content analysis, one way or another, has to lie in relating 'content' as sent to the wider structures of meaning in a society. This path can probably best be followed by way of discourse analysis, which takes account of other meaning systems in the originating culture, or by way of audience reception analysis, which takes seriously the notion that readers also make meanings. Both are necessary in some degree for an adequate study of media. The various frameworks and perspectives for theorizing about media content that have been introduced often imply sharp divergences of methods of research as well as differences of purpose. The full range of alternative methods cannot be discussed here, but the main options will be set out in Chapter 14.

Further Reading

Barthes, R. (1967) *Image, Music, Text: Essays*. Selected and translated by Stephen Heath. London: Fontana.

Some of the key writings by one of leading theorists of semiology in accessible form. Especially interesting is the treatment of the photographic image.

Krippendorf, K. (2004) *Content Analysis*, 2nd edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. A standard work of reference and explication dealing with all main methods of empirical analysis of content, by one of the early authorities and practitioners.

Matheson, D. (2005) *Media Texts: Analysing Media Texts*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Provides clarification of the central term of discourse 'analysis' and illustrations of applications.

van Dijk, T.A. (1993) 'Principles of critical discourse analysis', *Discourse and Society*, 4 (2): 249–83.

A good concise summary of key ideas, by one of main founders of critical discourse analysis, especially in relation to racism and the news.

Williamson, J. (1978) *Decoding Advertisements*. London: Boyars.

Judith Williamson applies critical theory and various methods of content analysis to unpack the open and hidden meanings of a range of different kinds of visual display advertisements, in a series of case studies.

Online Readings



Deacon, D. (2007) 'Yesterday's news and today's technology', *European Journal of Communication*, 22 (1): 5–25.

Hellman, H. (2001) 'Diversity: an end in itself?', *European Journal of Communication*, 16 (2): 281–308.

Philo, G. (2007) 'News content studies, Media Group methods and discourse analysis: a comparison of approaches', in E. Devereux (ed.), *Media Studies*, pp. 103–33. London: Sage.

Smith, P. and Bell, A. (2007) 'Unravelling the web of discourse analysis', in E. Devereux (ed.), *Media Studies*, pp. 78–100. London: Sage.

Wodak, R. and Busch, B. (2004) 'Approaches to media texts', in J.D.H. Downing, D. McQuail, P. Schlesinger and E. Wartella (eds), *The Sage Handbook of Media Studies*, pp. 105–22. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.