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What's Wrong with Content Analysis;  
A Methodological Critique

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Content analysis is a step-child in the family of social sciences methods. While researchers are agreed regarding the significant role which communication plays in nearly all social processes, methodologically sophisticated researchers tend to use controlled experiments, prestructured interviews, surveys or observational techniques in preference to an analysis of the freely exchanged verbalizations. This is rather surprising in view of the fact that messages represent almost everything that individuals feel, social groups do, or cultures know and that current content analysis does not require great analytical sophistication. Either content analysis cannot provide what it promises or it is confronted with unfounded prejudice. I have yet to find a discussion of the analytical limits or a good methodological critique of the approach that would put the suspicions on a sound basis. I would like to see the development of techniques for analyzing messages that are more powerful than those currently available. To foster such progress, let me try to list a few critical issues that might be regarded as current obstacles for growth.

#### Definitional Ambiguities

The problems of this method begin with the inability to give an unambiguous meaning to the term "content analysis." Clearly the most celebrated definition is Berelson's. It reads:

Content analysis is a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication. (Berelson, 1952: 5-6)

Ever since this definition was proposed (Berelson and Lazarsfeld, 1948) the technique has been attacked from various angles. After Kracauer's (1952) criticism and at least since George's (1959) argument in favor of a "qualitative" approach, the insistence on quantification can hardly be maintained. Similarly, the interest of psychoanalysts and social psychologists in the latent patterns in verbal expressions, suggests that the attribute "manifest" is less useful as a defining

criterion. In fact Cartwright (1953) suggests to simply remove this restriction. On the other hand, the two terms "objective" and "systematic" refer to the most general prerequisites for any scientific method and should be presupposed for any technique of research. They could very well have been taken for granted without any loss. What remains then of the definition is an uninformative sentence of near tautological appearance as far as the crucial term "content" is concerned:

Content analysis is a research technique for the description of the content of communication.

The only thing that the definition somewhat elaborates is the term "analysis." The meaning of "content" is left entirely open. Content analysis is the analysis of content.

In consequence, whenever someone counts the letters in words he might well say that he is making a content analysis. So too could a television repairman who analyzes the color of the image label his work as content analysis. This lack of clarity pre-empts the term "content analysis" of almost all content, a fact that shares responsibility for the slow methodological progress and the large of volume of inconsequential research in this area.

Berelson's definition is not the only one. But most definitions that have been proposed after his influential book are merely elaborations of it. For example, Schutz (1951) argues that the noun phrase "content of communication" be replaced by "human behavior particularly linguistic," Cartwright (1953) suggests to substitute the same term with "any symbolic behavior." Holsti (1968) replaces Berelson's "research technique" by "any technique for making inferences" and prefers "process of identification of specified characteristics" to the term "description" in Berelson's classical definition.

A notable exception to this derived class of definitions is Jamis' attempt to give an operational account of what a researcher does when engaged in content

analysis:

"Content analysis" may be defined as referring to any technique (a) for the classification of sign-vehicles, (b) which relies solely upon the judgments - which theoretically, may range from perceptual discriminations to sheer guesses - of an analyst or group of analysts as to which sign-vehicles fall into which category, (c) on the basis of explicitly formulated rules, (d) provided that the analyst's judgments are regarded as the reports of a scientific observer. The results of a content analysis state the frequency of occurrence of signs - or groups of signs - for each category in a classification scheme (Janis, 1943: 429)

A similar account has been given by Miller (1963). But I am not so happy with this approach either because the task of assigning identifiable incidents of a concept to well defined categories is only one step in a complex research design. It is identical with the process of generating data in Coomb's (1964) sense or with the making of fundamental measurements as discussed by Campbell (1928). Indeed, Paisley (1967) has taken such a view of content analysis to its logical conclusion and considers the astronomers' traditional classification of stars and the biologists' more recent use of numerical taxonomy and the social scientists' use of verbal and non-verbal material all under this generic term.

Definitions are surely not the most important things to struggle about and would not otherwise deserve attention were it not for the fact that they have consequences which are not necessarily desirable. Indeed it can be argued that the current lack of definitional clarity has at the least invited confusion as to the analytical objectives, suitable methodology and subject-matter domain. Because of these definitional ambiguities I wish to disregard explicit definitions of "content analysis" in favor of what content analysts do and say, i.e., how "content analysis" is implicitly understood in the context of research.

### The Absence of Validity Criteria

The second problem I see is that content analysts seem to be least concerned with validating their results. This may in part be rooted in the peculiar history of the technique but is most probably due to the unclear conceptualization of the analytical process which makes the validation of content analysis results difficult if not impossible.

To take the historical dimension first, it is not unfair to say that content analysis started as a rhetorical device. It was used to support public judgments regarding press performance by supplying figures to journalistic arguments. The intervention by the social sciences, four decades ago, introduced more elaborate conceptual categories and more sophisticated computational techniques for analysis but did not change much in the spectrum of problems that were associated with the mass media. Although content analysis has now penetrated almost all disciplines concerned with man, most studies make use of mass media material and are concerned with revealing evaluative biases, undesirable attitudes, inadequate representation, coverage or attention. For such concerns validity criteria are virtually non-existent except perhaps by public consent. There are some exceptions to this generalization which I will mention briefly.

In order to consider the methodologically untenable conceptualization of the analytical process next, let me inquire into the decision criteria that go into the design of a content analysis. The first step of such analyses involves a recording of data, i.e., an assignment of words, sentences or paragraphs of a written document to categories or a classification of symbolic elements identifiable in a pictorial representation according to specified rules.

Of methodological significance is the fact that the research designer is free to choose among the possible categories, i.e., among the possible rules with which sign-

vehicles are assigned to a mutually exclusive set of analytical terms. As Janis (1943) points out these rules must be explicitly formulated and applied reliably. The importance of choosing good categories has been emphasized by almost all writers in the field. As early as 1948 Berelson and Lazarsfeld stressed:

Content analysis stands or falls by its categories...Studies done on a hit-or-miss basis without specific problems for investigation and with vaguely or poorly articulated categories are almost certain to be of indifferent or low quality as research productions. Although competent performance of other parts of the analytic process is also necessary, the invention and definition of appropriate categories takes on critical importance. Since categories contain the substance of the investigation, a content analysis can be no better than its system of categories (1948: 80)

The authors continue:

...Since communication materials contain almost everything people say or do, the production of relevant categories is limited only by the analyst's imagination in stating a problem for investigation and designing categories to fit the problem (1948: 101)

Although much of the quotation asserts the importance of appropriate choices, key criteria for such choices seem to be derivable from a "problem of investigation." Osgood also emphasizes this point when stating that "the nature, number and breadth of categories...depend upon the purposes of the investigation. If the analyst has a very specific purpose, he will select his content categories around this core" (Osgood, 1959: 62). But what is a suitable problem of investigation in content analysis and how is such a problem to affect decisions concerning particular category schemes? Berelson, Lazarsfeld and others require of a content analysis that the categories be chosen to test some hypotheses. Although this is not included as a definitional requirement they make the point quite clear:

The derivation of hypotheses for a content analysis study is of central importance, since the hypotheses determine the nature of the categories as well as the framework of actual

results. The hypotheses derive out of the nature of the problem and they in turn are translated into categories for analysis. It can hardly be over-stressed that the prior construction of appropriate hypotheses is indispensable for a sound and fruitful analysis...if the problem was not clarified to the point where several worthwhile hypotheses can be formulated (in advance), then the projected content analysis should be abandoned. One should not analyze unless or until he has something concrete and specific to analyze for (underlined in the original) (Berelson and Lazarsfeld 1948: 92).

If there is no constraint on how categories are defined, i.e., if categorization rules can be chosen freely by the content analyst, particularly after he has familiarized himself with the text to be analyzed, then almost any desirable frequency distribution can be created. If, in addition, the terms of the hypotheses to be tested are exclusively defined on the data which a content analysis provides, i.e., on the categories or derivations thereof, then it is possible to define categorization rules so that nearly any hypothesis can be confirmed or rejected at will. This simply means that the validity of the process is indeterminate.

To put the argument in different words: which of a set of hypotheses is to be accepted depends on the distribution of occurrences over categories. Which distribution is obtained depends on the way those rules are defined according to which given observations or unitized symbols are assigned to those categories. The content analyst is free to choose any categorization rule that seems to suit his purposes. Hence, whether a hypothesis so "supported" is in fact valid depends on the analyst's intuition in setting up categories and perhaps on the coders' native ability to interpret the text in meaningful terms. The method is not conclusive.

The problem is that content analyses of this kind do not employ evaluative criteria that would anchor the process to phenomena outside the data that are being analyzed. Two exceptions to this general rule should be noted.

The first is the use of standardized categories. If a variety of documents are described in terms of the same system of categories then distributional

differences presumably reflect true differences among the documents, permit inferential classifications, etc. Whether such differences are meaningfully interpretable is of course another question. In reality, these methodologically advantageous standardized categories have not replaced the convenient ad hoc categories. In fact, many content analysts argue against standardizations. "Proponents of this view," as Budd and Thorp put it, "maintain that every content analysis is unique, presenting its own individual problems that require individual handling" (1963: 13). Pool too believes that not enough research has been done to establish standardized measures in content analysis. "Such a measure is convenient when a considerable number of researchers are working on the same variable, and when someone succeeds in working out good categories for that variable. It is doubtful that either of those criteria can be met in most areas of content analysis... until that time there is a good deal to be said for ad hoc categories" (Pool, 1959: 213-124).

Lasswell used standardized content analysis procedures in his attempt to detect foreign propaganda sources in domestic publications as early as the 1940's (Lasswell, 1949). Similar uses of standardized categories are difficult to find. Recent advances in processing text by computer have changed the situation somewhat. For example, the dictionaries in Stone's General Inquirer have by now been applied in a great number of situations (Stone, et al., 1966) and the properties of the resulting distributions are increasingly understood. Numerous meaningfully interpretable statistical differences have vindicated the research efforts.

The second way to relate a content analysis procedure to phenomena outside the analysis is by what Janis (1949) calls indirect validation: The result of a content analysis is shown to correlate with some characteristics of the data source. Dollard and Mowrer's (1947) Discomfort-Relief Quotient has been shown to indicate the stress of a speaker, Flesch's (1951) measures of readability have been correlated



with the reading performance about which they are claimed to be predictive. Similarly has Holsti (1965) used the correlation of his content analysis measures with the Dow-Jones-index as evidence for the validity of his results. But these are rare examples of the use of psychological, social or cultural indicators. Indicators are too often established by fiat. However, their correlation with the phenomena of which they are said to be indicative has to be demonstrated.

As a rule, content analysts are not interested in inconsequential descriptions of communications. But how the results of a content analysis are related to real world phenomena is often difficult to see. Just which of the innumerable many ~~valid~~ descriptions of the content of the message is valid must be tested or at least testable in principle. The fact that it is sometimes quite costly to carefully establish indicators by this technique is no excuse. Many content analysts do not even care to raise questions of validity, declare the referential meaning of their measures by fiat or suggest that their results be accepted on the basis of face validity only. The example of the unjustified equation of frequency of mention with attention is discussed below. This situation is certainly not tenable. An analytical procedure that aims at describing phenomena of the real world - however abstract they may be - must be such that validating information can be brought to bear on its results. This can rarely be said for most content analyses.

### The Lack of Semantic Considerations

The third problem which I wish to consider is the frequent disregard of the semanticity of the data in content analysis procedures. It is one thing to argue that the material to be analyzed is symbolic, has meaning or consists of communications between human agents and quite a different thing to analyze or to process data in a way appropriate to their recognized semantic properties. This confusion between intuitive criteria for defining a sample for analysis and between criteria that go into the explicit analytical process employed may have its roots in uncertain

analytical objectives but is equally likely the result of common unawareness of the semantics involved in the analytical process.

Current linguistic theory does not consider "content" central to its concern. But whenever it appears in the literature, for example by Antal (1964), it tends to be used in the sense of a referent or a denotatum. The content of a message is what the message is about. The content of a theory is the empirical reality in which the theory claims explanatory or predictive power. The content of a statement is what the statement refers to. Something has no content if it is not informative of anything other than its own physical properties.

If content is understood in this way, then the task of content analysis becomes somewhat dubious. The content analysis of a book on child rearing practices would simply mean to study the child rearing practices that happen to be described and the content analysis of a report on Vietnam would require the analyst to go to Vietnam and analyze what the report refers to. Obviously, content analysis cannot mean an analysis of communications content but perhaps an analysis of how content is expressed.

In suggesting this slight shift from an analysis of content to an analysis of expression the distinction between observable events and symbols that stand for something is confounded in another curious way. Much of content analysis seems to incorporate the naive notion of "content" as something that is contained in the vehicles of communication, as something that merely needs to be extracted from the primary data, as something that objectively exists independent of an interpreter. This is a confusion that general semanticists have tried to fight with the slogan "don't confuse the map with the territory." In the terms of this analogy, content analysis is very much like a way of cutting a map into thousands of little pieces of paper, sorting and counting these pieces according to their color and shape and asserting that the resulting frequency distribution says something about the map maker.

Perhaps it seems surprising -- but a content analysis of political maps has indeed been done (Speier, 1941) though in a methodologically different spirit. It was designed to reveal the national interests of the map maker. Impressionistic as the process was, the analysis neither unitized the maps nor relied exclusively on evidence "contained" in them. As an important analytical ingredient it involved a comparison of the maps with what was known about the territory. In other words, the analysis considered the semantic relations employed and searched for how different representations of the same territory could be explained. However, this example is not at all representative of the many content analyses that are published.

To continue with the map analogy, one might argue that a scientific observer who classifies sign-vehicles -- to use Janis' phrase -- or that a trained coder who transcribes identifiable incidents of a concept produces something like a map of a map, the initial map being natural language expressions, photographic images, etc. The map and the map of a map consist of meaningfully ordered symbols (as opposed to observable events) which is another way of saying that maps are representative of something. The semanticity of the map implies which operations on those symbols do or do not destroy the nature of the map. If a geographical map is cut into small pieces then the representation of distances between geographical locations is lost. This might not be undesirable where only distributional characteristics (e.g., the proportion of urban to rural areas) are wanted. But when geometrical characteristics of the territory are the focus of analysis a cutting into pieces destroys the representation of interest.

What I would like to point out with this analogue is that an analytical procedure (e.g., cutting into pieces, classifying and counting) derives its appropriateness not only from a research objective but most importantly from the structure of the content that the set of ordered symbols, e.g., of the map, represents. The factor that ultimately determines which analytical operations are meaningful is the content, i.e., something that is essentially outside the data though represented by it but certainly not contained in it.

Since it is difficult to specify analytical procedures that are essentially controlled by content that is outside the immediately observable, content analysis has flourished with the systematic use of informed judges, human interpreters, or coders. When generating analyzable data, i.e., constructing maps of maps, coders can easily take account of the semantic properties of communications. If content analysis stops at this stage the semanticity of data has clearly been considered.

However, virtually all content analysts go beyond the coders' responses and to "more interesting stuff": count, cross tabulate, cluster, factor analyze, etc. The danger of using such computational devices is that their mathematical structure might not have anything to do with the structure of the content that is represented in data. They assume that everything that needs to be considered is contained in the data, they assume the data not to be representative of anything except perhaps in a primitive way by one-to-one correspondence.

A good example is the use of factor analysis in this context. This is an extremely powerful statistical technique which incorporates a host of assumptions about associational dependencies and about ways of accounting for them. It can be applied on any data that satisfy certain formal requirements. Being highly flexible and imaginative, human coders can translate complex symbolic material in appropriate terms. However, the results of factor analysis are often virtually uninterpretable. It is amazing to see how analysts who admire the rigor of such an analysis are forced to make sense out of their computer outprints. Much time is spent in trying out ideas about what the factors could be construed to refer to. With sufficient creativity, theory and plain luck it might indeed be possible to undo some of the harm that an inadequate analytical procedure can do to the semanticity of the data by finding a way of relating the results to experiences. But often the product becomes artificial and untenable and certainly not explicable.

The situation is precisely analogue to one in which hypothetical dimensions are given to an analyst that account for much of the variance in color, shape, lettering, etc. of paper chips made of our geographical maps and the analyst is asked to reflect on what can be said about the territory or of the map-maker in terms of these dimensions.

The lesson that needs to be drawn from these examples is that content is difficult to analyze, that the naive notion of content as something objectively contained in data is inadequate and that data processing which does not violate the representational nature of data requires a lot of insight into semantic structure which content analysts rarely exhibit and seldom aim to achieve.

How content analysis incorporates semantic considerations in its procedure (other than by using human coders in its initial stage) is not so clearly discernible. Nevertheless, volumes of content analyses are published and I take it that each such analysis is required to operationalize the concept of "content" either explicitly or implicitly. These possibly hidden conceptions may impose limits on the scope of the analysis and therefore deserves attention. Let me try to examine a few of these dimensions and start out with content as a permeating characteristic.

#### Content as a Permeating Characteristic

A common analytical problem in much of social research is the rigorous reduction of the volume of raw data to manageable quantities. In content analysis such simplification is achieved by enumerating the relevant units of observation (sign-vehicles, words, sentences, paragraphs, occurrences, etc.) according to some category scheme which is imposed on a given text. Enumerations of this kind lead to relative frequencies, association measures or other statistical indices of the distribution of category assignments.

A logical prerequisite of categorization and enumeration is the discriminability of mutually exclusive units within the symbolic material to be analyzed. However, the most significant feature of such simplifications is that the relative position of the categorized units within a text cannot be maintained. Thus, the statistical measures that are computed in this way are always measures of permeation.

Stone even went so far as to make the assessment of permeating characteristics a defining aim of content analysis. He suggests that "'content analysis' refers to any procedure for assessing the relative extent to which specified references, attitudes, or themes that permeate a given message or document" (Stone, 1964).

Unfortunately, sound theoretical bases for justifying the unitization of sign-vehicles in terms of meanings, content or other symbolic qualities are not available at this point. According to Pool the problem of "basic units of meaning of relevance to content analysis" has been considered at the first conference on content analysis at Allerton House. The working definition that emerged at this meeting turned out to be an entirely statistical one. It identifies "a basic unit of meaning" with "relatively little freedom for variation within it, but much freedom at its boundaries. Habit strengths are strong, transitional probabilities high within it but low across its boundaries. Such a unit, if it exists, is a kind of building block" (Pool, 1959: 203) that could provide the logical basis for categorization and enumeration.

The conference discussed this issue, could not find a satisfactory solution, and had to leave the matter of "basic units" vague. "It is one of the problems," writes Pool, "to which psycholinguistics may help to produce an answer. But as of now it is not clear how one identifies a basic unit of meaning" (Pool, 1959: 203-204). Linguists, on the other hand, start out with the assumption that words, while isolable on statistical grounds are inherently relatively meaningless unless viewed in the context of the syntactic and semantic structure of a language. Such a

structure, however, is precisely "counted away" when a syntactical or statistical notion of unitization is employed. Semantic information that might reside between or among such units enters at best through the backdoor of an extra analytical interpretation.

Regardless of how units are defined the theoretical meaning of permeation measures is not clarified either. Whether words, political symbols, propositions, themes or even the silences of a conversation are counted, one is always lead to such questions as "what do frequencies indicate?" "what characteristics of content could possibly permeate the communication in a statistically detectable way?" When for example, the political symbol "freedom" appears in a country A with the highest relative frequency while the political symbol "dictatorship" takes the first rank among the political symbols mentioned in country B, what does this mean? Are the people of country A more free than those of country B? The premise which seems to underly a confirmatory answer to this question could very well be reversed on the ground that people talk most about what they don't have. The inferences that can be drawn from the degree to which identifiable sign-vehicles permeate particular communications are most certainly not obvious.

Since Lasswell's (1941) World Attention Survey content analysts have taken the relative frequency with which a sign-vehicle, sentence pattern, etc. appears in a text as a measure for the amount of attention devoted to the phenomena signified by those vehicles. Unfortunately the identification of the relative frequency with relative attention has found little evidential support and content analysts who rely on such postulates cannot consider themselves on safe grounds.

For one thing, language can be used instrumentally in which case attention is devoted to something indirectly linked but not manifestly contingent on that symbol. For example, a writer under Stalinist rule whose concern lies in the opposition to this form of government would be a fool to use the symbol "dictatorship" or even

"decentralization" too freely in public. He is more likely to argue in economic terms or express concern with the working conditions of the people or their living standard. He will consciously conceal the true object of his attention by controlling the frequency of use of certain critical symbols. When early psychological theories of stimulus reinforcement were applied to political propaganda which is highly instrumental in nature the sheer frequency of stimulation was thought to have considerable significance. But as it turns out, such theories cannot account for instrumental usages of communication either. They reduce communicators and audiences to rather primitive mechanisms of habituation. Similarly does a conscious use of communication tend to escape the measures of permeation.

Psychological experimentation has produced other examples that critically oppose the frequency-attention identification: symbols when repeated frequently may lose their original meanings up to the point where they become habitual utterances devoid of cognitive or behavioral consequences. This is the essence of experimental work on "semantic satiation" (Lambert, 1960). It suggests that high relative frequency of a symbol may under certain conditions be indicative of meaninglessness rather than of high attention.

George (1959), who participated in the extensive efforts to obtain military intelligence from foreign domestic propaganda during World War II, provided quite different examples in which statistically insignificant occurrences yielded reliable bases of prediction. While also interested in such message characteristics as "the German war mood" which permeated domestic broadcasts, the simple presence or absence of a reference in a political speech or news cast seemed to provide more important indicators of changes in military situation, etc. than permeation measures could offer.

In content analysis, permeation measures seem to be productive where the problem is one of inferring emotional states that are unconsciously revealed in free speech



(Mahl, 1959); or where the identity of the author of an unsigned document can be based on so-called "minor encoding habits" (Paisley, 1964) of which the writer is not aware. In other words, the indicative power of permeation measures seems to be limited by the extent to which the expression of content is under control by the source.

#### Content as Intersubjectively Verifiable

A fifth critical issue in content analysis has to do with the manifestness, the reliability and the uniqueness of content. This might seem to be a strange cluster of concepts but it hangs together through the notion of intersubjective verifiability.

Let me start out with Berelson and Lazarsfeld's initial idea that content analysis should be limited to a study of the manifest content of communications. It seems that the so-called "manifest-latent controversy" which this definition invited is merely a semantic confusion due to idiosyncratically chosen words. Berelson and Lazarsfeld use these terms quite unambiguously. They argue:

If one imagines a continuum along which various communications are placed depending upon the degree to which different members of the intended audience get the same understandings from them, one might place a simple news story on a train wreck at one end (since it is likely that every reader will get the same meanings from the content) and an obscure modern poem at the other (since it is likely that no two readers will get identical meanings from the content). Other kinds of content will fall at various points along this continuum. Thus analysis of manifest content is applicable to materials at the one end of the continuum where understanding is simple and direct and not at the other. Presumably, there is a point on the continuum beyond which the "latency" of the content (i.e., the diversity of its understanding) is too great for reliable analysis (1948: 7-8).

It is only because of the unintended common meaning of "latent" as something hidden or unobservable that the controversy arises. For the two authors the manifest-latent continuum is operationally identical with intersubjective verifiability.

Intersubjective verifiability is also the underlying conception of content in Janis' sign-theoretical framework in terms of which reliability and validity in content analysis is discussed (Janis, 1949) . If two scientific observers cannot agree as to the assignment of sign-vehicles to categories, the data cannot be trusted and relied upon in subsequent analyses. In this sense the analyzability of symbolic material is limited by the intersubjective verifiability of category assignments. But, this limitation applies to the hidden content as well, thus leaving no operational distinction between manifestness and latentness in the common meaning of the terms to which Cartwright (1953) refers.

But of crucial importance is that the perfectly justifiable notion of intersubjective verifiability as a condition on scientific observation is extended to a "uniformity of comprehension and understanding" for a large majority of interpreters. This becomes explicit in another quotation from Berelson, who requires that

...the content be accepted as a "common meeting-ground" for the communicator, the audience, and the analysts. That is, the content analysts assumes that the "meanings" which he ascribes to the content, by assigning it to certain categories, correspond to the "meanings" intended by the communicator and/or understood by the audience. In other words, the assumption is that there is a common universe of discourse among the relevant parties, so that the manifest content can be taken as a valid unit of study (Berelson, 1952: 19).

It seems to me that intersubjective verifiability in this extended form is neither a necessary nor a desirable requirement in content analysis. Firstly, it tends to discard as irrelevant the relative sophistication of the scientific observer and, secondly, it seems to discard differences in perception and interpretation that might be of interest in communication research.

Let me begin with the first restriction due to intersubjective verifiability across communicators, receivers and analysts. By way of illustration, let me turn to Adorno's discussion of mass media content. He postulates "various superimposed

layers of different degrees of manifestness or hiddenness that are utilized...as a...means of 'handling' the audience" of television. His main hypothesis is that the "hidden message may be more important than the overt, since this hidden message will escape the controls of consciousness," (Adorno, 1960: 470-480) and will therefore not be subject to the same modes of interpretation. Adorno gives two examples of television plays which are overtly intended to be amusing and comical. Their "'hidden meaning' emerges simply by the way the story looks at human beings; thus the audience is invited to look at (and identify with) the characters in the same way without being made aware that indoctrination is present" (Adorno, 1960: 480-481). Thus if a content analysis of television drama were to consider only those features about which the communicators, the audience members and the scientific observer are conscious and in agreement, only the most overt characteristics of messages could be considered.

Similarly, do psychoanalysts find it useful to deal with underlying motivations, deep-rooted feelings and suppressed experiences about which mental patients are rarely aware and are seldom able to talk. In such situations a "uniformity of comprehension and understanding" between analyst and patient can hardly be assumed. It would obviate psychoanalysis altogether.

It seems to me that intersubjective verifiability in this extended form may have had its roots in the difficulty of finding suitable validity criteria in content analysis. The argument in favor of this requirement is like this: a scientific observer is known to be representative of a population of communicators and audience members; that observer responds to a message in such and such a way. Hence the population of communicators and audience members will respond in such and such a way. However any elementary statistics suggests that the probability of a sample of size one to be representative of a large population is very low.

The idea of regarding the scientific observer as representative of a population of communicators and audience is unsatisfactory also in a second respect. The fact is that individuals who occupy different nodes in a communication network rarely interpret the same messages in identical ways. What is meaningful for an advertiser on TV is not necessarily meaningful for a consumer. What a communicator intends to express is rarely identical with what a receiver perceives it to be, etc. In almost any complex social event messages have more than one interpretation. There is no such thing as the content. The analyst has to specify a population of interpreters in reference to which he can proceed.

Janis too recognizes that messages obtain different qualities depending on the class of individuals whose responses are to be estimated: "the classification procedures of semantical content analysis...require the classification of sign-vehicles on the basis of the coordinated signification responses of some class of sign interpreters" (Janis, 1943: 432). Here intersubjective verifiability has not been abandoned. It is merely restricted to a particular audience that the analyst delineates in advance.

Perhaps Lasswell had a similar search for meaningful external references in mind when writing: "although word counting is involved in the study of communication not all quantitative procedures are necessarily 'content analysis.' The term can legitimately be applied only when 'counts' are undertaken with reference to a general theory of the communication process" (Lasswell, 1949: 387). A theory of human communication that could relate the roles of the communicators, facilitate a description of the underlying dynamics and ultimately justify what the content analysts counts is yet to be developed.

But it is well known that much of human communication arises in asymmetrical social relations between communicators and proceeds on the basis of unequal

interpretations of messages. For example, political power is often defined in terms of one individual's ability to influence others, i.e., as a communication process. This process may ~~or may not~~ involve unequal access to information but is definitely an asymmetrical one. Similarly may the television viewer find himself increasingly involved in an entertaining program while its growing popularity helps the sponsor to sell his goods. For the one the program is interpreted as fun and leisure, for the other it is a convenient means to direct public attention. To neglect such differences is to discard the possibility of contributing to an understanding of communication.

The logical consequence of such situations is that content analysts should analyze messages in as many ways as required to account for how individuals or social organizations become related with each other by means of the messages they exchange. However, content analysts who subscribe to the extended form of intersubjective verifiability require that the categories of analysis are mutually exclusive. One unit of meaning is assigned to one category only. The content associated with a text is unique. The assignment of a unit of observation to two or more categories is regarded as an error.

And yet there seems to be no a priori reason for not allowing a content analysis to consider those interpretative differences that could shed light on the possible dynamics of communication. What needs to be rejected is the notion of intersubjective verifiability across communicator, audience and scientific observer.

Content as Individually Realizable

Built into content analysis is another important restriction. It lies in the almost exclusive reliance on a psychological formulation of the recording process. The use of trained but otherwise unaided scientific observers implies that content is identifiable by an observer, i.e., it is individually realizable.

By "psychological formulation of the recording process" I do not suggest that categories are held to be of psychological significance only. As Barcus' (1959) tabulation of the content analysis literature shows, categories of content refer more often to social matters such as prejudice, social stereotypes, majority and minority representation or to political matters such as attitudes toward ideological complexes, pro and con fascism, political symbols and values of elites. Essential is that such interpretations are being made by a human observer whose interpretations are merely thought to be more reliable and precise than the average reader, listener or viewer. According to Berelson:

In a sense, content analysis occurs whenever someone summarizes and/or interprets what he reads or hears...But in the more limited sense in which it is used here, content analysis denotes a...method...intended to provide precise and concise descriptions of what the communication says ... (Pool, 1952: iii).

Whatever it is that is to be recorded, it is always "someone" who summarizes, interprets or estimates an apparently intangible message characteristic. This is true whether this "someone" is a scientifically trained judge who becomes an essential part of the analytical procedure or whether it is a communicator and/or audience member in reference to whom the analysis is made. The meanings, significations, and contents are assumed to be housed solely in an individual human being. They are, so to speak, anthropocentral attributes.

As a consequence of this individual-centered conception of content, Schutz (1951) goes so far as to declare that content analysis is primarily a psychological

method of inquiry. How it is related to the technique of projective tests can be seen as follows:

Both, content analysis and such projective tests as the Rorschach and the Thematic Apperception Test offer a person texts, visual displays and other material for a symbolic interpretation. The difference merely lies in the interpretation of the results obtained in such situations. While response variations in content analysis are assumed to be due to some characteristics in the material presented to the respondent, response variations in projective tests are assumed to be due to variations in the respondents personality. By controlling for reliability and forcing judges to follow explicit categorization rules, content analysis at least aims at setting possible personality differences of the respondents at invariance. Projective tests, on the other hand, try to standardize the relatively ambiguous material presented to the respondents and thus hope to gain certainty about the way mental mechanisms are expressed in the responses and the way in which elicited projections are to be interpreted reliably.

In projective tests the type of information of interest is individual-psychological in nature, i.e., it refers to perception, cognition, motivation, affective processes, etc. In content analysis, on the other hand, desired information typically goes far beyond individual variables and tends to refer to social and political phenomena as well.

Let me consider a very common focus in content analysis: products of modern mass culture in industrialized societies such as books, records of popular music, television shows, fads or fashions, popular celebrities. While these messages are distributed on a mass basis to very large audiences whose members enjoy them and respond to them more or less as individuals they are undoubtedly the outcome of highly organized collaborations of man and machines, each participant of which fulfills specialized functions in, derives motivations and obtains rewards from those complex organizations called the "entertainment industry."

It is, of course, always possible to apply a psychologically based content analysis procedure to industrially produced messages and come up with some subjectively satisfying description of their characteristics. After all, individuals are involved in the process, perceive and interpret what they receive. However, the discovery of antecedent conditions of such communications which go beyond the habitual interpretations by single individuals are likely to escape a concept of content that is based on individually realizability. Mass media audiences perceive only the front of a stage made up of authors, actors, simple interpersonal relations, social situations or features purposefully cultivated about them. Judges chosen from such audiences are more likely to achieve reliability along habituated lines.

The constraint which this approach to content analysis imposes on its possible results refers specifically to the impact of more complex, super-individual, socio-technological structures of which mass entertainment is merely the outcome. The personification of modern governmental machineries or of international relations is a symptom of this incapability. Or, to stick to the mass media example that under these conditions individual authors are still associated with their final products is but an unconscious remainder of pre-industrialized culture and a useful sales argument skillfully manipulated by the entertainment industry at large. As Adorno put it vividly: "To study television shows in terms of the psychology of the authors would almost be tantamount to studying Ford cars in terms of the psychoanalysis of the late Mr. Ford" (Adorno, 1960: 482). The difference appears in the multiplicity of aspects under which the successful entertainment industry tends to view its own products and the singleness with which such a product appears to an individual. As messages are prepared for transmission this multiplicity of functionally interlinked 'contents' which reflect the complexity of institutional communication networks tends to become systematically reduced to a simple, single and functional interpretation which the individual consumer (and analyst) is willing to accept.



The fact that virtually no objections have been raised regarding the limitations that human observers introduce in content analysis seems to be indicative of the positions that this investigative tool occupies. With its emphasis on individually meaningful single interpretations it is ideally suited to inquire into the reception of single or statistically aggregated individuals in mass audiences. Content analysis is then severely bound by the nature of the popularizations, the images and points of view that the entertainment industry tries to create and to maintain. It can do nothing but conform when seeking validating support for its results in the individualized mass media audience.

Whenever messages mediate between social structures of some complexity, i.e., can be regarded as produced and/or received by social organizations, large institutions or industrial complexes, it is very unlikely that an individual can identify such pattern. Messages must be expected to exhibit an extremely complicated "grammar" and "semantics" with rules that go beyond the information processing capacity of single human observers, however trained. The analysis of messages that are the products of complex communications networks, of social organizations or of cultures is necessarily very involved. Hall (1961) realized the necessity for a conceptual framework in which messages that transcend the lifetime of individual beings are meaningful. But he could not provide practical procedures for analysis either. The ease with which individual-psychological conceptualizations are projected onto complex social structures, or the readiness with which social events are explained through the cognitive processes and psychological concepts of their participants has no empirical basis but has a long history and continual support in western philosophy. The definitions of signs, symbols, language, etc., tend to be such that they uniquely segregate man from animals on the one hand and the individual from society on the other. A concept of content that is superindividually realizable is virtually nonexistent.

It is not difficult to conceive of analytical procedures that would incorporate superindividual concepts of content. Communication structures can be derived from valid social theories just as conceptual categories are said to follow from cognitive theories. These communication structures represent something like a social grammar for a complex message involving several individual interpreters. In the form of an analytical procedure they can provide the system constructs that would render the behavioral differences of specialized observers meaningful. But this is for the future to be worked out.

In concluding my critique let me express the hope that the overwhelming conceptual and methodological inadequacies of current content analysis will not continue to discourage social scientists from using this technique. Current literature in content analysis (Barcus, 1959; North et al., 1963; Stone et al., 1966; Holsti, 1968) describes many small successes. But I believe that the dominating concern with methods and results will not solve the salient problems of the technique which are essentially methodological. A more solution-oriented approach to these problems is taken in a contribution (Krippendorff, 1969) to a forthcoming volume on The Analysis of Communication Content.

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