



Content Analysis Guide

Why Content Analysis Is Critical to Change

Content analysis is a simple, effective means of measuring change. In fact, because the fundamental premise of content analysis is so simple – comparing what you publish to your goals and your audience – some editors overlook it in search of more sophisticated solutions. Those who do so are not taking advantage of a reliable, home-grown and inexpensive tool that can help keep their newsroom on track.

We used content analysis extensively during the Tomorrow's Workforce project with each partner newspaper. It provided those newspapers with an unvarnished snapshot – for better or for worse – of their news products. It can do the same for you. Without this baseline of “where we are now,” you will not be able to accurately assess progress toward “where we want to go.”

Linking Content and Practice

Before we get into the mechanics of content analysis, it is important to understand the connection between the content of a news product and newsroom practices.

Every piece of content in a newspaper or on a website represents a decision, a choice made by someone. Perhaps the choice was made by the executive editor, who said he or she wanted more local news on the front page. Perhaps it was made by someone on the night copy desk who needed a wire story to fill a hole where an ad dropped out. Perhaps the choice was made by a photographer at the scene of an event.

There are also structural choices that influence every newsroom's finished product. The traditional departments of Metro, Features, Sports and Business, for example, produce and sort content by long-standing definitions of what's appropriate for those areas. The beat system focuses the staff on some issues, but tends to exclude others. How many people work in a given part of the newsroom in comparison to the whole news operation determines the emphasis put on that type of content, whether it is written, visual or digital. These may seem like obvious observations, but ask yourself these questions:

- If online news and digital journalism are priorities for your newsroom, how many people work in those areas?
- If covering the growing Hispanic community in your area is a priority, how many people on your staff can speak Spanish?
- If reaching out to a younger audience in the newspaper, or other news products, is a priority, how many people are devoted to that effort – and what age are they?



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In other words, choices made by newsroom journalists represent a news organization's values and priorities. Content analysis shows, in raw numbers and in patterns of coverage, what a news organization values on a daily basis and where it puts resources of people, knowledge and time.

For many newspapers, content analysis will reveal that the daily news product contradicts the organization's stated mission. During the Tomorrow's Workforce project, for example, one newspaper said it placed a high value on diverse news coverage, yet a content audit found most of the images in the newspaper to be of white people, except in sports and crime coverage. Another newspaper emphasized its commitment to human interest stories, yet a content audit found stories about government and crime dominated the coverage.

In this regard, content analysis can show the leadership of a news organization if the values and priorities they want to guide their journalism by are actually being employed by their managers and their staffs. In short, is the news organization doing what it says it intends to do? Content analysis can answer that question.

Content Analysis Is Not Just for Print

Content analysis works as well in digital as it does in print. A news organization's standards, goals and metrics for success may be different online than they are in print, but only a careful and considered review of the digital news product can determine if these standards and goals are being met.

While online content analysis includes measuring many of the standards used for print coverage, such as the type of stories, story play and diversity, it also includes elements that are more integral to online journalism, such as:

- Frequency of posting stories: How often is the newsroom posting? Are stories going online before print?
- Digital layering of stories: How many are text only? How many include visual components such as slide shows or video? How many include audio? How many add research material that takes the story beyond the print version?
- Audience behavior: Are readers reading what you want them to read, downloading what you want them to download?

As more and more newsrooms converge print and digital news operations, new ways of measuring online success will emerge, and content analysis will help journalists understand better not only their internal processes and decisions but the readership's reactions to those choices as well.

The Seven Steps of Content Analysis

Content analysis starts with two basic questions: What are we as a news organization trying to do? And who are we trying to do it for?



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In Chapter 2, *Goals: Knowing Just Where You're Going*, we discussed the importance of setting organizational goals. Some goals might involve ways of leading or managing, others might be about process, but for news organizations most are going to be focused on products – editorial targets for their journalism, what we earlier called “intentional journalism.”

You need identifiable goals for content analysis to be useful. You can't measure what you can't define. Each news organization will have its own answer to the goals question – new types of story forms, unique online material, more faces in the news pages that look like those in the community. These are the things you can measure.

The second question is about audience: Who are we doing our journalism for? This question has become more critical as the mass reach of newspapers has diminished and forced top editors – and business managers – to concentrate on building readership within narrower components of the news organization's communities.

Successful content analysis requires knowing the demographics of the audience and, for online readers, their behavioral patterns as well. Large news organizations likely have scads of readership and audience research (and probably not all of shared with the newsroom). Smaller newspapers might only have access to U.S. Census data for their community. Web operations of every size track page views, downloads and reader behavior, such as the length of time users spend on the site, how they move from item to item and how they interact with both the site and with other readers.

Is more demographic and reader information better than a little? Sure. But a little is better than none. And there is no excuse not to have something.

Next, select a time period to analyze. For print, you need to review at least two weeks of the newspaper, but a month is better. Use non-consecutive weeks so a big running story or a special series doesn't skew the results. For online, the dynamic nature of a news site calls for real-time review. Track the pages daily during your chosen time periods to determine story play, choice of photos, content mix or whatever other metric you're using. Site statistics will provide usage data that can be mapped against your visual page review (where did the story with the most views play on the page, for example?).

Then, decide what exactly to count. In the news pages, that might be things such as varying story forms (narrative vs. graphic), types of stories (institutional vs. human, spot vs. enterprise, long vs. short), coverage patterns (crime, education, celebrity, for example) or story depth (how many sources in each story?). Diversity is most easily tracked through photographs because the names of people in a story don't necessarily convey gender, race or ethnicity. Who can you see in your newspaper or online? In which sections and with what types of stories do their pictures most appear? Are women mostly in the Features section? Are African Americans mostly in Sports?



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Some forms of content analysis can be done quickly, such as reviewing photographs or counting story forms. Others, such as tracking sourcing, require more time. But a basic review of photographs and story type can take only minutes a day. The “no time” excuse heard in many newsrooms doesn’t hold up when applied to content analysis.

Here’s the easy part. Now that you know what to count, then just do the math. Go through the newspapers or web pages, count the material and compile the numbers. We use Excel because it will not only do the math but produce charts that can be convincing visual aids when presenting the content analysis to your newsroom or leadership group.

Because content analysis is a diagnostic tool – a means, not an end – the next step is determining what numbers mean. Do they show you are succeeding, meaning that you’re meeting your stated goals, or do they show you are falling short of those goals? The differing answers lead to different conversations in your newsroom about next steps. Success suggests ways to breed more of the same. Failure demands learning lessons and applying them to remedies.

Finally, the last stage of content analysis – just as in the elements of goal-setting – is repetition. Content analysis should be ongoing, done at regular intervals in order to measure progress toward a news organization’s ever-changing set of goals. The newsroom changes, the audience changes, the competition changes – all these dynamics mean news products must be continually measured and analyzed. Over time, regular content analysis provides newsrooms with a historical record of performance that can guide decision-making in the future.

Content Analysis, Step by Step

1. Define the content you’re going to analyze. Base this definition on your news organization’s editorial goals.
2. Define the audience. Use demographic and other readership data for print. Add reader behavior to these for online.
3. Choose a time frame. What period are you going to measure?
4. Decide what to count. Use specific items, such as story forms, photographs or downloads, that be easily identified.
5. Count. Do the math.
6. Analyze. Apply the numbers to goals and determine success or failure.
7. Repeat regularly. Establish means for ongoing content analysis.



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Examples of Content Analysis forms and charts

Below are examples of demographic data and content analysis forms. The first shows a simple method of displaying the demographic data of a newspaper's market in comparison with the photographic content of the paper. In this case, note the number of Latinos on the circulation vs. the number seen in photographs in the newspaper.

Newspaper Diversity, Race, Ethnicity				
	White	Black	Asian	Latino
Regional Demographics, Census data	70	20.4	1.8	40.3
Mix of Photos by Section (%)				
A-1	80	23	0	2
Main News	76	15	7	8
Local	68	25	2	8
Business	73	7	0	22
Sports	53	43	1	4
Lifestyle	85	9	0	9
Totals (%)	73.8	22.7	4.9	1.6

The table below shows the Excel form used to tabulate the pictures during the initial count of the newspaper's content. Note where the non-white faces appeared in the newspaper.

Diversity (Photos), race					
	White	Black	Asian	Latino	Total*
A-1	35	10	0	1	44
Main News	178	36	17	18	234
Local	107	40	4	12	157
Business	54	5	0	16	74
Sports	204	163	4	25	381
Lifestyle	153	16	0	16	181
Sub-Total	731	270	25	88	1071

Below is the same data displayed as a chart. The visual presentation can make the disparities look particularly striking.



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