REFLECTIONS

Ethnographic Content Analysis

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ABS TRACT. An ethnographic approach to document analysis is offered based on principles of qualitative data collection and analysis. It is proposed that numeric as well as narrative data be collected when studying such documents as TV new and movies. Ethnographic content analysis is briefly contrasted with conventional modes of quantitative content analysis to illustrate the usefulness of constant comparison for discovering emergent patterns, emphases and themes in an analysis of TV news coverage of the Iranian hostage situation. It is suggested that an ethnographic perspective can help delineate patterns of human action when document analysis is conceptualized as fieldwork.

It has been claimed that all research directly or indirectly involves participant observation in the selection of a topic, method of study, data collection, analysis and interpretation (cf. Cicourel, 1964; Johnson, 1975; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983). While it may seem evident that any sustained inquiry is constituted through a complex and reflexive inter-action process, it is also apparent that some research methods, e.g., ethnography, embrace this process; while others, e.g., survey research and content analysis, disavow it. In what follows, I suggest that several aspects of an ethnographic research approach can be applied to content analysis to produce ethnographic content analysis (ECA), which may be defined as the reflexive analysis of documents (cf. Plummer, 1983). ECA has been less widely recognized as a distinctive method, although various facets of this approach are apparent in document analyses by historians, literary scholars, and social scientists (cf. Plummer, 1983; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). However, to my knowledge, the method for accomplishing such "grounding" with documents has not been set forth

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(cf. Starosta, 1984). A brief comparison of this approach with conventional content analysis will be proceeded with examples of the use of ECA in several research projects.

Ethnography in Context

In general, ethnography refers to the description of people and their culture (cf. Schwartz and Jacobs, 1979). In this sense, the subject matter—human beings engaged in meaningful behavior—guide the mode of inquiry and orientation of the investigator. However, if the meaning of an activity remains paramount, ethnography can also be considered a methodological orientation independently of a specific subject matter. Products of social interaction, for example, can also be studied reflexively, looking at one feature in the context of what is understood about other features, allowing for the constant comparison suggested by Glaser and Strauss (1967).

An Overview of Content Analysis

Ethnographic content analysis (ECA) may be contrasted with conventional, or more quantitative content analysis (QCA), in approach to data collection, data analysis and interpretation. Table 1 provides an overview of these approaches on several dimensions.

Quantitative Content Analysis (QCA)

Originating in positivistic assumptions about objectivity, QCA provides a way of obtaining data to measure the frequency and variety of messages (cf. Berelson, 1966). QCA analysis has been used to determine the "objective" content of written and electronic documents, e.g., TV cartoons (cf. McCormack, 1982). As summarized by Starosta (1984:185),

> Content analysis translates frequency of occurrence of certain symbols into summary judgments and comparisons of content of the discourse... whatever "means" will presumably take up space and/or time; hence, the greater that space and/or time, the greater the meaning's significance.

Units of space most commonly are seen as countable, and therefore, mea

TABLE 1
Quantitative (QCA) and Ethnographic (ECA) Content Analysis

	QCA	**ECA**
Research Goal	Verification	Discovery; Verification
Reflexive Research design	Seldom	Always
Emphasis	Reliability	Validity
Progression from Data Co1lection, Analysis, Interpretation	Serial	Reflexive; Circular
Primary Researcher Involvement	Data Analysis and Interpretation	All Phases
Sample	Random or Stratified	Purposive and Theoretical
Pre-Structured Categories	All	Some
Training Required to Collect Data	Little	Substantial
Type of Data	Numbers	Numbers; Narrative
Data Entry Points	Once	Multiple
Narrative Description and Comments	Seldom	Always
Concepts Emerge During Research	Seldom	Always
Data Analysis	Statistical	Textual; Statistical
Data Presentation	Tables	Tables and Text

surable. And, even though early proponents of QCA made it clear that imputation of the speaker's (writer's) motive was unwarranted, the method has been used to relate messages to the source's intent (Berel-3on, 1966).

QCA is used to verify or confirm hypothesized relationships. Indeed, QCA protocols are usually constructed on the basis of operational definitions of concepts which yield enumerative data for purposes of measurement (cf. Krippendorf, 1980). Research designs were organized serially, moving from category construction to sampling, data collection, data analysis and interpretation. As this mode of document analysis was influenced by electronic data processing formats, the researcher's role was reduced to setting up the protocol, and then analyzing and interpreting the data. Data collection and organization (coding) was carried out by novices hired and quickly "trained" to find, record, and count the "mentions" for each unit of analysis. Measures of "intercoder reliability" were undertaken to show that identical judgmental criteria were used in their selection and enumeration. The upshot of this procedure was that reliability produced validity. Indeed, this rationale has led to the institutionalization of intercoder reliability scores in most content analysis studies.

Ethnographic Content Analysis (ECA)

Ethnographic content analysis is used to document and understand the communication of meaning, as well as to verify theoretical relationships. Its distinctive characteristic is the reflexive and highly interactive nature of the investigator, concepts, data collection and analysis. Unlike QCA in which the protocol is the instrument, in ECA the investigator is continually central, although protocols may be used in later phases of the research. Like all ethnographic research, the meaning of a message is assumed to be reflected in various modes of information exchange, format, rhythm and style, e.g., aural and visual style, as well as in the context of the report itself, and other nuances.

ECA consists of reflexive movement between concept development, sampling, data collection, data coding, data analysis, and interpretation. The aim is to be systematic and analytic, but not rigid. Although categories and "variables" initially guide the study, others are allowed and expected to emerge throughout the study. Thus, ECA is embedded in *constant discovery* and *constant comparison* of relevant situations, settings, styles, images, meanings and nuances (cf. Glaser and Strauss, 1967). To this end, ECA draws on and collects numerical and narrative data, rather than forcing the latter into predefined categories of the former as is done in QCA. ECA is oriented to check, supplement, and supplant prior theoretical claims by simultaneously obtaining categorical and unique data for every case studied in order to develop analytical constructs appropriate for several investigations (cf. Schwartz and

Jacobs, 1979). Further, data are often coded conceptually so that one item may be relevant for several purposes. In short, while items and topics can still be counted and put in emergent categories, ECA also provides good descriptive information.

An Example of an ECA Study

Ethnographers approach a topic with a wealth of information and understanding about human behavior. Previous work on TV news provided a foundation in news procedures and perspectives which could be reflexively incorporated in a study of TV news coverage. The relevance of reflexive observation can be illustrated by a study of network news coverage of the Iranian hostage crisis, which involved 52 Americans who were held for 444 days (November 4, 1979—January 24, 1981) (cf. Altheide, 1981, 1982, 1985a). This was the first study of its kind since previously there had not been an extended crisis that was so heavily televised. My task was to describe the news coverage in a theoretically informed manner which would provide data for further conceptual refinement. Theoretical and saturation sampling were combined. Ultimately, I viewed 925 news reports about this highly publicized series of events.

The major focus of the study was to examine the role of formats in TV news coverage of an international crisis. Formats are organizational devices to facilitate coordination of the news process. Format refers to the rules and procedures for defining, recognizing, selecting, organizing, and presenting information as news. They are a link to, and a probe of the external environment (cf. Altheide, 1985b). TV news formats include short reports with visual and aural information, presented in a narrative form with a beginning, middle, and end. Particular attention was paid to the nature, extent and source of visual imagery, and how it was used for thematic emphasis (cf. Epstein, 1973; Altheide, 1976; Tuchman, 1978; Bennett, 1983).

While it is possible to adapt almost any event to the narrative format, events with certain characteristics are more likely to be selected for coverage *because* they can readily be shaped into such a format (cf. Altheide and Snow, 1979). These characteristics include: accessibility, visual quality, drama and action, perceived audience relevance, and encapsulation and thematic unity. The general dimensions of each of these characteristics can be briefly stated:

Accessibility refers to how easily newsworkers can learn about an event, obtain information about it, get to a site where it occurs, and/or obtain visuals.

Visual quality is the extent and clarity of film, tape or other visual depictions of the significant action.

Drama and action refer to the graphic, visual and aural portrayal of some movement which is sued to illustrate the event.

Encapsulation and thematic unity refer to the ease with which an event can be (1) briefly stated and summarized, and (2) joined to a similar event or a series of reports over a period of time, or even within the same newscast.

Finally, *audience relevance* is the interest newsworkers perceive an item to have for a mass audience. Of course, the extent of the audience's interest is also a feature of the way the other format criteria are brought to bear on an event.

Together, these format considerations direct as well as reflect news messages. However, the selection of a sample and the data collection procedures must be theoretically informed by this perspective.

Sampling and Data Collection

Prior to systematically selecting newscasts which would represent adequately the more than 14 months of daily coverage, all available news reports pertaining to Iran on the network evening newscasts during the first nine days of the embassy takeover (November 4—12, 1979) were viewed and analyzed. This preliminary analysis made it clear that a simple random sample or stratified sample would systematically distort an understanding of news coverage of this event. This is because coverage was in groups of days, such as concentrations around holidays and the tendency to broadcast a certain feature of the ordeal over a period of several days.

A few brief examples illustrate what was gained from viewing news content reflexively rather than statically. If the QCA approach to sampling and data collection had been followed, important thematic pat-terms would have been lost. Major reports about various facets of the hostage situation occurred in mini-series, often over a period of several days. The significance and message of one report would be lost when removed from the context of other reports. For example, while the families of hostages were featured in about 12 percent of the total sample of 925 news reports, they were involved in 37 percent of all hostage related reports during the hostages' first Christmas, and 25 percent of reports about the second Christmas. The upshot is that the hostages' families played more of a role at certain times, and this role had a great deal to do with the format of TV news.

The final sample was a saturation sample of approximately 112 days and 26 hours of compiled news reports. Since a simple random sample would rarely select two or three days in succession, it would obscure the fact that networks frequently stretch a series of reports over several days. The solution was to combine two units of analysis: (1) each network report pertaining to Iran (which may have included more than one topic) presented in a newscast; and (2) several consecutive newscasts or "clusters." Thus, the sample consisted of seventeen "clusters" consisting of 5—9 consecutive newscasts per network. In addition, care was taken to proportionately represent all 14 months, as well as weeks 1—4 of the various months. I also checked news records from the Vanderbilt University Television News Archive to determine if the networks were similar in the amount and emphasis of their coverage (Altheide, 1982). This check indicated that they were.

The original protocol was constructed to provide both numeric and narrative (descriptive) data on the following topics: network; presenter; length of report; origin of report; news sources; names and status of individuals presented or interviewed; their dress, appearance, and facility with English; what was filmed; and the correspondence between film, speech and overall emphasis. The narrative portion was particularly helpful for developing a framework for dealing with *visuals.*

With the exception of identifying materials, (e.g., network, date, time), the news broadcasts were viewed without predefined and rigid categories for defining what was relevant. At the same time, prior research and familiarity with news procedures provided me with tools to use in observations and analysis. My general procedure was to view a few reports, assess the message(s) in terms of news techniques, and then note general categories for this report, and for reexamining several previous reports. Then I checked the quality and quantity of information recorded in terms of what was being omitted and what segments or time blocks were not important for the present focus. This continuously refined exploration and comparison became a substantively informed sampling procedure and *topical* guide to data collection. The topics that emerged in this way were as follows:

Hostages: Any report which focused on the hostages' status, location, health, etc.

Families: Any report which focused on the hostage families' status, health, reaction, plans, etc.

Shah of Iran: Any report which focused on the context of the Shah's rule, including political alliances and enemies, as well as his status, health, location, and statements.

Iran: Any report which focused on Iranian government action, plans, reactions, statements, or elections.

Iran (internal problems): Any report which pertained to economic, civil, criminal, and demonstration problems, underlying internal revolts.

Iran (external problems): Any report which concerned economic sanctions or military threats such as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and Iran's war with Iraq.   -

U.S.A.: Any report which concerned U.S. government actions, statements, reactions, proposals, or criticisms.

International: Any report which concerned international statements, actions, reactions, proposals, involvements, or sanctions, including the actions by the United Nations and the World Court.

Iranian Students: Reports about Iranian students in the United States, reactions to U.S. policy, support of the Iranian government, demonstrations, civil and criminal actions, etc.

The progression from data collection to interpretation was intended to be reflexive rather than serial. While there was an effort to verify the findings of some prior research which suggested that news organizations employ stereotypical angles to encapsulate an event (cf. Epstein, 1973; Batscha, 1975), that focus alone would have precluded important emergent understandings about the interaction between formats. One product of an emergent orientation to the data was a set of insights about the source of reports. Previous research revealed that newsworkers often incorporate "file" film and "old" reports into new ones (cf. Altheide, 1976) so that any update or overview of a report is usually tied to what has gone before. In this sense, TV news often reports on itself. The news sources and visual opportunities fluctuated during the hostage ordeal so that new visuals of hostages and their captors became quite scarce. The networks' problem then was to look elsewhere, but where they looked also led to different topics, e.g., family members, emphases, and conclusions. An atheoretical sample would have missed these systematic clusters which show very clearly that the substance of reports could be predicted by the origin of reports (cf. Altheide, 1985b:77ff).

The fact that the origin of reports and visuals contributed to the thematic emphasis did not emerge until well into the study. ECA offers an approach for systematically studying the use of visuals and text as features of formats (cf. Lang and Lang, 1968; Adams and Schreibman, 1978; Tuchman, 1978). My procedure was to describe the visuals in terms of "what was shown," "who was shown," and "what they were doing." Rereading my descriptions and relating these to certain events (e.g., the hostages' Christmas) led me to return to previous tapes and add additional data to the open-ended protocols. In turn, since I began to under-

stand that the "file tape" was used more often with reports originating from certain locations, I saw the pattern between these sources and certain topics and aspects of the hostage situation. For example, visuals— usually file film—of crowds chanting anti-American slogans were routinely used when a reporter in London would conclude a summary of the day's nondevelopments.

Moving reflexively between data collection, analysis and reconceptualization increased my understanding of the relevance of TV news formats, sources, and thematic emphasis. While hostage families had been a part of the story from the beginning, they became relatively more prominent over time. A key factor in the visual focus on families was their portrayal of grief, anguish, frustration and anger. Hostage families were often willing to be interviewed on camera, and several invited reporters into their homes for days at a time. Because they were also available for coverage from the network affiliate stations throughout the United States, they received a disproportionate amount of the coverage originating from U.S.A./Other (not New York or Washington, D.C.). Moreover, the hostage families also received a good deal of coverage from Washington/New York because many of the family members formed a quasi-organization, centered in Washington, D.C. The articulate spokespersons, who made public speeches, were adept at reaching the centers of government and the news media.

This availability, in combination with visual news format, contributed to the hostages' families becoming the visual signature for emotion, fear, and administration inaction. Furthermore, hostages' families received more coverage than other facets of the event (e.g., Iranian government) which clearly were necessary for a broader understanding. Reports about the hostages would be joined with a report about the hostages' families, especially certain family members who became quite familiar to TV audiences. Because the hostages' families were seen routinely on the evefling newscasts and ABC's *Nightline,* they became the visual link to the hostage ordeal.

If the hostages' families were symbolic of the American perspective, visuals of Iranian crowds chanting anti-American slogans emerged as the symbol of the adversaries. For example, there were 87 film reports (9.4 percent of total reports) about Iranians, primarily in street demonstrations and crowd scenes. Iranians in the United States were similarly presented: 31 of 64 reports featured them in crowd activities, including broadcasts of some of the most brutal confrontations since the Civil Rights movement. The way this film defined events can be illustrated with a 2:40 report by CBS reporter Liz Trotta in an interview with an Iranian official who was complaining about problems in media

presentations of cultural differences. While one of the aims of the report was to depict other aspects of life in Iran, only about :20 of "non-hostage" daily life was actually presented.

The visual emphasis further compounded an already strange encounter with adversaries embedded in a different culture, with a different world view and a different religion. Media personnel were not unaware of this tendency to heighten dissimilarities. The push to deliver exciting film and to maintain the "story" on the embassy contributed to a distorted view of Iran that precluded understanding of the context in which the hostage situation emerged and persisted. On January 16, 1980, the following exchange took place between an anchorperson and a reporter in Iran.

> Anchor: What is happening there? Do Americans really understand that is happening there?
>
> Reporter: I think . . . that the impression we convey from the scenes in front of the embassy, all the fist shakers yelling "Death to Carter, Death to America," we conveyed a picture of a nation in the grip of madness, and yet just a few blocks away from the embassy gates people are going about their lives in a normal fashion. Mothers are taking their babies to the park. Businesses are opened. Tehran is pretty much working as normal. (1/16/80; NBC Special Report: "Crisis in Iran: 1 Year After the Shah, Day 75").

The excerpt suggests that reflexive appraisal of documents such as TV newscasts are done by newscasters themselves. The aim of ECA is to place documents in context just as members do, in order to theoretically relate products to their organizational production.

Conclusion

A rationale for an ethnographic and reflexive approach to documents is similar to the rationale of ethnographic research in general. Sampling procedures are informed by theory while constant comparison and discovery are used to delineate specific categories as well as narrative description. Situations, settings, styles, images, meanings and nuances are key topics in the analysis of news documents. I have found that structured data collection based on a protocol combined with ethnographic field notes supports a theoretically informed account of media content.

Structured protocols used alone hide critical questions and issues which may become apparent only later. If ethnographic materials are included, it is usually possible to return to the data when other questions

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Table 2 of David Altheide's article in this issue was inadvertently omitted at the time of printing. This table, show below, should have appeared on page 75.

TABLE 2

Time	Statement	Speaker	Film
:15	There are about 150 foreign newsmen in Iran now. They come from all over the world to cover this major story, and are permitted to work after they are accredited by the ministry of national guidance.	Liz Trotta	Journalists and cameras
:18	For the moat part, journalists here have been accorded the freedom of movement they enjoy in Western countries. But now that freedom is threatened by an announcement from the government that Western journalists may be expelled from Iran in the near future.		Ghotbzadeh and journalists walking
:18	Our revolution has created a vast cultural gap. From what West understands life should be, and we're trying to close this gap and this is where the media can help a great deal...	Sadegh	Sadegh sitting behind desk
:12	Indeed, there is a culture gap. The very nature and ritual of Islam is an intellectual confrontation for the West. And the new religious militancy inspired by the revolution has only heightened the challenge.	Trotta	film of crowds, self-flaggelation, praying in mass
:22	As with most stories, ~there are negative aspects in the telling of the Iran story: bloody challenges to the Khomeini government in _____ Provence; the mistrust and defiance of the new regime in _-_ Province; a serious threat to Ayatollah Khomeini. From a official point of view, the Western press focuses too closely on these apects.	Trotta	crowd, chanting and waving knives, weapons people running man holding a gun close-up of man peering through wrap around face; man on roof with a gun; crowd
:26	When I have an American reporter from one of the major television stations coming from Rome, and he says, my God, I thought the whole country was falling apart. I was even afraid of how lam going to get from the airport to the hotel, and then I came and I saw everything cairn and quiet. I was surprised. That reflects the kind of negative reporting, or reporting out of con.	Sadegh	behind his desk
:20	text ... In the midst of these political and religious clashes, there is a normalcy in the city of Tehran. The legendary traffic jams are still a game of nerve and skill; the businessman and housewives mainthin the daily life; street vendors cook their hot red beets in the markets.	Trotta	vendor; autos; woman making purchase from street vendor; beets cooking; people walking; crowd; burning flag; chanting crowd
:21	But against this background one must weigh the headlines: Afghans attack the Soviet embassy in Tehran; Armenians attack the Turkish embassy in Tehran; Afghans attack the Afghanistan embassy in Tehran; And above all, Americans still captive in the US embassy. Liz Trotta, CBS News, Tehran.		chains on embassy gate; camera pointed at embassy

and inquiries arise. For this reason, I have been able to use "old" data sets to answer new questions.

My recent attempts to integrate findings from studies of the mass media (especially TV news) with the nature of media in general in social life. I have examined non-mass media institutions, settings and practices to develop a conceptual about the effect of mass media on a wide range of activities. These concepts clarify the influence of temporal and spatial features of what appear,, at first glance, to be nonmediated occasions. This approach yielded "format" as a common concept in studies of mass media and other types of mediation.

I have looked for instances of mediation in situations which may not be associated conventionally with media principles and theory. In recent years this has led me into settings and issues involving social definitions and applications of "justice." The settings I have examined include TV coverage of courtroom activity, the use of "keyboards" and other terminals by police officers and other criminal justice agents (Altheide, 1985c), and TV viewers' requests for assistance from an action line "troubleshooter." In brief, ethnography offers a perspective for analysis of human action in the field and in documents; the key is to reconceptualize the latter as the former and vice versa.

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