

Enhancing Media Literacy Through Content Analysis: A Comparison of Historic Speeches by Franklin D. Roosevelt and Implications for the Present

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The Asian Conference on the Social Sciences 2018
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

In the contemporary global era of false or misleading news spread rapidly by online social media, the need for enhanced media literacy and advanced critical thinking skills has become increasingly urgent. Responsible and accountable political leadership based on reliable and consistent facts and reporting is essential for the development of national and international policies which promote and support a sustainable world. Content analysis can be employed as a useful tool to enhance media literacy by systematically analyzing, evaluating, and comparing media reports and speeches by public officials. Researchers can use a coding procedure to identify and group various units of text to detect key patterns and themes. Content analysis is an objective, systematic, and effective method to improve media literacy and critical thinking skills by combining quantitative and qualitative research approaches. Factors such as the frequency of various vocabulary items and the lexical density of a written text can be measured by content analysis (Creswell, 2005). This presentation demonstrates the practical use of content analysis by examining the first and third inaugural addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt and uses both manifest and latent coding to detect stylistic and thematic similarities between the two different texts from the same source. Manifest coding involves the surface level features of a text that are clearly visible to the reader, while latent coding is used to detect deeper, underlying levels of meaning and major themes (Neuman, 2003). Implications for analyzing and understanding contemporary media reports and political discourse are also addressed.

Keywords: media literacy, content analysis, presidential speeches

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Introduction: Content Analysis

The content analysis examines the first and third inaugural addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt and employs both manifest and latent coding to detect stylistic and thematic similarities between the two texts from the same source. Neuman (2003) asserts content analysis involves “objective and systematic counting and recording procedures to produce a quantitative description of the symbolic content of a text” (p. 311). A researcher can employ content analysis to examine textual and visual material. Content analysis can measure such factors as the frequency of various items and the lexical density of a written text (Creswell, 2005). The four dimensions of frequency, direction, intensity, and space in written or transcribed texts can be analyzed, contrasted, and compared (Neuman, 2003). Researchers use a coding procedure to identify and group various units of text to detect patterns and themes. Manifest coding involves the surface level features of a text that are visible to the reader, while latent coding is used to detect deeper, underlying levels of meaning and themes. Latent coding is more subjective in nature and may be influenced by the coder’s own cultural background, life experience, and linguistic knowledge, training, and abilities (Neuman, 2003). Researchers must guard against personal bias when analyzing a text. Content analysis can reveal cultural characteristics and values in detail and can show unexpected patterns of thought and trends in society (Imada, 2010). Text analysis can provide multiple perspectives on changes in society and culture expressed in written form. Content analysis and text mining techniques contain many quantitative elements but are also qualitative in nature and can significantly enhance qualitative research (Yu, Jannasch-Pennell & DiGangi, 2011). The results of content analysis can be viewed and interpreted through a qualitative lens.

Manifest Coding: Units of Analysis

The basic textual units of words, paragraphs, and lines were counted by highlighting each text and using the word count function in Microsoft Word. The length of each spoken text was automatically calculated by the mp3 audio file and Real Player software. The average number of words per sentence, the lexical density, and the Gunning Fog Readability Index were calculated using the Content Analysis Tool (Using English, n.d.), a free software tool available at www.usingenglish.com.

Frequency

Franklin D. Roosevelt’s first inaugural speech contains 1, 875 words, 24 paragraphs, and 129 lines, while the third inaugural speech contains 1, 336 words, 37 paragraphs, and 101 lines. The actual spoken text of the first inaugural speech, downloaded from the University of Virginia, Miller Center of Public Affairs, Scripps Library and Multimedia Archive Web site as an mp3 audio file, is 17 minutes and 17 seconds in length. The third inaugural speech is 14 minutes and 49 seconds in duration. The frequency of visible, basic surface level textual features is similar in both speeches. The length of the spoken text of each speech is also similar. Although the overall word and line count decreased in the third inaugural speech in comparison with the

first speech, the number of paragraphs increased. The larger number of paragraphs may be attributed to the larger number of subtopics contained in the second speech. The results are summarized and compared in Table 1 below.

Table 1
Frequency of Basic Textual Units and Duration of the Two Speeches

	Word Count	Paragraphs	Lines	Minutes/Seconds
First Inaugural Speech (1933)	1, 875	24	129	17.17
Third Inaugural Speech (1941)	1, 336	37	101	14.49

The spoken text was delivered with the same, relatively slow, measured tone and enunciated with the same clarity and precision in each speech. Each sentence was clearly separated by a short pause of one second or longer in each speech, and one or more major keywords were emphasized in each sentence. The keywords that received the greatest word stress were primarily nouns but also included verbs. At regular intervals of approximately one minute, longer pauses of several seconds occurred in both speeches due to applause from the audience. Applause was more frequent during the first speech. At regular intervals of several minutes, entire key sentences in both speeches were emphasized with a significantly louder, deeper voice, and serious tone. In the first text, the first entire sentence to be emphasized in this manner reads, “This Nation asks for action, and action now” (Roosevelt, 1933, para.8). In the second text, the first entire sentence to be stressed in the same way, in reference to claims made by America’s enemies, reads, “But we Americans know that this is not true” (Roosevelt, 1941, para.8). The occurrence of the first entirely stressed sentence in the eighth paragraph of both speeches is further evidence of a nearly identical structure in both texts.

The researcher used the Content Analysis Tool, a free software tool, to calculate the lexical density, average words per sentence, and the Gunning Fog Readability Index for both texts. Lexical density is calculated by dividing the number of different words by the total number of words and multiplying by one hundred. The Fog Index expresses the reading level or years of education that may be required by a reader to understand a text. The reading level or grade equals the average number of words per sentence plus the percentage of words of three or more syllables multiplied by 0.4. The Fog Index for most texts appearing in Time magazine is approximately 11 (Using English, n.d.). The Content Analysis Tool results are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2
Content Analysis Tool Results

	Lexical Density	Avg. No. Words/Sentence	Gunning Fog Index
Text 1 (1933)	39.41%	23.64	13.59
Text 2 (1941)	36.23%	18.14	10.63

The lower lexical density, average number of words per sentence, and lower Gunning Fog Readability Index for the second speech may be attributed to the greater seriousness of the crisis in 1941 and the even greater need for the speech to be clearly understood by the vast majority of the population. In 1933, the president was addressing his inaugural speech to the failed business elite as much as to the common person, and so employed a higher general level of language in his speech. In 1941, the speech was intended for all citizens of the nation, and so the level of language was simplified slightly to be intelligible to a greater segment of the population, including students and citizens with a relatively low level of formal education.

Table 3
The Fifteen Highest Frequency Words in Each Written Text (Words in Bold Occur in Both Texts)

1. national	1. because
2. helped	2. democracy
3. leadership	3. spirit
4. because	4. America
5. action	5. freedom
6. measures	6. years
7. congress	7. speaks
8. upon	8. something
9. efforts	9. government
10. public	10. states
11. task	11. faith
12. emergency	12. into
13. respects	13. task
14. values	14. united
15. duty	15. destiny

Direction

The words with the highest frequency in both texts are essentially positive or neutral in nature, with the exception of the relatively negative word “emergency” in the first text, ranked number twelve in terms of frequency. The majority of the highest frequency words in both texts, the inaugural speeches of a president, are related to the theme of government/leadership. The words “task” and “because” occur in both texts with high frequency. The lack of words with negative connotations is conspicuous given the gravity of the crisis facing the nation in each case. In both speeches, Roosevelt explained his vision of the future and the necessary tasks that lay ahead. By choosing such positive, value-laden words as “values,” “duty,” “spirit,” “faith,” “freedom,” and “destiny,” Roosevelt, speaking in a confident, determined tone, led the nation by example, creating the impression that a positive outcome was inevitable in each case.

Intensity

Some of the highest frequency words employed by Roosevelt possess a major level of intensity. “Emergency” in the first speech, and “destiny” in the second speech, carry intense meanings. Roosevelt managed to convey a sense of urgency while remaining

calm. He did not overuse high intensity words, despite the enormity of the national crisis being addressed in each speech.

Space

The largest amount of space in each text is devoted to the theme of government/leadership. The second largest amount of space is dedicated to the theme of religion/values, while the theme of action/work occupies the least amount of space in each text. The percentage of space devoted to each theme is nearly identical in each text, as revealed by latent coding.

Latent Coding: Units of Analysis

Content analysis can identify major themes and subthemes in a text (Luque, Bowers, Kabore & Stewart, 2013). The manifest coding results revealed the fifteen highest frequency words in each speech. The researcher grouped the fifteen highest frequency words from each text into three major categories or common themes. The common themes in both speeches, separated by eight years, are government/leadership, action/work, and religion/values. The researcher analyzed each paragraph in each text, assigning a thematic code to each paragraph based on the presence of one or more key words or phrases related to one theme: 1. government/leadership. 2. action/work. 3. religion/values.

17 of the 24 paragraphs or 71% of the text in the first speech (1933) contained the theme of government/leadership. 2 of the 24 paragraphs or 8% of the text contained the theme of action/work, and 5 of the 24 paragraphs or 21% of the text was devoted to the theme of religion/values. In the second speech (1941), 25 of the 37 paragraphs or 68% of the text contained the theme of government/leadership, and 3 of the 37 paragraphs or 8% of the text contained the theme of action/work. 9 of the 37 paragraphs or 24% of the text in the second speech was dedicated to the major theme of religion/values. The percentage of text devoted to each of the three major themes identified by the researcher is nearly identical in both speeches. Government/leadership was not simply the largest theme because the texts in question were presidential inaugural speeches; Roosevelt recognized that decisive leadership, clear direction and vision were urgently required to deal with the national crisis in each case.

The theme of religion/values also played a major role in each speech since Roosevelt was a religious man and believed in the need for people to turn to core moral and spiritual values for support in times of deep national crisis, whether the threat was internal or external. The spiritual element of Roosevelt's speeches caused them to resemble sermons to a certain extent. In both speeches, Roosevelt partly assumed the role of a national spiritual leader, leading the nation on a type of crusade from chaos to the promise of order and safety. The percentage of text containing the themes of Government/Leadership and Religion/Values is nearly identical in both speeches. The percentage of text related to the theme of Action/Work (8%) is identical in the two speeches. Paragraphs were the units of analysis for the latent coding.

Implications and Conclusion

The results of manifest coding conducted using a software tool reveal that the surface level features of the text are similar in both speeches. The lower lexical density, lower average number of words per sentence, and lower Gunning Fog Readability Index of the second text may be explained by the greater seriousness of the crisis in 1941 and the even greater need for the speech to be clearly understood by as many citizens as possible. The frequency of textual units (words, lines, paragraphs) is similar in both speeches. The direction of the highest frequency words in both cases is largely positive to neutral and high intensity words are present but are not used excessively. The results of latent coding reveal that the largest amount of space in each text is devoted to the theme of government/leadership, followed by religion/values, and action/work.

At the time of each speech, America was faced by a grave crisis. In 1933, during the Great Depression, the financial system and free market economy were paralyzed. The future of capitalism itself was in doubt. Mass unemployment, growing poverty and despair posed a potential threat not only to the economy but also to the unity of the nation. In 1941, America once again faced a grave and serious threat to its continued existence as a nation. The nation was confronted by a growing external threat posed by aggressive, expansionist military dictatorships around the world. In his historic speeches, President Roosevelt demonstrated strong leadership and a clear vision that was both practical and optimistic in nature. President Roosevelt's style of speech writing, delivery, and amount of emphasis on key themes was nearly identical in each inaugural speech. In each case, America was faced with a grave threat to its existence, and the president's carefully measured words of confidence and resolve helped to guide the nation to a more prosperous and secure future.

In the current era of globalization, a growing number of Internet-based, social media platforms are competing with traditional news sources, and it is not always clear which information is being provided by professional journalists (Kamerer, 2013). The ease and speed with which false or deliberately misleading news can spread poses a challenge to democratic institutions and to international organizations which are based on trust and mutual cooperation. Citizens require a minimum amount of critical thinking skills and media literacy to avoid being influenced by false or misleading information during elections and other important events which require reliable information. A growing number of educators have recognized the need to teach media literacy across disciplines and to ensure that students and citizens are able to evaluate the authenticity of news sources and to compare and contrast textual content and images (Flamiano & Ostermiller, 2017). Content analysis methods and software can be used by students and citizens to analyze, compare, and contrast media stories and political speeches to identify information which may not originate from an authentic source and to detect and highlight major trends, patterns, and changes in authentic news stories and official policy statements.

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