

Chapter 12

Examining Online Communication: A Method for the Quantitative Analysis of Qualitative Data

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ABSTRACT

Methods of individual communication continue to expand through online media. Given the dynamic nature of online communications, traditional methods for studying communications may not suffice. A hybridized content analytic approach that combines qualitative and quantitative methods offers a unique methodological tool to researchers who seek to better understand computer-mediated communications and the psychological characteristics of those who communicate online by evaluating qualitative information using quantitative methods. This means of measurement allows researchers to statistically evaluate whether investigated phenomena are occurring in combination with the richness that qualitative assessment provides. As with any approach to computer-mediated communication, various ethical considerations must be borne in mind, and, thus, are discussed in concert with this hybridized approach to content analysis.

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INTRODUCTION

According to Internet World Stats (2011), the number of people who use the Internet worldwide is in the billions – to be more precise, 2.3 billion of the world’s 7 billion people are Internet users. This number is staggering given that the Internet is a relatively new form of media. In fact, since 2000 this number has increased by over 528% (Internet World Stats, 2011). This exponential growth in Internet usage calls to mind a basic question: for what purposes are people using the Internet? According to research conducted by the PEW Internet and American Life Project (2012), the most common activities for adult users of the Internet are sending or reading email, using search engines, searching for maps or driving directions, checking the weather, and buying products. Other common activities include looking up information on politics, uploading photos to share with others, sending instant messages, and visiting social networking sites.

PEW (2010, 2012) reports that 68% of adults use social networking sites, and 93% of teenagers use these sites to communicate with their friends and family. Social networking is one of the top five Internet activities engaged in by teenagers and members of Gen Y (currently aged 21-35). These statistics suggest that among other uses like shopping and information searching, people are using the Internet to socialize and communicate at an ever-increasing level. Given the generational differences in these types of Internet activities, this trend is likely to become even more prevalent as online teenagers become adults. This broaches another, more important question: have communication research techniques been able to “keep up” with this ever-expanding channel of communication? While it may be a challenge for researchers to keep up with the pace of technology, this paper proposes a methodology for examining online communications that can be readily applied to a variety of formats. More specifically, this methodology is a form of content analysis that transforms qualitative data into quantitative data. Below we discuss the issues surrounding the nature of Internet communications that call for new methods of examination. Also, we provide a step-by-step procedural explanation as well as an example of this content analytic approach. Additionally, the advantages, disadvantages, and ethical issues surrounding this technique are discussed.

BACKGROUND

Nature of Online Communications

Over the past few decades, computer-mediated communication (CMC) has garnered a great deal of research focus and interest. With the advent of new online outlets for discussion arising at a remarkable pace, the breadth of communication research only continues to expand as each new medium brings with it unique intricacies and idiosyncrasies. Although, for the most part, previous approaches to the study of communication appear to have adapted well to the technologically driven new media of Internet communication and discourse, it seems reasonable for one to question if new methods of inquiry might be better-suited for capturing the wealth of information that such online contexts have to offer. In particular, Internet bulletin boards (or message board forums) have become an extremely popular means of modern discourse, but the online context and asynchronous nature of message board discussions entail unique concerns for communication researchers interested in studying these environments. Therefore, in this paper we propose a quantitative approach to analyzing qualitative content analytic data aimed specifically at studying the communications found on Internet message board forums.

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