Media analyses

Introduction into the topic

One of current trends in the media and information literacy is to increasingly put an emphasis on digital (even artificial intelligence) tools to reveal and debunk various forms of misinformation. However, critical thinking about the information people receive and media analyses methods that help to develop it are still at the core of this field. They don't require use of sophisticated tools and methods – what one needs is the knowledge of methods to be able to pick up the right one and use them in practice and an open mind to be able to ask the right questions.

Soon you find out that this course is different from others. Even though some theoretical background is included as well, it's much more focused on practice and builds on previous courses. This course is not about resuming various information on techniques that are used to encode meaning in media messages or other content, create misinformation, or manipulate with the content in other ways. Other courses were designed to provide you with the necessary insights already. It's about providing you with tools and knowledge to decode those messages, reveal content or information distortion, and develop or maintain your critical thinking abilities. Therefore, if you have jumped to this course directly, it might be better to go through previous ones at first. Either way is fine eventually, as practice makes the master.

In this course, you explore the various methods at first and then steps of analysis that can be applied to each of them. You also distinguish between hypothesis and research questions, as well as two ways of finding answers to your questions.

At the end, you are asked to complete probably the most complex exercise in this whole series of courses. Don't be afraid though, it's designed to be intuitive, go from surface to depth, correspond with your realities and provide you with competences that will surely come in handy.

What else is needed to understand the world of media?

Competences that you gained through completing the other lessons that are included in this online course and through additional resources will help you to effectively analyse media pieces and their context. However, there are still several topics that cannot be missed out to give you a broader understanding of the current media world.

A) Modern types of journalism: engaged, solution, citizen

In general, new methods and tools are being developed to enable producers to create high-quality and engaging content (e.g. interactive videos) and audience to see between and behind the lines. There are now more opportunities for connections with an audience: e-participation tools, discussion forums. However, already before the digital era there were practices of audience engagement, e.g. interactive shows, during which people were able to influence the direction of the story.

In the digital era, media and journalists are becoming more open and are looking for effective ways of engaging and interacting with an audience. **Engaged journalism/media** is an approach that strengthens their relationship and increases trust in the media. Audience has more opportunities to express their opinion or share information, and is able to define the importance of topics and be involved in agenda or decision making (similar to e-participation in the field of active citizenship). Journalists/media makers and their audience can even co-create the content. More people can also contribute to the content of media by producing it.

Citizen journalism/media refers to the practice of the audience creating content which is then published and distributed by the media. Both parties are not collaborating on the production of content, but this method is beneficial for both of them - media get more content, people and stories they cover gain more visibility. Ultimately it also helps to bring people closer to the media, bridge the gap between them, and raise trust.

Solution journalism is a method of coverage of topics that responses to societal problems. It continues with telling the story where other methods usually end, because it focuses on analysis of potential solutions. It doesn't look for or come up with perfect solutions, but offers options and alternatives.

B) Prosumption and produsage

Line between producers and consumers is now more blurred. Concepts of prosumption or produsage emerged thanks to digitalisation of media.

A prosumer is a person both consuming and producing information or media content. There are six basic types of prosumers: DIY prosumers, self-service prosumers, customizing prosumers,

collaborative prosumers, monetised prosumers, and economic prosumers[1]. The terms prosumer and prosumption were coined in 1980 by Alvin Toffler[2].

Produsage is user-led content creation. This term was coined by Australian media scholar Axel Bruns. Examples are citizen journalism or social media. It's similar to commons-based peer production, where large numbers of people cooperate on creation of the content[3].

C) Wisdom of the crowd

Aristotle is credited as the first person writing about the "wisdom of the crowd" in his work titled Politics. It refers to the collective opinion of a group of individuals.

This concept gains importance in the digital era and is explaining assumptions on which platforms such as Quora, Stack Exchange, or Wikipedia are based.

On one hand people are less dependent on opinion or symbolic leaders, on the other hand they can be influenced by the group (crowd or social bubble). On the basis of *criteria separating wise crowds from irrational ones* formulated by James Surowiecki, wise crowds are characterised by diversity of opinions, independence of their members, decentralization (people can specialize and be focused on a local level), aggregation of information or opinions that can support decisions of the whole group, and trust of members towards the group. The opposite are irrational crowds.

In relation to engaged media/journalism it's important to mention three main types of disorganized decisions described by James Surowiecki that can support this approach:
- Cognition – mutual cognition of needs, audience can recognise important local topics better and faster than media leaders.
- Coordination (of actions) – allowing the audience to enter discussion about topics/agenda can ensure the media will address local needs.
- Cooperation – people can form networks with media producing content at a local level without interferences of headquarters[4].

D) Sources and communication

Original source (also a primary source) is a person or organisation making the information known first (e.g. author, witness, conversation partner, but also media). Recipient is then a person or organisation receiving the information (audience, listener etc.). Usually the information doesn't get directly from the original source to the final recipient, as there are several intermediaries involved.

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[1] Lang, B., Dolan, R., Kemper, J., Northey, G. (August 6, 2020), Prosumers in times of crisis: definition, archetypes and implications, Journal of Service Management, Emerald Publishing Limited, Retrieved from: https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOSM-05-2020-0155/full/html

[2] Wikipedia (April 21, 2021), Prosumer, Retrieved from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prosumer#:~:text=A prosumer is an individual,the words provider and consumer

[3] Wikipedia (January 2, 2021), Produsage, Retrieved from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Produsage#:~:text=Produsage is the type of,passive consumption and active production

[4] Based on the book Surowiecki, J. (2005). The Wisdom of Crowds: Why the Many are Smarter Than the Few. Anchor Books. ISBN 978-0-385-72170-7, available online: https://books.google.cz/books/about/The_Wisdom_of_Crowds.html?id=bA0c4aYTD6gC&redir_esc=

Sources then become secondary, tertiary, etc. The information can be distorted in the process and its variations can come from several sources. Therefore it's important to understand types and flows and communication and some concepts that explain why people miss information even if there is no distortion (e.g. cognitive dissonance theory).

Relevant types of communication:
Their combination is very common nowadays, e.g. in engaged journalism or on social media. Type also depends on the perspective: one to many type of communication from the perspective of, for example TV, would be regarded as many to one from the viewpoint of the viewer who receives other information from other sources.

- *One to one:* conversation between two people, personal interaction between medium and audience member.

- *One to many:* the most common type - traditional media, digital media, and people publishing there; influencers; other very active users of social media; politicians.

- *Many to one:* social media in general – passive users are only receiving information (and do not interact). Also when followers interact with influencers or the audience interacts with media.

- *Many to many:* growing type - social media, discussion groups, live-chats, various online communication platforms, citizen journalism.

- *One-way communication:* audience is passive (mainly in case of one to many or many to one type of communication)

- *Two-way communication:* audience is active or even engaged in co-creation of content.

Flow of communication:
- **One-step flow of communication:** Information from the original source reaches the recipient directly. It is gaining importance again and is supported by diversification of media and customisation of content.
  Sources of information are transmitting it directly to the audience without interference. Gate-keeping effect of big media is decreasing. Content, especially advertisement, is reaching the audience on the basis of a person's preferences or behaviour in the online space.
  On the other hand, people are influenced by previously gained knowledge and experiences, which serve as a filter of information.
  Mis- and disinformation creators are counting on this model.

- **Hypodermic needle model (magic bullet theory):** It's not always related to one-step flow of communication.
  Information provided by the media reaches its recipient directly and has an immediate effect. This model may work today in the case of powerful messages, when someone strongly believes the media/source of information, or when a person doesn't think about presented information and accepts it as fact). The audience is passive.

- **Two step flow of communication and multi step flow of communication:** Indirect, original message is processed and presented by one or several intermediaries (e.g. influencers, media, friends, or colleagues) before it reaches the final recipient.
  Opportunities for an audience to be active (become an intermediary) or even co-create the content.
  Communication in the media space is now two-way thanks to discussion forums, emails, social media, competitions, and feedback forms that enable continuous engagement of customers.
  Customisation is also based on two-way communication, but in this case the customer (audience) is represented by digital data. Therefore the entrepreneurs, marketers, or advertisers need to supplement their knowledge of traditional media communication with that of technical matters, e.g. how algorithms on social media work. That is also relevant for increasing monetization of published content.

Important concepts from the behavioural psychology:
- Opinion leaders: information provided by these people changes the opinions of others.

- Symbolic leaders: people, organisations, or institutions having an indirect influence through symbols: celebrities, politicians, but media as well).

- Cognitive dissonance theory: people follow only media that confirm their opinions.

- Spiral of silence: people/media with minority opinion stay rather silent.

Customisation:

This concept refers to advertisement and other media content that is tailored to the audience and potential customers, specifically to their (assumed) needs and preferences. It is also based on two-way communication, but in this case the customer (audience) is represented by digital data. Therefore the media makers, entrepreneurs, marketers, or advertisers need to supplement their knowledge of traditional media communication with that of technical matters, e.g. how algorithms on social media work.

Customisation can have four kinds of effects:
- neutral: people just receive content based on their previous preferences or behaviour online.

- negative are twofold: a) people remain in social bubbles in which misinformation and hate-speech is being spread; b) even if only facts and unbiased content are spread in the social bubble, it's never good to stay only within its boundaries.

- risk of automatic evaluation, which means that some online tools may wrongly evaluate a person's preferences, because they don't consider individual needs (e.g. questionnaires before elections) or use just the internet browser history (e.g. advertisement customised on the basis of previously visited websites).

- positive (people receive information they might miss otherwise, e.g. on the basis of their behaviour online or who are their friends on social media).

E) Social responsibility of media

Social responsibility of media means to think about and consider various effects that the published media content may have on the public. It is a feeling of responsibility towards the audience and ultimately the whole society.

Nowadays, it can also refer to ensuring digital safety of the audience (secure websites and tools), empowering people to be resistant to disinformation and harmful content (through media products and learning opportunities). It applies not only to the public service media and it should not be confused with a corporate social responsibility (CSR).

Being socially responsible doesn't mean that media and information producers are self-censoring themselves. On the contrary, it supports independence of media and broad public discussion about their role and content.

Social responsibility of media helps to avoid:
- Commercialisation (excessive use of advertisement in public service media, or dependency on the corporate sector) and negative effects of customisation.
- Intentional distortion (manipulation, e.g. disinformation, fake-news) or unintentional distortion of information or media content – including unprofessionalism (e.g. misinformation, bad quality of content, unverified information, funny headlines, various mistakes, bad grammar and strange sentences).
- Spread of harmful content: hate and divisive speech, defamation.

F) Media regulations

Social responsibility as such is not regulated, therefore it can be defined as a set of internal or personal rules. However, media are regulated by codes of ethics, professional codes of conduct, media councils, or media law. In pluralistic society, such laws or councils do not interfere in freedom of media as long as they follow the ethical principles and respect the other laws.

Media must not publish content that supports disinformation, harmful content, or illegal behaviour. They should also take all steps necessary to avoid that the published content causes any harm.

In the case of defamation they can, however, prove that it was needed to publish certain information through defences of *honest opinion* (statement of opinion and not a statement of fact), of *truth* (the statement is true), and of *public interest* (defendant reasonably believes that publishing the statement was in the public interest)[5].

Serious harm and defences mentioned above are defined in Defamation Act 2013 of the Parliament of the United Kingdom. In this context, the media should do *serious harm test*[6] – ask questions to check whether the work can cause a serious harm to someone's reputation (defamation, libel, etc.)[7].

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[5] Carruthers Law (2021), Defamation Defences, Retrieved from:
https://www.carruthers-law.co.uk/our-services/defamation/defamation-defences/
[6] Little, A. (October 2, 2019), Defamation – test of serious harm, Hill Dickinson LLP, Retrieved from:
https://www.hilldickinson.com/insights/articles/defamation-test-serious-harm
[7] Legislation.gov.uk (2013), Defamation Act 2013, Retrieved from:
https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2013/26/contents/enacted

Likewise, they should think about possible negative effects on the audience, even if there is no legal regulation (***potential harm test***). When it comes to legal proceedings, the defences mentioned above may apply as well, in justified cases.

Methods

Content analyses

Through content analysis of media content it's possible to effectively deconstruct any text, being it written or expressed through auditory or visual means. It focuses only on the text itself, disregarding external influences. There are four main methods:

a) Quantitative

Analysing the whole medium or pieces of media content, not its parts: how often is a certain topic presented, what is the frequency, what amount of time is dedicated to it?

b) Qualitative

Analysing whole medium or pieces media content, not details of individual pieces: what topics are presented, who is interviewed, where is it presented, are there any mistakes (factual, grammatical) in the reportage?

c) Semiotic / semantic

What is obvious or hidden in the text. What meanings are encoded? What is the language used? Are the words neutral, or expressive? What headlines, pictures, or graphics are used and how? Are mistakes (factual, grammatical) in them as well? Are they related to the rest of a medium?

d) Parsing (syntactic analysis)

Structure of the media piece: analysing sentences, paragraphs, and whole text. Are some words or sentences present very often? Is the media piece consistent? Are quotations used? What headlines, pictures, or graphics are used and how?

Contextual analysis

A contextual analysis is already going beyond boundaries of the media content and focuses on external influences. It is *"simply an analysis of a text (in whatever medium, including multi-media) that helps us to assess that text within the context of its historical and cultural setting, but also in terms of its textuality – or the qualities that characterize the text as a text. A contextual analysis combines features of formal analysis with features of "cultural archaeology", or the systematic study of social, political, economic, philosophical, religious, and aesthetic conditions that were (or can be assumed to have been) in place at the time and place when the text was created. While this may sound complicated, it is in reality deceptively simple: it means "situating" the text within the milieu of its times and assessing the roles of author, readers (intended and actual), and "commentators" (critics, both professional and otherwise) in the reception of the text"[8].*

A contextual analysis can be basic or complex, depending on the focus of the researcher. Generally includes several key questions: what is the socio-political, historical, and cultural

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[8] Behrendt, Stephen C. (Spring 2008), Using Contextual Analysis to evaluate texts, Retrieved from:
http://english.unl.edu/sbehrendt/StudyQuestions/ContextualAnalysis.html

context of the media piece; to what does it react; is it relevant; is the information presented in the right context; does it use sources that are not relevant?

Analysis of authorial intent

As you learnt in the lesson "Language of media", each author creates a text with an intention to inform, entertain, provide aesthetic or emotional experience, promote a viewpoint, etc. (internal influences). This analysis is focusing on internal influences of media content and it is seeking answers to the questions such as why the author published the media piece, what may be their intentions, are we understanding the text right? During this analysis, it's possible to focus not only on what the author said and how it's been presented, but also on what is omitted and why.

Looking at the whole medium, the researcher can consider for example a TV station as an author. In this case the whole agenda can be analysed with questions such as why a certain topic always appears on the first page.

In this context it's important to explain the term *agenda-setting*, which is media practice that aims to influence public perception of importance placed on the topics. Media gives importance to topics on the basis of their own interests instead of that of the public. *Gate-keeping* is a related concept, which refers to filtering of information. Media are deciding which information to publish, and which should stay "behind the gate".

All the methods mentioned above can be naturally combined. Hence the semiotic analysis can be for example complemented by questions seeking quantifiable answers, such as how many times certain words appear or how often the author uses biased expressions.

Comparative analysis

It's not necessary to focus on one medium or one text only. Comparison of various pieces or media is very useful as well. Researchers can choose the topic and then compare how it's been covered by several media. The questions may be what they put emphasis on, do they point out the same facts, whom they interview, where they present the topic, how much space they devote to it, what can be causes of different presentations?

This analysis can be also interesting to compare various genres and their approach to the same topic. This is especially important when analysing shifts in the meaning, for example when original satire is presented as news, or when identifying by whom and when the topic was covered for the first time.

Steps of the analysis

Step 1: Aim of the analysis, main question, and hypothesis

After selecting the topic - subject - of the analysis it is necessary to define the aim. The general aim should be the analyst's (researchers) explicit intention to collect data in such a way that they can answer the main question and verify or disprove the hypothesis.

For example: *"Aim of this analysis is to find out how the media are portraying certain topics."*

Main question is then the inquiry the analyst wants to know the answer to, e.g. "What is the relationship between ....? What is the best way to ...? What happens if ... ?"

In the context of the media, an example can be this:*"How has a certain topic been portrayed by the media during the past year?"*

After having a clear idea of what researcher wants to analyse and find an answer to, it's possible to formulate hypothesis or hypotheses.

It is a statement about the nature of a certain situation or matter in the world. It is a proposal of the assumed relationship between research variables and can also include assumptions related to cause and effect of actions.

During the research (and analysis), the hypothesis is confirmed or disproved on the basis of empirical evidence. It is not necessary, but hypotheses can be designed at the end of the pilot research.

Example of the hypothesis: *"Media are mostly portraying certain topics in a biased way."*

Simple analyses don't require creation of the hypothesis - it's enough to define its aim.

Step 2: Choosing the right method

Relevant methods for analysis of media content have been described in the previous part of this course. Choosing the right one is important, otherwise it may not be possible to find the answers to questions and verify/falsify the hypothesis. For example, semantic analysis will not be helpful at all when an analyst is aiming at finding out whether the medium is practicing agenda setting in favour of certain topics or interest groups. However, it can be complementary to analysis of authorial intent, as it can provide answers to whether reporting on other topics is biased, or not.

Please note that *comparison* of various texts from one or more sources that have been analysed using methods mentioned above helps to find the answer to the main question as well.

Step 3: Specific questions

Since the hypothesis is still very broad, the list of questions helps the researcher to analyse the media content and find enough evidence to confirm or disprove the hypothesis.

Below you can find several examples of specific questions that you can use in your analysis of media content.

1) Basic analysis

- Where and how is the reportage presented?
- Is space given to various (opposing) sides? Is the reportage biased, or balanced?
- Who are the sources/people interviewed or quoted?
- Are any expressive words used in the reportage?
- Is the headline corresponding to the rest of the reportage?

2) Advanced analysis:

- What headlines, pictures, or graphics are used and how?
- Are there any mistakes (factual, grammatical) in the media piece?
- What is the language used? Are the words neutral, or expressive? What headlines, pictures, or graphics are used and how? Are mistakes (factual, grammatical) in them as well? Are they related to the rest of a medium? (semantic analysis)
- What is the context of the media? What does it react to? Is it relevant? Does it use sources that are not relevant? (contextual analysis)

Step 4: Finding the answer

During process of finding an answer to the main question it's possible to use one, or even combination, of two approaches:

Verification – it is an aim to confirm the hypothesis, prove that something is correct. Verificationism is *"the philosophical doctrine which maintains that only statements that are empirically verifiable (i.e. verifiable through the senses) are cognitively meaningful, or else they are truths of logic (tautologies)"*[9].

Falsification – it is an aim to disprove the hypothesis, prove that something is wrong. Falsifiability means that a statement, theory or hypothesis can be contradicted by evidence. For example, the statement "All swans are white" is falsifiable because one can observe that black swans exist. *"Falsifiability was introduced by the philosopher of science Karl Popper in his book Logik der Forschung"*[10].

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[9] Wikipedia (February 12, 2021), Verificationism, Retrieved from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Verificationism
[10] Wikipedia (April 19, 2021), Falsifiability, Retrieved from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Falsifiability

Summary

In the age of advanced digital technologies, media analyses remain one of the most effective tools for discovering mis- and disinformation and distortion of media content, such as fake news. Although it's needed to use artificial intelligence tools to recognise manipulation techniques such as deep fake, application of competences from the field of media analyses provide first hints that information or media content is or may not be completely accurate. In addition, they help us to better see between (which meanings are encoded) and beyond (what are the real reasons and various influences) the lines of media messages. And first of all, these competences are accessible to basically everyone, even to those who don't have access to new technologies.

Let's not look only at media analyses as tools to discover something bad. They are also very much useful for understanding of messages that are hidden in films, theatre plays, pictures, and various visual or auditory pieces of art. Hence they can help us get a new experience when watching or thinking about, for example, our favourite movie. Last but not least, these competences would help you create your own media, making you more aware of what to avoid and what works the best.

The same topic or story can be presented in different ways by various media. This can be caused by various reasons – type of medium, focus on parts of the topic, viewpoint, genre, target groups of the media, or intention to distort the story and manipulate the audience. Other lessons in this online course provided you with relevant competences, but some important topics needed to be included in this one, such as social responsibility of media, some communication theories and models, agenda-setting, customisation, or media regulations. Those also come in handy when diving deeper into the media world and analysing it.

It's up to everyone to decide, which type of analysis is the most relevant and useful. Whether it's to be the one that is simple or advanced, focused on one media piece or comparing many of them, this course has been designed to provide overview of the necessary knowledge and support relevant skills and abilities. To provide you with more information, a list of additional useful resources is included at the end.

This course is very much different from the others, as it puts emphasis on practices. Therefore the final exercise will take you more time than the others. But do not worry, you can choose any medium so that it is really beneficial for you. Feel free to go through the theory and do the exercises as many times as you need, and do not hesitate to ask us any questions related to the topics.

Resources

List of used resources

Topic 1: What else is needed to understand the world of media?

Lang, B., Dolan, R., Kemper, J., Northey,   G. (August   6, 2020), Prosumers in times of crisis: definition, archetypes and   implications, Journal of Service Management, Emerald Publishing Limited, Retrieved from:
https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOSM-05-2020-0155/full/html

Wikipedia   (April   21,   2021),   Prosumer,   Retrieved   from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prosumer#:~:text=Aprosumer_is_an_individual,the_words_provider_and_consumer

Wikipedia (January 2, 2021), Produsage, Retrieved from:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Produsage#:~:text=Produsage_is_the_type_of,passive_consumption_and_active_production

Based on the book Surowiecki, J. (2005). The Wisdom of Crowds: Why the Many are Smarter Than the Few. Anchor Books. ISBN 978-0-385-72170-7, available online:
https://books.google.cz/books/about/The_Wisdom_of_Crowds.html?id=bA0c4aYTD6gC&redir_esc=

Carruthers   Law   (2021),   Defamation   Defences,   Retrieved   from: https://www.carruthers-law.co.uk/our-services/defamation/defamation-defences/

Little, A. (October 2, 2019), Defamation – test of serious harm, Hill Dickinson LLP, Retrieved from: https://www.hilldickinson.com/insights/articles/defamation-test-serious-harm

Legislation.gov.uk   (2013),   Defamation   Act   2013,   Retrieved   from: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2013/26/contents/enacted

Topic 2: Methods

Behrendt, Stephen C. (Spring 2008), Using Contextual Analysis to evaluate texts, Retrieved from: http://english.unl.edu/sbehrendt/StudyQuestions/ContextualAnalysis.html

Topic 3: Steps of the analysis

Wikipedia   (February   12,   2021),   Verificationism,   Retrieved   from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Verificationism
Wikipedia (April 19, 2021), Falsifiability, Retrieved from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Falsifiability

List of other useful resources

https://courses.lumenlearning.com/boundless-politicalscience/chapter/regulation-of-the-media/
https://www.communicationtheory.org/social-responsibility-theory/
https://www.communicationtheory.org/agenda-setting-theory/
https://www.publichealth.columbia.edu/research/population-health-methods/content-analysis

https://ecu.au.libguides.com/research-methodologies-creative-arts-humanities/media-analysis
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BwrnhMZT3Cc
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K2JRplnBjSk