Student Content Analysis of Business News Coverage

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Abstract

Content analysis of media coverage provided a setting for group work, critical thinking, research, and data analysis. The analysis was motivated by a series of news stories that had damaged the reputation of the local community. The question was whether local news coverage was negative toward the business community. A business class addressed the problem and found that articles that business would view as favorable predominated. Based on their research, the class formulated a public relations strategy. Although this setting is a business class, content analysis of news media would work in other classes that emphasize critical thinking and problem solving.

Keywords: content analysis, news, teaching methods

A Case for Content Analysis

A case assignment in content analysis was developed for a course titled, Contemporary Skills For Business Professionals. The course objectives stress the development of technical, interpersonal, and problem-solving skills. A content analysis assignment uses all of these skills and would be useful in many courses with similar objectives. The particular course uses a case to motivate a series of assignments involving research, student-centered discussion, spreadsheet analysis and oral and written presentations. Instructors periodically develop new cases to discourage the transfer of completed assignments from one semester's class to the next. One of the goals of the class is to familiarize the students with local business conditions; therefore, the executive vice-president of the local Chamber of Commerce was consulted for ideas. His suggestion was topical, based on a controversy brewing over local newspaper coverage.

During 2000, the York, Pennsylvania newspapers ran a series of articles on two unsolved murders associated with the 1969 race riots in York. At the time, the current mayor of York was a police officer. When he was indicted for allegedly supplying weapons to the shooters, it attracted national news coverage and generated negative publicity for the city. On June 2, 2001, a letter signed by ninety-four York County business, political, and religious leaders was delivered to the York newspapers. The letter stated that the inflammatory nature of the coverage risks impacting the reputation and economic well being of the community.

Given the controversy surrounding the media's coverage of thirty-two-year-old events, we might ask if coverage of current events is favorable to business. Bob Jensenius, Executive Vice President of the York Chamber of Commerce, suggested examining local media to evaluate whether the image that they provide of local business is favorable or unfavorable. Newspaper, television or radio coverage could be examined. Based on the students' content analysis of media coverage, they are to recommend a strategy for business in dealing with the media and public. Alternative strategies are avoiding publicity

versus seeking the spotlight?   For example, some firms publicize charitable donations; others do not.

Development of Teaching Materials

The web site that served as a reference for the course had not been updated for several years. Its author was no longer working in the area. With its format as a model, a new web site was developed for the content analysis case, http://www.personal.psu.edu/faculty/c/x/cxm53/ba321.htm   The site featured updated links to URLs on problem-solving, student-centered discussion, cooperative learning, learning styles, and other materials that focus students' attention on course objectives. The revised web site also provided new links to content analysis sites. Assignments were developed that were consistent with the original design of the course.

Student Contributions

The assignments for this case focused on newspaper coverage. In practice, content analysis involved more critical thinking and creativity than the instructor had anticipated – an observation supported by the discussion of a similar classroom technique (content, form and function outlines) found in Cross and Angelo (1993).

Through student-centered discussion techniques, the class determined the criteria for coding articles, deciding on a 0,1 notation for negativity. The discussion process allowed students to confront a variety of perspectives, explore assumptions, build a relationship to a topic, and develop critical thinking skills (Brookfield and Preskill, 1999). For example, the students had to define "negative", as well as identify pertinent terms that would allow them to apply a set of codes to written texts. This process, one of classical content analysis, produced a table in which the rows were news articles and the columns were attributes of those articles. The students defined negative coverage as anything the business would view as potentially damaging. Thus, they defined topics, rather than bias, as negative. For example, business losses, layoffs, and pollution made their negative topics list.

The 0,1 notation for negativity made possible calculating its average value. Students used the data functions of Excel, sorts and filters, as well as counts, to analyze their data. They decided to track the authors of the articles to find finer patterns in the data. They found that some authors wrote only articles favorable to business. Other authors presented specific themes and points of view. The students speculated that some of the authors could have industry employment as a goal.

The traditional spreadsheet application for the course is financial analysis. The students analyzed the financial health of selected local companies. The subjects of the comparative financial analysis were the same larger companies that appeared most often in the news articles.   Calculating financial items for local companies, such as their current and debt-equity ratios, provided background for the news.   The data analysis, associated with content analysis, corresponds to the following assignment.

Sample Assignment

Group the news articles using Excel's data functions.

Tasks

   1.Working in groups of 2 or 3, create an Excel sheet (to be used as a database) of newspaper articles on local business.   Collaborate with the other group members so that the two pairs in a group cover different time periods

   2.Include

      a. Title of article

  b. Newspaper

  c. Date

  d. Companies mentioned

  e. Pertinent data on company, such as industry, size

  f. Overall tone—positive or negative

  g. Target phrases mentioned

  h. Subject of article

 3. Re-sort these data according to each of the following criteria:

  a. Subject

  b. Company

  c. Positive/Negative tone

  d. Target phrases.

  e. Other useful sorts

  e. Use auto filter to create a table of only articles containing a specific phrase identified as positive or negative for purposes of content analysis.

  f. Use auto filter to create other useful groupings.

  i. Use the COUNTIF function to count the number of positive and negative articles

   4.Create a WORD document that summarizes the tone of news articles from the current year, referring to the results of the sorts completed for the project

   5.Using Office OLE, combine the summary document and spreadsheet operations into a single document, including at least two of the sorted results and at least two of the filtered results.

Results of the Student Analysis

Newspaper articles positive toward business predominated in York newspapers. We note that York has retained a higher proportion of manufacturing jobs than other areas of Pennsylvania. York's industrial climate is still healthy. The relative number of positive articles differed among reporters. One reporter, in particular, tended to write articles from a business' point of view.   Reporters revealed their value system in their articles and in the topics they chose. Bias was not evident.

In their final presentation before the vice-president of the Chamber of Commerce and the business editor of the York Dispatch, the students recommended that business adopt a proactive public relations strategy. They noted examples where businesses had failed to take opportunities to present their side of a story. They recommended that business provide stories with a positive theme to the press and that they open information channels to the community. Supporting that conclusion, the newspaper editor pointed out that he looks for business stories and uses material provided by businesses.

The sole African-American student in the class made an unexpected recommendation. He urged the newspapers to provide coverage of the relative success of the African-American community. He said that manufacturing positions provide them with good jobs, and that they are much better off than in other cities that he had visited, specifically Las Vegas. From his perspective, York's negative reputation, promoted by the newspapers' riot coverage, is unwarranted.

Conclusion

A content analysis case provides a rich classroom experience. Brainstorming in groups can provide terms and criteria; individuals can divide the work based on time periods or sources. The process relates to the community and to current events. Students can look into issues of bias and selective coverage. Furthermore, case analysis is well suited to group methods and creates learning that is directly tied to a local context, generating involvement, and enthusiasm about the assignment. This case assignment also engages students in group learning that involves a prioritization and consensus-building process requiring discussion in order to determine what is important. The case, the business processes, and assessment are tailored to local, unique needs.

Content analysis is research-oriented and fits naturally with data analysis. This approach uses rich, free-flowing textual analysis (i.e., qualitative analysis) followed by a rule-guided, systematic, (quantitative) process. Through the case approach, methodological strengths of both quantitative and qualitative content analysis are presented to students (Mayring, 2000) and links with critical thinking and problem-solving are strongly established.

References

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