

Content Analysis: Can Shared Indicators Improve Monitoring and Evaluation?

The Center for International Media Assistance

By Erich Sommerfeldt, Ph.D.



The Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA), at the National Endowment for Democracy, works to strengthen the support, raise the visibility, and improve the effectiveness of independent media development throughout the world. The Center provides information, builds networks, conducts research, and highlights the indispensable role independent media play in the creation and development of sustainable democracies. An important aspect of CIMA's work is to research ways to attract additional U.S. private sector interest in and support for international media development. The Center was one of the of the main nongovernmental organizers of World Press Freedom Day 2011 in Washington, DC.

CIMA convenes working groups, discussions, and panels on a variety of topics in the field of media development and assistance. The center also issues reports and recommendations based on working group discussions and other investigations. These reports aim to provide policymakers, as well as donors and practitioners, with ideas for bolstering the effectiveness of media assistance.

Marguerite H. Sullivan

Senior Director

Center for International Media Assistance

National Endowment for Democracy
1025 F Street, N.W., 8th Floor
Washington, DC 20004

Phone: (202) 378-9700

Fax: (202) 378-9407

Email: CIMA@ned.org

URL: <http://cima.ned.org>

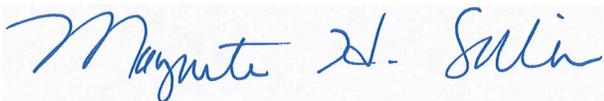
Preface

On March 9, 2012, CIMA organized a working group to discuss approaches to using content analysis within an overall framework for monitoring and evaluation (M&E). The meeting succeeded in generating a lively discussion on that topic as well as on the viability of creating a shared set of indicators to apply across media development projects.

CIMA is grateful for the valuable contributions of the working group participants. We extend particular thanks to Advisory Council Member Craig LaMay, associate professor and faculty associate at Northwestern University's Institute for Policy Research, for his skillful moderation of this important topic and to Erich Sommerfeldt, assistant professor at the University of Maryland, for serving as the rapporteur and organizing the discussion into a summary report.

We would also like to acknowledge Susan Abbott, Louis Botello, Sinclair Cornell, Klara Debeljak, Nick Oatley, Laurina Strikwerda, Maureen Taylor, and Mark Whitehouse for their insightful presentations, which informed the group's discussion and structured much of the debate.

We hope that this report contributes to the dialogue on assessing the impact of projects and measuring their effectiveness.



Marguerite H. Sullivan
Senior Director
Center for International Media Assistance

Executive Summary

On March 9, 2012, CIMA organized a day-long working group in response to stakeholders in the media development community who expressed an interest in discussing common approaches to content analysis within an overall monitoring and evaluation (M&E) framework. The working group explored the possible development of a common protocol and set of indicators for content analysis—the premise being that a more standardized approach and set of indicators might empower researchers with the ability to measure a project’s wider impact as well as to enable comparisons across different development projects. The stated goal of the group was to consider whether a shared proposal on methods and indicators for content analysis is possible—one that is general enough to be applicable in many contexts, yet specific enough to be applied and yield comparable cross-project results.

Recognizing that content analysis is likely to be conceptualized and employed in different ways across projects, the working group comprised 32 representatives from different media development implementers, donor organizations, and academic institutions. Participants gave presentations on their experiences using content analysis for media development projects in Iraq, Pakistan, East Timor, Haiti, and Kosovo. The presentations provided insight into how content analysis has been used in a broad range of media development work and demonstrated how the research tool can differ both implementation of and outcomes in M&E.

The presentations generated discussion on conceptual and methodological approaches to content analysis, the successful integration of content analysis into an overall M&E plan, and the feasibility of arriving upon a shared set of indicators with the potential to be applicable across all media development projects. While no common protocol or set of indicators were arrived upon or endorsed, a number of procedures, opportunities, and problems about content analysis received tacit support from most in the working group. Many topics were discussed throughout the course of the day. This report summarizes the presentation topics and the main themes of the resulting discussions. The main themes of the discussion can be characterized as follows:

- **Cost vs. benefits.** Participants considered the time and funds it takes to perform a robust content analysis versus the benefits of its results. While content analysis may be cheaper than other forms of research, it may consume a large portion of an M&E budget, does not produce real-time results, and may not provide as much value per data point as other methods. However, it was recognized that content analysis is a form of program quality control and a way to show to donors that programs are having an effect.
- **Limited scope of content analysis.** Discussion was given to what content analysis can actually measure and its larger contributions to media development. Some participants claimed the value of content analysis has been exaggerated by implementers and that analyzing content is a small part of effective media development. Participants agreed content analysis cannot demonstrate the actual

effects of media content on audiences. Moreover, it was argued that content analysis research must be as close to “real time” as possible to yield more valuable results. One critic of the narrow definition of content analysis stressed the need for a more innovative approach that combines traditional research on content with analysis of social sources to provide real-time intelligence about audience engagement. Such an approach will better measure the impact of a consumer’s ability to access and absorb information and a community’s ability to improve that information. Finally, the notion that content analysis should be only applied to traditional news media was criticized for ignoring alternative or social media.

- **The overall role of content analysis in M&E.** Participants recognized that content analysis should be just one part of an M&E program and that effective M&E uses a “mixed” approach that blends content analysis with other research methods. The results of content analysis are more valuable and more easily interpreted when placed in the context of other research results. One donor noted that content analysis cannot focus simply on the quality of the material, but should provide open, real-time metrics that inform media organizations about engaging their communities to make more effective adjustments during the life of the project. Participants also discussed the need for a more thorough integration of M&E into development programs, and that content analysis could be a valuable formative research tool—research conducted before and during the development of an intervention program—were it not for lack of funding to engage in formative research. On that note, representatives from donor organizations implied that proposals should demonstrate how content analysis and M&E are related to broader development goals in order to receive greater funding for content analysis *and* M&E research, formative or otherwise. How media contributes to democracy goes far beyond what content analysis can measure.
- **Building local capacity.** The presentations and discussions made clear that participants viewed capacity building as a significant goal of content analysis and other research method training. Training local researchers in a variety of methods helps media to continue with self-monitoring and evaluation after the withdrawal of assistance programs. However, participants related that donors must sometimes be convinced that developing content analysis research teams is worthy of funding, as donors likely do not perceive such research to be self-sustaining. Thus, time and thought must be given to ensuring there is a commercial value to or market for content analysis research to ensure sustainability.
- **Defining appropriate indicators.** The working group participants were uncertain as to the feasibility and practicality of a common set of indicators for content analysis that could be applicable across all media development projects. Some participants felt that common indicators might undermine the flexibility of implementers in working in contexts with idiosyncratic needs and problems. Others noted that a common set of indicators might be too closely tied to an

idealized model of Western-style journalism that is not achievable or necessarily desirable. Instead, participants argued that indicators should be based on what local journalists and practitioners are willing to do or can feasibly accomplish. Another participant emphasized the need to transform content analysis practices to include audience engagement metrics and leverage innovative measurement tools.

- **Best practices.** While the development of a common set of indicators for content analysis was not met with broad agreement, the creation of a set of best practices for engaging in content analysis research was viewed as more practical. No specific set of best practices was agreed upon or endorsed. However, based on the presentations and discussion, a set of best practices might include:
 1. determining of where and when it is appropriate to use content analysis,
 2. appropriately scaling content analysis to available resources in an M&E program,
 3. ensuring full cooperation and buy-in from local media producers on the use of content analysis in analyzing their content,
 4. identifying contextually appropriate and achievable indicators,
 5. acquiring a robust representative sample for analysis,
 6. carefully training coders,
 7. creating a clear and exhaustive set of coding categories,
 8. using content analysis to produce useful, timely feedback for program adjustment
 9. working to build local capacity for content analysis, and
 10. increasing partnerships and interaction among researchers to improve metrics and modernize approaches.

The report concludes by offering recommendations on topics for future discussion. First, it is suggested that a common pool of indicators from which projects could draw remains a possibility for future debate. Second, if establishing best practices for content analysis research is indeed perceived to be a worthy goal, future discussions among media development stakeholders and expert content analysis methodologists are needed and must include innovative, private-sector audience research firms. These firms can share their creative approaches that show real-time, effective content analysis, including information-flow tracking and semantic tools for

enhancing audience engagement. Lastly, it is suggested that extended dialogue among donors and implementers is needed to clarify the role of content analysis and M&E in future project proposals, and on how to appeal to donors' broader development goals.

Background

Content analysis is a quantitative research method used to understand both the explicit and implicit characteristics of communication messages. A body of communication messages, such as media content, is subjected to a systematized analysis to identify common patterns and themes. This reduces content to a manageable size and enables the derivation of meaning. Scrutinizing message content affords researchers opportunities to learn both about the message itself and about those who produce messages. Often, the ultimate goal of content analysis is to better understand the potential effects that communication content has on those who receive messages. Content analysis thus affords media development implementers and donors a scientific and systematic means to identify specific content features of media output.

How to assess the impact of development projects has become a significant topic of concern and debate to implementing organizations and donors alike. The impact of media assistance programs on local communities is not fully understood, nor is there common agreement on what the desired outcomes of assistance programs should be. One way in which media development implementers have attempted to assess the impacts and outcomes of their programs is through content analysis. Content analysis research has been employed by many organizations to assess the content produced by media prior to, during, and after assistance programs. However, there is no common protocol or set of indicators for assessing the impact of media development programs, casting doubt on the reliability and robustness of some content analyses, and making scientific comparisons across projects in different nations and at different times more challenging.

Given the lack of a common approach to the design, implementation, and evaluation of content analysis research, CIMA invited the working group to consider the development of a shared approach to content analysis and a more standard set of outcome indicators that could be referenced in future solicitations to donors. It was proposed to the group that developing a set of general procedures and indicators for content analysis in media development projects would more effectively measure a project's wider contributions to a particular media landscape over time. Such indicators would also enable media professionals, policy and decision makers, development agencies, implementers, and project proponents to undertake stronger cross-project comparisons on program effectiveness and identify the areas where assistance is most needed. In order to encourage debate on the possibility of creating a common set of indicators for content analysis, media development professionals who had previously engaged in content analysis were invited to present the indicators and methods used in their research.

Overview of Presentations

The Caux Guiding Principles

Presenters: Susan Abbott, Internews; Sheldon Himelfarb, United States Institute of Peace

Before the presentation of specific case studies using content analysis, the day-long discussion opened with a brief presentation on the results of working sessions on M&E for media development held during the summer of 2011 in Caux, Switzerland. The United States Institute of Peace as well as Internews, the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, the Broadcasting Board of Governors, and Fondation Hirondelle convened the workshop, which addressed evaluating media interventions in conflict situations. The results of the sessions, published in a report entitled “Evaluating Media Interventions in Conflict Countries: Toward Developing Common Principles and a Community of Practice” (available online at <http://www.usip.org/files/resources/PW77.pdf>), were offered—although not explicitly outlined or discussed—as a potential guide for the development of common content analysis indicators.

Abbott and Himelfarb explained that at the weeklong event approximately 30 stakeholders in media development, including implementers, donors, and academics, examined the difficulties of measuring media development. They noted a concerted effort was made to unpack the unique concepts of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) for conflict countries, recognizing that while M&E is discussed at many development conferences or events, very little progress is made. Similarly, they noted that M&E professionals also often discuss content analysis, but little progress is made in furthering its development because of the complexity in the conceptualization, implementation, and evaluation of content analysis research. They concluded their brief presentation by suggesting the working group consider the Caux guiding principles as inspiration for creating standards that articulate clear and universal content analysis procedures and indicators.

Session 1: Studying Diverse Approaches to Content Analysis through Case Studies

Part of the working group session was dedicated to the presentation of case examples that used content analysis in media development contexts. The next section summarizes each project’s purpose(s), key considerations, methods, and indicators in order to provide comparable information across each participating group’s use of content analysis.

FATA Insight: Media and Perceptions

Presenter: Klara Debeljak, InterMedia

The first presentation detailed collaborative research in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) region of Pakistan undertaken in 2011 by InterMedia; the Popular Engagement Policy Lab (PEPL); and Raabta Consultants (RC), a local Pakistani research firm. The purpose of the research was to explore the relationship between media and the people of FATA on governance and conflict issues. In so doing, the research was used to inform radio and magazine

content created by RC, and to provide data to other civil society organizations seeking to engage with different groups in the region. Debeljak further explained that research efforts were simultaneously concerned with building the capacity of local implementers such as RC to independently implement various research methodologies and remain sustainable.

The research was co-designed with local agencies in order to ensure that cultural norms and sensitivities were taken into account in the design and evaluation stage. Their approach to content analysis was lodged within a larger research framework aimed at investigating governance and conflict issues from both the audience and media perspective, and to capture local, national, and international media views. While the audience perspective was gained through in-depth interviews, media perspectives were captured using content analysis of radio and print news of conflict and governance-related developments.

Debeljak explained that to ensure the robustness of the research, objectivity and inclusivity were a priority. A clear coding framework was developed and used by all coders across all media analyzed, helping to minimize subjective influences. Secondly, she highlighted that all of the content related to the topics of concern were included in the sample for analysis. As a further measure of quality control, intercoder reliability assessments were conducted across coders on a regular basis. Intercoder reliability assesses the extent to which two or more coders agree on the coding of the same content, and helps to ensure the reliability of end results. Simple items were recorded such as the name and type of the media, author, and publication date. Other, more detailed elements relating to the content were assessed, such as type of violence mentioned, drivers of violence, who were the perpetrators/victims of violence, and the sentiment or tonality as it pertained to all individuals or organizations mentioned in the story.

The comparison of the content analysis data to the interview results revealed significant gaps in media reporting, specifically around provision of services on the local level, in that individual concerns about essential services were not adequately represented or covered in media. The complete study is available at www.raabta.pk.

USIP Content Analysis of Iraqi Media: Steps to Creating a Self-Regulating System
Presenter: Maureen Taylor, University of Oklahoma

Taylor discussed ongoing content analysis research she is leading on behalf of USIP in Iraq. The idea behind the project was to identify and contain the use of inflammatory terms in Iraqi media and to help media create a self-reinforcing framework and a training tool to minimize the use of terms that may incite violence. Both the manifest content (what terms were used) and the latent content (how the terms were used) of content leading up to national elections were examined.

Taylor emphasized that a considerable amount of time is needed to train coders in content analysis research, create exhaustive content categories, put those categories into operation, and establish reliability so that result of content analysis may be considered valid. First, USIP asked local journalists to identify inflammatory terms that were currently being used in media. Twenty-two terms were identified. Then, over 20 hours of discussion, the terms were operationalized and

placed into a codebook, making the definition of each as clear as possible. Scales were created to determine whether the terms were used implicitly, explicitly, or neutrally. A random sample of television programming from top stations was then analyzed by a team of Iraqi and Jordanian coders. The random sample helped to ensure that no one part of a broadcast was selected over another.

The results of the content analysis revealed that most of the inflammatory terms are used by news anchors between segments. The results, Taylor argued, provide a clear indication of where training needs to occur or where future resources should be invested. A presentation of the results to news directors of the stations analyzed was well-received, as the directors had first been briefed on content analysis as a reliable and unbiased scientific method. Directors thus became more aware of the use of the terms. Taylor explained that this encouraged directors to continue to do their own content analysis of programming. Follow up content analysis will be conducted to see if there has been a change in the use of terms.

It's Not Just About M&E: An Indigenous Media Monitoring Operation for Haiti
Presenter: Sinclair Cornell, OTI

Cornell began the presentation by explaining the Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI), as a part of USAID, works in select post conflict/disaster countries for a short period of time, typically a few years, to provide fast, flexible, short-term assistance targeted at key political transition and stabilization needs. As part of its development strategy, OTI focuses on how media can encourage such transitions. In Haiti, OTI supported research conducted by the local firm Matrix Media during the November 2010-March 2011 presidential election season. Cornell explained the rationale for the research was grounded in the recognition that as the elections approached there was little visibility or understanding of how media were discussing candidates, the political system, or the election cycle itself. An understanding of how media were commenting on the elections was thus necessary to inform OTI's programming both before and after the elections.

However, Cornell explained that television and radio stations had not archived materials, nor was there any culture of monitoring content prior to the earthquake. Matrix Media used digital media tracking software to automatically record radio and television content. Matrix Media trained a team of local sociology students to code the massive amount of television and radio programming being recorded, analyzing the context and tone of news and current affairs content. A daily report was compiled to track media content, followed by weekly analysis reports. The reports were distributed to the U.S. Embassy and USAID.

When project funding ended, the media monitoring program struggled but continued to produce reports for foundations and local business organizations. Eventually, the office of Haitian President Michel Martelly requested dedicated media monitoring reports to feed into strategic communications decisions made by the president's office. Cornell concluded by suggesting the project would have benefited initially by helping Matrix Media better understand the project objective of informing decisions on programming (rather than purely academic research). Later, it became clear that a dedicated effort early on during the project should have been made to

develop a business plan, facilitating continued sustainability of the project after OTI financial and technical support ended.

Kosovo: Strengthening Independent Minority Media

Presenter: Mark Whitehouse, IREX

IREX has a long-standing content analysis research project in Kosovo. The goal of this research has been to strengthen independent minority media, specifically Serbian-language radio and television. In doing so, IREX aims to improve business management skills, support networking among media outlets, and improve the quality of local Serbian journalism.

Working with local radio and television networks, content produced by these radio stations was analyzed to assess whether IREX's training activities are having an impact on the quality of reporting. A random sample of monthly programming was selected, and each individual story was analyzed for the use of video, graphics, inflammatory language, stereotyping, balance, and use of facts, among other items. The indicators for success were not only the quality of individual stories, but the quality of programming as a whole. Whitehouse commented on budgetary concerns and the need for consistent staffing, a consistent schedule, and intercoder reliability to ensure the soundness of results.

Individual story scores were produced, and the analysis of quarterly progress reports were used to demonstrate to funders such as USAID that the program was having impact. Whitehouse explained that content analysis research is part of IREX's larger M&E plan in the region, which also includes audience research, and other efforts to make local stations more sustainable. Additional research may help show if the improved quality of content is leading to greater audience size and trust in media.

Session 2: Is Content King and How Does Content Analysis Fit into M&E?

Unlike the first session of presentations, which focused on case examples of content analysis research, the second group of presentations questioned the rationale behind the application of content analysis, the ultimate usefulness of the approach, and alternative means to measure the outcome of media assistance programs. The following sections briefly report the comments given by the second set of presenters.

Presenter: Nick Oatley, Lurna Strikwerda, Search for Common Ground

Oatley of Search for Common Ground (SFCG) began the second session by explaining that the M&E plans of SFCG are more focused on the actual effects of development work. As such, SFCG will commonly “skip” the content analysis phase of research and go directly to audience that is consuming media. Oatley summed up SFCG's approach to M&E with three R's: research, resonance, and results. SFCG is more likely to measure the number of people reached by their programming—how many people listening or watching media. Second, they question to what extent audiences can become engaged with content or the degree to which a program resonates

with or reflects the daily life experiences of the audience. SFCG also seeks to measure the results of its programs by tracking changes in a target audience's knowledge, attitudes, or behavior.

Strikwerda then described the efforts of SFCG to measure the impact of its efforts to shift discourse in mainstream media on Muslim-Western relations on the Common Ground News Service website (<http://www.commongroundnews.org>). Strikwerda argued because the idea behind the Common Ground News Service is so large—namely to alter the discourse on Muslim-non-Muslim relations in global media—it has been difficult to use content analysis given the broad range of media in which the service's stories appear. Instead, SFCG has used measures such as the reprint rates of stories, how many languages stories are translated into, and the extent to which its content penetrates mainstream media.

Presenter: Susan Abbott, Internews

Abbott emphasized that M&E should be an integral part of development programs from inception through the life of a project, rather than an add-on near a project's conclusion. Abbott asked the group to consider the impact of the new USAID evaluation policy, and if this new policy should affect the adoption of a common set of indicators or a research method for content analysis.

Abbott commented that content analysis is only one part of an M&E plan, and that in many cases there may be better, more cost effective tools. She noted content analysis is often a useful research tool, but there are other things that require measurement. Therefore, content analysis may not always be necessary in media development work. She suggested the group consider when the use of content analysis is most helpful or appropriate to demonstrating program impacts. She further noted the distinction between programmatic M&E and more macro-level research. Abbott implied that often the larger question of media development work is how media assistance programs contribute to democracy. Answering this question, she argued, is beyond the capability of programmatic content analysis research.

Abbott noted that content analysis, with its quantitative orientation that favors objective, systematic research and clear content categories, has sometimes not been well-received or clearly understood by research teams in other countries. Content analysis is a positivistic, Western, research tool that may not translate well to those with whom media assistance programs work in other societies. Abbott articulated that content analysis provides a way of understanding the quality of news and the composition of a particular media landscape. But she cautioned against imposing Western democratic standards that may make sense to U.S. researchers, but may not be helpful or applicable to those for whom projects are designed to help. Abbott concluded by suggesting that the group consider both outcome as well as impact measures for the media development sector, noting existing indicators by Freedom House and UNESCO, and questioning if the development of a common set of indicators is desirable or necessary.

Presenter: Luis Botello, International Center for Journalists

Botello, like several of the other presenters, stressed that content analysis is only one part of the

overall M&E strategy for ICFJ. In order to assess the overall efficacy or impact of a program, many other areas besides content production must be measured. Botello mentioned several challenges that ICFJ has experienced in content analysis, using a program in East Timor as an example. As Botello described it, ICFJ arrived in East Timor to foster an independent media system where previously there had not been one. In such a case, he argued, the standards or indicators of success are far different than in an environment with a long history of media production. Indicators in a place like East Timor might include simple measures of structure and word count, while indicators in a more developed media landscape such as Pakistan might include more complex indicators of fairness and balance.

Botello also commented on the need for understanding the capacity of local organizations to engage in content analysis research. While it is desirable to use local coders in content analysis research, Botello noted that in a place like East Timor it is difficult to explain to these coders what is important to report. Moreover, in places like Pakistan, where the political system suddenly and dramatically changed, employing content analysis may prove intimidating to local media outlets and politicians. Therefore, the context in which content analysis is to be engaged should be a driving consideration in the conceptualization and implementation of the research technique.

Finally, Botello expressed hesitation about a set of standards that must be followed in every content analysis research project. Instead, he suggested that a large pool of indicators should be created from which researchers could pick and choose based on the context and what needs to be measured.

Challenges in Using Content Analysis

Between and after the presentations participants raised questions that initiated discussion about the use of content analysis in the field. Much of this dialogue was centered on the challenges of using content analysis as a research tool. The following sections organize this part of the day's discussion into representative thematic categories.

Cost of Content Analysis vs. Benefits

Much time was spent discussing the relative costs of content analysis in time and funds compared to the benefits gained from the results of research. It was explained that while content analysis may be less expensive than some other commonly used research techniques such as surveys, performing a content analysis study that will generate useful and fresh results can be quite costly when considered as part of an overall M&E budget—which are typically meager in comparison to budgets for program implementation.

Content analysis is usually only one part of an M&E plan. While content analysis is likely cheaper to perform than a large-scale survey, one participant explained the cost per data point can vary in terms of value. A project may not garner as much research value from content analysis each time it is performed. In other words, content analysis research may take a long time with many series of analyses before the true value in the research method is attained. Another participant cautioned that the costs of content analysis might quickly grow to dominate M&E budgets, but that without the inclusion of other research elements the value of content analysis may become limited.

Several factors were discussed as contributing to the expense of robust content analysis research. First, experts discussed that at least two coders—who are preferably local language speakers—must be carefully trained over a period of at least several days. More coders are needed if the sample to be considered is large and varied. Second, time is needed to create comprehensive content categories. The content to be measured must be clearly defined, with no room for ambiguity in how content items of interest should be coded. Third, there are often difficulties in obtaining a sample large enough to generalize to the population of interest. Securing a sample is often costly and stressful, particularly in post conflict/disaster situations. Media in developing countries often do not archive their content, which may necessitate the creation of archival infrastructure, adding time and expense to program interventions. Lastly, content analysis is time-consuming work. Units of analysis such as newspaper stories or television programs often must be read/watched two or three times to ensure they are properly and exhaustively coded. Without properly trained coders, a thorough coding protocol, and a large random sample the external validity and value of content analysis results are questionable.

The benefits of content analysis can include an objective presentation of results that show media content is improving. Content analysis is one clear method “to show media development has worked.” Therefore, as one participant claimed, content analysis is far preferable to anecdotal

evidence when reporting results of a program to a donor such as USAID. Content analysis was described as a way to help to make mid-program adjustments. One donor noted that metrics should be open and in real time so that the media organization can make more effective adjustments during the entire life of the project. Another participant referred to content analysis as “first order quality control,” ensuring that media intervention programs are working. If implementers can show through baseline and end line content analysis research that media content is improving in quality, it helps to validate program activities and encourage future funding.

The Limited Scope of Content Analysis

While participants generally appreciated content analysis as a means to demonstrate the effectiveness of media programs designed to improve content, they were largely uncertain about the larger role or contributions of content analysis in media development work. Participants discussed that inherent assumption of media development is that improved content will lead to a more informed and engaged audience, which in turn stimulates greater levels of social trust. In other words, it is hoped that quality media will eventually help to stimulate development and democratization. However, one participant who was largely critical of the assumptions of the working group warned that content analysis of media output is not a substitute for understanding audience interpretation of media and resulting attitudinal or behavioral changes and that there is much to learn from the private sector regarding new audience measurement standards. Another implied that attempts by implementers to demonstrate the causality between content of programs and audience response/behavior change through content analyses are doomed to fail even with better audience engagement metrics. How media contributes to democracy goes beyond what content analysis can measure.

Most participants generally agreed that content analysis research is limited to assessing the nature of media output at the time in which data are collected and analyzed. Indeed, the timeliness of content analysis research generated significant discussion. One contributor pointed out that content analysis must be as close to “real time” as possible to be truly useful, noting, “to find out what [media] were doing two years ago is not always valuable.” This same participant subsequently noted donors should not be blamed “for not funding things that are expensive but not effective.” He further argued that content analysis is merely a “piece of a third of an issue” wherein the thirds are: (1) information provided by media, (2) the audience’s ability to access and absorb the information, and (3) the community’s ability to use the information. The presumption of content analysis research, in his opinion, that the quality of the information is all that matters ignores the latter two crucial aspects of content analysis and results in incomplete data. He noted that accessible, up-to-the-minute information can improve community engagement and a project’s efficacy and wondered if it were feasible for the research experts to measure this. While some participants agreed that there is much to learn from innovative approaches by audience research firms, others argued that the private sector has different and more immediate goals—selling a product or increasing advertising revenue. Therefore, measurements cannot capture the complexity of a media development project’s high-level impact indicators, such as improving human rights or advancing democracy and good governance.

A related aspect of the discussion focused on limiting content analysis to the study of news media. One participant stressed there is significant value in and opportunity for analyzing other types of media content. She argued that implementers and donors have largely overlooked social media and alternative news as other mechanisms through which public opinion is established. Another participant agreed that development work must shift its focus beyond traditional news media, asking “is traditional media the relevant content today? It may be relevant, but not sufficient.” One way in which to overcome the current limitations of content analysis may be to look at the broader role of all media that affect or create social norms. While another expert agreed there are ways to analyze social media content that produces informative results, how to create systematic programs to improve social or alternative media content is more problematic.

Thus, while most participants agreed that there is merit in interpreting the results of content analysis, the ultimate question of the overall value of content analysis versus its costs remained. One participant’s comment encapsulated the group’s general uncertainty: “Does content analysis make the case for media development?” Put differently, the skeptic in the group asked, “Do we need to shift the paradigm [of metrics]?”

The Role of Content Analysis in Overall M&E Programs

Another recurring theme in the discussion was that content analysis should be but one research method employed in a thorough M&E plan. Experts advocated for a hybrid approach in M&E research methods, a “mixed focus” when measuring the impact of media development programs. Indeed, as one presenter highlighted, content analysis should be part of a larger research package. The results of content analysis become more valuable when considered with results from other research methods. Often, the goal of the overall M&E program is to consider if improved content leads to greater media viewership/readership. Thus, other measures of improved content must be utilized along with content analysis when evaluating media assistance programs. Real validity of project outcomes is demonstrated through the triangulation of content analysis with other methods such as focus groups and surveys. As another presenter remarked, “Content analysis is not the whole picture.”

There was also general discussion that M&E should be more intelligently designed into development projects from the outset instead of “tacked on” at the end of implementation. Content analysis was discussed as a research tool that can be used prior to the development and implementation of programs. One participant explained that content analysis could be useful in the formative stage of media interventions, to obtain a “clear-eyed view” of the situation. Participants made clear that there is significant opportunity for formative research prior to project implementation—which can be better than applying the same research techniques after the fact. However, participants noted significant difficulty in obtaining funding for formative research, explaining that evaluative research receives more attention in M&E budgets as it is used to demonstrate program effects to donors.

Moreover, a related discussion about lack of funding for M&E research in general, and content analysis in particular, prompted a participant to comment that implementers should submit

proposals that take into account the broader development goals of donors. This participant observed that implementers should “be thinking about how the project fits in the context and the space with respect to the other projects [the donor] is doing there.” The participant further implied that if implementers were to demonstrate how content analysis and M&E contribute to the grander ideals and policy imperatives of international aid, donors will be more inclined to increase funding for M&E activities.

However, this topic again triggered remarks that it is problematic for implementers to show that M&E and content analysis contribute to larger-scale development goals—goals that may be well out of the realm of what media development can attain. One participant cautioned that M&E is not capable of demonstrating such lofty achievements: “M&E is about a reality check. For you to be realistic about what you can achieve. [M&E] helps us to learn lessons. It is unrealistic to pretend that [media development] would contribute to other sectors in society.”

Consequently, while it was recognized that donors desire proposals that connect research and implementation activities to overall national development strategies, the group was unclear on how content analysis could be used for such a purpose.

Building Local Capacity

Several participants expressed that content analysis research should be designed with the ultimate goal of program-creation, and agreed that planning is required from the outset regarding the continuation of research after the life of the project, if any. Several of the presentations mentioned that capacity building was a significant goal of their content analysis or other research programs. Capacity building might entail enabling local media to continue with their own content analysis programs and develop community-specific tools to do so, for example, helping Iraqi media create a self-reinforcing framework so that content is routinely analyzed for incendiary terms that might incite violence. However, capacity building might also entail the creation of independent research teams and other media monitoring products.

One participant stressed that work must be done up front to convince donors, and in particular USAID, of the inherent value of funding research teams that perform content analysis among other research methodologies. In the case mentioned, the participant implied that USAID did not foresee the sustainability of a media monitoring research mechanism beyond the context of the development project. As such, a lack of planning on the part of the implementer meant the research team and product created during the course of the project struggled considerably after donor support ended. The participant thus stressed the need for content analysis to have a commercial value to ensure the sustainability of research teams created through intervention programs. He noted a number of clients that may find value in content analysis research, such as government, political parties, commercial advertisers, and media outlets themselves. Explaining to donors that content analysis can be a practical and viable product for local clients may be a way to gain additional funding to help ensure the long-term sustainability of research teams. Some members of the group agreed that content analysis has definite value to media development outside the scope of M&E. Indeed, the independent and systematic use content analysis outside

the scope of M&E may be one way in which research can become sustainable in development contexts. A participant noted there are other ways to look at content analysis if “you take it out of the M&E silo in the project.” This participant offered the example of an independent Ukrainian organization, Telekritika, which emerged with assistance from international media development organizations. Telekritika uses content analysis to monitor Ukrainian media in real time. Its analyses have become required reading for journalists, political elites, and civil society leaders. Telekritika, as a “media on media” institution, might provide a valuable model for building local capacity outside of the M&E framework.

Moving Forward

Following the presentations sessions, the group was asked to consider the development of “a skeleton of a metric” from which a common set of content analysis indicators could be built. The general feeling of the group was that a universal set of indicators for content analysis is not feasible, practical, or desirable. The notion of a set of best practices for content analysis research, however, was more warmly received. Both areas of discussion are presented below.

Defining Appropriate Indicators

Many participants were skeptical of the possibility of arriving upon a set of universal indicators for content analysis. One participant raised the question of whether a set of standard indicators would undermine the most important aspect of aid effectiveness: how donors and/or implementers work with unique countries and/or contexts to affect change. He explained that indicators or output measures are dependent on the nature of the project to be evaluated. In a similar vein, several members of the group expressed caution that care must be taken not to impose a standard set of change indicators that too closely reflect a “perfect” model about how Western nations believe media should work. One participant rhetorically asked if Western measures are truly reflective of what constitutes quality journalism all over the world.

Indeed, it was noted that open and free media look different everywhere, and that Western models of media are far from immediately attainable in many contexts. We should not, therefore, impose a model of idealistic journalism. One participant argued that media development implementers and donors in particular are too preoccupied with establishing an idealized version of journalism in less than ideal conditions:

“We cannot keep our mind off of the perfect model. Instead of thinking about interim steps, and what is closer to what the local country is going to do, we keep our eyes on this very idealistic situation...and we very rarely get there.”

The same participant argued that both donors and implementers should be humble about what can be feasibly accomplished through media development programs and more realistic about how far content analysis can go towards making the practice of media development more effective.

Instead, some argued that indicators should be based on what media in a developing country are willing to do. Participants claimed implementers and donors should strive to adopt indicators appropriate to the context. As one participant phrased it, there is an “issue of responding to demand from the client country ... there are different views on how things should develop. Partners may not accept standard measures.” While he further explained that measures should be scaled to the environment, he acknowledged there are general principles about journalism that may serve as a foundation to develop universal indicators.

Participants expressed that one of several hindrances to the development of universal content analysis indicators is the existing state of media in a particular region or country. One participant explained that program success looks very different in a nation with little to no media infrastructure or history of journalism than in a more-developed nation. A simple indicator such as an appropriately constructed news lead may be entirely reasonable in one context, while other, more complex measures of success “cannot be achieved in certain spaces.”

Similarly, development goals may be different in conflict or post-conflict environments, which prompted one participant to remark: “I don’t think there can or should be one standard ... it’s not realistic. Post-conflict, around elections, over time, there are a variety of ways to use content analysis. I would be leery to say ‘every program must do this.’”

The group thus agreed that measures of media development program success, therefore, might be vastly different based on the context. One set of indicators that prescribes appropriate measurement outcomes for analyzing media content is consequently not practical or desirable. As one participant described, “great work may make a different impact in different places.”

Best Practices

Rather than a standard set of content analysis indicators that should be adopted for all media assistance program, several participants said the creation of a set of “best practices” for methods of content analysis research may be the more realistic goal. Most participants felt that it is the methods, not the measurements, which distinguish quality content analysis research. As articulated by several of the presenters, content analysis requires a good deal of preparation and coding time, resources to acquire a representative sample, thorough adherence to coding standards, checks for intercoder reliability, and a meaningful interpretation of results. The group suggested that instead of mandating what projects should be measuring, a better goal would perhaps be the establishment of quality standards for the means by which content analysis research is practiced.

Many interrelated issues emerged from both the presentations and the discussion that might contribute to a set of best practices for content analysis research. No set of best practices was established or endorsed. However, derived from the participant’s presentations and resulting discussion, a set of best practices for performing content analysis research might include, but certainly is not limited to:

- **Determining the appropriate use for content analysis.** Participants stressed that content analysis should be used when it is programmatically effective and designed against project objectives. SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-oriented) objectives will guide the selection of appropriate research methods for assessment, which may not always include content analysis.
- **Scaling content analysis research to available M&E resources.** As one participant put it, “the resource question remains large” when considering the use

of content analysis. The level of resources dedicated to content analysis must be weighed against other complementary research methods used to create a well-rounded picture of project impact. Participants suggested that content analysis should focus on a few key areas that inform future training or development programs.

- **Ensuring buy-in from partnering organizations.** Several participants noted it is important to build trust and reliability between the media stations whose content is being analyzed and research teams so that research can proceed uninterrupted. One participant related that content analysis could be construed as threatening to broadcast stations, particularly in conflict or post-conflict environments. Obtaining the trust and support of media is more likely to result in the acceptance of content analysis results, as well as increasing the chance that media will use research to improve program content.
- **Identifying appropriate and achievable indicators.** What to measure in content analysis is predicated on what development programs are designed to change. Participants suggested that such measures may include simple items such as bylines or parts of effective story construction, but may also include broader features of content that are expected to have subsequent impacts on democracy, civil society, or the economy. Above all else, participants stressed that effective indicators are realistic and achievable, as well as appropriate to the context at hand. While there may be “certain markers of the professional practice of international journalism,” as one participant phrased it, such markers may be far from immediately attainable in underdeveloped media landscapes.
- **Acquiring a representative sample.** First, an assessment should be made of the population of media content under scrutiny. From this population, every effort must be made to select a random sample, so that the results of the content analysis are not likely to be skewed in one direction or the other. Random sampling helps to ensure the validity of content analysis results, and inspires donor confidence in the robustness and impartiality of implementer research.
- **Thorough training of coders.** Experts stressed that coders, who are preferably local language speakers knowledgeable in the subject area, should be trained in content analysis through several days of instruction. This thorough preparation is not only to train them *how* to perform content analysis, but also to illustrate *why* content analysis should be performed and its value as a research method. Rigorous training of coders also helps to build local capacity in research methodologies.
- **Clearly operationalizing coding categories.** Coding categories for content analysis should be based on clear project objectives: What is it that needs to be changed for objectives to be met? Local research partners should be involved

in the development of a coding protocol to take into account language and cultural idiosyncrasies. Moreover, coding categories should be exhaustively described so that items are reliably coded. Consistent checks for intercoder reliability will help to determine the exhaustiveness of a coding protocol and the validity of results.

- **Generating useful feedback for program adjustment.** Participants explained that best practice for content analysis was not only to use it in baseline and end line research. Regular and systematic content analysis throughout the course of the project can be used to make continual program adjustments. Emphasis was also placed on ensuring that research is shared with those for whom and with whom the research is performed. Indeed, one participant called this the “participatory diagnostic of the system,” in that those who are being assessed should have significant involvement in making such assessments so that research is more likely to be trusted and used to enact changes.
- **Building local research capacity and sustainability.** Much discussion was given to the value of training local research teams in various methodologies. Involving local researchers in content analysis and other research methods helps them to independently implement research projects in the future, which makes ongoing research more sustainable after the end of assistance programs. Research must be tailored to respect the capacity of local researchers, but implementers must also strive to educate these researchers in how to use the results of the research.
- **Increasing partnerships and interaction among researchers to improve metrics and modernize approaches.** One contributor took issue with the idea that there is broad agreement among implementers on the importance of content analysis, its major objectives, and basic principles. He argued in an e-mail exchange after reading a draft of the report that there are many different types of “implementers,” pointing out that the meeting only included representatives from the non-profit and public sector. Missing from the discussion were “companies and groups that are real-time, impactful content analysts, including a lot of companies building flow-tracking and other semantic tools for enhancing digital engagement.” In other words, organizations using traditional research methods for content analysis should collaborate more with private research companies and innovative analytic firms to better understand how audience’s access to, engagement with, and action on information is as important as the quality of the content.

Conclusion

In sum, the working group did not support the proposition that a common set of indicators for content analysis would be beneficial for cross-project comparisons or useful in the creation of future solicitations to donor agencies. While the working group appeared to tacitly endorse a set of best practices for content analysis, no concrete list of such practices were arrived upon. As such, the working group was generally unclear as to future steps in developing a common approach to content analysis.

That said, a number of unresolved discussion points may help to clarify the goals of future discussions on content analysis and other related issues. First, working group participants did not rule out the possibility of creating a general pool of indicators from which development projects could draw. A pool of indicators would allow the selection of appropriate indicators for the context and relevant goals, and provide some form of commonality in indicators used by development professionals. A pool would also mitigate some concern of a single standard imposed on all content analysis research in media development projects. Second, if a set of best practices for the implementation of content analysis research is indeed deemed valuable and relevant to the media development community, future discussions should be held with stakeholders and expert content analysis methodologists to solidify a common research protocol.

Last, donors and implementers take a different approach to assessing the overall value and role of content analysis and M&E in media development work. Future discussion should examine donors' expectations of content analysis and M&E compared with what implementers perceive can be accomplished and/or demonstrated as evidence of program effectiveness. Discussion is also needed to clarify how future proposals can better illustrate how project goals in general, and content analysis and M&E in particular, can be associated with the wider development goals of funders.

Advisory Council for the Center for International Media Assistance

Esther Dyson

Caroline Little

Stephen Fuzesi, Jr.

Richard Lugar

William A. Galston

Eric Newton/

Suzanne Garment

Amy Starlight Lawrence

Mark Helmke

William Orme

Ellen Hume

Dale Peskin

Jerry Hyman

Adam Clayton Powell III

Alex S. Jones

Monroe E. Price

Shanthi Kalathil

Adam Schiff

Susan King

Kurt Wimmer

Craig LaMay

Richard Winfield

Center for International Media Assistance

National Endowment for Democracy

1025 F Street, N.W., Suite 800

Washington, DC 20004

Phone: (202) 378-9700

Fax: (202) 378-9407

Email: CIMA@ned.org

URL: <http://cima.ned.org>



**National Endowment
for Democracy**

Supporting freedom around the world