CHAPTER 1. PLUGGED-IN RESEARCH

New technological and theoretical developments, along with numerous queries from students and professionals, warranted a fresh look at documents and the mass media. This book is for students and professionals who seek an integrated approach to the actual conduct of document analysis. Qualitative approaches to documents have become more acceptable as a feature of multiple or mixed methods, although qualitative analysis is often treated as a worthwhile secondary or tertiary method to use. This book reflects the dynamic interplay between substantive media research and the methodological adjustments that must be made to address new research questions. Major shifts in research and theorizing in qualitative methods and media/communication studies have contributed to the intellectual foundation of document analysis.

Consider the major shifts in research methods. Methods should be shaped and influenced by the nature of the phenomena under investigation, on the one hand, and the particular research questions being asked, on the other. The *method* of studying the mass media and our *theoretical understandings* of the nature of the mass media developed together. We will discuss each of these in turn.

First, let us offer a few brief statements about the context and prospects for developing a qualitative approach to studying the mass media. Theoretical advances and paradigm shifts have also influenced the expanded use of qualitative approaches to documents and representations of human action. Excellent overviews of changes in the assumptions about qualitative research, Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS), and challenges to working with Internet and social media data are available, although our specific focus is much narrower (Davidson & Gregorio, 2011; Gatson, 2011; Lewins & Silver, 2007). Our methodological approach to studying the mass media was closely connected to ongoing studies of the mass media themselves; we learned what was missing from conventional content analysis (to be discussed below); a different method would be required to answer the kinds of questions that we were asking of the media data. The explosive growth in academic publications, including qualitative methods books and journals, has undoubtedly contributed to the quest for more specific guidelines for specialized approaches to qualitative research (e.g., depth interviewing, life history reporting, autoethnographies, and document analysis). Qualitative methods have increasingly been embraced by disciplines ranging from sociology to education to health and nursing to marketing research. Literally hundreds of citations could be mentioned, but suffice it for our purposes to simply note the immense popularity and scholarly significance of the *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Sage), edited by

Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln. First published in 1994, this compendium of innovative approaches to qualitative research is now in its fourth edition (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Much of this shift is due to an avalanche of literature documenting and supporting the importance of understanding social meanings for actors, including social contexts, situations, and emotions. The focus on perspective and voice in a plethora of qualitative research has also supported more interest in document analysis. In the chapters that follow, we draw on four decades of research experience and teaching research methods to undergraduate and graduate students in several countries. Their routine questions and problems regarding conceptualization and data collection guidelines have guided this effort. Indeed, in a few instances, we use examples from student projects to illustrate points. The main goal is to convey a sense of the "total" research project involving documents, so that students/researchers can plan, organize, conduct, and analyze their own research projects. Although parts of the package can be used separately, there is a unifying conceptual approach that joins the parts. A related concern is to convey a sense of how this approach to research can be combined with other methods and materials to provide a more complete look at a research topic. This becomes particularly challenging as a host of new electronic information bases are becoming available in libraries as well as home computers. A number of references are included in the Appendix.

Second, changes in media and communication research approaches and paradigms contributed to the expanding interest in qualitative approaches to studying the mass media. It became apparent that traditional approaches to understanding many documents, such as the mass media, were inadequate in dealing with newer information and perspectives about how documents were constructed and the ways in which media were being shaped and used by claims makers, journalists, and different audiences. This has especially become the case with the emergence and expansion of social media (Chapter 6). The development of ethnographic content analysis (a distinctive version of qualitative media analysis) and its use by researchers was influenced by an awareness by many researchers that simply studying the content of the mass media was not enough; it was also important to be aware of the process, meanings, and emphases reflected in the content, including discursive practices. We understood from our research that there was an underlying "media logic" that guided—but did not determine—how information technology, communication formats, and media content were defined, selected, organized, and perceived and interpreted by audiences. This book is about the method that was developed from an understanding of what was necessary to investigate. A later section will discuss themes and frames, but for now we want to stress that the openness to using qualitative approaches to examine media, messages, and meanings was tied to a context.

We can provide an overview of trends in mass media research to locate qualitative media analysis. Altheide's (2009a, pp. 2–4) rendering of the changes in studies of the mass media is consistent with McQuail's (1983, p. 176; 2010, pp. 451 ff) insightful demarcation of the first three "phases of media effects":

Phase 1 (1900 to late 1930s). The emphasis was on the nature and impact of the mass media in shaping public opinion.

Phase 2 (1930s to 1960s). Attention turned to the use of film and other media for active persuasion or information, including some of the unintended consequences of media messages.

Phase 3 (1960s to 1980s). Interest in studies of media effects but with a shift toward long-term social change, beliefs, ideologies, cultural patterns, and "even institutional forms." (*Note:* This was the period of the rise of "cultural studies" approaches, [Williams, 1982], interest in structural and rhetorical uses of the mass media, and also a renewed interest in semiotics, deconstruction, and literary criticism.)

With the exception of a few works represented in Phase 3, many of the significant works examined media as content and tended to focus on individual effects—for example, voting behavior, violence, prejudice, and susceptibility to messages. It is really in the latter part of Phase 3 that attention began to shift to cultural and, especially, institutional analyses, but even here—including in some of Altheide's previous work—the focus was on content, ideology, and how messages can be "biased."

Phase 4 (1990 to 2000). A strong focus in this period was on how cultural logics, social institutions, and public discourse contribute to social meanings (Ferrarotti, 1988; Gronbeck, Farrell, & Soukup, 1991). This phase focused on media and modes of representations as significant features of social life.

During this phase of media analysis, attention shifted decidedly away from the content of communication to the role of audiences and the impact of media forms, formats, and the logic of order (Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1987, 1991). Formats of communication and control are central elements of this phase; communication modes are no longer regarded merely as "resources" used by powerful elements, but rather, communication formats become "topics" in their own right, significant for shaping the rhetoric, frames, and formats of all content, including power, ideology, and influence. In this period, significant social analysis is inseparable from media analysis. Here, the key concept is "reflexivity," or how the technology and logic of communication forms shape the content and how social institutions that are not thought of as "media arenas"—such as religion, sports, politics, the family—adopt the logic of media and are thereby transformed into second-order media institutions.

Phase 5 (2000 to the present, 2012). Two significant shifts occurred during this time. First, more academic research in communication studies addressed mediation (or mediatization) and the role of media logic throughout social life (Adolf & Wallner, 2011; Couldry, 2008; Doyle, 2003; Farré Coma, 2005a, 2005b; Livingstone, 2009; Lopez, 2010; Notley, 2009; Plesner, 2010). This phase is largely defined by the ecology of communication process involving technology, formats, and social activities. The basic idea behind media logic is that information technology and communication formats shape how information is constructed, recognized, and interpreted in social interaction according to certain media principles (Altheide 1995; Altheide & Snow, 1979). In this phase, the awareness of "social mediation" (or mediatization or medialization, etc.) became widely accepted among other media and communication theorists. While the concept "media logic" is misunderstood by many analysts (Lundby, 2009), there is now widespread acceptance of the theoretical significance of information technology, communication formats, and the general media logic, as well as more specific variants that inform human interaction and affect social activities (Hepp, 2011).

A second shift that added to the growing awareness about the importance of mediation in social life was a tsunami increase in the use of new technologies and digital communication (e.g., cell phones, e-mail, texting, Twitter). More attention was paid to cyberspace and the impact of digital media on personal identities, relationships, activities, and social institutions. This was also the period when more social science theory pertaining to social change had to attend to the role of the mass media in social and political life (Altheide, 2003; Meyer & Hinchman, 2002; Kamalipour & Snow, 2004; Norris, Kern, & Just, 2003).

In sum, the media looked much different to consumers as well as theorists and researchers. The general theory of media logic continues to be examined and explicated with specific applications as part of the ecology of communication to clarify how information technology, communication formats, and social activities—including communication styles—change. There was more awareness that methods such as ethnographic content analysis were essential to discover, clarify, and document the process, formats, and cultural meanings, and the emphasis and discourse that were being presented to audiences. We fully expect that ongoing research using qualitative media analysis will contribute to adjustments in our understanding of the varieties of media as features of an ecology of communication. This book addresses the dynamic exchange between substantive research in media and communication, on the one hand, and an adequate method for capturing important changes, on the other.

This book is intended to fill a gap in research methods between traditional "content analysis" or systematic techniques for the objective study of characteristics of messages (Holsti, 1969) and qualitative methods such as participant observation and focused interviewing. There are numerous discussions of different kinds of content analysis, both quantitative and qualitative, as well as computer-assisted content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004; Prein, Kelle, & Bird, 1995; Weitzman & Miles, 1995). Several others are listed in the reference section.

Our approach is to blend the traditional notion of *objective content analysis* with *participant observation* to form *ethnographic content analysis*, or how a researcher interacts with documentary materials so that specific statements can be placed in the proper context for analysis (Altheide, 1987). The next chapter discusses this approach in some detail, but the immediate concern is to suggest why an expanded view of document analysis is needed.

Our aim is to help researchers understand culture, social discourse, and social change. We seek to attain this goal by studying documents as representations of social meanings and institutional relations. Documents are studied to understand culture—or the process and the array of objects, symbols, and meanings that make up the social reality shared by members of a society. We agree that "qualitative analysis is a process that requires the exploration, organization, interpretation, and integration of research materials (data)" (Davidson & Di Gregorio, 2011, p. 636). For our purposes, a large part of culture consists of documents. *A document* can be defined as any symbolic representation that can be recorded or retrieved for analysis. *Document analysis* refers to an integrated and conceptually informed method, procedure, and technique for locating, identifying, retrieving, and analyzing documents for their relevance, significance, and meaning. Technology has made it possible to construct, save, retrieve, and investigate massive amounts of information. (The relevance of documents in our daily lives cannot be overstated.) Electronic documents are increasingly important in national and international affairs. Notwithstanding efforts to keep certain documents secret, retrieval systems—often run by "hackers"—can capture, analyze, and even publicize documents to reach a broader audience. This is precisely what WikiLeaks did in 2010–2011; the publication of sensitive and classified/secret diplomatic and economic documents revealed numerous state secrets and disrupted routine intergovernmental and economic communications and transactions. The implications of such document leakage for the definition of the situation become a topic of interest when classified documents are publicized, on the one hand, while their use is simultaneously forbidden in courtrooms, on the other. Broadly conceived, all research materials are potentially documents within the researcher's framework. All documents that are selected can be used as data, but not all data are documents. The meaning and significance of all documents are informed by the research perspective and act. Most human documents are reflexive of the process that has produced them. This means that the context (political and economic), medium, logic, content, format, and presentation of the material can be gleaned from the document. Moreover, any changes in one of these can change the character of the document. A researcher prefers to be aware of this process to understand the meaning and significance of the document. It is the *researcher's interest and the relevance of the document* plus its retrievable characteristic that characterize a research document. If something is relevant but not retrievable, it does not qualify as a document, even though it may be helpful for the overall project. The document has an existence independent of the researcher, although its meaning and significance for the research act will depend on the researcher's focus—that is, the document will not be transformed into "data" without the researcher's "eye" and question. Indeed, it is the research question and focus that is the major difference between mere information and data. Moreover, researchers' findings and interpretations of the document reflect a perspective, orientation, and approach.

Culture is difficult to study because its most significant features are subtle, taken for granted, and enacted in everyday life routines. Our capacity to study many aspects of culture is closely related to theoretical ideas about what is important as well as the technological capacity to capture what we would prefer to examine. Not surprisingly, these are related, because technological innovations expand some of the conceptual questions one can ask. One needs to have the vision to "see" possibilities—these are theoretical insights—but one also needs the capacity to pursue this new vision. Later sections will illustrate how a research question (or hunch?) helped researchers discover documents appropriate for a particular study.

This is also true of document analysis. The current capacity for exciting document analysis surpasses our conceptual awareness of what to do, how to do it, and how to interpret what is found. This is part of an *ecology of communication* of the structure, organization, and accessibility of various forums, media, and channels of information (Altheide, 1995). This means, quite simply, that the increased technological capacity to record and retrieve information has expanded the range of potential documents. For example, the availability of video cameras since the 1970s now makes routine interaction documentable in a way that was not readily available and affordable even with 8-mm and 16-mm film. Whether they are completed surveys, interview schedules, official records and statistics (e.g., the FBI Uniform Crime Report), a newspaper or television news transcript (CTV.ca & News Staff, 2007), photographs, text messages, e-mail reports, Facebook exchanges, blog comments, YouTube videos, or field notes, these are all documents that the researcher intends to reflect some event or activity within a sphere of interest. There are numerous information bases available for researchers to use; the documents have been pulled together electronically and can be easily accessed with a computer, including a "smart" phone. The trick, however, is to know how to explore these bases in order to discover and select appropriate documents to help answer research questions, and then be able to systematically collect relevant information. That is our challenge in this book.

There are three classes of documents relevant to researchers. First are *primary documents*, which are the objects of study. Examples include newspapers, magazines, TV newscasts, diaries, text messages, photographs/videos, and even archaeological artifacts. Most of this book is about this class of documents. Next are *secondary documents*, which are records about primary documents and other objects of research. This includes field notes, published reports about primary documents (e.g., a newspaper analysis of campaign speeches), and other accounts that are at least one step removed from the initial data sourced by a researcher or some other "filter." Diaries may also be included in this category. The last category of documents is a catchall that may be referred to as *auxiliary documents*, which can supplement a research project or some other practical undertaking but are neither the main focus of investigation nor the primary source of data for understanding the topic. It seems that we are constantly running across new auxiliary documents as new electronic information bases become available. The hundreds of blogs and commentaries on newspaper and news articles that are presented online provide interesting nuggets of emphasis that can be useful in illustrating certain findings obtained from systematic investigation of other documents. These materials are often discovered by the researcher as being relevant to understanding a particular aspect of a study. For example, the contents of a garbage can may be useful to help clarify what a news editor finds as not newsworthy, or in the case of a long-term project on consumer behavior called *garbology*, refuse can clarify actual consumer and eating behavior—for example, how much alcohol is actually purchased. If one is only studying garbage, of course, then garbage is the primary document. Footpaths worn in grass, dog-eared pages in books, and other unobtrusive indicators can become documents under a researcher's purveyance. Wearing apparel and photographs of how research subjects dress may be useful documents when combined with other data about social class, fashion, and hobbies. Similarly, Facebook "friends" could be useful in exploring friendship and communicative networks. This book will not focus on auxiliary documents except to note their importance for most research projects and to encourage researchers to look for such documents to clarify and illustrate data derived from other research materials.

The relationship of these documents in a research project can become a bit complex. On the one hand, an ethnographer studying a TV newsroom obtains data from what is seen and heard working with journalists. There may be written documents that the investigator collects, such as a reporter's notebook or copies of the station's editorial about a mayoral candidate. The latter would be treated as auxiliary documents to the researcher's field notes chronicling observations and interviews, which are secondary documents. On the other hand—and consistent with most of the material in this book—a researcher may investigate newspaper or TV news transcripts and visuals. These are the primary documents from which the researcher may collect data using a protocol or a secondary document, similar to an account of an account.

These brief remarks about a typology of documents should not be regarded as cut-and-dried in that it is ultimately the researcher's perspective and focus that makes particular documents relevant. For example, if one wished to study the interview notes or diaries produced by other researchers to understand their language and assumptions, then those notes would be the primary documents for the investigation. Regardless, a researcher would prefer to have access to as many relevant documents for a study as possible. Moreover, part of the research quest is to actually "discover" new documents that may be treated as auxiliary or supplemental to one's main focus.

A certain style of work and commitment to a research project can help a researcher accumulate numerous documents for a current project. The idea is to interrogate what one reads, sees, and explores and integrate it with research and scholarly interests. A simple way to do this is to develop what a colleague termed as a style of work and a "habit of mind," or an open-ended perspective to capture materials that are relevant to theoretical, methodological, and substantive interests, such as one's immediate research project. We are referring to almost daily collection of documents to be placed in the electronic files that researchers keep. In some circumstances (e.g., social networking sites), collecting documents daily remains an important methodological task as these "live" data materials can be removed or edited without notice. What the files might be called can vary, especially if the project is not yet clear or if the item seems relevant to a different project. For example, you may have several files called "Interesting" and "Miscellaneous." Each of these can have subfiles. We often add a few key words to items (e.g., newspaper articles, TV shows, movie clips, etc.). For example, in the next few chapters, we'll be examining some research on mass media emphases on fear as entertainment. Accordingly, many documents that Altheide collects will have key words added such as "discourse of fear," "fear of crime," "organizational terrorism," and so on. The main point is to be collecting information regularly, even after a project has been completed. Keep in mind that research projects never completely end; we finish phases for an article, chapter, or dissertation, but we often revisit the topics. Computer-aided searches can help you find the relevant articles later.

Problems With Studying Documents

Research is a social process. The social and cultural environments in which one operates as an investigator contribute to how one views research problems, data sources, and methodological approaches. In addition to political and funding "guidelines" for studying certain kinds of advertising and mass media documents, the way one studies documents has been influenced by context, particularly retrievability and access. Some approaches to the study of documents were constrained by more limited documents, information technology, mass media, and popular culture. For example, Altheide's (2002) research on the creation and promotion of fear in the mass media was greatly aided by his having access to thousands of electronic newspaper and TV news reports from around the world. Collecting text and narrative data from these reports helped identify key themes and frames (to be discussed later) of fear and how these varied with different issues and problems. Another constraint on document analysis was a positivist model of science (or objective analysis) independent of the investigator's method and theory. The latter point has been exhaustively analyzed and will not be repeated here, except to state simply that most approaches to content analysis were grounded in a tradition that equated "true knowledge" with numbers and measurement and, therefore, collecting quantitative data. (Some journalists share part of this "objectivist" view of the world [Muñoz Torres, 2007].) Assumptions were made about the media's impact on audience members, who essentially were regarded as being very passive and subject to influence by the bullet-like impact of messages. It was assumed that simply studying the frequency and pattern of bullet messages would tell us what was happening to audience members. Of course, we now know that audience members are very "active" and interpret messages in many different ways, so the impact of a message cannot be understood without examining other relevant social factors—an institution-based approach to the study of mass media (Ericson et al., 1991). However, it is still not uncommon for some students to have to justify their use of a qualitative approach to media analysis. While this book should help resolve such issues, it may also be helpful to note that ethnographic content analysis is listed as an acceptable method in *The Sage Encyclopedia of Social Science Research Methods* (Altheide, 2004b). Use of this method can also be located with increased frequency in high-quality, peer-reviewed journals (see the Appendix).

The documents subjected to analysis were also quite limited, consisting mainly of printed materials (e.g., newspapers, magazines, letters, and diaries). Information technology was significant for document analysis because of the problem of access and retrievability. This was important because the documents were limited by their own physical availability and existence. For example, only if newspaper articles could be physically stored somewhere could they be retrieved. Archives of news materials, historical documents, and records became the primary source of data. With the advent of photography, including microfilm, microfiche, and the like, a document's life and access were extended through reproduction and making copies available to libraries. Many of these materials are increasingly being made available online.

Most of the reproduction technology, rationale, and procedures were owned and controlled by bureaucracies and formal organizations. This was very important for the thrust, cost, and actual conduct of document research. For example, if a researcher in the 1940s wanted to compare the coverage of homicides over a 10-year period in *The New York Times*, he or she would have to gain access to newspaper archives at the offices of *The New York Times* or meticulously go through daily news reports just to find the news stories! This would take several months and be very expensive. Moreover, just gaining access to the materials could be very difficult, requiring permission from various individuals in the newspaper organization. It would be very unlikely for a graduate, and a virtual impossibility for an undergraduate student, to have this access. If the same project were carried out in the 1960s, a researcher could use microfiche (photocopies) of *The New York Times* in his or her own university or public library, but the project would still take several weeks just to find the homicide articles by going through each issue (if the researcher did not have access to a "newspaper morgue"). Students, however, would be more likely to have access to these materials.

Possibilities for document analysis have expanded geometrically during the past 40 years. What used to be major undertakings to conduct research can now be done by undergraduate students with a little training in a matter of several weeks. The massive changes in information technology and culture were reflected in new documents and popular culture, particularly the electronic media. No culture in history has been more recorded or replayed—but not yet analyzed—than that of North America (the United States and Canada, and now increasing portions of Western Europe) during the past three decades. The method, approach, and relevance of document analysis changed with the movies, radio, audio recordings (records), television (and later, cable TV), videos, video cameras, video recordings, compact discs, computers, computer games, and the range of message delivery systems relevant to the Internet or "information highway." More and more experience, business, news, and fun were being processed as "media" products. Popular culture became a significant part of everyday life. But what is most important for researchers is that these devices and products became more easily accessible, retrievable, and affordable. For example, using LexisNexis (one of the information bases to be discussed in a later chapter), an undergraduate student could obtain the data for a comparative crime (discussed below) in a few days.

With the integration of information technology throughout popular culture, document analysis now covers a wider range of topics than previously.

When the officials and heads of organizations controlled access to relevant documents, research was severely limited, even to the point of getting approval for a research topic! Relevance was also limited by the documents that were retrievable. Since archival records were the only available source of data, it severely limited what could be studied, and with the exception of some studies using personal letters and diaries, most research using documents available at the time would have benefited substantially from other sources of data that were not so readily available. These information bases make more culture and history available for research.

Culture is more available to document analysis today partly because the electronic and information technology revolution that is the source of such research is also the single greatest contributor to cultural change. Because of cable TV, syndicated reruns, videotape, and, above all, the Internet, it is now possible to study the same television programs today that had a major impact on how American families thought about themselves (e.g., Ozzie & Harriet) in the 1950s. Indeed, it is partly because such materials are on "record" and have been studied as cultural documents that we have a better understanding of the impact of popular culture on "nostalgia," "cultural myths," and our sense of the future (Combs, 1991). These historical materials are now used for teaching purposes as well. For example, Stephanie Coontz (1992), an authority on the history of the family—especially perceptions of the family as in "the good old days"—refers to TV and movie nostalgia as examples of popular distortions about family life in an earlier period. Another, more general, example might include a website like The Sociological Cinema, a site created and edited by a group of graduate students at the University of Maryland. The site includes an archival collection of videos, including news clips, useful documents to illustrate sociological concepts in the classroom. The upshot is that some familiarity with document analysis is useful not only for research questions but also for a kind of cultural self-awareness. Because most of the relatively new information technologies are based on visual and aural (in addition to literal or narrative) materials, we present several illustrations of conceptual and data-gathering approaches appropriate for these documents.

Information technology has opened up a potentially enormous source of new documents for investigation of culture, but this entails adjusting views of documents and their significance as well. A related concern is how changes in information technology, such as computer applications, can direct how we approach documents, rather than complementing an approach that may be more theoretically informed. For example, there is a growing supply of computer programs (e.g., CAQDAS) for qualitative document analysis (e.g., NVivo, Ethnograph, MAXQDA, etc.) (Lewins & Silver, 2007). These products have surfaced not only because more qualitative-oriented researchers provide a potential market but also because working with text materials is very demanding, cumbersome, and seldom as precise and systematic as working with quantitative data. We note in a later chapter that such reliance on software that is mainly oriented to helping one code data is not always fruitful for cogent and creative analysis. For that reason, there is very little material in this book about software applications.

An Approach to Document Analysis

The materials in this book are oriented to the analysis of multiple documents rather than one in detail. Although single-document analysis is not necessarily incompatible with multiple-document analysis, historically there has been a much different emphasis. The approach to examining single documents (e.g., a movie, a novel, or a McDonald's restaurant) is called *semiotics*, or the study of signs. There are a number of detailed accounts of the use of semiotics in social science research (Berger, 2005; Manning, 1987; Manning & Cullum-Swan, 1994). Such studies focus on depth, and unlike the kind of document analysis we deal with in this book, the critical emphasis is on trying to unravel the author's assumptions, motives, and intended outcomes as revealed by analysis of the document. Manning and Cullum-Swan (1994) capture the orientation of a semiotic task, especially if guided by an interactionist perspective, in the following:

> Reading entails an audience. . . . Reading is done by scholars, critics, other writers, reviewers, historians and related intellectuals. The serious critic intends to reconstruct the process of writing, reading, and reflection and to ruminate upon, according to the conventional canons of taste and the genre, the quality of the writing. The critic's task is to place the writing, the text, and its readings into alternative contexts or fields, or to recode the text. Adequate criticism should enable others to "penetrate" the author's intent and the tenor of the times within which the text existed, to strip away lies and stylistic obfuscations, and to discover therefore the deeper or "real" meaning of a written product. (p. 468)

As with most research approaches, any attempt to look backward from a text toward the author's motivation is replete with problems, especially if the author lacks an awareness of and familiarity with the historical, cultural, and organizational contexts (Manning & Cullum-Swan, 1994):

> The interpretant, perspective, or standpoint of the observer from which the system is constructed must be identified in social and cultural context. In this sense, a social semiotics requires (or assumes) a rich ethnographic texture within which the semiotic analysis can be socially embedded. (p. 470)

It is best to approach a study with awareness of relevant information or experience. This comes from immersion in the social setting if one is conducting a conventional fieldwork ethnography. But it can also come from immersion in documents, as in ethnographic content analysis.

Our approach to document analysis is derived from a theoretical and methodological position set forth by George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer, as well as by Alfred Schutz (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Schutz, 1967) and others. There are three general points that inform the chapters to follow. First, social life consists of a process of communication and interpretation regarding the definition of the situation. The symbolic order we join as infants infuses our own view of our self, others, and our future.

Second, it is this communicative process that breaks the distinction between subject and object, between internal and external, and joins them in the situation that we experience and take for granted. Our activities are part of the social world we study and are "reflexive," or oriented in the past to what has gone before as part of the relevant process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983). We try to be aware of this process by being reflective of the overall process, although this orientation could also be said to be reflexive of a theoretical orientation, including assumptions about science and order. Third, the notion of process is key because everything is, so to speak, under construction, even our most firmly held beliefs, values, and personal commitments. What we consciously believe and do is tied to many aspects of "reality maintenance"—of which we are less aware—that we have made part of our routine "stock of knowledge."

This is also true of the research process in that it takes place in a historical–cultural context. This means that all research is a social activity. That is, research methods develop in and are influenced by a social context. Finally, research methods and data are derived from a theoretical position about how the world (reality) operates. This means that one selects a method to study certain kinds of data to answer a particular question because there is "reason" (or theory) to believe that the method is appropriate for the data and question in mind. Consequently, a faculty member probably would not ask for students in a classroom to raise their hands if they thought he or she was a poor instructor! (At least, there may be some question about "validity"!) Moreover, as ideas about how the world operates change, so too do our approaches to studying the social world.

The general methodological stance is called analytic realism:

> "Analytic Realism" is based on the view that the social world is an interpreted world, not a literal world, always under symbolic construction (even everyday life is informed by social contexts and uses of evidence). As originally formulated, these five dimensions of qualitative research include problematic issues pertaining to validity. Indeed, we argued that the "ethnographic ethic" calls for ethnographers to substantiate their interpretations and findings with a reflexive account of themselves and the process(es) of their research.
>
> (1) the relationship between what is observed (behaviors, rituals, meanings) and the larger cultural, historical, and organizational contexts within which the observations are made (the substance);

> (2) the relationship between the observer, the observed, and the setting (the observer);
>
> (3) the issue of perspective (or point of view), whether the observer's or the member(s)', used to render an interpretation of the ethnographic data (the interpretation);
>
> (4) the role of the reader in the final product (the audience); and
>
> (5) the issue of representational, rhetorical, or authorial style used by the author(s) to render the description and/or interpretation (the style).
>
> Each of these areas include questions or issues, which must be addressed and pragmatically resolved by any particular observer in the course of his or her research. (Altheide & Johnson, 1994, p. 489)

In broad terms, these assumptions are consistent with the symbolic interactionists' perspective, which includes a focus on the meaning of activity, the situation in which it emerges, and the importance of interaction for the communication process. Some important concepts relevant to these considerations are context, process, and emergence. *Context*, or the social situations surrounding the document in question, must be understood to grasp the significance of the document itself, even independently of the content of the document. In this sense, archaeologists spend a lifetime trying to understand the nature and cultural meaning of an artifact, some of which any child of the group could explain to them.

Studying documents of our contemporaries or our own lifetimes makes the problem a bit more manageable. For example, one of the most important things to understand about newspapers and TV newscasts is that they are organizational products. This again suggests the importance of *process*, or how something is actually created and put together. Newspapers and TV newscasts are put together according to a routine, and there is a complex division of labor, with deadlines. For example, due primarily to entertainment values, TV news formats are oriented to visually exciting and dramatic events, but these can only be filmed (taped) if the crew can know about them before the event occurs or can get rapid access to them (e.g., taping a drug bust). Not much detail is necessary. Few local reports will last longer than 90 seconds because TV news organizations assume that few viewers want details or indeed have an attention span to warrant more information. So news reports are very brief.

Coverage of news events has to be scheduled according to the availability of film crews, although the advent of "smart phones" with photographic capability enables citizens to take visuals (photos and videos) of events and activities that can be forwarded to news organizations. Indeed, many news operations now request viewers to provide them with visuals. Civilian materials about some domestic and especially foreign news (e.g., wars, riots, etc.) are often all that is available to news organizations where professional journalists are not permitted. These are used often by news organizations, although it is not uncommon for them to appear initially on YouTube or other nonjournalistic Internet sites. Indeed, sometimes these visuals become an unplanned news story, for example, videos of police misconduct posted to sites such as YouTube. (We will discuss in another chapter how to study these sites and videos as either primary or auxiliary documents.) Moreover, some of the major U.S. television networks (e.g., NBC) routinely broadcast YouTube photos/videos that have been widely viewed—suggesting a lot of audience interest—especially if they are about animals (e.g., dogs or whales). There is no conventional news value to these telecasts, but they are entertaining, and after all, that is one of the most important considerations for news organizations.

This general awareness greatly informs the nature of the work that must be completed before a TV report or a newspaper can even be studied by a researcher. Ideally, any researcher investigating documents such as newspapers or TV newscasts would be familiar enough with the context and process of each to adequately consider the relevant aspects of a news report, including having the knowledge to rule out erroneous explanations of news content. For example, numerous studies of local and national media essentially rule out the importance of a reporter's personal bias in reporting news; this does not mean that there are no exceptions, but for the most part—and quite contrary to many views held by both left and right critics of news content—personal bias plays a relatively minor role in shaping news (see the Appendix). Of course, there are now more TV networks and programs that are admittedly politically biased. One of the prime examples of this writing is FOX TV, whose chief operating officer, Roger Ailes, worked as a media consultant for Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and George Bush (Ailes & Kraushar, 1988). No network in the United States was as explicit in stating its political orientation as FOX TV:

> Ailes likes to boast that Fox News maintains a bright, clear line between its news shows, which he touts as balanced, and prime-time hosts like O'Reilly and Hannity, who are given free rein to voice their opinions. "We police those lines very carefully," Ailes has said. But after Bush was elected, Ailes tasked John Moody, his top political lieutenant, to keep the newsroom in lockstep. Early each morning, Ailes summoned Moody into his office—often joined by Hume from the Washington bureau on speakerphone—and provided his spin on the day's news. Moody then posted a daily memo to the staff with explicit instructions on how to slant the day's news coverage according to the agenda of those on "the Second Floor," as Ailes and his loyal cadre of vice presidents are known. "There's a chain of command, and it's followed," says a former news anchor. "Roger talks to his people, and his people pass the message on down." (Dickinson, 2011)

While there are politically oriented talk and comedy programs on other networks (e.g., Comedy Central, with FOX TV's *The O'Reilly Factor* inspiring the popular Comedy Central program *The Colbert Report*, and MSNBC) in the United States, there is no other network dedicated to a political position, although many other countries have an explicitly partisan press, often aligned with a political party. Consider, for instance, the 24-hour news channel the Sun News Network, introduced in Canada in 2011. The TV channel has been referred to as "Fox News North" (Korducki, 2011) and "Fox-lite" (MacDonald, 2011) in *The Globe and Mail*, Canada's national newspaper of record. Conservative Sun News pundit Ezra Levant, host of the evening television talk show *The Source*, has described the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), Canada's public broadcaster, as "'Pro-Taliban,' 'pro-terrorist,' 'PR agency for terrorism,' 'mooches,' 'a national disgrace,' 'crazy,' 'radical,' and 'off-the-hook partisan'" (Doyle, 2011). Considerations of an explicitly partisan press, of course, can inform how a researcher selects document sources.

Context and process are also important for the meaning and message of a document. These meanings and patterns seldom appear all at once, however; rather, they *emerge* or become clearer through constant comparison and investigation of documents over a period of time. It is because documents provide another way to focus on yet another consideration of social life—emergence—that they are helpful in understanding the process of social life. *Emergence* refers to the gradual shaping of meaning through understanding and interpretation. We use documents to help us understand the process and meaning of social activities. This is very significant in organizations for workers who can use documents as a resource. It is also significant for theoretically informed social analysts, who understand that what people do and how they behave are influenced (but not determined) by their definition of the situation. Symbolic meanings are very important in this process. As we understand the processes used in the production of news or public accounts of social order and disorder, we are able to clarify why the news is what it is and that news content may be as much influenced by the organization of the news process as it is by the events it claims to be about (see the Appendix). For example, is crime rampant, or is crime covered constantly because of certain organizational and ideological orientations of news producers? Fortunately, numerous studies of the news process have clarified some of these issues, and they are reflected in the suggestions for how to study news reports in the following chapters.

It is the interaction between the reader, viewer, or listener of a news report and the news report itself that is important. This may include the situation in which the report is read, seen, or heard—for example, riding a commuter train or sitting alone in one's own living room watching television. The audience member brings experience (context), interest, and degree of awareness to the report, and the complex interaction of these provides the meaning of the report and, therefore, its significance to the individual. The same news report (e.g., of a tax increase) will draw different reactions from various readers, and indeed, the report itself may be interpreted quite differently. It is the message in interaction with the audience member (who has a history and context of experience) that provides the meaning of the report for that particular individual.

But then, why study documents? If one is not interested in the immediate impact (as a bullet) on an audience member, why waste time in carefully investigating documents such as news reports? This is a very important question that requires a complex answer. Interest is not primarily in the immediate impact of messages on some audience member but rather in two aspects of the document: (1) the document process, context, and significance and (2) how the document helps define the situation and clarify meaning for the audience member. We want to show how this works. First, studying documents for, say, political bias would be relatively simple if all information sources (e.g., newspapers, TV, Internet sites) were like FOX TV in the United States or Sun News TV in Canada. The impact on audiences would also be less problematic because FOX TV very narrowly adjusts its content to what the audience expects. While this is somewhat true of all mass media, FOX TV does so quite meticulously:

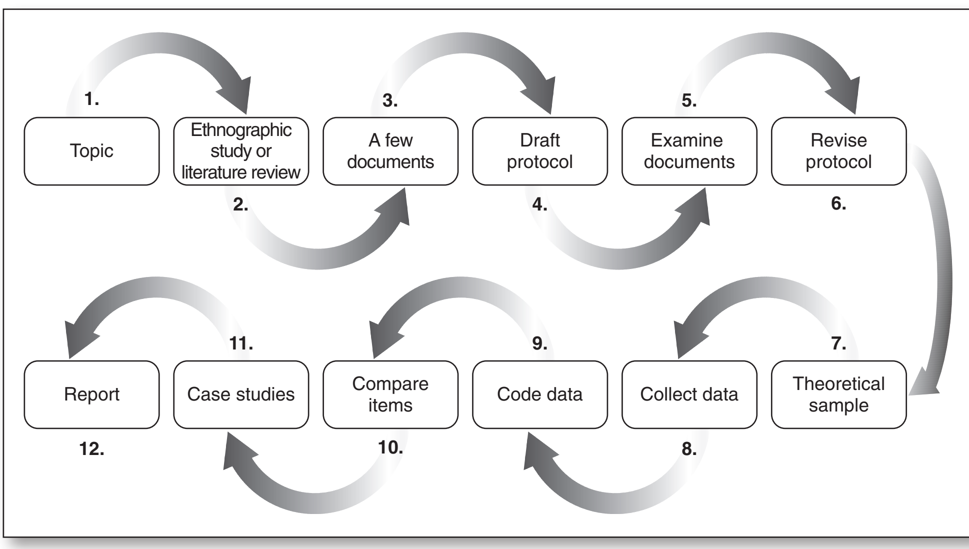
> The network's viewers are old, with a median age of 65: Ads cater to the immobile, the infirm and the incontinent, with appeals to join class action hip-replacement lawsuits, spots for products like Colon Flow and testimonials for the services of Liberator Medical ("Liberator gave me back the freedom I haven't had since I started using catheters"). The audience is also almost exclusively white—only 1.38 percent of viewers are African-American. "Roger understands audiences," says Rollins, the former Reagan consultant. "He knew how to target, which is what Fox News is all about." The typical viewer of Hannity, to take the most stark example, is a pro-business (86 percent), Christian conservative (78 percent), Tea Party-backer (75 percent) with no college degree (66 percent), who is over age 50 (65 percent), supports the NRA [National Rifle Association] (73 percent), doesn't back gay rights (78 percent) and thinks government "does too much" (84 percent). "He's got a niche audience and he's programmed to it beautifully," says a former News Corp. colleague. "He feeds them exactly what they want to hear." (Dickinson, 2011)

Second, documents are very relevant for audiences' views, themes, and narratives—or common stories—of the world and for the language and symbolic meanings and images that are associated with certain problems and issues. As noted previously, our perspective on documents has been quite limited by narrow approaches to method and data. The focus of many of the earlier approaches was the individual actor. This remains important, but in more recent years, the view has been greatly expanded to include the "effective environment," or the everyday physical and symbolic reality in which people live. Messages and mass-mediated communication work like this: Broadly conceived as "cultural studies," this approach seeks to examine the complex interaction between individual perspectives and patterns of meaning and symbolic ordering to understand new sources of social definitions and sort out their consequences. The mass media and the rest of the popular culture industries are now worldwide, just as our growing awareness of the penetration of information technologies into everyday life and discourse has sensitized us to the power of symbol systems, reality industries, and a host of new realms referred to as cyberspace, hyperreality, and the like. What we want to know is how these influence social definitions and social lives. An expanding array of potential documents to investigate has provided new understandings associated with intellectual developments, including critical theory, cultural studies, and postmodernism. Research suggests, for example, that information technologies and logics guide the content of many aspects of culture, in an expanding ecology of communication that views an activity (e.g., news presentation) as the information technologies and communication formats that govern that activity. Our awareness of what may be called *hyphenated activities* (e.g., "TV-entertainment-spectacle-news") has led us to a new appreciation of documents as texts that are interpreted and used by audience members.

The nature of the "text process," from its initial production to its internal organization to its "use" and meaning for an individual, is but one of the challenges for students of culture. We all grow fond of metaphors, but the problem with them is that through repetition they become much more real and taken for granted. For Forrest Gump, "life is like a box of chocolates"; for some analysts, "life is like a text." The suggestion is that the metaphor text, which is enacted when an individual interprets a symbolic representation in a specific situation, can also be problematic. *Text*, a term borrowed from literary criticism, is a helpful metaphor, but it can also be limiting if misused and universally applied by fiat to all of social life. Many analysts, hungry for a new conceptual handle for complex phenomena, have grasped text, but it, like the positivists' objective reality, will crumble as our insights into even better and richer analytic modes are discovered. In this sense, traveling through culture and hyperspace today is a discovery process for ourselves. Just as many "younger" people today derive news and views about world problems and issues from their communication environment *without* reading a newspaper or watching a complete TV newscast, researchers must learn to recognize patterns, themes, and even certain discourses that reappear within and across information channels (e.g., news, entertainment, music, sports, fashion) and information technologies (e.g., popular magazines, the Internet/webpages, theaters, DVDs, iPods). Emergence is all we have for certain, but this means that any author's attempt (our own included!) to chart a course through the territory can be compromised, less by poor navigation than by the changing nature of what we are traveling over, through, or in. After all, cyberspace and hyperreality did not exist a few years ago.

These considerations inform an approach to documents. Some guidelines for understanding the context of discovery in documents, the process or life cycle of a document, and the use and meaning of that document are presented in Figure 1.1. Although this process will be revisited in Chapter 3, the general flow moves from an original idea about a topic to some ethnographic materials about a relevant or related setting, context, or culture. These initial steps are intended to help clarify what the problem to be investigated is, or what the "research question" is, as well as what is the appropriate unit of analysis from which to collect data. By unit of analysis we simply mean how large a chunk of a document matters. For example, are we focusing on individual news reports or on certain scenarios and themes presented in the report? If the former, we would look for specific news articles, but if the latter, we might focus on a few articles that have several scenarios or themes within them. Step 3 entails actually examining a few relevant documents with this awareness in mind and then, following Steps 4 through 12, drafting a protocol for data collection, coding, and analysis and drafting the report. A protocol or data collection instrument

Figure 1.1 The Process of Qualitative Document Analysis



Source: Created by Roisan Rubio specifically for use in this book.

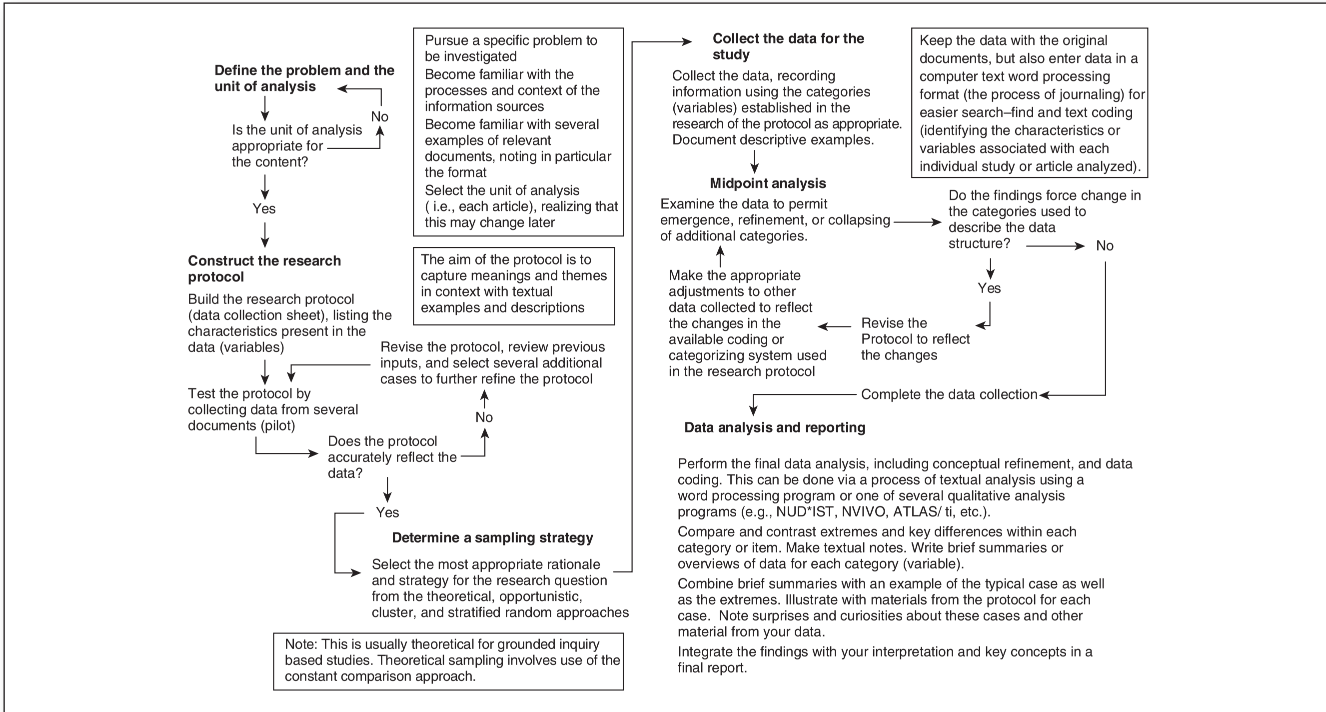
helps query the unit of analysis in an appropriate document. The challenge is to be able to ask the "right" questions that will provide the data necessary to help answer our research question. This is a very inductive process, meaning that we read a few sample articles (or whatever the documents are) and derive some questions on the protocol that will help us get that information. Then we have to check the data collection sheet with a few more examples of data to see how it works.

A flow chart of the process is also provided (Figure 1.2). This shows key steps, links, feedback, and emergence as a qualitative project unfolds. Basically, we need to define the problem (our research question or interest) and make certain that what we are studying—collecting data from—is appropriate; next, we construct a data collection sheet or protocol to guide our inquiry; then, based on our understanding of the unit of analysis, we determine the best sampling strategy, or which documents we want to select and how. We will discuss this in more detail in a later chapter. Moving along the research process, we then actually collect the data on the protocol (data collection sheet), but we also keep the original data (e.g., a complete newspaper article) in a file that we can access later. After several protocols have been completed, we will then review the materials, especially the data collection sheets (which will probably also be in a computer file), to be certain that we are obtaining the kind of information necessary to help answer our questions. This might entail revising or adding items or dropping them from our protocol. The final step in answering the research question is to code or organize the data that have been collected, summarize and group these in appropriate ways (this is where qualitative software can come in handy), and begin making some descriptive statements about what we have. These statements will then be the basis for a more elaborate writing of the research report. We will examine these steps in more detail as we proceed.

Documents, then, enable us to (a) place symbolic meaning in context; (b) track the process of its creation and influence on social definitions; (c) let our understanding emerge through detailed investigation; and (d) if we desire, use our understanding from the study of documents to change some social activities, including the production of certain documents!

The following chapters are organized to provide some procedures and rules of thumb for conducting document analysis. Materials from our own or students' projects involving primarily print and television materials will be used to illustrate the steps of this research approach. Following the next chapter's comparison of traditional quantitative with ethnographic (or qualitative) content analysis, Chapter 3 provides an overview of the steps in qualitative document analysis and the role of the research task and perspective in various sampling strategies. Chapter 4 incorporates some basic information about information bases in developing protocols and data collection

Figure 1.2 Flow Chart for Qualitative Document Analysis



Note: This is usually theoretical for grounded enquiry-based studies. Theoretical sampling involves use of the constant-comparison approach.

Source: From Huffam, C.J. (2011). *Through the Looking Glass sideways: An Application Guide for the Eightfold Path model.* Paper 11066 in the Proceedings of the 32nd Interservice / Industry Training and Simulation in Education Conference (I/ITSEC), Nov 29th–December 1st 2011. Orange County Convention Centre, Orlando FL. USA: National Training and Simulation. Association.

instruments for printed documents. Extending this approach to television and other visual and electronic documents is the focus of Chapter 5, whereas Chapter 6 delineates how social media might be studied and incorporated into a qualitative research design. Chapter 7 provides a brief illustration of the approach and advantages of using computer information bases for tracking discourse. Chapter 8 examines field notes and other research materials as documents that can be analyzed more powerfully using the document approach discussed throughout this book.