

The News-watch Methodology

News-watch implements a range of robust analytical tools in its study of news and current affairs output, based on firmly-established academic principles, and involving both quantitative and qualitative components.

The bedrock of the approach is that a selected group of programmes are viewed or listened to in their entirety for a set period of time. A detailed log is compiled, with comprehensive information on all the news items broadcast, their running times and full details of those who contributed, including presenters, correspondents and guest speakers. Individual reports of interest are then fully transcribed and further information is entered into a customised database. This database is constructed around a coding frame piloted during News-watch's early studies, and collates information on each programme item and contributor, including the number of words spoken by interviewees. This data is used to provide statistical information on the programmes being sampled; the transcripts become the focus of a detailed textual analysis, which focuses on theme, approach, tone and content.

Many inequalities – particularly those which develop over an extended period – are impossible for viewers and listeners to perceive by simply watching a television programme or listening to a radio broadcast. Without a rigorous monitoring framework, discussion of media content can rarely be sustained beyond the speculative or impressionistic. **Quantitative research** techniques – specifically content analyses – are able to confirm or disconfirm intuitive impressions, through the analysis of specific recurrent elements within a large number of media texts.

News-watch's analysis measures a number of quantitative variables: how much airtime is given to a particular issue or subject compared to other areas of news; the prominence of particular stories within a programme's running order; and to investigate which voices are allowed most access to a given debate. Data is cross-referenced with earlier investigations to identify long-term trends. The theoretical concept of most relevance here is that of 'agenda-setting' - the hypothesis that while the media may not tell audiences what to *think*, it may tell them what to think *about*.¹ Quantitative analysis allows News-watch to establish exactly how much time and space is being devoted to specific themes during particular periods, and which arguments are being given precedence in on-air debates.

Qualitative research methods are less concerned with the statistical measurement of frequency, and more with the matter of how individuals and groups understand and construct meanings from particular media texts. A number of distinct properties may be assessed, including: the overall thematic structure; how interviews are framed using introductions, correspondent reports and soundbites from

¹ Jensen, *A Handbook of Media and Communication Research*, Routledge, 2002, p.146

other speakers; the quality of editorial judgment and content; the lexical decisions of journalists and presenters; and the interplay between interviewer and interviewee. When the monitoring schedule involves televised material, it is also possible to consider how visual signs - camera angles, locations, lighting and graphics – can combine to create a particular meaning. Attention must also be paid to how a particular text operates in its wider context, whether as a component part of an individual programme, as part of a series of reports on the same theme across a number of programmes, or its place within wider social and political discussion and argument, including other media.

Contemporary media studies theory indicates that only by using a number of different analytical tools in tandem can a series of texts be fully and properly assessed, and that when quantitative and qualitative techniques are used in combination, the resultant analysis is invariably stronger.²

News-watch has worked consistently to ensure that its research methods are fair, equitable, thorough, replicable, and take into account new developments in media theory.

² Deacon et al, *Researching Communications*, London, Arnold, 1999, p.134