Tools 3: Textual Analysis and Media Research

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Introduction

In the preceding chapters we have explained what textual analysis is and why you might do textual analysis. In this tools section we want to show you how textual analysis is undertaken, some of the ways in which texts can be analysed, and some tools to help you make your textual analyses.

Where does textual analysis come from?

As you saw in Chapters 9–11, textual analysis comes out of the work of theorists known as the French structuralists in the 1960s—particularly the work of Roland Barthes (1915–80). Barthes believed that any kind of popular cultural product could be ‘decoded’ by reading the ‘signs’ within the text. It is one of the primary tools media researchers use to understand how meaning is made from media texts.

As media theorist McKee (2003:1) puts it:

> Textual analysis is a way for researchers to gather information about how other human beings make sense of the world. It is a methodology—a data-gathering process—for those researchers who want to understand the ways in which members of various cultures and subcultures make sense of who they are, and of how they fit into the world in which they live.

Textual analysis is also the perfect starting point for somebody writing a news story, analysing a public relations (PR) campaign or developing a television series—and an effective way of assessing, comparing and understanding media texts. It is something we all do instinctively, to some extent, but if you follow these steps, textual analysis can become a skill that as a person involved in media, journalism, business or public life more generally, you can use to understand why certain media texts are successful or subversive or popular.

Ultimately, textual analysis is a toolkit for examining the media, applicable to very simple media forms (such as advertisements), up to more complex forms such as news narratives, television series and films. It is also a toolkit for media practitioners who want to convey a certain message or try to convince audiences to think in a certain way. There should be something here of use to you, regardless of your future career in media.

When we perform textual analysis on a text, we make an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text (McKee 2003:1).

The most important thing to note is that this is an educated guess: that is, informed by research and utilising the tools outlined below.
What is structuralism?

Structuralism is a French intellectual movement, commencing with the work of Ferdinand de Saussure in linguistics, that was subsequently used as a model in anthropology, psychoanalysis and literary theory. Structuralists include Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan and Claude Lévi-Strauss.

Structuralism seeks to analyse social structures (such as language and narrative) to determine the structures that underlie them. Such structures often take the form of binary oppositions (hot–cold, being–nothing, culture–nature), which can then be broken down into units (such as signs), codes and rules. In this way all meaning that is contingent as meaning depends on difference; it depends on the relationship between two concepts (such as hot and cold—we cannot know one without knowing the other). Structuralism therefore forms the basis of semiotics and our form of textual analysis.

Is this the only form of textual analysis?

It is also worth noting that there are many different ways of defining ‘textual analysis’. For example, when US Supreme Court Judge Antonin Scalia, refers to the textual analysis of America’s Constitution he is referring to having regard to the original intentions of the drafters of the Constitution, something completely at odds with the ideas of polysemy and ‘the death of the author’ we’ve presented in previous chapters.

Our form of media studies follows the form developed by fellow media and cultural studies theorists such as John Hartley (1999) and Alan McKee (2003).

There are basically three important things to remember about this form of textual analysis:

- As in Chapters 9–10, it involves a new and unique vocabulary. Don’t panic! While the terms may be unfamiliar to you, the practices they describe won’t be, because you are engaging with them every day.
- As with other media tools, you will find different uses for different tools in different situations. Not every tool is applicable to every text. They are here to help you make meaning. Use only the ones you need to make a persuasive and compelling argument.
- Practise using these tools on the media you encounter in your daily lives. The more often you use them, the sooner you will feel comfortable applying them.

Why textual analysis differs from the other tools in this book

Generally the tools in this book are practical applications of some of the concepts presented in the preceding chapters. They are skills we most often label as ‘journalistic’ but are, in fact, transferable to a number of occupations. Textual analysis differs from these other tools in that it is a mixture of **theory** and practice.
The way we study the relationship between media, culture and society is by applying theory, and for the purposes of this book we define theory as being ‘a critical reflection on the actual world.’ Furthermore, theory in itself is not an evaluative term. What makes one theory ‘better’ than another, or more persuasive than another, or having what we may term more academic rigour than another are two further factors: methodology and evidence.

The basics of media research: research, methodology and evidence

Theory
You start with a theory: a critical reflection on the world that takes the form of a rule, idea or principle that applies to a particular subject that you want to test.

Research questions
The theory you choose becomes the basis of your research question(s), which might include, for example, ‘How can this text be understood?’ ‘Why is it popular’, and ‘How does it relate to other media texts?’

Methodology
A methodology is a technique designed to answer such questions: a systematic way of producing knowledge, involving both the production and analysis of data. A methodology is a way of testing, accepting, developing or rejecting theories.

Textual analysis (see Chapter 9) is one such methodology for testing and developing the theories raised about texts in the preceding chapters.

But textual analysis is not the only methodology media researchers use. Other methodologies include taking ratings, conducting interviews (see Tools 1) and compiling audience surveys. To answer some research questions you can even develop new methodologies, and frequently researchers use these different methodologies together to do just that. This is because different methodologies produce different kinds of information.

Textual analysis is a useful methodology because it focuses on the media texts themselves. Whenever you’re involved in audience research (through interviews or surveys) you are, in effect, creating more texts to analyse, such as statistics, articles, books and surveys. In textual analysis we always remain focused on the primary media text itself (and we’ll define what that means below).

Evidence
The evidence that we will be looking at will be media texts, such as films, television programs and magazines.
Evidence can be broken down into two forms: primary evidence and secondary evidence, as all of our evidence can be found in two types of texts, we can refer to these texts as being either primary texts or secondary texts.

Types of texts

Primary texts

Primary texts comprise the original information that you begin with: the primary object of study. If you were analysing an episode of a sitcom, or a magazine, or a particular film, you would call this text the primary text.

Depending upon your research question, you could look at more than one primary text; for example, you could be writing a historical overview of the Walt Disney Corporation, so your primary texts would include the Disney films, Disney television series and Disney-linked products.

For a constitutional lawyer, the Constitution will be the primary text; for an investigative journalist writing an exposé of potentially criminal business dealings, the primary texts could include business documents and interviews with the people involved; for a surgeon, the body itself becomes the primary text.

Secondary texts

Secondary texts are the texts that make an analytical or descriptive study of the primary text or texts. They help us to understand the primary text, or otherwise clarify our analysis of the primary texts.

For academics and students, secondary texts are usually reference works taken from the body of academic literature around a subject. They could include textbooks or academic articles, lectures and seminars. For journalists, these could include other articles on the subject or interviews. For people working in public relations, they could include analyses of audience surveys or statistics.

Tools for all types of texts

Some tools are applicable to all types of texts, regardless of whether they are image or written texts.

Encountering the text

1. Take notes about where and how you encounter the text for the first time.
2. Make notes about why a text produces certain responses or encourages audiences to react in certain ways.
3. Make a guess at how meaning is made; this will remain a ‘guess’ (or hypothesis), but through analysis you will unpack how this meaning is made, ‘educating’ your guess by continuing examination of the primary material.

Jason Bainbridge
As you build up both primary and secondary evidence, you may be quite surprised by how correct your ‘gut instincts’ or ‘first impressions’ were. They should be, because you’ve been unconsciously training yourself to analyse texts every day, as you live in a multimediated world.

Analysing the text
This is the way in which we ‘educate’ our guess.

Break down the text
- Break the text down into its component signs, or units of meanings.
- Focus on the relationship between the physical part of the sign (the signifier) and what the sign signifies (the signified); that is, how each part of the sign makes meaning.

Tips for breaking down the text
As we have seen in Chapters 9–10, a sign is anything which produces meaning. In analysing signs, remember:
- signs do not merely comment on things in the world; they are things in the world; for example, street signs, clothing or parts of a magazine
- signs are also units of meaning: they produce meanings
- signs can produce many meanings, not just one per sign. We call this spread of possible signifieds connotations. The most stable and verifiable of these we call the denotation
- signs are social: they require an audience to function, and often hail this audience by addressing them in some way.

Encoding texts
As the link between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary, media texts are naturally polysemic: open to many interpretations. In their attempt to ensure a particular meaning is made, the industries and individuals responsible for these texts attempt to manipulate the relationship between signifier and signified to direct receivers to adopt an intended message.

The sender is encoding the text in a certain way, which means that we can classify texts as being either:

- **Open texts**: texts that have many possible meanings.
- **Closed texts**: texts that focus on a specific meaning and permit little space for the reader to generate a variety of interpretations.
- **open texts**: which have many meanings (depending on time, gender, race, politics, place, class, age and experience), or
- **closed texts**: which encourage a specific meaning and permit little space for the reader to generate different interpretations.

As a (very) general rule, the more complex the text, the more ‘open’ it will be (allowing for many different readings). The simpler the text, the more ‘closed’ it will be (allowing for relatively fewer readings). A great deal of textual analysis will be spent understanding how the text is encoded.
Tips for determining whether this is an ‘open’ or ‘closed’ text
There are three principal ways senders attempt to produce closed texts—to limit the range of connotations available or specifically encode a spread of signifieds around a certain signifier:

1. by anchorage: the use of captions or commentary designed to select and/or control the connotations that can be made by a reader. This ‘anchors’ an image text (through a caption) or a written text (through a headline) to a certain meaning
2. by metaphor: an implicit or explicit comparison between signs by which the qualities of one are transferred to another. Imagine a big equals sign between two aspects of the text, whether words or pictures or a combination of the two. If you use this lipstick, you too can become glamorous, sexually attractive and shed ten kilos: the lipstick becomes the metaphor for personal success.
3. by metonymy: a part or element of something is used to stand for the whole. At its simplest, a pair of good legs in an advertisement represents an entire person. We assume that the rest of the person continues outside the frame; we are not looking at just a pair of dismembered legs. In complex metonyms, a person can stand for all people, a colour can represent an entire product (Coca-Cola’s use of red and white), a symbol can represent a company (the Nike swoosh or McDonald’s arches) or a particular writing style can represent a particular way of being (class, taste or passion).

These three methods can work together; for example, a strong arm wearing a watch with the slogan ‘Testosterone Watches—for real men’ would be a combined example of anchorage, metaphor and metonymy. The caption anchors the image: we know it refers to a particular brand of watch, as it is a watch advertisement. The arm works metonymically, in that it stands in not just for the rest of the model (who we assume continues outside the frame of the ad) but for all men. The arm also works metaphorically; that is, it transfers the strength of the arm to the strength of the watch. The implication is that if you wear a Testosterone watch you too will be a strong man, a ‘real man’. This could appeal to women too; if they buy your boyfriend, husband or colleague a Testosterone watch, it will make him a strong man, ‘a real man’, an appealing man to a woman.

Advertising
Still having trouble breaking down texts? Try these tools on some of the advertisements you might encounter on public transport, television, in newspapers or in those magazines you keep under the bed. Advertisements are often the simplest texts, because they are so clearly encoded to make you think a certain way: that you need to buy this product or service. It is estimated that the average Australian sees 1500 marketing messages every day and 240 thirty-second TV commercials per week.
The cultural studies theorist Raymond Williams (1980/1960) once called advertising the ‘official art of modern capitalist society’. That is because advertising:

- is one of the oldest forms of media
- it informs much of the media we consume, as advertising provides the main source of income for media owners
- advertising orientates the range of entertainment and information produced by the media toward those audiences advertisers want to reach. In developing a program or publication, the question of who it may appeal to is therefore both an artistic and commercial matter (though public broadcasters like the ABC and BBC are seen to be excepted from this). This is the idea of ‘show business’ we discussed in Chapters 7 and 10.
- advertising is all about image (signifier) and association (signified) rather than product (see below).

Framing the text

Framing the text involves two considerations:

- the frame of the text is the way the text is presented to us
- the context is where the text is located, and how it is encountered by use.

**Framing the text**

In looking at the frame of the text:
- Ask yourself not only why certain elements have been included, but also, what has been left out? Ask yourself why these have elements been left out. How does this affect the possible meanings the text might have?
- In thinking about what is not included in the frame, look at structuring absences: what is absent, what is missing from a text. Since all media texts are mediations of the world, affected by a series of choices and selections, and framed in a certain way, we must always be aware of what is not included in the text.

- What is missing?
- What choices have been made in leaving out this or that element?
- What selection of images and information has occurred?

Always be aware of what is absent from the text as much as what is there.

In thinking about analysing what is included in the frame, use the following tools to help you determine how meaning is made:

- Exnomination: the process by which dominant ideas become so obvious they don’t draw attention to themselves; instead they just seem like common sense.
considered skin coloured. The phrase ‘skin-coloured bandaid’ therefore works hegemonically to reinforce certain ideas of race, a form of racism that doesn’t draw attention to itself. Therefore, you need to be aware of exnomination so that you can draw out the subtleties of power relations in texts, particularly where they work with other intertexts to support a certain ideology of the world.

The commutation test is a test by which you replace one element of a text with another one to see how this affects how meaning is made; for example, substitute ‘man’ for ‘woman’, ‘black’ for ‘white’, ‘arm’ for ‘leg’ or ‘young’ for ‘old’ to find out how these substitutions alter the meaning of the text.

Context
In looking at the context, consider:

- the time in which the text was created
- the type of media product in which the text is located
- where the media text is placed in that product; for example, is it located toward the front of a newspaper or magazine? or does it go to air during prime time or late at night?
- the country of origin (and reception) for the text
- the industry responsible for the text’s creation

Recognise that the context may be somewhat artificial. You could be encountering the text as a result of an assignment from your boss or an academic exercise set at university. Try to keep in mind the regular context for such a text, otherwise it will remain abstracted from the wider culture and society.

Intertexts
While the primary text should remain the focus of textual analysis, two other types of text can help us understand how meaning is produced by a text. As we saw in Chapter 9, intertexts are interrelated, interdependent texts that relate to either primary or secondary texts, and can inform us about how meaning is made from the primary text. They can include production records, academic articles or other media programs in a similar genre.

Texts frequently make meaning through their relationship with other texts. Indeed, as we have seen time and again, the logic of representation in the mediasphere is intertextual, because social and political significance cannot be achieved through reading a single text.

Specific tools for specific types of texts
Because of the variety of texts, we also need specialised tools designed for particular texts. Some texts are primarily written (such as newspapers, novels or letters) and some are primarily image based (such as films, television programs or computer games). Others are combinations
of the two (such as comic books or websites). Just as you would select a screwdriver for some household jobs and a hammer for others, you should use these specific tools for some specific textual jobs and not others.

**Analysing image texts**

As we saw in Chapter 6, films can provide us with a vocabulary that we can use to analyse both still and moving image texts (photographs and films). This involves breaking down these image texts into their individual components, naming each component, and seeing how each works as a unit of meaning. These parts of an image’s composition are similar to the signs we discussed earlier, in that they are all comprised of a signifier (a physical or aural element) and a signified (the mental element we associate with that physical part).

This also means we can read image texts just as we would a written text. This shouldn’t be that surprising, for after all, the literal definition of photography is ‘writing with light’.

When we read a still image text (such as a photograph or a piece of art) we look at two aspects of the text:

- the form of the text: the shape of the text and the way it appears before us
- the content of the text: what is actually there, what is the subject of the text and how that subject is presented to us.

When we read a moving image text (such as film or television), we look at the form and the content, as well as the camera movement, the sound and the editing (the way the film is put together).

**Tools for still image texts**

**Form:** the shape of the text and the way it appears before us.

**Components of the form**

- **Frame:** be aware of the size of the image and how the image has been presented.
  - Has the image been cropped or cut?
  - Why have particular elements been cut out?
  - Where is the centre of the image?
  - Does the important part of the image fill the frame, or is it alone in the centre of the frame?
  - Does this make the image dominant or isolated?

- **Lens type:** which lens has been used to shoot the image?
  - A telephoto lens can signify voyeurism, giving the impression that you are seeing something you shouldn’t see.
  - A standard lens can signify normality, placing the audience at ease.
  - A wide angle lens can signify drama, placing the audience in a state of anticipation.
Film stock: be aware of whether this is a digital shot or a shot created on film stock.
- Think about why the producer of the image has made this choice.
- Has the image been shot digitally so it can be manipulated in some way?
- ‘Fast’ film and ‘slow’ film are terms that refer to the speed at which the film stock responds to the light. A fast film stock produces a grainy, documentary look that can appear unguarded and ‘real’. A slow film stock produces a high resolution image that can appear more normal.

Camera angle: be aware of how the image has been shot.
- Are you looking up at the figure (implying a low camera angle) or are you looking down at the figure (implying a high camera angle)? Low angles often reinforce the power of the figure on the screen; high angles may signify subservience.
- For drawings or pieces of art, you can substitute the words ‘point of view’ for ‘camera angle’.

Height: be aware of the height at which the shot was taken.
- Is the shot taken higher or lower than how you would normally view this image?
- Does it encourage you to look at the image in a certain way? For example, does it offer a child’s-eye view of the world or a bird’s-eye view of the world? (The most common height is eye level, just under two metres.)

Level: be aware of the level the camera was on when the shot was taken. Usually this will be straight on (0 degrees), but altering the level of the camera can create a feeling of disorder, unease or chaos.

Distance: be aware of the distance of an object from the camera. This can take a variety of forms:
- extreme long shots (for landscapes or aerial photography)
- long shots (for groups of people): setting a scene; that is, placing subjects into a context.
- medium shot (one or two people): places members of the audience at a safe distance to observe without feeling as though they are intruding
- medium close-up (part of body): focuses the audience’s attention on something important
- close-up (face): places the audience in an intimate relationship with the subject, usually signifying an emotional moment
- extreme close-up (part of face): can, conversely, create distance by making something familiar appear strange.

Depth of field: be aware of the focus range of the shot.
- deep focus (where the whole scene is in focus) is an expressive technique by which the entire content of the shot becomes unnatural and strange. All parts of the content (or mise-en-scène, see below) add to this.
- selective focus (where some parts of the shot remain indistinct) signifies what is important in a shot.
- soft focus (where the shot appears fuzzy or somewhat indistinct) can signify nostalgia (in the form of a flashback), a dream state, romance or glamour.
Components of content

The content is what is actually inside the frame: the subject of the text and how that subject is presented to us. In film, this is often referred to as the mise-en-scène, French for ‘put on stage’.

The content is made up of:

- the subject(s): the focus of the shot
- the setting: the background; an indication of the physical and temporal location for the shot
- the lighting: how the shot is lit. Lighting often signifies mood. High-key lighting can indicate optimism; low-key lighting can indicate a sombre mood; back lighting can create a halo effect around an actor, making him or her appear glamorous; fill lighting can appear natural, while a lack of fill lighting can highlight the contrast between light and dark, something particularly common in the film noir genre.
  - Be aware of where the lighting is coming from (above, behind or in front)
  - Be aware of whether the lighting is of equal intensity (which is unlikely), and think about why certain elements are better lit than others
  - Be aware of where the light is supposed to be coming from: is this because natural light is being used, or is the lighting being used to convey a certain mood?

Tools for moving image texts

For moving image texts, in addition to looking at form and content, you should also look at:

- Camera movement: be aware of how the camera moves.
  - Why was this decision made?
  - How does it position the audience in relation to the subject?
  - Pan: where the camera moves horizontally from a fixed position, allowing the audience to survey an area or follow a subject at a distance.
  - Tracking (or dolly) shot: where the camera moves on tracks (a very smooth movement), positioning members of the audience so they can follow a movement from a close proximity.
  - Tilt: to left or right, allowing an audience to follow a movement up and down.
  - Crane shot: moving up or down (ultimately a helicopter shot), signifying drama through the rapidity of the movement toward or away from the subject.
  - Handheld: shaky ‘documentary’ style that can appear natural or create a point-of-view shot.
  - Zoom: altering the focal length of a shot to bring us closer to an object. A zoom in allows the audience to see detail from a distance, akin to a telephoto lens. A zoom out places the subject into context.

- Sound: be aware of where the sound is coming from and why it might be being used.
  - Diegetic sound: comes from within the film shot, from somebody talking or somebody singing, a gunshot from a gun, a tyre bursting, a laser firing.
Tools 3: Textual Analysis and Media Research

Extradiegetic sound: comes from outside the film shot—it is only on the soundtrack; it has no obvious source in the diegesis of the film (the world of the film). Music is often extradiegetic, and signifies an emotional state; in a horror movie, for example, it can signify tension, imminent peril or a madman with a very big knife standing just behind you ...

Editing: the way a film is cut and put together, creating the illusion of continuous motion.

- Montage: the compression of time and space through the juxtaposition of a series of images. Why are the scenes being cut in this way? What does the juxtaposition of these images signify?
- The 180-degree rule: establishes an axis of action that shows us where the characters are (for example, the two shot, shot–reverse shot and establishing shot).

The cut (edit): be aware of how the film is cut.

- How does a particular cut (or edit) highlight a particular scene or signify a change in mood between scenes?
- Fade-out: fade to black, scene ends
- Fade-in: reverse of above
- Dissolve: second shot fades in, superimposed over the first shot
- Wipe: as if a curtain had come across the screen

Tools for analysing written texts

Written texts include books, magazines, newspapers, phone messages and captions for images. The following tools enable written texts to be analysed in terms of their individual components (content analysis) and for their contributions to wider social and cultural ideas (discourse analysis) (see Chapter 10).

While content analysis and discourse analysis are usually applied to written texts, there is no reason why they could not also be applied to image texts. You could do a content analysis based around the frequency of John Wayne's appearances in movie Westerns of the 1950s, or the frequency of underweight models in the pages of a fashion magazine, or a discourse analysis of interviews on current affairs television programs or reports on Indigenous communities.

Content analysis

Content analysis is of textual analysis that focuses on the frequency of presence or absence of certain words or categories within texts, often involving the estimation of how often a word, phrase or name recurs in the media.

Content analysis can inform a study of representation. For example, if you were studying the impact of Al Gore's documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* on people's perceptions of climate change, you could count and list—do a content analysis—of how many times *An Inconvenient Truth* appeared in news reports. Furthermore, you could list how many times the words 'climate change' appeared in print before and after the release of the movie.
Content analysis is a unique form of textual analysis, in that it can be used by itself (as a quantitative measure), or as part of a larger textual analysis (once you have completed your content analysis you can then look at how meaning is made, by breaking down the texts where the relevant terms appear). It has the advantage of requiring precise research objectives and sample sizes, but at the same time can be a subjective measure as the researcher develops his or her own categories for research (frequently limited by time and budget). It is therefore best used in a pilot study or in conjunction with detailed textual analysis or audience research that can demonstrate how frequency relates to how meaning is made.

Discourse analysis

Discourse analysis is a specific form of textual analysis that focuses on the ways in which media texts support or subvert such aspects of the world as the unequal distribution of power in society, or the legitimisation or subversion of one presentation of the world (white or patriarchal, for example) while excluding others (African, queer or feminist, for example.)

In the context of journalism studies, discourse analysis has been rigorously applied to journalistic texts (such as British newspapers), to explore how the routine practices of journalism, and the interdependence of news reports and interviews on government reports and press releases, help legitimate certain positions at the expense of others. Elements that scholars have looked at include the choice of words, the tense and the expert voice used in stories on riots, youth issues and Indigenous issues.

Discourse analysis therefore focuses on the way texts work together to provide certain ways of representing the world. It works best on a sample of texts, rather than individual texts, looking at the intertextual relationship between these texts and the larger ideas of representing the world that are produced as a result. But as it requires a sample, it is also subject to the same accusations as content analysis; that is, it can be used in a subjective way. Discourse analysis is best applied in tandem with some more detailed individual textual analysis to demonstrate how the production of discourse affects how meaning is made.

Conclusion

Using textual analysis as a toolkit to analyse media should enable you to make educated guesses about how media texts function and the meanings that can be derived, a skill that is as necessary for the work of journalists, writers and PR campaigners as it is for media producers and students of media. Use it frequently, have fun with it, and it will soon enable you to move from being a consumer of media, to an educated consumer of media, to a skilled media practitioner in your own right.
KEY REFERENCES