

Analysing found non-text social media data: Options and challenges

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X Work-in-Progress Paper

ABSTRACT

Background:

This paper is based on a chapter entitled “Coding of non-text data” (Rasmussen Pennington, in press) that has been accepted for publication in *The SAGE handbook of social media research methods*. The chapter outlines the special concerns associated with collecting and analyzing data found on social media sites and not in language-based text (Rasmussen Neal, 2012). The presence of non-text information on social media sites, such as photographs, videos, music, and even games on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Flickr, Pinterest, Snapchat, YouTube, and Vine, continues to grow exponentially. Despite their abundant presence, and the wealth of insight that social media researchers could obtain from them, few methods have been developed and utilized to use them. They are naturalistic, “found” data sources, just as tweets and blog posts are, but they are frequently ignored in favour of text-based data.

Objective:

The objectives of this paper are: (1) to outline qualitative research methods that can be used to analyze non-text social media data and illustrate them with examples, and (2) to set forth an agenda for developing this underdeveloped area of research methods.

Methods:

The methods to be overviewed will include compositional interpretation, quantitative content analysis, qualitative content analysis, and approaches related to content analysis such as document analysis and musical analysis. Next, methods influenced by cultural understandings will be reviewed, including approaches from the disciplines of cultural studies, visual sociology, visual anthropology, semiotic analysis, and iconography/iconology. Finally, analyses influenced by social understandings, including discourse analysis, visual social semiotics, and multimodal research, will be discussed. Since many methods will be outlined in a short amount of time, a list of resources for reading about the methods will be provided at the session.

Results:

The purpose of this paper will not present original empirical results; instead, it is meant to introduce social media researchers to potentially new data sources as well as methods for analysing them. Results from the author’s previous studies in this area will be used as examples.

Future Work:

The second part of this paper will be to discuss what the methodological future of this emerging area of research might look like, with an eye toward engaging the audience in contemplation and discussion about the unique questions surrounding non-text research. As discussed in the chapter, questions about the development and implementation of non-text methods include:

How can the relatively recent appearance of non-text documents achieve the same status in social science research as the long-standing text-based documents possess?

How can the textual and the non-textual be integrated with one another in data collection and analysis while still observing the special challenges that non-text items present to researchers?

Although all existing analysis methods to date are described in text, could social science researchers envision a research environment in which we use formats other than text to describe future approaches to analysing non-text documents? (Rasmussen Pennington, in press)

References:

Rasmussen Neal, D. (Ed.) (2012). *Indexing and retrieval of non-text information*. Berlin: De Gruyter Saur.

Rasmussen Pennington, D. (in press). Coding of non-text data. In A. Quan-Haase and L. Sloan (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of social media research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.