

## Chapter 6

# Analyzing Verbal Narratives in TV News and Commercials

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter acknowledges the truism that “television is a visual medium” but discusses six reasons for sometimes focusing scholarly attention on the non-visual, lexical content of TV news and commercials. It summarizes three different lexical analyses of network TV news dealing with economic news reporting, the reporting of presidential approval polls, as well as general presidential news coverage. All three studies were carried out within the context of charges of political news bias, and all three found evidence to support public perceptions of such bias. The fourth study summarizes a longitudinal analysis of presidential campaign TV commercials from 1952-2008. The particular focus of this study was to look for lexical differences in the content of commercials from winning vs. losing campaigns. The four studies summarized in this chapter demonstrate that, even in this visual age of television, words still mean things.*

### **ANALYZING VERBAL NARRATIVES IN TV NEWS AND COMMERCIALS**

Content analysis is one of the most frequently used research tools by mass communication scholars, along with survey research and experiments. While the range of content analysis topics has been wide, two content areas that have received considerable attention have been news and advertising.<sup>1</sup>

Traditional content analysis has employed manual reading/viewing of content by multiple coders, followed by inter-coder reliability checking to assure that the coders are applying the coding categories and definitions in consistent and replicable ways. The entire process is slow and highly labor intensive, thus placing pragmatic limitations on the amount of content analyzed. It is understandable, therefore, that many scholars have been switching to computerized analysis of textual material. This chapter will review the successful use of one such software program, DICTION 5.0 and 6.0, as well as one other program, to analyze network TV newscasts for political bias, and also to analyze rhetorical choices in a large sample of presidential campaign commercials.

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Both of these mass communication areas, TV news and TV commercials, are naturally assumed to be heavily visual in terms of information---and their texts or narratives are assumed to be relatively unimportant. Intuitively, TV content on the surface, would not seem to be a good area in which to conduct lexical analyses. This chapter will argue that the lexical content of TV news and commercials is often at least as important as the visual content, and for some research purposes, it is more important.

## **Importance of Analyzing Words on Television**

It is a truism that television is a visual medium; however, this chapter focuses on the verbal rhetoric in news and commercials. Why? There are six reasons. First, Robinson (1984), in the context of TV news content analysis, argues that, "While television is regarded as an essentially visual medium (this being what differentiates it from print and radio) *sound dominates image in news broadcasts*" (p. 202, emphasis added). Thus, the studies described below were based in part on Robinson's ". . . first assumption that television news makes sense to us because the *verbal dominates the visual*. This verbal dominance is represented in the continuous flow of commentaries, reports, and interviews, emanating from anchor persons, reporters, and commentators' voice-overs" (p. 206, emphasis added).

An example of the importance of the verbal narrative in television news occurred while this chapter was being written---the day after 20 first grade students were murdered in Newtown, Connecticut. News anchors sat at their desks or on their sofas; correspondents stood in the streets; detectives, pathologists and psychologists sat on the news sets and gave their learned opinions about the shootings; but there was no visual action on the screens. Instead, there were hours spent repeating the basic facts, analyzing the facts, and giving opinions about what might have caused the shooting, and what might happen next. The important content was verbal; a TV viewer could have ignored the screen, listened to the discussion, and come away with a full understanding of what was happening in Newtown.

Another example of the importance of the verbal narrative would be when the TV news plays segments from the White House press briefings, or politicians giving a speech. The screen shows someone in a suit talking, but the important message, the news information value, is in the words.

A second reason for focusing on words is based on the inherent power of words in shaping political consciousness. In fact, Green (1987, p. ix) states, "Language is the most powerful of human weapons." Numerous examples could be provided to demonstrate this point.

*The third reason for concentrating on lexical analysis rather than visual analysis is based on the expository nature of TV news. Butler (1994, p. 77) states, "Newscasts largely use an expository mode to present information," and "the basic logic of most news stories is an argument." He further summarizes the format of a typical TV news story as: "The reporter's opening lead . . . a first sound bite . . . the reporter's transition . . . a second sound bite . . . and the reporter's concluding stand-up" (p. 174). Throughout this process, as suggested by Robinson (1984), the visuals are supplemental to the verbal story narrative, even though television is thought of as a visual medium.*

Fourth, according to Entman (1993), "Texts can make bits of information more salient by placement or *repetition* . . ." (p. 53, emphasis added). DICTION and another lexical analysis software program used in the studies described below measure frequency of word usage. Therefore, the network TV news and campaign commercial studies below analyzed the repeated use of certain words by the networks to make them potentially more salient to their audiences.

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