

## Chapter 25

# DICTION as a Tool for Studying the Mass Media

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter offers a systematic assessment of DICTION's ability to address a wide range of media content. Each of the media-related works in this volume reflects a unique mix of communication inputs, and DICTION proves itself able to generate valid and reliable insights on a diverse range of material. In addition, the chapter focuses on a series of challenges (e.g., Message Tailoring, Hypertext, Interactivity) and opportunities (e.g., big data) for DICTION in relation to the study of media content. The program and the researchers who utilize it need to continue to evolve with the changing media landscape in order to generate practical knowledge that is relevant to improving communication.*

### DICTION AS A TOOL FOR STUDYING MASS MEDIA AND THE PRESS

Any one communicative act consists of five input variables: Message, source, recipient, channel, and context (McGuire, 1984). The treatment of mass media and the press as institutions can be addressed from all five of the communication inputs, and there is much scholarship in this volume devoted to each of these elements. In terms of message, a multitude of scholars focus on how journalists or news organizations frame a topic of social interest (e.g., Chong & Druckman, 2007; Entman, 2007; Scheufele, 1999). Journalism scholars have studied a variety of source characteristics of mass media and the press, including trust (e.g., Kohring & Matthes, 2007), credibility (e.g., Newhagen & Nass, 1999), and ideological orientation (e.g., Bovitz,

Druckman, & Lupia, 2002). Entire frameworks of study derived from competing explanatory principles like understanding (e.g., Uses & Gratifications; see Holbert, in press) and consistency (e.g., partisan selective exposure; see Stroud, 2011) have developed to study audience activity. While some of the major theories in journalism studies (e.g., agenda setting; McCombs, 2005) treat news as a single institutional entity, there is much work focused on the unique roles played by distinct mass media channels (e.g., Martinelli & Chaffee, 1995). Finally, there is much research devoted to the role of mass media and news in different contexts, with one of the classic distinctions being election (e.g., Hallin, 1992) versus non-election (e.g., Habermas, 2006) time periods. It is rare for any one study to devote sufficient attention to all five communication input variables (often too complex a task).

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-5003-9.ch025

In fact, it is most often the case that one of the communication inputs tends to dominate within a given study. However, all five are deeply relevant to the study of mass media and news.

All of the works in this volume treat messages as the primary communication input. This point of interest is as it should be given our collective attention to DICTION and the varied ways in which it has been employed to better understand the language of institutions. It is clear, as will be outlined in this essay, that DICTION retains epistemological value in that it can help researchers generate new knowledge about a wide variety of texts. However, to focus only on the diversity of message types analyzed by DICTION would be a disservice if our goal is to gain proper insight about this software package's ability to aid the study of a truly diverse range of communicative acts, with any one communicative act consisting of more than just the message(s) being provided. Each of the chapters in this volume represents a unique mixture of message, source, potential recipient, channel, and context. The fact that DICTION can be used to address a wide range of communicative acts is testament to the tool's ability to bring utility to a multitude of research agendas.

This essay devotes space to each of the five communication inputs and summarizes this volume's chapters in relation to these inputs. What becomes clear from this summary is that there is true diversity found in association with each of the inputs. It is clear from these chapters that DICTION is a valuable tool in the hands of a strong researcher who wishes to address an interesting question. However, it must be the goal of scholars who are employing this software package to continue to push its boundaries and shore up its weaknesses. The essay closes with thoughts about the challenges and opportunities afforded DICTION with the coming of the digital media revolution.

## **Communication Inputs**

### **Message**

DICTION has proven itself to be a methodological tool that offers valid and reliable assessments of a diverse range of content (see <http://www.diction-software.com/published-studies/#peerarticles>). However, it will be important to provide a formal assessment of the nature of the messages analyzed within this volume in order to present a baseline for this chapter's core argument that DICTION is a flexible methodological tool for this particular type of work.

Several of the chapters focus on a variety of messages that speak to the values or identity of a broad range of organizations. Abelman (Chapter 18) focuses on the vision statements of institutions of higher education. These statements are deemed persuasive acts aimed at both internal and external publics that allow universities to take some ownership of and retain at least a modicum of efficacy over their image. Carroll and Einwiller (LCW, Chapter 15) attend to an analysis of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Reports and DICTION proves itself able to offer quality assessments of this content type. A major focus of their analysis was on the transparency levels offered in the reports, with specific attention given to the dichotomous moderator of whether the various corporations signed on to the United Nations' Global Reporting Initiative (GRI). Lellis (Chapter 20) turned her attention to health care/disability non-profit organizations and how their promotional materials reflect what they value as organizations. Much like Abelman, it is argued by Lellis that public sector organizations face many challenges in establishing an identity with an external public that allows for trust to be established (trust being a primary outcome variable for public relations activities; see Botan & Taylor, 2004). This chapter's analysis reveals

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