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Formats and Genres: Collecting formal variables during content analysis

Lisa Schwaiger und Daniel Vogler

1 Introduction

When researchers analyze journalistic media, they usually select and categorize a sample of different sources. Usually this process includes defining the formats as well as genres of the content that is analyzed. This is normally done before the actual coding process. Formal variables, such as “formats” and “genres”, are important but often underestimated components of content analyses. Both refer to manifest categories, provide important information about the analyzed content and are widely used: Especially for journalistic, non-fictional content of print, broadcast or online media, on which we focus in this chapter. Although closely related, the two variables refer to different layers of analysis. Whereas the variable “format” characterizes the outlet level, the variable “genre” gives us information about the form of the single news article or story. Both variables are therefore often combined in studies and used for comparative analyses to categorize other variables, such as “reporting style”, or “media quality” (Rössler and Geise 2013). Considering the literature, no standardized approach exists to operationalize the two variables which leads to heterogenous applications. The operationalizations also vary depending on the research question and the investigated

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media type. In general, the variable “format” categorizes the outlet and is sometimes used synonymously to the variable “media type” (e.g. “Daily Newspaper”, “Sunday News Paper”, “Tabloids”, etc.) (Bonfadelli 2002; fög – Forschungsinstitut Öffentlichkeit und Gesellschaft 2019; Rössler 2017; Strömbäck and van Aelst 2010; Udris et al. 2020). “Genre” refers to the form of presentation or content of an article (e.g. “interview”, “report”, “commentary”, etc.) (e.g. Beam 2003; Quandt 2008a). Some authors label this variable as “section”, especially when analyzing newspapers, and use the term “genre” for the social sphere addressed in the article (e.g. “politics”, “economy”, “sports”, etc.) (Rössler 2017).

Many authors use these variables to analyze the content of newspapers (e.g. Beam 2003; Dotson et al. 2012; fög – Forschungsinstitut Öffentlichkeit und Gesellschaft 2019; Levinsen and Wien 2011), television and radio programs (e.g. fög – Forschungsinstitut Öffentlichkeit und Gesellschaft 2019; Maier et al. 2006; Seethaler, 2015) as well as news websites (e.g. Neuberger et al. 2009; Quandt 2008a, b). Even if not included in the coding process, the variable format is commonly used to select media types or outlets for the analysis (recent examples e.g. Boumans 2017; Hase et al. 2020; Vogler et al. 2020; Zerback et al. 2020). However, there are strong variations in how the variables are conceptualized and used in the studies. Within this chapter, we aim to give some general remarks on the use and operationalization of the variables, as they are important for almost every study that copes with journalistic media content.

2 “Formats” and “Genres” in the context of print media

Especially in studies of news media the collection of formal variables like “format” and “genre” are very common as they are useful variables to characterize different media outlets and forms of presentation – also when compared over time. “**Format**” and “genre” are often used as explanatory or dependent variables. In their study on soft news elements in election coverage, Strömbäck and van Aelst (2010) find that the formats, called “media types” within their study, matter and that scholars should systematically consider them as “structural antecedents” of news coverage. The authors show, for instance, that political framing is strongly dependent on media types – in both Sweden and Belgium. Examples for studies which use the variables in this sense include the Swiss Yearbook Quality of the Media (fög – Forschungsinstitut Öffentlichkeit und Gesellschaft 2019) or its Austrian equivalent on behalf of the Austrian Regulatory Authority for Broadcasting and Telecommunications (RTR) (Seethaler 2015). Both projects are based on a normative perspective on media quality and analyze in how far different media formats and genres fulfill democratic demands articulated towards news media coverage. Both studies collect the variable “media title” (or “media brand”), whereas the media type or format is categorized ex-post, which is a common practice. This means that the articles are first coded before they are categorized by media type for further comparative analyses. Seethaler et al. (2015) further differentiate the “format”

of a contribution either between print, TV, or radio. There are different approaches how the media format can be categorized. Typically, a differentiation can be made in regard to the media quality (e.g. low quality vs. high quality; tabloids vs. quality media), the publication period (e.g. daily, weekly or monthly newspapers and magazines) or the local orientation (e.g. local, regional, national) (fög – Forschungsinstitut Öffentlichkeit und Gesellschaft 2019; Levinsen and Wien 2011). For instance, Udris et al. (2020) could prove that media quality depends to a large extent on the “format” or media type.

“**Genre**” can be described as the type of presentation (e.g. “Report”, “Interview”, “Commentary”, etc.) (Bauer 2011; fög – Forschungsinstitut Öffentlichkeit und Gesellschaft 2019; Gerhards et al. 2004; Seethaler 2015; Wolling and Arlt 2012) and can be also labelled as “content type” (Beam 2003) or “story type” (Dotson et al. 2012). The variable “genre” is, like “format”, often used before the coding process to select relevant articles. For instance, when exclusively analyzing opinion pieces, excluding agency-based coverage for a study, or to select segments of articles (e.g. all articles from the politics section of a newspaper). From a theoretical point of view, a distinction regarding the “genre” of an article is important, because the different genres fulfill different journalistic functions. For instance, a report offers analytical depth and contextualization, short newslets report the main facts about an event in a brief manner, and in opinion pieces the author or journalist articulates her or his opinion on a topic.

3 “Formats” and “Genres” in the context of broadcast media

The two variables in focus are essential for conducting program analyses in the context of broadcast media, like public and private radio or television. Exemplary studies in German-speaking countries are a project of the Otto Brenner Foundation in Germany, which compared the program content of the two TV channels “SWR” and “NDR” (Trebbe 2013); the periodically repeated program analysis of the German TV channels “ARD”, “ZDF”, “RTL” and “Sat.1” of the IFEM Institute for Empirical Media Research (Krüger et al. 2019); a content analysis on news values in German TV programs (Maier et al. 2006); the analysis of media quality of Austrian TV channels (Seethaler 2015); and – already mentioned – the Swiss Yearbook Quality of the Media that analyses not only print media but also radio and TV outlets in Switzerland every year (fög – Forschungsinstitut Öffentlichkeit und Gesellschaft 2019).

All of the mentioned studies use at least one variable (“format” or “genre”), mostly to categorize other content variables. However, the variables are only rarely described and often taken for granted. Krüger et al. (2019) distinguish in regard to the “format” between informational content, journalistic entertainment and factual entertainment. Trebbe (2013) has a different and broader approach, as he classifies news formats in main categories, like “universal news”, “regional news” and “thematic news” where sub-types of contributions can be subsumed. Also, apart from news formats, one can collect categories for other broadcast formats, like advertising, trailers and other

non-fictional formats for entertainment (Trebbe 2013). A comparison of the two studies by Krüger et al. (2019) and Trebbe (2013) shows that results differ depending on the operationalization of the variable “format” and the drawn sample. Since the two studies work with different definitions of “information” vs. “entertainment”, different results are not surprising (Maurer and Reinemann 2006, pp. 83–98). These differences illustrate the importance of clear operationalizations in content analysis and the interpretation of results. However, these variables and categories are helpful to describe channel-specific programs and their differences, e.g. when comparing public and private TV (fög – Forschungsinstitut Öffentlichkeit und Gesellschaft 2019; Seethaler 2015).

“Genre” (or frequently labelled “type of presentation”) differs in the context of broadcast media, for instance, whether the contribution is a “message of a TV/radio host”, an “interview”, “news during a film”, etc. (Maier et al. 2006), or a “documentation”, “event broadcasting” and others (Krüger et al. 2019; Trebbe 2013). These categories can be used, for instance, to analyze differences in political news coverage or between content by public and private broadcast services depending on the genre (Maier et al. 2006, p. 36). Similarly, categories for radio programs can be created. For content analyses one can either focus on journalistic content or add other genres like reports about music or call-ins from the audience (House of Research 2016).

4 “Formats” and “Genres” in the context of online media

Definitions of “formats” and “genres” in the context of online media are more diverse compared to those for print and broadcast media. Firstly, it is hard to identify which online contents fulfill the criteria of being a journalistic product because of the variety of communicating actors online. Secondly, online media are heterogeneous in regard to their content as single websites and can combine different “formats” and “genres” (Neuberger et al. 2009). Quandt (2008a) further assumed that formal characteristics of online news had been insufficiently described. Although scholars turned from printed to online news as the primary research object, the diagnosis of Quandt (2008a) remains, which, we argue, can be attributed to the very heterogeneous structure of online news outlets. They can range from almost identical structures as in printed newspapers to new and innovative formats and genres (Humprecht und Esser 2018). According to Sjøvaag and Stavelin (2012, p. 215), “online research methods need to be redesigned to account for the medium-specific news features on the internet”.

Neuberger et al. (2009) suggest to firstly select media types and internet formats when analyzing the content of journalistic websites. “Format” may then refer to the media type such as “daily newspapers”, “national weekly or sunday newspapers”, “general interest magazines”, “news agency” but also “broadcast service”, as online media content can be arranged audiovisual as well. These characteristics relate to traditional media types and

can be used to compare print media content with online media content from the same outlet (e.g. Hoffman 2006; Quandt 2008a). The variable “format” can further distinguish whether the article originates from, for instance, an “online portal”, an “user platform”, a “search engine” or “weblog”, as journalistic media content often varies from other content (Neuberger et al. 2009). In a similar way, Thorsen and Jackson (2018) focus on the type of content when analyzing online news articles and live blogs. However, the authors use the variable to distinguish between text, audio, video, image and social media content.

Quandt (2008a, b) describes a helpful approach in order to define the type of presentation (which we described as “genre” at the beginning of this book chapter). He uses the same codebook for both press and online media. The type of presentation may then refer to “traditional” types such as “interview”, “lead”, “report”, “comment”, etc. He further suggests distinguishing between the type of multi-media content (which can be subsumed under “**genre**” as well), like “video stream”, “audio stream”, and others. Colussi and Rocha (2020) analyzed the “journalistic genre hybridisation” of two newspapers on Facebook Live. By “hybrid genres”, and in contrast to “traditional” genres as mentioned above, the authors understand the combination of different genres (such as interviews, debates, news reports) using the example of audiovisual content on Facebook.

5 Conclusion and research desiderata

Although many studies collect formal variables such as “formats” and “genres”, there are large variations concerning their use and operationalization. Also, many authors rather focus on the collected content variables used in their studies than on the detailed description of formal variables. Both variables are not necessarily included in the codebook and are often directly imported as meta-information from databases like Factiva or Lexis Nexis or from web scraping tools. The process is often not documented or validated properly which makes it difficult to assess the quality of the variables. This deficit is astonishing, as the variables are among the most frequently used concepts in studies on journalistic media and often explain a lot of variance in the datasets. We, therefore, suggest that researchers should give more attention to formal variables like “format” and “genre” in their studies.

Relevant Variables in DOCA – Database of Variables for Content Analysis

Format: <https://doi.org/10.34778/2za>

Genre: <https://doi.org/10.34778/2zb>

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