Qualitative Document Analysis in Political Science

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Abstract
Qualitative document analysis remains one of the most common, yet methodologically misunderstood, components of political science research. While analysts are accustomed to incorporating manifestos, speeches, media reports, and other documents as evidence in their studies, few approach the task with the same level of understanding and sophistication as when applying other, more quantitative methods. Indeed, while recent innovations in statistical analysis have lent significant precision to the study of political texts, these advances have vastly outstripped those in the interpretive field. Building bridges between the two traditions, drawing lessons from several recent studies, and borrowing advice from other disciplines in the social sciences, the following paper sets forth a series of guidelines for the rigorous, qualitative study of political documents. The discussion includes a novel examination of materials from the Poltext Project collection – a compilation of documents from across the ten Canadian provinces, over the past four decades. The paper concludes that, whether approaching their work from a quantitative or non-quantitative perspective, researchers must adhere to similar disciplinary standards if their findings are to be considered trustworthy contributions to political science.

Keywords: qualitative methodology; content analysis; documentary research

Introduction

Seldom do textbooks or courses in political science methodology devote any attention to qualitative document analysis (QDA). Dominated by the discussion of interviews, focus groups, (quantitative) content analysis, experimentation, and field studies, few offer any treatment of QDA, whatsoever (but see Wesley, forthcoming-a). When it is discussed, the qualitative analysis of political texts is typically included under broad topics like "unobtrusive" or "archival research," or conflated with the coding of transcripts or field notes (George, 2006: 135; Platt, 2006a: 83). This lack of detailed methodological discussion is disconcerting, considering that most political scientists have, at some point, incorporated elements of textual interpretation as evidence in their research. To move beyond "armchair interpretation," however, such analyses must be guided by the same level of rigour as those in the quantitative fields (Wesley, 2009a). The following paper suggests a series of such guidelines, based on a comparison with traditional modes of quantitative content analysis, a review of recent QDA studies, an examination of similar approaches in other social science disciplines, and a novel study of documents drawn from the Poltext Project collection.

Building Bridges

Three Ontological Perspectives

The following discussion proceeds under the assumption that the qualitative and quantitative approaches to textual analysis are commensurable under the same, general standards of empirical inquiry. While distinct in many ways, each tradition contributes its own set of tools for the overall "toolkit" of the twenty-first century political scientist (Wesley, forthcoming-b). This view is only one of three general perspectives on the relationship between quantitative and qualitative methods (Bryman, 2001: 276; Corbetta, 2003: 50). While ideal types, in that no researcher is likely to adhere entirely or permanently to one set of beliefs, the distinctions are informative.

The first perspective holds that the quantitative and qualitative traditions are so ontologically distinct as to be incommensurable. Scholars in this "*purist*" school believe in a hard-and-fast connection between quantitative methods and the tenets of positivism,[1] on one hand, and qualitative methods and interpretivism, on the other. According to this perspective, quantitative positivists believe in the principles of inherency and verifiability, which puts them at odds with the belief among qualitative relativists that all reality is socially constructed. As Manheim et al. (2002: 318) describe, "Some quantitatively oriented scholars regard at least some qualitative work as so dependent on the perceptions of the individual researcher and so focused on specific cases as to be unverifiable and essentially useless. In contrast, some qualitatively oriented scholars judge quantitative methods to be so incomplete in their representation of reality as to be empirically misleading…" In this environment, researchers toil in opposing camps – either parallel, but separate, in their pursuit of knowledge, or actively seeking to undermine the other. Political science has not been immune to these tensions; thankfully, however, "Most empirical researchers work primarily with either qualitative or quantitative methods but can see value in the other approach…" (Manheim et al., 2002: 318).

A second perspective, embodied most famously in the work of King, Keohane and Verba (1993), holds that both quantitative and qualitative research methods are commensurable under the positivist approach to social life. In their words, "the differences between the quantitative and qualitative traditions are only stylistic and are methodologically and substantively unimportant. All good research can be understood – indeed is best understood – to derive from the same underlying logic of inference. Both quantitative and qualitative research can be systematic and scientific," provided each submits to "the rules of scientific inference – rules that are sometimes more clearly stated in the style of quantitative research" (1993: 4-5, 6). Critics of the "KKV" approach accuse the authors of developing a "quantitative template for qualitative research" – a premise that presupposes the superiority of the former over the latter (Brady et al., 2004: 3). For this reason, qualitative purists have anointed King et al. as headmasters of the "quantitative imperialist" school, imposing positivist concepts like hypothesis-testing and inter-subjectivity on an unwilling qualitative community. In fairness to King et al., their aim was to bridge the "quantitative-systematic-generalizing" / "qualitative-humanistic-discursive" divide (King et al., 1993: 4). Less pejoratively, then, one may refer to theirs as the "*neo-positivist*" perspective.

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[1] For the purposes of this discussion, "positivism" is defined by the following three tenets: (1) scientific methods (i.e., the testing of hypotheses derived from pre-existing theories) may be applied to the study of social life; (2) knowledge is only generated through observation (empiricism); and (3) facts and values are distinct, thus making objective inquiry possible (Snape and Spencer, 2006).

A third perspective takes a middling view of the relationship between quantitative and qualitative methods. Developed most coherently in a volume edited by Brady and Collier (2004), the "*dualist*" school promotes the co-existence of quantitative and qualitative traditions within a broad social scientific enterprise. Unlike "purists," "dualists" see value in collaboration between quantitative and qualitative researchers, and an important element of interdependence in their relationship. Compared to "neo-positivism," the "dualist" school sees strengths and weaknesses in both approaches. As Brady et al. (2004: 10) put it,

> *In the social sciences, qualitative research is hard to do well. Quantitative research is also hard to do well. Each tradition can and should learn from the other.* One version of conventional wisdom holds that achieving analytic rigor is more difficult in qualitative than in quantitative research. Yet in quantitative research, making valid inferences about complex political processes on the basis of observational data is likewise extremely difficult. There are no quick and easy recipes for either qualitative or quantitative analysis. In the face of these shared challenges, the two traditions have developed distinctive and complementary tools (emphasis in original).

Instead of struggling for methodological supremacy, dualists implore all social scientists to "refine and develop the battery of techniques on offer, and above all to be as explicit as possible about the implications of the methodologies we employ…" (Laver, 2001: 9).

While acknowledging that many readers view the world from the "purist" and "neo-positivist" perspectives, the following discussion proceeds along "dualist" lines. According to this view, social science is the systematic study of the social world; the definition of what constitutes "systematic" is contentious, a debate that is explored in greater detail below.

Two Traditions of Document Analysis

As the paradigm governing most quantitative research, positivism elevates two key concepts as crucial elements of any legitimate study in political science: validity and reliability. The former term refers to the importance of ensuring that one's findings accurately represent the concepts under examination. In content analysis, for example, a valid conclusion about the "positive tone" of a particular document must incorporate evidence of the author's optimism, cheerfulness, sanguinity, buoyancy, exuberance, other sense of approbation. From a quantitative perspective, this evidence is often derived by counting the number of "positive" references, be they measured in terms of keyword mentions, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, or other units of analysis. Reliability, on the other hand, refers to the consistency of a particular measurement – the extent to which a particular assessment would yield identical results if repeated under the same conditions. Content analysts typically measure this consistency through inter-coder reliability testing, a process in which the analyst's measurements are checked against those of an independent researcher.

As standards of academic rigour, both validity and reliability are rooted in the assumption that the information contained in documents is inherent – that the evidence embedded in the text is objectively identifiable. Armed with a list of pre-defined variables, the content analyst's task is to "mine" the documents in search of specific bits of data. This information is then analyzed, statistically, to discern important patterns existing within and between the documents.

While requiring a similar level of precision, the qualitative approach differs from quantitative content analysis in important ways. Rather than viewing data as inherent to the documents, themselves, most QDA researchers reject the notion of inter-subjectivity. From this perspective, "*the meanings invoked by texts need not be shared*" in a direct sense (Krippendorff, 2004: 22-23, emphasis in original) (see also: Morse and Richards, 2002: 125). To many QDA researchers, their particular interpretation of the text is just one of many possible "readings," thus imposing a different set of methodological burdens on them as they seek to convince their readers of the persuasiveness of their analyses (Gerring, 1998: 298; Laitin, 1986:13).

As Manheim et al (2002: 317) point out,

> Quantitative researchers are usually able to employ some well-established rules of analysis in deciding what is valid evidence for or against their theory. These include such tools as measures of statistical significance and statistical tests of validity, as well as formal logic. Qualitative researchers generally lack this type of commonly agreed to and 'objective' tool. Rather, they must rely on their ability to present a clear description, offer a convincing analysis, and make a strong argument for their interpretation to establish the value of their conclusions. Advocates of qualitative methods argue that this is an inevitable result of seeking to deal with the richness of complex realities rather than abstracting artificially constructed pieces of those realities for quantitative analysis. Critics of their approach contend that the vagueness and situational nature of their standards of evidence make it difficult (if not impossible) to achieve scientific consensus and, therefore, to make progress through cumulative knowledge.

One particularly stinging critique holds that the findings of most qualitative analyses tend to be "conjectural, non-verifiable, non-cumulative, 'meanings'… arrived at by sheer intuition and individual guesswork" (Cohen, 1974: 5). In short, qualitative researchers are subject to the criticism that they leave their readers with little choice but to "trust" that their interpretations of the data are accurate and legitimate.

Trustworthiness in Political Science

To guard against these criticisms, disciplinary standards require all political scientists to adhere to certain "rules" when it comes to treating texts as data. In particular, both quantitative content analysts and qualitative document analysts must establish the legitimacy of their research by protecting its "trustworthiness" in the eyes of their peers.

The notion of "trustworthiness" is borrowed from the seminal research of Egon Guba and Yvonna Lincoln (1985). According to their view, while quantitative research tends to be conducted under the premises of positivism, and qualitative inquiry under the auspices of interpretivism, there is considerable middle ground upon which to build consensus over the norms of social scientific analysis. Whereas scholars working in the qualitative tradition tend to reject the objectivity embedded in concepts like validity and reliability, for instance, Guba and Lincoln found that they tended to value and impose a similar set of standards on their own work. Their book, *Naturalistic Inquiry*, served as a sort of Rosetta Stone for interpreting four such common norms.

First, all document analysts must protect the *authenticity* – or "truth value" – of their research. An authentic analysis is one that offers a genuine interpretation of reality, or an accurate reading of a particular (set of) document(s). This is referred to as "measurement validity" in the quantitative-positivist tradition, and "credibility" in the qualitative-interpretivist tradition. For the latter, the objective is less to offer a "truthful" account of the information found in the document, than to provide a believable interpretation of the meanings found therein (Richerson and Boyd, 2004: 410-411). The authenticity of a qualitative analysis, then, relies upon the subjective evaluation of the reader, as opposed to being based against some objective standard (Krippendorff, 2004: 314).

Portability is a second concern for analysts dealing with political documents. To make a substantive contribution to knowledge, most social scientists concur that their inquiries must offer insights extending beyond the specific cases under study (Bryman, 2004: 539). In quantitative-positivist terms, this is referred to as "external validity" – the generalizability of a particular analysis to broader questions about political life. Content analysts strive to convince their readers that their findings can be expanded to other documents, from other sources, times, or places, for instance. The term "transferability" is preferred among those conducting QDA, once again reflecting their reluctance to accept the inter-subjectivity of their interpretations. Rather than establishing the generalizability of their analyses through tests of statistical significance, for example, qualitative document analysts rely upon their readers to assess the broader applicability of the lessons drawn from their findings. In this sense, the question of whether the results of a qualitative document analysis can be extended to another context must be answered – not by the *original* investigator – but by the student seeking to make the transfer (Lewis and Ritchie, 2006: 145; Merriam, 2002a: 228-229).

Third, researchers studying political documents must be wary of the *precision* of their analyses. Discussed above, content analysts tend to assess this aspect of trustworthiness in terms of reliability, through inter-coder testing. While replicability is fundamental to the positivist approach, however, its relevance is more contentious in the interpretivist tradition. As a consequence, many qualitative document analysts use the term "dependability" to describe the precision of their research. This captures the belief that, provided the research is conducted in a transparent manner, readers may assess the accuracy of the findings by asking, "Would I have reached the same general conclusions, given the opportunity to read the same set of documents under similar conditions?" An affirmative answer would confirm the dependability of the analysis.

The fourth and final concern among document analysts surrounds the *impartiality* of their observations. Social science is premised on the capacity of its practitioners to produce relatively unprejudiced knowledge about the social world, through findings that are reflective of reality as opposed to their own pre-determined beliefs (Marshall and Rossman, 1989: 147). In quantitative research, this means preserving the "objectivity" of the analysis. Because they are more likely to consider personal biases to be unavoidable, if unfortunate, factors in the research process (King et al., 1993: 14-15; Merriam, 2002b: 5), qualitative document analysts tend to acknowledge (even embrace) the subjectivity of their interpretations. To remain impartial, they must achieve "confirmability" in their findings, ensuring that their conclusions are drawn from the evidence at hand, as opposed to the predispositions of the researcher. The results of a QDA study are confirmable if the inferences drawn are traceable to data contained in the documents, themselves, and if the preponderance of evidence corroborates those findings. This is the very essence of empirical inquiry.

The foregoing discussion suggests that, relative to quantitative content analysis, QDA tends to place a heavier burden on the *reader* of the study to assess its trustworthiness. Some argue that this places too little responsibility on the *researcher* to defend the merits of the analysis. This criticism is misplaced, for in order to convince their audience of the trustworthiness of their research, qualitative data analysts must take equal care to meet the following disciplinary expectations of their work.

Achieving Trustworthiness in Qualitative Document Analysis

According to Guba and Lincoln (1994), all students of social life must provide two key assurances of the "trustworthiness" of their analyses: (1) they must be explicit as to the process by which they interpret their evidence, and (2) they must provide access to their data, so that their findings may be verified. While providing for a post-hoc verification of the authenticity, portability, precision, and impartiality of their analyses, researchers are wise not to rely on these two general safeguards, alone.

As Morse et al. (2002: 14) argue, by turning their attention to the end of the study rather than focusing on the conduct of the research itself, investigators risk missing serious errors until it is too late to correct them. According to their assessment,

> in the time since Guba and Lincoln developed their criteria for trustworthiness, there has been a tendency for qualitative researchers to focus on the tangible outcomes of the research (which can be cited at the end of a study) rather than demonstrating how verification strategies were used to shape and direct the research during its development. While strategies of trustworthiness may be useful in attempting to *evaluate* rigor, they do not in themselves *ensure* rigor. While standards are useful for *evaluating* relevance and utility, they do not in themselves *ensure* that the research will be relevant and useful (Morse et al., 2002: 16, emphasis in original).

With this in mind, the following discussion provides a series of *guidelines* for the conduct of qualitative document analysis. Their compilation may create a useful checklist for reviewers, but their greater value lies in the support they provide for ensuring the trustworthiness of document analysis, be it quantitative or qualitative. Three sets of concerns are outlined, including those dealing with (1) triangulation, (2) intense exposure and thick description, and (3) audit trails and discrepant evidence.

Triangulation

When using any form of data, political scientists are wise to corroborate their findings using other types and sources of evidence. Document analysts are no different, in this respect (Boyatzis, 1998: xiii). Whether combining their findings with interviews, focus groups, or other research strategies, or conducting a "mixed-methods" form of research involving both quantitative and qualitative forms of textual analysis, researchers using political documents as their primary sources of evidence must substantiate their findings with some form of external support (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003: x). For qualitative document analysts, this "triangulation" may take several forms.

The first, and most common, involves "quantizing" one's findings. This means buttressing any subjective, qualitative interpretations of the latent elements of a text with more

objective, quantitative analyses of its manifest content (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2006: 326-330). References to the existence of a particular "theme" in a set of documents, for instance, may benefit from an indication of how many times a particular set of keywords appeared in the texts. Doing so bolsters (the reader's confidence in) the precision of the analysis.

John Gerring applied this technique in his study of *Party Ideologies in America* (1998). Confronted with the choice between quantitative content analysis and qualitative document analysis, Gerring opted for the latter. "To make claims about party ideologies," he argued, "one must involve oneself in the meat and gristle of political life, which is to say in language. Language connotes the raw data of most studies of how people think about politics, for it is through language that politics is experienced" (Gerring, 1998: 298). In this vein, Gerring (1998: 297) suggested, "it would be unrealistic to expect content analysis to bear the entire burden of analysis on a subject as vast and complex as party ideology. To begin with, one would be forced to scale back the quantity of evidence in a fairly drastic fashion… Second, and perhaps more significantly, content analysis is somewhat less scientific than it appears. Since the meaning of terms is not static or univocal, words do not fall automatically within content analysis categories."

In search of this "language," Gerring turned to American party platforms, dating back to 1828. There, he found distinct rhetorical patterns, such that Whig-Republicans spoke in terms of "order versus anarchy" and "the state versus the individual" and the Democrats in terms of "liberty versus tyranny" and "the people versus the interests". To substantiate his interpretation, Gerring provided detailed paraphrasing and copious quotations from the party platforms. Yet he also bolstered this analysis with a content analysis of specific terms, phrases, and concepts used by the various parties. By including graphs depicting the differentiated use of words like "liberty" or "the people", over time, Gerring effectively quanitzed his qualitative findings.

A second method of triangulation involves "member-checking" – a familiar tool to those conducting field or focus group researchers. These analysts often verify the results of their observations with the subjects, themselves, as a means of verifying the authenticity of their findings. In document analysis, this means consulting the authors of the texts, to see if one's interpretations match their original motives or intent. It may not be possible to consult the author of a specific document, whether due to death, anonymity, location, or disinclination. Where possible, however, member-checking should be viewed as a valuable, "continuous process during data analysis... [not simply] as verification of the overall results..." (Morse et al., 2002: 16).

There may be disagreement between the researcher and the author, of course; indeed, there is often a healthy tension within research conducted from the emic and etic perspectives. In this sense, an author's intent may not be conveyed effectively to his or her audience, in which case the researcher's interpretation may provide a more authentic account of the *reader's* view of a particular text. Moreover, given that QDA is conducted with the understanding that no two readers are likely to come to identical interpretations of a given text, some disagreement between the author and the researcher is to be expected. The objective of member-checking is to provide at least some safeguard as to the authenticity of the researcher's interpretation of the text. Any disjunction between those findings and the author's own interpretation should not be taken necessarily as a refutation of the former, but rather a point to be explored during the analysis. The analyst should be prepared to defend his or her interpretation as the more trustworthy account of the text.

Intense Exposure and Thick Description

A second set of guidelines requires qualitative document analysts to immerse themselves in their texts and produce detailed accounts of their findings. Some people refer to this process as one of "soaking and poking," although the imagery belittles the amount of rigour involved (King et al., 1993: 36-43; Putnam, 1993: 12; Shively, 1998: 17). Granted, like any researcher, document analysts ought to "marinate" in their data until no new, alternative interpretations appear to emerge. (This is often referred to as the "saturation point.") Yet, to offer a trustworthy and systematic account, this process must be analytical and empirical, not simply a matter of osmosis.

To facilitate this, social scientists have come to consensus on a rigorous, three-stage process for the analysis of qualitative data.[2] The first step requires the researcher to take a broad overview of his raw materials, in search of general themes. In QDA studies, this "open-coding" stage involves reading through a smaller sampling of the available documents, recording any noticeable patterns in these texts in the form of "memos" or marginalia. A second stage of "axial-coding" allows the researcher to review the entire sample of documents, "tagging" specific passages as belonging under the various theme-categories identified in the initial phase of open-coding. During the third and final "selective-coding" stage, the analyst combs through the documents in search of mis-coded passages and discrepant evidence.   By following this three-stage process, qualitative document analysts are more likely to produce trustworthy and convincing interpretations of their data.

Consider a recent study of party platforms in the three Canadian Prairie Provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba (Wesley, 2009b). Like Gerring, the researcher was motivated by the desire to uncover patterns in the rhetoric of dominant parties in each province. His specific intent was to discern whether the different political cultures found across the region were connected, in some way, to the elite level discourse taking place during election campaigns. Was Alberta's conservative political culture associated with the rhetoric of its dominant politicians? Did Saskatchewan politicians campaign with a left-wing accent, matching the social democratic ethos of the province? And was Manitoba's political culture of moderation connected to the campaign messages of its leading parties?

Armed with these initial questions and hypotheses, the analyst entered the inquiry by assuming that no such patterns existed, seeking evidence to support their presence and reject the null hypothesis. This is known as the "directed" approach to qualitative textual analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005: 1281). In search of these themes, he collected and analyzed over eight hundred pieces of campaign literature, dating back to 1932. (Discussed below, many of these documents are available online, as part of the Poltext Project collection.) During the open-coding stage, the analyst detected certain broad-ranging themes.   In Alberta, the discourse appeared to revolve around notions of liberty and anti-conformity, whereas parties in Saskatchewan tended to campaign on the importance of solidarity and community, and Manitoba on tolerance and modesty. These observations were recorded in the form of memos, which were used to direct the second phase of axial coding.

During this second stage, key passages were highlighted as belonging under the broad categories identified during the first read-through.   Statements in Alberta were tagged as

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[2] Here is not the place to review the qualitative coding process in a step-by-step fashion; excellent guidebooks are available elsewhere (e.g., Altheide, 1996; Morse and Richards, 2002; Neuman and Robson, 2007; Richards, 2005; Ryan and Bernard, 2003; Wesley, forthcoming-a).

belonging under the category of "freedom," including sub-themes like populism, individualism, and provincial autonomy. In Saskatchewan, axial coding classified certain statements as being evidence of the province's "security"-based discourse, including references to collectivism, strong government, and polarization. Manitoba party platforms were coded for evidence of "moderation" (incrementalism, pragmatism, and a loose form of partisanship). A third, systematic pass through the documents involved significant reflection and revision. Some passages were reassigned to different categories, for instance, and numerous cases were highlighted that challenged the tidiness of the earlier analysis. Some Alberta politicians made use of social democratic rhetoric, for instance, while parties in Saskatchewan and Manitoba occasionally invoked conservative terminology during campaigns. This discrepant evidence was recorded, reported, and addressed in the final report (see below). Through this three-stage process, the analyst was able to systematically identify several themes, refine their content, and support their existence with evidence drawn from the documents, themselves.

Researchers must be equally meticulous in reporting the results of this analysis, and the evidence upon which the interpretations were based. Known famously as "thick description," Gerring refers to this process as grounding one's findings

in copious quotations from the principals. At times, this may seem laborious. However the inclusion of actual language in a rhetoric-centred study should be seen as equivalent to the inclusion of raw data in a qualitative study; both allow the reader to evaluate the evidence without relying entirely on the author's own authority. It also provides a depth otherwise lacking in discussions of abstract concepts and content-analysis statistics (Gerring, 1998: 298).

This begs the question, however: "How much data is enough to substantiate one's findings?" Without enough supporting evidence, a qualitative document analysis amounts to little more than "armchair interpretation" (Wesley, 2009a). Even with proper citations, too much paraphrasing may lead readers to question the authenticity and impartiality of the study. Conversely, "How much data is too much?" Without the researcher's own voice, a study consisting of too many direct quotations amounts to transcription, not inquiry (Morse and Richards, 2002: 188). Striking a balance between evidence and analysis is especially challenging for QDA researchers, in this regard (Platt, 2006b: 111-112).

While no disciplinary convention exists, as "a safe rule of thumb," Berg (2004: 270) recommends including at least three pieces of corroborating evidence for each major interpretation. These may come in the form of direct quotations or detailed paraphrases, and – depending upon the researcher's style and chosen venue – can be incorporated in-text or by way of footnote. This places the onus on the analyst to support his or her interpretation with adequate evidence, while providing the reader with the assurance that the findings are not derived arbitrarily.

Audit Trails and Discrepant Evidence

Perhaps more than any other method, qualitative document analysis requires that its practitioners provide detailed accounts, not only of their findings, but of the *process* by which they reached their conclusions (Platt, 2006b: 116). This entails creating an "audit trail" and reporting any discrepant evidence that may challenge their interpretations (Altheide, 1996: 25-33).

As Holliday (2007: 7) suggests, most qualitative research involves making sense of the often "messy reality" of social life. Doing so requires the qualitative document analyst to make dozens of difficult and subjective decisions throughout the research process – choices about which similarities and differences constitute real "patterns" in the text; to what degree certain parallels constitute genuine "themes"; which titles should be used to identify these themes; which passages constitute solid "evidence"; how much discrepant evidence must exist to refute a particular set of findings; and many others. There are no inherently right or wrong answers to such questions; there are only stronger or weaker justifications of these choices. As a result, qualitative document analyst must be explicit in identifying and defending the various decisions they made throughout the research process.

Contrary to most methods textbooks, an audit trail is not constructed solely at the end of the study. While a post-hoc report may satisfy the needs of reviewers, documenting the development of a completed analysis does little to ensure that the study, itself, is conducted in a trustworthy fashion (Morse et al., 2002: 16). Rather, researchers must keep detailed records of their progress throughout the data gathering, analysis, and reporting stages. These notes are often kept in the form of memos or journals, and serve two objectives. For the benefit of the reader, they allow the analyst to more accurately report the outcome and rationale behind the various decisions made. Second, the process of chronicling, itself, serves a valuable purpose, as it ensures the analyst is aware of, and continuously seeking to justify, the many choices made throughout the inquiry.

Some of the most important decisions concern how to deal, and whether to report, discrepant evidence. By including only information that serves to confirm their interpretations of the text, qualitative data analysts often face criticism for offering analyses that are "too tidy" or "circular". On the latter, critics of some QDA studies cite the researchers for entering the analysis with pre-defined hypotheses that, in turn, determine what they "see" as significant (George, 2006: 155). To avoid succumbing to this tendency, Becker (1998), Esterberg (2002: 175), and Berg (2004: 184) recommend employing the "null hypothesis trick," by which the analyst enters the inquiry assuming that no patterns exist; he or she must then assemble evidence from the documents to establish the existence of any themes. This helps shift the 'burden of proof' onto the researcher, and away from the reader.

Of course, qualitative document analysts need not "prove" the "truth" of their interpretations beyond all doubt. Most social scientists operate on a different standard, requiring their peers to establish the persuasiveness of their findings against competing interpretations. In quantitative research, persuasiveness is often measured in terms of *probability* (e.g., statistical significance), whereas qualitative researchers often speak in terms of *plausibility*.[3] As Richerson and Boyd (2004: 410-411) note, "plausibility arguments" have three features in common with more conventional hypotheses developed under the positivist paradigm:

> (1) a claim of deductive soundness, of in-principle logical sufficiency to explain a body of data; (2) sufficient support from the existing body of empirical data to suggest that it might actually be able to explain a body of data as well as or better

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[3] As a method of scientific explanation, plausibility arguments are well established in both the natural and social sciences. Indeed, plausibility arguments underlie much of what we "know" about the physical and social world; they underpin many of the theories and laws developed by mathematicians, physicists, archaeologists, evolutionary biologists, anthropologists, and others. Some plausibility arguments are used in exploratory research, developing hypotheses to be tested empirically in the future. Others are untestable, at least given current knowledge, technology, theory, or conditions. (Consider theories surrounding the existence of the "quark," for instance.) In cases like this, plausibility arguments often resist "proof" – or even "testing" – in the formal sense.

than competing plausibility arguments; and (3) a program of research that might distinguish between the claims of competing plausibility arguments. The differences are that competing plausibility arguments (1) are seldom mutually exclusive, (2) can seldom be rejected by a single sharp experimental test (or small set of them), and (3) often end up being revised, limited in their generality or domain of applicability, or combined with competing arguments rather than being rejected. In other words, competing plausibility arguments are based on the claims that a different set of submodels is needed to achieve a given degree of realism and generality… or that a given model is correct as far as it goes, but applies with less generality, realism, or predictive power than its proponents claim.

Thus, when developing their interpretations, qualitative document analysts need not feel pressure to "prove" their reading is the only accurate one. In fact, they are encouraged to report evidence that places reasonable bounds on their findings. An accomplished QDA researcher

> considers not just one inferential hypothesis when reading and rereading the original communication material, but also many alternatives to it. He systematically weighs the evidence available for and against each of these alternative inferences. Thus, the results of his analysis, if fully explicated, state not merely (1) the favored inference and the content 'evidence' for it, but also (2) alternative explanations of that content 'evidence,' (3) other content 'evidence' which may support alternative inferences, and (4) reasons for considering one inferential hypothesis more plausible than others (2006: 155).

Doing so, and reporting the specific decisions in the audit trail, boosts the credibility of the analysis (Holliday, 2007: 167-181).

Two other pieces of information ought to be reported as part of the study. First, qualitative document analysts ought to provide reasonable access to their raw materials. This is not simply as a courtesy to reviewers, or to protect against charges of inauthenticity, imprecision, or partiality. It is also crucial to the advancement of knowledge, as it permits other researchers to conduct their own inquiries without having to undergo the same painstaking process of collecting the raw materials. While not always possible (due to resource constraints or concerns over copyright or confidentiality), ideally documents should be placed in the public domain. Given advances in digital scanning and optical character recognition, it is becoming increasingly easier to post texts online, in electronic form. One such collection has been amassed under the auspices of the Poltext Project.

Funded by a grant from the Fonds québécois de la recherche sur la société et la culture, and housed at Université Laval in Quebec City (and online at www.poltext.org), the Poltext project collects and provides access to political documents drawn from across Canada and over time.[4] Amassed by a research team from across the country, the open-source collection is one of the largest of its kind in North America. It contains a growing assortment of party platforms, throne speeches, budget speeches, and a variety of other political documents at both the federal and provincial levels, dating back to the 1960s. As such, the Poltext collection serves as an unparalleled source of data on democratic life in Canada. Of note, access to provincial-level data is especially valuable to comparative researchers, both in Canada and beyond. The ten

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[4] The use of data from the project for publication purposes is subject to the mention of the following source: "Poltext project (www.poltext.org) Université Laval (Québec). The Poltext project is funded by a grant from the Fonds québécois de la recherche sur la société et la culture."

Canadian provinces constitute an underused series of laboratories for the comparative study of public policy, party ideology, political rhetoric, and many other areas of political science research.

The main advantage of the Poltext project lies in its provision of raw textual data for both quantitative content analysts and QDA researchers. Unlike similar databases, including those assembled by the massive and influential Comparative Manifesto and Euromanifesto Projects (see Budge et al., 2001; Klingemann et al., 2007), the information found in the Poltext collection does not come as pre-packaged data. While useful, one of the drawbacks to many other manifesto collections lies in the fact that their users must conform their research questions and methods to the data; the resulting inquiries amount to secondary data analysis, rather than primary research.

Second, to guard against partiality, qualitative document analysts ought to investigate and report their personal biases. QDA may be considered a form of "unobtrusive" research, in that it does not directly involve human *subjects.* However, as the researchers are key *instruments* of qualitative research – filtering the raw documents through their own personal lenses in order to produce "data" – it is important to investigate possible sources of contamination (Merriam, 2002b: 5). Thus analysts must undertake a process of critical self-reflection before and during the inquiry, and disclose the results as part of the final report (Creswell, 2003: 182).

Conclusion

To reiterate, the foregoing discussion serves as a set of *guidelines* for the conduct of trustworthy qualitative document analysis. This is by no means an exhaustive list (see Wesley, 2009a, forthcoming-a). Nor is it intended as a checklist for evaluating the authenticity, precision, portability, or impartiality of QDA studies. Morse et al. (2002: 16) are correct:

> Using standards for the purpose of post-hoc evaluation is to determine the extent to which the reviewers have confidence in the researcher's competence in conducting research following established norms. Rigor is supported by tangible evidence using audit trails, member checks, memos, and so forth. If the evaluation is positive, one assumes that the study was rigorous. We challenge this assumption and suggest that these processes have little to do with the actual attainment of reliability and validity. Contrary to current practices, rigor does not rely on special procedures external to the research process itself.

In sum, the qualitative analysis of political documents requires as much rigour as any other methodology, and attention to trustworthiness must be paid throughout the research process. The lack of attention paid to QDA in most methods textbooks and courses is disconcerting, in this regard, particularly given the tremendous advances in quantitative content analysis in recent decades. To engage in this debate, this paper has suggested a series of guidelines for the effective and trustworthy completion of qualitative document analysis.

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