

An integrated guide to thematic analysis

Combining top-down and bottom-up approaches

Journalistica: The Methods Section

In this section, Journalistica puts a spotlight on research methods used in journalism studies and/or journalism practice.

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1. Description of the method

Thematic coding is a popular approach in journalism studies for analyzing qualitative data that involves condensing and interpreting meaning by identifying patterns in data (Braun & Clarke 2006; Brooks & King 2014). Many existing guides for thematic analysis recommend first generating detailed codes that are subsequently subsumed under larger themes (Attride-Stirling 2011; Braun & Clarke 2006; Creswell 2014; Miles et al. 2014). Yet, as Deterding & Waters assert (2021), such pure bottom-up processes bear little resemblance with current research practices. Instead, they propose first sorting larger blocks of text into so-called indexes, which can be considered containers where you collect all text that refers to the same broad topic. Thereafter, fine-grained analytic codes are applied to all text in each index. However, despite its undeniable

strengths, their approach lacks transparency in the development of analytic codes and validation processes.

In this context, we develop an integrated guide to thematic analysis that combines the top-down approach of first indexing transcripts (*ibid.*) with the transparency, closeness to text, and careful validation of codes offered by bottom-up approaches. We use qualitative interviews to describe the method, but it can be applied to other forms of qualitative data, including news articles, social media material, or participant observation.

Step-by-step guide

I. Index coding

First, read all interview transcripts and sort large text chunks into indexes. The indexes reflect the project's research questions (Deterding & Waters 2021) and may be derived from the interview-guide or reflective notes made during the interviewing and transcribing processes (often referred to as memos, see Miles et al. 2014). Index coding eases the data analysis by grouping all parts of the interviews/transcripts where participants talk about a given topic. Furthermore, reading the transcripts gives a first sense of the overall meaning of the data (e.g. Braun & Clarke 2006; Brooks & King 2014; Creswell 2014).

II. Applying analytical codes

Next, apply analytic codes. These fine-grained codes capture repeated concepts in the data and assign interpreted meaning to smaller bits of text to identify patterns (Miles et al. 2014). Ideas for analytic codes are developed during the indexing phase. Code indexes one at a time to avoid being overwhelmed by the amount of data and overlooking important patterns (Deterding & Waters 2021). For example, in a project about conflict reporting, all text assigned to an index called 'different understandings of peace journalism' was coded first. It contained all parts of the interviews in which respondents talked about this topic. Analytic codes like 'promoting peace' and 'giving voice to all parties' were applied to the text, reflecting different understandings of the concept that participants referred to.

III. Searching for negative cases

Collectively, the analytic codes must reflect all meanings in the data relevant to answering the research question(s) (Dahler-Larsen 2008; Miles et al. 2014). After applying analytic codes, re-read all text in the index searching for negative cases that point in the opposite direction of the identified patterns (see Miles et al. 2014; Silverman 2020).

This helps identify coherent patterns while faithfully reflecting the contradictions and complexities in the data (Deterding & Waters 2021; Schwartz-Shea 2013) and adds analytic insight by illuminating the limits of the dominant patterns (Dahler-Larsen 2008; Miles et al. 2014).

IV. Validating analytical codes

Validate analytic codes to verify that there is substantial data for supporting each code (Braun & Clarke 2006; Morse et al. 2002) and ensure that codes have been applied consistently across data (Creswell 2014). Do this using the criteria of internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity (Braun & Clarke 2006, citing Patton 1990): All text bits coded with the same analytic code should create meaningful cohesion and point in the same direction, and the meaning captured by each analytic code should be different from other analytic codes. If this is not the case, collapse or split analytic codes into separate codes.

V. Subsuming analytical codes under themes

Provide a final description of the meaning each analytic code captures before grouping them into themes (e.g. Braun & Clarke 2006; David & Sutton 2004). All codes within a theme must relate to that theme, be different from other themes, and contribute to answering the research question(s). Cross-read themes and analytic codes to check whether any analytic code would fit another theme better. If so, reassign it.

VI. Checking back with interviews

Finally, re-read all transcripts to ensure the analysis mirrors all relevant insights from each interview (Silverman 2020). This helps rule out that important meaning or alternative answers to the research question(s) have been overlooked. If so, adjust the analysis accordingly.

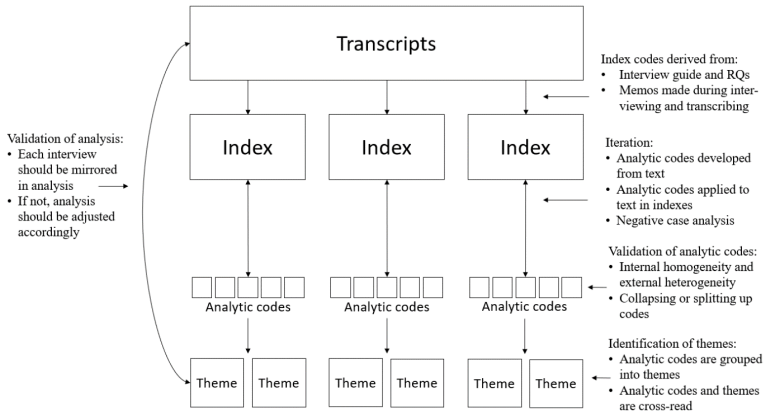


Figure 1: Integrated coding guide

2. Example of use

The proposed integrated guide has been used in two diverse research projects. The one takes a constructivist standpoint and explores different roles and practices related to peace journalism in the coverage of electoral conflict and terrorism in Kenya (Arregui 2023). Interview data with 35 journalists was coded on MaxQDA and combined with textual analysis of newspaper articles and participant observation. The other takes a news repertoires-approach and investigates why and how Danish alternative news users seek out and combine alternative and mainstream media (Brems 2024). Data from 25 interviews was analysed using NVivo and combined with insights from a large-N survey study. These examples illustrate that the approach travels well across studies set in varied contexts with different theoretical underpinnings, underscoring that a central advantage of thematic coding is that it is not tied to any specific theory (e.g. Braun & Clarke 2006).

3. Main advantages and challenges of using the method

Thematic analysis is an intricate and time-consuming method, and accounts for it are often unclear and sparse in academic publications (e.g. Dahler-Larsen 2008). This murkiness omits researchers' active role in interpreting data (Braun & Clarke 2006) and turns the analysis process into a 'black box' with raw data on one end and themes emerging on the other with no proper delineation of how these came into being. Our proposed integrated guide does not lead to different analytical results than would be obtained following prior

guides. Rather, by combining top-down and bottom-up approaches, we aim to integrate the best practices of each: 1) It offers clear validation steps that provide transparency in the process of analysis and its following presentation. 2) Beginning by indexing breaks the analysis into smaller parts and allows researchers to focus on analyzing a fraction of the data relevant to answering one research question at a time. 3) It allows to divide sections of the analytical work between researchers working on the same project and makes it easy for two coders to test inter-coder reliability on subparts of the data. 4) Indexing makes recoding of data later in the analysis process more manageable as it is not necessary to recode all data but just the subpart in the given index.

4. Ethical considerations

The relationship between researcher and research participants is asymmetrical as the former has the power to define the topics of interest and interpret the meanings of the collected data (Kvale & Brinkmann 2014; Miller & Crabtree 2004). This is a fundamental term of qualitative research but places ethical responsibilities on the researcher. Furthermore, the researcher must protect the identity of participants if anonymity has been promised (David & Sutton 2004; Kvale & Brinkmann 2014) in accordance with the principle of striving to do no harm (Rubin & Rubin 2012). This may conflict with ideals of open research, e.g. if transcripts cannot be made publicly available because certain content would reveal participants' identities.

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