Culture Hack Method:
Understand

How to show the way media and public discourse are constructed.

This process is directed towards analyzing the dominant messages of a narrative, with the intention of revealing who or what is being talked about and in what terms, as well as who or what is being ignored in the discourse.

Who

Journalists, linguists, students, the person or the group of people in an organization who are tasked with analyzing the media discourse and producing insights for a broader political discussion.

/ **CHM - Ask Index**

How to engage with this step

This process requires samples of media or academic articles around a specific subject, this can be gathered through manual or automatized tracking. If this process is done analogically it can be done with a worksheet, if done digitally it will require a software like antconc and the previous creation of a corpus.

/ UNDERSTAND

During the Mapping process, we collect valuable data on the shape of a narrative, made up of the stories that shape opinion and experience. The Understand process takes these building blocks and transforms them into insights. How is meaning made by participants in an online conversation? How do messages with a particular ideological bent travel through media? How are the stickiest memes used? How can we identify gaps in the range of stories being told that we can fill with alternative counter-narratives?

This analysis is done through analyzing media content and social discourse. The media analysis is used mostly to understand the hegemonic narrative, the mainstream take on the issue we are tackling and the evolution of this topic in the public sphere. This sort of analysis is mostly content based, answering the basic journalistic questions around media discourse: Who? What? Where? When? How? Why? What for?

The discourse analysis uses tools from linguistics to understand the language in how messages are conveyed and opinions expressed, to surface the underlying logic of the narrative - how the world makes sense through a narrative lens. It focuses on understanding the dominant concepts, agency and evaluation within and across pieces of language: tweets, opinion pieces, policy documents, manifestoes, and so on.

/ Theory

Analyzing media

The media ecosystem has an effect on the perception, comprehension, sensation and creation of social values in a community. Mass media provides tools for individuals to understand their social, political and cultural reality, enabling them to express their opinions and thus form a socially constructed imaginary.

As culture hackers we know there is an ongoing struggle for the symbols that render society understandable, symbols that are constantly changing and moving. The dominant narratives that surround us are propagated by dominant networks and counter-narratives are created and propagated by networks of resistance to hegemonic power. To make sense of what is behind messages created and propagated by capital, we need to scrutinize the concept of power.

Practically, we understand power as an imbalanced relationship, a tension between the powerful and campaigners, activists and all of those who oppose power. While the "powerful" a.k.a nations, politicians, capitalists; have the means to dictate and assert dominant narratives subjects do maintain certain amount of agency to revert that, by disputing the dominant narratives that are important references for our life in society, we call that arena of dispute public space, but let's not forget that public space is linked to a capitalist mode of production and with regard to media production, it's up to the journalist to reproduce the discussion amongst citizens of those issues of collective interest, that is called public opinion. Public opinion comes from the symbolic world and participates in social dynamics in the sense that representations are shared around reality.

Understanding public opinion and the content of mass media is relevant for culture hackers because this process allows us to identify the dominant narratives around our subject, and through discourse analysis we can take a deeper dive into these narratives to look for opportunities to change them.

Analyzing language

As culture hackers, we have an intuitive sense of the inherent power of language, and its ability to create stories that endure. Naming a thing is calling it into being, and defining a narrative is creating a piece of reality.

Understanding language in cultural narratives is about more than word-smithing or creating effective and sticky messaging. The goal is more basic, and more radical: to understand the underlying logic of a narrative -- how the worldview presented in a narrative make sense; and the pieces of language that can cause damaging narratives to stop making sense.

In the Understand step, we take the insights gained from Mapping and use linguistic analysis tools and techniques to make a panorama of how a narrative is talked about, that is, how it lives in the world. We look at the small linguistic building blocks (words, phrasings, references) to see how they create the frames (see Re-Code) through which we understand the world.

We use tools from critical discourse analysis and cognitive linguistics to pinpoint the most meaningful units of language; we can then manipulate these units to create persuasive, daring frames that get to the heart of an issue and inspire new ways of imagining the world.

Critical discourse analysis holds that all language is inherently ideological; all expressions are there to present a particular point of view. We find evidence for points of view and the narratives which they create in aggregate in, among others, these linguistic elements:

- Reference
- Frequency
- Evaluation

Agency

Understanding which references are chosen to talk about issues, events, and people, as well as how frequently they occur, gives us an answer to the questions, "Who are the characters in the stories told - and who are not?" and "What are the basic premises of this narrative?". Seeing how issues, events and people are evaluated lets us know "What values are prioritized in this narrative?" Determining who has agency in a narrative gives us a sense of how dominant powers want us to see the world. All these insights are key to crafting powerful counter-frames to challenge the dominant narratives.

/ Further Reading

Content Analysis. An Introduction to its Method. By Klaus Krippendorff is examines the conceptual aspects of content analysis and shows how to apply evaluative techniques that can be helpful when we do media analysis.

/ Stories

#GrowthOrLife

It's a case study we wrote on how to hack the logic of economic growth and the trendy notion of "green growth" with a video and a series of articles in key media outlets.

The language of inmigration reporting: Normalizing vs Watchdogging in a nativist age

The language of inmigration reporting: Normalizing vs Watchdogging in a nativist age. This study harnesses journalism collections at Media Cloud to test if the language used in inmigration has changed over the Trump campaign and administration.

Media Analysis 101 Worksheet

What to look for when we analyze media

Every media piece is made from different elements, identifying each one is the first step towards content analysis.

Media outlet	
Name of the outlet	
Headlines (What)	
Main actors (Who)	
Places (Where)	
Time (When)	
Framing (How)	
Themes (Why)	

Questions we ask

There are different things that we interrogate in different parts of the media piece we are engaging with:

Headlines

Do the headlines match the story told in the body of the article?

Main actors

Who are the actors in the stories portrayed in the article?

How are they described?

How many times are they mentioned?

Places

> What are the main places mentioned in the article?

> What spaces or territories are being made invisible by the article?

Time

> Is the story written in present or past tense? What does this indicate?

> Is the note about something that is happening now or does it recount past events?

Framing

> Whose side do you think the writer or outlet telling the story is on?

> Does the article show different perspectives on the story? Should it?

Themes

> What are the main topics and subtopics of the note?

Based on these questions, analyze the content in media articles:

How climate change is driving emigration from Central America

Climate refugees fleeing drought were part of the migrant caravan from Central America

How climate change drives migration to the U.S

1. Write one sentence about the main issue of the articles
2. Identify the main actor(s) and place(s)of this articles
3. Describe how these actor(s) are being represented (are they victims or culprits, how much agency do they have, are they multidimensional protagonists)
4. Think over if these three media pieces are representative of the issue in question (climate refugees)
5. Identify the frames around the relationships on land-subjects, land-migration and land-climate change.

/ Simple Language Analysis

Analyzing language

Why language

Understanding language gives us an insight into the underlying logic of a narrative. This is an exercise in reading closely and coding linguistic elements to make them available for direct comparison and critical analysis.

Accessing the core logics

If we understand the logics at the core of dominant narratives, we can intervene and change them

How do we know?

* Dominant concepts (what's important)

* Agency (who does what to whom)

* Evaluation (how we're supposed to feel)

Where and how we look for data

Social media

For example, discussions on Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, other channels

Media

For example, national, international, regional media

Other sources

Focus groups, surveys, art, campaign materials, policy documents… the sky is the limit!

Questions we ask

Dominant concepts

- How do the concepts important to your issue show up (e.g. through word choice)
- If they don't -- what does this mean about the ideology of the data source?

Agency

- Who are the actors in the stories told?

- Who is in a position of agency?
- Who is left out or misrepresented?

Evaluation

- How are the important events described?
- What adjectives appear alongside which actors?

Example- Concepts

Word choice

- Concepts can be described using a variety of words
- Word choice reflects ideology
- Try searching for your preferred term in your data set
- If it's there, this could be an opportunity to amplify; if not, it's the dominant narrative

What's different in these sentences?

"The protesters created a powerful direct action"

"The police protected private property from the rioters"

Analysis

The author of the 1st sentence is aligned with…

The author of the 2nd sentence is aligned with…

Example- Agency

Subjects/objects

- Subject = "doer" of the sentence
- Object = "result" or "recipient" of the action of the subject
- The position in a sentence indicates the logic of the message
- Who is active/central/important and who is passive/secondary in this story

What's the difference in these sentences?

"The protesters created a powerful demonstration"

"The police stopped and beat back the protesters"

Analysis

The author of the 1st sentence is aligned with…

The author of the 2nd sentence is aligned with…

Example- Evaluation

Describing qualities

- Word choice about HOW something is shows the reader how to think about something
- Describing qualities is never neural, always ideological
- Adjectives are evaluative
- The voice of the author decides how to evaluate parts of the story

What's different in these sentences?

"The protesters created a beautiful intervention"

"The police forcefully controlled the vicious rioters"

Analysis

The author of the 1st sentence is aligned with...

The author of the 2nd sentence is aligned with...

/ Tech Tools

MediaCloud

Is an open-source platform for studying media ecosystems. The tools of this software are designed to analyze, visualize and deliver information to answer quantitative and qualitative questions about the content of online media, it collects most of its content through the RSS feeds of media sources they follow, they only have data from the media sources from the time they started scraping its RSS feeds.

Antconc

AntConc is an open-source, user-friendly piece of software which gives overviews of word frequencies, modifiers, locations, and sentiments of words and phrases within any type of text.

/ Teachings

Heather Froehlich's AntConc tutorial This in-depth tutorial walks a new AntConc user through every step of startup, how to build a corpus, how to run searches, how to ask questions of the data and interpret findings. Created by Literary Informatics Librarian and Assistant Professor Heather Froehlich of Penn State University (Pennsylvania, USA).

Culture Hacking AntConc exercise This is a practical exercise for culture hackers, focused on familiarizing you with the basic steps of analyzing language with AntConc. Use it as a first step toward your narrative inquiries!

Getting started with Media Cloud guide this page provides basic information for doing basic research with Media Cloud, it's free and you can access through Media Cloud web page.

Media Cloud Intro Webinar An Introduction to the platform Media Cloud made presented by Anushka Sha, Natalie Gyenes, Cindy Bishop and Rahul Bhargava, it's free.

/ Glossary

Agency is the expression of who has the power in a narrative, compared to who is powerless or not even mentioned at all. Dominant narratives can also refuse to take responsibility by stripping away agency (i.e. "Mistakes were made").

Critical discourse analysis is the study of linguistic patterns through an ideological lens. The goal is to understand how ideologies are reflected in and created through specific linguistic elements within and across texts.

Discourse can be defined in a number of ways. Most simply, it is language about some issue. It can encompass any genre of speech and writing. All discourse is available for critical study and culture hacking.

Evaluation is how a speaker/writer chooses to portray a referent, through choice of adjectives and adverbs.

Frequency is how often a particular reference is used, particularly in comparison to other possible references.

Media ecosystem Is the set of institutions that develop activities around production, distribution and knowledge of information and data. The mass media communication industry can refer to print media, digital media and broadcasting.

Reference is how a writer/speaker chooses to refer to an entity, state, action, or event (e.g. global warming vs. climate change.