



**Researching the Public Sphere - Methods for Content and  
Discourse Analysis  
16-20 November 2010 at Freie Universität Berlin**

The Method School's aim was to highlight the state of the art in the field and discuss which research questions can be tackled by which computer-aided content and discourse analysis. Large-n content analyses have become popular, as content data such as news media articles, parliamentary debates and governmental reports are increasingly accessible in a digital format. Some of the new approaches go beyond counting single terms in documents, and seek to understand the structure and the context of the content analysed. Several approaches have entered the stage at which it becomes possible to combine quantitative and computer-aided qualitative coding. The Method School will, therefore, offer an introduction into some of the most widely used software packages in the field, but also introduce the basics of content and discourse analysis. Besides introductions by specialists in the field, the programme included intensive group work, practical sessions using traditional and new computer software and possibilities for students to bring in their own research ideas and approaches.

The target group of the Method School was early doctoral students (first two years) with a research interest in the public sphere and no or limited prior knowledge in the field of content and discourse analysis. The participants came from political science, international relations, sociology, cultural anthropology and communication sciences. All in all, 21 participants took part in the method school. Many participants either worked on a PhD in Germany or were German nationals. However, besides German nationals, the inclusion of participants from Armenia, Brazil, Italy, Romania, Switzerland, Turkey, and the USA ensured an international atmosphere.

The programme consisted of two parts: the first three days, an introduction to content and critical discourse analysis, then, during the last two days, a hands-on training into large-N content analysis.

The lectures by dr. Roel Popping on content analysis and by dr. Veronika Koller on critical discourse analyses were preceded by group work on these two research methods. Dr. Marianne van de Steeg (JMCE, FU Berlin) prepared the participants for the lectures by the two specialists by discussing with the participants the assigned literature and, then, have the participants work in groups on a research design that should include the main lessons from the methodological literature. The resulting (hypothetical) research designs were later discussed by the specialists in the field, respectively, Roel Popping and Veronika Koller. The idea behind the group sessions was that one only realises

what a methodology implies and which kind of choices a researcher has to make when applying it to a real research question.

Dr. Roel Popping (Sociology, Groningen University) taught the basics of quantitative content analysis and demonstrated the use of dictionaries and software such as the beta-version of Textual Content Analysis. Textual Content Analysis will be freely available from 1. January 2011. This programme allows to combine a quantitative content analysis with subsequent hand-coding. During Roel Popping's lecture special attention was given to the choices a researcher makes while preparing a quantitative content analysis, and to the issues of reliability and validity.

Dr. Veronika Koller (Linguistics, Lancaster University) lectured on critical discourse analysis. She introduced the participants to the ontological background of critical discourse analysis and, then, put the principles of discourse analysis into practice by critically discussing the articles written by herself that was on the literature list. By referring to this older article by herself and by having the participants talk about the research designs prepared during the group work, Veronika Koller demonstrated what it entails to make a discourse analysis. Later, the participants received a hands-on training in Wmatrix, a software programme developed by Lancaster University that enables to combine critical discourse analysis with quantitative sampling of potentially relevant text fragments. The use of Wmatrix (so far only available in English) expands significantly the scope of research questions in the area of critical discourse analysis.

During the second part of the method school, Brit Helle Aarskog (Computer scientist, Bergen University) gave a hands-on training to the participants on two software packages: WordSmith and Atlas.ti. WordSmith is a software package with which large-N text corpuses can easily be analysed. WordSmith allows the researcher to identify patterns in the material. By combining WordSmith analysis with linguistic notions – e.g. after 'therefore' and 'because' usually follows an argumentation – the researcher is able to identify where in the text corpus clusters relevant for her/his research question are located. The knowledge about these clusters can subsequently be used in software such as Atlas.ti as a query for automated coding. Atlas.ti, just like MaxQDA and InVivo, is a software package that can be used for qualitative and quantitative text analysis. Brit Helle Aarskog trained the participants how to combine the advantages of a first round of quantitative, automatic coding with subsequent hand-coding.

Besides discussing methods that are useful for those who research the public sphere, the programme included an in-depth discussion of research on a European public sphere. Dr. Marianne van de Steeg answered the participants' questions on how to do this type of research by showing how the operationalisation of her research question led to a coding tree and qualitative coding in WinMax (a predecessor of MaxQDA), which, then, was turned into a data file with which in SPSS factor analyses and regression analyses were made. A roundtable with Prof. Dr. Thomas Risse (International relations, FU Berlin) and Annette Heft (Communication sciences, FU Berlin) introduced the participants to research on European identity, a European public sphere, and public argumentation.