GEOG/SOC 251: Media Frame and Content Analysis   **Professor Chris Henke, chenke@colgate.edu**
Working with MAXQDA   **Fall 2016, Colgate University**

MAXQDA is a software package that assists with the analysis of qualitative data. When working with large amounts of textual or visual data, MAXQDA can help to organize the messiness of qualitative research. The key steps in using MAXQDA include: importing documents to work with, developing a code structure to analyze and code your documents, and retrieving the results of your coded documents. These steps will be demonstrated in class and are documented in a nice series of videos from the makers of MAXQDA (linked on our course Moodle site), so this document is not focused on these basic steps, but is instead a set of tips for working with MAXQDA that will make the process somewhat easier and make your project better in the end.

General Principles for Working with MAXQDA

- There is an old saying among software geeks: "Garbage In, Garbage Out" (GIGO), which emphasizes the mindlessness of computers and their software---computers only tell us in the end what we have told them to say. If we give them garbage, then they will give it back. This is definitely true with MAXQDA! The more thoughtfully and consistently that we work with our data in the software, the more helpful it can be with our data analysis process.

- MAXQDA does not provide "answers"---its main virtue lies in organization. It's like a magic notebook that stores all your qualitative data files and allows you to mark them up with dozens of different highlighters. Then, when you want to retrieve data with a certain highlight, you can ask MAXQDA to give you just those segments of the data. There are all kinds of interesting visual reports and other fancy tricks that you can do with MAXQDA, but each of these is, in the end, dependent on the quality of your data and how you've coded it. Again, GIGO.

Working with MAXQDA Project Files

- We have a class file share that is located on the Colgate network.
   o From the PC environment where you will work with MAXQDA, you can access the fileshare at:
      ▪ \\fileshr01\Labs&Classes\GEOG-SOC-251-Fall16
      ▪ Just put this link into the address bar in a Windows Explorer window
   o If you have a Mac and want to access your files when not in the virtual PC, you can use this address:
      ▪ smb://fileshr01/Labs&Classes/GEOG-SOC-251-Fall16
      ▪ Note that you need to be on the Colgate network to access this shared folder.
   o Each project team has a dedicated folder for your use in the fileshare. Please use only your own folder and do not access any of the files in other folders.

- There is no "save" function in MAXQDA files---each time you make a change in a MAXQDA project, the file is saved automatically. This means that changes are applied instantly, and, in many cases, there is no going back after you make those changes. For example, if you delete a document or a code, that code is gone, and you can only recreate it by adding it to the file again, which may require a lot of work.

- For this reason, a good approach to managing your MAXQDA project is to have one file that is your working file---you can even name it something like, "Class Project – WORKING." All of your work in MAXQDA will be with that same file.

- Each time you begin a session working with MAXQDA, you should backup your working file and provide some detail about that backup. For example, you could name a backup file, "Class Project – BACKUP 2014-09-01." The backup function is listed under the "File" menu in MAXQDA; once you give your backup file a name, MAXQDA will ask you if you want to work with the backup file. I suggest saying "NO" and continue to work with your working file. Backups, then, are only for use when you make a change that you did not mean to make, and you can use the backup for recovery.

- Make frequent backups---you should make a backup when you start a work session, then again after a certain amount of time (every hour or so is a good practice), and just before you make any major changes to your working file (changing documents, codes, etc).

Keeping Track of Documents

- Documents you work with in MAXQDA will be in the form of a text file (RTF, DOC, or TXT file), an image file (JPEG or PDF) or a video file (MP4 and others). Depending on the type of data you are using, you may wish to have MAXQDA import the file in discrete units---for example, if you have a text file with 50 articles in it from a Lexis-Nexis search, you might actually want MAXQDA to break those 50 articles into separate documents, rather than having them all in one big file. This is where the hashtag (#TEXT) command is useful. By placing #TEXT followed by a string of text at the start of each article, you can signal to MAXQDA where articles start and end as well as the name you would like to assign to that data. If, for instance, you wanted to give each article in your sample a title with the author and year of the article, you would put #TEXTAUTHORYEAR at the start of each article, where AUTHOR is the actual name of the author and YEAR is the actual year. MAXQDA will chop up your larger document into separate documents when it sees each of the hashtag marks.

- For all projects, but especially for those involving images or videos, use a spreadsheet to keep track of each of your source documents. Create columns for variables such as document title, author, date of publication, date of access, source for access, etc.

- Another way to keep track of your documents is through the use of memos. Especially if you have a complex document with a number of different sources in it, it's a good idea to assign a memo to your documents, with a description of what is in it. In the memo you might include: what kind of data is in the document, how did you find the data (source, sampling technique, etc), specific keywords you used to find the data (through search engines, etc), and notes about any distinguishing characteristics about the data.

- A more advanced way to work with documents in MAXQDA is to assign them variables. For example, in an interview with a white, female student, aged 20, you could assign variables indicating each of these attributes to the data file. Then, when you wish to analyze your data, you can use these variables to specify the data that you wish you to work with. In the example above, if you have a gender variable assigned for each interview subject, you can ask MAXQDA to activate just the interviews with women or men. Similarly, you can ask MAXQDA to activate combinations of variables to get more complex combinations of the data you have coded. Use of variables in this way allows you to control for certain characteristics, like you would do in a quantitative analysis.

- The larger your data set, the more you will appreciate taking the time to carefully organize your documents in these ways.

Creating and Refining Codes

- Your most important decisions when doing qualitative analysis often involve choices about the kinds of codes to assign to your data. Where do these codes come from?
  - The first source for potential codes is the concepts in your research question and project literature review. Codes are conceptual, and your literature review should help you to identify the key concepts that you are using to frame your project. If you are doing a project focused on gender and advertising, you might be using Goffman and concepts like presentation of the self or fronts. Those concepts might be used as the basis for some of your initial codes.

  - The second main source for codes comes from your data. Although you can anticipate some codes before you even collect your data, there are also going to be patterns and trends that you did not anticipate, but instead emerge as you read and interpret your data. This process is sometimes called "free coding" or "open coding," where you are assigning codes as you read through your data. This ability to see unanticipated trends in your data is one of the main advantages of qualitative data, so you should make sure to be mindful of new codes when working with your data.

- Each time you create a new code, you should add a memo to the code with a description that provides more detail about the code and the kind of data that you will associate with the code. As you work through your data, it is possible that you will expand or refine the meaning of a given code, and so that memo will help you to keep track of just what the code means. In addition, if future researchers wish to use your data for their own project, it will help to convey the meanings you attached to each code.

- Use the tools that MAXQDA gives you to organize your codes, using code trees, colors, etc.

- Resist the urge to create new codes for everything you see in your data. In general, your projects will likely have 3-8 main codes and then a larger number of subcodes under each of those main codes.

Other Tips for Using MAXQDA

- To access your data in MAXQDA, especially to retrieve coded segments of documents, you need to activate the specific documents and codes that define the data you want to see. Activated documents or codes turn red when they are activated.
  - If you move to another set of documents and codes, make sure to deactivate any that you no longer wish to work with.

- It is important to think about your work with MAXQDA as a process that evolves as you work through it. As you add new documents and codes, especially, you will be changing your overall project, and it makes sense to revisit parts that you have worked on previously. In some cases, you might need to go back and add codes to a document that you have already coded. Overall, the more you work through your data and become really familiar with it, the better your coding will be.