

REPERTOIRES OF EMPIRICAL SOCIAL SCIENCE AND FREEDOM OF INFORMATION REQUESTS

Four techniques for analysing disclosures

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Introduction

The use of freedom of information (FOI) requests to produce empirical material is growing in popularity among social scientists. In the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), Canada and more than one hundred other countries (Hazell & Worthy, 2010; Holsen, 2007; Jiwani & Krawchenko, 2014; Roberts, 2006; Savage & Hyde, 2014; Worthy, 2017), FOI laws allow researchers to request information that would not otherwise be released from government agencies. Many FOI users are journalists (Cribb, Jobb, McKie, & Vallance-Jones, 2015), lawyers or government opposition staffers (Worthy & Bourke, 2011), but academics increasingly see the benefits of and insight to be obtained from accessing government texts that have not been proactively released into the public domain. While there are works on the history of FOI (e.g., Birkinshaw, 2010; Schudson, 2015; Worthy, 2017), and texts in journalism that reflect on basic techniques of its use (e.g., Burgess, 2015; Cuillier & Davis, 2010), the methodological and disciplinary implications of FOI are only beginning to be explored.

As FOI becomes a more popular approach to producing empirical material for social science research, literature on the methodological dimensions of FOI has started to emerge. Methodological interventions reflecting on FOI requests and social research have so far focused on research design, data collection, establishing rapport with FOI coordinators and ethics (Jiwani & Krawchenko, 2014; Lee, 2005; Savage & Hyde, 2014; Walby & Luscombe, 2018). The issue of data analysis in relation to FOI disclosures has not yet been developed in any lengthy methodological discussion.

In this chapter, we describe four approaches to data analysis that can be used to help interpret and make sense of FOI disclosures. We argue that content analysis, discourse analysis, metaphor analysis and social network analysis can be used

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together or on their own by researchers analysing the results of FOI requests. There is value in comparing and contrasting data analysis techniques (also see Burck, 2005; Starks & Trinidad, 2007) not just for FOI researchers, but for social scientists more broadly. To illustrate these techniques, we draw from the results of some of our own analyses and the research of others.¹ We do not mean to suggest that these are the only four approaches with merit (see for example, Greenberg, this volume for a discussion of other approaches). Rather, inspired by Honan, Knobel, Baker, and Davies (2000), we show that different techniques for analysing the same data can result in qualitatively different claims and arguments that enrich an account and extend an inquiry in novel ways. For these reasons, social researchers must be open to using multiple tools to make sense of empirical material.

By explaining how content analysis, discourse analysis, metaphor analysis and social network analysis can be used to make sense of FOI disclosures, we add to literature on FOI use in the social sciences, and to literatures on these four approaches to data analysis. However, we also engage with what Savage and Burrows (2007) call the “coming crisis in empirical sociology.” In response to the waning validity of traditional survey and interview research, Savage and Burrows (2007, p. 895) call on scholars to rethink the repertoires of knowledge production in the social sciences. Haggerty (2004) has similarly lamented the decline of politically engaged and ethically “edgy” research that often provides the deepest insights into authority, relations of power and domination, and inequality. As a means of accessing government data, some of which is politically sensitive and potentially contentious, we conceive of FOI requests in research as a means of helping rethink the repertoires of empirical social science. It is the promise of revelation, its power as an investigative tool and the credibility and trustworthiness of FOI disclosures as the “raw” stuff of bureaucratic governance that makes FOI such a powerful and exciting research technique. Elsewhere, we have argued that FOI data, when obtained systematically, can be considered as credible and trustworthy as the results of established research methods (Walby & Luscombe, 2017). Building on this argument, and on the grounds that no data speaks for itself (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003; Yanow, 2000), here we discuss four approaches to analysis of FOI data.

This chapter has four parts. First, we situate FOI use and disclosures in literature on research design and overview some of the key aspects of FOI in practice. Second, we provide an overview of four methods of analysis and how they can be used to make sense of FOI disclosures. The four techniques we discuss are content analysis, discourse analysis, metaphor analysis and social network analysis. In conclusion, we reflect on what our arguments mean for the growing literature on FOI research methodology and to literatures on these four approaches to data analysis more broadly.

Freedom of information and research design

Before turning to analysis of FOI disclosures, an outline of the process of using FOI requests to produce datasets is warranted. Like other approaches to data

collection, there is no how-to guide for using FOI requests to produce data. Similar to ethnography or interviewing, FOI is a research “craft” (Tracy, 2010) that one gains a tacit knowledge of and knack for over time. It is easier to demonstrate in practice than to write out the steps and wrinkles involved in incorporating it into a project’s research design. Previous research has used FOI requests in a nested sequential design prior to interviews (Monaghan, 2017; Walby, Lippert, & Wilkinson, 2014), after interviews, in conjunction with archival materials (Clement, 2015), and in combination with news media, political speeches and other open-source materials (see Monaghan, 2014).

To make an FOI request, the researcher submits a written letter (sometimes with an initial processing fee) to a government agency’s FOI unit, where it is subsequently assigned to a coordinator. The FOI coordinator locates any texts relevant to the researcher’s request and prepares them, in accordance with FOI legal requirements (e.g., protection of privacy or sensitive proprietary information, national security, etc.), for whole or partial disclosure. Some records do not have to be released and are exempt from FOI disclosure requirements (e.g., cabinet confidences in Canada, security intelligence records in the UK). An FOI request is completed once the requester receives a disclosure package and/or legal explanation for why some or all of the records were withheld from disclosure.

Only a fraction of the texts that government workers create are ever publicly disclosed (Galison, 2004), and those texts which are proactively released (i.e., without FOI) are typically manicured by public relations and communications specialists. To better understand government practices, researchers can use FOI to access those circulating texts that actually inform and bring into being the process of governing. Internal government texts that order and inform civil servant’s actions and decision-making, communicate rationales, make calculations, or provide rules for organisation can all to some extent be accessed using FOI. FOI can produce useful insight into government conduct that can be generative for theorising (Swedberg, 2016) as well.

There are five steps involved in filing a successful FOI request (Jiwani & Krawchenko, 2014; Savage & Hyde, 2014). First, some preliminary research identifying the relevant agency (or agencies), programme, file type, etc. is required. Second, the request must be submitted. This can require a paper letter submission, but increasingly the submission process is moving online. Third, once the request is received, the FOI coordinator will be in contact with the researcher/requester in order to clarify, negotiate and broker the scope and meaning of the request. In more egregious cases, the FOI coordinator may try to stealthily steer the FOI user away from certain topics or dates (Sheaff, 2016). Fourth, usually after some period of waiting, the requester will receive a written explanation with a possible disclosure package containing the requested information (sometimes the information may be withheld outright, depending on the nature of the records, specific FOI law, etc.). The letter iterates what was requested and explains (if applicable) why information was redacted and under what section of law. Finally, and usually outlined at the end of the letter, there

will be an option to appeal the agency's decision. Though not always warranted, the appeal process is an important phase in the FOI process and can be an effective means of correcting erroneous decisions made by coordinators. When multiple disclosures from different agencies are combined, these data can have what Monaghan and Hameed (2012) call a mosaic effect; that is, the sum of FOI records released in portions can reveal more than its parts in isolation.

We understand use of FOI as part of an ethical obligation of researchers to study up (Nader, 1974) and to investigate powerful, authoritative organisations that may be secretive or resistant to outside scrutiny (Lee, 2005; Monahan & Fisher, 2015). Although shadowing can be used (McDonald, 2005), access is difficult to come by and often only provides a glimpse at one part of any organisation. Expert interviewing (Meuser & Nagel, 2009) likewise can provide partial insights into government practices and processes, but government workers are often restricted in what they can say, calling the validity of such data into question (e.g., Brodeur, 2010, p. 36 on police as "deceptive objects"). Yet these more conventional research approaches are not immune from recent critiques of traditional methodological repertoires in social science (Greiffenhagen, Mair, & Sharrock, 2015; Savage & Burrows, 2007). Government workers, notably those in more guarded agencies and ministries, can come to operate as "cloistered communities" (Wichroski, 1996). One way to peer into the everyday worlds of these insulated communities and organisations is to use FOI requests.

In our view, FOI disclosures should be conceived of differently from "secondary data" in the traditional sense (Tarrant, 2017). There are two reasons for this. First, the multiple, complex and variegated processes that the researcher becomes embroiled in when filing an FOI request means that they play an active role in producing a disclosure (Luscombe, Walby, & Lippert, 2017). Two researchers seeking records on the same general subject are unlikely to produce identical disclosure packages. The researcher files and frames the initial request, brokers and negotiates with the coordinator over its meaning, appeals the agency's decisions and redactions and can even subsequently sue the organisation. An FOI disclosure package is "produced" for the user, not "found" data produced for secondary purposes. Second, data generated through FOI can describe existing and ongoing government practices. A report disclosed through FOI may be still actively circulating in government and being discussed by bureaucrats at the same time as the researcher obtains a copy. Based on this temporal element, analysing secondary data seems to have much more in common with archival research than data produced by FOI for social scientific research.

In sum, we understand academic inquiry as a "reticular process" (Brownstein, 1990, p. 163) that unfolds in a non-linear manner and that demands the continual use of reflexivity (Berger, 2015; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Incorporating FOI into one's research design could be considered what Altheide, Coyle, DeVriese, and Schneider (2008) refer to as emergent document analysis. Though it is difficult and challenging to mix approaches to data collection and analysis (McLellan, Macqueen, & Neddig, 2003; Moran-Ellis et al., 2006), we advocate for research

designs that include FOI requests, surveys, interviews, archival documents, news media and other available sources. Elsewhere, for example, we advocate nested sequential interviewing before and after use of FOI requests (Walby & Luscombe, 2017). When combined with multiple different research techniques and used in accordance with criteria for quality (Tracy, 2010), FOI requests can have a major impact on the design and results of social inquiry. Focusing on data analysis rather than design *per se*, below we reflect on four ways of analysing the results of FOI requests. Developing themes (Ryan & Bernard, 2003) and patterns is a key goal of any research technique, and the four approaches we discuss below each provide a unique yet complementary approach to identifying, analysing and making sense of the information contained in FOI documents.

Four approaches to analysing Freedom of Information disclosures

Content analysis

Content analysis allows researchers to extract manifest and latent trends from documents (Fields, 1988; Grümmer & Stewart, 2013). Content analysis can be used to determine the character and substance of a text by identifying, for example, how frequent the use of specific words or phrases is. Content analysis, often conducted with the aid of computer software, can be performed on both large and small datasets (Nelson, 2017; Nelson, Burk, Knudsen, & McCall, 2018). The categories used for coding can be derived both inductively (from the data) or deductively, using themes from relevant literature (Cho & Lee, 2014).

There are a number of examples of using content analysis strategies to analyse FOI data. Using records obtained through FOI, Young (2015) calculated that, for the past four decades, at least one pipeline every day had ruptured and created an oil spill in the province of Alberta. In their research on the representation of ethnic groups in Canada's prisons, Owusu-Bempah and Wortley (2014, p. 292) conducted FOI requests with provincial and territorial prisons across the country. Unlike at the federal level, Canadian provincial and territorial prisons do not proactively disclose information on the ethnic makeup of their prisoner populations, making FOI a necessary means of access. The data Owusu-Bempah and Wortley (2014) gained access to under FOI showed clear evidence of Indigenous and African Canadian overrepresentation in provincial and territorial prisons. In their analysis of racial disparities in marijuana misdeemeanour arrests in New York City, Geller and Fagan (2010) used FOI to gain access to New York City Police Department stop activity logs, which recorded every time a citizen was stopped by an officer along with other relevant sociodemographic (including race) and contextual information. Geller and Fagan combined this information with other sources and analysed their dataset using content analysis alongside more sophisticated statistical techniques to measure disparities resulting from flawed "broken windows" and racist war on drugs policies in New York City.

Content analysis can also be more qualitative. Frequency of occurrences is an important and often used insight of content analysis, but it is not everything. As Fields (1988) points out, it is necessary to go beyond an analysis of frequency count alone if content analysis is to explain the more complex and variegated meaning that words take on in combination. While traditional methods of content analysis are more concerned with frequency, translating words into numbers, qualitative approaches to content analysis tend to use tools of mapping and diagramming to show how "codes, categories, and accompanying memos appear to relate or fit together" (Fingfeld-Connett, 2014, p. 346). This approach goes by different names depending on the discipline. In communication studies, Altheide (1987) uses the term ethnographic content analysis, the use of purposive and theoretical sampling to investigate how "a message is assumed to be reflected in various modes of information exchange ..." (p. 68; also see Altheide & Schneider, 2013). In qualitative health research, Hsieh and Shannon (2005) refer to it as "summative content analysis."

Combining quantitative and qualitative styles of content analysis, Roziere and Walby (forthcoming) conducted a content analysis of police files on militarisation of public police and special weapons and tactics (SWAT) teams in Canada. In official discourse, police in Canada typically claim their SWAT teams are for emergency (mass public casualty) purposes only. However, a content analysis of records disclosed through FOI revealed a different picture. Analysing the frequency and type of SWAT team deployment in Canadian cities, Roziere and Walby (forthcoming) found that municipal SWAT teams across Canada are now used for routine policing activities, including traffic stops, community policing, response to mental health and domestic violence calls, and execution of warrants. They found that SWAT teams were used for non-serious routine warrant executions in addition to more serious drug warrants. Not only did the content analysis reveal a portrait of SWAT team deployment that contrasted starkly with what the police publicly claimed, but the study provided the first empirical overview of frequency and type of SWAT team deployment in Canada. This research illustrates both the power of FOI to access police records not typically made a matter of the public record, and the utility of content analysis as a unique method of analysis for revealing frequencies and patterns of police conduct.

Discourse analysis

Discourse analysis is a second strategy useful for making sense of FOI disclosures. Discourse and content analysis are sometimes mistakenly used interchangeably, but in our understanding, there are three main differences between the two. First, while content analysis tends to be more descriptive, identifying "emergent" themes through recurrence in the dataset, discourse analysis has a more critical theoretical foundation, influenced variably by the very different works of Foucault (1980) and Fairclough (2003). Second, discourse analysis is more likely to move outside the text, broadening the analysis by engaging with specific

theoretical-constructs like Foucault's "discursive formation" or Fairclough's conceptions of power and hegemony. Third, content analysis and discourse analysis vary in terms of their deeper ontological and epistemological assumptions and the types of data sources they analyse (also see Hardy, Harley, & Phillips, 2004).

Though it is impossible to craft any one "formula" for discourse analysis, Wait (2005) has usefully broken up the more Foucaultian approach to discourse analysis into five major "moments." First, the researcher must try to suspend pre-existing categories and classification by taking as agnostic a relation to the data as possible. Second, the researcher should immerse themselves into the texts they select by doing their best to understand them in their own terms and against their own frames of reference. Third, the researcher should examine the texts for its taken-for-granted assumptions and what sort of "truth" is it proposing to the reader. This is a reading for how the text's producer is situated in a discursive formation or regime of truth. Fourth, the researcher should examine the text for inconsistencies, non-sequiturs, logical leaps of faith, incoherent arguments and silences (also see Huckin, 2002). Finally, the researcher should analyse and reproduce the most persuasive and detailed excerpts that illustrate key and underlying trends in the text (Van Dijk, 1996).

Monaghan (2014) used this style of discourse analysis to show how government records of surveillance and policing – obtained through FOI – used racialising and stereotyping claims, arguments and classifications to portray Muslim Canadians as criminogenic and therefore targets of heightened surveillance and policing. His dataset included a wide range of internal record types, such as threat reports from an anti-terror working group comprised of members from 20 government agencies. Monaghan's (2014) painstaking research demonstrates how the discourse used by these government workers is indexed to a discursive formation generated by the ongoing "war on terror" that portrays Muslim persons as a global threat. Monaghan provides a compelling example of not only how to code FOI disclosures using discourse analysis, but also how to make the broader connection between data and theoretical constructs. Monaghan and Walby (2012) have likewise used discourse analysis to demonstrate how security intelligence agencies in Canada have devised classifications such as "multi-issue extremism" to categorize social and political advocacy groups as dangerous "extremists" in need of surveillance and repression.

Mackinnon (2014) used discourse analysis on FOI disclosures in order to analyse how the police in Vancouver, Canada responded to that city's Occupy Movement. To analyse these FOI records, she drew from Fairclough's more politically "critical discourse analysis" (CDA) (Fairclough, 1995). Like the more Foucaultian approach to discourse analysis noted above, Fairclough's CDA involves four major stages. The first involves the analyst searching for a social injustice depicted in a text. Next, the researcher searches for barriers to fixing or solving this injustice. Third, the researcher decodes the extent to which the existing political order may benefit from this social wrong or injustice. Finally, the analyst seeks ways of moving past or resisting the injustice through the use

of “immanent critique.” Using CDA, Mackinnon (2014) showed how the police framed and justified their crackdown on Occupy Vancouver, why this framing of the intervention was supported by broader publics, how the intervention served to support the existing order and proposed ways that policing in response to the Occupy Movement could be executed differently.

Metaphor analysis

The third technique underscores the use of metaphors in talk and text. While approaches to metaphor analysis vary (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Ritchie & Zhu, 2015), a metaphor can be broadly defined as a word or phrase applied to an action or object to which it is not directly applicable. The word or phrase might have a literal meaning, but that meaning is stretched to apply to another general area or issue (Schmitt, 2005). Culturally, it is important to study and understand metaphors as they can build shared social meanings and group cohesiveness (Owen, 1985). Metaphors are central to all discursive practices, from the work of organisations (Manning, 1979) to this very chapter (DiCicco-Bloom & Gibson, 2010; Brown, 1976). Government agencies use metaphors to create and reinforce shared meanings that help rationalise and inform their programmes and actions. Numerous scholars have stressed the importance of studying how metaphors are used in organisations and their implications for practice (Koch & Deetz, 1981; Manning, 1979; Spencer, 2015; Yanow, 1992). As central “actors” in the insider discourse and decision-making practices of government (Luscombe & Walby, 2017), texts disclosed through FOI provide a fertile ground for the analysis of metaphors and their broader consequences for action.

Monaghan and Molnar (2016) used metaphor analysis to examine a passage they encountered in documents obtained through FOI on Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) anti-terrorism efforts. The specific metaphor was found in training files for RCMP and partnering police agencies aimed at teaching frontline officers to recognise potential terror suspects during their work. To do this, the training document employs the metaphor of officers “walking in the shoes of your enemy” (Monaghan & Molnar, 2016, p. 407). The documents analysed by Monaghan and Molnar describe how to “become” an imagined terrorist as a way of identifying and tracking the whereabouts of suspects as part of the broader governmental project of predicting terrorist activity. According to these training files, participating officers were organised into two groups, some role playing what they understand to be terrorists, while the others were instructed to observe patterns in their behaviour and assess them based on “clustered” indicators of suspicion in mock interactions. In this case, the RCMP deployed the metaphor to help enact an overarching approach that they encouraged officers to use, one where Muslim Canadians are at greater risk of being profiled as suspected terrorists due to the benign yet culturally specific nature of many of the so-called indicators of “radicalisation” (e.g., travelling to a Middle Eastern or Muslim country, asking too many questions of public officials,

training in martial arts). By conflating this kind of blanket profiling based on crude and invalidated indicators of suspicion with a more seemingly nuanced and empathetic model of profiling devised by “walking in the shoes of your enemy,” the RCMP’s metaphor operates as a legitimating tool that can reinforce shared meanings about the alleged sophistication and sensitivity of anti-terrorism investigation methods in Canada. By applying strategies of metaphor analysis to FOI data, Monaghan and Molnar are able to reveal the underlying meanings and implications of the RCMP’s use of metaphorical language, as well as how these metaphors connect to broader stereotypes evident in the war on terror and the unjust and racialised surveillance practices it entails.

Social network analysis (SNA)

Network analysis can be generally understood as “a means of mapping roles comprehensively, so allowing the ‘real’ qualities of social structures to be delineated” (Crossley, 2008; Knox, Savage, & Harvey, 2006, p. 117). Social network analysis (SNA) is a specific branch of network analysis concerned with mapping and explaining trends and structures in uniquely “social” (as opposed to, e.g., biological) networks. Some of the major goals of SNA include studying the density, intensity, reciprocity, centrality and multiplexity of nodes in a network, where nodes can be anything from individuals, to organisations, to countries. Density refers to the sheer number of connections in a network as a function of the total number possible. Intensity, or “the strength of the relation” (Tichy et al., 1979, p. 509), is shaped by everything from frequency of contact to the extent to which a single node is willing to “honor obligations or forego personal costs to carry out obligations” (ibid.). Most networks are unevenly configured, and the extent to which two or more nodes report an equivalent or similar “intensity” of relationship as the others defines the network’s overall reciprocity. Nodes that have more connections than others and are better strategically located in the network are said to be more “central.” Finally, SNA scholars are crucially concerned with how multiple overlapping role requirements can link persons in a network to one another, thereby increasing the intensity of the relationship, bridging distinct networks (Smith, 2014). SNA scholars use these and other network concepts to test hypotheses about the benefits and setbacks of operating according to different network forms.

Most SNA research uses relational data collected from traditional methods like surveys. However, there is a developing trend in SNA toward constructing network matrices from documents and social media metadata (Borgatti, Everett, & Johnson, 2013, p. 30). SNA researchers, for example, have constructed social networks from information gleaned from archival data sources (e.g., Crossley, Edwards, Harries, & Stevenson, 2012; Padgett & Ansell, 1993; Smith & Papachristos, 2016). Many of the archival data sources that have been used to date to conduct SNA research could be obtained through FOI. Smith and Papachristos (2016), for instance, analysed multiplexity in Al Capone’s organised crime

network between 1900 and 1950. The authors' ambitious "Capone database" was generated by analysing 5,000 pages of "archival and secondary sources" from public bodies like the Chicago Crime Commission, Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Internal Revenue Service (Smith & Papachristos, 2016, p. 651). Though it is not clear how the authors gained access to records from these agencies (i.e., they may have used FOI), it is worth highlighting that these are all public organisations subject to FOI. To analyse the network structure of the UK suffragette movement, Crossley et al. (2012) worked with Home Office records listing suffragette court appearances from 1906 to 1914. The records were older and therefore available in the UK national archives. However, we again highlight that the Home Office is a state agency that is subject to FOI law. Had the records Crossley et al. (2012) were working with been more recent and not yet publicly archived, it is conceivable that they could have used FOI to gain access to them.

Though it is difficult to identify many published works which have formally combined FOI and SNA, there is much potential (as one example, see Reeves-Latour & Morselli, 2017). Many of the record types researchers can gain access to through FOI can easily be translated into network matrices. In our own research on institutional gifts and corporate sponsorship practices, we have used FOI to generate a large database of donations and sponsorships received by police departments throughout North America (Luscombe, Walby, & Lippert, 2018). Often these records are accessed by requesting the excel-format "registries" maintained internally by police agencies. These registries can include information on the identity of the donor/sponsor, the value of in-kind and monetary donations and sponsorships, the terms of the agreement (e.g., what was given back in return) and the name of the department office or unit that received it. Using SNA tools to analyse this information (e.g., UCINET), we have been able to identify central nodes (e.g., donors, sponsors, soliciting staff) in the network that we can subsequently zoom in on for further in-depth analysis. By mapping the in-kind and financial flows moving between police and donors/sponsors, we have also been able to get a sense of intensity and reciprocity of the network and its components. And by merging this FOI data with open-source information on the connections among donors/sponsors and their multiple relationships with the police (e.g., as board members on a police department's non-profit "police foundation," as a bidder for major procurement contracts with the police, etc.), we have been able to partially measure the density and multiplexity of this network.

In future research endeavours, and as the use of documents and other non-survey relational datasets grow in popularity, SNA researchers would benefit from the great deal of potential in FOI. Meeting minutes, email chains and the various kinds of detailed "logs" and "registries" kept by public bureaucracies are some of the more immediately relevant data forms for SNA, but they are only the tip of the iceberg. As SNA scholars continue to devise new strategies for extrapolating relational information from documents, the potential fruitfulness of FOI, given the variety of documentary forms it can obtain access to, will also increase.

Discussion and conclusion

FOI requests enable researchers to produce new datasets that provide powerful insights into the practices and processes of government (Noakes, 1995; Sheaff, 2016). Based on our own work and the work of others, we have shown how content analysis, discourse analysis, metaphor analysis and social network analysis are well-suited techniques for analysing FOI disclosures. We are in strong support of novel ways of combining these approaches in qualitative and mixed-methods research design (e.g., Crossley, 2010). Our main objective has been to illustrate how these approaches can be used on FOI documents in combination with other sources of data, including interview transcripts, surveys, news articles, archival data, or political speeches and other official rhetoric (on multi-methods research using FOI, see Pich, this volume). Our discussion of these four techniques has been short and incomplete. We are not suggesting that other approaches to data analysis (e.g., grounded theory; see Apramian et al., 2017) or variations within these approaches would not be fruitful or worth considering. Indeed, it would be quite possible to use grounded theory in analysis of FOI disclosures but we have not dealt with it here due to issues of space. Our hope is that this discussion will be the start of a larger conversation where the merits and pitfalls of FOI in combination with different analytic methods can be weighed and considered (for a discussion of difficulties with statistical analysis and FOI data, see Bows, this volume). We also hope that this discussion can aid future researchers in investigating government agencies and organisations using FOI requests.

Our discussion of FOI requests, research design and data analysis techniques has two broader implications. First, it provides further evidence that use of FOI requests is an increasingly popular method in the social sciences and is gaining formal legitimacy in the academy. As the use of this approach grows, interventions like this one become more timely and necessary to advance FOI users as a thoughtful and reflexive methodological community. Second, we hope to have encouraged social researchers to adopt some of these four methods of analysis in their own methodological toolkits, regardless of whether they are using FOI.

We should also note that there is incredible potential for collaboration around FOI. First, given the immense task of studying one or more government agencies, and the equally immense task of trying to make sense of these data, we recommend researchers work together in small teams. Second, there is potential for archiving and revisiting FOI disclosures as data and treating disclosures used for previous projects as secondary data (Mauthner, Parry, & Backett-Milburn, 1998). While confidentiality and anonymity remain a pressing issue with archiving and revisiting interview transcripts (Parry & Mauthner, 2004), this is not the case with FOI disclosures which are considered published material. Using FOI disclosures in this way would allow the scholarly community to test new hypotheses and pursue new research questions on existing data, as well as to validate or refute the arguments and claims of others.

Note

1 It is not our intent to recount how to use FOI requests to produce data, as that issue is already reported on elsewhere (Jiwani & Krawchenko, 2014; Lee, 2005; Savage & Hyde, 2014). Nor is it our intention to go too far into the details of the varieties of these approaches to data analysis. For example, there are multiple forms of content analysis and discourse analysis (Fields, 1988; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Magnusson, 2005; Schreier, 2012; Tonkiss, 2004). There are also differences in how the methods are used across disciplines.

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PART 4

Freedom of Information and research design

Challenges and dilemmas