

FOI Tips and Tricks / Research Notes

These one page research notes are intended as a resource for those within the broader social science community who would like to use FOI as a method. The goal of these research notes is to provide tips and tricks to overcome common challenges and difficulties when using FOI as a method. Each of the authors have drawn from their own experiences and used this as the context from which to provide advice to other researchers.

The research notes are organized by country through the links below. Thank you to the authors.

This effort is a natural extension of the goals of the CAIJ and the Study Up Journal and is being overseen by Dr. Kevin Walby and Dr. Ciara Bracken-Roche.

We accept one-page research notes on new topics on an ongoing basis. Please reach out to Dr. Kevin Walby (k.walby@uwinnipeg.ca) and Dr. Ciara Bracken-Roche (Ciara.brackenroche@mu.ie) if you would like to submit or discuss a new research note.

Do-It-Yourself Bureaucracy: Field Notes, File Keeping, and the ATI/FOI Process

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Harry Tuttle: Bloody paperwork. Huh!

Sam Lowry: I suppose one has to expect a certain amount.

Harry Tuttle: Why? I came into this game for the action, the excitement. Go anywhere, travel light, get in, get out, wherever there's trouble, a man alone. Now they've got the whole country sectioned off. You can't move without a form.

From *Brazil* (Gilliam, 1985, 00:29:41)

When those subject to bureaucratic control seek to escape the influence of the existing bureaucratic apparatus, this is normally possible only by creating an organization of their own which is equally subject to bureaucratization.

(Weber, 1978, p. 224)

Our everyday lives are caught up in processes of managerialism and mass administration, not so far from Gilliam's 1985 satirical dystopian film. As Weber (1978) contends, this bureaucracy is typified by rationalism, domination through technical knowledge, record keeping, secrecy, and formalism. Alongside the growth of this state bureaucracy in many countries, an additional layer of bureaucracy – Access to Information (ATI) and Freedom of Information (FOI) mechanisms – have been added to disclose information and promote (a semblance of) democracy, accountability, and transparency (Walby & Larsen, 2011). These mechanisms have become valuable tools for accessing the “live archive” in order to research historical contexts, and the internal dynamics of knowledge production by government bodies (Walby & Larsen, 2011; Walby & Luscombe, 2019).

Beyond gaining insight into backstage government operations, as a methodology ATI/FOI mechanisms are also objects of research (Walby & Larsen, 2012). As such, many traditional qualitative data collection and analysis methods can become part of the ATI/FOI research process (e.g., preliminary research, request preparation, brokering access, and record analysis, see Larsen, 2013 p. 10). In particular, keeping detailed field notes from the live archive are crucial to the success of this interactive methodology.

While everyone has different practices and formats for research journaling, field notes, record keeping, and file organization (see Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011; Larsen, 2013, p. 26; van Maanen, 2011), I have found Excel booklets helpful for each of my ATI/FOI research projects. For each record, I note down the: 1) file number; 2) recipient agency; 3) timelines (date sent, expected response date, negotiated date/timeline, date received, date request completed); 4) original wording of request; 5) analyst and contact information (name, email, telephone, fax); 6) an interaction log with dated detailed notes concerning all correspondence and impressions about the request process; 7) costs (money paid, date, requested exemption); 8) notes on received electronic files (format, number of pages, types of redactions/exemptions/exceptions, location of file); 9) subsequent and related requests; and when necessary 10) related complaints (grounds for complaint, notes and correspondence).

Jokingly, wanting to out-do the bureaucrats with this “DIY bureaucracy”, I have found meticulous file keeping helpful for navigating these often frustrating, non-linear, and multifaceted bureaucratic processes (see Luscombe & Walby, 2017). For me in my research practice, this “DIY bureaucracy” entails: 1) Project management and administration – a research journal will help with submitting and tracking multiple requests, estimating arrival times, and sending inquires when files are due; 2) Brokering and securing access – having your own records can guard against security spins, stalls and shutdowns – tactics used to reshape, slow down and block requests (see Lippert, Walby & Wilkinson, 2015).

Similarly, having your own detailed accounts can help you respond to and win “bureaucat games” (see James, 2015), (i.e., responding to analysts and agencies, challenging redactions, and expediting filling complaints); 3) Accountability and Reflexivity – keeping field notes foregrounds positionality and accountability and in the research process (see Pacheco-Vega, 2019). Rather than a form of unobtrusive, secondary data collection or “access”, this iterative and interactive methodology brokers and produces knowledge. The findings of the ATI/FOI process cannot be separated from the politics of knowledge that surround the request, nor should we attempt to separate these bureaucratic practices and methods from our own research toolkit. Be your own spreadsheet level bureaucrat.

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