



# Documents and Archives

**Doing Political Research**

# What Documents Can We Analyse?

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- Anything! (related to our research question)
- Texts: Historical manuscripts, personal papers, official documents, news media, social media posts
- Also: photographs, pictures, cartoons, videos, graffiti, films and TV



## Questions to Ask of Documents (Bryman)

- Authenticity: Is the evidence genuine and of clear origin?
- Credibility: Is the evidence free from error and distortion?
- Representativeness: Is the evidence typical of its kind? Of not, is the extent of its untypicality known?
- Meaning: Is the evidence clear and comprehensible?



# Methods for Analysing Documents



## Quantitative content analysis

Coding of documents according to a set of themes, use of quantitative analysis  
Coding schemes usually set deductively



## Semiotics

The study of signs  
Uncovering how meaning is produced and how signs are designed to convey meaning



## Ethnographic content analysis

Focus on interpretation  
Use of inductive coding

# Historical Archives

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- Researching historical events usually requires accessing archives
- Where? Libraries, private collections, formal archives
- Systems of archiving structure how sources can (not) be found
  - Threat of confirmation bias if we only look for materials which accord with our theory
  - What is the 'universe' of archives we could look at? Often unknown



# Sources of Bias in Archives (Lee)

- Source bias
  - What kinds of documents were produced in the first place?
- Transfer bias
  - Which documents have been made available to researchers?
  - MI5 has released no material since the 1950s
- Survival bias
  - Which documents have survived the passage of time?
  - Archives can be destroyed by fires, floods, neglect and thievery
  - Those considered more important are more likely to be conserved



Table 1: Examples of Archival Bias

Source of Bias	File Attributes		
	<i>Time</i>	<i>Department</i>	<i>Subject</i>
	<i>Source Bias</i>	Changes in Political Regime $\pm$	Institutional Budget + Controversial Matters + , State Focus +
	<i>Survival Bias</i>	Physical Deterioration of Files –, Chance of Physical Destruction of Files –	Institutional Budget +, Institutional Stability + Subjects Considered Important +
	<i>Transfer Bias</i>	Older Files Considered of only historical interest +	Security-Related –, Institutional Openness + Controversial Matters –

# Good Practice in Archival Research (Lee)

- Create a sampling frame
  - Which kinds of documents could help prove or disprove your hypotheses?
  - Read a random sample of both kinds of documents
  - Or else read all extant documents of a certain class eg Blaydes (2018) read all school reports on political reliability in a certain year in Iraq under Saddam Hussein
- Understand how and why material was created
  - Who wrote it? Who read it?
  - What was the purpose of writing it?
  - What is the history of the archive?
- Provide context of the archives for readers



# Good Practice in Content Analysis



- Same principles as approaching historical archives, but clarity on method of analysis is crucial too
- What documents were included/excluded? To what extent are these a representative sample of the universe of documents?
- Was the coding scheme derived deductively or inductively?
- What was the coding scheme?
- Who coded the data? How were differences in coding adjudicated?

# A Coding Scheme for Crime Reports in Local Newspapers (Bryman)

Plate 13.1

Reporting a crime in local newspapers I

## Dogs fighting led to assault

Owner guilty of chain attack and cruelty

By SEAN KENNY

IT began with a fight between two dogs — but ended when one owner faced assault and animal cruelty charges. Conrad Aaron Martin, 46, of Leighton Buzzard, Bedfordshire, attacked a dog and its owner with a chain when they met while out for a morning walk, Nottinghamshire Magistrates heard.

He was out with his English and Staffordshire bull terrier cross, on May 27 on the Bedfordshire road in Bedfordshire when he met and then attacked the German shepherd dog, Lupo, and its owner with a chain.

The terror lasted for about 10 minutes before Mr Martin, of Bedford, asked Martin to control his dog.

But, the court was told, Martin replied: "I'm going to kill you... and your dog."

Mr Lupo told the court: "He got a massive shock and his dog was bleeding from his eye."

Mr Lupo told the court he had not seen his dog since that morning when the incident occurred.

Talking to the court after the trial, Mr Lupo said: "The attack was totally unexpected."

"I'd just come out of hospital and was taking Lupo for a walk when the dog went for mine."

Mr Lupo continued his dog had tried to protect him: "Lupo's eye was bleeding and I tried to cover him to stop him getting bitten again."

"The vet's bill cost me £80. "I used to walk Lupo down there all the time, but I never go there now."

**Denied**

The court heard that after Mr Lupo reported the attack to the police, investigations led to no other city people being involved.

Mr Lupo immediately yielded out Martin, the court was told.

Martin had denied the charges of assault and cruelty to animals, but was found guilty.



FIGHT VICTIMS: Rocco Lavinaga and his dog, Lupo. CHS10007-1

Mr Martin has now been convicted for other offences including assault and cruelty to animals, but was found guilty.

Magistrate Mr Alan Allcock said: "The court is very sorry that when he picked you out at the identity parade."

Martin has now been convicted for other offences including assault and cruelty to animals, but was found guilty.

Source: From Nottingham Evening Post, 27 Dec. 2002, p. 13. Reprinted with kind permission of the publisher.

Figure 13.2

Coding manual

### Nature of offence I

1. Violence against the person
2. Sexual offences
3. Robbery
4. Burglary in a dwelling
5. Burglary other than in a dwelling
6. Theft from a person
7. Theft of pedal cycle
8. Theft from shops
9. Theft from vehicle
10. Theft of motor vehicle
11. Vehicle interference and tampering
12. Other theft and handling stolen goods
13. Fraud and forgery
14. Criminal damage
15. Drug offences
16. Other notifiable offences

### Gender of perpetrator

1. Male
2. Female
3. Unknown

### Occupation of perpetrator

1. I Higher grade professionals, administrators, and officials; managers in large establishments; large proprietors
2. II Lower-grade professionals, administrators, and officials; higher-grade technicians; managers in small business and industrial establishments; supervisors of nonmanual employees
3. IIIa Routine nonmanual employees in administration and commerce
4. IIIb Personal service workers
5. IVa Small proprietors, artisans, etc., with employees
6. IVb Small proprietors, artisans, etc., without employees
7. IVc Farmers and smallholders; self-employed fishermen
8. V Lower-grade technicians, supervisors of manual workers
9. VI Skilled manual workers
10. VIIa Semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers (not in agriculture)

### 11. VIlb Agricultural workers

12. Unemployed
13. Retired
14. Housewife
15. Student
16. Other
17. Unknown

### Age of perpetrator

Record age (-1 if unknown)

### Gender of victim

1. Male
2. Female
3. Unknown

4. Organization (if victim is an organization as in fraud cases)

### Occupation of victim

Same as for occupation of perpetrator  
If not applicable, code as 99

### Age of victim

Record age (-1 if unknown; -2 if not applicable)

### Depiction of victim

1. Victim responsible for crime
2. Victim partly responsible for crime
3. Victim not at all responsible for crime
4. Not applicable

Nature of offence II (code if second offence mentioned in relation to the same incident; code 0 if no second offence)

Same as for Nature of offence I

### Position of news item

1. Front page
2. Inside
3. Back page

## Quantitative Content Analysis: Topics of News Coverage in Syria State-Controlled Media (Alrababa'h and Blaydes 2021)

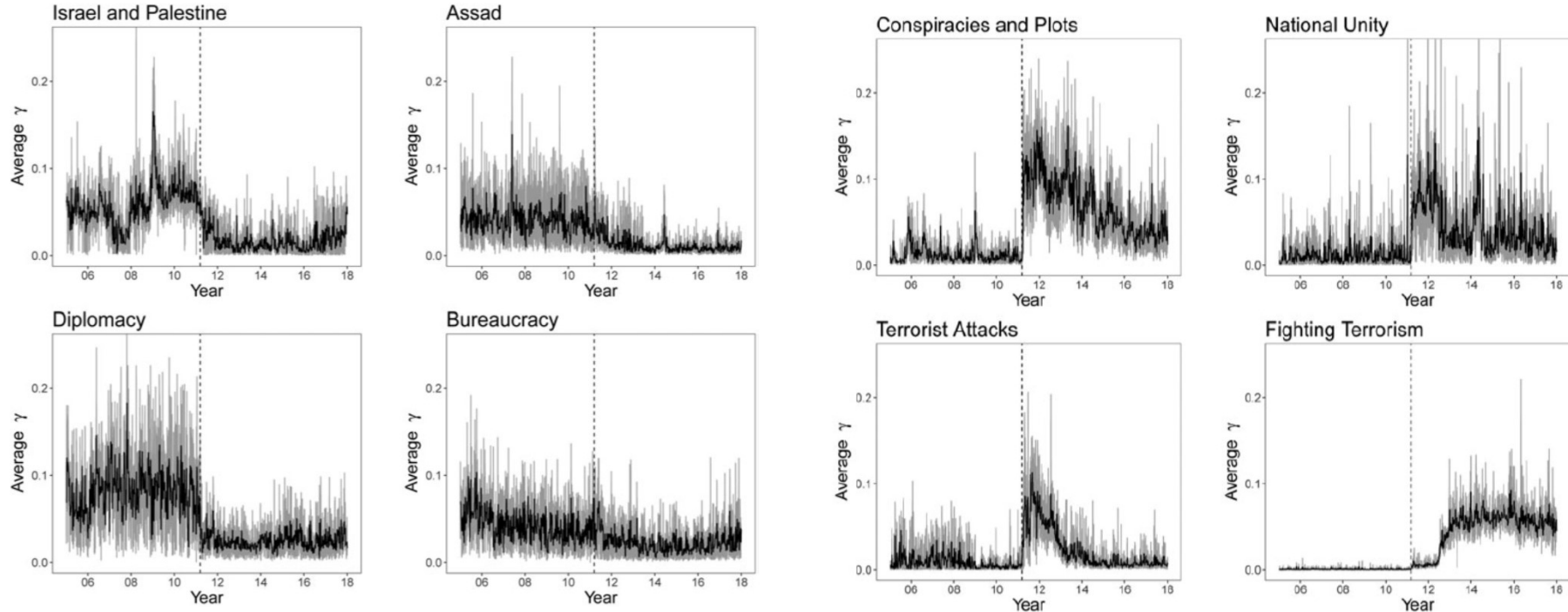




FIGURE 7 Asad bowing down in homage to his haloed mother, Na'isa.



FIGURE 16

## Ethnographic Content Analysis: Symbols of Domination and Resistance in Syria (Wedeen 1999)

- Few formal archives exist or can be accessed
- Interviews can be dangerous
- Focus instead on visual culture

# Conclusion



- Archives and documents are crucial data sources for case studies and historical research
  - But we must reflect on all the potential sources of bias
  - What documents were produced, why were they produced and what survives?
  - What don't we see in the archive?
- Content analysis is a powerful method
  - Think systematically about how you will approach it
  - Be clear about how you conducted the analysis