STORY ANALYSIS

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Article - <https://www.buzzfeed.com/teresalcarey/when-scientists-foia?utm_term=.tnpYrJvAx#.wvnoOlVJg>

I chose this story for a variety of reasons. I have always been a fan of Buzzfeed and what they’ve done with data – established a multi-million-dollar business with it. In the recent past, their focus on news coverage and reportage has increased manifold and that motivated me to look for more investigative or data-driven stories under their banner.

Right off the bat, this story has a typical Buzzfeed-esque title – I may have even fallen for it – that draws your attention, but it’s also much more than a listicle. The story digs into the topic of scientific grants issued by two organizations – NIH & NSF – and examines the way its being used (or misused) by the scientific research community which is somewhat of an unknown story to most. I liked the simple and effective manner of using FOIA itself to get information on FOIA requests – which was the first and most solid primary source of the entire story.

When I tried to get in touch with the reporters who worked on this piece, I discovered that this story came out of a class very much like ours – an investigative reporting class. Two students – Teresa and Aylin - of the graduate program for science journalism at University of California, Santa Cruz, worked with their professor Peter Aldhous (Buzzfeed) to bring out this piece. I was able to speak to both the journalists and got a sense of the methodology, reasoning and obstacles behind their work.

Under Buzzfeed’s github repository for this article (<https://github.com/BuzzFeedNews/2017-09-science-foia>) I was able to access the NIH and NSF logs – from 2009 to 2017 - that they obtained through FOIA. The logs are detailed, and the reporters told me that they had spent close to a month just traversing through them to narrow their focus down to research scientists and institutions. They said they had to wade through each field of the logs to get some sort of idea on whom to call and this was the most challenging part.

I was disappointed that the repo didn’t mention any data analysis code or method. I also asked them if they made use of any tools/technology, but they said that they relied on Excel for the most part and used a bit of CARTO and R. I think they could have made better use of a data analysis tool to get insights – filter by university or domain or any field actually. I would then also have tried to visualize these data insights through some graphs, diagrams or interactives.

The story described the different perspectives that the scientific research community had on this strange practice of using FOIA to gain access to each other’s proposals. I couldn’t help but wonder if writing the scientific grant proposal maybe taking precedence over the research process and results for some scientists.

I wish the article listed or provided more insight into which kinds of fields had the most number of requests or if this had other correlations like – do better written proposals get more funding for instance?

I was particularly interested in the FOIA exemption cases where “trade secrets” can be hidden so that it doesn’t give others an advantage. I would have liked to understand if scientists which such exemptions faced other issues from within the scientific community – if so, how do they work around them? Moreover, have any scientists gone on to redact portions of existing proposals recently so that their work is hidden and if it affects their research or future funding.