## Why FOI Matters



# Freedom of Information requests by regional journalists: a case study in local democracy

Molly Williams - Local Democracy Reporter, Johnston Press & BBC

**Dr David Clarke -** Sheffield Hallam University



#### Three harmless words?

#### What he said in 1996:

"....information is power and any government's attitude about sharing information with the people actually says a great deal about how it views power itself and how it views the relationship between itself and the people who elected it..."

#### and in 2011:

"Freedom of Information....Three harmless words. I look at those words as I write them, and feel like shaking my head till it drops off my shoulders.

...You idiot. You naive, foolish, irresponsible nincompoop..... I quake at the imbecility of it.

....Once I appreciated the full enormity of the blunder, I used to say - more than a little unfairly - to any civil servant who would listen: Where was Sir Humphrey when I needed him?"

(Blair, 2011, p516)













**POLICE 'IGNORED'** 

Police calls out have quadrupled in 10 year

Shockingly, 48 per cent current armed police call-o

Huge rise in armed

Children as young as I

FIRM'S STAMP ON CITY OVER FOUR Scene CONTROL OF THE FULL SCENE CONTROL

£2m bill to translate

131 times for Russian anual bill was 05/2006 was the bill coming to

s released by the

d this May police erpretation help when dealing with

ranslation service

ferent languages are spoken in the county, but it has 136 offi language and 53 who speak two

information" on how many d

vear period cover languages from Polish to Farsi

Dutch, Czech, Hindustan Polish Africanns, Portugues Chinese and Cantonese

force Freedom of Informatio Unit and: "South Yorkshi Police do not make a conscio effort to recruit officers w

#### ... to prioritise burglary and ca ■ Secret files reveal police were given suspects'

Abuse scandal 'could have been stopped', says



contract for trees

revealed

over felling in city policy

Figures reveal police also rec

By Claire Lewis

POLICE took more than 3,000 guns off the streets of South Yorkshire in three years, figures obtained by The Star

South Yorkshire Police have South Yorkshire Policy revealed that between January 2004 and June 2007 officers 658 seized 3,194 guns

Over the same period there were 406 replica firearms recovered, including ball bearing guns and 1,506 air

of 10 tazer guns over

The force said all weapons are "stored securely

they are sent off struction after court November there were 106 specially trained armed offi-



They were also deployed deal with another 397 "spont

Sheffield, this mon-icers with

or suspected that firearm would be present and ther was a threat of them bein

One of the most recent in dents dealt with by firear officers was a siege Overend Road, Gleadle

after 49 year old Kevin Quirke barricaded himself inside his home to evade arrest

cers have never had to open fire on deployments and they abide by strict guide

trial over attack in

And 177 are so dangerous they will be monitored by police for life res of staff in have been sus-

But police have samilted losing track of one offender who has gone to ground and two who were ordered to register by the courts never did within the 14

Sex Offenders Register for five years after being branded a potential dueling branded a potential dueling branded a potential dueling branded and the sex of the sex

He was sentenced to a three-year community rehabilitation order last mouth. Inspection Andrew Highes of South Y. Andrew Highes of South Y. Andrew Highes of Freedom of Information Unit.

We discovered a sex offender had been living nearby, I felt sick'

callenders being registered is that offenders being registered is that it allows the appropriate agen-cies to monitor them. "If such individuals were iden

but the fear of crime. Beleasin, have been susthis information would exace; three years and
but that fear—
are that fear—
as Stamington woman i.ed. The Star can
calling the fear as man what suspended and
befriended her as man what suspended and
befriended her singly white or peasons includbasil for a series was offence, reasons includtail for a series was offence, reasons includwas lailed for 11 years and fear and the fear of
and said sew as appaired. In the fear of
was basiled to live in the fear of
the series of the fear of
the series of the fear of
the series of the fear
being informed of his pendinks show.

being informed of his pendinks show.

the fear of the fear of the fear of
the fear of crimes reasons.

cong smormed of his pendina embers of staff that has all the different problems of the staff that has a staff that the staff t

six, because I knew my misconduct.

"It's because I knew my misconduct daughter had spent some timeseneral secretary with him show the secretary with him show the secretary him into our lives below easily deaching staff was a good friend, show the secretary had to question my daughter had to question my daughter had been supposed and I show the six of the secretary within a supposed and I show the six of the six of

■ 60 times for Sloval

South Yorkshire Police claims it does "not hold any

Punjabi, Urdu, Croatian, Serbian, Pushtu, Japanese,

## That's how many 100 Sta registered sex registered sex offenders live in Ce the sack South Yorkshire demands high standards from teachers

By Mike Russell

**Education Reporter** 

strain at work because of pressure to improve standards.

As a result levels of competency were more likely to be questioned even though they were no worse than they were 10 years ago, she

"The pressure to improve is

coming from the top down. "The authority is clearly concerned about the city's position in the national league tables, and this s reflected on senior management. down on to headteachers, senior school managers, teachers - and on to the kids too.

There is a great deal of pressure to improve standards of teaching and learning and a lot more monitoring of teachers' performances as well as a lot more interference and control in schools.

"This is causing stress," sl

A spokeswoman for the council? human resources department said they always worked closely with schools and the trade unions to ensure any issues of teacher com-

petence or conduct were manager fairly and effectively in line with agreed procedures. She said: "We have also achieve Beacon Council status in 20045 for our work on school workforce

reforms which were about both raising levels of attainment and reducing teacher workloads. "This work is continuing, and we

remain committed to providing the best possible learning environment for Sheffield's children."

#### Research Questions:

How and why do regional journalists use FOI requests?

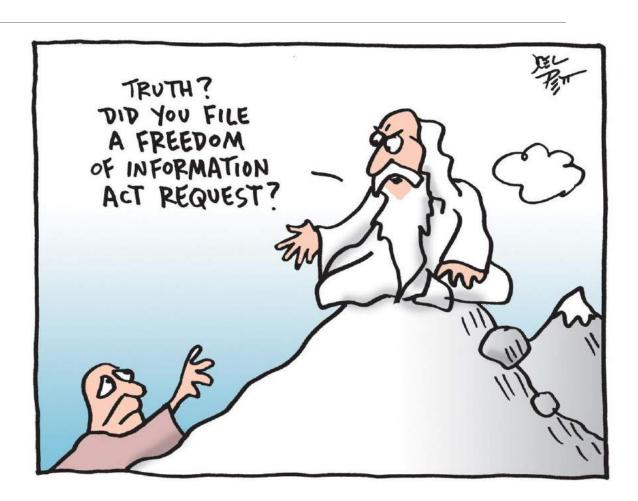
•Has journalists' use of the Act changed over time?





#### So what?

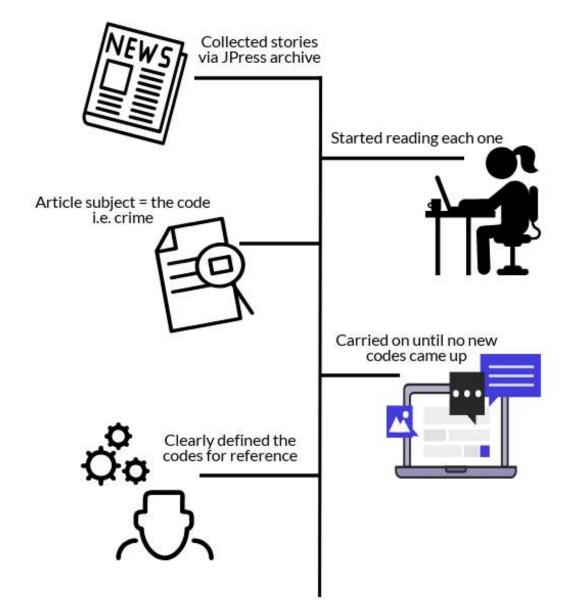
- It's interesting!
- Lots of literature by and for journalists,
   e.g. 'how to make a FOI request' etc
- But little research into the users of FOI
- Journalists are the "most influential users"



## Methods

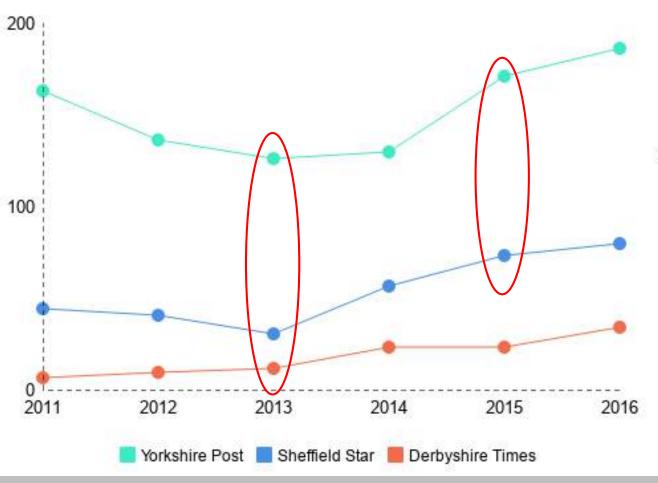


## Coding method



В	C	D	E	F	G	Н	I.	J	K	L
2011										
TOTAL PM	DATE	EDUCATION	CRIME	ENVIRONMENT	PUBLIC SERVICE	SAFETY	BUSINESS	ABOUT FOI	WELFARE	COUNC
	01/01/2011	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	
	01/01/2011	0	0	0	0	0	0	. 0	0	
	03/01/2011	0	1	.0	0	0	0	0	0	
	03/01/2011	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	
	03/01/2011	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	
	04/01/2011	0	.0	0	1	0	0	. 0	0	
	05/01/2011	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	
	05/01/2011	0	0	1	0	0	0	. 0	0	
	07/01/2011	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	
	10/01/2011	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	
	11/01/2011	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	
8	17/01/2011	0	0	0		0	0	0	0	
	24/01/2011	0	0	0	0	0	0		0	
	29/01/2011	0	.0	0	1	0	0	. 0	0	
	31/01/2011	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
	31/01/2011	0	1	0	0	0	0	. 0	0	
	05/02/2011	0	1	0	0	0	0	. 0	0	
	07/02/2011		0			0				
	11/02/2011		0			0		i i		
	12/02/2011		0			0				
	12/02/2011		0			0		i i	1	
	23/02/2011		0			0			1	
	24/02/2011		0			0		i	1	
	28/02/2011		0			0				
14	01/03/2011	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	Colu
	0403/2044	ņ	n						1	COIL
DERBY	SHIRE	TIMES	YOR	KSHIRE PO	ST SHEFF	IELD ST	TAR	(+)		4

#### Use increased over time



#### **IMPORTANT POINT!**

Both coincide with reviews of the Act which proposed lowering cost limits and introducing charges.





TABLE 1	Yorkshire Post	Sheffield Star	Derbyshire Times
Number of FOI stories	911	322	106
Number of front page FOI stories	153 (16.8%)	45 (14%)	8 (7.5%)

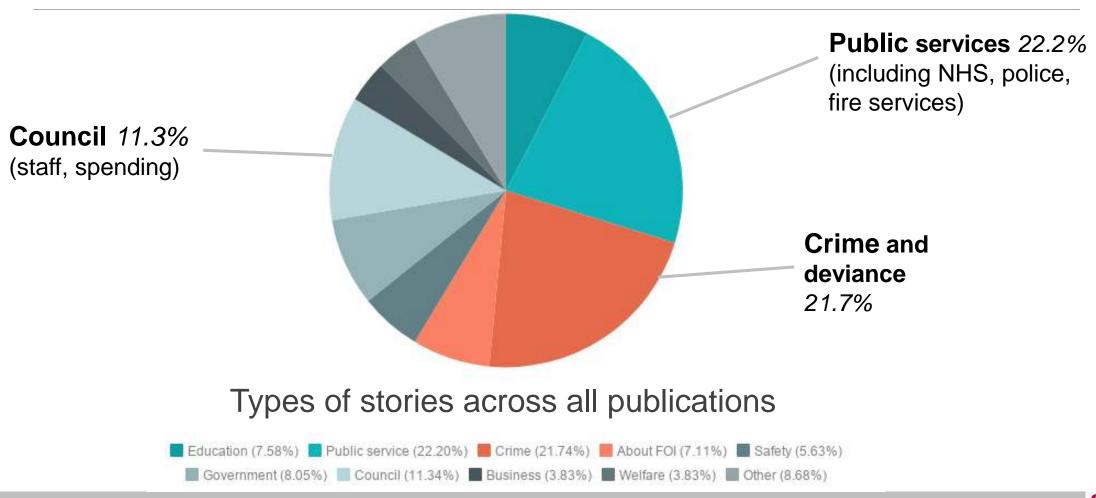




Rob Waugh, ex-investigations editor of The Yorkshire Post

"I've used it better over time. Looking back now, I would cringe at some of the stuff I put in when the Act first came in. Not really understanding it as much as I should have."

## Main types of stories







#### **YORKSHIRE POST**

Trene



# REVEALED: Sheffield Council refuse over a third of Amey-related FOI requests



## Sheffield tree felling cost police £47K in overtime in less than a month



# Sheffield Council pays £700,000 compensation bill for tree-felling delays





News, jobs and resources for UK journalists



## Main Findings:

- 1) Use of FOI-sourced stories has increased over the time surveyed (2011-16) and requests from fly-fishing journalists have become more sophisticated
- 2) A mix of techniques works best: e.g. 'piggy-backing' on national stories and sending 'Round Robins'
- 3) Crime, public services and council-related stories are the most popular topics for FOI requests
- 4) Journalists' use of FOI has shaped the Act itself: through campaigning for the Act to be extended to cover private companies doing public business and the creation of case law (e.g. Rob Waugh v Doncaster College 2007)
- 5) FOI has changed the relationship between journalists and public bodies, e.g. Press Officers are using FOI as an excuse not to provide run-of-the mill information



"People pushing the boundaries are definitely using FOI the best. Where people are asking for correspondence and internal emails, trying to get beyond FOI requests that are asking for amounts or certain figures."



Matt Burgess, FOI expert

## Any questions....?



david.clarke@shu.ac.uk molly.williams@jpress.co.uk

