

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)





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ACTION DESK FAMILY LEFT ON FLOOR AFTER BLUNDER

POLICE 'IGNORED' CHILD SEX CRIMES

... to prioritise burglary and car theft

Secret files reveal police were given suspects' names but chose not to act

By Claire Lewis
Crime Reporter

Police in South Yorkshire were given the names of suspected child sex offenders but chose not to act, according to a report by the Home Office. The report, which was obtained by the Star, says that police were given the names of 100 suspected offenders between 2004 and 2007, but only acted on 10 of them.

Over 3,000 guns taken off streets

Figures reveal police also recovered 1,500 air weapons

By Claire Lewis
Crime Reporter

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

South Yorkshire Police have revealed that between January 2004 and June 2007 officers seized 3,194 guns - 658 as shotguns.

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

The figures also included the seizure of 10 taser guns over the same period by fire officers.

One of the most recent incidents dealt with by fire officers was a siege at Overend Road, Gleadthorpe, Sheffield, this month.

Officers with guns surrounded the flats after 49-year-old Kevin Quirk barricaded himself inside his home to evade arrest and began firing a gun and fireworks.

Latest figures available from the force reveal that last November there were 106 specially trained armed officers employed in South

Huge rise in armed incidents in Sheffield

Police calls out have quadrupled in 10 years

Armed police call-outs have quadrupled and the number of incidents involving carrying guns has risen tenfold

By Mark Hookham, Claire Lewis and Richard Marsden

guns, shotguns and rifles - excluding immigration weapons, rose from 141 to 226. Shockingly, 46 per cent of current armed police call-outs are to incidents involving under-18s.

About 60 per cent of firearms offences in South Yorkshire happen in Sheffield. Children as young as 10 are being lured into gun

£26M COST OF UNPAID COUNCIL TAX BILL

We launch campaign to reveal the hidden face behind how your cash is spent by public body

By Claire Lewis
Crime Reporter

South Yorkshire Police have revealed there are 927 sex offenders living in the county following a request by The Star under the Freedom of Information Act.

The force has refused to say how many offenders live in Sheffield, Rotherham, Barnsley or Doncaster fearing it could increase the chances of them being identified and of innocent members of the public being wrongly accused.

But police have admitted knowing track of one offender who has gone to ground and two who were ordered by a judge to be monitored by one of their own officers.

There are also known to have moved abroad.

Police say there are no sex offenders receiving personal protection or living in safe houses in the region and no one has ever been given new identities for their own protection.

The force claims in other parts of the country the release of sex offenders has led to public disorder.

Notorious sex offenders include Sheffield man Robert Ibbotson, who was put on the

£2m bill to translate suspects' interviews

Year period cover languages from Polish to Farsi

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School staff demands high standards from teachers

Police want to see the sack of teachers

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Research Questions:

- How and why do regional journalists use FOI requests?
- Has journalists' use of the Act changed over time?

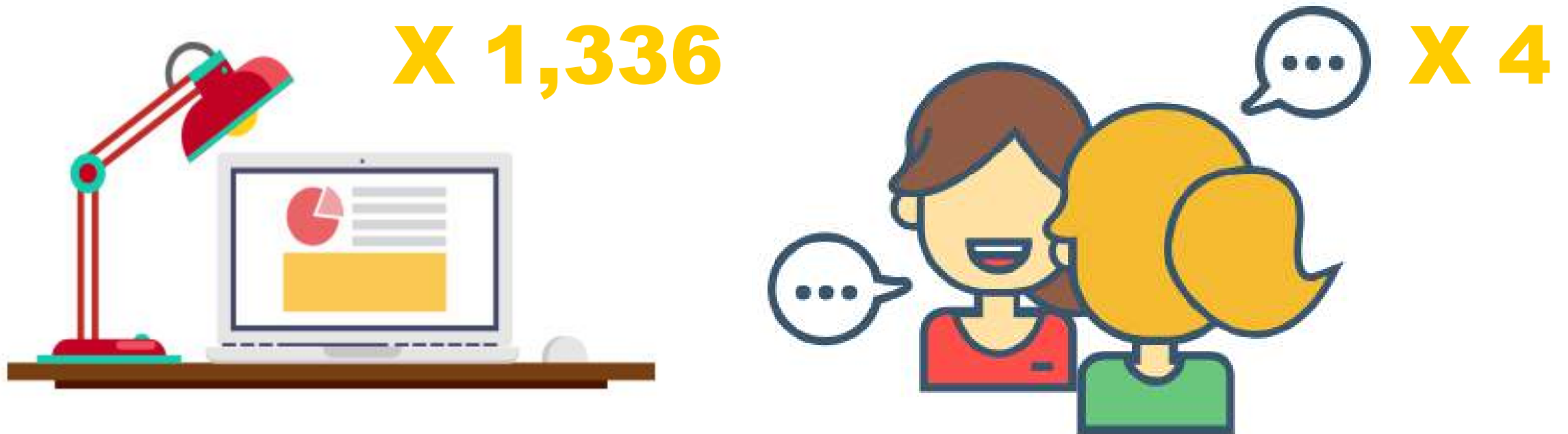


So what?

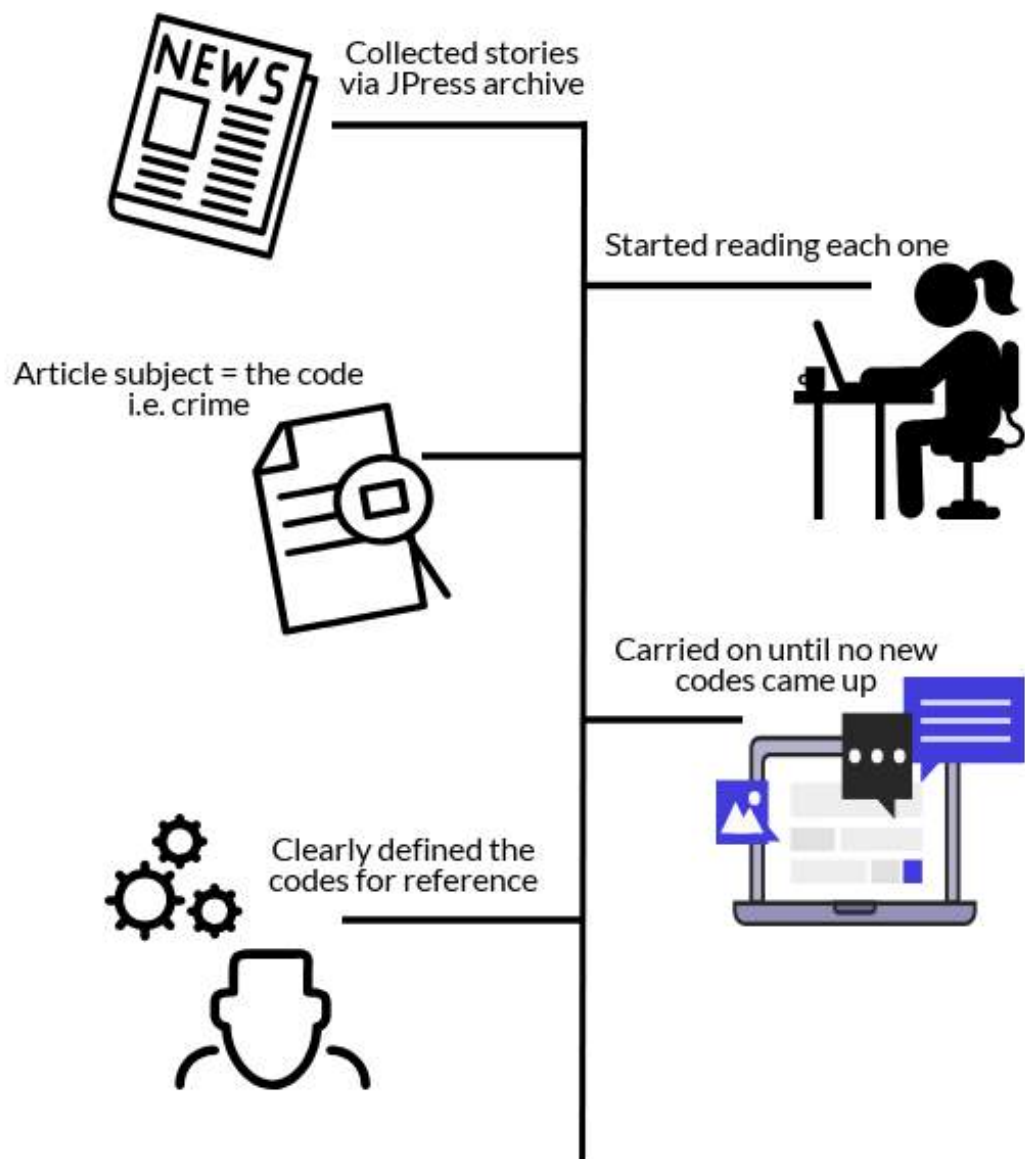
- It's interesting!
- Lots of literature by and for journalists, e.g. 'how to make a FOI request' etc
- But little *research* into the users of FOI
- Journalists are the “most influential users”



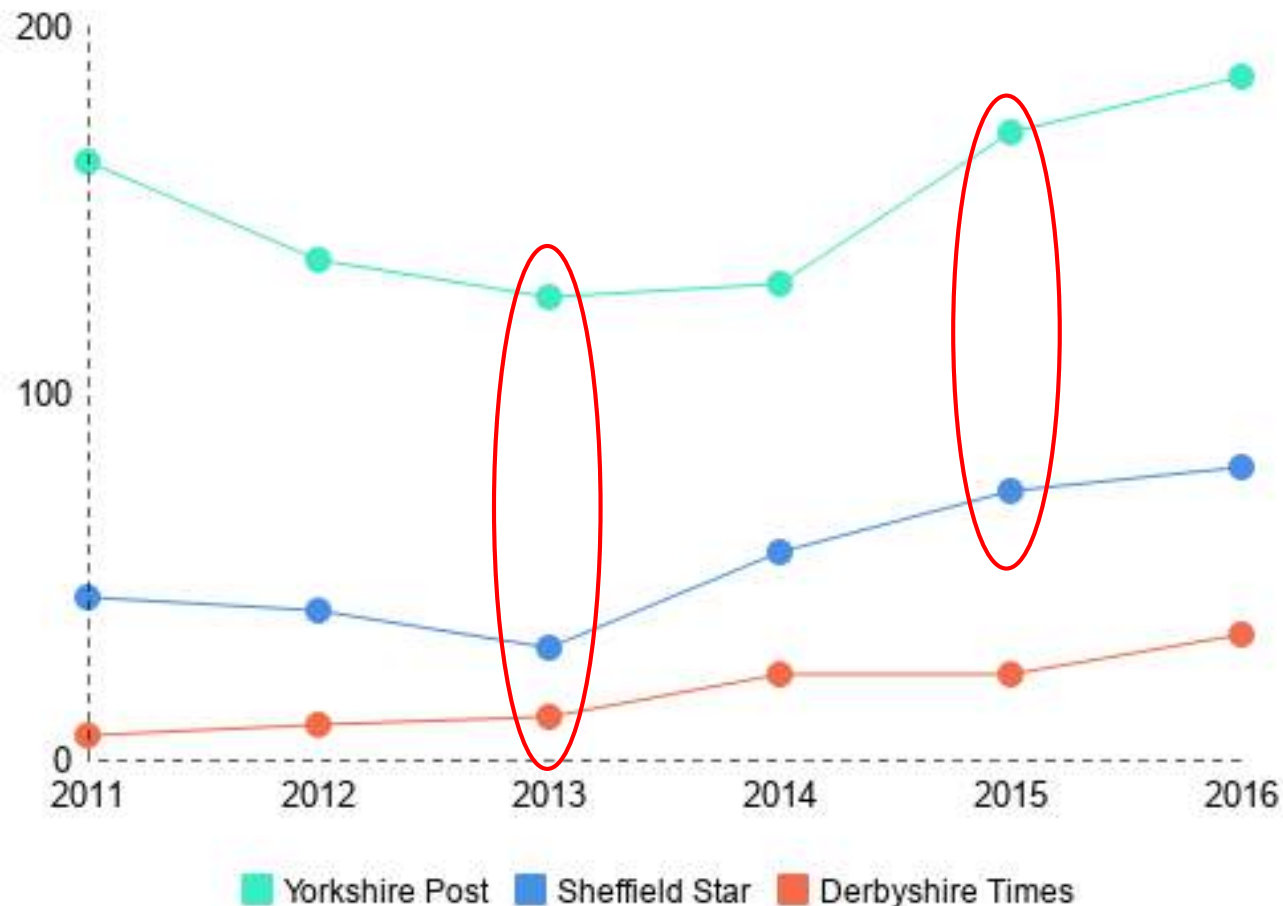
Methods



Coding method

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Use increased over time



IMPORTANT POINT!

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



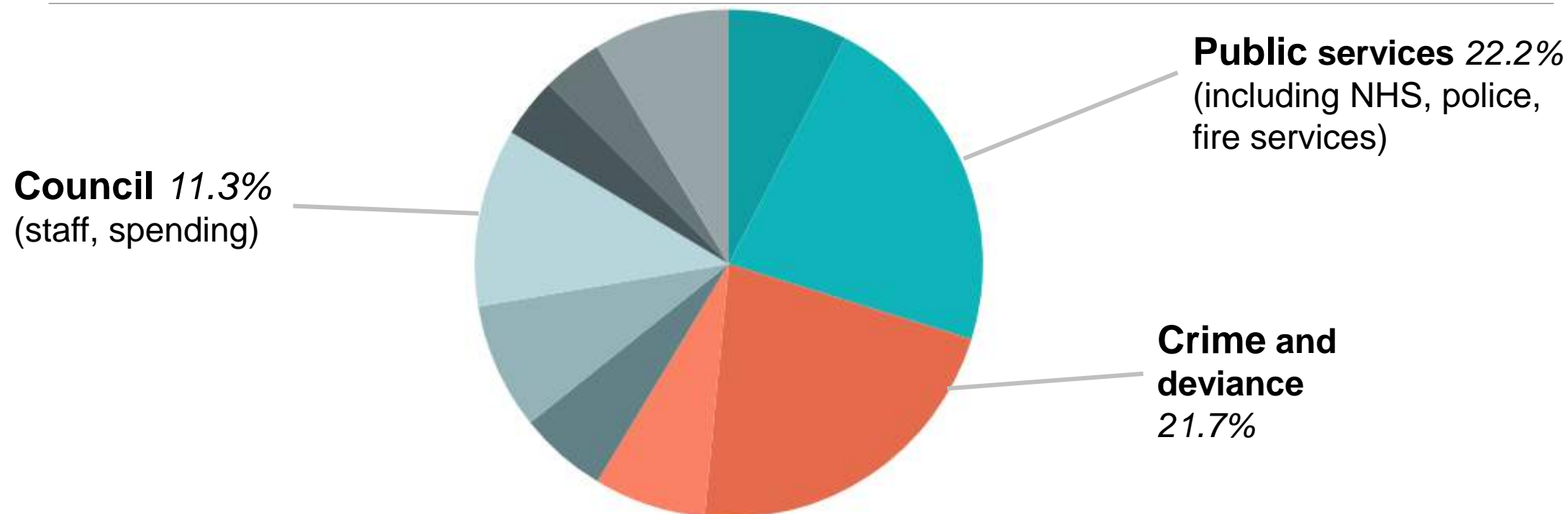
TABLE 1	Yorkshire Post	Sheffield Star	Derbyshire Times
Number of FOI stories	911	322	106
Number of front page FOI stories	153 (16.8%)	45 (14%)	8 (7.5%)



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



Types of stories across all publications



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



Trend

1

2

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Main Findings:

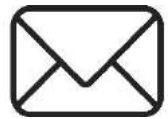
- 1) Use of FOI-sourced stories has increased over the time surveyed (2011-16) and requests from fly-fishing journalists have become more sophisticated
- 2) A mix of techniques works best: e.g. 'piggy-backing' on national stories and sending 'Round Robins'
- 3) **Crime, public services and council-related** 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....?



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