

Moving Beyond Data Constraints in Qualitative Political Science: The Systematic Analysis of Press and Country reports

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Moving Beyond Data Constraints in Qualitative Political Science: The Systematic Analysis of Press and Country reports

Friedrich Plank and Ingo Henneberg

Abstract

Qualitative research in political science and international relations increasingly adapts various methods to analyse politics, policies, and polities. With complex dynamics and environments specific to these analyses, scholars face severe data challenges. Against this background, we provide insights into systematically collecting additional evidence through the analysis of large amounts of media bulletins e.g. through the Nexis database and examination of standardized and thus comparable documents such as country reports. These tools might be able to inspire triangulative approaches to political science analyses and allow for the collection of micro-level data in contexts of limited data availability, while providing systematic and replicable access. We argue that specifically qualitatively inspired research efforts benefit from these reports. This paper provides detailed instruction for collecting data with these tools, analyses best-practices, and outlines possibilities to systematically examine very large amounts of reports. Moreover, by engaging with examples of studies that have made use of these tools, we reflect on possibilities and challenges for the acquisition and evaluation of reports. This study thus provides fruitful information for scholars struggling with limited data access in complex research environments and facilitates the systematic and replicable evaluation of huge and comprehensive data in a viable and precise manner.

Keywords: Methods, qualitative research, data, press report, country reports

1. Introduction

Political science scholars apply a multitude of methods to analyse the complex interactions and processes that underline politics, policies, and polities. In political science, complex dynamics are at play that we analyse in diverging environments and settings. Therefore, researchers vary in the methods applied. However, in particular qualitative scholars often face severe data challenges. Whereas it is extremely difficult to engage in commonly applied data acquisition methods of qualitatively inspired research such as expert interviews or participant observation in many research fields, for instance due to security risks for both researchers and interviewees (Wood, 2006; Mazurana, Jacobsen and Andrews Gale, 2013) or since events lie in the past and finding interviewees is thus complicated, limited access to official documents and archives challenges scholars' ability to provide for thorough empirical examinations. Moreover, with the need for detailed sources of evidence in qualitatively inspired analyses as well as the imperative to delimit potential data biases through triangulative approaches that rest on multiple sources of information (Rohlfing, 2012; Yin, 2018), their availability is highly relevant.

Despite the need for finer-grained data acquisition tools in qualitative political science, there are remarkably little efforts that provide for detailed insights and critically reflected practices on how to systematically acquire large amounts of data beyond event-datasets, interviews, and official documents which are difficult to assess in many research attempts. Despite some recent contributions (Möller, 2011; Öberg and Sollenberg, 2011), particularly our knowledge on how to collect and evaluate large amounts of systematically acquired media and country reports in research projects that are qualitatively inspired is limited. For instance, a large literature has provided for detailed insights on how to conduct research interviews (Mazurana, Jacobsen and Andrews Gale, 2013; Dreier and Niederberger, 2018), whereas few efforts have been made that provide for information on how to collect and analyse media data as well as country reports. These sources have been frequently applied in quantitative research endeavours spanning a wide range of topics such as frame analysis (Brewer and Sigelman, 2002), contextualisation of surveys (Hindman, 2005; Motta, 2018), or the generation of datasets (Nam, 2006; Henneberg, 2022; Pickering and Kisangani, 2009; Ottmann and Vüllers, 2015). In contrast, few qualitative studies have made use of these reports in a systematic manner (Mermin 1997; Plank, 2022a; Henneberg and Plank, 2020), although particularly scholars that apply process-tracing techniques, engage in detailed case studies, or compare cases systematically would potentially benefit from another data source for triangulation and evidence-building. Against this background, we argue that the use of country and news reports might be highly relevant for qualitative research. As the use of these sources is frequently emphasised (George and Bennett, 2005; Yin, 2018), we seek to contribute to the debate by providing information as well as critically reflect on one way to systematically collect and use these reports. We focus on two questions:

(1) How to collect data for qualitative research purposes from large amounts of country reports and news bulletins?

(2) For which qualitative research objectives is such data collection useful?

We argue that an acquisition of these reports can sufficiently and substantially answer calls made for a triangulation of data sources in qualitative research (Rohlfing, 2012) and cover the requirement of finer-grained information and multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2018). Moreover, these reports enable the collection of information in contexts of limited data availability, while providing systematic and replicable access.

To engage with the first question, we provide detailed instruction and guidelines for collecting sources with these tools. We focus particularly on media reports generated through the media platform Nexis and country reports from the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU).

Both are accessible across many research institutions and have been used quite frequently across quantitative and, to a lesser extent, qualitative political science. Moreover, this paper analyses best-practice examples for different research efforts in terms of empirics, theory and methods, and outlines possibilities to systematically examine very large amounts of country reports and news reports to embark on the second question. This specifically involves an engagement with illustrative examples of studies that have made use of these tools and a reflection on possibilities and challenges for the acquisition and evaluation of reports.

2. Qualitative data acquisition in political science: challenges and demands

Political science research embarks on the analysis of complex and dynamic processes. Specifically for qualitative inspired research, three challenges and demands are noteworthy:

First, in particular qualitatively inspired research builds on fine-grained information. For instance, studies that embark on process-tracing require detailed data on the causal mechanisms at play (Beach and Pedersen, 2013: 123), whereas accurate observations based on in-depth data constitute an important prerequisite for small-n-comparisons (George and Bennett, 2005: 67–70). Overall, qualitative scholars have emphasized the need for finer-grained data as prerequisite for a thorough analysis (Checkel, 2006; Gerring, 2007; Beach and Pedersen, 2013; Bennett and Checkel, 2014; Yin, 2018). This is, for instance, specifically important in the context of causal process observations as key feature of process-tracing. They have been defined as “[...] an insight or piece of data that provides information about the context or mechanism and contributes a different kind of leverage in causal inference. It does not necessarily do so as part of a larger, systematized array of observations” (Collier et al. 2004: 252). Observations become evidence after being assessed for accuracy and interpreted in their specific context (Beach and Pedersen, 2013: 73). As such, the researcher collects observations that enable her to critically test or find hypothesised causal mechanisms. For qualitative comparisons, data standardisation and systematic data acquisition constitute essential “structured” elements (George and Bennett 2005: 67–70).

Second, qualitative scholars strongly emphasize that studies should be based on a triangulation of data sources to reduce selection bias (Rohlfing, 2012; Bennett and Checkel, 2014; Yin, 2018). Although qualitative research usually engages with various data, it is challenging for many projects to rely their analysis on several independent information sources, particularly in studies which are prone to data constraints for instance with regard to interviews being conducted in conflict regions (Wood, 2006; Mazurana, Jacobsen and Andrews Gale, 2013), limited availability and access to archives, specifically in the Global South, or a lack of transparent and accessible official documents such as in the context of international organizations. The proposed collection of media and country reports might be helpful in this regard and our main objective is to provide for detailed instructions and reflections on their use, drawing on “documentation” as key source of evidence for research projects (Yin, 2018: 113).

Finally, replicable data acquisition increasingly is important for qualitative research as well. As it has been argued that qualitative research in political science faces “a failure to impose firm standards of replicability” (Moravcsik, 2010: 29), a debate on replication standards in qualitative political science and beyond has evolved (King, 1995; Lieberman, 2010; Freese and Peterson, 2017). Many have emphasized that data collection in qualitative research requires systematic and replicable data collection procedures that enable a certain level of transparency (Lupia and Elman, 2014; Janz, 2018; Jacobs *et al.*, 2019; Kapiszewski

and Karcher, 2020). The acquisition tools of information put forward in our study acknowledges the need for research transparency and replicability. In this context, country reports and media reports can enable a transparent and replicable data acquisition, as for instance specific queries can be followed and data is repeatedly accessible.

Against this backdrop, this paper draws on existing descriptions of sources of evidence (George and Bennett, 2005; Yin, 2018) and sets out to put forward a systematic approach to the collection and analysis of large amounts of country reports and media bulletins that can be used separately or in combination. In the following sections, we will provide hands-on instructions on how to collect and evaluate these reports before pointing to the reports' use for specific research objectives.

3. The systematic analysis of country reports and media bulletins

Two types of reports might be used to engage successfully with the challenges and demands identified. So far, quantitatively inspired research projects have made substantial use of both collection tools – country reports by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) and news bulletins provided by the Nexis database – for the acquisition of datasets (Pickering and Kisangani, 2009; Ottmann and Vüllers, 2015; Basedau, Pfeiffer and Vüllers, 2016). Moreover, scholars have quite traditionally made use of these reports in various quantitative studies (Ansolabehere et al., 1994; Brewer and Sigelman, 2002; Nam, 2006; Motta, 2018). As already emphasised by Yin (2018: 113) we argue that the systematic analysis of these reports provides a promising path for qualitative endeavours as well.

Country reports

As a first type of reports put forward in this study, country reports are systematic and standardized reports on political, social, and often economic developments within a country. They are usually organized in a manner that enables comparability over time and between different states. Country reports can serve different purposes in form of specific subjects (e.g. the human rights situation within a country) or to provide a broad overview about current development within a country (e.g. for business purposes).

Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) reports are frequently used country reports as they provide information for a broad set of research agendas. They have been used in quantitative research such as for the generation of datasets related to conflict settlement (e.g. Ottmann and Vüllers, 2015; Basedau, Pfeiffer and Vüllers, 2016) or datasets in public policy (Aleman, 2009), the assessment of specific government policies (Strobl *et al.*, 2021), the measurement of political pressure (Gavin and Manger, 2022), or political responds to external events such as financial crises (Gandrud and Hallerberg, 2019). They have also been used by few qualitative studies (e.g. authors, author a). Other standardized reports include, among others, the Political Handbook of the World, the Statesman's Yearbook, the SIPRI Yearbook, the US State Department Reports, the Africa Yearbook and Keesing's Contemporary Archives. Most of these reports are limited to specialized research areas or are difficult to access.

EIU country reports as striking example provide standardized political (such as cabinet positions) and economic data and detailed information on political events on a regular basis. They include information on current and expected future political and economic developments, foreign trade, and an overview of the most important economic indicators.

Media bulletins

As a second type of reports which we deem suitable for the purpose of qualitative research, media bulletins can inform about political, societal, economic, and other issues. Method experts frequently advise to use newspaper articles and other media bulletins in order to get a good picture of the political landscape and context knowledge about the case(s) under study (e.g. George and Bennett, 2005: 97). Media bulletins from multiple sources are best collected via media databases. The latter usually combine news content from different international and local media outlets. They include news from international news agencies such as Agence France-Presse (AFP), Associated Press (AP), Reuters, Deutsche Presse-Agentur (DPA), Interfax, or the Xinhua News Agency; major international broadcasters such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the Cable News Network (CNN), or the Deutsche Welle (DW), national and local newspapers, magazines, and other written publications.

Nexis is the largest media database in the world and provides access to wide a variety of more than 40,000 global media sources in multiple languages (LexisNexis, 2021). Since many quantitative inspired studies have made use of Nexis, we place a special emphasis on this tool for qualitative purposes as well. For instance, quantitative research has used Nexis for the generation of datasets such as the International Military Intervention Dataset (Pickering and Kisangani, 2009), the Peace Accords Matrix (Joshi and Darby, 2013), or the Power Sharing Event Dataset (Ottmann and Vüllers, 2015), and for coding data across datasets more generally, such as on political protests (Nam, 2006). Moreover, scholars have used Nexis to illustrate news coverage against surveys (Hindman, 2005; Motta, 2018), engaged in the analysis of frames using Nexis data (Brewer and Sigelman, 2002), or probed machine-coding with Nexis-data (Schrodt and Gerner, 1994). Only few qualitative research endeavours have made use of Nexis data as well (Mermin 1997; Plank, 2022a; 2023; Plank et al., 2023; Henneberg, 2020), which is why we argue that the use needs further elaboration and outline. Overall, the media database includes a wide range of news content, also including local, partly translated media bulletins. Hence, we argue that qualitative scholars should be interested in the use of Nexis, potentially answering calls for the inclusion of media data in qualitative analyses (Woolley, 2000; George and Bennett, 2005; Möller, 2011).

Advantages and disadvantages of country reports and media bulletins

Country reports and media bulletins can be useful sources for a variety of research projects. However, both forms of data also come with their limitations. Some of the advantages and disadvantages of documentation as source for qualitative research projects have been already emphasised (see Yin, 2018: 114). Drawing on these accounts, we seek to provide more detailed reflections on the use of such sources and to outline possible areas in which they might be helpful. Most of these advantages and disadvantages constitute structural factors embedded into the logic of an expert based regular report or news bulletins collected from multiple resources.

Regarding country reports, a clear advantage is that they offer a high degree of comparability between different countries (or conflicts, crisis, processes within these states) and over time. The standardized and systematic approach to every country report ensures that the reports cover major political events and provide the same basic information in order to reduce missing information.

A clear disadvantage of country reports is their focus on only highly relevant political and economic issues, limiting their suitability for investigation of certain research questions. In general, the reports cover questions regarding national and very important political issues in a more thorough manner than smaller and local issues. In addition, the analysis is limited to

the timeframe in which the report is available. As EIU publishes most systematic reports in the Western world, they potentially include a bias towards or against certain values, assessments, and perceptions.

In comparison, a larger news database usually entails multiple sources including both local and international news outlets. This automatically provides a greater variety of perspectives and can reduce perception biases through data triangulation. As larger news bulletins often include documentations of press conferences, official documents, and political speeches, they have a very broad spectrum of information.

The disadvantages of using media bulletins consist of multiple reporting bias within the data pool (Weidmann, 2015; 2016). For instance, all media and especially international media suffer from an unequal distribution of reporters and correspondence across different states and within a country. This might give produce an over-representation of political and economic centres in comparison to the periphery (Öberg and Sollenberg, 2011: 55). For instance, international media tend to cover economic important states to a larger extent and also tend to host a higher number of local media. Within a country, national and international media tend to report events in the capital to a greater extent than events in the rest of the country. An additional problem consists of different levels of media freedom and censorship (Öberg and Sollenberg, 2011: 50). As specific states systematically suppress both local and international free press, the quantity and quality of reporting can be significantly less than in more liberal states, thus comparison between different states can be problematic. Using media bulletins on states such as North Korea, Russia, Turkmenistan, Eritrea and China (Reporters Without Borders, 2020), can be problematic. In addition, biased reports on international events by international news agencies from authoritarian states such as Russia (e.g. Interfax, Rossiya Segodnya, Ruptly, Russian News Agency TASS) and China (e.g. CCTV + , China News Service, Xinhua News Agency) can negatively influence the analysis as well. Moreover, the generation of news bulletins can be problematic in a more general way, mainly as media reports are constructed by actors with potentially diverging political views, socialization, or biases. Hence, we hold that researchers using the sources of information presented in this paper should also engage in a triangulation approach while simultaneously considering the potential biases, limitations, and roles of such media reports and their producing agencies.

Table 1: Advantages and disadvantages of country reports and media bulletins.

	Country reports	News bulletins
Advantages	Highly comparable between states and over time; standardized and systematic approach to every country report	Multiple sources including both local and international news sources; includes official documents and speeches; broader
Disadvantages	Focus only on highly relevant political and economic issues; not suitable for investigation of certain research questions; local issues; limited to the timeframe of the reporting	Reporting bias over-representation of centre vs. periphery; censorship; propaganda; data availability decreases when going back in time; generation of news includes bias and subjective views

4. How to collect, process and analyse reports?

The qualitative analysis of large amounts follows three steps: first, the data collection, then the data processing, and finally the actual qualitative data analysis (QDA). This section describes these steps and discusses their challenges.

Data collection

Focusing on analyzing large numbers of documents, data collection can be a very time-consuming undertaking. Both types of data need to be stored as word or pdf documents to be processed by the QDA software. Like other protected content such as journal articles, EIU documents are not stored as already uploaded documents on the EIU servers but are newly generated each time and stamped with the users log information (timestamp etc.). This feature creates some technical difficulties in the data collection process (the annex explains how to overcome them) when dealing with large amounts of documents. For a data collection through the Nexis database, clear, transparent, and comparable search parameters for each search are decisive. Each search consists of a set of keywords, timeframe parameters and language settings. The search results then can be stored as word document files (see annex). In a final step, the stored documents need to be put in order for the analysis. This order may be issue-related, but in most cases, it will follow a chronological order. The guide in the annex is providing advice for this step.

Data processing

After the researcher has collected and stored the data, and the documents are in a chronological order, it is principally possible to start with the qualitative data analysis (QDA). However, as we discuss the analysis of large amounts of data, such as over 6,000 EIU reports with up 70 pages or more than 70,000 news bulletins, additional data processing is advisable. For this step, all files are included into the QDA software Atlas.ti (e.g. Friese, 2019). Atlas.ti offers professional capabilities to search large number of documents. One frequently used step of data processing is to use the “automated coding” function. With this technique, it is possible to search for certain keywords with country reports and copy a paragraph of text around these keywords to a new file. Making use of this tool, researchers can significantly reduce the amount of text that they need to read for the qualitative analysis. For Nexis results, the Nexis search can be focused with an additional layer of keyword searches. The feature of automated coding is also included in MaxQDA as another prominent QDA-software. Additional steps can be added to focus only on the relevant texts or paragraphs or to enhance the qualitative data analysis by color coding certain keywords that are important within the qualitative analysis. In how far additional data processing steps are advisable depends on the research question and the amount of data. They will be discussed in the following section.

Qualitative data analysis (QDA)

The last step of this process is the actual qualitative data analysis. As QDA is a standard method of social sciences (e.g. Grbich, 2012; Flick, 2013; Miles, Huberman and Saldana, 2018), we do not focus extensively on this process. For instance, the software MaxQDA is well-suited for hand-coding of the collected and processed data material (e.g. Kuckartz and Rädiker, 2019), but also other QDA-software such as atlas.ti is helpful. The coding can proceed deductively with theory guided codes according to the research question and hypothesis or inductively by generating ad hoc codes while reading and recoding within the process (Elliott, 2018). The use of a residual coding category even when using theory-guided codes is advisable, to be open to new insights and information which the research was not aware of. The then generated codes need to be structured and applied to the research framework. In addition, these qualitatively generated data could allow transformation into a dataset for quantitative analyses. It is, moreover, important to note that the use of QDA-software might include substantial funding requirements for researchers since software-licences might have to be paid. This can specifically affect researchers from less-privileged research environments.

Against this important background, other open source QDA software-tools such as Taguette, qcoder, or QDA miner might be helpful. Some QDA software such as MaxQDA also feature a test-version in which the software can be used free of charge for a limited period.

5. Applying large numbers of country reports and media bulletins in qualitative research

In the following section, we outline for which qualitative research objectives data collection of these reports can be useful and provide examples. In our view and as previously outlined, several objectives might be prone to a collection of these reports with varying purposes, methodological focuses, and differing spaces and periods of investigation. Besides the frequent application of these reports in quantitative inspired datasets (Ottmann and Vüllers, 2015; Basedau, Pfeiffer and Vüllers, 2016; Ahir, Bloom and Furceri, 2022; Henneberg, 2022), we argue that qualitative inspired projects can benefit substantially from this approach.

First, the acquisition of these reports might be fruitful for cross-comparisons of cases. As previously outlined, both types of reports enable a standardized data collection across cases, for instance in so far as the researcher standardizes queries for Nexis search or uses EIU country reports for all cases under study. Such an approach enables a structured comparison across cases (George and Bennett, 2005: 67–70). Beside a standardization in quantitative datasets, there also exist few examples of cross-comparisons that have made use of Nexis media bulletins to analyse cases in a systematic and comparable manner. For instance, inter-organizationally managed peace operations conducted by regional organizations have been analysed with such media reports (Plank, 2017a; 2022a; 2022b). Moreover, Nexis has been helpful in perception analyses comparing the view of different countries on the European Union (Fioramonti, 2007). In other examples, the media reports were used to assess the overall media coverage with regard to the salience of policy issues (Baum, 2002; Plank et al., 2023; Hochschild and Einstein, 2015; Zimmermann, 2019). Moreover, it allows for a comparison of the media coverage between regions (Mahoney, 2007; Plank et al., 2021). The latter can be assessed through the inclusion or exclusion of specific media outlets of specific regional origin.

Second, these reports can facilitate examinations of complex environments and micro-level analyses, also in order to engage in fine-grained analysis such as process tracing for which scholars suggest the acquisition of detailed information to gather observations (Beach and Pedersen, 2013: 73). For instance, EIU country reports can constitute a source of information for general economic and political trends of a country (Frynas, 2004; Grodsky, 2009), for political reforms (Bäck *et al.*, 2022), or help to assess complex media debates and discourses, such as in presidential campaigns (Payne, 2010). Another example used these reports to assess micro-levels of conflict. It (Plank and Henneberg, 2015) examined categories of inclusion in power-sharing implementation processes and investigated the implementation process of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in Sudan by using 15,391 media bulletins from the Nexis database and EIU country reports. This was supplemented by group- or party-specific searches (for an example see annex). Also for informal political processes, specifically Nexis has been relevant when other data sources are also used (Mermin 1997; Henneberg, 2020; Henneberg and Plank, 2020). For instance, varying discourse analyses such as on war metaphors used by politicians (Paris, 2002), national discourses more generally (Lodge and Wegrich, 2011), cross-national debates in energy policies (Plank et al., 2023), or on the domesticating sphere of law discourses (Jupille and Caporaso, 2009) have been examined with Nexis-data.

Third, the collection and evaluation of reports as outlined in this study might particularly facilitate a triangulation of data sources. While these reports have been helpful to examine

claims more closely and thus to increase the plausibility of findings in quantitative research such as for investigating the relationship between corruption and voting behaviour (Klašnja, Tucker and Deegan-Krause, 2016), they also facilitate triangulative approaches in qualitative studies. We hold that the acquisition of media reports and/ or country reports provides a helpful data acquisition tool particularly for this purpose. Too often, scholars struggle with a triangulation of finer-grained data sources in qualitative projects, although also transparency on how a study triangulates is important (Leuffen, Shikano and Walter, 2013). As the illustrative but not exclusive example of some of our own research shows, these reports can be helpful for the purpose of a triangulation of data sources across a variety of research objects in the field. As other data sources, they have relied on aggregated data such as V-Dem project data, ACLED data, semi-structured interviews, or official documents. In addition, scholars have used Nexis to gather additional information in case of data constraints such as official documents (Hall, 2001). In fact, given the potential biases generating from their production, a use of news bulleting and country reports itself requires triangulating evidence against such other sources.

Table 2: Different combinations of country reports, media bulletins and other data in our own studies.

Research project	EIU country reports	Nexis media bulletins	Other data
Cross-Comparison:			
Politicization in interregional relations (Plank et al., 2021)	-	7,600 media bulletins across two cases in 4 queries (case 1: 2003-2014; case 2: 2014-2019)	Semi-structured interviews, aggregated data from the V-Dem dataset
Discourse analysis of hydrogen application debate in the EU (Plank et al. 2023)	-	32,231 media bulletins in one query (01/2019 – 07/2021)	-
Regional response to terrorist threats (Henneberg and Plank, 2020)	Nigeria reports 2008-2015, 96 monthly country reports	70,131 media pieces/ bulletins (2008-2015)	Semi-structured interviews, official documents, Africa yearbook
Micro-level:			
Peace process and power transition in Sudan (Henneberg and Plank, 2015)	Sudan reports 2005-2010, 72 monthly country reports	15,391 media bulletins (2005-2010)	Official documents
Inter-organizational cooperation (Plank, 2022a)	-	70,000 media bulletins for three cases	Semi-structured interviews, official documents, aggregated data from ACLED
Multi actor crisis management (Henneberg, 2020)	Central African Republic reports 2013-2017, 60 monthly country reports	64 keyword specific media bulletins (2013-2017)	Official documents, Africa yearbook

Processes within rebel groups in civil wars (Plank, 2015; 2017b)	Philippines reports 1996-2001, 60 country reports for Plank 2017b In addition for Plank 2015: Indonesia reports 2005-2010, 60 country reports	4,044 media bulletins (1996-2001) for Plank, 2017b In addition for Plank 2015: 2,737 media bulletins (2005-2010)	Official documents
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Overall, this preliminary assessment of some studies in the field that have made use of media bulletins collected through Nexis and country reports provided by the EIU indicates that the acquisition of these reports can indeed be fruitful to delimit data constraints. Specifically, it facilitates the generation of datasets, can provide detailed information for comparative endeavours, enables the collection of detailed data sources on the micro-levels, and increases the possibility to limit data biases through a triangulation of data sources with these reports as one component of a complex collection of different data.

6. Conclusion

Starting from the observation that political scientists, especially in qualitative research projects, face severe data constraints, this study has put forward the use of systematically collected country and news reports – media bulletins of the Nexis database and EIU country reports – as fruitful path to gather evidence and detailed information. It has shown how we can collect and analyse large amounts of such reports and engaged with studies that have made use of these reports across a wide range of research objectives and methods. Specifically, we argue that the use of these reports can be a relevant and helpful tool for scholars that focus on qualitatively inspired research projects.

Since the advantages and disadvantages of country reports and media bulletins matter in very different aspects, it is often a good research strategy to combine both types of reports to balance their advantages and disadvantages and use them for data triangulation. This might also reduce biases in such reports that have been frequently debated (Weidmann, 2016). However, the potential of this combination depends on the specific research topic and might not be applicable for every research project. Given the many biases that come with the generation of both country reports and news bulletins, for instance subjective views of the authors of these reports, it is furthermore required to additionally use other sources. Hence, like other sources, reports need a balance against other information (Yin 2008; George and Bennett 2005).

As we have shown, acquisition of these reports in a systematic and standardized manner facilitates the generation of datasets, can provide detailed information for comparative endeavours, enables the collection of detailed data sources on the micro-levels of political science, and increases the possibility to limit data biases through a triangulation of sources with these reports as one component of a complex collection of different data. However, these reports might also generate a certain degree of costs for the researcher since they create large amounts of data and require detailed assessment, coding as well as reflection, depending also on the purpose, empirical depth, and prominence of the cases under analysis. As significant advantage, these very different types of sources make it possible to increase the validity of the empirical material in terms of cross-checking by different researchers or data triangulation and thus improve the results of the analysis. Overall, we hold that these reports can help to address data constraints in political science and provide a useful tool particularly for the purpose of qualitative projects. The application of these tools has also proven to be helpful

for the teaching of qualitative research methods, specifically the acquisition of data and information, as the process of acquisition can be easily shown to students. It is, finally, also important to note that the data acquisition and data coding approach we propose might come with substantial costs in terms of licensing and access, especially for researchers from less-privileged research environments than the authors of this study. While we can only draw on our own experiences here which draw on the approaches described, at least some challenges might be addressed through other sources and software. Finally, we also want to highlight that the approach outlined in this paper needs other sources as well (triangulation) since news reports and country reports also come with a certain bias, specifically regarding their potentially subjective views or limited media freedom in some countries.

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ANNEX for study “Moving Beyond Data Constraints in Qualitative Political Science: The Systematic Analysis of Press and Country Reports”

Nexis media bulletins data collection

Nexis is offered by the US based company LexisNexis which belongs to the British RELX Group (LexisNexis 2021a). Many major research institutions provide a basic access to the Nexis database, usually via the Nexis university database.

- 1) Signing up
- 2) Go to "professional search" above
- 3) Then copy the search list (appended) into the top of the page.

It is very important to pay close attention to the correct use of the boolean operators:
(Sudan) AND (Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army) OR (SPLM/A) OR (Sudan People's Liberation Movement) OR (SPLM) OR (Sudan People's Liberation Army) OR (SPLA)

Technical advice to reproduce the data record: On the LexisNexis web page, click on the tab ‘News’. In the field for the search terms, input the exact search items as shown in the chart. Under ‘Select Sources’, limit the search to ‘English speaking press’. Under ‘Specify Date’ search year by year by selecting ‘Date is between DD.MM.YYYY and DD.MM.YYYY’. Run separate searches for single years in a time span.

Important notice: A hundred-percent reproduction of this LN data collection is not possible – probably due to technical or legal reasons – as a LN-search could slightly vary in the total number of hits from one day to the next.

An illustrative example for South Sudan:

((South Sudan) OR (S. Sudan)) AND ((SPLM) OR (SPLA) OR (SPLM/A) OR (Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army) OR (Sudan People's Liberation Movement) OR (Sudan People's Liberation Movement Army) OR (Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army in Opposition) OR (SPLM/A-IO) OR (Kiir) OR (Salva Kiir) OR (Riek Macher) OR (Macher) OR (Mathiang Anyoor) OR (Duk-ku Bany) OR (Anyoor) OR (United Nations' Mission in South Sudan) OR (UNMISS) OR (David Yau-Yau) OR (Yau-Yau) OR (Taban Deng Gai) OR (Deng Gai) OR (Alfred Taban Logune) OR (Nhial Bol) OR (SSACC) OR (election) OR (Lam Akol) OR (Sudan People's Liberation Movement for Democratic Change) OR (SPLM-DC) OR (group of 10 former detainees) OR (G-10) OR (G10) OR (National Movement for Change) OR (NMC) OR (People's Democratic Movement) OR (PDM) OR (South Sudan Democratic Front) OR (SSDF) OR (Peter Adwok) OR (Adwok) OR (Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa) OR (COMESA) OR (IGAD) OR (Intergovernmental Authority on Development) OR (EAC) OR (East African Community) OR (European Union) OR (African Union) OR (United Nations) OR (South Sudan Land Commission) OR (SSLC) OR (Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan) OR (ACRISS) OR (Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan) OR (R-ARCSS) OR (internally displaced persons) OR (Johnson Olony) OR (Shilluk people forming a rebel group in opposition to the government) OR (Agwelek) OR (Local Government Act) OR (Peter Adwok Nyaba) OR (Pagan Amum) OR (George Athor Deng) OR (Sudd Institute) OR (South Sudan Law Society) OR (Community Empowerment for Progress Organization) OR (CEPO) OR (peace agreement) OR (mediator) OR (power-sharing) OR (power sharing) OR (peace deal) OR (military integration) OR (security sector reform) OR (CTSAMM) OR (Ceasefire and Transitional Security Arrangements Monitoring Mechanism) OR (Monitoring and Verification Teams) OR (MVTs) OR (Permanent Ceasefire and Transitional Security Arrangements) OR (PCTSA) OR (disarmament) OR (DDR) OR (Thomas Cirillo) OR (SSDM) OR (National Salvation Front) OR (Nuer White Army) OR (Tiger Faction New Forces) OR (TFNF) OR (SSFDP) OR (South Sudan National Army) OR (SSPA) OR (SS-UF) OR (Arrow Boys) OR (John Uliny)

OR (Gabriel Tang) OR (Paulino Zangil) OR (Peter Gadet) OR (Khalid Botrous) OR (Mathiang Anyoor)
OR (Maban Defence Force) OR (James Ajonga Mawut) OR (Paul Malong Awan) OR (James Hoth
Mai) OR (Kuol Manyang Juuk) OR (Peter Par Jiek) OR (Johnson Olony) OR (Taban Deng Gai) OR
(Cobra Faction) OR (Chan Garang) OR (Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Committee) OR (JMEC)
OR (ceasefire agreement))

A second example for a broader analysis

((Hydrogen) AND (European Union) OR (European Commission))

4) Set everything to "All English News"

5) Enter the exact dates for the investigation period for instance January 1, 2017 to December 31, 2018.

--> LN cannot output more than 3000 hits at the same time, so it must be split into quarters, month etc. depending on the amount of hits.

6) Check the box "Group duplicates (identical)" [Duplicates will be searched afterwards, i.e. there are only 3000 hits left of the 3000 hits e.g. eight hundred left.]

7) Click on Search

8) Click on "chronological order" in the upper right corner of the screen.

9) Click on "Export" (top left) and "Save"

10) In the export menu item 1: Documents 1-200; 201-400 etc. Unfortunately LN only save 200 documents at a time; so the storage process is a bit frustrating sometimes.

11) In the export menu point 2: Insert a note: For each case, e.g. "South Sudan Search no. 123, "Date";

Check the boxes "List of contained documents" and "Each document on a start new page"

11) "Save"

Data Collection EIU country reports

The 'EIU Country Reports Archive' includes all country reports since 1996 – excluding the four most recent volumes – and is publicly available for many research institutions. In principal, also printed EIU reports are available since 1991. However, as computer-assisted analysis needs digitalized text, these reports can only be used after an optical character recognition (OCR) scan which is frequently in a quality that creates major problems for data analysis.

The first step is the collection of the data files. For EIU country reports, there are multiple options available. We recommend using PDF files. EIU presents a list of all country reports with a link that generates the document after a click.

As our introduction focuses on analyzing large numbers of documents, the data collection can be very time-consuming undertaking. Similar to other protected content such as journal articles, EIU documents are not stored as already uploaded documents on the EIU servers but are newly generated each time and stamped with the users log information (timestamp etc.). This circumstance creates some difficulties in the data collection process. We now explain how to overcome them.

Use the “Firefox” browser by Mozilla as it is highly adaptable via add-on programs. To download large number of files under the restrictions explained above, two add-ons are used. Please download and install the add-ons “Snaplinksplus” (<https://addons.mozilla.org/de/firefox/addon/snaplinksplus/>) and “DownloadThem all” (<https://addons.mozilla.org/de/firefox/addon/downthemall/>). “Snaplinksplus” is used to open multiple links in new tabs at ones and by that start the process of generating the PDF documents, “DownloadThem all” is used to save the content of the opened tabs. Without these tools, all files have to be opened and saved manually for each file.

Create a folder for each state and download all country reports for one state and once.

1) Using Snaplinksplus

Check the Snaplinksplus settings and set a command for using multiple links. Mark certain links (in our case all country reports of one state) and then open them all in new tabs at once (we use this command: “Alt” + “right mouse button” + drag). If you open many files, quite often some PDFs are not created correctly. Important: Check if the PDF was opened correctly and refresh the particular tab if necessary before you proceed.

2) Using DownloadThem all

The using of the DownloadThem all tool is straightforward. There are several settings to select open files within the browser. Selecting “all tabs” or “all pdf” should work fine, as only content relevant to the data collection is open. Save the documents into the particular folder.

Preparing coding files

In many cases, the data files need to be structured in a certain way. For EIU country reports, the files should be named by the state name and the date. Even as newer reports usually have a structured file name, especially older reports from the pre-2000 era often use random file names. In order to create files that are ordered chronologically, the PDF files should be renamed in a consistent manner. Without this step, a chronological analysis will be very difficult to achieve.

For instance: One could apply the following naming scheme:

Country_Report_state name_year_report number (month or quarter)

Example: Country_Report_Algeria_2011_01

As many file systems cannot control for individual numbers, it is important to name the year first and use a zero before all numbers under 10.

To process a large number of files, it is helpful to use a file manager that is able to rename multiple files at ones. On Windows machines, the freeware tool "FreeCommander" for instance offers such functionality. You can use the option "Multi rename" under "File".

ATLAS.ti searches

Create an ATLAS.ti library that encompass all documents that shall be analyzed.

Open the “text search” menu (magnifying glass symbol on the task bar).

Add your search codes:

First, the label or code is defined. Second with the “:=” command the search items that will be labeled with the code named before are mentioned. A “|” separate different variations of the item. Often we use different languages and abbreviations here.

Examples for three different regional organizations:

AC:=AC|Arctic Council

AU:=AU|UA|African Union|Union africaine

ECOWAS:=ECOWAS|CEDEAO|Economic Community of West African States|Communauté économique des États de l'Afrique de l'Ouest

Use “Options” to save these codes (here named categories) with the “save categories” command. As the categories are saved, they can be opened using the search and the “options” (load categories).

ATLAS.ti auto-coding

We use the auto-coding option of ATLAS.ti to reduce the amount of text that has to be read by the researcher. For EIU country reports, large parts of the reports which contain economic data are often not important for a political science analysis. For media data this step is not so important, as the search already focuses on specific key words. However, as LN often contains larger reports or press briefings that encompass different topics, the auto-coding can be helpful to reduce the number of pages as well. Proceed as follows:

- 1) Open the “auto coding” option (ninth symbol in the task bar depending on the ATLAS.ti version).
- 2) Create a code with an abbreviation. For instance, “ECOWAS” in the example above.
- 3) Select a code from the code list (as created by the search option; in this case the ECOWAS code).
- 4) Select the following option at the right: “case sensitivity”.
- 5) Scope: Select “all documents”
- 6) Use the “Create a quote from the hit extended to” option and select “paragraph and at least one blank line”. This is important in order to cut the relevant content around your search item in order to allow for a qualitative analysis.
- 7) Run the auto-coding.
- 8) Re-do step 2 and 3 for every other code; settings 4-6 stay the same.

As all codings are done, open the “quote browser”. Select “all quotes”. Select “quotes”, “export quotes”. A selection menu opens. Select the „save as file“ option. Save the text as rich text file.

Additional hints for analyses with regard to the United States:

EIU country reports often use abbreviations within the text, so a analysis which focus on the United States should also search for the abbreviation “US” (for instance using this code “USA:=USA|US*|U.S.|United States|United States of America|États-Unis d'Amérique|États-Unis| Estados Unidos|Estados Unidos de América|EUA”).

However, as EIU reports are highly economic focused, a large number of information is referring to US Dollar (USD or US\$) and generate a huge number of codes. As it is not possible to easily separate US and USD/US\$ from each other, the following procedure is helpful: US* will code US, USD and US\$. If you expand the query to word boundary then you can use the following approach: Autocode US\$ with a special code (for instance “remove US\$”). Open the quotation manager. Select the code "remove US\$". Remove the quotations referring "remove US\$". This will also remove the wrongly defined quotations from the first query.¹

Intermediate step: Using Microsoft Word for visual coding support

As many export documents are very large files with sometimes more than 10,000 pages, it can be very helpful to highlight the words you search for within the text in order to speed up your reading and coding time. Unfortunately, this is not possible with ATLAS.ti or MaxQDA. Depending on the research topic and the number of pages the step is useful or in itself to time-consuming.

- 1) Open the rich text file created by ATLAS.ti with Microsoft Word.
- 2) Open the “advanced search” and select the “Search and replace” option.
- 3) Insert your search abbreviation into the “search for” field.
- 4) Insert the same word into the “replace with” field.
- 5) Open the “extended” options.
- 6) Select “case sensitivity” as applicable (important option for abbreviations)
- 7) Open “format” under the “replace” headline while having the “replace with” word selected.
- 8) Select “highlight”
- 9) Run the procedure using “replace all”.
- 10) Repeat steps 3 and 9 for other search items.

Make sure that the highlighting command is applied to the replace word and not the word search for. In some cases, you have to highlight a word manually first in order that the command works properly.

Save the file as PDF.

Manual coding using MaxQDA

Import the generated and modified PDF file into MaxQDA.

Read the prepared document and code the aspects under study.

¹ Thanks to Clemens Hoffmann from the ATLAS.ti support team for this advice.

If student assistants do the initial coding, it is helpful to give them a “Code in case of doubt” rule. By doing this kind of large-scale qualitative coding, it is relatively easy to recode or delete codes that not fit into a category or the overall research scheme, but it is problematic to add categories or additional research questions later on. As the necessary resources are available, an independent double-coding by two researchers can help to avoid researcher bias and improve data quality. In this case a clearing step afterwards is necessary