

# **Media reporting of FOI & RTI Laws in Queensland**

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# Presentation Aims

- Highlight the policy issues which prompted from our research
- Explain how our research contributes to the issues
- Justify our methodology
- Identify policy recommendations

# Background

## The Queensland Context

- Freedom of Information reforms were introduced in Queensland in 2009.
- Moved from a **pull model** for accessing government information to **push model**, whereby information is released administratively without request.
- Office of the Information Commissioner was formed as part of these reforms.
- The OIC sought to understand the role of media in reporting FOI which is now known as Right to Information.



# Policy issues

- Journalists play an important role in converting government information into stories that are useful and meaningful to the public.
- Journalists can play a crucial role in putting pressure on governments to introduce and reform Freedom of Information laws.
- The role of the media (traditional and new) in shaping and framing the culture of Freedom of Information is often overlooked in implementing and evaluating Freedom of Information regimes.

# Research

**Research aim:** Identify trends and patterns in journalists' reporting of FOI in pre-reform, reform and post-reform periods in Queensland.

## **Approach:**

○ The study used a **triangulated methodology** comprising qualitative and quantitative research methods to examine the **frequency, orientation and tone** of newspaper reports about *Freedom of Information* or *Right to Information* over three periods from January 2007 to November 2007 (pre reform); December 2007 to June 2009 (during reform process) and July 2009 to January 2011 (post-reform) addressing whether there has been qualitative and/or quantitative changes in the way :

i. Newspapers report government agencies since the implementation of RTI?

ii. RTI or FOI has been used to source stories?

iii. RTI or FOI is represented in newspaper stories?

# Data

Two sources:

- a. newspaper reports
- b. interviews with journalists, who have reported on and used FOI and RTI in Queensland.

Newspaper reports were sourced using the Factiva database, which contains full text content from Australian newspapers, and subjected to three levels of analysis:

- i. Exploratory analysis using data mining software  
Leximancer
- ii. User-defined concept analysis using Leximancer
- iii. Discourse analysis to explore the context and themes that emerged within the use and reporting of FOI and RTI during the three periods.

# Quantitative findings

- The transition from FOI to RTI has been reflected in media reports with the language of RTI increasingly being used in those reports.
- Metropolitan newspapers are the key sources of RTI/FoI stories. It is not reported in local or regional newspaper. This could be a peculiarity of Australia given its media ownership.
- Story tone shifted across the three time periods resulting in more positive stories about access to government information in the later time periods.
- Most of reporting around FoI/RTI focuses on a small number of portfolios.
- Access to PSI is a salient and newsworthy issue in its own right

# Qualitative findings

- Different news themes emerge through the three periods under review: 1. Fol = broken; 2. Promise of a new policy; 3. Optimism towards the new policy.
- Discernible shift in the way RTI and Fol have been used to source stories;
- Some portfolios are more advanced in cultural change than others.
- Negative experience of Fol/RTI can increase risk of double negative reporting.
- Increase in double negative reporting has potential to alter positive perceptions that have emerged around RTI.

# Policy recommendations

- **Recommendation 1:** Educate journalists on the importance of Freedom of Information laws.
- **Recommendation 2:** Using the repeatable methodology developed by Breit, Fitzgerald, Liu and Neal (2011), undertake research to ascertain whether Africa and Asian or international journalists are reporting Fol as a news issue in its own right.
- **Recommendation 3:** Undertake a focused government portfolio study into government agency culture to ascertain capacity of FOI administrators to work with journalists to promote public right to know.
- **Recommendation 4:** Develop educational program for Fol administrators to help understand the role of journalists in making government information meaningful and useful.