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# How Queensland newspapers reported public sector information reform

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**Abstract**

This article explores the role of media in Freedom of Information (FOI) policy transfer, using a case study of Queensland's 2009 FOI reforms. A multi-dimensional analysis was used to discover how newspapers reported changes in Queensland's public sector information (PSI) policy to identify whether stories on PSI policy were reframed over time. At a quantitative level, the text analytics software Leximancer was used to identify key concepts, issues and trends in 786 relevant articles from national, metropolitan and regional newspapers. At a qualitative level, discourse analysis was used to identify key themes and patterns from the newspaper articles. Both qualitative and quantitative shifts in the media reporting of Right to Information (RTI) and FOI were revealed across three time periods representing the periods before, during and after the reform implementation. The findings offer insights into the role of newspapers in policy diffusion, revealing how Queensland media reports framed the shift in PSI policy from pull model FOI to push model RTI.

**Keywords**

framing, Freedom of Information, journalism, policy transfer, reform

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## Introduction

This study focuses on the role of journalists in Queensland's policy shift from a request-driven Freedom of Information (FOI) regime to push model Right to Information (RTI), where information, data or content generated, collected or funded by government – collectively known as public sector information (PSI)<sup>1</sup> – is to be made publicly available as a matter of course. It investigates whether radical policy change around access to PSI resulted in changes in the way the policy was represented in the media by undertaking a framing analysis over three distinct periods between 2007 and 2011. These periods were selected to capture newspaper coverage during the pre-reform, reform and post-reform periods. Historically, FOI reform in Queensland has been triggered by allegations of political corruption. The Fitzgerald Inquiry led to the introduction of Queensland's first FOI Act in 1992. The 2009 reforms came about following a series of scandals relating to deaths in regional hospitals (the Dr Death Inquiry), allegations of corruption and perjury relating to a former member of parliament (MP) (the Gordon Nuttall Affair), and criticism of the government's use of the Cabinet Document exemption preventing documents from being made public. After extensive consultation, the FOI Independent Review Panel recommended a complete overhaul of the policy. A new regime was implemented, fundamentally shifting the policy paradigm from requiring information to be requested from government to a system of pro-active disclosure of government information unless contrary to public interest. As a consequence of these reforms, formal requests to access government information using the legislative process would be a last resort.

Drawing on theories of policy transfer and media framing, we explore how newspaper reports on PSI policy were reframed over time. To date, there has been minimal research examining the way media report RTI and FOI, and little has been done to understand the role media plays in PSI policy reform. The majority of research and literature in this area comprises descriptive texts on how FOI laws can be used as an investigative tool to source government information (see Martin, 2008) or the effect of FOI laws on the media's capacity to report (Banisar, 2006; Mendel, 2008). Lidberg (2003, 2009) has investigated how journalists from different jurisdictions make FOI requests. By trialling an International FOI Index, he attempted to contextualise the promise and the practice of FOI regimes across a number of international jurisdictions. Others (see Lamble, 2003; Roberts, 2006; Snell, 2002) have pointed to the deficiencies and challenges facing journalists using FOI, while additional research has focused on evaluating FOI policy performance (Hazel and Worthy, 2010). US academic Relly (2012) has explored the influence of geographical proximity and news media environments on adoption of FOI laws. However, little research has been undertaken to understand the role of media in FOI policy transfer. Accordingly, this article evaluates the role newspapers played in translating the policy ideals of push model RTI into reality by exploring how the media reports were reframed across three distinct periods comprising the pre-reform, reform and post-reform phases of the policy implementation.

This research is important because mass media (particularly newspapers) play an important role in publicising policies and promoting policy innovations (see Newmark, 2002: 165; Rogers and Shoemaker, 1971). Journalists are the main conduits through which policy information is conveyed (Newmark, 2002: 163). In the arena of PSI policy, journalists not only report on issues relating to PSI policy, but they also rely on PSI as a source of information. Consequently, they experience the policy first hand, and this experience – good or bad – can become a story in its own right. We investigated whether media reports about PSI policy were reframed over the period of policy change to better understand the way media made sense of the policy reform and how events and issues were organised throughout the pre-reform, reform and post-reforms periods (see Coleman et al., 2009: 150; Reese, 2007: 7).

Frames are the 'interpretative packages' which give meaning to an issue. At the core of this package is 'a central organizing idea, or *frame*, for making sense of relevant events, suggesting

what is at issue' (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989: 3, italics in original). Using framing analysis, we were able to detect whether some aspect of reality was selected and made more salient 'to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation' (Entman, 2010: 52). By virtue of emphasising some elements of a topic above others, a frame provides a way to understand an event or issue. In this vein, Cappella and Jamieson (1997) suggest that frames activate knowledge, stimulate 'stocks of cultural morals and values, and create contexts' (p. 47). In doing so, frames 'define problems', 'diagnose causes', 'make moral judgments' and 'suggest remedies' (de Vreese, 2005: 53). Frames provide 'coherence, through a causal explanation, a moral statement, or a recommendation for a solution' (Avraham and First, 2010: 484). Frames can be identified in media stories through journalists' repetitive use of metaphors, key sentences as well as symbolic verbal and graphic techniques. Common mechanisms utilised by journalists to frame stories include 'excising, sanitizing, equalizing, personalizing, demonizing, and contextualizing' (Avraham and First, 2010: 484, citing Liebes, 1997).

Scholars disagree on how to identify frames in the news, but de Vreese (2005: 53) isolates two key approaches: the inductive approach, whereby frames emerge from the material during the course of analysis (e.g. Gamson, 1992; Neuman et al., 1992), and, the more deductive, theory-driven approach, where frames are defined and operationalised prior to investigation. Given the exploratory nature of this study, we sought to discover whether journalists employed any identifiable 'schema or heuristic' when constructing stories about FOI and whether this schema changed across the pre-reform, reform and post-reform periods.

Inductive framing analysis was used to explore the selection and salience of issues relating to reporting of Queensland's PSI policy reform as reported in newspapers (see Entman et al., 2009: 175). But we wanted to know whether the way PSI was framed in newspaper reports changed over time. Here, we were mindful of Lecheler and de Vreese's work (2013), which highlights the importance of repetitive and competitive news framing on public opinion formation over time. Repetitive news framing reinforces a particular version of reality, thereby heightening the potential impact and durability of the one-sided message. Competitive news framing provides alternative or conflicting versions of reality that might 'stimulate individuals to deliberate on the merits of alternative interpretations' (Chong and Druckman as cited in Lecheler and de Vreese, 2013: 150).

Interestingly, Lecheler and de Vreese (2013: 163) discovered that repetitive news framing had no substantive effect on opinion formation. 'When a news frame is repeated, effects did not add up, but stayed at a more or less comparable-level across time'. However, in terms of competitive news framing, they found that 'most delayed frame exposures led to a substantial opinion reversal', confirming Chong and Druckman's research (2008) which revealed that 'even when individuals have been previously exposed to alternative frames, they tend to be susceptible to the most recent frame they encounter, including weak frames' (pp. 29–30).

This suggests that media framing might play an important role in policy transfer, but public acceptance of the policy change could be vulnerable to the most recent frame presented within the media. Therefore, we were interested to discover whether the media reframed its reporting of Queensland's PSI policy by exploring the framing flow over time and identifying whether competing frames were being presented across and within different time periods.

## Methodology

Newspaper stories (texts) relating to RTI and FOI were explored across three key periods, which are the following: the periods from January 2007 to November 2007, representing the pre-reform period; December 2007 to June 2009, the reform process period; and July 2009 and January 2011 representing the post-reform period. Newspapers were selected as the main media

**Table 1.** Distribution of newspaper stories on FOI and RTI across three time periods.

Time period	FOI	RTI	Total
January 2007–November 2007 11 months	141	2	143 (18%)
December 2007–June 2009 7 months	297	27	324 (41%)
July 2009–January 2011 7 months	142	177	319 (41%)
Total	580	206	786 (100%)

FOI: Freedom of Information; RTI: Right to Information.

source because they have been identified as the most influential media in effecting policy transfer (see Newmark, 2002).

Examination of the literature reveals four broad approaches have been adopted to extract frames from media content, namely a qualitative approach, a manual holistic approach, manual clustering approach and the computer-assisted approach (see Entman et al., 2009: 180–181). To render an interpretative account of media texts dealing with FOI reform in Queensland, this study combines the computer-assisted, manual clustering and qualitative approaches. This triangulated research design provided ‘rigor, breadth, complexity, richness, and depth to’ our inquiry (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005: 5).

Newspaper stories relating to RTI and FOI across three time periods<sup>2</sup> were identified using the Factiva database, which contains full text content from Australian newspapers. The reports were subjected to three levels of analysis, namely, exploratory analysis using data mining software Leximancer (computer-assisted approach), user-defined concept analysis using Leximancer (manual clustering approach) and discourse analysis of news text (qualitative analysis).

An initial search of regional, metropolitan and national newspapers was undertaken around the terms FOI and RTI. This comprehensive search revealed that *The Australian* plus *The Weekend Australian* and *The Courier Mail* and *The Sunday Mail* were the only newspapers undertaking regular reporting on FOI and RTI as it related to Queensland (see Table 1). Therefore, data collection focused on two newspapers *The Australian* (and *Weekend Australian*) and *The Courier Mail* (and *The Sunday Mail*), which belong to the News Limited stable of publications.

A total of 786 relevant articles were identified from our initial search, which were then subjected to Leximancer analysis<sup>3</sup> to identify frequency and patterns of words and concept use as well as reveal thematic relationships and associations across data. Co-occurrence of concepts found within the text is also measured by revealing how identified concepts are related to each other within the documents. The software mines the data to produce a two-dimensional concept map which displays the network of concepts, reveals relations between themes (or parent concepts) and other connected concepts (Smith and Humphreys, 2006). The interactive map enables the user to explore examples of concepts, their connections to each other, as well as links to the original text. In this way, Leximancer software provides a means of quantifying and displaying the *conceptual structure* of the news stories. Conceptual maps can be generated from data relating to newspaper coverage from different time periods, thereby enabling comparison of trends (over time).

An initial exploratory analysis was conducted to identify specific vocabularies used within the news text to examine, track and compare word usage across a number of different variables including time frames, peaks in reporting, duration of coverage and co-occurrence of concepts. To further validate findings, a second level of Leximancer analysis was conducted by creating user-defined concepts (based on feedback from policy stakeholders including journalists), which were manually

seeded. Leximancer was used to identify other concepts in the text related to these user-defined concepts and provide additional insights into their use, similar to that generated during the exploratory analysis (Cretchley et al., 2010).

While Leximancer maps the structure of the stories and identifies segments of texts where key issues are covered, it cannot address the question of how those key issues are reported. Therefore, discourse analysis was applied to examine examples of news items and to explore how the reports of FOI and RTI are embedded within various discourses around the topic. Discourse analysis is able to relate language and text within a discursive network, where texts interlink and connect with each other, between each other and across time (Fitzgerald and Housley, 2009). This study explored language use within news stories at the level of the sentence through word choice and its immediate context (lexical choice), allowing us to identify how different forms of words relate to various discursive themes, where language and text connect with wider structures of meaning. Therefore, we were able to distil the organising ‘frame’, schema or heuristic around which stories were generated over the three time periods. This combination of Leximancer and discourse analysis enabled us to identify how FOI and RTI were framed in newspaper reports over time.

## Findings and discussion

Our research revealed changes in the way FOI and RTI were reported across the three time periods under review, indicating significant changes in the way newspapers framed stories over time. Significantly, the analysis revealed changes in the framing flow of news reports in five key ways:

- The salience of PSI policy as a news item in its own right;
- The terminology used to describe the policy and recurrent concepts emerging within reports;
- The tone of reports;
- The level of cultural change within different portfolios;
- The key organising themes across the different time periods.

### *The salience of PSI policy as a news item*

The Leximancer analysis revealed fewer stories were reported on PSI policy in the pre-reform period (143 news stories), which is the longest time period under investigation. The number of stories relating to FOI and RTI more than doubled in the later time periods. Reporting of FOI peaked during the period 2007–2009, while RTI coverage peaked in the later time period (2009–2011); Table 1 summarises the number of newspaper stories that refer to FOI and RTI, revealing the patterns of newspaper coverage.

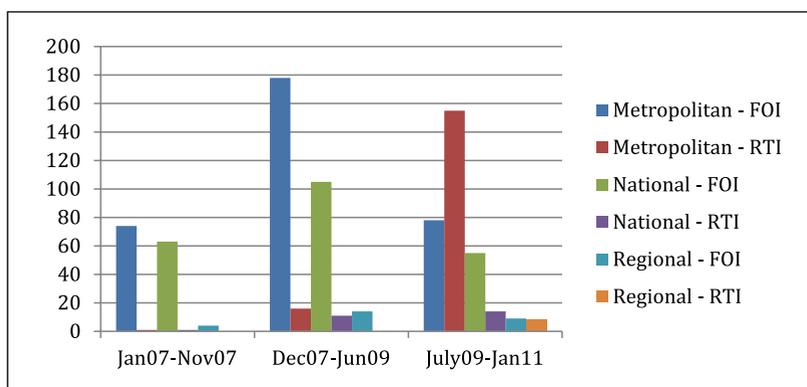
Significantly, not all newspapers found FOI and RTI newsworthy in its own right (see Table 2). Metropolitan newspapers account for 57% of the total news stories on FOI (330 stories out of total 580) and 83% of the news stories on RTI (172 stories out of total 206). Regional newspapers, on the other hand, only carry 5% of the news stories on FOI (27 out of 580) and 4% of the news stories on RTI (9 out of 206). Figure 1 visually illustrates these findings, which suggests metropolitan newspapers in Queensland see PSI policy as being newsworthy in its own right.<sup>4</sup>

### *Concepts and language*

Leximancer analysis enabled us to mine the frequency of concepts emerging over the three periods by grouping concepts into two broad categories: *word-like concepts* (e.g. freedom, information, crime, press) and *name-like concepts* (e.g. Government, Queensland, Australia, Bligh<sup>5</sup>).

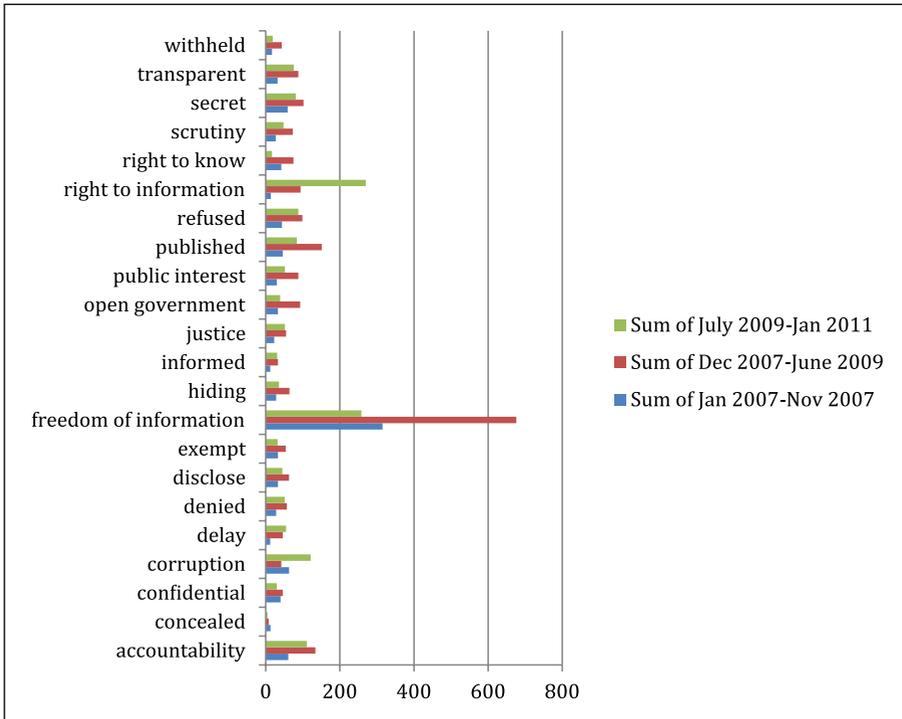
**Table 2.** Coverage of concepts over three time periods.

Concepts	In-story comments count			Total
	January 2007– November 2007	December 2007–June 2009	July 2009–January 2011	
Concealed	13 (50%)	8 (31%)	5 (19%)	26 (100%)
Corruption	63 (28%)	42 (18%)	121 (54%)	226 (100%)
Open government	33 (20%)	93 (56%)	39 (24%)	165 (100%)
Right to information	14 (4%)	94 (25%)	270 (71%)	378 (100%)
Transparent	32 (16%)	88 (45%)	76 (39%)	196 (100%)

**Figure 1.** Distribution of media stories on FOI and RTI across different newspapers.

The exploratory results identified ‘freedom of information’, ‘report’, ‘media’, ‘police’, ‘review’, ‘release’, ‘secrecy’ among the top ranking word-like concepts. The top ranking name-like concepts included ‘Queensland’, ‘Government’, ‘Premier’, ‘Bligh’, ‘Labor’, ‘Cabinet’ and ‘Opposition’. A total of 144 concepts (unedited) were generated across the three time periods. These were manually edited, based on the context in which they occurred and their relevance to the focus of this study. Leximancer also allowed us to query the relationship between concepts and explore the specific texts, where the concepts occurred. For example, the concept ‘government’ was closely related to other concepts<sup>6</sup> including ‘local’, ‘power’, ‘corruption’, ‘change’, ‘policy’, ‘reform’, ‘information’, ‘federal’, ‘political’ and ‘legislation’. By ranking concepts and examining their co-occurrence with other concepts, we identified the 25 most prominent word-like concepts, and 22 of these were used for focused analysis.

The focused analysis revealed increased media interest in issues relating to open government and accessing government information across the three time periods under review. The analysis suggests that, over time, the PSI policy became a salient news issue in its own right for metropolitan and national newspapers. This result emerged by comparing the total number of comments<sup>7</sup> (positive or negative) in news stories referring to each of the 22 concepts across the three time periods – pre-reform, January 2007–November 2007; reform, December 2007–June 2009; and post-reform, July 2009–January 2011 (see Table 2). The example of the concept ‘right to information’ helps illustrate the process. There were a total of 378 comments embedded within stories about this concept. In the pre-reform period (Jan 2007–Nov 2007), there were just 14 in-story



**Figure 2.** Distribution of comments referring to each concept across three time periods.

comments referring to this concept (4%) while the number of stories in this time period accounted for 18% (143 news stories) of the total stories. In the reform period (December 2007–June 2009), however, the number of comments (positive and negative) referring to ‘right to information’ increased to 25% while the number of stories in this time period accounted for 41% of the total news stories (324 stories). In the post-reform period (July 2009–January 2011), the number of comments referring to ‘right to information’ reached 71%, although the number of news stories in this later time period remained the same as the reform period (41%). A similar pattern emerged in relation to the concepts of ‘open government’, particularly during the reform period, and ‘transparent’ (see Table 2).<sup>8</sup>

The Leximancer analysis also revealed a steady decrease over time in in-story comments referring to the concept ‘concealed’ – a concept associated with request-driven FOI. Notably, however, the amount of comments referring to ‘corruption’ increased in the post-reform period, suggesting more open media discussion about this issue (positive or negative). Figure 2 portrays the distribution of in-text comments referring to each concept across three time periods revealing a shift from the language of FOI to RTI over time. The clearest example emerges from use of the terms ‘Right to Information’ and ‘Freedom of Information’. While ‘Right to Information’ was infrequently used in the pre-reform period, its use increased progressively through the reform and post-reform periods. By contrast, the use of the term FOI was used extensively during the pre-reform and reform periods, and it occurred less frequently in the post-reform period.

Further insights into the reporting patterns relating to FOI and RTI emerged by looking at the relationships or co-occurrence between concepts. Leximancer revealed that ‘accountability’ was closely related to ‘open government’ and ‘transparent’; ‘right to information’ was closely related to

**Table 3.** Parent concepts emerging from story text.

Story orientations	Related concepts
Language of the policy	Freedom of Information, Right to Information
Accountability issues	Accountability, corruption, justice, open government, scrutiny, transparent
Accessibility of information	Withheld, concealed, delay, denied, exempt, hiding, informed, published, public interest, refused, corruption
Public rights to access information	Laws, right to information, public interest; right to know, withheld, revealed
Quality of information	Confidential, secret
Specific news issues	Corruption, police, crime, education, health, community safety, transport

‘laws’, ‘public interest’, ‘withheld’ and ‘revealed’. On the other hand, ‘corruption’ was more closely related to ‘police’, ‘concealed’, ‘crime’, as well as ‘accountability’. Analysis of the related text reveals six key ‘orientations’ within FOI and RTI stories (see Table 3) relating to language of the policy, accountability, accessibility of information, the right to access information, the quality of information and specific news issues emerging within key government portfolios (see also section ‘Portfolio focus’).

Leximancer does not include the word ‘*not*’ in identifying concepts and concepts’ co-occurrence. Therefore, we cannot infer positive/negative tone of media coverage simply based on relationship between concepts. For example, that ‘corruption’ co-occurs with ‘police’ could be due to the fact that the police services are frequently involved in investigating cases of corruption. However, we can use concept co-occurrence to categorise these concepts into parent concepts, comprising a range of related concepts.

### Story tone

To further explore how the concepts are used in different contexts to convey favourable or unfavourable meanings and to uncover the subtle nuances of positive or negative tones of the news stories, we conducted discourse analysis of the texts where the key concepts (identified above) and government portfolios were mentioned within a particular context. Across all three periods under investigation, a number of news stories referenced the ‘failure’ or ‘success’ of FOI and RTI requests as part of the news story. Stories were classified as either negative or positive based on whether they referenced the ‘success’ or ‘failure’ of the experience of accessing information under either FOI or RTI. For example, a number of news reports simply referred to information being obtained through RTI requests (see Table 4). In this way, FOI/RTI was depicted as a tool to obtain information. This straightforward mention of FOI/RTI as the source of information was treated as neutral. If an FOI/RTI process was simply reported as the source of the information, the story tone was classified as positive because the PSI policy did not form part of a critical story. RTI and FOI were *not* the story. The agency from which information was sought faced negative exposure around the issue being reported. It was not criticised for the way it provided access to the information sought by journalists.

In other stories, however, the process of accessing information became part of the story (see Table 4). These stories were treated as negative because the PSI policy was reported negatively within the story. Thus, the administering agency faces negative messaging around the issue being

**Table 4.** Story tone and FOI/RTI as a source.

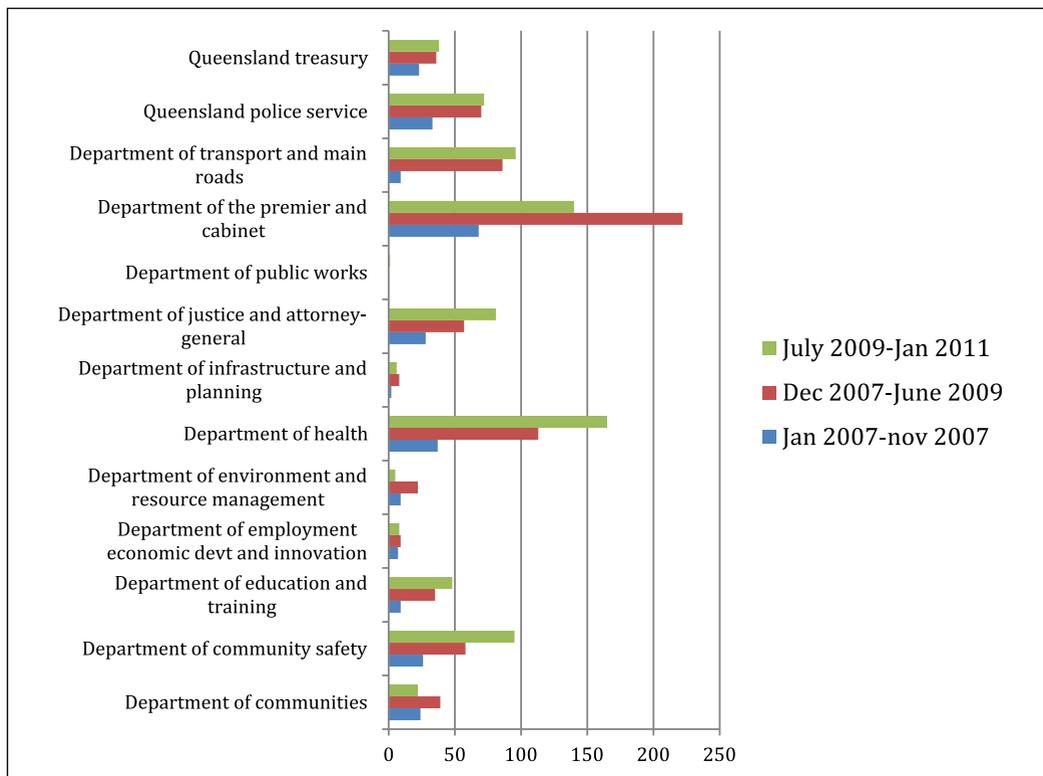
	Using FOI/RTI as an information gathering tool	Highlighting the problematic process of obtaining information
Pre-reform January to November 2007	The Government refused to say whether its gambling regulator found any areas of concern, so <i>The Weekend Australian</i> <b>used freedom of information laws to obtain</b> the commission's secret internal research. <i>The Australian</i> , 28 April 2007	A Freedom of Information request by <i>The Sunday Mail</i> for eight special safety audits into mines across Queensland conducted this year has resulted in the release of only two of the documents. <i>Sunday Mail</i> , 25 November 2007
Reform December 2007 to June 2009	Residents on the island rioted after the release of an autopsy into the death, burning down the police station, watchhouse and the officer-in-charge's residence. <i>The Australian</i> reported that documents it <b>obtained under freedom of information</b> showed Sen-Sgt Hurley lodged a claim with the Queensland Police Service for personal items lost when the three-bedroom residence burned down. <i>Courier Mail</i> , 28 May 2008	The Friends of Noosa recently sought 20 documents relating to forced amalgamations under the Freedom of Information Act. Only three were made available. <i>Courier Mail</i> , 26 January 2008
Post-Reform: July 2009 to Jan 2011	BRISBANE City Council's top flood engineer recommended a decade ago that Wivenhoe Dam be operated differently to ensure a much larger buffer against flooding, <b>documents obtained under Freedom of Information show</b> . <i>The Australian</i> , 20 January 2011	Even the new Right to Information regime - so proudly touted by Ms Bligh as a major accountability reform - has stumbled, with a number of RTI requests for data refused point blank. We all know transparent public administration and the welfare of the people must come before spin. <i>Courier Mail</i> , 30 November 2009

FOI: Freedom of Information; RTI: Right to Information.

reported such as hospital waiting lists and the way the agency (in this case the Department of Health) processed the request for information. Where the RTI/FOI process has been problematic, an agency faces double negative exposure around the specific news issue and the process of accessing PSI. Table 4 provides examples of how this occurred in stories.

Table 4 sets out in the left hand column; the stories where there is reference to obtaining information (notably using the FOI term despite the different time periods) through FOI. Here, the story makes reference to the source of the information. These stories can be contrasted with the examples where the results of the process are incorporated into the story (set out in the right hand column). In the above examples, criticism is directed towards the outcome of the request for information as well as any comment on the issue being reported. This is classified as double negative coverage.

Discourse analysis revealed that stories about the success or failure in obtaining information emerged in each of the time periods under investigation resulting in both positive and negative frames within each of the time periods. This indicates the framing flow is not a simple process of more positive reporting emerging as the policy changed. The framing of stories was strongly affected by the journalists' experience of accessing information, that is, their experience of the FOI/RTI policy. If the request for information was not successful or difficult, negative comments about the process of obtaining information were included in the story.



**Figure 3.** Distribution of comments referring to each portfolio across three time periods.

### Portfolio focus

In addition to the 22 concepts, 14 portfolios of interest (e.g. Department of Police, Department of Transport and Main Roads) were identified for focused analysis.<sup>9</sup> Results indicate a steady increase in in-story comments (positive or negative) referring to ‘Department of Community Safety’, ‘Department of Education and Training’, ‘Department of Health’, ‘Department of Transport and Main Roads’ and ‘Queensland Police Service’. The Department of the Premier and Cabinet featured in a large number of stories (52%) during the period when the RTI reforms were being implemented (December 2007–June 2009). However, in the later period, the coverage decreased. Figure 3 illustrates the distribution of coverage of each portfolio across the three time periods.

Coverage of the different departments changed over the three time periods (see Table 5). For example, in the reporting of Queensland Police Service (QPS), the Leximancer analysis revealed that the QPS was a prominent topic in the news reporting of RTI. The discourse analysis highlighted a shift in how QPS was reported, with the language of pull FOI (i.e. ‘obtaining’ information) to the language of push RTI (i.e. ‘release’ of information). Several examples of the language of ‘push’ replacing the language of ‘pull’ emerged, evidencing the pro-active work of requesting information giving way to the receiving of released information. Stories in the pre-reform period reference the process of accessing information in terms of obtaining information, whereas stories in the post-reform period described documents being ‘released’ and the process of sourcing information is passed over without negative comment.

**Table 5.** Changing tone and sentiments.

Pre-reform	Post-reform
'according to <b>previously secret documents obtained</b> under Freedom of Information laws' <i>Courier Mail</i> 07 March 2007	'documents <b>released</b> under Right to Information laws show the CMC ...' <i>The Australian</i> 28 May 2008
'Police photographic infringement notices <b>obtained</b> by The Courier-Mail under Freedom of Information laws reveal ...' <i>Courier Mail</i> 09 January 2008	'Data <b>released</b> by the Queensland Police Service under Right to Information laws ...' <i>Courier Mail</i> 14 December 2010
'The Australian reported that documents it <b>obtained</b> under freedom of information ...' <i>The Australian</i> 28 May 2008	

This change was not apparent across all portfolios. For example, reporting on Queensland Health experience the 'double negative effect' associated with poor FOI or RTI experiences and criticisms emerging from PSI information. In the two early periods, January 2007–November 2007, December 2007–June 2009, reporting on Queensland Health tended to follow the single negative pattern, where the information was reported without criticism of the FOI/RTI process. In the post-reform period, however, there was a marked change. After the implementation of the RTI policy, Queensland Health faced criticism emerging from information obtained under FOI/RTI and about the journalists' experiences of obtaining that information.<sup>10</sup> Discourse analysis revealed a gradual rise in double negative reports around Queensland Health. For other portfolios, such as Transport and Treasury, double negative reporting was quarantined to a particular time period. For Queensland Health, on the other hand, double negative reporting increased progressively over the entire period of the study, suggesting this portfolio had not adapted and enacted the concept of open government as well as other government agencies.

In terms of framing flow, therefore, individual departments fared differently. Some were represented in the news as embracing the cultural change of RTI, while others were represented as being slower to take on this cultural change. The notable shift in language from 'obtained' to 'released' identified in the QPS stories corresponded with the lack of double negative stories concerning this portfolio. On the other hand, other portfolios – such as Queensland Health – were subject to a rise in double negative reporting, where the process of obtaining information is made a prominent component of the story. This indicates competitive frames were emerging within specific time periods, with the policy change being reported positively in the context of some portfolios and negatively in relation to others.

### *Thematic reframing*

Discourse analysis revealed three different orientations and themes emerging across the pre-reform, reform and post-reform periods, which we described as 'the policy is broken', 'transition' and 'change' (see Table 6). This suggests reports about Queensland's PSI policy reframed over time.

In the period between January 2007 and November 2007 leading up to the FOI policy being replaced, newspaper reports were predominantly negative. They contained negative evaluations of the FOI policy itself and the culture surrounding the policy. Stories were critical of the FOI legislation, which was widely reported as unworkable, undermined by political interference and poorly administered by government agencies. Example 2, set out in Table 6, makes reference to the 'fridge trolley to wheel cartons of documents into the cabinet room'. This metaphor – which is referring to

**Table 6.** Emerging themes in reporting of FOI and RTI.

Theme	Pre-reform January 2007–November 2007	Reform period December 2007–June 2009	Post-reform July 2009–January 2011
	<i>The policy is broken</i>	<i>Transition</i>	Change
Example 1: Newspaper	Access to documents had become so expensive that cost was a major disincentive to the media, the Opposition and businesses seeking information. FOI laws were administered unevenly, with wide variation between departments about the nature and quantity of information that could be released. <i>The Australian</i> , 19 September 2007	Freedom of Information has been an oxymoron. Most individuals don't have the patience or the money to pursue the trail until they obtain the information they want; information they have a right to know that should automatically be in the public domain. <i>Courier Mail</i> , 14 June 2008	She [Anna Bligh] has moved to formalize the relationship between the Government and lobbyist by bringing it out in the open and setting some parameters around it. She has also improved transparency of how the Government operates, bringing in new right to information laws and attacking the culture of secrecy that has so afflicted the state's bureaucracy. <i>Courier Mail</i> , 30 September 2009
Example 2: Newspaper	Labor governments and their conservative predecessors have routinely foiled FOI laws in Queensland by using cabinet to exempt contentious documents from public scrutiny for 30 years. One functionary was authorised to buy a <b>fridge-trolley</b> to wheel cartons of documents into the cabinet room. <i>The Australian</i> , 20 September 2007	Solomon and his co-panelists ... are ... right to spell out ... a single overarching theme: the need to move FOI from the existing pull model to a push model, where government routinely and proactively releases government information without the need to make an FOI request. It's a sentiment reflected in recommendation 138 which urges a new law called the Right to Information Act. <i>Courier Mail</i> , 17 June 2008	Some larger departments are experiencing up to a threefold increase in new RTI and privacy applications compared with workloads under the old freedom of information legislation. <i>Courier Mail</i> , 24 June 2010

the then Labour Government's over-reliance of the Cabinet document exception so much so that they needed a fridge trolley to move the documents – emerged frequently in news reports. The 'fridge trolley' metaphor was and remains a powerful symbol of all that was wrong with the 1992 FOI regime in terms of both policy failure and political interference – in this sense the policy was broken. Given the recurrence of these negative sentiments, the theme emerging during this phase was described as 'the policy is broken'.

The reform period, between December 2007 and June 2009, covered the ending of the FOI policy and the implementation of the new RTI policy. The overall theme of this period is about transition from the old policy to the promise of the new policy. This is reflected, for example, in the stories (set out in Table 6) where there is a temporal pivot from the past to the future. In this period, stories shift from being critical of the past regime to the promise of a new policy designed to promote open government. The extracts, set out in Table 6, are examples of how the negative references to the past are giving way to a more optimistic view of the future. Overall, newspaper reporting during this period tended to focus on the development and implementation of the new policy that was keenly anticipated. The stories in this period revealed a more positive outlook with some optimistic reports, suggesting a thematic reframing from the policy being broken to a policy in 'transition'.

In the post-reform period, from July 2009 to January 2011, references to FOI in Queensland became sparse. As well as a noticeable shift in reports using the language of RTI, we discovered a qualitative and quantitative shift in how RTI is reported, with more optimistic sentiments emerging around the operational culture under the new RTI policy. The examples, set out in Table 6, characterise the reporting during this period. The third period (July 2009–January 2011) newspaper reports tended to focus on 'change'.

## **Conclusion**

Our study findings confirm that newspapers play an important role in publishing policies and promoting policy innovation (Newmark, 2002; Rogers and Shoemaker, 1971). Our study suggests, however, that this role is limited to metropolitan and national newspapers. PSI policy did not seem to be a salient news issue for regional newspapers. For metropolitan and national newspapers, the news value of PSI policy remained salient beyond the reform period particularly when agencies failed to embrace a culture of openness envisioned as part of the PSI reforms.

Significant changes in the way FOI and RTI were reported across the three time periods under investigation were also identified, as PSI policy became a news item in its own right. These changes included the terminology used to describe the policy, the concepts reported, the tone of reports, the level of cultural change within different portfolios and in terms of the key organising themes emerging from the stories. The study also revealed that newspaper stories about Queensland's PSI policy regime were reframed over time as the 2009 PSI policy reforms were implemented.

The role of newspaper journalists in policy transfer is evidenced through the language used in newspaper reports across the transition from FOI to RTI. Language used to describe the process of accessing government information shifted from documents being obtained through formal FOI requests to PSI being released administratively (see Table 5).

More interestingly, however, discourse analysis revealed the tone of reports changed over time. In the pre-reform period, reporting was very negative. In the transition and post-reform periods, reporting became more positive.

In terms of the overall orientation and organising theme of stories across the different periods, our study revealed that negative stories describing the 1992 policy as 'broken' changed to neutral stories about the transition then transformed into stories which depicted a sentiment of optimism

about the policy change. This trend suggests that journalists are more optimistic about the accessibility of government information under the new regime.

But, the framing flow was not consistent, with competing frames emerging in the later periods under review. This was particularly evident in the focused analysis of portfolios indicating this reframing of media sentiment is not consistent across all government agencies, with negative stories about the RTI experience emerging in portfolios like health, education and communities, where tensions between privacy and openness are at the forefront of information management practices. Where the journalists' experience of accessing information was negative, we identified what has been described as a 'double negative effect', where stories reported negative information while being highly critical of the process of accessing information. This indicates that some portfolios were seen as more advanced in cultural change than others. The perceived slowness in effecting cultural change appeared to increase the risk of double negative reporting. Consequently, agencies that failed to adequately resource and support RTI's transparency agenda were at risk of continued negative reporting.

Competitive news frames in the post-reform period highlight the nexus between media coverage and PSI policy transfer. Our analysis suggests that at the time this research was undertaken, the 2009 reforms had not resulted in a complete policy transfer across all portfolios. Diffusion appears to be slow and patchy across different portfolios. This is not surprising given the complexity of many government agencies that face inherent challenges in implementing RTI reforms because of the need to balance openness with individual privacy.

Entrenched practices of 15 years under push model FOI pose further obstacles to policy transfer. The slow implementation of RTI policy reform renders the policy vulnerable to 'the most recent frame' emerging within media reports. According to prior studies (see Chong and Druckman, 2008; Lecheler and de Vreese, 2013), negative frames – emerging from the poor performance of a small number of portfolios – could cast the whole policy in a negative light. This highlights the power of the media in keeping governments accountable for PSI policy. In their study of the role of newspapers in policy diffusion, Makse and Volden (2011) observed that 'complex policies that are not compatible with past practices and whose effects are not easily observed are unlikely to diffuse broadly' (p. 109). Our findings tend to support this view.

In conclusion, our study exposes the complex role played by journalists in Queensland's access to information policy reform process. PSI policy appears to have news value at state and national levels; however, regional newspapers had little interest in covering this issue. Reporting of PSI policy was reframed to a more optimistic outlook in the post-reform period. Competing frames emerged in the post-reform period, which could overshadow optimism surrounding the PSI policy reforms as a reporter's negative experience of accessing information forms part of the news story (see Chong and Druckman, 2008; Lecheler and de Vreese, 2013). This double negative coverage is continuing. For example, the *Courier Mail* was scathing of Queensland Health's handling of a request for information:

[We request] documents which review in-unit deaths in emergency departments during the period 1 July 2008 to 30 June 2009. With this Right to Information application, *The Courier-Mail* sparked a chain of events that would showcase all that is rotten with Queensland Health's administration. (See 'When right to information is a sick joke', *The Courier Mail*, 7 April 2011)

This story prompted one reader to comment, 'The refusal to release the information quickly only makes it more of a story. It adds credence to the idea that the department has something to hide'. As recently as 2016, the journalistic experience of RTI hit the headlines when *The Courier Mail* used this process to access recordings and documents of Queensland's former chief justice:

Right to Information applications by the *Courier-Mail* newspaper were initially denied, even though they pertained directly to the workings of our judiciary.

But thanks to the real hero in this saga, Right to Information Commissioner Clare Smith, the public will see and hear the material. (Fynes-Clinton, 29 June, 2016)

These competing frames again highlight the disconnection between agency practices and the policy, suggesting PSI policy diffusion is patchy at best.

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### Notes

1. The term public sector information describes data, information or content that is generated, collected, or funded by or for the government or public institutions. It covers information that is reproduced and disseminated by these bodies.
2. These periods cover different lengths of time. These variations were taken into account in our analysis. The aim of this research was to identify trends and patterns across periods rather than track numerical change; therefore, the difference in time periods did not affect the validity of findings which were subjected to three levels of analysis.
3. The software generates a ranked list of important concepts based on word frequency and co-occurrence usage, then statistically develops a thesaurus comprising concepts. Sentences are tagged as containing a concept if the accumulated evidence (the sum of the weights of the keywords found) is above a set threshold.
4. This issue will be explored in a separate paper that is focused on internal and external influences on frame and agenda setting.
5. Anna Bligh was Premier of Queensland from 2007 to 2012; she initiated the review, which resulted in sweeping changes to the state's PSI policy.
6. These concepts were ranked in order of likelihood of occurrence.
7. By comments, we are referring to the statements relating to the policy embedded within the story.
8. It needs to be noted that, while the increased media coverage on 'open government' and 'transparency' may highlight the prominence of the issues, frequency of coverage does not address the question of tone, that is, whether those issues are reported in a positive or negative way.
9. These were manually entered in the Leximancer programme (portfolios were treated as name-like concepts in Leximancer). All previous names of government departments were used to seed the current name.
10. Examples include the following:

Despite *The Courier-Mail* agreeing to de-identify the material, Queensland Health denied access to all 234 pages of a Right to Information request. (*Courier Mail*, 04 December 2009)

It has produced some statistics only after being prodded by media questioning and its defiance of the Information Commissioner instructing it to release key Right to Information data is appalling. (*Courier Mail*, 12 August 2010)

Queensland Health continues to fight torrid battles with this newspaper over Right to Information matters. (*Courier Mail*, 15 September 2010)

An RTI search revealed the department had conjured a series of options that would enable it to hide information from RTI applicants and, therefore, the people of Queensland. (*Courier Mail*, 06 December 2010)

Last week, it was revealed how Queensland Health took special steps to block this newspaper's 2009 Right to Information request for details of deaths in four major Queensland hospital emergency departments. (*Courier Mail* 11 December 2010)

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