OPEN RESEARCH CASE STUDY

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Annotating for Transparent Inquiry: Making Archival Documents Accessible

Historical or political science research using primary source evidence faces a major barrier to transparency and replicability: the archival documents used are often difficult to access. The Annotation for Transparent Inquiry Initiative developed a digital overlay tool that enables researchers to create enhanced annotations in articles and link to digital copies of archival sources in trusted repositories. Dr Joseph O'Mahoney was involved in the project to pilot this tool and has published a practical guide based on his experience.

Whereas citations to journal articles and, increasingly, books can usually allow a reader to check evidence within minutes, citations to archival documents can require months or years to verify, if it is even ever possible. This is a serious problem for qualitative and multi-method research in my field, international relations and the study of foreign policy decision-making, which relies heavily on archival documentary evidence.

I recently took part in a project to pilot technology developed to address this problem. I wrote an article which included an analysis of foreign policy decisions regarding the international recognition of the new state of Bangladesh after the 1971 India-Pakistan war.[1] In the article, I refer to many primary documents, including ones sourced from the UK National Archives. Previously, a reader would either have had to take my word for the contents of the documents or make their own trip to Kew, which is mostly infeasible.

But an initiative run by the Qualitative Data Repository at the Center for Qualitative and Multi-Method Inquiry at Syracuse University, USA, allows for instant access to the original documents. The Annotation for Transparent Inquiry (ATI) initiative uses the Open Source Hypothesis software to allow annotations to be added to articles. As ATI states, these annotations:

> include 'analytic notes' discussing data generation and analysis, excerpts from data sources, and links to those sources stored in trusted digital repositories. Readers are able to view annotations immediately alongside the main text, removing the need to jump to footnotes or separate appendices. Sharing the data sources via a secure repository ensures that they are findable, accessible, interoperable, reusable, and preserved for the long term.[2]

My paper was one of the pilot cohort to be annotated using this software. While reading the article, a reader can click on an annotation and view a longer excerpt as well as a more detailed and informative citation – for example, including the full names and titles of the sender and receiver of a telegram. They can also click through to access a PDF of the original archival document that I scanned from the National Archives.

The benefits for replicability are clear. Not only is there now instant proof of the existence of the documentary evidence, but the reader can also analyse or interpret the documents in order to check the reliability of my analysis. Further, the documents are available for use by other researchers.

With these annotations, readers can now click to get full original document text, a more informative and detailed citation, an analytic note with comment on the interpretation of the document, and a PDF scan of the original archival document.

Hungary, this was their only stated concern. However, many states conditioned their recognition decision on an action related to Indian troop withdrawal and gave three different types of reasons for doing so. States also differed in the extent of troop withdrawal they required before recognition. See Table 2 for a full list of states, their stated reason for conditioning recognition on withdrawal (if any can be identified), and what recognition was conditioned on (whether actual withdrawal or a proxy).

The first type of reason, opposition to condoning or legitimizing aggression, is labeled as "Non-aggression." A good example comes from Mexican Foreign Minister Emilio Óscar Rabasa who reported that the Mexican president had decided not to recognize Bangladesh because, "since the Mexicans, like many Latin Americans, refuse to condone territorial aggrandizement as a result of war, they would prefer to wait on the withdrawal of Indian troops as the sign of true independence."[90]

This statement also appeals to "true independence." Self-determination is another important value expressed by the Mexican representative and is the second type of reason commonly appealed to as justifying recognition as Bangladesh. For

88. See Figure 2.
89. A frequent concern was that states had to recognize in a group, or on the same day as multiple other states. However, even allowing for minor coordination problems, this in and of itself cannot explain the length of time taken to make recognition decisions and declarations.
90. Cable from Hope, 16 January 1972, FCO 37/1020.

QDR ⚑ CambridgeCore/ATI — Jan 31

they would prefer to wait on the withdrawal of Indian troops as the sign of true independence."

Annotation for Transparent Inquiry (ATI)

Full Citation: Sir Peter Hope, UK Ambassador to Mexico, a confidential telegram from Hope to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 26 January 1972. Folder 37/1020 of the FCO Archives held at the National Archives at Kew, UK.

Source Excerpt: Rabasa said that, since the Mexicans, like many Latin Americans, refuse to condone territorial aggrandizement as a result of war, they would prefer to wait on the withdrawal of Indian troops as the sign of true independence.

Analytic Note: This is a confidential telegram from UK Ambassador to Mexico Sir Peter Hope to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office of 26 January, 1972, from folder 37/1020 of the FCO Archives held at the National Archives at Kew, UK. This excerpt shows that the Mexican Foreign Minister, Emilio Oscar Rabasa, gave as a reason for the Mexican President's decision not to recognize Bangladesh, that they did not want to condone territorial aggrandizement as a result of war until Indian troops had been withdrawn. The telegram also indicates that this reason and another reason, i.e. that Mujib's assumption of several cabinet portfolios cast doubt on the fact that his government had been elected by the people, were the only two reasons cited by the Mexican government.

Data Source: https://data.beta.qdr.org/api/access/datafile/2529?key=13e4c93f-1172-4d53-8a07-6f2651e5da97

Sample annotation, showing the full citation, the source excerpt, the analytic note, and a link to the PDF of the original document.

Participating in the project has led to changes in my research practices. Previously I had not been assiduous in assigning unique identifiers to the digital photos I had taken of the documents, which led to some confusion when I went back to annotate the paper later. I am now much more systematic in how I approach collecting and cataloguing such qualitative documentary evidence so that it can be more easily shared through ATI.

In order to help other researchers make use of this innovative technology that enhances the transparency, replicability, and credibility of qualitative research, I have published an Open Access practical introduction to the process.[3]

Open at a glance

- Research based on archival documents often lacks transparency because source materials are difficult to access
- The Annotation for Transparent Inquiry initiative provides an annotation overlay to an article that links to a digital repository containing images of the archive sources
- This solution enhances research transparency, the reproducibility of its analyses, and makes valuable material freely available for other scholars to use

ⓘ For more information, please contact:

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References and further information

1. O'Mahoney, J. (2017). Making the Real: Rhetorical Adduction and the Bangladesh Liberation War. *International Organization* 71(2): 317–48. **https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818317000054**
2. Making qualitative research more transparent: announcing the Annotation for Transparent Inquiry (ATI) Initiative. Blog post. **https://qdr.syr.edu/qdr-blog/making-qualitative-research-more-transparent**
3. O'Mahoney, J. (2021). A Practical Introduction to Annotating for Transparent Inquiry in Qualitative Research. *Qualitative and Multi-Method Research* 19(1): 19-23. **https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5495563**