

Qualitative Analysis of Online News Media Articles to Explore the Mobilization of Megaproject Narratives

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Sage Research Methods: Doing Research Online

Qualitative Analysis of Online News Media Articles to Explore the Mobilization of Megaproject Narratives

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Abstract

Megaprojects combine multiple external stakeholders, and a common narrative is essential to drive the project among often conflicting objectives. The research project considers the single in-depth qualitative case study of the High Speed Two (HS2) megaproject in the UK to explore how narratives are mobilized through narrative instruments and processes. Since the focus is on narratives, 113 online news articles on the megaproject are systematically studied. A qualitative analysis using open codes and axial codes is employed to understand the narrative instruments and processes. The “talk the walk” strategy to improve the rigor in qualitative research is described. The use of power quotes and proof quotes to reduce the word count while not compromising on the trustworthiness of qualitative research is explained. Finally, the case offers guidelines on the use of online naturalistic data such as digital news media data to explore project management practice in the 21st century.



Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case study, readers should be able to:

- Use single in-depth case studies to examine constructs and the relation between them
- Identify naturally occurring data to address research questions
- Present research through power quotes and proof quotes
- Use the “talk the walk” strategy to increase qualitative rigor

Project Overview and Context

Megaprojects are projects of a significant cost, typically more than USD 1 billion, that attract a high level of public attention or political interest because of their substantial impact on the community, environment, and state budgets ([Söderlund et al., 2017](#)). These projects create social, political, and environmental unrest in the society and often impact external stakeholders such as owners of the land from whom the land is acquired, those who are inconvenienced by the construction noises, vibrations, diversions, etc., and those who stand to benefit from the project improving the services ([Ninan et al., 2022](#)). In contrast to internal stakeholders, such

as the contractor building the project who have a contractual relationship with the client, external stakeholders do not have a such contractual relationship with the project ([Winch et al., 2007](#)). Often the vested interest of each external stakeholder is different from those of the project and that of other external stakeholders. Ignoring the needs and expectations of the external stakeholders can generate social unrest or community resistance through collective action against the project through petitions, protests, picketing, vandalism, and can result in even the cancellation of the project ([van den Ende & van Marrewijk, 2019](#)). Hence, there is a need to successfully manage external stakeholders to make the best use of the effort, time, and resources invested in the megaproject.

In situations such as in the case of external stakeholder management in megaprojects where there are multiple stakeholders with different objectives, there is a need to achieve strategic convergence among these often conflicting objectives ([Denis et al., 2007](#)). A common narrative, for instance of the need for the project or the benefits from the project is essential to drive the project among these conflicting goals. After all, narratives help create a common project identity by bringing plausibility and coherence to disparate experiences ([Sergeeva & Winch, 2020](#); [Vaara & Tienari, 2011](#)). The aim of the research project is to empirically explore the narrative instruments and narrative processes and show how they are used together to mobilize narratives in megaproject settings. The two research questions are: (1) How narrative instruments help in mobilizing megaproject narratives for external stakeholders, and (2) How narrative processes help in mobilizing megaproject narratives for external stakeholders.



Section Summary

- Megaprojects are projects which cost more than USD 1 billion and attract a high level of public attention.
- External stakeholders in megaprojects can influence the project and have no formal contractual relationship with the project.
- A common narrative is essential to drive the project among these conflicting goals.

Research Design

We use a qualitative single in-depth case study approach to address our research questions. Qualitative re-

search enables a rich understanding of people's lived experiences and generates a detailed and empathetic understanding of these experiences ([Pink et al., 2010](#)). A single in-depth case study research studies the phenomena within a single context to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events ([Yin, 1984](#)). It aims to optimize understanding of some concepts, such as narrative instruments and narrative processes, and to explore the relation between them. They enable an exploration of concepts within the case rather than to generalize beyond it ([Stake, 2005](#)).

We selected news media articles as the data source for our study on narratives in infrastructure projects due to four reasons. First, considerable media interest arises in infrastructure projects because of their enormous budgets and considerable social impact ([van Marrewijk et al., 2008](#)). These media discourses can be analyzed to identify and understand all discourses about the project from different perspectives ([Ninan & Sergeeva, 2021](#)). Second, news media play a large role in perpetuating public perceptions through images, hyperbolic reportage, and reporting comments from public officials ([Morehouse & Sonnett, 2010](#)). Much of social life in the modern society is mediated by written texts of different kinds such as news media articles ([Atkinson & Coffey, 1997](#)). From a narrative perspective, a study of the reportage is recommended to identify coherent and competing narratives that consciously perform and project the future ([Dalpiaz & Di Stefano, 2018](#)). Thus, we see news media as sites where different stakeholders negotiate, oppose, or resist dominant ideologies ([Hall, 1980](#)). Third, data from news articles are a form of naturally occurring data. These data arise without a researcher intervening directly with a group of respondents ([Silverman, 2001](#)) and hence do not have biases due to prodding questions from the researcher during the data collection stage as with interviews or questionnaires ([Ninan, 2020](#)). Thus, responses inscribed in the documentary sources are not shaped by the researcher's agenda nor influenced by the relationship between the researcher and researched ([Platt, 1981](#)). In contrast to interviews as "data got up" by the researcher, news articles and other documentary evidences are "data that are" ([Potter, 2002](#)). Finally, news articles are captured and stored in databases and do not rely on the recollection of events by the respondents to an interview ([Ninan, 2020](#)). This allowed us to understand what happened during the initial stages of a project.

We chose to study the High Speed Two (HS2) megaproject in the United Kingdom. The megaproject is delivered in multi-phases and plans to connect the city centers of London, Birmingham, Manchester, and Leeds with 345 miles of new high-speed railway track. The mega project aims to bring UK cities closer to each other by effectively shrinking the distance and time taken to travel between them. The first phase of the megaproject intends to connect London and Birmingham with a 140-mile-high speed rail line to reduce the travel time between the two cities to 45 min at a cost of 30 billion pounds. The first phase was proposed in 2009 and is

scheduled to be operational in 2026. We chose to study the megaproject due to multiple theoretical reasons. First, the megaproject had very active resistance from the external stakeholders along the route of the high-speed rail because they saw only the demerits of noise and vibrations with no visible benefits as the project passed through their lands with no nearby stoppages. These stakeholders even campaigned for their councils to invest huge sums of money in opposing the construction of the project. Second, to counter this massive opposition, the project was very active in trying to create a reputation for the megaproject and sought to recruit proactive press officers and digital media advisors for managing the project's reputation. Finally, the HS2 megaproject drew plenty of media attention similar to other megaprojects ([Strauch et al., 2015](#), [van Marrewijk et al., 2008](#)). Hence, the project was selected for theoretical reasons such as the need for creating a narrative, the presence of narrative instruments and narrative processes, and the accessibility of retrospective data.

We chose to study the early stages of the project including events such as the first announcement of the project in 2009, the community consultation of the project in 2011, the green light for the project from the government in 2012, and the judicial review of the consultation process of the project in 2012. We restricted our study to this period as our aim was to study the narrative instruments and processes in the project and not to trace all the events relating to the project in its lifecycle.



Section Summary

- Single case studies are useful to optimize understanding of some concepts and the relation between them. They enable an exploration of concepts within the case.
- Online news articles are captured and stored in databases and do not rely on the recollection of events by the respondents to an interview.
- High-speed rail projects had very active resistance because protesters only have demerits of noise and vibrations with no benefit of nearby stoppages.

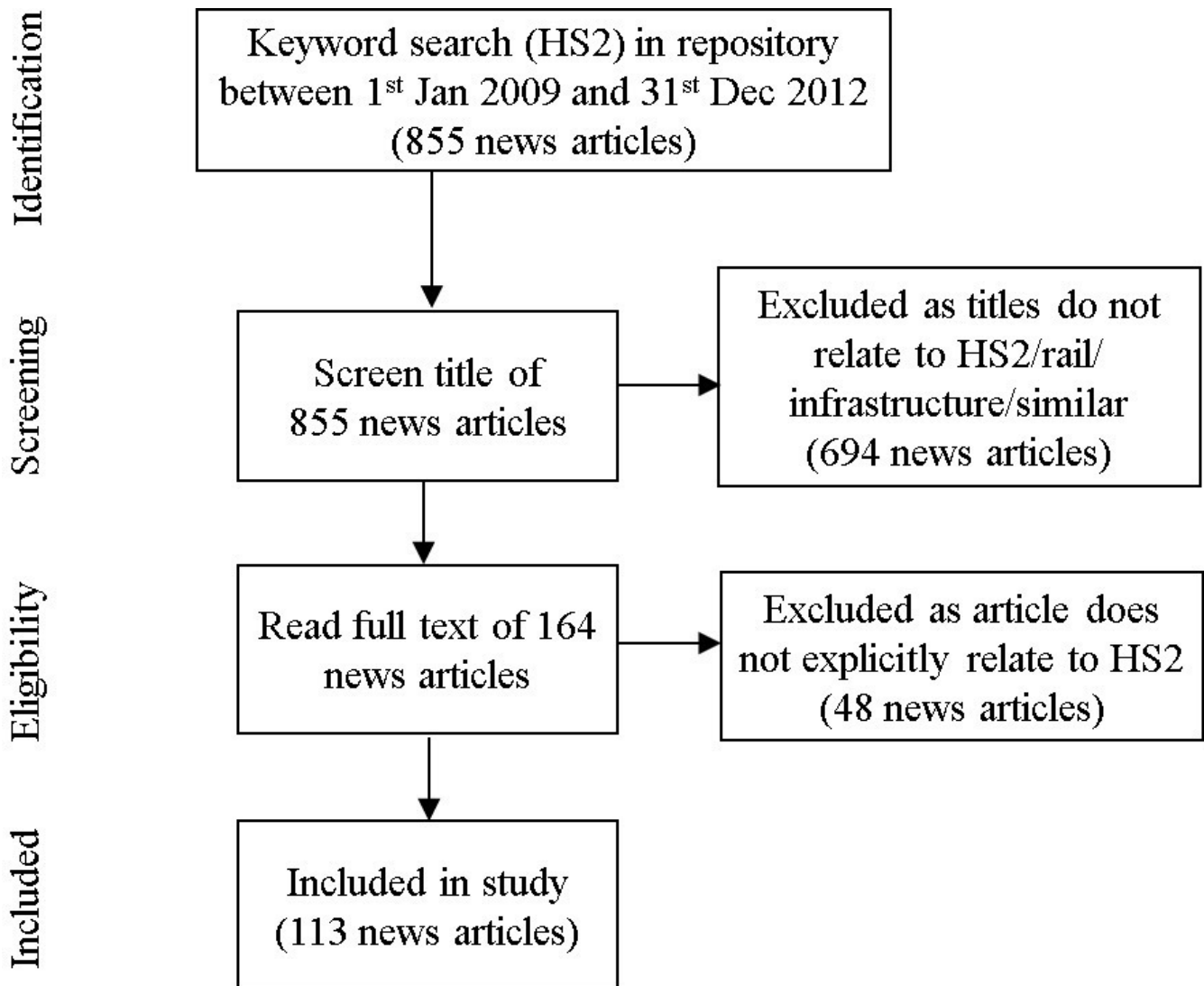
Research Practicalities

The news articles for the study were collected through a keyword search in the “google news” repository. Google news is one of the major aggregators of news on the web and is used as a scholarly source for research ([Bandari et al., 2012](#)). With the use of a news aggregator, we reduced the bias that would be created

from the study of news from only one media outlet. Thus, we were able to include news articles from The Telegraph, British Broadcasting Company, Daily Mail, Bucks Herald, Independent, Financial times, etc., among others.

We used the keyword “HS2” to search for news articles relating to the project in between 1st January 2009 and 31st December 2012. A total of 855 news articles were retrieved from the search. We manually screened the title of each news article to identify whether the article related to HS2, rail, infrastructure, or anything similar. There were 694 news articles that did not relate to HS2 but had the keyword “HS2” within them as hyperlinks to other HS2 news articles. These were excluded. Following this, we went through the text of the remaining 161 news articles and excluded 48 news articles that did not explicitly relate to the HS2. The remaining 113 news articles were included in this study. [Figure 1](#) summarizes the process of inclusion and exclusion of news articles relating to the HS2 project.

Figure 1. Process of inclusion and exclusion of news articles relating to HS2.

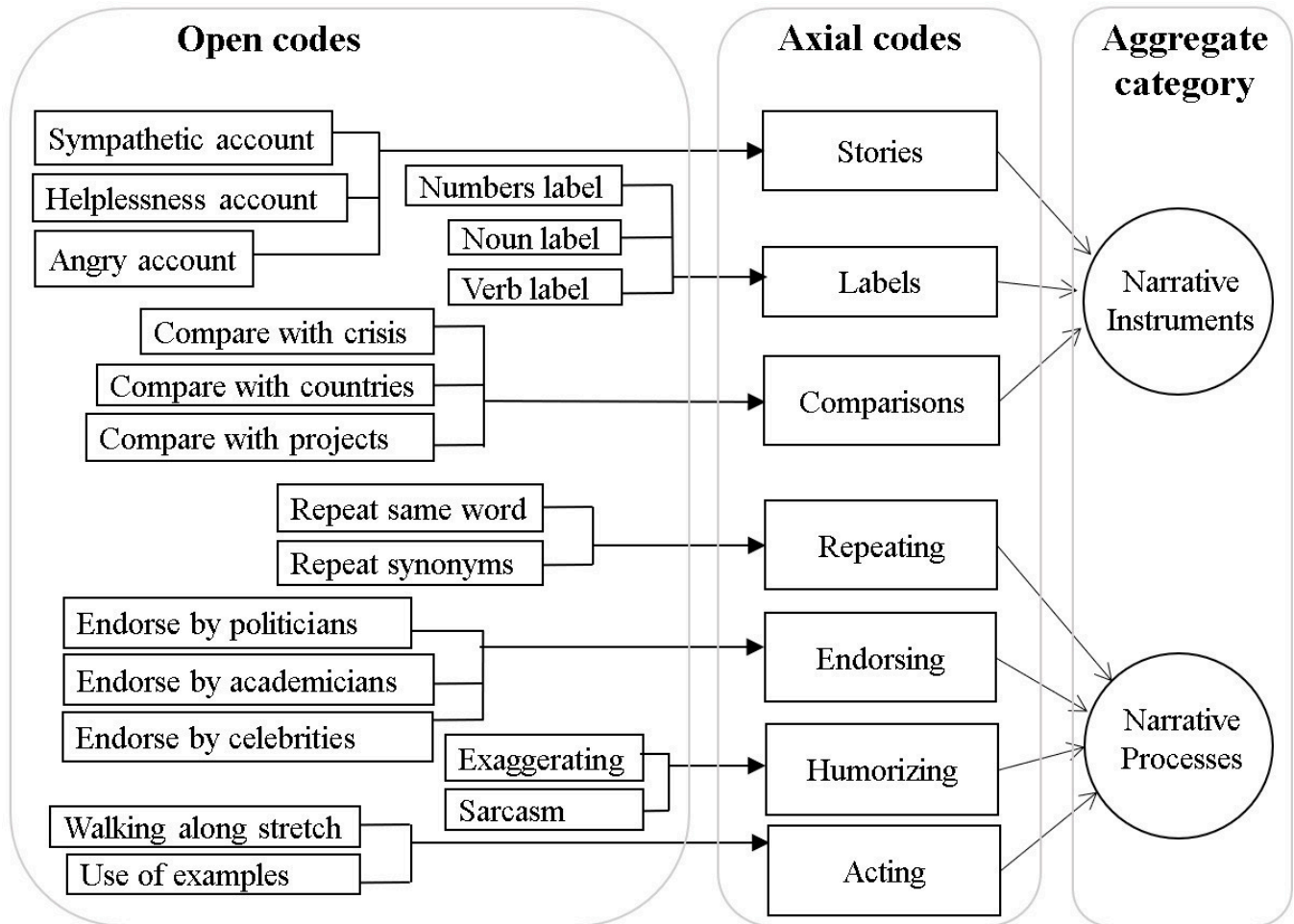


We thus selected 113 news articles from different newspaper agencies such as the Telegraph (32 news articles), British Broadcasting Company (29 news articles), Daily Mail (7 news articles), and Bucks Herald (5 news articles). Other newspaper agencies such as the Independent, Financial times, etc., that had less than 4 articles each were also considered for the study. Within the news article, we studied the quotations or statements from the official spokesperson of the project, politicians, or resistance group to capture the naturally occurring data rather than interpretations by the journalists, reporters, and editors of the article. We tried to identify and understand the narrative instrument and narrative process employed in these statements. We also studied the 612 comments by readers below the selected 113 news articles. The comments were studied

to understand the community's response to the news article.

For qualitative analysis, this research used open coding of the data collected from news articles to arrive at theoretical constructs and thereby build theory. For this, the research employed manual coding as automatic methods could create a barrier to understanding ([Kozinets et al., 2014](#)). The data analysis was done in parallel with data collection, and with each new data point, the existing codes were revised. The analysis was done mainly in an inductive manner ([Wodak, 2004](#)) with some abductive reasoning as the researcher went back and forth between theory and empirical data to create an increasingly elaborate understanding of instruments and processes for mobilizing narratives. For example, literature records the process of repetition for stories ([Dailey & Browning, 2014](#)), however, we found empirical data on the repetition for stories, labels, and comparisons. Thus, we moved back and forth between theory and data. Such moving back and forth between theory and data helped us to anchor the data in the literature and extend it to sharpen generalizability, improve construct definition, and raise the theoretical level following the guidance of [Eisenhardt \(1989\)](#). The coding pattern employed is shown in [Figure 2](#).

Figure 2. Coding pattern.



From the open coding, we created codes such as “sympathetic account,” “helplessness account,” and “angry account.” We then employed axial coding and grouped these as “stories.” Abstracting codes from instances to categories can make the theory generalizable. The categories or codes emerged from the data and were not predetermined. For example, when there were claims of HS2 creating 10,000 jobs, we initially coded it as belonging to the narrative instrument “numbers,” as numbers were used as an instrument to describe the number of jobs created. Subsequently, when HS2 was claimed to be fast, frequent, and revolutionary transport system, we noted that the project is being labeled to a well-established category, and therefore, we modified the narrative instrument category from “numbers” to “labels.” Thus, multiple revisions were carried out such that the categories extracted remain exclusive and collectively exhaustive (Golden-Biddle & Locke, 1997). When the same labels were highlighted by the Prime Minister, we categorized it as belonging to the narrative

process “endorsing” as the narrative instrument “labels” was used in a particular narrative process “endorsing.” Careful and repeated readings are important because some constructs often are not obvious until the second or third reading ([Stegar, 2007](#)).



Section Summary

- Google news repository reduces the bias of news from only one media outlet and considers multiple news media.
- Focus on quotations or statements reported in news articles can reduce bias of interpretations by the editors of the article.
- Abstracting codes from instances to categories can make the theory generalizable.

Method in Action

Our qualitative research method involved generating theory through open codes and axial codes from the multiple instances of the use of narratives observed in the news articles. We got a lot of instances from the news articles and it was challenging to discuss them in the limited space requirement of journals. Our initial draft of the manuscript was over 20,000 words. One strategy advised by [Cloutier and Ravasi \(2021\)](#) to reduce the word count at the same time not compensating for the trustworthiness of qualitative research is to use tabular displays such that we can represent more data. [Pratt \(2008\)](#) suggests differentiating between “power quotes” and “proof quotes” while presenting qualitative research. Following the suggestion, we discussed the concise and insightful “power quotes” in the body of the article to show the essence of the category while a few more instances and quotes are displayed in tables as “proof quotes” to show the prevalence of the category. For example, in one instance the promoters of the project called the consultation process as the “largest” ever undertaken by the government as highlighted below,

“This was one of the largest consultations ever undertaken by a government with over 30 events along the line of route attended by tens of thousands of people (Quoted from the news article ‘Fury for homeowners booted out to make room for a high-speed rail link...but minister behind it halted a similar project in his own back yard’ dated 13 November 2011)”

We then anchor the particular instance in data by highlighting the use of similar labels in other works, such as being “innovative” or “largest” used by [Sergeeva and Winch \(2020\)](#) and [Ninan \(2020\)](#). Chreim (2005) records that clichéd labels such as “innovation,” “ability to change,” and “commitment of employees” are effective in creating organizational change. Following this, other instances are only shown in the table (e.g., [Table 1](#)) and not discussed in the text to save space.

Table 1. Proof quotes for labels.

Instances	Proof quotes
Business case labeled as flawed	“HS2 isn't green, the business case is flawed, and curing the north-south divide is pure fantasy (Quoted from the news article 'Middle England on the march as a revolt over 250mph rail link grows' dated 14 Nov 2010)”
Transport secretary labeled the people resisting as implacably opposed and not up for negotiations	“There is a hard core who are absolutely implacably opposed. Quite frankly I am not going to shift those (Quoted from the news article 'Philip Hammond high speed rail will be a pleasant surprise for many' dated 11 Dec 2010)”
Protesters labeled as wealthy few	“It is a worry when a very small group of people from a tiny slither of one of the wealthiest areas in the country seek to thwart a major infrastructure project that would be of huge benefit to the whole country and that was a manifesto promise of all three main parties (Quoted from the news article 'Nimbys' begin struggle over High Speed 2' dated 18 April 2011)”

Thus, we were able to reduce the word count to 12,000 and not compromise on the trustworthiness of qualitative research by discussing the power quotes and displaying proof quotes in tables.

One of the reviewers of our paper highlighted that social media also includes narratives and considering it along with news articles can offer interesting insights. We saw merit in the suggestion, however, felt that this would increase the scope of the research and dilute the findings of the current study. So, we responded that future studies could look at social media while this study is limited to news articles alone. We added this as a limitation of our study and even highlighted a scope of future research by exploring media such as TV, social media, community meetings, etc. to study how narrative instruments and processes vary in these channels. We acknowledged that it is through the continuous interaction of narratives at multiple levels and mediums that the meaning is constructed, and a shared vision is achieved.



Section Summary

- Power quotes can be used to discuss categories and proof quotes to show the prevalence of the category.
- Anchoring findings on similar examples in literature can increase validity of findings.
- Increasing the scope of research could dilute the findings of the current study.

Practical Lessons Learned

Researchers have often struggled to understand and assess quality in part because there are no obvious rules in qualitative research ([Pratt, 2008](#)). A strategy to increase rigor in qualitative research is “talk the walk” where the researcher lists all the specific research actions taken, carefully relaying them to the reader so that they can appreciate the logic and purpose of these actions in the context of the specific case study ([Gibbert & Ruigrok, 2010](#)). We tried to follow this recommendation by listing the reasons for selecting news media data in this research, the steps followed in selecting the news articles, the analysis approach, etc. This strategy helps us to justify the selected naturalistic data methodology and appreciate the value of the data analyzed. In addition, an “audit trail” with evidence of the textual source is important for documentary research ([Platt, 1981](#)).

Data compiled from digital sources can be categorized as “new ways of seeing” ([Bansal et al., 2018](#)) and it can give significant insights into the practice of management in organizations which can inform how they can be managed better. As more work migrates online, many interactions concerning those work are only in the digital environment. We feel that we have adopted this new way of collecting and analyzing the digital data and have contributed to the methodology of management and social science research. Researchers should seek data from places where the action is happening and online news articles and social media posts are important avenues to explore practice in this modern digital era ([Mathur et al., 2021](#); [Ninan & Sergeeva, 2021](#)). After all, the internet is a “laboratory for the social sciences” as multiple human interactions occur in these digital habitats ([Hallett & Barber, 2014](#)). Most of this data is stored digitally, can be retrieved over time, and can therefore supplement any other data gathered by the researcher during the period of physical observation. We have archived the data collected in this research on a word file and submitted it to the funder of the

research (ESRC) as per funding guidelines.

We have put a lot of effort and time into designing the research questions that guided the data analysis. The researcher must ask the right research question while pursuing online naturalistic data. If the researcher asks “what happened in this project,” then news articles are treated as a repository of events that occurred in the project, and the data retrieved is secondary data. For example, [Matinheikki et al. \(2018\)](#) use news articles to triangulate the data from interviews. In contrast, if the researcher asks “how interactions between different stakeholders occur in news articles,” then news articles are treated as a place where these interactions can be observed, and the data retrieved is primary data. For example, in this case study, we use news articles to understand how narratives are mobilized by different stakeholders in megaprojects. Thus, we focus on an examination of what is, and what is not, said in the news articles ([Scott, 1990](#)). As [Speer \(2002\)](#) notes, what the researcher intends to “do” with the data deems the status of data as natural or not.

It has been a valuable learning experience for us to use and analyze the naturalistic data of online news articles. We have learned the comprehensiveness of the data set and how it can be analyzed and presented in journals. These data can be analyzed from different theoretical lenses and re-used in the future by researchers worldwide. In the contemporary world of the digital environment, the digital data become a more and more useful and important way of collecting and analyzing the data.

One of the limitations of using online naturalistic data is the limited engagement of the researcher with the context, thereby restricting their ability to probe deeper or ask follow-up questions ([Roberts, 2015](#)). Engaged scholarship is defined as co-generative theorizing with a emphasis on knowledge creation through close work with stakeholders ([Barbour et al., 2017](#)). Researchers can conduct interviews with respondents to supplement the naturalistic data and create knowledge closely with stakeholders as part of engaged scholarship. Another limitation is regarding the authenticity and credibility of the news articles considered in this study. Media houses can have vested interests and may only report or publish news that supports their interests. Biases in the media houses can be understood by “source criticism” such as investigating the publisher’s intention in reporting the news and whether they would have any interest in misrepresenting the news ([Milligan, 1979](#)). We tried to address this bias by considering news from multiple news media outlets. In addition, the socio-cultural and political climate of the period being investigated may influence how the information is presented within the source ([McCullagh, 1991](#)).



Section Summary

- A “talk the walk” strategy can help increase qualitative rigor.
- News articles and social media are places where the action occurs in the modern era and researchers need to use these data sources to understand the practice.
- The same online data changes between primary and secondary data depending on the proposed research question.

Conclusion

The objective of the research was to explore the narrative instruments and processes used to create a stable narrative and achieve strategic convergence among conflicting objectives of external stakeholders. From our single in-depth qualitative case study of the High Speed Two (HS2) megaproject in the UK, we were able to identify narrative instruments such as stories, labels, and comparisons, and narrative processes such as repeating, endorsing, humorizing, and acting. Quotations or statements from the official spokesperson of the project, politicians, or resistance groups were analyzed as naturally occurring data for the case study.

In contrast to traditional observations of practices, observations based on the digital environment are a “new age data set” may suffer lesser participant or researcher biases in contrast to other data sources. At the same time, these data are retrospective, longitudinal and can be collected without any obstructions. Digital news media can be used as a data source, and it holds an archive of retrospective data which can help researchers understand projects better in the 21st century ([Ninan, 2020](#)). Future research can consider other documents such as official reports, internal reports, planning, and investigative documents as well as policy and mission statements ([Prior, 2003](#)).

We discuss several steps to increase the qualitative rigor of the study. First, a ‘talk the walk’ strategy was used, where we described all the specific actions taken in our research journey. Second, we described power quotes in the body of the article and proof quotes in tables to show the prevalence of the category. Finally, we anchored the data and instances in the literature to sharpen generalizability, improve construct definition, and raise the theoretical level of our findings.



Classroom Discussion Questions

1. What are the advantages of using single in-depth case studies?
2. How can “talk the walk” strategy be implemented in qualitative research?
3. What are naturalistic data and when to use them?
4. How to reduce bias of using data from news articles?
5. How does online data become primary or secondary data?



Multiple-Choice Quiz Questions

1. When is single in-depth case studies used?

a. to generalize findings across contexts

Incorrect Answer

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is B.

b. to find the relation between categories in a context

Correct Answer

Feedback: Well done, correct answer

c. to validate observations

Incorrect Answer

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is B.

2. Which of these are NOT naturalistic data?

a. interviews

Correct Answer

Feedback: Well done, correct answer

b. social media posts

Incorrect Answer

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is A.

c. new articles

Incorrect Answer

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is A.

3. Which of these is NOT used to reduce bias while using data from news articles?

a. use of a news aggregator

Incorrect Answer

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is C.

b. study quotations in news articles

Incorrect Answer

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is C.

c. limit the study period

Correct Answer

Feedback: Well done, correct answer

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