FURTHERING OPEN RESEARCH: OPEN ACCESS PLATFORMS FOR FREEDOM OF INFORMATION (FOI)

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FOI IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

- Opportunity to examine public agencies' processes and structures (Lee, 2005)
  - Common application in US, journalism contexts
- Democratises research and data access for 'non-traditional researchers' (Savage & Hyde, 2014)
- Literature reveals researchers consistently make FOI requests themselves
  - Whistleblowing; children in care; food safety regulation
- Open FOI platforms are increasingly used in research methodologies
  - Medical agency regulation; governance during COIVD-19 pandemic; motivations for information seeking (Grigg et al., 2019; Jefferson et al., 2022; Žuffová, 2024)
  - 'Patchwork Method' for algorithmic accountability and the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP)

MYSOCIETY + ALAVETELI

- mySociety: UK-based non-profit; focus on increasing civic participation using online technology
- Alaveteli: Open-source software for FOI/ Access to Information (ATI)
  - 26 locations; US, Colombia, Hong Kong
  - Consolidate fragmented data, facilitate oversight, tool for digitally-enhanced democratic participation
- WhatDoTheyKnow: UK platform to submit FOI requests, archive of results for public viewing and download

USING OPEN FOI REQUESTS FOR ALGORITHMIC ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE UK

Method:

- Downloaded from WhatDoTheyKnow all correspondence between a requester and the DWP, plus primary source documents released through the request
- Data collection took place between March and July 2025
- Dataset includes 51 FOI requests and 44 internal, primary source documents released by the DWP
- Analysis includes public documents and media reports referred to by requesters in their requests
- Labelled requests using WhatDoTheyKnow's categories of 'refused,' 'successful,' 'partially successful' or 'information not held'
- Organised all requests into chronological order

USING OPEN FOI REQUESTS FOR ALGORITHMIC ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE UK

Findings – 3 levels of analysis:

- Shows how brief mentions of technologies in public documents become matters of concern, giving insight into **how civil society seeks information** on issues they believe should be of public deliberation
- Allows us to **peer into public agencies** by tracking chronologies of technical practices over the years
  - We gain insight into systems adopted, staff roles and internal governance strategies through DPIAs and Fairness Analyses
- Reveals the **FOI request process:** how an agency applies FOI legislation and balances transparency with other values - security, privacy, safety and the interests of the public
  - Across 51 requests, only 7 successful, 24 partially answered, 16 refused, and several only answered after requesters went to the Information Commissioner's Office

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THANK YOU

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