

# DOCUMENTS: TEXTS AND IMAGES

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- Documents, comprising texts and images, are physical traces of the social world and provide the basis for the interpretation of social events.
- There are varying forms of documents depending on the type, audience, nature of production and purpose. The example of maps shows that documents are not simply neutral products but are constructed in particular ways and can have real effects on how different groups are treated in society.
- Researchers need to be critical of documents as particular representations of reality, rather than reading off facts as independent from interpretation. What is recorded and how, by whom and for what purpose are all important points of reflection.
- A key issue in documentary research is understanding the potential for bias and positioning documents in the context of their production. Documents do not just reflect the social world, but are situated in time and place, and informed by different interests.

“Documents can be seen as the sedimentation of social practices...how documents are used is a methodological and theoretical question.”

(May and Perry, 2022: 124)



## DISCUSS

- What documentary sources would you use in studying policy implementation in an organization?
- What issues should be considered in examining 'meaning' in the production of documents?
- In approaching a document for analysis, what questions would preoccupy you as a researcher?
- How should we treat the documentary output of research itself?

## DO

*You are asked to devise a study which employs 'unobtrusive measures' of police performance.*

- How do you define the idea of 'performance'?
- What sources would you use?
- What kinds of indicators might you use? Is the level of graffiti in public places a better indicator than the number of pairs of boots an officer goes through in a year of beat patrols?