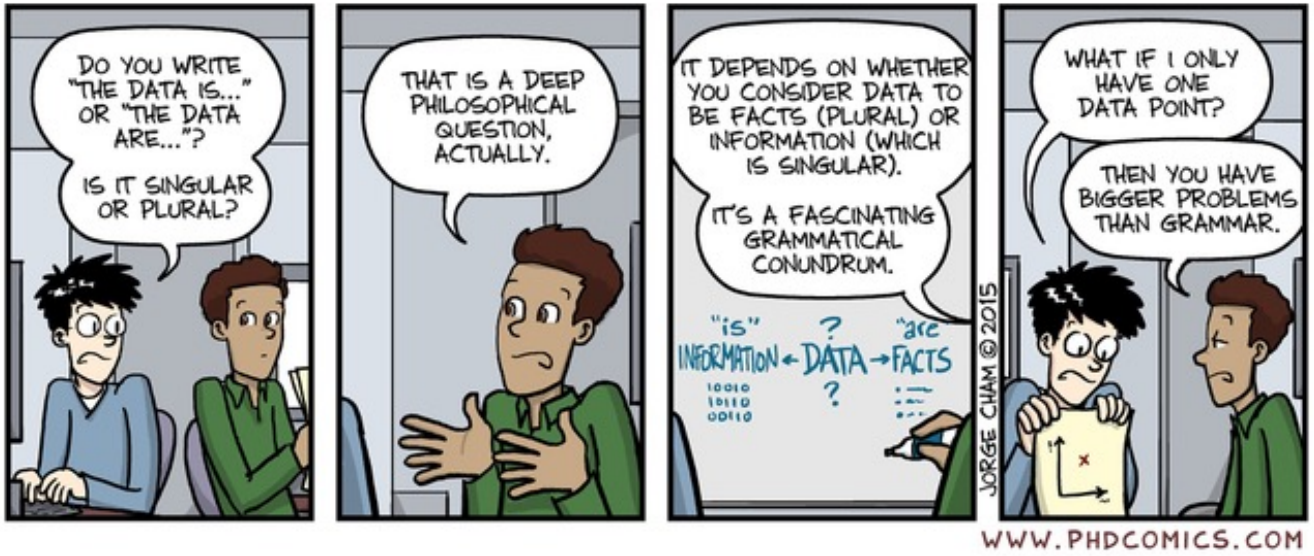
Data quality and data sets in the social sciences: thinking behind the scenes



Prof. Juliet J. FALL
FACULTÉ DES SCIENCES
DE LA SOCIÉTÉ
Département Géographie et environnement
UNIVERSITÉ DE GENÈVE

Diplomatic practices at the UN Security Council

Trump to Preside Over U.N. Security Council, Prompting Anxiety All Around

In a visit to the United Nations General Assembly last year, President Trump did not appear to be concerned about bruising any feelings. Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/06/us/politics/trump-un-security-council-iran.html?action=click&module=Top%20Stories&pgtype=Homepage

United Nations Security Council:
diplomatic practices in international diplomacy

Five Permanent Members (« P5 »): China, France, Russian Federation, UK, & USA
Ten non-permanent members: Elected for 2 years by the UN General Assembly

Unige / ETH Zürich / SWP Berlin

Our team

An international, multi-disciplinary team working across political science, geography and critical security studies.

Juliet

Stephen

Aglaya

Nadine

Paul

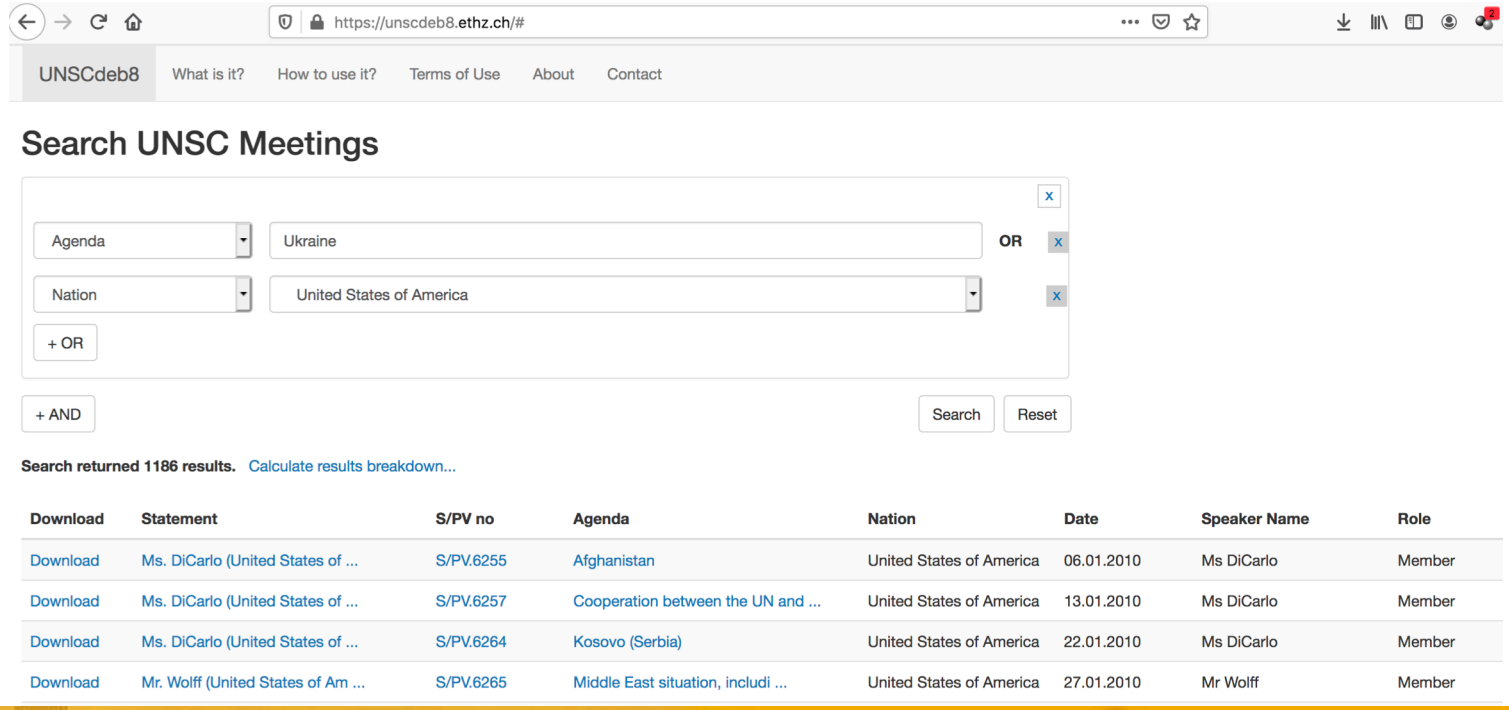
Carinne

Eliana

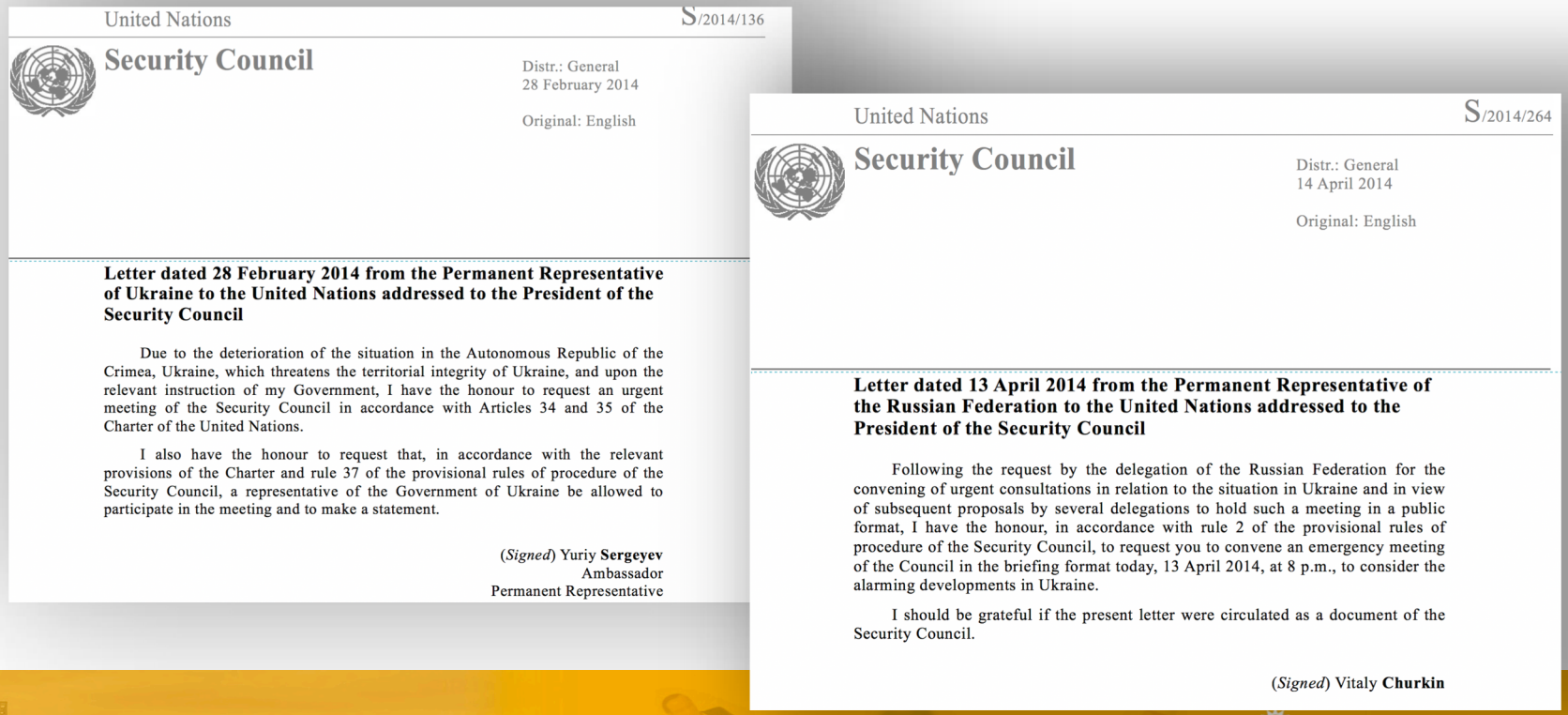
+ Fred Sündermann

Web-based query tool

= > quickly and intuitively assemble sub-corpora of UNSC-debates, based on chosen metadata-filters



Transcripts are publicly-available but are difficult to analyse longitudinally



United Nations S/2014/136

Security Council

Distr.: General
28 February 2014

Original: English

Letter dated 28 February 2014 from the Permanent Representative of Ukraine to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council

Due to the deterioration of the situation in the Autonomous Republic of the Crimea, Ukraine, which threatens the territorial integrity of Ukraine, and upon the relevant instruction of my Government, I have the honour to request an urgent meeting of the Security Council in accordance with Articles 34 and 35 of the Charter of the United Nations.

I also have the honour to request that, in accordance with the relevant provisions of the Charter and rule 37 of the provisional rules of procedure of the Security Council, a representative of the Government of Ukraine be allowed to participate in the meeting and to make a statement.

(*Signed*) Yuriy **Sergeyev**
Ambassador
Permanent Representative

United Nations S/2014/264

Security Council

Distr.: General
14 April 2014

Original: English

Letter dated 13 April 2014 from the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council

Following the request by the delegation of the Russian Federation for the convening of urgent consultations in relation to the situation in Ukraine and in view of subsequent proposals by several delegations to hold such a meeting in a public format, I have the honour, in accordance with rule 2 of the provisional rules of procedure of the Security Council, to request you to convene an emergency meeting of the Council in the briefing format today, 13 April 2014, at 8 p.m., to consider the alarming developments in Ukraine.

I should be grateful if the present letter were circulated as a document of the Security Council.

(*Signed*) Vitaly **Churkin**

Making publicly-available data searchable

United Nations S/PV.7365

Security Council
Seventieth year

Provisional

7365th meeting
Wednesday, 21 January 2015, 3 p.m.
New York

President:	Mr. Barros Melet	(Chile)
Members:	Angola	Mr. Gaspar Martins
	Chad	Mr. Mangaral
	China	Mr. Liu Jieyi
	France	Mr. Lamek
	Jordan	Mr. Hmoud
	Lithuania	Ms. Murmokaitė
	Malaysia	Mr. Haniff
	New Zealand	Mr. McLay
	Nigeria	Mr. Laro
	Russian Federation	Mr. Churkin
	Spain	Mr. Oyarzun Marchesi
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Sir Mark Lyall Grant
	United States of America	Ms. Power
	Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of)	Mr. Ramírez Carreño

The meeting was called to order at 3.05 p.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

Letter dated 28 February 2014 from the Permanent Representative of Ukraine to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council (S/2014/136)

The President (*spoke in Spanish*): In accordance with rule 37 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the representative of Ukraine to participate in this meeting.

In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite Mr. Jeffrey Feltman, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, to participate in this meeting.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

I give the floor to Mr. Feltman.

Mr. Feltman: Today I will briefly update the Council on developments related to the conflict in eastern Ukraine, as well as on my own recent visit to the country, from 15 to 17 December 2014, in continuation of the Secretary-General's good offices.

I would like to begin by clearly stating our alarm. Following weeks of relative calm, the Council meets today amid the worst hostilities in eastern Ukraine since the ceasefire and the Minsk protocol were agreed to on 5 September. Encouraging signs of progress, such as the exchange of hundreds of prisoners, are quickly being overshadowed by renewed fighting and a deepening political stalemate. Ukraine, as well as its neighbours and the broader region, cannot afford the current violent status quo. The escalation of fighting threatens to unravel the Minsk protocol.

While the heavy fighting of the past few days was initially concentrated around Donetsk airport, the numbers of dead and injured, including innocent civilians, are quickly rising elsewhere, as violence spreads throughout the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, including in heavily populated civilian areas such as the city of Donetsk. The conflict is also reportedly inching dangerously close to cities such as Mariupol and Debaltsevo, and endangering areas that until recently have been relatively quiet. In another sign of escalation, reinforcements of fighters are reported on both sides, with the deployment of more sophisticated and heavier weaponry. In Davos today, President Poroshenko stated that there were more than 9,000 regular Russian troops in Ukraine, an accusation that Moscow denies.

On 13 January, as a direct result of the renewal of the fighting, 12 civilians lost their lives and 17 were seriously wounded when their. bus was hit in Volnovakha. The United Nations has no means of verifying the facts independently, but after visiting the site three times and conducting crater analysis, the Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) to Ukraine of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe concluded that "the rockets that caused craters 1 and 2 had been fired from a north-north-eastern direction" and that

> "the rockets may have been fired approximately 20 kilometres from the point of impact. The SMM is not able to independently verify the point of origin of the rockets or to identify the entity that fired them."

As the Secretary-General stated, this incident, which must be thoroughly investigated and for which those responsible must be brought to justice, is a stark reminder of the urgent need to halt the violence.

Let me also say a few words on the humanitarian situation, which has deteriorated further as conflict has again intensified. A country that until a year ago had no displaced people now has at least 850,000 citizens displaced within its borders and over 600,000 in neighbouring States, according to Ukrainian sources.

Humanitarian actors must have access to do their life-saving work. All parties to the conflict have an obligation to guarantee free and unhindered humanitarian access to all people in need, irrespective of where they are located, and they also have to fully respect international humanitarian law. A recent directive with respect to crossing the contact line from Government-held to rebel-held areas could make it exceedingly difficult for humanitarian actors to move aid into areas beyond Government control. It is critical that resources be made available to meet life-saving needs on the ground. The 2015 Strategic Response Plan requests $189 million, and few commitments have been made as yet.

Regrettably, the upsurge in fighting has been accompanied by mutual recriminations between Kyiv

Building a database UNSCdeb8 (« debate »!)
https://unscdeb8.ethz.ch/search/

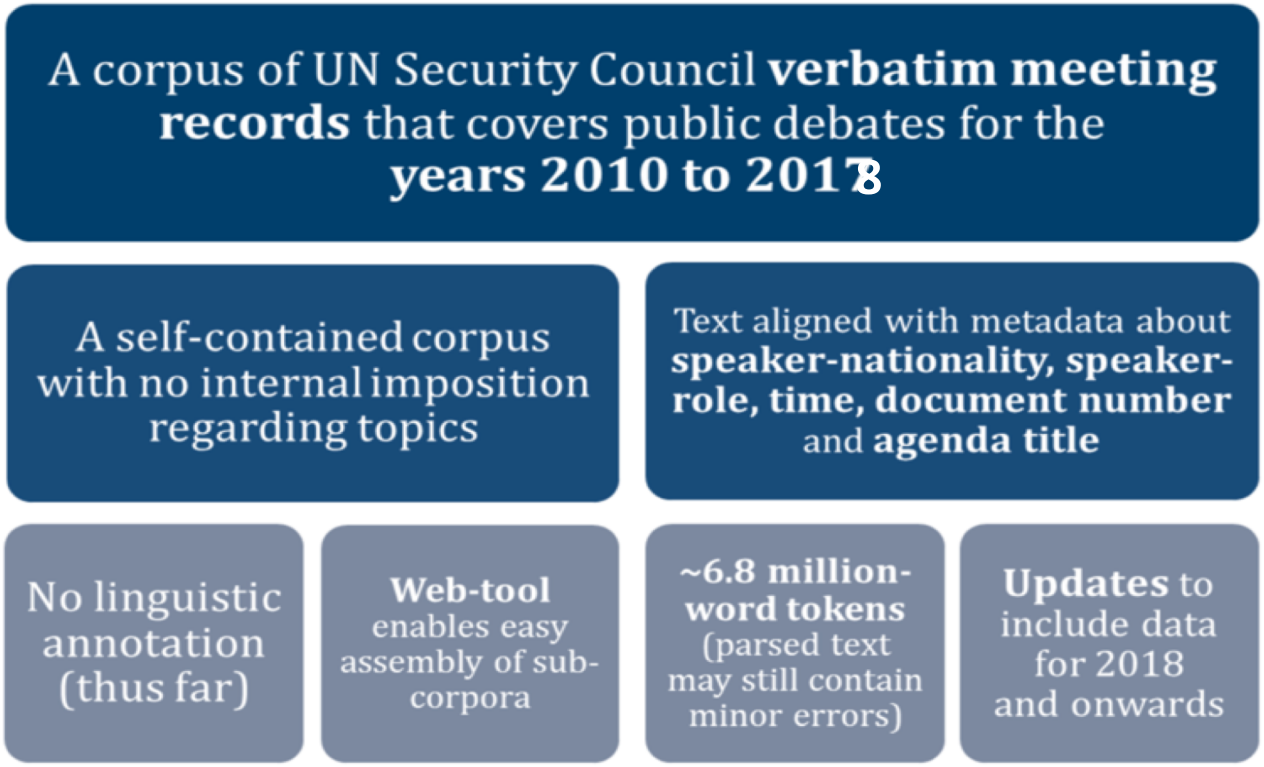


Figure 1: UNSCdeb8 (beta) at-a-glance

- Using automated pdf file conversions
- Web-scraping
- Manual verification
- and endless, endless trouble-shooting & testing!

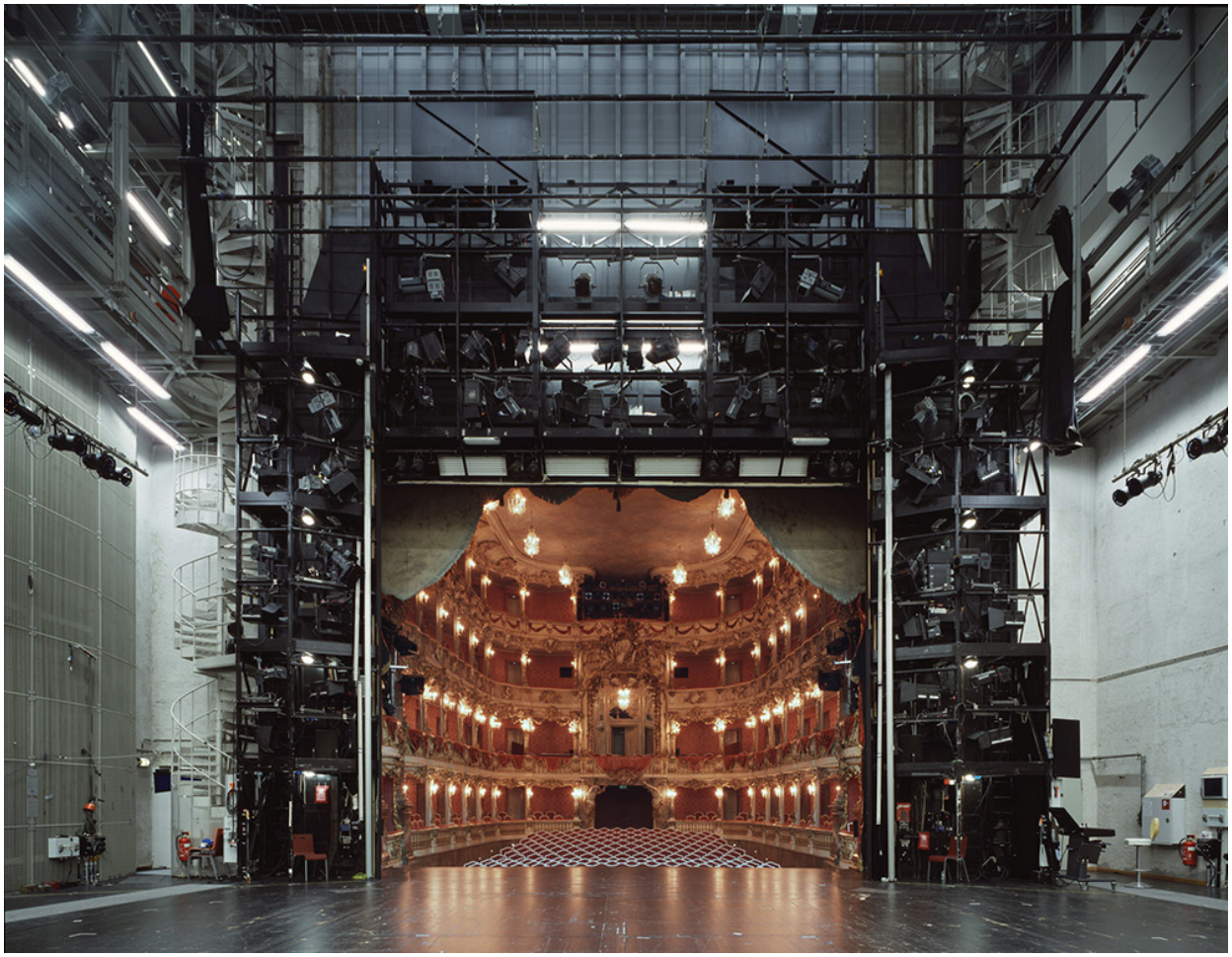
How to use UNSCdeb8

- It is a ‘specialized corpus’, i.e. assembled from a single and continuous source of documents
- It allows comparisons over time, particularly of the P5 countries
- It can be used in tandem with corpus-linguistic analysis software such as *Antconc* or *Wordsmith*, for example to:
  - Calculate the most statistically significant key-words that differentiate the members of the UNSC
  - Examine how the discourse of a particular UNSC member evolves over time or changes with regard to specific thematic issues
  - Trace subtle discursive changes within a particular member state’s outlook on a particular crisis

Working through case studies

Example: the conflict in Ukraine from 2014

But what about the data behind the scene?



Diplomacy as performance

"We use many beautiful words about the need to peacefully settle political crises (…). However, after discussing Ukraine here about 30 times, the question arises as to how well-aligned the declarations are with the situation in the country. Are they directly applicable, or are they provided just for the sake of eloquence?"

(Russian Ambassador Churkin 2015. United Nations Security Council 7365:7)

Data quality and data sets in the social sciences

- Processes and debates surrounding the design of a large database shed light on what quality might mean in the social sciences.
- Data quality control & future use: Who is (legally) responsible if this database is used by others & comes up with wrong results?
- Even assuming high data quality, a lot simply cannot be captured by this type of data that appears to capture complex social and political processes.
- Despite successfully building a unique and powerful database, a number of crucial epistemological issues remain.

Are we just being hypnotised by the tool? Behind the scenes is where the fun takes place!

- What can we say with this tool, what cannot be grasped?
- Is it just a glorified index & search tool?
- What happened before & after these speeches including closed-door preparatory meetings and behind-the-scenes negotiations?
- Can a corpus assembled partly through language translation be used for corpus analytics?
  - Example: Translating Chinese terms (“community”), culturally-situated use of first-person etc.
- Are we missing or forgetting crucial qualitative data just because it is not available?
- How can fieldwork (observations & interviews) help complicate the story?
- How do bodies perform discourse and how can that be captured?
- How can bodily reactions from others be understood?

Thinking data behind the scenes

The challenges of capturing the complexity of social and political interactions in diplomatic discourse

Russia's late U.N. Ambassador Vitaly Churkin, left, and United States' former U.N. Ambassador Samantha Power interact before an U.N. Security Council meeting on the Ukraine crisis, Saturday, March 15, 2014, at the United Nations headquarters. (AP Photo/John Minchillo)