

Asdal, Kristin and Hilde Reinertsen. 2021. *Doing document analysis: A practice-oriented method*. SAGE Publications. ISBN 9781529759792. US\$51.00.

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Some political ecology-informed research tries to understand and analyze the emergence of particular discourses of environmental governance. Many political ecologists draw on different forms of discourse analysis when exploring environmental controversies and their underlying power relations (Scoville-Simonds, 2009). Documents are often an important source for such analyses, but seldom the key objects of attention. In their recent book, the historians Asdal and Reinertsen offer an in-depth and expanded understanding of what document analysis can be, and how it can be used to comprehend complex processes of change. Their approach is steeped in the concepts and theories of science and technology studies (STS), paying attention to the material nature of documents, their relationality, and performativity.

There have been scattered attempts at bridging political ecology and STS (see for example, Lave 2012) and the topic was a theme at the 2022 POLLEN conference, reflecting an appreciation that there is much to be gained from bringing political ecology into closer conversation with more STS-informed work. Asdal and Reinertsen's explicit practice-oriented focus on the importance of the materiality of documents and what they do is a welcome contribution to this conversation.

The book highlights how documents enter into various concrete practices, and partially shape them. The authors' intention is to make us more aware of the richness that resides in documents. Documents are material artifacts; they are things being worked upon, worked with, and that themselves do work in the world. "By being set in motion, documents can act upon other things" (p. 5). Such a perspective opens broader analytical avenues for political ecology research, to consider the textual elements of documents and the effects of their emergence and movement in the world.

The book is structured into three parts. The first introduces the core concepts that make up a practice-oriented method for document analysis. The second provides more in-depth guidance on the issues and practicalities associated with conducting documentary analysis. The final section is just one chapter that lays out in more detail the theoretical foundation on which the author's methodology is based.

In the first part, Asdal and Reinertsen offer six key concepts that can be helpful when setting about the work of analyzing documents. These concepts are document *sites*, *tools*, *work*, *texts*, *issues*, and *movements*, with a chapter being devoted to each. In the chapter on document sites, the authors highlight the importance of understanding where documents emerge, and how the documents themselves constitute sites. They then identify how documents can serve as three main types of 'tools,' namely tools of governing (such as white papers), tools of knowledge (such as research reports), and as economic tools (such as annual reports). Often, documents may be all these simultaneously and are not limited to these three categories, but the categorizations are helpful for identifying the work that a document does.

Document work can be understood dualistically, both in terms of the work that is done in creating and maintaining them (writing, revising, filing, archiving, etc.) in bureaucracies, but also in the work that the documents themselves engage in. Chapter four focuses on texts and starts out by emphasizing that they are not only words, but encompass signs, including maps, images, and photographs. While much research has a tendency to concentrate on text as words, maps and photographs do matter in environmental governance (see e.g. Movik et al., 2021).

Chapter five concerns how documents move between sites, institutions, and people, and with what effects. Understanding how documents move is of key importance when studying environmental controversies, as it brings to light how some documents may falter and fade into insignificance, whereas others gain traction and clout. Political ecologists can fruitfully untangle the dynamics of movement and their impacts. In chapter six, the authors bring to our attention the notion of issue formation: how issues are established and modified through documents. Often a degree of effort is required to identify and understand how a particular issue gets established and how it may change over time.

Chapter seven draws together the previous conceptual chapters, explaining how concepts overlap and can be woven together. The concepts presented in this chapter offer a useful framework for understanding what documents do, going beyond a focus on their text alone. The view that documents are artifacts with agency opens analytical avenues that can potentially provide deeper insights into the nature of environmental controversies, unpacking their role in shaping conflicts.

The second part of the book offers practical guidance on how to put the book's concepts to use. Three chapters deal with practical techniques for doing document analysis, such as how to go about searching for and systematically storing documents, advice on working in archives, and how to handle digital documents. This part also addresses ethical issues that may emerge when researching them.

The one-chapter final section expounds upon the theoretical foundation of the book. It starts out by noting that while a turn to a practice-oriented approach in social science is welcome, its predominant pitfall is that researchers lose sight of the role that documents play. Asdal and Reinertsen emphasize that document work is also a form of practice. They draw attention to Foucault's orientation towards practice, illustrated through the quote "...the task of analysis consists of not – of no longer – treating discourses as groups of signs (signifying elements referring to contents or representations) but as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (Foucault, 1989, quoted on p. 212).

Such a broad conceptualization of practice is also useful in political ecology. The chapter presents six 'practice orientation modes' (not necessarily neatly corresponding to the six moves presented in the first part) as follows: i) words form things, ii) signs are part of social life, iii) moving inscription devices and things around, iv) counter-movements and modifiable mobiles, v) from the material turn to material semiotics, and vi) issues in the making. To explain these modes, the authors draw heavily on the insights and concepts of key French theorists, including Saussure's notion of *langue* and *parole*, Foucault's writings on governmentality and discourse, and Latour's actor-network theory. While the authors at the outset clearly state that this is an introductory textbook that will not delve into detail on STS theories, one might be forgiven for wishing that this foundational chapter had devoted more space to discussing the various modes of practice. The theoretical chapter shows how Foucault's practice-oriented approach is relevant to understanding documents as practices, and how the work of Latour can help inform thinking about the agency of documents, which may inspire political ecologists to regard documents in a broader perspective.

Overall, the book is well structured and written in a clear and accessible style. The chapters have explicit learning objectives and reflective questions at the end, ideal for teaching purposes. The chapters also provide examples from real-life research, often drawing on the authors' own work. These cases provide helpful illustrations of how the concepts that are introduced can be applied in practice. It comes across as an easy-to-use text that students and more experienced scholars from a variety of social science disciplines can employ as a source of inspiration and as a handbook to consult when developing their research methods. It offers a fresh and comprehensive conceptual and practical roadmap for doing document analysis, which many researchers, including political ecologists, will find valuable.

References

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