

## TRANSPARENCY, RESEARCH INTEGRITY AND MULTIPLE METHODS

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Who could be opposed to transparency? Presumably only someone hostile to democracy, skeptical about motherhood, and allergic to apple pie. And there is something to be said for transparency, as thoughtful proponents of the DA-RT initiative have argued. No doubt this accounts for much of the momentum behind that initiative.

In my view, however, what social scientists should value most highly is not transparency, but the integrity of research, understood as research that reflects an honest and systematic search for truths about society, the economy, or politics. In its various dimensions, transparency is a means toward that end. But it is only one of several such means and, like most of them, its various modalities come laden with trade-offs. Therefore, as they seek to assure the integrity of research, the gatekeepers of the discipline should weigh the value of demanding certain kinds of transparency carefully against the costs of meeting those demands, and they should do so in light of the alternative means available for securing integrity.

We are not starting from ground-zero here. For some decades, the canons of good scholarship in political science, taught in all graduate schools and practiced by most scholars, have demanded a good deal of what is currently being described as analytic, production, and data transparency (Lupia and Elman, 2014). Scholars publishing empirical work in the discipline are generally asked by editors, reviewers, and readers to identify how their data was collected, how systematically and from where, with precise citations to the sources on which they base any contentious points. They are also called upon to spell out the logic behind their causal inferences and the scope conditions, in terms of familiar principles of case selection, inference in process analysis, and statistical estimation.

To the extent that the DA-RT initiative draws our attention to the importance of such matters, it has some value; and moderate steps to reinforce current practices should be welcomed. It makes

sense, for example, to ensure that the citations supporting contentious claims reference specific pages and identify sources in terms that allow other scholars to find them (Trachtenberg, 2015). Published articles should specify the logic of inference which leads their authors to conclude that the data confirms or disconfirms their core propositions.

At issue today, however, is whether journals should demand more than this, notably, by requiring active citation in the form of links to excerpts from sources that are cited and notes explaining their relevance to the point at hand, by seeking appendices outlining in extensive detail how the observations bear on the argument, and by requiring authors to deposit in public digital repositories the source material on which a study is based, whether in the form of statistical data or qualitative material such as transcripts of interviews and documentary sources. Each of these measures has been suggested by some proponents of the DA-RT initiative, and it is now up to journal editors to decide what new requirements to impose on scholars submitting articles to them.

I will focus, in particular, on the requirement that the data gathered for a study be deposited in a publicly-available digital repository and that extensive notes about how the observations lead to the conclusions of the study be provided there or in an online appendix. Few would disagree with the desirability, where feasible, of making newly-collected data useful to other scholars available to them. APSA's *Ethics Guide* suggests that this should be done on a voluntary basis. The question is whether such steps should be required as a condition of publication.

This is where the issue of trade-offs comes in, and those trade-offs vary with the type of research being conducted. It may not be costly in terms of time or resources for an author whose work is based on statistical data gathered by others to include the data, meta-data, and estimation procedures used for the study in a public repository. Even a scholar who has spent some years assembling a new dataset should be encouraged to make it publicly available, as a recognized contribution of the research. But I think there are grounds for wondering whether the one-year time-frame for doing so now widely

mooted as a requirement in the latter case is long enough to allow a young scholar to exploit the fruits of her own research before others with more time, resources, and job security do so. In my view, a three-year window seems more appropriate, especially if those who make their data available sooner are acknowledged for doing so. Here, the potential cost is straightforward: if young scholars are not given ample time to publish on the basis of prodigious efforts at data collection, we will see fewer such efforts and the discipline as a whole will be the poorer for it.

However, the steepest trade-offs arise from requirements for the deposit of qualitative data — not only because it is more difficult to provide and prepare such data for deposit but because the gains to doing so are more meagre. Of course, much depends on the precise character of the qualitative research. But, compared to requirements for the deposit of quantitative data, the costs are greater and the gains smaller for virtually all types of qualitative data.

It is now widely-recognized that requirements for the public deposit of interview material would make qualitative research on topics of great personal or political sensitivity infeasible (Parkinson and Wood, 2015). However, even when the research topic is more prosaic, securing candid responses in interviews often requires offering respondents anonymity. Those doing research on the dynamics behind policy-making, for instance as I have, know that much will be left unsaid if respondents are not offered such anonymity; and securing their agreement to speak candidly is not as compatible with the deposit of interview transcripts as some assume.

A scholar whose study is based on twenty-five in-depth interviews that have been recorded in a digital format with respondents who have readily agreed to have their words used provided their identities are concealed may be able to put those audio files in a public repository with relative ease. But audio files do not adequately conceal identities and transcription is a costly process. Even when transcription is feasible and interviews are ostensibly anonymous, many potential respondents are going to worry that making a verbatim account of their interview publicly available will betray confidences

or their identity.

Indeed, precisely for these reasons, many of the interviews qualitative researchers conduct are not recorded but written up in short-form or long-hand notes immediately afterward. Transcribing those notes for the sake of putting them in a public repository is a laborious process that offers little in the form of enhanced research integrity. In many cases, even when interviews are recorded, researchers often work from the audio files rather than convert them into hundreds of pages of transcriptions. Requiring that all of those interviews be transcribed for digital deposit puts costly burdens on them. Those who have ample funds and research assistants for such tasks should be wary of imposing these requirements on resource-poor faculty members or graduate students in the name of some abstract principle of transparency.

Asking scholars who do qualitative research to put the documents on which their arguments are based into such a repository has a similarly sonorous — but empty — ring to it. In many cases, those documents will be from archives, whether publicly-accessible or private, that place limits on whether the materials can be deposited elsewhere. Anyone who has done such research knows that archivists can be extraordinarily proprietary about their materials, and the relationships one often has to build to secure access to the best materials can be destroyed if the latter are redistributed rather than simply consulted or selectively quoted. Providing clear citations to the relevant documents should be sufficient to allow others to follow up the research.

Given the burdens imposed by such requirements, one must ask: what does the other side of this trade-off look like? Precisely what would we gain from such requirements? Once again, the answer turns on the character of the research being done. I see an argument for requiring that the statistical data central to a study along with the protocols or meta-data necessary for analyzing it be made publicly-available (within an appropriate time-frame), not only because this is relatively easy, but because the core inferences in such studies often turn heavily on the results of estimations on that data. These are instances where the replication of

the statistical results is relatively straightforward and judgements about the validity of the study are likely to turn on those results.

By contrast, the chain of inference in most studies based on qualitative research is much longer and more complex. We would all like to find a ‘smoking gun’ but hardly anyone does. Instead, inferences are drawn from an accumulation of evidence, often of different types, such that examining a few interview transcripts or documents is not going to confirm or disconfirm the overall findings of the study. Indeed, many of the articles published from qualitative research are short-hand reports of larger projects in which the full panoply of evidence can be presented only in book form. The argument that the deposit of data will allow for ready replication does not hold for this kind of study, since replication would require another commensurate effort at field research. Indeed, it is doubtful whether the concept of replication is really meaningful for research of this type.

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It makes more sense in the case of qualitative research to ask for enough information to allow for what [Bütte and Jacobs \(2015, 57\)](#) call ‘replication-in-thought.’ That is to say, scholars should provide enough information to permit readers to evaluate the processes of observation used in a study and to assess the overall reasoning leading from those observations to the conclusions. By and large, that task can be accomplished in the text and references of the article. Requiring the deposit of a multitude of documents or interview transcripts is not essential for this purpose; and the value of doing so is often overestimated given the extent to which the accurate interpretation of such materials depends on a lively knowledge of contextual factors that cannot readily be codified or deposited.

There are dangers in assuming that principles appropriate for quantitative research apply equally to qualitative research. It is surely appropriate to ask, in general terms, that both types of studies make the grounds for their causal inferences clear; and important work over the past two decades has improved the techniques for doing so when using qualitative methods ([Brady and Collier, 2010](#); [Mahoney, 2010](#)). However, much of that literature points to the importance of handling the ‘causal-process observations’ in case-studies differently from the ‘data-set observations’ lying behind statistical studies ([Collier, 2011](#)). If the value of the latter is highly dependent on the quantity of observations available, the inferential value of the former turns more heavily on the quality of the observations, namely, the multiple ways in which they fit into a larger context ([Bennett, 2008](#)). Thus, effective comparative case-studies depend on observations married to a thick background knowledge that cannot readily be deposited in a library or fully captured by active citation.

Of course, it is incumbent on those who draw conclusions from such research to report their basic logic of inference and how the principal observations underpin their core propositions. But calling on researchers who have made hundreds, if not thousands, of observations, often in the context of an extensive process analysis, to spell out the role that each of those observations plays in their inferences seeks something that is not only infeasible but misconstrued ([Lupia and Elman, 2014, 33-34](#)). It misrepresents as mechanical a process that involves complex forms of interpretation, in which each observation is weighed within the context of many others. Efforts to weigh the importance of every observation quickly make the text of an article cumbersome, rendering studies that might otherwise deserve a large audience virtually unreadable. The paradoxical effect would be to make major research findings less accessible just when the discipline is being asked to produce studies of interest to policy-makers and a wider public ([Isaac, 2015](#)). Demanding that such efforts be included in an online appendix, in effect asking qualitative researchers to write their articles twice — in short and then extended form — does not make the task any more feasible, as [Fairfield’s \(2015\)](#) effort to do so indicates. The result can easily become a po-

litical science that smacks of scientism rather than science.

Where the conclusions of a study depend primarily on a quantitative analysis whose data and meta-data can readily be made available, there are strong arguments for asking scholars to do so (Lupia and Elman, 2014). But the relevant trade-offs for qualitative research are different. This does not mean that qualitative research is somehow less useful or less trustworthy. That kind of research allows the discipline to explore problems in the political world that are resistant to quantitative analysis or to delve more deeply into the causal mechanisms behind many political outcomes; and existing practices that require the authors of such studies to identify how they collected their data and why in aggregate it supports their inferences go a long way toward ensuring the integrity of what is published.

Indeed, before we enact an additional set of requirements that are especially onerous for scholars doing qualitative research and of dubious value for establishing its integrity, we should note that there are already significant mechanisms in place for promoting such integrity. Papers submitted for publication are generally reviewed by scholars familiar with the cases and issues addressed. I know from experience that these reviewers are a suspicious lot, prone to question any accounts that do not comport with their own deep knowledge of the cases. And then there is the test of time. Ours is a discipline organized around scientific research programs, in which each new study is questioned by scholars working on similar issues, whose investigations typically interrogate and revise the previous research. The consensus judgments in most fields rest on critical comparisons of studies of similar phenomena, which typically expose their limitations as well as their contributions.

For this process to operate well, researchers do not need access to the raw data on which a qualitative study is based but, rather, clear statements about the nature of that data, how it was collected, and why in aggregate it supports the core inferences of a study — of the sort that good journals have long demanded. The provision of such information allows scholars doing subsequent field research on these issues, in the same or parallel cases, to

compare their findings to those of previous studies and to calibrate their own inferences in the light of prior research. This is the kind of ‘practicable transparency’ at which the discipline should aim and which it largely achieves.

These issues matter because there is a lot at stake here. Imposing a set of requirements that are especially onerous for scholars doing qualitative research, however well-intentioned, will discourage scholars from undertaking such research. That is especially true of requirements that force them to deposit the interviews they conduct and documents they collect in public repositories. It applies with lesser, albeit some, force to procedures for active citation unless these impose relatively-minimal requirements bearing only on the most crucial and contentious claims in a study. Younger scholars deciding what kind of research to conduct will find the costs of such requirements hardest to bear. The need to spend long months in the field, cajoling interviews out of people and taking notes from archival documents, already renders qualitative research more burdensome than many types of statistical research. Some may not lament the decline in the amount of qualitative research that steps to make such procedures mandatory are likely to precipitate, but I for one would miss the rich insights that this research tradition produces.

Of course, the discipline should demand, as it already does, that all empirical scholars conduct systematic research, cite with precision the sources on which they rely, and report the basis for their causal inferences. But imposing new requirements that put especially large burdens on scholars doing qualitative research without significantly enhancing the integrity of that research will ultimately weaken, rather than strengthen, the capacity of the discipline to identify and establish new truths about the political world.

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