

DA-RT: Prioritizing the Profession over the Public?

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Critics of the American Political Science Association's Data Access and Research Transparency (DA-RT) policy have targeted the initiative on many fronts, not the least of which is the impact that the policy will have on political science's engagement with the public—evocative of the recurrent appeals to remake the discipline with an eye to relevance, usefulness, and comprehensibility (Isaac 2015).¹ DA-RT's proponents seem assured of the positive impact of the policy, heralding its contributions to transferring knowledge beyond disciplinary boundaries, and in particular toward improving political science's public face, making it more credible and legitimate (Lupia and Elman 2014). However, I argue that DA-RT overemphasizes the purported disciplinary benefits without adequate consideration of the probable harms to the public. This is especially the case for marginalized communities and the policy issues that affect them, and is likely to result in a chilling effect on such research.

The Discipline and the Public Good

The Preface to the APSA's *Guide to Professional Ethics for Political Science* describes the organizing impetus for the association's Standing Committee on Professional Ethics, stating that the Committee was created in 1968 to “protect the rights of political scientists” (2012, i). Despite subsequent iterations of both the ethics committee and the ethics guide, there remains no introductory reference to the public or the public good. For instance, when compared with the preamble to the document produced by our cognate discipline, sociology, and its professional entity, the American Sociological Association, a clear distinction becomes apparent. In the ASA's *Code of Ethics and Policies and Procedures of the ASA Committee on Professional Ethics*, disciplinary goals are laid alongside what is termed “social responsibility”: “Sociologists... strive to advance the science of sociology and to serve the public good” (2008, 6-7). Here, and elsewhere in the ASA ethics guide, ethics are delineated that go well

beyond individual scholars and the discipline and are explicated in detail.

It is perhaps no coincidence that a close examination of the documents and arguments undergirding the DA-RT policy also makes clear a primary focus upon benefits for the discipline, with only secondary and vague assertions of the contributions that could be made to the public good. Both “Draft Guidelines for Data Access and Research Transparency in the Qualitative Tradition” and the APSA ethics guide give a nod to a limited set of alternative professional ethical responsibilities, but they tilt the balance of focus toward the asserted disciplinary benefits. For example, responsibilities are listed—to human subject requirements and professional norms (privacy and confidentiality), as well as to legal principles and institutional actors (copyright rules, law enforcement, grand juries). Yet, these largely legal responsibilities amount to a constrained sense of the potential ethical responsibilities of a researcher.² Absent is a more thoroughgoing examination of potential alternative ethical concerns in any level of specificity comparable to those goals and values that are discipline-specific.

Further, researchers are advised by the APSA ethics guide to prioritize transparency over competing values. “Decisions to withhold data and a full account of the procedures used to collect or generate them should be made in good faith and on reasonable grounds”; further, researchers are instructed to “exercise appropriate restraint in making claims as to the confidential nature of their sources, and resolve all reasonable doubts in favor of full disclosure” (APSA 2012, 10). Yet, questions remain: What would entail “reasonable” grounds, especially as the default is specifically set to be the provision of transparency, operationalized primarily as data access? (More on this below.) Surely if dedication to the public good were prioritized, it would lead to erring on the side of preventing harm or exploitation. Here again, the ASA *Code of Ethics* provides a contrast: “While endeavoring to always be collegial, sociologists must never let the desire to be collegial outweigh their shared responsibility

1 See the Perestroika-themed symposium in *Perspectives on Politics* accompanying the Isaac (2015) piece for an important recent iteration of this discussion.

2 A similar point is made in the Final Report of QTD Working Group on Research Ethics and Human Subjects: A Reflexive Openness Approach. Here MacLean et al. assert: “Conducting ethical research goes well beyond the IRB review process and the Belmont principles, however, which are themselves incomplete and subject to internal conflict” (2019, 4).

for ethical behavior” (2012, 6). ASA guidelines also note that shared data ought to be subject to safeguards equal to or greater than those established by the originating researcher.

In the draft guidelines and their introduction to the *PS* symposium “Openness in Political Science: Data Access and Research Transparency,” Lupia and Elman (2014) also expand upon the underlying logic of these ethical guidelines and reveal their clear priority concerning openness: data access. While suggesting that three “constitutive elements” are involved—data access, production transparency, and analytic transparency—they reveal in many ways their primary preoccupation with data access. Political science scholars largely agree that production transparency and analytic transparency, in one or another form, are worthy goals. Disagreement increases when considering whether such transparency is truly a problem in all sections of the discipline, and concerns among interpretive scholars like myself have also coalesced around the “DA” portion of DA-RT: namely that data access requirements are either unworkable in practice or are deemed to be fundamentally detrimental to the research and to those individuals and groups being studied.

Toward a More Thoroughgoing Engagement with “The Public(s)”

DA-RT’s proponents tell us that in addition to replication, there are other compelling reasons to support the value of openness. They assert that if one cares about underrepresented individuals and groups, one ought to support data access because it will increase the strength and span of these communities’ voices. In the draft “Guidelines for Data Access and Research Transparency in Qualitative Research in Political Science,” Lupia and Elman assert:

For instance, those who believe that an important social scientific task is to encourage the recognition of the extent and importance of cultural, historical and social diversity should acknowledge the value of transparency in permitting the record of actors speaking in their own voices to reach readers of social scientific texts (2014, 28).

Yet, as argued, the DA-RT policy does not seem to include as its originating impulse any connection to such publics. The DA-RT policy seems to be centrally focused on the public as a circumscribed set of elites, predominantly policymakers and especially funders. Certainly, the insights garnered by political science as a

discipline and individual political scientists can usefully inform political decision-making, public discourse, and assessment of policy alternatives both domestic and global. Yet, many of us are engaged with the public in a different way—not as an audience but rather as the subjects of our research, gathering and, in some cases, co-producing empirical research. We work closely with community members and organizations that are deeply involved in public matters of importance. Cramer (2015) powerfully advances the argument that DA-RT would affect a researcher’s integrity and interactions with respondents on matters of public opinion. Scholars who do work within authoritarian regimes (Shih 2015) or on violence (Parkinson and Wood 2015) have compellingly made the case that DA-RT would make such work, already difficult and dangerous, less safe for those with whom one might engage, interview, and garner data. While IRB processes establish certain groups as “vulnerable” or “marginalized,” a recent QTD report on the subject argues that the range of groups that may fit into this category is surely broader, more fluid, and should be understood as context-driven (Lake, Majic, and Maxwell 2019). The need to comply with DA-RT guidelines for publication would in some instances mean that, ethically, it may not be advisable for researchers to undertake studies of vulnerable communities.

In particular, I assert that such likely harms and ethical conflicts would hold within far less dramatic and immediate life-and-death circumstances, such as those that exist in marginalized communities in the United States, especially when we take on questions of significant importance and relevance—what might be deemed true public controversies—such as immigration, climate change, or voting rights. Through such work, we necessarily engage people and organizations that are living amidst adverse circumstances and usually lacking traditional sources of power. Those of us who study public policy and work in community contexts understand the history and legacy of academic researchers’ engagement in communities of color and poor communities, which far too often has been brief, instrumental, and of value primarily to one side of the exchange—the researcher. For these reasons, those of us who do this research must work (and it is work) but also employ our personal engagement and individual qualities over a period of months and sometimes years to develop a rapport and trust with people and organizations within often understandably skeptical and cautious communities (Majic’s piece in this symposium addresses a similar point). In some cases, the community members and

organizations are even engaged in cooperative research efforts with us. We get to know people and organizations personally (and vice versa), as we learn their stories or study the experience of systemic processes, all the while establishing our genuine respect for and reciprocation of the time and access that they share with us. In short, we may be initially viewed warily as representatives of our profession, but it is with us as individuals that trust is developed. Not our discipline, nor our colleagues. And it is appropriate that this is so. An inherent part of this work is safeguarding the “data” that result. I feel strongly that part of my responsibility as a researcher—who has the attendant privilege that comes with my degree, institutional standing, and expertise—is that I must remain the caretaker of the research, the stories and experiences and institutional insights that are shared and garnered, as I am the one to whom others have entrusted this responsibility. As noted in the recent QTD Working Group Report on Research Ethics and Human Subjects, a researcher’s responsibility persists “from a project’s very beginning and throughout data collection and analysis, writing, and publication stages” (MacLean et al. 2019, 15). For me, this means not turning those materials over to someone else—an editor, a database, or something else over which I have no continuous control. The constrained notion of the public advanced by proponents of DA-RT does not seem to carry with it sufficient recognition or concern about DA-RT’s impact on the public that I and so many others engage through our research. It is likely for this reason that the urging to see DA-RT as a means to expand the reach of these marginalized voices rings somewhat hollow.

Without a belief in these potential benefits, it is understandable that so many feel DA-RT asks us to abdicate the caretaker role we hold dear without adequate reasoning. The kind of data we produce needs nuance and context, so erring toward openness in data access is likely to be an error with consequences. “Data” without context are more likely to be misinterpreted, and this is likely to be to the detriment of the people and places we study. Despite assurances of the ability to anonymize or veil transcripts and records to ensure the confidentiality that we promised to those we study, the level of contextual detail is difficult to modify in such a way that retains utility while simultaneously assuring that the information cannot be linked back to an individual or community. Even with one’s best efforts (especially for

vulnerable groups like the poor or undocumented), the risks clearly outweigh the benefits. This is especially so when both past and present remind us that communities are far too often stereotyped and scapegoated through oversimplified argumentation, and that facts and anecdotes can be manipulated without adequate mooring to context. From shaping the public’s sense of causation and accountability to jeopardizing government oversight or funding, the risks are real and could severely impact public health and public safety in already overburdened communities.

The Effects of DA-RT

DA-RT will create barriers to achieving the public good because it will make it more difficult to engage with the public. The time, trust, and rapport needed to conduct certain types of research are themselves sometimes a barrier, but the possibility that one would be unable to publish without putting others in jeopardy is likely to be the straw that breaks the camel’s back. While exemptions, work-arounds, and customization to different research approaches have been promised, the originating logic and motivation that imposed a narrow definition of disciplinary interests around the public interest suggest otherwise. The lack of specification about research transparency in contrast to the greater emphasis on data access suggest otherwise. What we know about how established defaults can guide individual decision-making also suggest otherwise,³ and this is especially likely to be the case among junior members of our discipline whose professional security and advancement requires conformity to prevailing publishing norms.⁴ The history of our discipline in regard to addressing inequalities and its yet incomplete aspirations to endorse a shared commitment to the public good suggest otherwise.⁵

Expertise cannot substitute for a democratically engaged citizenry (Schneider and Ingram 1997), and contributing to the public good is surely a weighty task. Perhaps political scientists can simultaneously aspire to contribute while also employing more humility about how and to what extent our research and engagement can potentially have an impact. A first step might include prioritizing caretaking of the information the public entrusts to researchers and how this information is used. Doing all we can to avoid harm to the public—especially those who entrust us with examining the details of their stories and problems—could potentially be something

3 See Thaler and Sunstein (2008) for a discussion of this research trajectory.

4 See Lake, Majic, and Maxwell 2019 for a more extended discussion and existing signs of the impact of the DA-RT debate.

5 On political science’s engagement with race and racial inequality, see e.g., Smith 2004.

upon which agreement can be built. Perhaps the critical debate around DA-RT and the mirror it holds up to our disciplinary priorities might serve as an impetus to further advance longstanding discussions about our discipline and the public good.⁶

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⁶ Here, see MacLean et al. 2019, which suggests, among other potential reforms and institutional changes, that political science as a discipline renew its attention to the ethics of research with human participants. In particular, it suggests redoubling efforts to incorporate matters of ethics into professional training, whether in graduate school or via association-led institutes. They also advocate for a much-needed update to APSA's overall ethics guidelines, a position with which I would concur, with particular attention to the critiques noted earlier in this piece.