

Every Reader a Peer Reviewer? DA-RT, Democracy, and Deskilling

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...the reason to believe a scientist's claim is not because he or she wears a lab coat [or has] a PhD...
—Lupia and Elman (2014, 20)

...documenting every step in the research process of designing and executing a research project—in a format that *everyone* can access and understand—surely will lead to better research...
—Büthe and Jacobs (2015, 61); emphasis added

Like manual labour in the past, intellectual labour now also begins to undergo a process of deskilling and precarisation.
—Previtali and Fagiani (2015, 89)

Over the course of the unfolding of the DA-RT initiative and the debates that have ensued, one of the most curious silences has been an absence of explicit discussion of how DA-RT relates to the practice that has historically differentiated social scientific claims from other sorts: peer review. If DA-RT is intended to enforce quality standards, it is taking on a role that peer review has played for quite some time.¹ As Dvora Yanow and I asked in an examination of the origins of DA-RT (2016, 11):

[W]hat, precisely, is wrong with continuing to rely on peer review for policing epistemic-community standards? While the peer review process is not without problems or critics, when it functions well, it draws on [reviewers'] expertise. Informing this expertise are evaluative standards that are to some extent codified in methods texts,

but practitioners also draw on expert knowledge that is often known tacitly (Polanyi 1966; Flyvbjerg 2001; Yanow 2015, 277–85; cf. Yashar 2016).

A search of the founders' arguments for DA-RT (Lupia and Elman 2014; Elman and Kapiszewski 2014) as well as their rejoinder to critiques (Elman and Lupia 2016) produced no references to peer review.² Is DA-RT meant to substitute for peer review, improve peer review, or be a supplement to it? To date, the critical question concerning DA-RT's relationship to peer review remains unanswered.³ Since there seems to be no associated effort to get rid of peer review, it could be that, implicitly, DA-RT is seen as a means of improving it. Alternatively, peer review may be seen as necessary (and improvable) but still insufficient. In this event, DA-RT is primarily meant to improve post-publication reading experiences and scholarly exchanges (including promoting efforts toward

1 Although some scholars have found evidence of such activity as early as the seventeenth century, the practice of peer review only became wide spread after WWII (Horbach and Halffman 2018, 2).

2 There has been some attention to peer review in political science. Referencing DA-RT in the APSA Guide to Professional Ethics (2012), Nyhan (2015a) offers three ideas for journal reform for quantitative studies. In note 7 he observes that his reform idea for "preaccepted articles" might be possible for "qualitative research," then noting that "format" is beyond his expertise (2015a, 82). Nyhan's (2015b) "checklist manifesto for peer review" does not even acknowledge the possibility of research outside a positivist, variables-based tradition, much less the inappropriateness of many items on the list to such studies.

3 The final reports of the elaborate participatory process designed by Jacobs and Büthe (2015), the Qualitative Transparency Deliberations, are now available. An examination of the 12 draft reports' treatment of "peer review" showed: five made no mention of it; six mentioned it either as sufficient—peer review is working fine—or as being harmed by DA-RT through various means, such as discouraging access to participants or archives. Only the draft document by Schwedler et al. gave guidelines related to peer review. There is a logical connection between DA-RT and peer review but, as the draft reports made clear, peer review had not been a focus initially, which is consistent with the founders' failure to explicitly discuss that connection.

reproducibility and replication⁴). Let's review these two possibilities.

Improving Peer Review?

DA-RT might be understood primarily as a means of improving peer review, of making sure that peer reviewers have still *more* access to the data used in the article and *more* information than is now the case about how the data was generated and how it figures into the author's argument/findings. As expressed in the revisions to the APSA *Guide to Professional Ethics* (2012, 10, emphasis added):

6.2 Production Transparency: Researchers providing access to data they themselves generated or collected, should offer a *full* account of the procedures used to collect or generate the data.

6.3 Analytic Transparency: Researchers making evidence-based knowledge claims should provide a *full* account of how they draw their analytic conclusions from the data, i.e., clearly explicate the links connecting data to conclusions.

These changes to the *Ethics* guide imply that something about existing scholarly practice needed fixing: the typical methods statement in a research article or methodological appendix in a book was seen as wanting, as not “a full account,” but as incomplete. The systematic evidence that standard practices have been problematic has never been offered; and, indeed, the notion that researchers had to be admonished in the *Ethics* guide to do these things seems strangely ahistorical. Since WWII, scholars have anticipated peer review, conducting research *knowing* that their particular knowledge claims would be assessed by reviewers prior to publication. As important, editors and reviewers have had the authority and power to call on authors to provide

more information on their evidence, how it was obtained, and how they used it (Isaac 2015). How, exactly, is DA-RT an improvement on these long-standing practices?

Perhaps “the problem” is that scholars have changed? In reading DA-RT proponents' arguments and listening to them at conferences, I heard one implicit theme sounded, that scholars' motivations are suspect, that they—we—need to be “incentivized” to conduct ourselves appropriately.⁵ Because the pressures to publish have become so intense, we are not to be trusted, but require more explicit guidance than that offered by the existing peer review system. Hence the change to APSA's *Ethics Guide*, and the subsequent, successful effort to coordinate agreement among editors to explicitly incorporate DA-RT into their published guidelines.⁶ Even if this aspersion cast on scholarly character were to be given credence, it is not clear that DA-RT is a reasonable means of improving researchers' ethical conduct and thereby the general trustworthiness of research.

I take specific issue with Büthe and Jacobs' statement in the second epigraph that “documenting every step in the research process of designing and executing a research project...surely will lead to better research” (2015, 61). First, why single out documentation of “every step” as opposed to the myriad other things that could make us better researchers: What about imagination and creativity? What about the relationship of our research questions to contemporary problems? What about improving our interviewing skills or writing ability? Second, the focus on giving a “full” or “complete” account seems to imagine the impossible: that every “step,” every inspiration, *can be known* explicitly and laid out verbatim. Büthe and Jacobs (2015, 61) themselves recognize that “publishing an article based on a case study should not require a supporting manuscript several times the length of the article itself.” Yet their admonishment to provide a “full”

4 Reproducibility rather than replication seems to be the actual focus of DA-RT. Reproducibility in quantitative research means that a quantitative data set, meta-data, software, and associated commands are provided to others so that they can apply the statistical techniques used by the author to check whether the results turn out the same. In contrast, a bona fide replication begins at the data generation stage, running an experiment in a new lab, repeating survey questions among the same population, or trying to achieve cold fusion (Browne 1989) using the processes claimed by the researcher. The conflation of reproducibility with replication elides ontological assumptions about the stability of the phenomenon under study. The physics of matter is law-like making replication feasible, assuming the new knowledge is valid. In contrast, human activity changes by generation and with historical events including shifting cultural underpinnings. For such reasons ontological stability should be actively theorized. King (1995) is, in part, responsible for this original conflation, failing to discuss ontological assumptions essential to conceptualizing the appropriateness of replication to the social sciences.

5 Whenever I hear “incentivized,” I must admit that it makes me cringe as it is the language not of the academy but of “New Public Management” (NPM). That “innovation” in governance practices imagines that workers are not intrinsically motivated, not agentic, but, instead, *homo economicus*, responding to “incentives” dangled before them by oh-so-wise managers (deans and presidents intent on improving the national rankings of their departments and institutions). NPM is part of the larger trend toward the corporatization of the university (see, e.g., Strathern 2008, Broucker and De Wit 2015).

6 See the Workshop on Data Access and Research Transparency (DA-RT) in Political Science, 2014.

account—complete, comprehensive, all-encompassing and, my favorite synonym, exhaustive, as the effort to do so will, in fact, be exhausting—reminds me of the famous Jorge Luis Borges story in which the science of cartography becomes so exact that cartographers “struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it” (Borges, 1998, 325). As the fable recounts, succeeding generations judged the map worthless. Will scholars in twenty years’ time look back at the tumultuous Obama-Trump years and ask, “*This* was the preoccupation of the political science discipline?”

Returning to peer review, if we think about its purposes, it accomplishes two very specific things: it gives tailored advice to authors about what they must do to achieve publication in one particular journal for their particular projects, and it signals that readers (of any stripe) should have confidence in the article because relevant experts assessed the research and found it both worthy of publication and as offering trustworthy knowledge claims. On the former, the general admonitions of DA-RT hardly seem an improvement over the project-centered assessments from peer reviewers. To the latter purpose of signals to readers, I now turn.

Improving Readers’ Experience / Empowering Readers?

Perhaps DA-RT is aimed at improving the post-publication experience of readers.⁷ The implication seems to be that readers themselves want the opportunity to do their own review of the evidentiary basis of what they’re reading. And, indeed, DA-RT takes for granted that post-publication readers will be accessing the author’s evidence either through “trusted digital repositories” and/or directly via “active citation,” a technological innovation made possible by the internet which provides links to particular bits of the evidence base that support particular parts of an author’s argument. The ideal is that the author will also annotate these evidentiary sources, so that the reader can directly assess the author’s logic for why that particular evidence supports that particular part of the argument (see Figure 1, in Moravcsik 2014, 51). Of course, to some extent the longstanding use of footnotes accomplishes some of what is envisioned, but

now, this will be facilitated by instantaneous access to texts (assuming functioning links).

Who are these imagined readers? Lupia and Elman characterize the audiences for DA-RT as fourfold (2014, 22): members of a particular research community, scholars outside that immediate community, those who want to use the research as a basis for action (their example is teachers), and “public and private sector decision makers.” For each of these groups, it is the *possibility* of looking at the evidence *for themselves* that is important, in contrast to, as Lupia and Elman put it (2014, 22), knowledge “claims whose origins are... hidden.” In other words, for these four audiences, expert peer review prior to publication is insufficient. Moreover, an associated implication is that all of these audience members are somehow as or more qualified than the peer reviewers or the author him- or herself to assess the evidence!

Andrew Moravcsik is the most enthusiastic promoter of active citation, arguing that it will give scholars “greater incentives to improve their qualitative methodological skills” (2012, 35). But, more than that, in his view: “While active citation encourages more careful research, it will also empower critics. By revealing evidence at a single click, active citation will democratize the field, letting new and critical voices be heard” (2012, 36). Moravcsik goes so far as to envision a new future:

In all these ways, active citation can be understood as a way of transforming traditional hierarchies of control and publication into an open, virtual network, in which new and plural streams of evidence and interpretation can emerge—while still imposing discursive rules that require some substantial commitment from serious participants in the scholarly debate, and permit others to voice their objections (2012, 36-7).

This future is desirable because, in his view, peer review does not function well. Ironically, without citation to any systematic studies, he states that:

It is common—yet almost never remarked by referees or reviewers—that citations lack page numbers, secondary materials are cherry-picked from historical debates, journalistic conjectures are cited to establish causality, primary sources are taken out of context, or important empirical points rest on the interpretations of generation-old historians whose work has been overturned

7 I’m setting aside reproducibility and replication as much ink has been devoted to that and relatively less to “readers.” But see note 4 on the conflation of two these concepts.

by subsequent scholarship (Moravcsik 2010, 34).

Notwithstanding a loosened link between active citation and DA-RT,⁸ Moravcsik's argument merits further examination—not only because he offers a critique of peer review but, also, because his is a clear explication of what transparency is meant to accomplish. His 2012 article references his detailed assessment of six criticisms of active citation (2010, 33-34), and he then concludes, “For the most part, I find them without much substance—in part because other disciplines have adopted similar practices without ill consequences” (2012, 36). The disciplines that he takes as models are history⁹ and legal scholarship. Lacking in-depth familiarity with either of these, I cannot confidently assess his rebuttal. But I am wary of his evoking democratization as a rationale for active citation, and I am troubled by his additional comment that “one can imagine some preferring that scholarly debates remain restricted to a small number of insiders, as they are today, even with the resulting costs in scholarly quality and the anti-democratic hierarchy” (2012, 36). Who are these “insiders” who have the power to restrict debate? Are these the peer reviewers chosen by editors? As important, is democratization, as he sees it, an improvement over the existing peer review system?

Let's take a hypothetical case. Imagine that a reader clicks on a link that takes her to a legal text in Spanish from the Colombian parliament. To make sense of that bit of evidence, she needs the ability to read Spanish but also to make sense of legal discourse in that context. Assuming she has those skills, she will still, in most cases, lack the in-depth knowledge of the specific information the researcher has drawn on to make sense of this particular bit of information as it plays a role in the analysis of the entire body of evidence. Should she trust her own abilities or should she trust in the peer

review process, which has vetted the author's research? Put another way, Moravcsik and DA-RT seem to imply that the researchers' (and peer reviewers') expertise is not to be trusted, whereas it assumes that any reader from any of these four audiences has the ability to make sense of such evidence without having the in-depth education of a disciplinary Ph.D. or the situational knowledge of the research setting, much less the time to devote to the topic at hand.¹⁰

Of course, it is members of Lupia and Elman's (2014) first two communities who have more of what it takes to assess this evidence, i.e., the disciplinary Ph.D., familiarity with scholarly discourse and norms of argumentation, and perhaps the requisite language skills and familiarity with legal jargon and modes of analysis. Even these two audiences, however, will lack what the author can claim: in-depth knowledge of the case and its socio-political setting, gained through time spent generating and analyzing the evidence (as Renee Cramer explicates in her contribution to this symposium). As has always been the case pre-DA-RT, the onus is on the author to make the case to peer reviewers that her knowledge claims are trustworthy; and, again, peer reviewers have or can request access to evidence they deem missing. That said, ultimately, peer reviewers must trust researchers to some extent—that researchers have acted ethically (i.e., not fabricating data) and have reported their modes of analysis in good faith. If in doubt, they can challenge the manuscript.

Turtles all the Way Down: Trust in Scholars

Part of what seems to motivate DA-RT is decreasing trust in researchers. They are expected under DA-RT to somehow lay bare every decision and every insight for inspection—almost seeming to imply that, from this

8 Understanding how active citation relates to DA-RT requires examination of two versions of the statement endorsed by those editors who committed to implementing it at their journals. The first document is “Data Access and Research Transparency (DA-RT): A Joint Statement by Political Science Journal Editors” available at http://media.wix.com/ugd/fa8393_da017d3fed824cf587932534c860ea25.pdf (accessed February 18, 2019) from a workshop held at the University of Michigan. That active citation was a part of the discussion at the workshop is clear on its first page, which states: “The materials that an author might provide to show her analytic procedures, for example, could include program code, pre-analysis plans, activated citations, and so on.” The sentence ends with an endnote to Moravcsik's 2010 article on active citation, published in a *PS* symposium that was one of the first efforts of those promoting DA-RT, including the 2014 article by Colin Elman and Diana Kapiszewski. The second version of the statement, what is now being called “JETS,” for the Journal Editors' Transparency Statement, is available at <https://www.dartstatement.org/2014-journal-editors-statement-jets> (accessed February 18, 2019). This version no longer includes the reference to the location of the Workshop at the University of Michigan, the sponsorship by APSA, nor the four-paragraph background section that included the quotation above. The removal of that section would seem to imply the downplaying of active citation as part of the DA-RT program, although the requirement remains that authors clearly delineate “the analytical procedures upon which their published claims rely, and where possible ... provide access to all relevant analytical materials.”

9 Moravcsik's own use of historical sources has been challenged forcefully by Lieshout, Segers, and van der Vleuten (2004).

10 Readers of a certain age may be able to recall the naïve enthusiasm with which some initially greeted the internet—as if it would usher a new period of peace and understanding. Instead, the internet has produced rumor mongering that has, at times, produced physical violence, e.g., in Pizzagate (Fisher et al. 2016). What unintended consequences might the democratization of peer review produce?

information, the reader should be able to (re)conduct the research! But who among one's readers will do so? And why would we expect them to? In contrast, what peer review ideally produces (though not inevitably) is a peer, or a set of them, capable of reviewing a specific manuscript. When the process works as intended, he or she can be expected to read a manuscript at least once with care, perhaps going back to particular parts or checking his or her own comprehension in the preparation of the review. This assumes that the peer reviewer has been selected by editors based on theoretical and methodological expertise and knowledge of the general and specific existing literatures engaged by the researcher—that is the ideal and the norm that most editors strive for.

At its logical extreme, echoing the third epigraph of Previtali and Fagiani above, DA-RT implies a “deskilling” of the researcher who, after all, has invested years in obtaining the PhD. As Lupia and Elman claim in the opening epigraph, the reason to believe a scientist's claim is not because she has a PhD. Instead, it is her ability to fully reveal all of what she has done to accomplish the

research which will somehow render her both ethical and open to all readers. Under DA-RT, her years of investment in the PhD and her specific project become erased, her embodied effort denigrated by an absurd notion that any reader has the skill to make sense of her evidence. This web-enabled “democratization” may sound tempting: “Why shouldn't anyone be able to examine the evidence for themselves?” Yet there is a clear tension between that impulse and the roles many academics fashion for themselves as experts in their research areas. Whither expertise in an “open, virtual network?” It's a question DA-RT proponents should be asking.

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