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The Tyranny of Light

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*In these dark rooms where I live out empty days
I wander round and round
trying to find the windows.*

*It will be a great relief when a window opens.
But the windows aren't there to be found—
or at least I can't find them. And perhaps
it's better if I don't find them.*

*Perhaps the light will prove another tyranny.
Who knows what new things it will expose?*

—Constantine Cavafy

"I celebrate opacity, secretiveness, and obstruction!" proclaimed no one, ever, in the social sciences.

As with "love" and "democracy," merely uttering the words transparency and openness generates a Pavlovian stream of linguistically induced serotonin. Who, really, would want to come out on record as a transparency-basher, an openness-hater?

But as with love and democracy, it is the specific details of what is meant by transparency and openness, rather than their undeniable power and appeal as social science ideals, that most matter. This, to me, is the single most important point to be made about the DA-RT¹ initiative that has provoked this QMMR symposium:

DA-RT does not equal transparency, and transparency does not equal DA-RT.

Rather, DA-RT is a particular *instantiation*, and—if its proponents have their way—an increasingly institutionalized and "incentivized"² *interpretation* of transparency and openness, one which draws its strength from a specific, and contestable, vision of what political science has been—and, equally important—what it should become.

DA-RT proponents argue that they are simply reinforcing a key universal value—transparency—and that they are not doing so in any way that troubles, challenges, reorders, or

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¹ Data Access and Research Transparency.

² Translation: rewards and punishments can and will be applied for compliance and noncompliance.

imposes an explicit or implicit hierarchy of worth on the ontological and epistemic diversity of existing research communities and traditions within the discipline. DA-RT, in this view, is a strictly neutral vessel, at its core an a-political or depoliticized set of guidelines which scholars from every research tradition should then take and decide for themselves how to best implement and enforce. To wit:

“...a critical attribute of DA-RT is that it does not impose a uniform set of standards on political scientists.”³

“...openness requires everyone to show their work, but what they show and how they show it varies. These differences are grounded in epistemic commitments and the rule-bound expectations of the tradition in which scholars operate.”⁴

In this essay, I advance a reading of DA-RT that seeks to trouble its purported neutrality. In particular, I briefly sketch two intertwined dimensions that I believe deserve closer attention and discussion prior to an enthusiastic embrace of discipline-wide transparency standards. The first is historical and contextual, a kind of time-line of DA-RT’s development, a sociological account of the key players involved as well as their motivating logics, and a look at the mechanisms of institutionalization, “incentivization,” and enforcement that are currently being deployed to normalize DA-RT across the discipline. The second is ontological and epistemological: the rapid, near-automatic, and all-but-unnoticed collapse of the wonderfully ambiguous categories “research communities” and “research traditions” into the two tired but tenacious proxies of “qualitative research” and “quantitative research,” proxies that do more in practice to suffocate than to nurture the generative plurality of ontological, epistemological, and even stylistic and aesthetic modes that constitutes the core strength of our discipline.⁵

It is crucial to understand that, on its proponents’ own account, the original motivation for both DA-RT and for the APSA Ethics Guidelines Revisions that authorized the DA-RT committee to do its work derive directly from concerns about replicability in empirical research conducted within positivist logics of inquiry. Specifically, “APSA’s governing council, under the leadership of president Henry E. Brady, began an examination of research transparency. Its initial concerns were focused on the growing concern that scholars could not replicate a significant number of empirical claims that were being made in the discipline’s leading journals.”⁶ As the dominant DA-RT narrative has it, this emerging crisis of replicability in positivist political science⁷ was soon found to also exist, in

³ Lupia and Elman 2014, 20.

⁴ Elman and Kapiszewski 2014, 44.

⁵ For elaboration on this point, see my (2013) review of Gary Goertz and James Mahoney’s *A Tale of Two Cultures*.

⁶ Lupia and Elman 2014, 19.

⁷ See, for example, “Replication Frustration in Political Science,” on the Political Science Replication Blog (<https://politicalscience.replication.wordpress.com/2013/01/03/replication-frustration-in-political-science/>, last accessed 6/27/2015). Or, more dramatically, the

different registers, for a range of scholars “from different methodological and substantive subfields.”⁸ Thus, while the DA-RT narrative acknowledges its specific and particular origins in concerns over replication of empirical studies conducted within positivist logics of inquiry, it moves quickly from there to claiming a widespread (discipline-wide?) set of shared concerns about similar problems across other methodological and substantive subfields.

DA-RT proponents further assert that, “an unusually diverse set of political scientists identified common concerns and aspirations, both in their reasons for wanting greater openness and in the benefits that new practices could bring.”⁹ But the DA-RT statement produced by these political scientists, as well as the list of initial DA-RT journal endorsements, strongly suggests that this purported diversity was almost certainly within-set diversity, diversity of subfields and methodologies deployed *within* positivist logics of inquiry rather than across logics of inquiry that might include, for example, interpretive logics of inquiry.¹⁰ As Appendices A and B of APSA’s DA-RT statement and the January 2014 *PS* Symposium’s disaggregation into DA-RT “in the Qualitative Tradition”¹¹ versus DA-RT “in the Quantitative Tradition”¹² format suggests, we once again witness the ways in which the type of information a researcher works with (numbers vs. text) simultaneously obscures and usurps a potentially generative discussion about the underlying logics of inquiry that researchers work within and across.

The existing language used to justify DA-RT’s universal applicability across the discipline is particularly illuminating here, especially the strongly worded assertion that “[t]he methodologies political scientists use to reach evidence-based conclusions *all* involve extracting information from the social world, analyzing the resulting data, and reaching a conclusion based on that combination of the evidence and its analysis.”¹³ Attention to the specificity of language deployed here signals immediately that we are working within a decidedly positivist conception of the world. Most scholars working within an interpretive logic of inquiry would not be so quick to characterize their evidence-based work as being about the *extraction of information* from the social world and the subsequent analy-

unfolding and emerging story of outright fabrication, including fabrication of the replication of a fabrication, surrounding LaCour and Green 2014.

⁸ Lupia and Elman 2014, 20.

⁹ Lupia and Elman 2014, 20.

¹⁰ As of the writing of this essay, <www.dartstatement.org> notes that thus far 25 journal editors have signed on to the DA-RT statement. But there are notable exceptions. Jeff Isaac of *Perspectives on Politics* wrote a prescient letter that outlines not only why he would not sign the DA-RT statement on behalf of *Perspectives* but also why its adoption as a discipline-wide standard might prove detrimental rather than constructive. Other top disciplinary journals that are currently not signatories to DA-RT include *Polity*, *World Politics*, *Comparative Politics*, *ISQ*, and *Political Theory*.

¹¹ Elman and Kapiszewski 2014.

¹² Lupia and Alter 2014.

¹³ Elman and Kapiszewski 2014, 44, emphasis in the original.

sis of the *data* byproducts of this extraction, but would instead speak about the co-constitution of intersubjective knowledge in collaboration with the social world.¹⁴ The D in DA-RT stands, of course, for data, and it is this underlying and unexamined assertion that *all* evidence-based social science is about the *extraction* of *information* which is then subsequently processed and analyzed as *data* in order to produce social science *knowledge* that most clearly signals that the diversity of disciplinary interests represented by DA-RT is both less sweeping and less compelling than is claimed by the dominant DA-RT narrative. In short, quite apart from how DA-RT might be implemented and enforced at the disciplinary level, the very ontological framework of *data extraction* that undergirds DA-RT is itself already anything but neutral with regard to other logics of inquiry that have been long-established as valuable approaches to the study of power.

To be fair, some DA-RT proponents did subsequently advance arguments for the benefits of DA-RT in research communities that do not value replication, as well as in research communities that prize context-specific understanding over generalized explanation.¹⁵ But, as justifications for the importance and necessity of DA-RT *for these communities* in the context of concerns that originated out of a crisis of replication in positivist social science, these arguments seem weak and ad hoc; they sit uncomfortably and awkwardly in the broader frame of *data extraction*; and they fail to demonstrate that members of those communities themselves have been experiencing any sort of crisis of openness or transparency that might cause them to advocate for and invite a disciplinary wide solution like DA-RT.

Take, for example, the surprising assertion advanced in an article on the value of “Data Access and Research Transparency in the Qualitative Tradition” that “[a]lthough the details differ across research traditions, DA-RT allows qualitative scholars to demonstrate the power of their inquiry, offering an

¹⁴ There are several sophisticated treatments of this basic point. See, for example, Patrick Jackson’s distinction between dualist and monist ontologies; Dvora Yanow’s (2014) essay on the philosophical underpinnings of interpretive logics of inquiry; Peregrine Schwartz-Shea’s (2014) distinctions between criteria of evaluation for evidence-based research conducted within positivist and interpretivist logics of inquiry; Lisa Wedeen’s (2009) outlining of the key characteristics of interpretivist logics of inquiry; Frederic Schaffer’s (2015) treatment of concepts and language from an interpretivist perspective; and Lee Ann Fujii (Forthcoming).

¹⁵ The single paragraph in the pro-DA-RT literature that seems to most directly address interpretive logics of inquiry reads: “Members of other research communities do not validate one another’s claims by repeating the analyses that produced them. In these communities, the justification for transparency is not replication, but understandability and persuasiveness. The more material scholars make available, the more they can accurately relate such claims to a legitimating context. When readers are empowered to make sense of others [sic] arguments in these ways, the more pathways exist for readers to believe and value knowledge claims” (Lupia and Elman 2014, 22). As I argue below, this paragraph offers a partial description of what interpretive scholars already do, not an argument for why DA-RT is needed.

opportunity to address a central paradox: *that scholars who value close engagement with the social world and generate rich, thick data rarely discuss the contours of that engagement, detail how they generated and deployed those data, or share the valuable fruits of their rigorous labor.*¹⁶

For interpretive methods such as interpretive ethnography, the italicized portion of this statement is nonsensical. There is no such central paradox in interpretive ethnography because the very foundations of interpretive ethnography rest on an ontology in which the social world in which the researcher immerses, observes, and participates is already always co-constituted in intersubjective relationship with the researcher. A work of interpretive ethnography that did not seek to centrally discuss the contours of the researcher’s engagement with the social world, that did not aim to detail how the researcher generated and deployed the material that constitutes her ethnography, and that did not strive to share that material in richly specific, extraordinarily lush and detailed language would not just fail to persuade a readership of interpretive ethnographers: it would, literally, cease to be recognizable as a work of interpretive ethnography!

Where other modes of research and writing might prize the construction and presentation of a gleaming and flawless edifice, two key criteria for the persuasiveness of an interpretive ethnography are the degree to which the ethnographer leaves up enough of the scaffolding in her finished ethnography to give a thick sense to the reader of how the building was constructed *and* the degree to which the finished ethnography includes enough detailed specificity, enough rich lushness, about the social world(s) she is interpreting that the reader can challenge, provoke, and interrogate the ethnographer’s interpretations using the very material she has provided as an inherent part of the ethnographic narrative.¹⁷

To put it another way, the very elements of transparency and openness—what interpretive ethnographers often refer to as reflexivity and attention to embodiment and positionality—that DA-RT proponents see as *lacking* in deeply contextual qualitative work constitute the very hallmarks of interpretive ethnography as a mode of research, analysis, and writing. What is more, interpretive ethnography prioritizes dimensions that go beyond what is called for by DA-RT, encouraging its practitioners to ask reflexive questions about positionality and power, including ethnographers’ positionality and power as embodied researchers interacting with and producing politically and socially legitimated “knowledge” about the social world, and the potential impacts and effects of that embodied interaction and knowledge production.

Indeed, the types of reflexivity valued by interpretive approaches would question the adequacy of how DA-RT conceives of openness and transparency and would seek instead to examine the power relations implied by a model of research

¹⁶ Elman and Kapiszewski 2014, 46, emphasis mine.

¹⁷ For further elaboration on the importance of reflexivity to interpretive ethnography, see Pachirat 2009a. For key rhetorical characteristics of a persuasive ethnography, see Yanow 2009.

in which the researcher's relationship to the research world is *extractive* in nature and in which transparency and openness are prized primarily in the inter-subjective relationships between researchers and other researchers, but not between the researcher and the research world from which he *extracts information* which he then *processes into data for analysis*. For interpretive ethnographers, research is not an extractive industry like mountain top coal mining, deep water oil drilling, or, for that matter, dentistry. Rather, it is an embodied, intersubjective, and inherently relational enterprise in which close attention to the power relations between an embodied researcher and the research world(s) she moves among and within constitutes a key and necessary part of the interpretive analysis.¹⁸

In any potential application to interpretive ethnographic research, then, DA-RT seems very much like a solution in search of a problem. Indeed, in its purported neutrality; in its collapsing of "research communities" into the tired but tenacious prefabricated categories of quantitative and qualitative rather than a deeper and much more generative engagement with the diversity of underlying logics of inquiry in the study of power; and in its enforcement through journal policies and discipline-wide ethics guidelines that are insufficiently attentive to ontology and logic-of-inquiry specific diversities, DA-RT risks becoming a solution that generates problems that did not exist before.

Here is one such potential DA-RT generated problem: the claim, already advanced in "Guidelines for Data Access and Research Transparency for Qualitative Research in Political Science," that ethnographers should—in the absence of countervailing human subjects protections or legal concerns—post to a repository the fieldnotes, diaries, and other personal records written or recorded in the course of their fieldwork.¹⁹ But, really, why stop with requiring ethnographers to post their fieldnotes, diaries, and personal records? Why not also require the ethnographer to wear 24 hour, 360 degree, Visual and Audio Recording Technology (VA-RT) that will be digi-

¹⁸ For an example of this kind of close attention to power in relation to a specific fieldsite, see my ethnography in Pachirat 2011. For an example of this kind of reflexive analysis of power at the disciplinary level, see Oren 2003.

¹⁹ See DA-RT Ad Hoc Committee 2014, 26. The specific wording reads: "The document's contents apply to all qualitative analytic techniques employed to support evidence-based claims, as well as all qualitative source materials [including data from interviews, focus groups, or oral histories; fieldnotes (for instance from participant observation or ethnography); diaries and other personal records....]" I believe concerned ethnographers need to take issue with the underlying logic of this guideline itself and not simply rely on built-in exemptions for human subjects protections to sidestep an attempt to normalize the posting of fieldnotes to repositories. Also note that the main qualitative data repository created in conjunction with DA-RT, the Qualitative Data Repository (QDR), does not contain a single posting of fieldnotes, diaries, or other personal records from ethnographic fieldwork. Where ethnographers have used the QDR, it is to post already publicly available materials such as YouTube clips of public performances. Further, I am not aware of any ethnographic work within political science, anthropology, or sociology for which fieldnotes have been made available in a repository.

tally livestreamed to an online data repository and time-stamped against all fieldwork references in the finished ethnography? Would the time-stamped, 24 hour, 360 degree VA-RT then constitute the raw "data" that transparently verifies both the "data" and the ethnographer's interpretation and analysis of those data?²⁰ VA-RT for DA-RT!

VA-RT dramatizes a mistaken view that the ethnographer's fieldnotes, diaries, and personal records constitute a form of raw "data" that can then be checked against any "analysis" in the finished ethnography. The fallacy underlying the mistaken proposal that ethnographic fieldnotes, diaries, and other personal records should be posted to an online repository derives from at least three places.

The first is an extractive ontology inherent in a view of the research world as a source of informational raw material rather than as a specifically relational and deeply intersubjective enterprise. Fieldnotes, and even VA-RT, will always already contain within them the intersubjective relations and the implicit and explicit interpretations that shape both the substance and the form of the finished ethnographic work.²¹ Quite simply, there is no prior non-relational, non-interpretive moment of raw information or data to reference back to. What this means is not only that there is no prior raw "data" to reference back to, but that any attempt to de-personalize and remove identifying information from fieldnotes in order to comply with confidentiality and human subjects concerns will render the fieldnotes themselves unintelligible, something akin to a declassified document in which only prepositions and conjunctions are not blacked out.

Second, fieldnotes, far from being foundational truth-objects upon which the "research product" rests, are themselves texts in need of interpretation. Making them "transparent" in an online repository in no way resolves or obviates the very questions of meaning and interpretation that interpretive scholars strive to address.²²

And third, neither fieldnotes nor VA-RT offer a safeguard "verification" device regarding the basic veracity of a researcher's claims. The researcher produces both, in the end, and both, in the end, are dependent on the researcher's trustworthiness. For it would not be impossible for a researcher to

²⁰ And, in the spirit of discipline-wide neutrality, why not implement the same VA-RT requirements for all field researchers in political science, including interviewers, survey-takers, focus-group leaders, and field experimenters? Indeed, why not require VA-RT for large-N statistical researchers as well, and not only during their analysis of existing datasets but also during the prior construction and coding of those data sets? I hope to write more soon on this thought experiment, which provides a nice inversion of a prior ontology-related thought experiment, the Fieldwork Invisibility Potion (FIP). See Pachirat 2009b.

²¹ On the inherently interpretive enterprise of writing fieldnotes, see Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011. In particular, Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw demonstrate how fieldnotes, no matter how descriptive, are already filters through which the ethnographer is attending to certain aspects of the research situation over others.

²² My thanks to Richard Payne for his keen articulation of this point.

fabricate fieldnotes, nor to stage performances or otherwise alter a VA-RT recording.

The notion of a “data repository,” either for ethnographic fieldnotes or for VA-RT, is dangerous—at least for interpretive scholarship—both because it elides the interpretive moments that undergird every research interaction with the research world in favor of a non-relational and anonymized conception of “information” and “data,” and because it creates the illusion of a fail-proof safeguard against researcher fabrication where in fact there is none other than the basic trustworthiness of the researcher and her ability to communicate that trustworthiness persuasively to her readers through the scaffolding and specificity of her finished ethnography.

Political scientists do not need VA-RT for DA-RT. Instead, we keenly need—to roughly translate back into the language of my positivist friends—a much better specification of DA-RT’s scope conditions. Something like DA-RT may indeed be appropriate for positivist traditions of social inquiry in the discipline. But it does not therefore follow that DA-RT should be applied, at however general or abstracted a level, to research communities and traditions in the discipline which are already constituted in their very identity by keen and sustained attention to how the positionality of the researcher in the research world constitutes not only what she sees, but also how she sees it and gives it meaning. Indeed, interpretivists have long argued that scholars working within all modes of inquiry, and the discipline as a whole, would benefit enormously from a much higher level of reflexivity concerning the underpinnings of our research and our knowledge claims. If broader calls for transparency signal a movement toward greater reflexivity within non-interpretivist traditions of social inquiry in the discipline, they deserve both cautious applause and encouragement to expand their existing notions of transparency and openness in ways that acknowledge and embrace their intersubjective relationships and entanglements with the communities, cultures, and ecosystems in which they conduct research and on which their research sometimes returns to act.

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