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## Area Studies and the Cost of Prematurely Implementing DA-RT

by Marc Lynch

George Washington University

At the May 2015 annual meeting of the [Project on Middle East Political Science \(POMEPS\)](#) at George Washington University, a plenary discussion convened to discuss the implications of the recently released Journal Editors Transparency Statement (JETS) signed by more than two dozen political science journal editors committing to new standards of data access and research transparency (DA-RT). Only one out of more than forty political scientists in attendance — including scholars versed in quantitative and qualitative methods, full professors and graduate students, even officers in APSA organized sections — had even heard of the DA-RT initiative. None had thought about how such blanket standards might affect their own research. All were horrified at the idea that such standards would come into effect in barely half a year with minimal input on their part, with a potentially major impact on their ability to publish in disciplinary journals.

Their response anticipated the intense public and private discussions about DA-RT which consumed the September 2015 annual conference of the APSA. The neglect of the concerns of scholars working in the developing world is perhaps explained by their near complete absence from the drafting process. Only three of the 34 named participants in the pivotal 2014 University of Michigan ICPSR workshop were comparativists specializing in any part of the non-Western world. Not a single political scientist specializing in the Middle East is identified as participating in any of the DA-RT deliberations listed on its website.<sup>1</sup> Scholars working on the Middle East have been grappling with issues related to data access, transparency, and research ethics for a long time (Lynch, 2014). They face issues common to many scholars working in authoritarian contexts and conflict zones (Parkinson and Wood, 2015; Fujii, 2012).

As both the director of POMEPS and a sitting member of the APSA Council, I support the call for a delay in the implementation of DA-RT standards that more

<sup>1</sup>A very small number of such scholars did participate in private DA-RT workshops whose participant list is not available online. The list of workshops can be viewed at <http://www.dartstatement.org/>

than 1,200 political scientists have now signed.<sup>2</sup> The process to date has been insufficiently inclusive and deliberative, and it would be damaging to the discipline to prematurely implement standards that have not been fully vetted. Is there anything comparable in the history of political science of a top-down, rapid, multi-journal imposition of such a dramatic change in publication requirements? Fortunately, the year-long process for formal deliberation proposed by the former, current, and incoming Presidents of the APSA in a thoughtful recent statement offers a roadmap that could, if implemented appropriately, allow for the full inclusion of the petitioners' concerns in the process.<sup>3</sup>

As a scholar of Middle East politics, especially one deeply involved in policy debates, I see several issues that merit significantly more debate. Political scientists working in the Middle East have long been concerned about the protection of human subjects, and worry that new transparency requirements could go against painstakingly developed best practices. Most political scientists working in the region do not record interviews, for instance, because doing so will cause their interlocutors to heavily self-censor for fear of the recordings being used against them by omnipresent security services. To this point, Institutional Review Boards (IRB) have been the primary recourse for both supporters and critics of DA-RT. Critics warn that they legally cannot comply with the standards because of IRB restrictions, while supporters suggest that the standards could be waived when contradicted by a formal IRB mandate. This IRB-based discussion has been unsatisfying, however. IRB committees have widely divergent standards from institution to institution, however, and have not typically had positive associations for scholars working in the Middle East (Brown, 2014). IRBs often focus on the wrong issues, substituting bureaucratic checklists for the real challenges facing researchers and their interlocutors (Bhattacharya, 2014). There is also a real risk that, assurances aside, authors invoking IRB protections will be viewed as suspect or second-rate, subtly encouraging scholars to erode such protections in order to gain access to prestigious journals.

While necessary, IRB protections also do not substitute for a full discussion of research ethics and the

complex requirements of protecting interlocutors in repressive, violent, and unpredictable contexts. The difficulty of guaranteeing confidentiality for materials deposited in a trusted repository are not hypothetical to those of us who conduct research in the Middle East and North Africa. Our interlocutors are often at deep personal risk of imprisonment, abuse, torture, or death at the hands of autocratic, repressive regimes. Conditions in such countries can change rapidly, and protections that seem exaggerated today may be essential tomorrow. In Egypt alone, at least three dozen people I have interviewed for research are currently in prison on political charges, often for critical statements or protest activities that seemed bold but safe during a revolutionary period of open politics but were criminalized following the July 2013 military coup. Details of seemingly safe interviews posted to a data repository in 2012 could easily now put other interlocutors at great personal risk. There is a reason that conflict-zone researchers go to extreme lengths to conceal identities of interview subjects: their lives could very well be at risk (Fujii, 2012). Any data archive which is accessible to peer reviewers could not be effectively inaccessible to prying governments seeking such information. Even worse, recent legal developments such as the opening of IRA oral histories deposited at Boston College raise important new doubts about such protections (Parkinson, 2014).

While the implication of the JETS is that non-compliance will downgrade the reputation of non-DART journals and the research which appears in them, I suspect that the impact factor and quality of such journals will actually go up as top scholars unwilling or unable to comply with DA-RT requirements redirect their publications towards them.

A second concern raised by Middle East scholars is that DA-RT standards impose a genuinely burdensome amount of new work, particularly for ongoing projects begun under old standards (Saunders, 2014). Language, translation, and transliteration issues are not inconsiderable. For example, my active citation to an Arabic newspaper or video would be of little use to a

<sup>2</sup>The petition, authored by Nancy Hirschmann, Mala Htun, Jane Mansbridge, Kathleen Thelen, Lisa Wedeen, and Elisabeth Wood can be found at <http://dialogueondart.org>

<sup>3</sup>The November 24, 2015, statement by Rodney Hero, Jennifer Hochschild, David Lake, and Steven Smith can be found at <http://www.politicalsciencenow.com/data-access-and-research-transparency-initiative-da-rt/>.

non-Arabic speaking reviewer, so does it become a best practice obligation that I fully translate the whole article? Must I transcribe and translate all of my interviews and interview notes, where in the past I kept them in my own files in the original Arabic? Who will pay for all of this time, effort, and archiving requirements, particularly for junior scholars or for scholars from institutions that lack the resources to subsidize such research practices (Kapiszewski and Kirilova, 2014)?

Scholars with long experience of research in the Middle East also raise serious questions about privileging the goal of reproducible results above other measures of valid and robust research.<sup>4</sup> My interview notes tell only part of any story developed through deep knowledge of local context, dense webs of interlocutors engaged over years, and immersion in distinctive narratives and interpretive worldviews. Of course any such scholar would include footnotes to specific quotes, tweets, or documents. But such ‘smoking gun’ quotes are only a window into a much broader process of interpretation rooted in years of deciphering political and interpretive context (Snyder, 2014). There are also deeper questions about the starting point for transparency to commence. Schwedler (2014) notes that transparency issues begin not with the construction or interpretation of a dataset but with the questions being asked and the methods chosen to study them. Would active citation or data repositories make transparent why a scholar chose to study the impact of drone strikes or the causes of Palestinian terrorism rather than some other topic?

One of the key arguments for DA-RT is that it is vital for the profession’s public and policy engagement. But this is also one of its weakest legs. Public engagement by political scientists involves asking important questions relevant to the public policy arena, generating novel insights, presenting robust and compelling evidence, and communicating those insights and evidence quickly and effectively to relevant audiences (Druckman, 2015; Lynch, 2016). DA-RT has no impact at all on three of those four dimensions and could even have a negative impact if its requirements slow down publication times or deter scholars from asking certain types of questions or generating certain types of evidence. The strongest case for DA-RT’s contribution to policy relevance lies with the third aspect, robust and compelling evidence, but even here there is (ironically) no

evidence to support the claim that DA-RT would in fact increase the credibility of political science’s evidence-based claims. Policymakers and the engaged public do need to trust that journal editors and peer review have vetted research, but most are not particularly interested in the mechanics of the process by which that happens. There are more direct, useful ways to pursue the goal of policy relevance (Hochschild, 2015; Lupia and Aldrich, 2015; Lynch, 2016).

For all the sincere efforts to engage the concerns of qualitative scholars (Moravcsik, 2014; Elman and Kapiszewski, 2014), DA-RT poses much more profound conceptual and practical problems for qualitative researchers than it does for quantitative researchers. Whether intentional or not, the DA-RT standards will privilege some methodologies over others and influence publication patterns in the field. For quantitatively-oriented research communities, sharing data and code are relatively routinized practices associated with established norms. DA-RT actually asks more of qualitative scholars, for whom the ‘thinking premium’ and start-up costs for implementing DA-RT standards are much higher. This is not because they believe that such scholarship should not be held to standards of research transparency and analytical clarity. There has been an active caucus in the APSA working to advance such methodological standards for several years, and journals featuring qualitative research have long required high standards of research transparency.

One of the implications of the current process is likely to be the further distancing of disparate subfields and intellectual communities. While the implication of the JETS is that non-compliance will downgrade the reputation of non-DART journals and the research which appears in them, I suspect that the impact factor and quality of such journals will actually go up as top scholars unwilling or unable to comply with DA-RT requirements redirect their publications towards them. This may further encourage the fragmentation of the field.

Postponing DA-RT implementation to allow for a discipline-wide deliberative process makes eminent sense. There simply has not been adequate time or opportunity yet for such deliberation among all affected by these decisions, and there is little reason for a sense

<sup>4</sup>These issues were discussed brilliantly by several scholars at the DA-RT special session at the September 2014 APSA conference; also see the essays in the 2015 QMMR Newsletter (Büthe and Jacobs, 2015).

of urgency about implementation. The January 2014 *PS: Political Science and Politics* DA-RT symposium effectively introduced the initiative, but there was little reason for others to expect that it had greater institutional standing than the many other similar symposia published on professional issues. The JETS was drafted at a private workshop in September 2014, and posted shortly thereafter (Elman and Lupia, 2015).<sup>5</sup> The maximum period of time in which political scientists could have realistically been aware of DA-RT before it was slated to come into effect, then, was fourteen months. In reality, the vast majority of political scientists became aware of DA-RT's implications only with the publication of Jeffrey Isaac's editorial statement in the June 2015 issue of *Perspectives on Politics*, six months before said implementation was set to begin (Isaac, 2015), with many key concerns circulated via the QMMR Newsletter (Büthe and Jacobs, 2015) in August 2015.

The intense formal and informal discussions of DA-RT in the September 2015 APSA conference halls should be the beginning, not the end, of a deliberative process. The process for consultation proposed by the APSA Presidents Letter, in my view, offers a path for doing so which is responsive to the petitioners calling for delay. Organized sections and diverse research constituencies should be fully engaged in this process. Concerned political scientists should take full advantage of this process, and the APSA leadership should for their part ensure that their arguments are fully included in an open, consultative deliberative process which does not prejudice the outcome. The call for more time to discuss a major change in the discipline that has not yet been fully vetted, discussed, or operationalized is well aligned with the normative principle of transparency. The current push for premature implementation risks turning a broadly consensual norm in favor of research transparency into a contested set of requirements that divides the discipline.

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<sup>5</sup>The statement can be viewed at <http://www.dartstatement.org/>