Qualitative Transparency Deliberations

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Risks and Practices to Avoid?

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Risks and Practices to Avoid?

Posted: **Wed Sep 14, 2016 2:03 pm**
by **SheenaGreitens**
What are the risks of transparency in authoritarian/repressive research contexts? What practices related to transparency -- current or suggested -- should be avoided in these contexts?

Re: Risks and Practices to Avoid?

Posted: **Tue Nov 01, 2016 4:50 pm**
by **Guest**
What follows is a comment submitted by Sheila Carapico, Univeristy of Richmond:

Protecting the confidentiality and safety of contacts are paramount. This goes especially for people who are dissidents, or critics of authoritarian regimes. However, it can also apply to officials, ruling party members, etc. who may not be authorized to give interviews, or say things that deviate from the official line. Depending on the degree of authoritarianism, protecting sources can mean not only not revealing their names or positions but thinking carefully about where to meet, phone records, etc.
Nonetheless, transparency needs to mean that we can somehow clarify what kinds of people we are talking to, because that influences (or determines) the information we gather, and how we interpret it. This is tricky, admittedly: there's a big difference between what one learns from an army officer and what we can hear from a feminist organizer; or from different communities and regions in places like Iraq or Yemen. Readers of research have a legitimate reason to know about the source.
I would also add that not all authoritarian environments are equivalent. Notably, the relationship of the US government to the authoritarian government matters when it comes to getting a visa or research permit, and to whether one is seen as a friendly investigator or an undercover spy.

Re: Risks and Practices to Avoid?

Posted: **Tue Nov 01, 2016 5:00 pm**
by **ebellin**
What follows is a comment submitted by Sheila Carapico, University of Richmond:

Verbatim notes can also be problematic, especially though not only in the original language (say, Arabic; much less Kurdish), where there are likely to be tell-tale signs – in Yemen, for instance, whether the current insurgents are called Huthi, Shi'a, or Ansar Allah, or, in Lebanon, HizbAllah or 'the resistance.' Direct quotes may reveal regional accents, etc.

Re: Risks and Practices to Avoid?

Posted: **Tue Nov 01, 2016 5:06 pm**
by **ebellin**
What follows is a comment submitted by Charles Kurzman, University of North Carolina:

I am increasingly concerned about the safety of researchers in the field as well. The murder of Giulio Regeni, a student doing dissertation fieldwork in Egypt, crystallizes a problem that I think has grown in recent years, although I do not have data on the subject. One doctoral student I worked with was detained for several months in Armenia after doing research in the national archives; several colleagues tell me that they have been detained (for shorter periods) and in several cases threatened. And that is just researchers based in Western Europe and North America - researchers who live in the authoritarian/repressive settings they study are far more vulnerable. One indicator of this trend, at least in the Middle East region, is the number of intervention letters issued by the Middle East Studies Association's Committee on Academic Freedom (http://mesana.org/committees/academic-freedom/). Transparency is double-edged, I think. Transparency brought Regeni and many others to the attention of a repressive apparatus, but a whiff of secrecy might make authorities even more suspicious of the researchers' intentions. Many governments already suspect that academic research (along with journalism and tourism) is a cover for intelligence gathering, if not intelligence operations!

Re: Risks and Practices to Avoid?

Posted: **Tue Nov 01, 2016 5:09 pm**
by **ebellin**
What follows is a comment submitted by Charles Kurzman, University of North Carolina:

Obvious risk of transparency: divulging the identity of one's contacts.

It is impossible to avoid divulging the identity of one's contacts, if a government really wants to know who they are. Most academic researchers are not going to be proficient in spycraft. For example, our cellphones may track our movements. Surveillance cameras could be anywhere. Our internet connections could be tapped, unless we take special precautions. Perhaps researchers should be trained to deal with these threats, but I don't think we can offer blanket assurances of confidentiality anymore, if we ever could. Instead, I prefer to think of contacts with respondents, especially in repressive settings, as a negotiation of the level of risk and disclosure that the respondents are comfortable with. I would like to see the development and distribution of model IRB protocols, for example, that include a paragraph along these lines: let the respondents who know the local situation best decide how they wish to be protected, not just at the initial contact and verbal consent, but throughout the research process and especially at the end, where the respondents work with the researcher to specify what identifying information can be written about and what should be removed or altered. In other words, I believe that transparency to our research subjects is crucial, even more than transparency to our readers.

Re: Risks and Practices to Avoid?

Posted: **Tue Nov 15, 2016 4:13 pm**
by **Guest**
I am participating anonymously due to my personal relationship to academics in my home country of India who have been targeted by the current regime.

In addition to the issues others have raised, I would add that keeping and making transparent a repository of research can make scholars and research participants vulnerable to heightened visibility and targeting under laws designed to create guilt by association, e.g. through "anti-terror" laws that use extremely broad and ambiguous definitions of "aiding and abetting." This can also make research staff vulnerable, as well as people who are paid for one-off services, depending on how the judicial (or parallel special judicial) system set up to implement these laws interprets abetment.

India is an interesting example because of the nexus of strong civil society organizations that are closely networked with the ruling party but not formally part of it. What this has meant so far is that once a scholar is seen as "anti-national" and word gets out, people closely affiliated with them have been targeted as well. Having researchers make their social and political networks more clearly and publicly visible can thus lend itself to surveillance even by states that don't have the most pervasive technologically sophisticated surveillance apparati.

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