Qualitative Transparency Deliberations

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Reviewer gets files, disappears

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Posted: **Wed Nov 30, 2016 6:33 am**
by **SStroschein**
We recently secured a reviewer on a niche piece with few potential reviewers. While our journal does not have a policy on DA-RT (for reasons of this forum) this particular piece was database-focused. When the reviewer requested all of the prior materials, referencing DA-RT, we contacted the author about this to see if they had any objections to providing the material, and we supplied it to the reviewer.

Much time has gone by. We are now in the process of trying to find another reviewer, as this one has disappeared. Most likely, this is no different from other reviewer disappearences. But what if it is not? What if that reviewer is busy using the materials themselves? Unlkely, perhaps, but possible. We as journal editors would feel somewhat responsible if this were the case, and of course we would supply all of this information in the event that the material was used inappropriatey. But this would be far after the fact, and only if it was brought to our attention.

Relating to qualitative research, the problems are even more serious. What if the piece were about Kurds in Turkey, and a reviewer had requested the materials? What if this had happened in May or even June this year (2016), and what if a journal had required these materials and sent them to a reviewer? What if, post-July and the government crackdown, that reviewer were comprimised by the fear that they could be fired or arrested by the state, and gave over these materials to show loyalty to the government? What if certain Kurdish individuals could be identified (or mis-identifed) by police in this move, and thus arrested? While this might seem an extreme example, this is a possible scenario in the current context.

I have not seen signs that these potential problems have come up in the DA-RT discussions. There are instead a set of assumptions that reviewers will always be operating on the same principles as those behind DA-RT, and that all share the same goal of the pursuit of transparency. One would hope that journal editors could guard against reviewer misuse of these files, but as editors we cannot know all of those individuals that we contact to review. We lose control over these files when they are requested. Moreover, it can be very difficult for authors to ask for an exception if they are under strong pressure to publish. There should be more consideration of these practical problems among DA-RT advocates, rather than just a reliance on assumed behavior and motives.

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