

Punk Is Not Dead: On the Integrity of Social Science Research Collections with a Reexamination of Qualitative Data within the Social Context of the Western Balkans

Povzetek

Punk ni mrtev: o integriteti družboslovnih raziskovalnih zbirk in ponovni preučitvi kvalitativnih podatkov na Zahodnem Balkanu

Cilj prispevka je preiskava raziskovalne etike in integritete v primerih, ko knjižnice in arhivi hranijo zbirke z občutljivimi podatki, informacijami, dokumenti in drugimi predmeti. V kontekstu sodobnih politik in pristopov odprtega dostopa preiskujemo načine varovanja osebnih podatkov, ki bi lahko vplivali na javno mnenje ali varnost. Arhivi družboslovnih podatkov delujejo kot repozitoriji, ki lahko koristijo novim generacijam raziskovalcev, da že obstoječe podatke uporabijo za morebitne nove premisleke ter prispevajo k izmenjavi znanja in kulturi deljenja podatkov, pridobljenih v družboslovnih raziskavah. To je vsekakor plemenit in zelo idealističen cilj, ki pa odpira pomembno vprašanje: Kako naj ravnamo z občutljivimi podatki (na primer prepisi pričevanj, intervjujev in fokusnih skupin ali podatki iz osebnih dnevnikov preživelih v vojni, pripadnikov različnih družbenih skupin in gibanj) iz posebnih zbirk? Ti podatki lahko škodijo sodelujočim v raziskavi, pa tudi njihovim skupnostim, kar znižuje zaupanje javnosti v raziskovalne procese in prizadevanja. V kratki razpravi se ukvarjamo z nevidnimi nevarnostmi, s katerimi se soočamo knjižničarji in arhivisti pri iskanju ravnotežja med spoštovanjem visokih etičnih načel in iskanjem resnice.

Ključne besede: podatkovni arhivi, integriteta podatkov, podatki staroselcev, raziskovalna etika

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine the ethical integrity of research when sensitive data, information, documents and other artefacts become stored within collections held by libraries and archives. Further, we are going to explore some possible paths for the protection of personal data, which may affect public opinion or public security in the context of contemporary open access policies and approaches. Social science data archives aim to be repositories of research data intended to be used by “new generations of researchers” to reinterpret “old” data with possible new insights, enhancing the exchange of knowledge and sharing of data collected through research in the social sciences. A noble and profoundly idealistic goal, without any doubt. However, the important question is, how should we treat sensitive qualitative data, e.g., transcripts of testimonies, interviews, and focus groups or personal diaries of war survivors, members of various social groups and movements, that are deposited in special collections? These are data which have the power to harm the very same individuals who agreed to be participants in the research process, as well as the entire communities from which they stem, and in so doing lower the public trust in research policies and efforts. Within this short discussion, we explore the hidden dangers which librarians and archivists have to overcome in order to both make sure that high ethical principles continue to be strived for while at the same time never compromising the everlasting quest for the truth.

Keywords: data archives, data integrity, indigenous data, research ethics

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Research and Beyond

Research is fairly simple in nature, and joyful when possible. It starts with a question, and ends up with an answer. But, if you would like to sound academic, you can split this process into five common phases: Formulation of a Working Hypothesis, Preparation of a Research Design, Collection of Data, Analysis of Data, and finally, Drawing Conclusions in the form of Theoretical Formulations and Generalizations. If you are taking a research methods course in another school, they might teach you to go through eight steps: Identify a Research Problem, Review the Literature, Determine the Research Question, Develop Research Methods, Collect & Analyse Data, Locate and Reuse Existing Data for Secondary Research Documenting the Work, Communicate Your Research, and finally, Refine/Expand, and Pioneer. Every research method course prepares researchers (at least in theory) for real-world research in pretty much the same manner. Once prepared, the joyful researcher goes into the field and conducts research. The final goal is to publish in a prestigious international journal. Researchers, regardless of age, are under pressure: complete research, publish results, and move on to new research projects. All this just in order to not perish from the academic scene. All the hopes and fears of the research community are rooted in this *publish or perish* aphorism, which offers very little space to think about the research documentation created or collected during the research process. So, it is expected to see the authors in the bar celebrating immediately after publication. After a hangover, he or she is assigned to a new project. Research documentation, tapes, research diaries, SPSS files, notes, interview transcripts, etc., remain buried in the researcher's personal computer, probably in some obscurely named folder. Librarians will store a final version of the published research (in a journal or a monograph) meant for further dissemination. This naive (or stereotypical) picture of the research process was mine as well until the famous Boston College Tapes case emerged and arrived in our lives.

The Boston College Tapes

A quick summary of the Boston College Tapes is as follows (*verbatim* BBC, 2019; for further details regarding the case, see Sampson, 2015; King, 2014):

The Boston [College] tapes are secret recordings in which ex-paramilitaries talk about their role during the decades of violence in Northern

Ireland known as the Troubles. The tapes contain interviews with both republican and loyalist paramilitaries during which some admit involvement in various attacks, including murders. The recordings were made on behalf of the U.S. university Boston College as part of an academic project to create an "oral history" of the Troubles. But the project was highly controversial, and police in Northern Ireland later gained access to the tapes for use as evidence in ongoing murder inquiries. Boston College launched its Belfast Project in 2001, three years after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, an international peace accord which effectively marked an end to the Troubles. By that stage, hundreds of paramilitary prisoners had already been granted early release from jail under the terms of the 1998 agreement. Historians saw an opportunity to obtain eyewitness accounts of the Troubles from some high-profile figures who had been directly involved in the 30-year conflict. The deal was that the former paramilitaries would tell their stories in secret, on the understanding that the recordings and transcripts would only be made public after their deaths. Boston College tried keep its promise, but the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) launched an international court battle to force academics to hand over the material.

This case has opened a storm of discussions on the fate of qualitative research, suddenly transferring focus from criminological research to the arena of criminological investigation. The perception of researchers and archivists as self-sufficient discoverers in an ivory tower ceased to exist. Researchers and archivists are no longer exposed only to peer review, but also to review by various governmental agencies ranging from privacy rights agencies to the police and other law enforcement agencies. What is the purpose of signing confidentiality agreements with our respondents when researchers and archivists do not have full control over their implementation?

The Western Balkans and Research over Troubled Waters

Up until that moment, my perception of published and deposited research results was comfortable and unquestioned. The researcher does something for the sake of better understanding the world we live in, while

librarians and archivists are doing their best to make sure this research is as visible as possible to the wider community. I did have some doubts about the work of librarians and archivists in relation to the curation of contemporary materials (Madacki, 2005a; 2005b; 2009), examining misconduct in terms of denying access to materials, or shaping collections in improper ways, or “sanitizing” their archives by way of removing documents that do not fit into the picture of the world the archivist or librarian believes in. Fifteen years ago, I was asking myself (to some extent) naive questions such as:

- Can you imagine an ordinary librarian, not infected with the virus of intellectual freedom, residing in Belgrade and ordering books about the necessity of NATO intervention, and placing them in the New Books section in the Public Library, or the librarian in Sarajevo organizing a public reading of *Načertanije*?¹
- Can you imagine a librarian in Tirana introducing books written by Enver Hoxha?
- Can you imagine a librarian in Srebrenica having books by Kosta Čavoški in his or her collection?
- Can you imagine a library in Priština widely advertising *The History of Serbs*?
- Can you imagine a librarian in Alabama in the Fifties introducing Martin Luther King?
- Can you imagine a librarian in Berlin in the Thirties presenting a “Night of Contemporary Jewish Fiction”?
- The new order in Balkan countries introduced democracy as a leading force. There is no censorship visible in legislation—yet what about self-censorship? Are we mature enough to overcome it? Are we self-confident enough?

All of these questions were posed from a local point of view—if the printed material exists, then the presumption is that the journal or book is printed in a certain circulation and that these copies being distributed and read somewhere. You may prohibit access locally, but the content will remain accessible somewhere else.

On the other hand, what happens if we store materials that *we believe in and would like to see widely accessible*, but following a policy of open access can cause harm due to the nature of the material? What will happen if we curate interviews on war atrocities, and find in interviews data on war crimes and perpetrators? The researcher does something for the sake of

¹ Editor's Note: *Načertanije* (“A Plan”) is a political programme, written in 1844 by Ilija Garašanin. The programme introduced nationalist and irredentist ideology of Greater Serbia that is promoted by Serbian radical nationalist politics until this day.

a better understanding of the world that we live in, as I said earlier—however, that world is not always pleasant. By law, we have to immediately report any crime that we become aware of, automatically overriding any confidentiality agreement even if we have explicitly agreed with the interviewee that their interview will remain confidential for an agreed period of time. Researchers, librarians and archivists are not in the position of lawyers, priests or medical doctors and authorized to keep all information to themselves. Or then again, what about data privacy, or anti-victimization, or anti-stigmatization policies, which are also enforceable? How should we behave? Which of these (seemingly) opposing policies do we choose to comply with? The Boston College Tapes case made clear that any deposition transcript can be requested by law enforcement agencies, regardless of the will of the deponent. So, maybe not so naively anymore, I ask other fellow librarians, archivists and myself: Are we giving false promises to our primary sources (our interviewees)? How should we position ourselves?

Another issue, which is not directly related to the integrity of collections but may be related to data quality, is the “lost in translation syndrome”, where the researcher is translating interviews and other collected research material not in terms of mere translation but in terms of translating meaning (semantic value of translated discourse) and cultural context. If a researcher who is conducting secondary research is not an active speaker of the native language of a given interviewee, a problem in interpretation may occur, consequently affecting the evaluation of the portrayed persons or events, in additions to creating a distorted image of the community the interviewee is coming from.

This next case is about data privacy as related to research that was carried immediately after the war in the former Yugoslav countries. During that veritable biblical flood of Western researchers rushing in to collect interviews on war atrocities and war experiences of inhabitants of the Western Balkan (or former Yugoslav) states, an immense amount of material was collected. Don’t get me wrong—research and collecting data is good and I share their passion for the research—however, in this case, we, as local researchers, archivists and librarians, never got the clear picture of the amount of materials that was collected or of how or where it is stored.

These questions are just coming now, and we are not getting concrete answers:

- Who has the data and testimonies of our nationals?
- How are those data stored and/or processed? Were they stored and/or processed at all?

- Are they stored on personal computers, and thus the “private property” of a researcher? Or are they stored in some archive waiting to be (re)discovered by law enforcement agencies?
- What is the status of the transcripts of testimonies, interviews and focus groups of war survivors, members of various social groups and movements, and personal diaries created during the war in and now in domestic and foreign possession?
- What will happen if some interviews in their entirety and without anonymization appear on someone’s blog?

It might not lead to criminal liability, but exposing the private life of a survivor without protecting their identity might cause difficulties in the private lives of interviewees. If I may be honest, and pardoned for being impolite, I see very little difference between the situation of exporting raw data from the post-Yugoslav countries and that of Egypt at the end of the 19th century, when hundreds of excavations were carried out across Egypt. While many of the objects discovered remained in Egypt, a large proportion were distributed to hundreds of museums across the world—exporting away a country’s very heritage without notifying what was being exported, where it was stored or for what purposes. Just dig it up, take it out, and run.

In order to prevent the fate of the Egyptian antiquities repeating itself in the Western Balkans, we could claim “data sovereignty” as described in the CARE Principles, which deal with “information and knowledge about Indigenous Peoples as collectives, including traditional and cultural information, oral histories, ancestral and clan knowledge, cultural sites, and stories, belongings” (Carroll et al., 2020) and request that local communities be included in data post-processing and use, and allowing the “inclusion of Indigenous Peoples in data processes that strengthen Indigenous control for improved discovery, access, use, reuse, and attribution in contemporary data landscapes.” To put it in simple words: *Do not talk about Us without Us*. This would create the opportunity to improve data preservation within new data ecosystems, a new dimension in the interpretation of data. While one might argue that Balkanians are not indigenous peoples, the CARE Principles can be applied to any community and serve the same purpose.

What Should Be Done?

I strongly believe that we need to initiate an extensive mapping project in order to:

1. Map published research on the Balkan war and war atrocities in PhD dissertations defended in Europe and the US. One possible starting place is an examination of the DART-Europe E-Theses Portal, which currently contains 965,839 openly accessible research theses from 540 universities in 28 European countries, followed by mapping dissertations from countries not included in DART (Bosnia, Montenegro), followed by an examination of metadata on dissertations indexed in ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global (containing five million citations and 2.6 million full-text works from over 3,100 institutions in over 100 countries);
2. Map published research on the Balkan war and war atrocities in major publications, unpublished papers starting with region-specific indexes such as CEEOL (Central and Eastern Europe Online Library), Central & Eastern European Academic Source (CEEAS) and American Bibliography of Slavic & Eastern European Studies;
3. Map individual researchers that are in possession of research material which is related to sensitive topics in relation to Western Balkan countries during and after the war using a snowball method—creating an initial set of prominent researchers focusing on Balkans (e.g., S. Jansen, E. Gordy, D. Abazović, E. Bećirević, M. Velikonja, N. Močnik, N. Čengiđ, L. Nettelfield, just to name some of them) and requesting them to nominate other potential researchers as data sources who will be able to participate in a mapping exercise;
4. Map research data that are stored in data archives anywhere and are related to Western Balkan countries during and after the war, starting with small-scale, region-specific collections, such as the Regional Research Promotion Programme Data Rescue (SEEDS Project) containing 74 datasets, followed by a global search of the CESSDA Consortium of European Social Science Data Archives Data catalogue containing 22,546 data sets from 22 countries in Europe;
5. Establish a permanent forum on sensitive research and its consequences that examines the challenges and recommendations as set out in the OECD reports *New Data for Understanding the Human Condition* (OECD, 2013) and *Research Ethics and New Forms of Data for Social and Economic Research* (OECD, 2016);
6. Establish links with human rights activists aimed at creating effective campaigns. This could be done by joining the *New Tactics in Human Rights* initiative that helps activists become more effective through strategic thinking and tactical planning (www.newtactics.org). *New Tactics...* develops and disseminates unique resources in three key ways:

Creating and sharing information and materials; Training and mentoring; and Building an online community.

All of this is needed in order to open a genuine dialogue on the fate of research data and results, research ethics and research consequences. As Janette Bastian (2014: 101) suggests:

Without respect for rights, records have no meaning. Holding governments and organizations accountable, protecting people's rights, advocating for social justice and permanently affecting the ways in which communities and nations understand themselves and their histories requires that records themselves be trustworthy and reliable.

Verne Harris suggests that “the heart of the uncertainty, of the ethical struggle, is that no professional code of ethics provides a recipe, or blueprint for resolving competing rights. I would go further and argue simply that there is no such blueprint.” (Harris, 2007: 204). Codes of ethics for researchers and archivists are full of *should* and *must* statements (“should treat fairly and without discrimination”, “must preserve”, “should protect privacy”, “may never personally profit”, “should not publicly disparage”). Since there is no self-evident blueprint or a recipe, we need to establish one. As witnesses of war and its aftermath, we need to create a forum of “biased and partial voices”, asking for help to establish a gold standard in this field and discuss how all of those *should* and *must* commands will work in concrete situations, since mere theoretical discussions and manuals on the ethical dimension of research will not do much. This can be achieved in two steps: first, to conduct a DELPHI study on the ethical dimension of dealing with qualitative data related to the Western Balkans aimed at gaining deeper insight into the problematic areas, gaining insights from key experts in social research; and secondly, to organize a public discussion on findings and concrete recommendations. If not, we will end up fated to asking ourselves the same question as in The Clash’s famous dilemma: *Should I stay or should I go?*

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