RMeS

Academic Integrity in Media Studies
Research School for Media Studies (RMeS).
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Introduction:
Academic integrity deals with the need for researchers to account for their individual research conduct in the context of norms and values shared in their disciplinary field and in the scientific community at large. This document describes some dilemmas most common in the (inter)disciplinary field of media studies, which methods are grounded partly in the social sciences and partly in the humanities. PhD candidates are required to reflect on their own practices in relation to standards developed in their field. This document spells out various forms of academic integrity breach; it also proposes some general guidelines and offers specific examples. We do not pretend to offer prescriptive rules or legal standards; in general we want to make every researcher aware of the norms and values involved in every step of the research process and make one accountable for decisions taken during this process.

What is academic integrity and what shapes does it take?
According to Wikipedia (!), academic integrity is "the moral code or ethical policy of academia. This includes values such as the avoidance of cheating or plagiarism; maintenance of academic standards; honesty and rigor in research and academic publishing." At stake are the following breaches of academic standards:

1. *Fraud*: the fabrication of data, fictive input, deliberate falsifications
2. *Plagiarism*: copying data, arguments or results from others without (appropriate) referencing
3. *Manipulation*: massaging research results by omission of negative data; deliberate distortion of interpretations; strategic selectivity in handling acquired data.
4. *Sloppiness*: careless use of sources, inadequate or selective representation of others' data, arguments, or research results, inadequate referencing.

Fraud and plagiarism may be the most well known breaches of academic integrity, whereas manipulation and sloppiness may be lesser known mistakes, even if they probably happen more frequently. There is a sliding scale between fraud and sloppiness, and between conscious and careless massaging of research results. Outright fraud may be rare, sloppiness is much more common and may occur in many (un)conscious forms. Standards on academic integrity serve as a check (and double check) on careful execution of research protocols and promote rigor in data/source interpretation and presentation.

Which general guidelines are relevant to the field of Media studies?
Research in media studies is subject to integrity norms partly pertaining to the social sciences, for instance when using methods such as interviews, ethnographic observation, (qualitative) surveys, content analysis, acquisition and interpretation of online user data. For another part, media studies is rooted in the methodologies of the humanities, where academic integrity mostly relates to issues such as the handling of (archival) sources in terms of their verifiability; moreover, interpretations of theoretical arguments and the (historical) data presented as evidence to support these arguments should adhere to standards of academic rigor and hence avoid misleading selectivity and strategic omissions.

In general, we assume a few ground rules:

- *researchers should always account for their original (research) data by explaining the terms of acquisition, selection, and presentation, for instance in an appendix.*
- *researchers are ready to make their own research data available to outside assessors (e.g. PhD committee members, referees) upon request, in case they want to check them.* [1]
- *Sources (e.g. literature, visual material) are verifiable and accessible to other researchers; if not publicly accessible, one should make sure sources can be checked by others*
- *researchers make an effort to verify the sources they use, and cite sources correctly and fairly; they are open to other potential interpretations and are aware of selectivity of sources. Relevant selectivity of sources should be accounted for (e.g. in an appendix).*

These are general rules; there may be circumstances in which general rules need to be adapted or specified, in order to guarantee academic integrity. Make sure to always discuss these circumstances with your advisor or, when applicable, with graduate school committees.

What counts as fraud and plagiarism?

Fraud is commonly defined as the falsification of data, information, or results in any formal academic context whereas plagiarism is the use of data, results, words, or work from others without (appropriate) referencing. We assume that PhD candidates understand the definition of research fraud and have adequate knowledge of the meaning for plagiarism. Outright fraud or plagiarism may not happen very often, but there are lesser-known forms of plagiarism that are more common, and which might also be regarded as sloppiness. Plagiarism is not restricted to the reuse of literal sentences without (appropriate) referencing but may also entail:

- Repeating or paraphrasing someone else's work/ideas without proper referencing.
- Inappropriate or inadequate attribution of ideas to the *original* source, for instance, citing or rephrasing original texts whereas these sources are cited from secondary literature. Appropriate referencing thus includes referring to original sources embedded in secondary sources.
- "Copying and pasting" sentences from unknown or anonymous sources (e.g. websites) without attributing them or giving due credit.

If you are insecure as to whether something counts as plagiarism, always check with your supervisor. In general, it is always safer to reference a source, at the risk of boring your reader.

What are examples of manipulation and sloppiness in the field of media studies and how can they be avoided?

Sloppiness and manipulation most often occurs in the gathering, selection, archiving, and presentation of *data* and *sources*. Here are several examples that deal with data and sources in connection to (methodologies often used in) media studies, followed by a few suggestions

[1] The principle is straightforward, but the ways in which this rule might be applied is subject to debate: Do you need to transfer all data to space where they are (physically or digitally) accessible? When do you make these data available and for whom? These operational questions are important to raise and discuss.

to *avoid* sloppiness and enhance verifiability. Please note that these examples below are NOT descriptions of how to conduct interviews, how to do ethnographic research, or how to handle archival sources in historical research, etc. Rather than being understood as prescriptive, these guidelines should lead to reflection and discussion (with peers and advisors) about how they apply to your specific type of research.

Example 1: Qualitative interviews:
For many types of media research, qualitative interviews are indispensible to acquire information on how media are used. There are many guides and books that elaborate on the do's and don'ts of interviewers. In terms of academic integrity, we concentrate on the handling and verifiability of interview *results*. In general, interviews from which quotes are used as evidence need to be treated as data; these data as well as their interpretation should be verifiable to outsiders who are qualified to judge their weight in the context of the full argument.

Here are a few general guidelines that may help guard the quality and integrity of research:

- *A precise list of all interviews complete with dates, names, functions, and places should be included in the dissertation (e.g. as an appendix). In case anonymity of interviewees is required (e.g. security or privacy of respondents), the researcher may deposit a coded key that can only be acquired upon authorization.*
- *Do not forget to justify your selection of interviewees and mode of interviewing.* [2] *A short justification at the beginning of an appendix may help account for your specific selection of interviewees; if relevant, you may also explain why some interviewees are missing or were not interviewed.*
- *If direct interviewees' quotes are used in the main text, interviews should be recorded and/or transcribed; full transcripts should be archived in such way that they are accessible to assessors in order to verify quotes and check quotes in their contexts (e.g. refer systematically to anonymised interviewee, function, etc).*
- *Upon request, referees or defense committee members may get access to the full transcripts of interviews.*
- *Quotes taken from interviews and used as evidence for the researcher's argument count as interpretations of data; in order to guarantee a fair and non-selective interpretative process, the researcher may ask a colleague (or supervisor) to check some or all quotes by reading the full transcripts and give feedback in order to enhance the quality and fairness of the interpretations.*

Needless to say, the more emphasis is placed on interview results as data supporting the main outcome, the more attention should be paid to these rules. If, for instance, interviews are mainly used as background material without interviewees being quoted as evidence, different rules may apply.

[2] For instance, justify selection by explaining why you talked to a,b, and c and not to x, y and z? Why this number of interviewees? How are they representative? How did you conduct interviews (by Skype, phone, in person, etc).

Example 2: Ethnographic observation:
In the field of media studies, ethnographic research methods are commonly deployed to systematically analyze communicative behaviors, mechanisms, and user strategies in everyday life. Since this method is concurrently descriptive and interpretative, we need to be all the more cautious when applying standards of academic integrity. Contrasting interviews, ethnographic observations are more subjective as they depend almost entirely on the interpretation of the researcher. In some cases, film, video, or sound tapes are used to register ethnographic observation. If so, that material should be handled as original data and should be archived so that other researchers may access it. A few general rules are listed below:

- *A precise description of observed events, objects, dates, and if relevant, circumstances should be made available (e.g. in an appendix) to assess the systematic rigor of observed situations.*
- *If possible, check the correctness of your descriptions/interpretations with a second person, for instance a colleague or advisor who may read your notes.*
- *Transcripts of observations and/or notes taken on the scene should be kept and archived for outside assessors of the dissertation.*
- *Audiovisual registrations, especially when being relied upon as evidence for your argument, should be appropriately archived and made accessible to outside assessors.*

Example 3: Archival sources:
The use of archival sources by media studies researchers deserves careful attention, especially when serving as primary evidence for your interpretations and argument. Needless to say, precision and accuracy are ubiquitous norms when citing sources, but in case of archival sources they need to be pursued even more rigorously. If sources are not readily available to outsiders (e.g. because the archives in which they are deposited are private property or difficult to access) it may be wise to keep copies of original sources and keep those available for outside assessment. If archives refuse permission for copying material, a detailed description of sources becomes more relevant. In case of audiovisual material, it may be hard or impossible to obtain copies of historical sources; descriptions or transcripts of footage may be second best after actual copies.

Try to adhere to the following guidelines:

- *Provide a full list of archival sources, their institutional origin, and include archival codes when applicable. Include data on which copy you have used and how you have accessed or viewed the copy (e.g. projection, original or edited version) If relevant, comment on the availability and accessibility of sources.*
- *If the archival material is private or not open to the public, provide truthful and detailed descriptions, including time stamps. These transcripts should be made available to outside assessors upon request. In case of nonpublic archives, it is even more important to use very precise descriptions and references.*
- *Whenever possible, make (digital) copies of sources and construct your own "shadow archive". When historical sources are difficult to find or hard to assemble (e.g. articles in magazines, journals or leaflets) through regular channels, you may want to make copies of the original sources accessible to a general audience (e.g. by posting them on a website).*

- *Reflect on your systematic choices for, and final selection of, sources: account for conscious omissions or explicitly comment on relevant choices (e.g. in an appendix or footnote).*

Example 4: Internet data and sources:
In general, online data and sources are easier to access by external assessors and thus easier to verify. However, the use of Internet sources and data requires a different kind of vigilance with regard to the academic integrity.

Here are a few more tips and guidelines:

- *If you are using online data, account for your selection decisions and explain the method of acquisition. For instance, how did you select specific (kinds of) Tweets or hashtags? Also reflect on the restrictions of each method: what may you have missed or what could have been found if other hashtags or tags had been used?*
- *Save and organize downloaded data in such way that they are accessible to other researchers and reviewers who may want to replicate your search. That is why it is important to describe your method of selection.*
- *If you work with (digital) content analysis, you should be ready to make your coding book and full coding results available to outside assessors upon request. Make careful distinctions between categories and variables. Explain how and why you cluster different categories. Make sure you perform reliability tests for each variable.*
- *If you make use of digital archives, account for the selection of your sample(s): which criteria and/or keywords did you use? Why did you decide on this selection? For instance, if you used digital newspaper archives, which sources did you include and which not? Also reflect on the potential restrictions of the technology you used: for instance, gaps in result due to poor OCR (optical character recognition).*
- *In terms of availability of online sources, one needs to take into account the volatility of websites vis-à-vis archival sources: links may be discontinued; websites may be disabled, etc. It is not enough to just provide a link; one also needs to refer to date of availability and check its availability as well as possible.*

For media studies scholars using the Internet as a source of (social) research, please consult the guidelines of the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) available at: http://aoir.org/reports/ethics2.pdf

About this document
This document has been compiled and revised by members of Advisory Board of the Netherlands Research School for Media Studies and has been added to by graduate students. It is a "living" document, which will be refined and amended as we go along and find more instructive examples of academic integrity consolidation. Academic integrity is a standard subject in the education of PhD candidates.

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