Description

An Academic Community

When we speak of the worlds of academic research and academic publishing, we often refer to the academic community as a collaborative group of professionals committed to discovering more about the world in which we live. The reality of that community can often be quite different. As an increasing number of doctoral graduates and researchers chase a declining number of research positions, dollars, and publishing opportunities, the rules of communication in this community can shift from collaboration to extreme competition in the blink of an eye.

Why Share Data?

In such a competitive environment, the first reason to share data would be to increase the visibility of your work and your opportunities for authorship as a co-author or contributor to more papers than the one you currently have in the apparently endless purgatory of academic peer review. While primary authorship may carry more prestige, you're only betting on one horse and one or two back-ups, whereas shared data increases your odds of publication considerably.

A second and more community-oriented reason is to avoid needless replication. Replication studies serve a valuable role in validating existing studies, but if data isn't widely shared, multiple original studies on the same topic using similar methodologies could be authorized and conducted simultaneously without any of the research teams being aware of the other studies. This would not be the best use of increasingly scarce research funding.

Potential Conflicts of Interest

While we can rationalize the choice not to share data on multiple grounds, there are potential conflicts of interest at work in those rationalizations:

- ***Not Your Data To Share*** – completing a detailed research study that produces the results you were anticipating, or better still, beyond your expectations, can be euphoric. The fruits of your labor should be shared, but what if those fruits aren't yours to share? Depending on the research-funding contract, ownership of the data may remain with the institution, grant organization, or corporation who underwrote your study. Even if the contract allows publication, specific clauses can specify where you can and cannot publish.
- ***How the Data is Shared*** – the widespread use of spreadsheets, website downloads, and accessible data repositories is making data sharing easier every day. However, the obligation of confidentiality of that data hasn't changed, and the burden of compliance remains with the sharer.
- ***Danger of Being Scooped*** – if your work is especially topical or groundbreaking, the desire to protect your data is understandable. The faster publication times of open access journals could quite easily get your data into the public domain, while your research is still under peer review. However, your conviction in the importance of your results should get some form of concurrence

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or consensus from an objective third party before you unilaterally ignore the scientific axiom that knowledge should be made available to everyone.
- **What Data to Share** – sharing files without accompanying instructions to ensure that the data is used correctly, creates a risk of misinterpretation or misuse that could damage the studies that incorporate your data, and your reputation if those studies bring your original work into question.

Tempered Enthusiasm

Sharing the results of your study with your academic colleagues (assuming you have permission to do so) is an experience that you deserve to enjoy after all your hard work, but to avoid the conflict of interest traps, temper your enthusiasm with some objectivity to ensure that your best intentions aren't derailed.

Category

1. Publishing Research
2. Understanding Ethics

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