

## The trouble with transparency: Reconnecting ethics, integrity, epistemology, and power

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### Abstract

Tracing the afterlife of our explorative article on marriages of Dutch-speaking women travelling to areas held by jihadist movements in Syria, we analyze the harm the celebration of transparency may do. Through an auto-ethnographic reflection, we address how the demand for transparency was used in a media hype that engendered parliamentary questions and an external reflection audit. To understand the appeal to transparency, we argue for the need to relate anthropological ethics to epistemological concerns, and to link transparency to power. Whereas anthropological research needs some level of trust and confidentiality, the quest for transparency starts from distrust and an impetus to control. Neoliberal forms of public management make universities vulnerable to external pressure, with anthropology as an interpretative discipline that values complexity an easy target. Researchers who are recognizably Muslim are exposed to particular harm as heightened ethno-nationalism and an anti-Islam political climate produce them as a category already ‘under suspicion’.

### Keywords

transparency, anthropological ethics, audit culture, diversity, integrity, the Netherlands

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## Introduction

Following up the invitation of the editors of *Ethnography* (18(3)) to reflect on the two demands of transparency and the protection of sources, this contribution zones in on a particular case to analyze the harm an uncritical celebration of transparency may do. In January 2017, a brief explorative article we had published in *Anthropology Today* about the marriages of Dutch-speaking female travelers to jihadi-held areas in Syria became the focus of a huge media hype in the Netherlands and beyond (Navest et al., 2016).<sup>1</sup> The *NRC Handelsblad* (hereafter the *NRC*), an upscale national daily, had framed our work as a case of how cyberjihadists had been able to influence academic research (Kouwenhoven, 2017). Within a few days, members of parliament asked a series of parliamentary questions about issues varying from the validity of the methods used to the names of our interlocutors and the possible use of the article in court cases.<sup>2</sup> The board of the university felt that it needed to act swiftly and committed itself to involve external experts in a reflection audit of the research. In July 2017 the board simultaneously put the reflection audit report and our response online.<sup>3</sup>

In spite of the board adding a positive evaluation of the ethics and integrity of our work, we were and are not happy. Our unhappiness should not be reduced to a personal, individual emotion. Rather, it is the kind of unhappiness that Sara Ahmed so aptly describes in her work on ‘feminist killjoys’:

My point here would be that feminists are read as being unhappy, such that situations of conflict, violence, and power are read as about the unhappiness of feminists, rather than being what feminists are unhappy about. (Ahmed, 2010: 583)

This article then focuses on what we are unhappy about. We present our analysis in the format of an auto-ethnographic contribution, that is, an analysis of experiences that did not first occur as part of a fieldwork project and involve a ‘field’ the researcher cannot simply choose to leave (Crawley, 2012). Whereas much of what we have learned is grounded in participant observation, we are able to substantiate our analysis with publicly available sources. This is so because we found ourselves first and foremost engaged in a *public* performance, a point we will return to.

In the following, we start with a brief note about the context and conditions that made our exploratory three-page article such an attractive target for a wide range of actors. Analyzing how our article travelled from the media to parliament, and from the university administration to the field of auditing, we were struck by the fact how in all these fields the notion of transparency was eagerly appealed to. It was invoked by the *NRC* to claim the right to invade the private life of our junior researcher and by the auditors to request us to hand our archive over to them. For the sake of transparency, the newspaper wanted to know the names of our interlocutors, an interest it shared with parliamentarians and the security services. Transparency was also the central concern of the three sets of questions the board of the university had formulated in its letter of intent for the reflection audit, and it

emerged time and again in the report of the auditors. Obviously, transparency was considered a virtue. In fact, the demand for transparency sounds so utterly reasonable that it is hard to legitimately oppose it. Resisting the call to transparency is easily taken as a sign of guilt (Birchall, 2011: 8).

Taking our lead from Strathern's (2000) reflections on the tyranny of transparency, Birchall's (2011) work on secrecy and transparency, and Shore's concerns (2008) about audit cultures and illiberal governance, we discuss the kinds of work such an appeal to transparency does. Birchall has argued that we live with the tension between transparency and secrecy on a daily basis; transparency and secrecy co-constitute each other: 'secrecy functions as a constitutive element of transparency, while transparency defines itself as a reaction against secrecy' (2011: 12). As Strathern points out in her reflection on audit culture, both anthropologists and auditors use analytical categories that turn one kind of a description into another and thereby conceal certain truths by revealing others. In the case of the latter

the rhetoric of transparency appears to conceal that very process of concealment, yet in so far as 'everyone knows' this, it would be hard to say it 'really' does so. Realities are knowingly eclipsed. (2000: 315)

More generally, while transparency is to make visible, to reveal certain aspects of life by putting these in the spotlight, it simultaneously actively keeps other aspects of life in the dark.

This becomes evident when we connect questions about ethics and integrity with epistemology (how knowledge is produced in anthropology), the positionality of researchers, and power relations within academia and beyond. With the emergence of new public management in higher education, public relations has become a major concern for universities. Not surprisingly then, the main function of the reflection audit was to domesticate a public outcry, which implied going along with public accusations and suspicions rather than critically investigating these. Under conditions of an increasingly vocal presence of ethno-nationalism and Islamophobia, this has further contributed to the harm done to researchers who, because of their background or the positions they have taken up, had already become publicly targeted.

## **Cyberjihadism at the University of Amsterdam?**

In our explorative article, 'Chatting about Marriage with Female Migrants to Syria', that we had published in April 2016, we were critical about how the media had labelled female travelers to Syria as jihadi brides. We presented our research findings about how these women had entered into marriage, we analyzed how this had changed after IS had proclaimed the Caliphate, and we ended our narrative with a brief reflection about the ways in which the women we chatted with positioned themselves. Mainly motivated by a desire to live in an Islamic state, they showed no interest to participate in the violent jihad, but considered

themselves first and foremost as responsible for domestic life. To this we added the comment that giving birth to children, caring for them and for their husbands, may also be considered a contribution to the reproduction of a social formation, in this case IS.

Nine months later, a journalist of an upscale Dutch national daily, the *NRC*, wrote a three-page article about our three-page publication, labelling it as a prime example of how cyberjihadists have been able to influence academic research.<sup>4</sup> The journalist accused the first author of being a supporter of the violent jihad, considered our methodology flawed because we had allowed our interlocutors to remain anonymous and stated that our article may obstruct the work of the security services as it could be used by lawyers defending women returning from IS areas. Another alleged flaw of our publication was that our conclusion was at odds with research conducted by other academics and by the security services.<sup>5</sup>

As soon as it was published, the newspaper article started to circulate online and became a hit in the alt-right blogosphere (including Breitbart). The next day, three political parties posted a total of 22 parliamentary questions. The board of the university was very supportive at a personal level, yet taken aback by the intensity and virulence of the commotion. It placed our response to the newspaper article on the university website and announced that it would invite external experts to conduct a reflection-audit.<sup>6</sup>

It took the board of the university considerable time and effort to find external auditors.<sup>7</sup> Finally, in July 2017, half a year after the publication of the newspaper article, the auditors had completed their 13-page report. Thanking the auditors profusely, the board of the university published this report online, but did not endorse the text of the report nor its recommendations. Instead, it stated that we, the researchers, had worked in accordance with the regulations about integrity and ethics of both the university and the ERC (our funder), simultaneously put our response online, and expressed the desire for 'an open discussion and debate about the dilemmas raised'. As we had predicted, the reflection audit report engendered a second round of negative publicity about us as researchers and anthropology as a discipline. The media hardly paid attention to the affirmation of the board that we had followed the regulations for ethics and integrity, but instead amplified the concerns the auditors had expressed. Still, for the board the case was now closed.

We had objected to the publication of the reflection audit report, because of major flaws in the procedure, the large number of factual inaccuracies as well as the almost complete absence of our lines of argumentation, which made it hard for readers to understand the motivations for our actions.<sup>8</sup> More important for a broader discussion about the trouble with transparency are the two main concerns we expressed, that we will elaborate on below. First, we objected to questioning our colleagues about their (political) ideas, activities, and other aspects of their private lives, and, secondly, we objected to the singling out of the Muslim researcher for scrutiny. We also pointed to the underlying sense of distrust of researchers

and the desire of the auditors for more monitoring and control.<sup>9</sup> In the words of the auditors themselves, ‘trust [in science] demands transparency and monitoring’ (De Bruijn and Widdershoven, 2017: 12). However, as Strathern (2000: 310) has argued, providing more information does not in itself produce more trust, as there will always be a quest for what has not yet been made visible.<sup>10</sup> Before turning to the substantive issues our casus raises, we first briefly turn to how our article became intertwined in parliamentary debates about the politicization of academia that called for shifting the call for diversity from a focus on the positionality of researchers to a diversity of (political) perspectives.

### **Parliamentarians debating diversity: From positionality to perspectives**

As mentioned above, soon after the media hype began, 22 parliamentary questions were posed about our exploratory research project, ranging from questions to the Minister of Education about the validity of the methods used to questions to the Minister of Security and Justice whether our article had been used in court cases. No doubt timing mattered. This was during the pre-election campaign and these questions functioned as a quick and convenient means for political parties to draw the attention of their constituencies. Soon a member of parliament for the right-wing liberal party (VVD), the largest party in parliament, Pieter Duisenberg, jumped on the bandwagon. Using our research project as, in his words, ‘a source of inspiration’, he raised the issue of ‘political homogeneity at universities’, which he considered as a threat to academic freedom.<sup>11</sup> Referring to the support of the Minister of Education for diversity policies, in particular to the fact that she had made funds available to appoint more women professors, he argued that a different kind of diversity is lacking in academia, that is, a diversity of (political) perspectives.<sup>12</sup>

Obviously the Minister and Duisenberg used very different notions of diversity, the former referring to diversity in terms of positionality, the latter to political perspectives. Scholars such as Gavan Titley and Alana Lentin (2008), as well as Sara Ahmed (2007), have pointed out that diversity is a highly ambiguous term, with different connotations, depending on the particular historical moment and on who employs it with what aim. The kind of work it does depends on whether and how it is connected to power. In academia, the call for diversity has emerged as part of an emancipatory struggle to open up academia to underprivileged or previously excluded categories of people. Yet, it has also been widely criticized for its depoliticizing effect, as a means to accommodate difference in an individualistic manner and as a positive term that celebrates difference and domesticates it (Titley and Lentin, 2008: 12). Because it can so easily be detached from histories of struggles for equality, it needs to be continuously re-attached, as Sara Ahmed (2007: 240) has pointed out.

Whereas for the Minister of Education diversity was linked to such an emancipatory struggle of those historically excluded from academia, for Duisenberg something very different was at stake, a diversity of (political) perspectives. When the Minister of Education stated that she would not investigate the political preferences of university staff, Duisenberg tabled a resolution in parliament, asking the Minister to assign the Dutch Royal Academy of Sciences the task to prepare an advice about possible self-censorship and a lack of diversity of perspectives in Dutch academia.<sup>13</sup>

Duisenberg's concerns about academic freedom and self-censorship at Dutch universities are not very original. They mirror the campaign that David Horowitz, 15 years earlier, had started for a new Academic Bill of Rights in the USA. Horowitz, a former Marxist turned neo-conservative, is the founder of the David Horowitz Freedom Center, which targets 'leftist totalitarianism' in academia, has a strong anti-Muslim and anti-immigration agenda, and is staunchly pro-Israel.<sup>14</sup> In September 2002, Horowitz had announced the Campaign for Fairness and Inclusion in Higher Education, calling for inquiries into political bias in the hiring of faculty, and in December 2002 he proposed that universities adopt an Academic Bill of Rights to promote 'intellectual diversity' in American universities. The Academic Bill of Rights focuses on eight broad-based principles that call for an academic environment where decisions are made irrespective of one's personal political or religious beliefs. Its first principle is very similar to what Duisenberg argued for:

All faculty shall be hired, fired, promoted and granted tenure on the basis of their competence and appropriate knowledge in the field of their expertise and, in the humanities, the social sciences, and the arts, with a view toward fostering a plurality of methodologies and perspectives. No faculty shall be hired or fired or denied promotion or tenure on the basis of his or her political or religious beliefs.<sup>15</sup>

Whereas the language used in the above is politically neutral, Horowitz's Freedom Center is far from so. It has been linked to an entire network of sites, committed to identify 'the enemies of America' (primarily the left, Muslims, and immigrants). One of its subsidiary projects is Jihad Watch, run by Richard Spencer, which presented our article as a contribution to Islamic State cyberjihadism (Spencer, 2017). More recently it also included an online blacklist, CanaryMission.org, with profiles of 'supporters of terrorism'. As W.T.J. Mitchell, a prominent member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, has argued, these accusations have no foundation in evidence but 'aim to harass, intimidate and do harm to the job prospects of vulnerable students and faculty' (Mitchell, 2018). In short, in spite of the neutral language of the Academic Bill of Rights it is evident that it needs to be seen in the context of a virulent anti-left, anti-Muslim, and anti-immigrant rhetoric and its concomitant conspiracy theories about cultural Marxism. As his critics have pointed out, Horowitz's new legislative initiatives do not only point to the need for 'balanced' viewpoints, but also for state legislatures to regulate and

enforce that ‘balance’. This then would paradoxically lead to increased surveillance of faculty viewpoints and activities, and is a strong example of how the liberal concept of academic freedom is used to promote illiberal practices. If a university would become responsible for making sure that a balance of political opinions is represented by the faculty, political opinions would become a legitimate consideration at the time of hire (Butler, 2006: 11).

Although Duisenberg’s language is far less alarmist and his political position more mainstream right-wing than Horowitz, there are interesting parallels in their use of neutral language in proposing lawmaking, while it is evident that their concerns are far from politically neutral. When Duisenberg responded to the petition launched against his appointment as chair of the Association of Dutch Universities (VSNU), he underlined that the resolution he had tabled was against *all* political interference in academia. Yet also in his case context matters, as evident in the brief history to this resolution. The initiative had been taken by Sid Lukkassen, a right-wing activist academic and a local council member for the same right-wing political party that Duisenberg represented (Hendriks, 2018).<sup>16</sup> In late 2016 Lukkassen had shared his concerns about left-wing censorship and the exclusion of right-wing researchers from academia with the Prime Minister, a member of the same political party, who had then directed him to Duisenberg. For the latter it came at the right moment as a convenient issue to take up in his election campaign. Together with Eric Hendriks, another young right-wing academic and polemist, the three started a campaign, almost simultaneously publishing opinion pieces with, as their central message, that academic freedom was under threat in the Netherlands because right-leaning researchers were discriminated against.<sup>17</sup>

In March 2018, the Dutch Royal Academy of Sciences published its report on academic freedom in the Netherlands (KNAW, 2018). It concluded that there are no indications of structural threats of self-censorship or of a restriction of diversity of perspectives. Instead, it expressed a greater concern about the effects of the increasing dependency of researchers on project funding and the impact of the emphasis on societally relevant research.

### **The trouble with transparency: Epistemology, ethics, and integrity**

In the meantime, the university administration was taken aback by the intensity of the commotion in the media and in parliament about our article. This is understandable as our case involved a rather provocative mix of an upscale daily, widely read in their own social and professional circles, accusations of researchers supporting jihadism and hindering the security services, and the involvement of major political parties.

Their solution, the invention of the genre of an external reflection audit, turned out to further complicate matters. From the onset the board of the university had

stated that it was convinced of the scientific integrity of our work, and hence did not consider involving its own academic integrity committee. At the same time, the board was very concerned about the huge amount of negative publicity, and hence felt it needed to act quickly to appease the concerned public. In its letter of intent for the reflection audit, the board then rather paradoxically asked the auditors to focus on *the integrity and the ethics* (emphasis added) of the research project, with the quality of the research and the actions and responsibilities of journalists as matters of lesser urgency. Whereas an official integrity investigation has checks and balances, this new genre of a reflection audit did not work with a protocol and was to invent the rules of engagement along the way.

The invention of such a format only makes sense if we recognize that the board's main aim was to domesticate 'public concerns', or, more precisely, the concerns of a particular kind of public, such as the upscale media, fellow administrators, including those at the Ministry of Education, and members of parliament. Opting for a reflection audit is an indication of how academic institutions have accepted the audit culture and its quest for transparency as a response to the crisis of public confidence. With the audit format and, even more so, by appointing *external* auditors, the university signaled simultaneously a lack of trust in its own institutions (such as its ethical committees) and the need to *publicly perform* transparency. That the reflection audit was invented as a quest for appeasement is also evident from the three sets of questions the auditors were to reflect on. Centering on bias due to the (political) perspectives of the researchers, the use of anonymous sources, and the desirability of sharing data, these tallied closely with the concerns the NRC had raised.

The almost exclusive focus on ethics and integrity points to the lack of recognition that these issues need to be connected to epistemology, that is, to how knowledge is produced in our discipline (see also Pels, 2018). It is this disconnect of ethics and epistemology that turns the reflection audit into a rather futile exercise. What matters is that anthropological research is often highly personalized, with knowledge production also taking the format of embodied knowledge. Based on sharing space and time (Fabian, 1983), it entails an ongoing and open-ended intersubjective process of learning, that does not allow for a strict separation between collecting and analyzing data (Ingold, 2014). This also means that much anthropological knowledge production requires some level of trust between the anthropologist and her interlocutors. That is not to say that anthropologists are naïve. On the contrary, our method of participant observation highlights that we recognize that what people say they do is not necessarily what they actually do in practice. We are also well aware of the fact that what our interlocutors tell us is strongly contextual and situationally dependent. Rather than claiming to know what people 'really think', we are interested in how they present themselves in particular settings, what they do in everyday life, and how they talk about their experiences, motivations and aspirations. In other words, because we are well aware of these caveats, we tend to be very careful in how we present our conclusions. As we explain below, the ways we produce knowledge in anthropology has

consequences for how we engage in discussions about bias, positionality, anonymity and open science.

### **The person of the researcher: Positionality and bias<sup>18</sup>**

The reflection audit's preoccupation with appeasement is evident in the first set of questions the auditors were to address:

To what extent should co-authors know about each other's activities, interests and (political) perspectives prior to and during research, and should these be mentioned in research reports in order to stimulate transparency about possible bias?

Note that the question is not 'whether', but rather 'to what extent', that is, the possibility of refusal does not seem to have been entertained. Rather than investigating whether there is any evidence that the *substance* of the article was biased, the focus is shifted to the possible bias of the researchers. Bias is then defined in a highly specific way, tallying closely with Duisenberg's and the NRC's concerns. On the one hand, bias is reduced to opinions, interests and (political) perspectives, and, on the other hand, extended to life 'prior to research'. Our response was rather straightforward. We consider it important to reflect on our positionality, which we do not limit to (political) perspectives. But we do not accept the *demand* to investigate our fellow researchers (and certainly not if we are in a hierarchical position to them) about aspects of their private life, such as their political opinions, their religious affiliations or their family relations. Let us explain.

As with other critical scholars, anthropologists have come to recognize that everyone speaks from a particular position and has certain biases. What matters is that we as researchers reflect on our own positionality and develop an awareness of the assumptions we all work with. Being a 'relative outsider' does not make one necessarily less biased than when one is a 'relative insider' or vice versa. Focusing only on one's (political) perspectives – often further reduced to party political affiliations – addresses this issue in a far too restrictive way. It is reductionist and deterministic, in the sense that it reduces the positionality of researchers to one aspect only, their political stance, which is then taken to determine their actions. It neither allows for the fact that people may hold ambiguous and contradictory points of view that are hard to categorize nor that other aspects of their positionality may have a far stronger impact.

There is, moreover, a major difference between, on the one hand, recognizing the importance of reflection on one's positionality, and, on the other hand, pressuring researchers to make information about their ideas, opinions, and activities available to the public. Such a demand for transparency with respect to values and perspectives is sometimes conflated with the obligation to report a 'conflict of interest'. There are, however, substantial differences between the notion of a 'conflict of interest', which refers to situations in which researchers have a material or institutional interest in the outcome of the research, and personal perspectives, political or

not. We fully agree with the need to make a conflict of interest known to the public. In fact, one danger of broadening the concept of 'a conflict of interest' to include personal viewpoints is that it deflects attention away from the very real and growing problem of material conflicts of interest. With research increasingly funded by external parties (including governmental organizations), or through public-private partnerships, an awareness of the risk that those who pay may attempt to influence the research results, or whether or not to publish these, is ever more important, as the KNAW report on academic freedom had also recognized.<sup>19</sup>

Demanding from authors to publicly disclose their private opinions and political perspectives is quite different from reporting a conflict of interest. When transparency is translated into the need to publicly state one's opinions vis-à-vis the topic of research, a host of problems may emerge. Whereas we agree that transparency is important in our interactions *with our interlocutors* in so far as appropriate, *publicly* reporting on one's opinions is a very different kind of demand. In many cases it may be irresponsible or culturally insensitive to do so. Authors disclosing their political preferences may endanger both their interlocutors and themselves. Demanding public statements on sensitive issues such as sexual preferences, views on abortion, or religious convictions may jeopardize their ability to work in particular settings and may impact on their personal lives. After all, in contrast to their interlocutors, authors cannot remain anonymous and may well need to exert some kinds of self-censorship, as we all do in social life. As researchers we may, of course, opt to publicly discuss our views and opinions and other elements of our private lives, but *demanding* such kinds of disclosure is something very different.

Such demands of disclosure are also problematic because they often involve double standards. Disclosure will not be equally demanded of all actors. It are those holding transgressive views who will be required to disclose their points of view, while mainstream perspectives are easily perceived as neutral, and not in need of disclosure. In our case, it was a pro-jihadist stance that was assumed to influence the research results and hence would need to be reported, while an anti-jihadist stance would not have been considered worth mentioning, as if this may not similarly affect research practices and outcomes. The point is that those who hold mainstream views, and hence often consider themselves, and are seen as, 'being neutral', run the greatest risk of lacking an awareness of how their own assumptions and backgrounds may impact on their research.

Once disclosure is demanded, reporting on personal opinions and allegiances is rarely deemed sufficient. The next demand would be to provide evidence that one does so truthfully. When we as researchers stated that none of us supports the violent jihad, this was, in the eyes of the *NRC*, irrelevant. Once the seeds of doubt and distrust have been sown, it becomes virtually impossible to correct this, especially when an appeal to cyberjihadism fits so well with the hegemonic security frame. After all, the ability to perform sincerity and truthfulness is unequally distributed. It is far easier to create doubt about a researcher who belongs to a category (such as a committed or orthodox Muslim) that is already under surveillance and hence an object of suspicion, than about those who are considered part of the

mainstream. What matters is not simply *what* is said and *how* it is said, but above all *who* says it. It is precisely because the junior researcher targeted is a Muslim woman that it was so easy to render our work suspect. This is not only an ethical or even a legal issue (the unequal treatment of researchers), but it also has serious epistemological consequences. It raises doubts about certain categories of researchers as producers of knowledge. The net effect is then that these researchers – and hence particular forms of experiential knowledge – are excluded from the process of knowledge production.

This was vividly illustrated in the reflection audit. In our article we had pointed out that the background of the junior researcher as a committed Muslim was important to be able to build a relationship of trust *with our interlocutors*. The reflection audit turned this into something else, that is, her ‘Muslim background’ became an issue. In the words of the auditors:

In the article it is stated that the junior researcher has a Muslim background. It is, however, not clear what the effect of her background may have been in collecting and analyzing the research material. (De Bruijn and Widdershoven, 2017: 6)

The personal characteristics of the other researchers and their possible impact on the analysis were apparently irrelevant. The net effect is that researchers ‘with a Muslim background’ are once more reminded of the fact that they are suspect as producers of knowledge and that their research will be scrutinized in particular ways. In other words, it is such an uncritical demand for transparency that produces bias.

### **The research process: Confidentiality and epistemology**

Whereas we consider ‘transparency’ translated into a demand to disclose aspects of the private life of researchers as highly problematic, transparency about the research process and the methods used is something else. In our brief article we had, in fact, explicitly addressed the issue that using online chatting has major drawbacks and is a far from ideal method. Yet we also concluded that, in the field we were working in, private chatting had, nonetheless, provided new insights. We had also been careful to present our article as explorative, had explained that its findings could not be generalized, and had been very careful in drawing conclusions. But these aspects of our work – a discussion of methodology and substance – were of no interest to the reflection audit.

As stated in the letter of intent, the auditors were also to focus on ‘transparency versus anonymity’, which engendered the second question:

‘To what extent should researchers – also in this kind of research – know about, control, and/or report about the real identities of respondents?’

We found this a rather disingenuous question. After all, the board of the university had mandated us to sign a contract with the ethical commission of our funder,

the ERC, which explicitly stated that we would neither ask nor register the names of our interlocutors. It was on the basis of this signed document that the grant money was released. It would certainly have been helpful if the board of the university had *from the start* of the controversy made a firm statement that we fulfilled the requirements of the ethics committee of its own research school (the AISSR) and acted according to the contractual agreement with our funder, the ERC. The fact that the board choose not to do so indicates once more that the reflection audit was first and foremost an attempt to pacify the concerns of the media.

Not surprisingly, the auditors could not but state that we had been contractually bound to refrain from registering the names of our interlocutors. After briefly affirming that such a procedure may be justified, they then quickly turned this into a suspicious act by making a series of critical comments and stating that the contract with the ERC ‘protects the informants and anonymity into the extreme’ (De Bruijn and Widdershoven, 2017: 10)

But why was anonymity such a vexed issue for the reflection audit? That was the case because the *NRC* had turned this into a major flaw of the research project. On the record the journalist had asked us the following question: ‘You did not establish through ID cards or passports that the research subjects were present in Syria. In hindsight, shouldn’t you have done so?’<sup>20</sup> Apart from the fact that it remains a mystery how a picture of an ID card would work as evidence of someone’s location, this question points to the very different ways in which journalists and anthropologists deal with anonymity. Whereas journalists prefer to include official names and other identifiers in their publications, especially when their concern is to expose misconduct, for anthropologists it is common practice *not* to mention people’s real names and to be careful with other identifiers.

What the reflection audit failed to recognize is that the anonymity of interlocutors is fairly standard in anthropological research, not only for ethical but also for epistemological reasons. For much anthropological research there is no need to link a particular practice to a named individual, as we tend to focus on patterns emerging from individual practices rather than on specific individuals. In some cases our interlocutors may themselves prefer to be mentioned by name. Often, however, they would either simply refuse to talk to us or, if they would do so, they would then be well-aware that they are ‘on stage’, that they are addressing a broader public while talking with us. This may have a considerable impact on the kinds of insights they would be willing to share with us, and hence on knowledge production.

Our interlocutors often share highly personal and sensitive material with us, based on some level of trust and on the assumption that we will act responsibly with the knowledge gained. This means that we need to keep such materials protected and confidential, guided by an ethics of care and the principle of ‘doing no harm’.<sup>21</sup> This is the more urgent when it involves people in a vulnerable position. In our research project we needed to be particularly careful with disclosing information that would make our interlocutors easily identifiable, as such disclosure may have major legal consequences for them and hence do serious harm. The

importance of the requirement of anonymity was substantiated in the course of the contestations about our research project. One of the parliamentary questions, addressed to the Minister of Security and Justice, centered on the identity of the woman that we had considered as the only one actively involved in and committed to IS state-building: ‘Was her name known to the public prosecutor and would a criminal investigation be started against her?’ As social scientists we ourselves faced the problem that we do not have a well-defined legal right to protect our sources. This placed us in a double bind. It was thanks to our contextual knowledge about our interlocutors that we felt a strong measure of confidence about the quality of the insights and the information they had provided us with. Yet, we needed to be careful about the extent to which we publicly reported about this, precisely because we cannot claim the right to protect our sources, an issue hardly addressed in the reflection audit.

The final set of questions the reflection audit focused on was

the extent to which the ‘data’ of this and this kind of research – transcripts and/or reports of conversations with respondents – also if it concerns possibly highly vulnerable groups and highly sensitive issues – should be available for colleagues (such as for re-analysis).

Here the main concern of the reflection audit was the need for institutional control over academic work, as triggered by the *NRC* article. Again we witness the problem that ethics and integrity are delinked from epistemology. The demand for replicability (in some fields requiring the pre-registration of hypotheses) has emerged in those disciplines that position themselves in a positivistic tradition, work with representative samples, aim to test hypotheses and set out to draw general conclusions. This does not work for our kind of research that is exploratory, interpretative, and intersubjective, and does not claim this kind of representativity. The auditors, however, hardly address such a plurality of perspectives. Instead, they choose to highlight that not providing access to data would only fuel distrust.<sup>22</sup>

Returning to how anthropological knowledge is produced, it is important to realize that much of our ‘data’ is co-produced with our interlocutors. This implies that we are not the sole owners of the data, that we cannot simply hand over ownership, and that we can only provide access to ‘our data’ with the consent of our interlocutors.<sup>23</sup> The option to completely anonymize ethnographic research materials is not workable, not only because it would be overly time-consuming but also because it would require the removal of so much detail that the material becomes virtually meaningless. Moreover, our field notes function as a memory trigger rather than as a complete record of the knowledge we have acquired through time. Using this material without access to such embodied contextual knowledge runs the risk of misinterpretation. This should not be read as if we are adverse to any form of accountability, but rather that such accountability needs to be case-specific and should involve those who are thoroughly

familiar with the field. The bottom line is that it is naïve to assume that the public performance of transparency in the research process will in itself engender more trust. Researchers will never be able to provide conclusive evidence that material has not been discarded or that our field notes contain a complete and truthful description of situations we have encountered. As Strathern (2000) has pointed out, claims to transparency will only lead to an infinite regression, which is compounded by the refusal to recognize the bias in what is made visible. Data are, after all, never simply ‘raw data’; they are always already mediated and hence produced.

### Transparency revisited

To end with, we once more return to the question of how our brief, exploratory article became the ideal target for a wide range of actors, how the disconnect between epistemology, ethics and integrity contributed to this, and how the public performance of transparency concealed the workings of power both in academia and beyond. Our article turned out to be a godsend for a national daily in dire need of clicks, and for politicians trying to profile themselves as non-nonsense and tough on jihadists during the election campaign. The *NRC* was still able to draw on its past image of an upscale quality paper, and the politicians involved were not only those of the extreme anti-Islam fringe, but also mainstream right-wingers and social democrats.

Our article was an attractive target, in part because of the composition of the research team, the kind of interlocutors we engaged with, the academic discipline involved, and even the university concerned. The research team included a committed Muslim woman, belonging to a category that is ‘already under suspicion’ and hence particularly vulnerable to allegations about bias, while our interlocutors were the kind of people that the public would find it very hard to empathize with. Anthropology, as a discipline that is intersubjective rather than positivistic, highlights ambiguity and fluidity rather than certainty, and foregrounds responsibility towards one’s interlocutors over institutional interests, does not fare well in the current academic and political climate that demands clarity and certainty. This is the more so in the field of security studies, where authorities are in need of categorical knowledge in order to classify, map and evaluate (Schiffauer, 2015). Working at the University of Amsterdam, a university that still has, rightly or wrongly, the reputation of being the most left-leaning university in the Netherlands, did not help either.

Transparency became a key concept in this controversy. It was first invoked by the *NRC*, then by parliamentarians, and the board of the university followed suit. Inventing the format of an external reflection audit, the board posed questions about the need to report on political activities of co-researchers prior to employment, about the admissibility of the use of anonymous sources and of keeping data confidential. As we have argued, the aim of the reflection audit was evidently less an evaluation of the quality of our work, as substance turned out to be irrelevant

and there was no interest in whether we could substantiate the claims we made, than an act of appeasing a particular public. Hence *external* auditors were invited to produce a *public* report as an act of *performing transparency*.

What then remained concealed in this public performance of transparency, what remained unspoken? It is not simply the lack of procedural transparency of the reflection audit; there are more structural issues at stake. Here we need to briefly discuss the material interests of universities as publicly financed institutions, the vulnerability of anthropology as a discipline and the political climate that has become increasingly suspicious of Muslims. With the rise of new public management in the late 1990s, universities have become increasingly sensitive to attempts to damage their reputation, as this may have serious material consequences. Dutch universities – which are all publicly financed – compete with each other for students and for external research funding. The main reason why the board of the university felt an urgent need to act was because it was concerned about the negative effect the commotion about our publication might have on its reputation. The ensuing attempts at damage control pushed the board to raise questions that closely followed ‘public concerns’. That such concerns were strongly influenced by increasingly vocal ethno-nationalist and anti-Muslim sentiments, that in the course of the last decades have gained an increased presence across the political spectrum, remained outside of the debate. The option to employ a more open perspective in line with the mission of universities as critical institutions does not seem to have been entertained.

Material interests are also at stake in the division of resources between academic disciplines. One major flaw of the reflection audit was that it insufficiently linked ethics and integrity to epistemology. This makes it hard to understand why for anthropologists anonymity is the default option, fieldwork material is to be considered confidential, and researchers’ positionality matters but cannot be reduced to political perspectives nor be disclosed on command. This negligence of epistemology matters also, because the partial shift from ethical concerns to integrity protocols has been particularly troublesome for anthropologists (and similar kinds of field research).<sup>24</sup> Integrity protocols tend to start from the notion of the autonomous, neutral researcher, preferably engaged in research in a controlled environment, working with a research protocol that highly values replicability. Within the social sciences, anthropologists are amongst those furthest removed from such a model, and hence run the risk of increased marginalization. We recognize that integrity protocols often have an opt-out option for sharing data, such as on the basis of a commitment to confidentiality. Yet this in itself positions those opting-out – e.g. anthropologists – as the exception to the rule.

There is yet another power-laden element that the quest for transparency concealed. The board of the university presented the reflection audit report and our response to it as contributions to an open discussion and debate.<sup>25</sup> It is true that our critical response was published online in a similar format and at the same time as the reflection audit report itself. This had, however, only materialized after we

had expressed our strong objections against both the procedure and the substance of the report, supported not only by fellow anthropologists and others familiar with our work, but also by professionals involved in the field of ethics, integrity and the law.

The upbeat tone of the board's response conceals that the media hype we were drawn into was more similar to a form of intimidation, that is, an attempt to a-priori disqualify our research and to silence us as researchers (especially the junior researcher), than to an open discussion about our research project. Framing the publication of the reflection audit and our response as 'the start of an open debate' also conceals the fact that we are not operating in a level playing field, but find ourselves in the position of employees, in varying degrees of vulnerability. The board decided whether, how, and when to make the report of the auditors, whom they had already endowed with the authority of 'external experts', publicly available. Whereas it is true that the board refrained from endorsing the audit report, harm has nonetheless been done, not only to our junior researcher but also, more generally, to researchers who are recognizably Muslim (if only by name) as the reflection audit indicates that they run the risk of being singled out for scrutiny.<sup>26</sup>

Reflecting on transparency, this brings us back to Birchall (2011: 12), who points to the double bind, that a regime that 'embraces transparency will only ever be able to go so far before it tips over into totalitarianism because of its parallels with surveillance'. Yet, 'if the regime doesn't go far enough, if it shrinks back from applying transparency *to its own actions* (emphasis added), the regime meets the charge of totalitarianism coming the other way'. Our case points to the need to distinguish between, on the one hand, demands for transparency from above that may indeed turn into a form of surveillance, or even require researchers to surveil each other, and, on the other hand, the desire for transparency from below that holds those in a position of authority accountable for their actions. We recognize that there is always space for ambiguity and the lines of demarcation are not firmly set. Still, a university that appeals to transparency needs to recognize the workings of institutional and political power, if it aspires to live up to its mission as an institution that critically engages with the powers that be. Profiling its staff and students as 'independent thinkers and competent rebels' and pushing its researchers towards making their findings available to a wider public, requires an institutional commitment to push back when its researchers are targeted.<sup>27</sup>

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Brug, and director of research Brian Burgoon - had not pushed us to engage with questions about epistemology, ethics, integrity, and especially the workings of power, this article would not have been written.

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### Notes

1. All translations from Dutch are by the author and term ‘we’ in this article refers to my co-authors. A reworked and updated version, that includes some of the chats, has been published in the Dutch Middle East journal *ZemZem* (Navest et al., 2018).
2. See: <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/kamerstukken/2017/02/22/antwoorden-3-sets-kamervragen-inzake-jihadonderzoeker-uva>. Parliamentary questions were submitted on 18 January 2017 and answered on 23 February 2017.
3. See: <http://aissr.uva.nl/content/news/2017/07/research-audit.html>.
4. In July 2016 the same journalist had sent us a draft article about the same publication in *Anthropology Today* that had summarized our findings adequately (email, 14 July 2016). This was before he had investigated our junior researcher. The NRC did not publish this article as it considered it insufficiently newsworthy. For an analysis of how the force of the security discourse enabled the NRC to link our article to cyberjihadism, see Moors (2019).
5. Our response was, in shorthand, that none of the researchers is a supporter of the violent jihad, that the use of anonymous sources is common practice in anthropology and, in our case, even mandatory, and that our article would not be of much use to either the public prosecutor or lawyers (see Moors, 2019). In March 2018, the CTIVD (Dutch Commission for the Supervision of the Intelligence and Security Services) evaluated the report of the security services mentioned by the journalist, and raised the very same critical comments that we had presented in our *Anthropology Today* article (CTIVD, 2018: 29–34; Moors and De Koning, 2018).
6. There is a remarkably rapid shift in the focus of this exercise. On 17 January the board stated that in order to stimulate academic debate about the methodology used it would invite external experts to reflect on this case (see: <http://www.uva.nl/content/nieuws/nieuwsberichten/2017/01/reactie-uva-op-artikel-nrc-handelsblad.html>), while on 20 January the research school (AISSR) announced that it would organize a

‘reflection-audit’ by external experts to broaden the discussion of the scientific integrity of this research project specifically, and on this kind of difficult-to-research topic in general (introducing both the term audit and integrity; see: <http://aissr.uva.nl/content/news/2017/01/discussing-integrity-and-ethics.html?page=5&pageSize=20&origin=%2BxIdW4bRwCjN8rZP%2BdJdA>).

7. No-one in our field was willing, able, or deemed suitable to conduct the reflection audit. In the end, Mirjam de Bruijn, Professor of Culture and Identity of Africa at Leiden University, and Guy Widdershoven, Professor of Philosophy and Ethics at the Medical Faculty of the VU University in Amsterdam, agreed to conduct the audit.
8. As there is no space to elaborate here, two examples suffice: for the auditors’ suggestion that a more open attitude towards the journalist may have been helpful, see note 21; and for their claim that our archive was inaccessible, see note 22.
9. To achieve this, they included a host of recommendations, including more control over how and where researchers should publish and with whom they ought to discuss their work. They also proposed that the university itself would monitor all contacts of individual researchers with the media.
10. More generally, Shore (2008: 280) has pointed out that ‘audits often create the very mistrust they are supposed to alleviate’.
11. Duisenberg referred to our article with the words: ‘Research such as about those ladies who are with IS and liked it very much there, that is all allowed’ (see: <http://www.scienceguide.nl/201701/vvd-wil-onderzoek-politieke-voorkeur-wetenschappers.aspx>). In one sentence he managed to both seriously misrepresent the content of our article and to suggest that allowing such research is problematic, which seems rather ironic when making an argument against self-censorship in academia. In a conversation on 11 December 2017, Duisenberg conceded that he had not read our article.
12. In 2017 the percentage of female full professors in the Netherlands was 19.3% (<https://www.lnhv.nl/site/Publications/Monitor/Monitor-Vrouwelijke-Hoogleraren-2017>).
13. On 2 February 2017, this resolution was accepted by a small parliamentary majority. In the meantime, Duisenberg had given up his seat in parliament to take up the position of Chair of the Dutch Association of Universities (VSNU). Immediately after his appointment was announced, a petition was launched by university professors concerned about his stance about financing the universities, his earlier expressed preference for the sciences, and his position about ‘a diversity of perspectives’. Within a week the petition gained over 5000 signatures.
14. In 2014–15 Horowitz provided 126.000 euros to support the Dutch anti-Islam party, the PVV (Van Outeren, 2016).
15. See: <http://www.studentsforacademicfreedom.org/documents/1925/abor.html>.
16. See Hendriks (2018). Lukkassen is the author of *Avondland en Identiteit*, an attack against the specter of cultural Marxism. He also argues in favor of the politicization of the academy in order to provide space for right-wing voices.
17. The three articles were published in *The Post Online* on 28 January (Lukkassen, 2017) and 6 February (Duisenberg, 2017) and in *NRC* on 12 February (Hendriks, 2017).
18. Parts of this section and the next one are based on Moors (2019).
19. A strong recent case is that of the WODC, the Research and Documentation Center of the Ministry of Justice and Security, where an investigation revealed that ministry officials had exerted pressure on researchers to change research results, so that these would be more supportive of government policy.

20. An email dated 13 December 2016.
21. That such issues are of no concern to the NRC is evident, as the journalist explicitly stated to us that he was well-aware that his publication could harm the junior research 'in a possibly fatal way' (recorded conversation, 17 November 2016).
22. We had offered the auditors to have a look at the material in our presence, which they declined. Instead, they requested to take our archive with them. This we refused, because of our commitment to protect our interlocutors and the information they had provided.
23. See also the EASA (European Association of Social Anthropologists) statement on data governance in ethnographic projects (<http://www.easaonline.org/downloads/support/EASA%20statement%20on%20data%20governance.pdf>).
24. But note also how in Anglophone anthropology already in the 1990s ethical review boards seem to sometimes 'worry more about the reputation of universities than about actual ethical conduct towards research participants' (Pels, 2018: 392).
25. The auditors had refused to discuss their findings with us, let alone to enter into 'an open debate'. The only debate that has taken place was the symposium 'Discussing Ethics and Integrity: Anthropological Dilemmas', that we ourselves had organized together with colleagues from other anthropology departments at Dutch universities and with colleagues from Germany and the UK (see: <http://aissr.uva.nl/content/events/events/2018/01/discussing-ethics-and-integrity.html>). An outcome of this debate is the 'Guidelines for Anthropological Research: Data Management, Ethics, and Integrity', endorsed by the ABV (the Dutch Association of Anthropologists).
26. Since we started presenting our case in public, we have regularly been approached by scholars who felt that they would not be able to count on the protection of their own institution in the case of a controversy. Because of their positionality – such as lack of tenure or being a scholar of color or with a Muslim background – they were very hesitant to address this publicly.
27. See Thomas (2019), who uses 'Competent Rebels' as the title of his book about the occupation of the administrative center of the University of Amsterdam by students and staff in 2015.

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