

InfoNorth

Between Personal Recordings and Shared Heritage: Reflections on Data Stewardship

by Henry P. Huntington and Hiroko Ikuta

DATA STEWARDSHIP IS THE RESPONSIBLE CURATION and maintenance of data during a project. This stewardship also supports ownership and authority after a project is over. Putting data stewardship into practice, however, may involve a number of potentially divergent interests that can also change over time. Here, we describe a recent experience that involved several missteps on our part. Our hope is to start a conversation that will help those involved in similar kinds of research to think more carefully about their work, their intentions, and the implications of their choices.

We are not Indigenous, and it is not our place to suggest what should or should not be done by Indigenous individuals and communities, nor to imply that we have any insight into their interests. Instead, we write as visiting researchers reflecting on what is needed for us to fulfill our role in responsible data stewardship amid ambiguous and potentially conflicting interests.

Data stewardship is distinct from Indigenous Data Sovereignty, which requires that decisions about data that are by and about Indigenous communities should be made by the communities and individuals involved (United States Indigenous Data Sovereignty Network, 2020). While data sovereignty is the domain of Indigenous communities, visiting researchers cannot simply dump their responsibilities for data stewardship on the community. Instead, researchers need to consider how to steward data to meet the short- and long-term rights and wishes of the community and, in some cases, of families and individuals within the community (for example, the collective benefit, authority to control, responsibility, and ethics [CARE], and reclaim relevant data, engage community and values, authority to control, and learn through data [REAL] principles; see Carroll et al., 2020 and Itchuaqiyaq et al., In press). Many factors may be involved and may change over time. These include protection of privacy and intellectual property, preservation of information for later ethical use, the types of uses that are anticipated, and the options for destroying or archiving data.

The basic ethical principles are not in question. Data have value and should be treated accordingly. They are

also subject to intellectual property rights, which must be respected. Data concerning Indigenous Peoples and communities must be handled in keeping with cultural norms and traditional governance, as well as with ethical principles for research. None of these should be left to chance in responsible data stewardship.

And yet, practice is always more complicated and nuanced than theory. Our experience illustrates why data stewardship should not be treated lightly or assumed to be straightforward. We also note that many legal and other aspects of intellectual property and data stewardship are important, but are beyond the scope of this essay. Our intent is simply to raise some practical considerations within the wider context of legal and ethical requirements by which researchers are bound.

THE PROJECT

The details of the project are not crucial here and have been omitted to avoid causing any harm or discomfort. A community leader, cultural ambassador, researcher, and hunter was chosen by his Elders as a living repository for one aspect of their community's shared cultural heritage. He compiled what was likely the most extensive collection of audio and video recordings (though others in the community and elsewhere had their own collections), comprising hundreds of recordings on VHS tapes, cassette tapes, reel-to-reel tapes, and more. On a personal and family level, our community partner was concerned that the various recording media were in danger of degrading, disintegrating, or simply being lost. With the community and its cultural heritage in mind, he was also interested in documenting what he knew so the information that had been given to him would be preserved.

A researcher (HPH) who had worked with our partner for many years was able to obtain modest urgent-research funding from the U.S. National Science Foundation (NSF) to support this effort. The work involved a team (including HI) with extensive expertise in anthropology, ethnology, data stewardship, and publishing, including some with

long-standing connections with the individual and his community. The ultimate goal was a digital archive of the recordings with related information provided by our partner, along with a record of these cultural materials, including their history, meaning, alterations over time, significance, and other pertinent information about the depth of cultural heritage associated with them. In addition to the archive itself, we planned for both a book and a website to share the information. This project had the support of the community's Tribal Council, but left many details to be worked out as the project progressed.

Unfortunately, shortly after the project started in late 2019, COVID-19 put a stop to travel and the extensive in-person work that had been planned. Digitizing of the recordings was mostly completed, but not their review and annotation. Carrying the work out remotely was not possible due to limitations of Internet connectivity and access to needed computer power. By the time in-person visits were again possible, our partner was suffering from memory loss and other aspects of aging. HPH visited him in his community in December 2022 and was able to return to him the original recordings and a hard drive with the digitized versions. He also recorded our partner playing music and discussing the songs he played, but was not able to do much more. A few months later, our partner died.

At this point, at a time of grief for our partner's family as well as those of us on the project team, our partner's family decided to stop the work on the project, as was their right. At their request, we returned to them the remaining hard drive with the digitized recordings (the original media having been returned to our partner earlier). We also wrote an obituary for our partner and published an essay he had written about his cultural experience. Remaining project funds were allocated back to NSF. These steps felt appropriate at the time. In retrospect, though, we recognize certain things we could and should have done differently throughout the project to help everyone involved be better prepared for making decisions about data stewardship, especially at an emotionally intense time. That is, we are concerned here with process rather than result.

A better process might, for example, have helped everyone consider data stewardship responsibilities over time. A member of the extended family later contacted HPH to ask if the research team still had a copy of the digitized recordings, as a younger member of the family was eager to learn from them. We believe that providing such cultural materials to a member of the community who was interested in continuing the community's cultural legacy would have been entirely consistent with our partner's intent. We were, however, unable to fulfill this request because we no longer had a copy of the materials.

As that request illustrates, today's preferences (to end the project) may not be tomorrow's (to have materials available to share with someone in the community). Our hope is to help those undertaking similar stewardship projects think through these questions so they can plan accordingly. In our case, the decision to end the project was made in the

wake of our partner's death, when he could no longer express his wishes. Failing to discuss this possibility earlier, difficult though such a conversation might have been, was an omission on our part. In our experience, many projects rely largely on one or two community members, creating similar vulnerabilities.

PHYSICAL ARTIFACTS AND CULTURAL HERITAGE

One complication that became apparent in retrospect was the distinction between preserving our partner's recordings and documenting the community's cultural heritage. Had the intent simply been to convert legacy media recordings to a robust digital format, the project would have been a technical one requiring a degree of technological proficiency, with a relatively straightforward question of where the new digital version or versions would be stored. Because the project was carried out with public (i.e., NSF) funds, creating some kind of accessible archive would have been a reasonable expectation, in addition to any version returned to our partner and perhaps the community's Tribal Council for his and their use. The recordings were his, and Tribal approval for the project anticipated an archive of some kind, with future access perhaps subject to Tribal approval.

Documenting the materials was a different task. Had that been the only goal, it might have made more sense to make new, high-quality recordings, some of which was begun by the ethnologist involved in the project but cut short by COVID-19. Our partner and others could have provided information about each item. The older recordings could potentially have been used to explore variations and changes over time, an idea our partner was interested in as a way to reveal cultural and environmental shifts that might be reflected in various ways, but this would have been an ancillary goal. A project of this kind would have been more clearly focused on cultural heritage, of greater community relevance and interest than a private collection of non-unique recordings. Such a project may also have been more obviously one for which wider community engagement was necessary, since it would have clearly focused on shared cultural heritage.

We attempted to do both at the same time, which blurred the distinction between the private property rights of the old recordings and the community's shared cultural heritage. It also blurred the distinction between the interests of the owners of the recordings, that is, our partner and then his family, and the interests of the wider community. We could have been more attentive to the different interests involved and discussed how our work would balance those interests, rather than ignoring the ambiguity and potential divergence of interests that might arise in the case of our partner's incapacity or death.

The recordings also included more than just items of the one community's cultural heritage. The same video tapes also recorded material from other communities, which would hold their own intellectual property rights. And they

included personal family material, such as a grandson's first haircut and a child's birthday party. Such materials may be of great interest to our partner and his family, and our intent was to go through the recordings with our partner and identify such materials so that we could create two digital versions, one for him and his family with everything included, and one for the community and potentially wider audiences that held only the community's cultural materials. This step had not been started at the time of his death, and so would have required that either the researchers do their best, or that one or more people from the family take the time and effort to do so. Our failure to anticipate this additional need speaks again to the shortcomings of our planning and our overreliance on our partner.

RELATIONSHIPS

A further consideration is that the relationships among researchers, community partners, and community members more generally can be multi-faceted. The formal research relationship, governed by ethical requirements, may be that of researcher and subject, but also that of colleagues, and furthermore may exist alongside friendships with not just the individuals involved in the research, but also their family, neighbors, and others. It is not hard to imagine situations such as one in which, say, photographs taken during a project (which might be considered data in some circumstances) are not allowed to be used in the research, but still may be shared with community members or even shown to the researcher's friends and relatives in private settings. Because the recordings were private property, and were originally made without an expectation that they would someday become "data," it is all the more understandable that in the family's eyes they would revert to their original status upon our partner's death. Because he had been the primary point of contact between the research team and the family and community, there was no one ready to take on the role, in coordination with the project team, of ensuring that family and community interests remained paramount. In other words, there was insufficient trust and sense of shared purpose to sustain the collaboration.

Our relationships were also uneven. When our partner was healthy, it seemed reasonable to rely on him as the representative of his family's interests and the liaison with the Tribal Council and wider community. Without the disruption of COVID-19, perhaps we would have been better able to build up further relationships with Tribal leaders and other members of the family and the community. But we did not. The involvement of others might have reduced ambiguity and could have spared the family from having to make a decision at a time of grief about a topic they were not well informed about or engaged in. Those of us on the research team, too, were grieving the loss of our friend and colleague and did not want to further burden the family and community with our own wishes for what should be done next, or with a series of questions

about various options when they had been clear about their desire to end the project and have the remaining materials returned to them. In brief, and with the clarity of hindsight, we did not sufficiently think through the practicalities of our data stewardship responsibilities and how building more relationships could have better prepared all concerned for the shock of our partner's death.

In this light, the relationships among the members of the research team are also worth considering. The digitizing of the recordings was done by the team members with the greatest expertise in data management. While archiving was a central purpose of the project, crucial decisions, such as where the archive would be kept, were still under discussion as the work proceeded. In one way, this was a reasonable way to work, given good communication among research team members and a desire to give our partner and the community a range of options to consider as the scope and nature of the archive became clear. At the same time, treating data management and archiving as a detail to be dealt with later also postponed our engagement with the kinds of experience and expertise that would have been helpful to those of us who were not used to situations of this kind. Earlier attention to these matters among those of us on the research team might have helped us see the risk entailed in our overreliance on a single person.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Where does this discussion take us? Two main messages come to mind. First, the more that can be discussed and decided upon, the better. Data stewardship should be a central concern. Those with the necessary expertise to think through and carry out the aims of the research team, consistent with the ethical and other requirements that bind them, should be involved. In this project, the research team did not acknowledge the possibility that our partner might die during the project, even though his age and health were part of the justification for urgent funding, and we had not discussed with him or with others what should be done in that case. Understandably, such conversations are not always easy ones to have. But the alternative is to be left with ambiguity.

Second, not all possibilities can be anticipated, and so the ability to make good decisions will likely rest largely on the strength of the relationships among those who have an interest in the outcome, including relationships among research team members, as well as those between the community and the visiting researchers. The relationships are likely to involve many factors, including diverse personalities and histories, and are also likely to change over time, even during the course of a research project. Nonetheless, it is essential to be able to have a conversation among those who have an interest. The ultimate decision may still rest with one person or group, but at least others can express their views in hopes of finding ways that can serve many interests to at least some degree.

We offer these thoughts because we think discussion is needed across the research and data management community and among those involved in individual projects. Data stewardship is not a simple process with straightforward decisions and binary outcomes. Many interests are involved and deserve consideration. Simply hoping that complications do not arise is not a responsible strategy. Outcomes that fully satisfy everyone are unlikely, but an honest conversation at least offers a chance to be heard and a way to establish the communication needed for thoughtful and sensitive procedures for making data stewardship decisions under difficult circumstances.

The implications also go beyond individual projects. Many requirements and expectations for data stewardship may inadvertently reduce flexibility and leave little room for a nuanced response when many factors and interests and, as in our case, strong emotions are involved. We were fortunate to have a program officer at NSF who appreciated the situation we were in and recognized that the imperative of Indigenous Data Sovereignty required us to end the

project and return all remaining materials. Although those of us on the visiting research team were fully invested in the project, it was not a career-making one for any of us, which reduced the personal stakes in ending the project. Other researchers in other circumstances may face an even more complicated situation, adding to the difficulty of making sound decisions under stress. As the research community continues to put data stewardship principles into practice, further effort is needed to learn from those experiences and adjust our expectations and practices, for the benefit of all involved.

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Henry P. Huntington
Huntington Consulting
Eagle River, Alaska, USA
henryphuntington@gmail.com

Hiroko Ikuta
Kyushu University
Fukuoka, Japan
ikuta.hiroko.953@kyushu-u.ac.jp