“Beyond Sleep” – The search for the aerial photographs

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Data collection, analysis, publication and preservation have been core business of the academic world and its institutions for ages. Still, depending on one's background, discussions about research data management could sound very new, strange, technical, fancy, confusing, ....or as a new layer of red tape. One might even forget the motivation and different reasons for doing it. Let's leave all the policies, regulations, protocols, laws and IT projects aside for a moment and join Alfred Issendorf, the protagonist of the novel "Beyond Sleep", in his fieldwork and especially the search for existing data.

*Beyond Sleep* has been published originally in Dutch as *Nooit meer slapen*, by W.F. Hermans in 1966[1]. The protagonist Alfred Issendorf is a young ambitious doctoral candidate travelling from the Netherlands to Norway to conduct geological fieldwork. He intends to join three other young Norwegian researchers in Finnmark, the northeast part of Norway bordering Finland and Russia. First, as instructed by his supervisor, he is looking for existing data – aerial photographs – to use as reference during fieldwork before he is actually starting out with his collection of new geological data that should support his supervisor's hypothesis that certain holes in the landscape have been caused by meteorites and not by ice.

Unlike today where young researchers are accustomed to using satellite images, the aerial photographs – in the times that novel is set – are presented as a revolutionizing method (p. 46) that is “a must in modern research” (p. 60). Searching for and using them, does not seem to be established practice yet. Recalling the conversation and the perceived uneasiness of his supervisor professor Sibbelee, Alfred doubts whether he is certain about the approach on how to obtain the data. Technological change is a phenomenon of all times and doctoral candidates will continue finding themselves in the position that
they are using certain types of data or tools with which their supervisor may not (yet) have (a lot of) practical experience. As it is still quite common today, the first route for data re-use is to contact a befriended researcher who is assumed to have such data and is hopefully willing to share them: Prof. Nummedal in Oslo.

Clearly, in the fictional fieldwork case, research data management planning is not common and no one encourages adventurous Alfred to first sit down, think and ask questions, plan and prepare before he travels to Norway alone. Eager to make a great discovery, he learns his lessons about research data - and more importantly, lessons for life - the hard way.

Finding and trying to get access via connections between researchers turns out to be more difficult than anticipated:

“He doesn’t know what I am talking about! Could he have forgotten his promise to Sibbelee, that he would give me the aerial surveys, I need for my fieldwork?” (p. 9). “How am I to get through to this very old man, who’s long past caring what anyone might have to say (…), assuming he still knows what he’s doing?” (p. 20).

He gets the impression that the relationship between the two professors is not as good as his supervisor had made him believe and that an academic conflict about the “meteorite hypothesis” (p. 80) might reduce his chances of getting access to the data. As van Stralen (2001) [2] points out the doctoral candidate cannot challenge the two unconcerned professors in their position of power. He is being refused any data and he made him believe that he was wrong in his assumptions and search strategy: “aerial photographs for you to use in the field – how could you think…?” (p. 24). Automatically, Alfred uses a referral approach in his search and follows the only hint he gets from Prof. Nummedal: “go and get them from the Geological Survey in Trondheim, which is where they are kept” (p. 24). There he learns that tensions in the relationship between the Norwegian professor and the director also could have compromised his request for the photographs.

He experiences the Geological Survey as a labyrinth (van Stralen, 2001, p. 53) and throughout his preparation and fieldwork phase keeps receiving unclear and contradictory information about the photographs he is looking for. The confusion is increased by the fact that the organization is in the process of moving to another building and there is construction work going on: “I have lost track of which level we are on (…) We step over loose planks and beams, avoiding puddles of rainwater (…) Once more we arrive at a section of the building that is finished. The doors to the offices are open” (p. 45).

The photographs that are crucial to his research do not seem to be cared for and protected well at that moment. In the absence of the director and the staff of the department it is not clear who should handle data requests or give access. It is also not clear which datasets are in which location. He is invited to handle photographs in the archive himself, “caus[ing] a tear in the corner” (p. 44) and noticing that the information printed on the developed photographs is not sufficient for him to find out if these are what he is looking for. Without an available catalog that explains the meaning of the numbers on the boxes, the aerial photographs are useless for him:

“I turn it over to look at the back. Stamped: Ministry of Defence. Nothing about the location. (…) the grey lady says. ‘This has never been my department. I didn’t notice any filing system when I unpacked the case. And Fro[unintelligible], who is in charge of this, is in Oslo.’” (p. 45). “Oftedahl explains that, unfortunately, he cannot be of any further assistance to me. His secretary called Oslo and was told the catalogue has already been
packed and could now even be on its way to Trondheim. It was definitely not in Oslo.” (p. 45)

When he inquires about other possible data sources, he is being disappointed and told that these are “classified material” which “Only exceptionally are (...) made available, under very strict conditions, for specific scientific purposes. Besides, the ones you want are of Finnmark, so close to the Russian border!” (p. 47).

Without any further referrals, he decides to keep to the original time planning and research setup even without the reference data. Also his Norwegian friend, another doctoral candidate, seems to be well aware of the methodological flaw:

“(…) for the kind of research you’re doing...If it had been me, I’d have made sure I had some’ (...) ‘You can always pick them up in Trondheim afterwards, on your way back. Then you can examine them at leisure when you get home. Reverse order,’ he says with a chuckle.” (p.77).

While in the field, Alfred keeps thinking about the missing reference data and considers which other options there might be. Even though Alfred received a grant for research abroad (p. 82), much to his frustration the funds would not be sufficient for creating his own data and take aerial photographs or survey the territory himself in a helicopter (p.59).

Much to his surprise he discovers that another member of the expedition, a doctoral candidate of the professor who refused him any photographs, carries the reference data with him for his own research. This makes him doubt the honesty of the people he had contacted and feel victim of academic conflicts and competition. Once it is clear to the others that he needs the data as well, he is given access to it, even when he is not sure what the motivation is behind the data sharing. Quickly he realizes that the photographs do not contain any hints in support of the hypothesis he is supposed to prove. He thinks that there is no chance for him to make the great discovery he strives for. “I realise now – and it is inconceivably stupid of me not to have thought of it before – that I should have got hold of the aerial photographs before I came here. Long before” (p. 163). He is highly critical of the behavior of his supervisor who let him travel abroad without desk research with reference data first. “Aerial photography is such a highly efficient, modern instrument of orientation that it would be absurd to take pot luck and rush off into the wilds without photographs” (p. 164).

After his own field work trip ended due to the tragic turn it took, he once more contacts the Geological Survey:

“the secretary has a message for me. She tells me that the aerial photographs have been loaned to the university of Oslo. They do not have copies, but they do have the negatives. A fresh set of prints? Yes that would be possible, but no, there is no point in calling round tomorrow. I cannot count on the prints being ready for a very long time. It will be two, three months at least, and there is considerable expense involved” (p. 236).

Being on his way back to the Netherlands, this seems not an option for Alfred.

What a contrast is Alfred’s experience in his search for existing data to the growing number of datasets in today’s research data archives or repositories with digital data deposits. Digital images and maps of Norway findable via a catalog, maybe even accessible online from the Netherlands, and receiving clear information on licenses, sharing procedures and contact persons would have been a dream for Alfred’s research, especially the formulation of the research question and fieldwork preparation.
Would the existence of a modern repository have made a difference in the fictional fieldwork example? The culture in academia and the characters and their relationships in the novel are far too complex to come up with an easy alternative ending of the story. A short blog post and the reduction of the work through this “data lens” is certainly not doing the novel justice and just scratches on the surface. Yet, Alfred and his fieldwork trip will come back in further blog posts – as the novel touches upon so many data management aspects relevant for today’s researchers.

This blog post is part of the series “Research in fiction through the lens of data management”.

How to cite this blog post (Harvard style)


Footnotes
