# Making Friends with Failure in STS

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I often tell a story to my Masters of Science students in a course called ‘Navigating Complexity’ about a research experience I had early in my PhD studies. It’s one part failure narrative, one part lesson in keeping boundaries in science and technology studies (STS), and another part entertaining story.

A group of us were doing a research project about selfie sticks (forgive us on the subject matter, it was 2014) with a mixed methods approach. One person in the group did an ethnography in a museum, another did a Twitter scrape of #selfiestick, and I did a visual analysis of Instagram images with the hashtag #selfiestick and later a breaching experiment at an art gallery where the object had been banned. We were using these methods to look for accounts of the selfie stick being considered disruptive in public places. In some respects, the research was a failure. The museum ethnography didn’t show anyone being offended at the selfie stick—in fact, its use was encouraged on the day our researcher visited. The co-hashtag analysis wasn’t useful from an STS perspective; we had gathered the data from the Christmas/New Year period, which meant a lot of people had received selfie sticks as gifts and were tweeting photos along with hashtags⁠ such as #love, #family, #NYE, and #xmas.[[1]](#footnote-1)

‘Love?!’ remarked one of the researchers, ‘we can’t do anything useful with love in STS!’

I tell that story to my students and emphasize the punchline to make the distinction between doing an STS-style controversy mapping, with the focus on objects and actors, and a cultural or media studies project, where an analysis could have been made of the tweets and their co-hashtags. I also follow up by reassuring students that within the bounds of the course where they are required to use digital methods to visualize and analyze a research question of their own choosing, that failure does not lie in the data collection activities itself.

For many students, it is the first time they have done research design with digital methods from a feminist STS standpoint. I make a point that digital methods projects such as these are inherently inductive. While the researcher can control the search queries they make to the application programming interface (API)⁠[[2]](#footnote-2), they are largely at the mercy of the what the API serves up based on those queries and what any given user is tweeting about on that day with those hashtags. For the purposes of the students’ projects, failure lies in a lack of working with the data they have collected to tell a narrative in relation to the course syllabus, which deals with methods, standpoints, data feminism, mapping, and analysis, along with the absence of data.

In the data collection and visual analysis of Instagram images tagged with #selfiestick, I was looking at the configuration of the images and specifically asking: what are selfie stick users taking pictures of and with? I was hoping to find some posts of people being annoyed at selfie stick users. After analysing more than 10,000 posts, I was somewhat surprised at what I found. Rather than producing a data visualization, I had managed to put together a typology of selfie stick posts. But the original intention of trying to find accounts of the selfie stick being disruptive or derided? There were only a few posts that backed that up.

In hindsight, it’s clear that this was a failure that lay in the research formulation. The research question (if there was one at the time) was as close to being deductive as one can get with qualitative digital research. There was the assumption that both selfie sticks are disruptive and that they were disruptive enough for people to post about them on social media. It was a rookie error; one that I would have encouraged my current students to avoid. But the error had been made and happens so often (especially when doing digital methods research)—you go in looking for accounts of the selfie stick being disruptive and end up with a typology that includes people using a selfie stick while posing with their pet.

The final failure in that project has turned into another one of those research stories that I milk for entertainment value with colleagues and friends. The breaching experiment was the most amusing research failure of all. A breaching experiment is a research method used almost exclusively by ethnomethodologists to try to uncover the reasoning for taken for granted behaviour. Breaching experiments usually consist of the researcher breaking a publicly accepted, taken for granted social norm or rule to deliberately get caught, with the intention of then asking the person responsible for keeping the rule why the rule exists in the first place. Some contemporary STS-based examples of breaching experiments come from Woolgar and Neyland, involving researchers taking more than 100 millilitres of liquid through airport security to try to uncover the reasoning for the rule and how it is enforced.[[3]](#footnote-3) Breaching experiments were initially devised by Harold Garfinkel⁠, who rather tellingly made his students do the research work that laid the foundations for this method.[[4]](#footnote-4)

My encounter with breaching experiments led me to purchase a selfie stick and take it with me on a visit to the National Gallery in London. The gallery had recently banned the selfie stick. The plan was that I would get caught using the selfie stick and then ask follow up questions as to why. In practice, I am a rather introverted person who dislikes breaking rules, especially in a conspicuous way. Perhaps doing a breaching experiment was not the research method best suited to my temperament, so I took my flatmate as moral support.

When we arrived, we found out that many of the National Gallery’s docents were on strike, so there was a reduced security presence. We were browsing the galleries and started taking photos using the selfie stick in front of artworks that piqued our interest. We were initially timid but became more brazen as we realized none of the docents or security guards had noticed our deviant behaviour enough to ask us to stop. By the end of our visit, none of the gallery staff had intervened in our selfie stick use. The indifference of the gallery staff meant that the breaching experiment was a failure in terms of uncovering an institutional explanation for restricting the selfie stick in the space.

However, despite the failure of the breaching experiment, the exercise was not wasted. It generated a rich, autoethnographic account of selfie stick use in galleries, particularly in relation to how visitors might navigate the space differently with selfies in mind. While it didn’t end up being a breaching experiment, it was also somewhat an instance of the walkthrough method[[5]](#footnote-5), as I had not used a selfie stick before the breaching experiment. The experience of navigating the gallery was also an experience of learning how to use the selfie stick.

I tell these stories to also make failure relatable. It happens to many of us, and yet we are not encouraged to publish about it, so as to falsely emphasize our infallibility as researchers. Twenty-five years after Haraway⁠6 wrote about the modest witness, we as a research community still do not acknowledge mess, failure, and conflicting standpoints in our outputs.[[6]](#footnote-6) Only the sanitized, wrinkles-ironed-out version of research activities and their analysis is worthy to be told to the broader academic community, or actioned upon by a business or government.

My PhD almost failed, and it resembles little of the selfie stick descriptions contained in the last few hundred words. It pivoted to become a digital ethnography of how mundane failure is demonstrated on digital and social media.⁠[[7]](#footnote-7) The failure of the selfie stick still makes an appearance as a chapter that reflects on methodological failures of researching disruption. If your entire PhD thesis deals with how commuters, public institutions, cybersecurity experts, and researchers talk about failure and breakdown, it takes the sting out of talking about your own failure. I rarely talk about this failure, but I own it and its contribution to my formation as a researcher.

But there has also been an urge in recent years to ensure that failure be generative, as some form of consolation prize for things not going to plan. Is that a neoliberal way of looking at failure? Everything must have value squeezed out of it, even our screw ups. As the British artist David Shrigley (2021)⁠ so astutely put on a poster: ‘When life gives you a lemon/ you must eat the lemon/ all of it /including the skin’.[[8]](#footnote-8) Sometimes we as researchers are in the position of eating the skins of our research lemons.

So how then to talk about failure in research? How do we work with failure in such a way that we do not feel shame about it, nor do we feel urged to capitalize on it? In short: how do we let failure be what it needs to be within our research?

Some colleagues of mine have run workshops that encourage participants to ‘talk to texts that they’re struggling to write.’⁠9 They consider the troubling parts of their work in the ‘monster writing’ process, but in framing these troubles as monsters, the troubles are rendered addressable. Part of the exercise involves addressing the text and honestly admitting the struggles that they’re having with it as a form of moving forward—either to closure or working more on the text with a renewed understanding of its place in the world:

What responsibilities does the writing self have toward the written creature, the written body, the body of text as it is set lose to roam the world? This creature is part self, part other, never at rest; in its hybridity and in its undoing of stable boundaries between self and other, this text-creature is a monster. How might one learn to live in the company of one's text monsters, both while writing them and while they roam this world, co-creating it as they go, separate from their creator but never fully other?[[9]](#footnote-9)

What responsibilities do we have towards our failures in STS research? How do we think about them not as offcuts of the research, but as a part of our narrative as researchers? By addressing our failure and introducing it to others like an old friend, we are able to share it but not exploit it under the weight of the constant pressure to be generative.

1. This co-hashtag scrape on Twitter happened during a time where Instagram users could also directly post to Twitter from the platform. The two platforms are now less coupled together in this way. This had an impact on the types of posts that appeared in our scrape. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The application programming interface (API) is the piece of code that allows the researcher to ask a platform to gather data. The API usually gathers a sample of content, rather than the entirety of what has been posted due to large volumes of data. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Steve Woolgar and Daniel Neyland, *Mundane Governance: Ontology and Accountability*, 1st edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Harold Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, 1st edition, Cambridge, UK: Polity, 1991. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ben Light, Jean Burgess, and Stefanie Duguay, ‘The Walkthrough Method: An Approach to the Study of Apps,’ *New Media & Society* 20. 3 (1 March 2018): 881–900. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816675438. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Donna Haraway, Modest₋Witness@Second₋Millennium.FemaleMan₋Meets₋OncoMouse: *Feminism and Technoscience*, New York: Routledge, 1997. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Jessamy Perriam, *Theatres of Failure: Digital Demonstrations of Disruption in Everyday Life*, PhD diss., Goldsmiths, University of London, 2018. http://research.gold.ac.uk/23312/. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. David Shrigley, *When Life Gives You A Lemon*, 2021, poster, 80 x 60 cm. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Line Henriksen, Katrine Meldgaard Kjær, Marie Blønd, Marisa Cohn, Baki Cakici, Rachel Douglas‐Jones, Pedro Ferreira, Viktoriya Feshak, Simy Kaur Gahoonia, and Sunniva Sandbukt, ‘Writing Bodies and Bodies of Text: Thinking Vulnerability through Monsters,’ *Gender, Work & Organization* 29. 2 (March 2022), 565. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12782.

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