

Background:

The Role of National Libraries, National Archives and Research Data Centres

Whilst there are some differences in structure between countries, the experience of Germany and the UK indicates that, in broad terms, the roles of the bodies concerned can generally be described as follows:

- National libraries exist to store and point to the nation’s knowledge (and often all knowledge created in the national language), to be a trusted source of content and to help anyone who wishes to gain access to research materials. National libraries also often contain content from across the world in a wide variety of formats that are accessible to all.
- National archives exist as the official archive of the government (and often also provide advice to the public sector on information management and curating).
- Research Data Centres (RDCs) exist as centres of expertise in the selection, acquisition and preservation of research data. Additionally, RDCs are responsible for ensuring long-term access to research data (defined as both the primary inputs into research and the first-order results of that research.) RDCs may also provide significant value-added services to research data including user support, promotion and the provision of metadata uncovered via research. Some RDCs may also be responsible for the generation of data.

Research Data

Research data are data of value for research. They can be both “the primary inputs into research, as well as the first-order results of that research” and as such are defined by their use or their potential for reuse. Nowadays they are predominantly digital in nature and can include texts, numbers, images, voice recordings and so on. The scope and scale of research data is expanding rapidly and becoming more complex. Currently, existing non-digital archival materials (texts and other artefacts held in repositories) are also being digitised and in this manner, research data is becoming more accessible. As the volume of new research data expands, however, so does the need for the archiving of such data as well as the implementation of efficient procedures that enable researchers to locate, search, retrieve and reanalyse these data. Research data comprise a mix of information that goes beyond the traditional separate realms of publications (the primary responsibility of national libraries), official records (the responsibility of national archives) and datasets (the responsibility of researchers themselves and RDCs).

Given this dramatic increase in the potential availability of research data and its widespread use by researchers, it is getting harder to answer traditional questions such as: how to decide which information to preserve? How should it be preserved? Who should do it? Where should it be kept? How can we encourage and develop the skills necessary for the task?

There is a danger that these important questions are not being addressed in a systematic fashion. A lack of clarity, and in some cases outright confusion, about the respective roles of national libraries, national archives and RDCs, coupled with the rapid growth of digital research data, lends urgency to the need to resolve these issues.