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On the Respective Roles of
National Libraries, National Archives and
Research Data Centers in the Preservation
of and Access to Research Data

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On the Respective Roles of National Libraries, National
Archives and Research Data Centers in the Preservation of
and Access to Research Data

by

John Pullinger¹ and Gert G. Wagner²

London, Berlin, August 2010

- 1 Chairperson of the UK Data Forum
- 2 Chairperson of the German Data Forum (RatSWD)

Background

A meeting was held in Berlin on the 22nd of June, 2010, under the aegis of the UK Data Forum and the German Data Forum (RatSWD). The purpose of this meeting was to consider the role of libraries and archives for the acquisition, management and preservation of research data in the behavioural, social and economic sciences.

For the purposes of this document we define research data broadly as “the primary inputs into research, as well as the first-order results of that research.”¹

Our conclusion from the meeting was that it would be useful to formulate a memorandum on the respective roles of national libraries, national archives and research data centres. In our capacities as the chairpersons of the UK and German Data Forums we have written the following short overview and memorandum.

John Pullinger

Chairperson of the UK Data Forum

Gert G. Wagner

Chairperson of the German Data Forum

1 Sustainable economics for a digital planet: ensuring long-term access to digital information
http://brtf.sdsc.edu/biblio/BRTF_Final_Report.pdf

Overview of the Role of National Libraries, National Archives and Research Data Centres

Whilst there are some differences in structure between countries, the experiences of Germany and the UK indicate that the roles of the bodies concerned with archiving “research data,” understood in its most general sense, 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 (hereafter 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 for research data users including support, promotion and the provision of “metadata,” that is, information about the research data. Some RDCs may also be responsible for the generation of data.

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, statistical offices and RDCs).

Given the 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 real danger that these important questions are not being addressed in a systematic manner. 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.

The following memorandum puts forward the views of the UK Data Forum and the German Data Forum and suggests a mechanism through which the roles and interests of these various bodies can be coordinated.

Memorandum
on the Respective Roles of National Libraries, National Archives and
Research Data Centers in the Preservation of and Access to
Research Data

- National libraries, national archives and RDCs should each play a role in the preservation of and access to research data
- Coordinating these roles would improve efficiency and provide more effective service to the research community
- The central idea is that a change in culture must occur within the research community to ensure that research data is documented from the point of creation onwards so as to ensure preservation and re-use.
- This will also require an alignment of incentives amongst all parties: the work required to achieve this cultural change must be adequately recognised in reward systems.
- The nature of that role will depend on the institutional mission of the respective organisation, its capacity and capabilities (human and financial resources).

The UK Data Forum and the German Data Forum are suitably positioned across institutional and national boundaries to moderate efforts to create guidelines on the roles of national libraries, national archives and research data centres for use within the context of national data strategies in the behavioural, social and economic sciences.

John Pullinger

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