

A Data Archive for Social Sciences in Romania

A little bit of history

The data archiving process, in Romania, can be best described as an on-going process. We have great expectations and we are doing our best in order to see this happening. But our task is not an easy one, dealing in a more or less close environment. If some Western European countries have 30 or 40 years of history in data archiving, the Romanian saga is just beginning.

Before 1990, the concept of a public data archive was unconceivable. Data were considered secret, with a limited access for only a few granted people. Comparing to that period, after the 1989 revolution there was an 'explosion' in social research, with valuable data being collected. Unfortunately, the old instincts are still in the system. Research institutes, private and public, state institutions (like the National Commission for Statistics), even non-governmental organizations still promote a close system policy, even if this means taking the risk of losing the data (in many cases, they are not aware of that risk at all).

A very good example that shows this kind of mentality is a story that happened to a fellow researcher. The National Commission for Statistics distributes a free booklet with information. The trouble is the booklet rapidly disappears because of the small number printed. When the researcher was told there were no more copies available, he asked 'Öbut why don't you put them on the web?'. The answer came promptly: 'No, no, this would mean to make them public!'.

In 1990, the Institute for Quality of Life Research (IQLR), Bucharest was founded. Taking this institute for example, there is an increasing number of studies being pursued and a lot of data collected. Naturally, problems of a comparative nature began to appear. Feeling the potential of a data archive, following western examples, Prof. Catalin Zamfir, Ph.D. – the director of the institute (now the dean of the Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, as well) quickly realized that a Romanian data archive was necessary. About three or four years ago, a team of researchers was formed, with the specific task of creating a data archive. They visited a couple of Western countries with tradition, coming back full of ideas and enthusiasm.

by Adrian Dusa¹

Unfortunately, partly because of the poor Romanian environment, a very sad but common event happened: many of them left the institute, for better paid jobs in the private sector or even leaving the country with the purpose of emigration. The remaining researchers lost their interest and the project got stuck, until recently. A new wave of young graduates

from the faculty of Sociology and Social Work were recruited, and new hopes are being raised. Having the support of both IQLR and the Faculty, these premises are very encouraging. A Romanian Social Data Archive (RSDA) was set up, currently being under construction, and some visible results are expected in the next couple of months.

Institutional background

The RSDA will function as part of the IQLR, which is an academic research institute founded in 1990 under the aegis of the Romanian Academy for Sciences and the National Institute for Economic Research.

The IQLR has relations of scientific cooperation with a large number of domestic and foreign institutions, promoting a sustained opening towards mass media. By the quality of its research activity and by the results it obtained, the institute earned its recognition both at national and international levels such as the Presidency and Government of Romania, ministries, from other domestic and foreign research institutes and universities, as well as from several international organizations such as the Council of Europe, UNICEF, etc.

Starting with 1990, the institute publishes on an annual basis, the diagnosis of the quality of life in Romania and evaluates the social policies adopted in our country during the period of transition. It also investigates and offers alternative solutions to the main social and economic problems of present day Romania, by conducting empirical research on local national samples. The institute publishes books, studies, reviews, brochures, and research reports and provides consultancy in its field of expertise.

The research activity of the institute is structured on five main directions as follows:

- Quality of life

- Social policies
- Disadvantaged groups
- Human and communitarian development
- Interethnic relations

The papers elaborated by the IQLR are oriented towards both fundamental and applied research in social sciences and quality of life, adhering to the values of the spirit of European integration and transition to a free-market oriented economy in Romania.

Apart from this valuable support provided by the institute, the RSDA receives financial and logistic support from the Faculty of Sociology and Social Work (the Romanian acronym is SAS), University of Bucharest. The SAS brought a great help in setting-up the Romanian Social Data Archive. Apart from the financial support from the institute that covers the salaries, we received on behalf of the Faculty the rights for using a network of 10 computers in one of the Faculty's establishments. To maintain this network, the Faculty bought a server with a minimal configuration.

So what do we do about it?

Setting up a data archive is a challenging thing to do. As already mentioned, the Romanian data archive is under construction. Practically, we only had a vague idea about what data archiving is, and a collection of data sets. In this stage, information is the key word, because we have to deal with some problems – some of them probably basic for long established data archives, but still problems for us.

Building a data archive from scratch means that we need answers for some elementary questions, like: – What exactly is a data archive? – How do we store data? – How do we build the metadata base? – How do we put it on the web? – What kind of procedures should we use? – What kind of software?

Of course, we didn't have those answers; so in order to get a good idea about how to do data archiving we maintain a close contact with the other European data archives. Their experience is very helpful, because they have already been here while ago. The good thing is that we do not have to 'reinvent the wheel' again, but to take advantage of the information they can provide and 'jump' to the construction phase.

The first major step is to be recognized as an institution on the international level; and in order to do this, applications to CESSDA and IFDO will be pursued. We estimate this happening somewhere in the beginning of 2002, when a workshop for new data archives is planned, which will take place in Berlin. Later on we plan to apply for membership at ICPSR as well. These international connections are very important indeed, as we will be able to have access to the enormous social science heritage in the world. We could not only provide access to the Romanian data sets, but to the other international ones that are similar.

Although we are working on our archive's development, the process is rather slow. There are several reasons; one of them is that our team is very small, with only three members, plus a part-time system administrator. All the tasks are distributed among these persons. We have to do everything on our own, and the lack of training is slowing the process even more. We will have to spend some time and money with staff training. Defining procedures using international standards cannot be made until the staff fully understands what those standards are and how do they work.

Another reason is the lack of money. Although the institute does pay us, there is no money for some professional help. For example, the team's members are mainly sociologists, having no experience in web-design. We are currently working on the web page design, but I feel that we are losing valuable time doing things that we are not trained for, instead of doing really important things. We will eventually do it, but with the cost of losing time.

One other reason (and I will continue no more after) is that the whole Romanian society is inert. It is very hard to move fast forward in a static society (or even worse, moving backward). We have to adapt our speed to the state institutions' speed, hoping that private research institutes will move faster.

Our plans

After the system will be set and available data sets archived, we plan an extensive number of visits to the other research institutions, trying to bring more data sets in. Things are easier now for long established data archives in the Western Europe, because the depositors are coming with their data to be archived. Here, we will have a tough job persuading data sets' owners that is worth depositing; until they will trust us, we will have to run and 'chase' data sets. The we will be able to offer an up to date catalogue with the Romanian data sets archived, increasing high quality social research in the academic community.

Another future plan is to get some additional funds, from national and international sources. For a short term, international funds could be a solution, but in a longer perspective, funds from national institutions are necessary. We plan to attract funds from the Romanian Academy for Sciences, from the Education and Research Ministry, and from any other source possible.

Finally, international affiliations will bring the recognition we need in order to say: 'Yes we do have a Romanian Social Data Archive'. We would like to bring our thanks to the UK Data Archive and Zentralarchiv für Empirische Sozialforschung, for their valuable training and support they provided. Without their help, nothing we have would have been possible.

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