

Creating data services in new democracies. Experiences from a case study and related neighbours

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Knowledge is a crucial factor in economic and social development, producing cumulative positive feedback effects as it is incorporated into policies and practices. But knowledge relates in complex ways to the availability of information, which has both temporal and spatial dimensions. It is always a challenging task to define the “Eastern” part of Europe, which refers less to a geographical notion than to patterns of knowledge in a fuzzy area. From any particular perspective, the “East” corresponds, *de facto*, to a knowledge deficit combined with a certain type of institutional tradition in which state secrecy was long dominant. For decades, relevant information was hidden and results released could not be verified. Predictably, a high level of risk aversion characterises participants in economies and societies shaped, *inter alia*, by such a tradition.

One possible response to this challenge is to transfer knowledge about the collection, storage, and use of information from those societies where know-how is better developed. However, while understandable, such a response also raises problems. Instruments positively verified in the societies where they were developed may be biased in ways revealed by their application to other contexts. Good information requires adaptation of instruments to specific cultures and settings.

This article refers primarily to Romania, where, until recently, there has been little

information about social research, including who is doing what and where datasets can be found. Comparative experience suggests, however, that the Romanian case is broadly generalisable. In recent years, interest in archiving social data has dramatically increased as governments and civil societies have realised the importance of high-quality data for effective social policies. Strongly supported by the German Society of Social Science Infrastructure Services (*Gesellschaft sozialwissenschaftlicher Infrastruktureinrichtungen* –

GESIS) and UNESCO, the data archiving movement in Eastern Europe has evolved from an idea to a reality. Following the examples of Hungary, Czech Republic, and Slovenia, a data archive has been set up in Romania, and many more are on their way. This article focuses on RODA, the Romanian Social Data Archive ([http://](http://www.roda.ro)

www.roda.ro), which is a fairly recent institution supported by the Institute for Quality of Life Research (an institute of the Romanian Academy of Sciences) and by the Faculty of Sociology and Social Work of the University of Bucharest. RODA, which has offered researchers from Romania and elsewhere free access to datasets and variables of interest, offers some indications on best practice in this area. The importance of the venture is indicated by the level of funding from the World Bank and the Ministry of

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Education and Research for investment in the infrastructure by the University of Bucharest. One year from start-up, the data archive was admitted to the Council of the European Social Science Data Archives (CESSDA) in February 2002 and is currently applying for membership of the International Federation of Data Organizations (IFDO).

Institutional background

The Institute for Quality of Life Research (<http://www.iccv.ro>) has relations of scientific cooperation with a large number of domestic and foreign institutions and promotes openness towards the mass media. By the quality of its research activity and results, the Institute has earned recognition at both national and international levels from entities such as the Presidency and Government of Romania, ministries, other domestic and foreign research institutes and universities, and international organisations such as the Council of Europe and UNICEF. Since 1990, the Institute has published annually a diagnosis of the quality of life in Romania and evaluated the social policies adopted during the 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 or national samples. The Institute publishes books, studies, reviews, brochures, and research reports, and provides consultancy services in its field of expertise. The research activity of the Institute is organised around five main fields: quality of life, social policies, disadvantaged groups, human and community development, and inter-ethnic relations. The publications of the Institute 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.

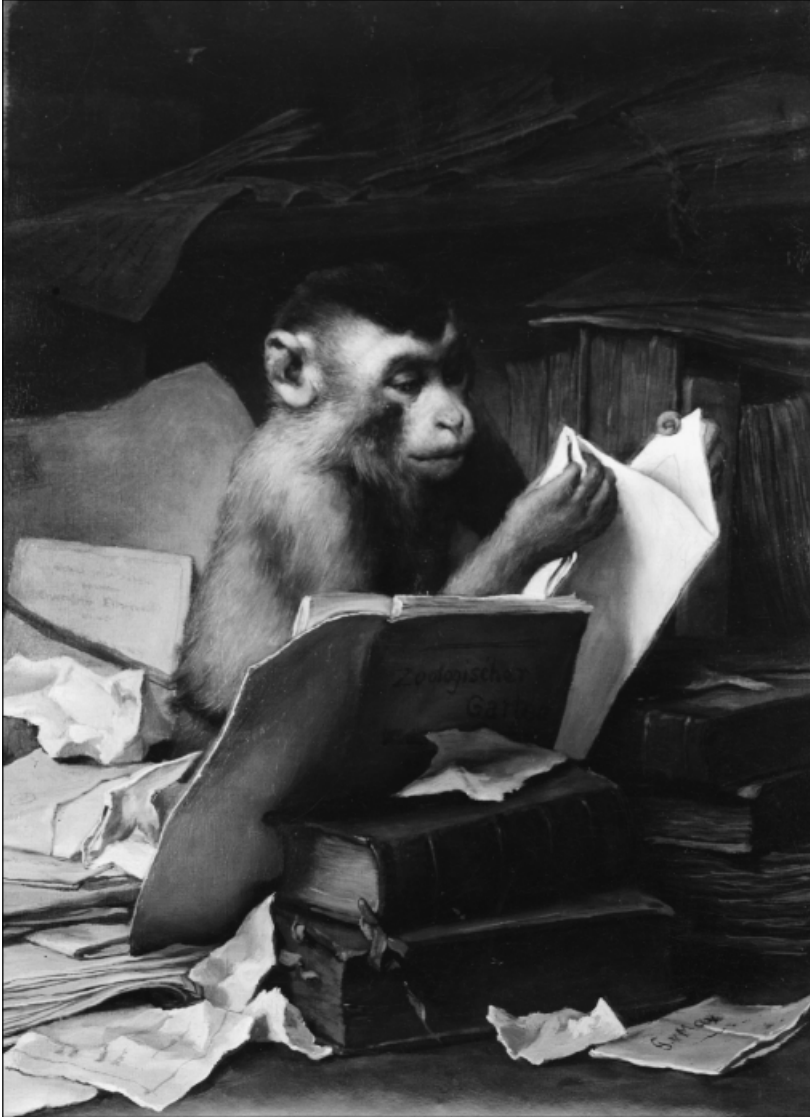
The Faculty of Sociology and Social Work (<http://www.sas.unibuc.ro>) of the University of Bucharest (<http://www.unibuc.ro>) re-opened in 1990 after a long interruption. In the new circumstances, the faculty trains specialists in sociology and social work, and organises and develops fundamental research programmes in sociology, social policies, and social work. The

Faculty maintains institutional relations with both domestic and international educational and research institutions, resulting in programmes, scholarships, and research fellowships for students and staff. Academic credit transfers are encouraged in international exchanges between universities, as well as collaborations with similar domestic and foreign institutions. The Faculty is currently in a phase of rapid development, with a threefold increase in student numbers in recent years. It was the first faculty in Romania to organise a social work department, and it is the largest of its kind. Its staff consists of professors with various responsibilities in other important institutions, combining the theoretical with the applied approach.

Domestic context

Disseminating social research data will serve not only social scientists but also Romanian society. Open access to survey data is one of the most important objectives. Availability of better information and on-line access to data sets for analysis would enable researchers, social scientists, the mass media representatives, decision makers, and government and state institutions to improve their understanding of social processes and use accumulated knowledge on contemporary Romanian society to design more effective social policies. With this in mind, RODA promotes an open policy, encouraging in particular secondary analysis of existing data. Archiving standards are set to a high level, using the latest software developed by the international community. Institutional development is ongoing, with funding from a World Bank grant and expected support from UNESCO.

Interest in RODA comes primarily, as one would expect, from Romanian researchers and academics. In May 2002, the official launch of the data archive was honoured by the presence of the Rector of the University of Bucharest, as well as the board members of the Faculty of Sociology and Social Work and guest professors from major universities across the country. All speakers saluted the appearance of RODA, agreeing that it was a long-awaited event. RODA's main goal is to promote usage benefits and dedicated software. In October 2002, extensive visits for



Lesender Affe [Monkey reading], by Gabriel von Mase (1840–1915). AKG images

these purposes were made to the other major universities and research institutions in Romania: the initiative was funded by the Ministry of Education and Research, through a project called INFOSOC (Information Society). In addition, there are lively discussions about the creation of a National Research Council which will link funding of the projects to an obligation

to deposit datasets in the data archive. Legislation is planned in this respect.

A data archive would be pointless without the people to use it. The appearance of RODA is not accidental, but indicates on the contrary that a qualified user community already exists in Romania. As in other countries of Central and Eastern Europe, this is evidence

that international partners can rely on local expertise.

An example of productive cooperation is CASPIS (the Government Commission on Poverty Alleviation and Promotion of Social Inclusion [<http://www.caspis.ro>]) which, under the direct guidance of the Romanian Government and World Bank experts, developed a National Anti-Poverty Plan, which is based on the template of the existing National Plans for Social Inclusion required by the European Union from its member states, but also includes a specific Romanian focus. For the purposes of the plan, a number of difficult issues needed to be addressed, including what poverty line to use, at what level, based on what kinds of poverty measures, what kind of data are more appropriate, how to exploit them efficiently, and so on. Both Romanian and World Bank experts quickly realised that general international formulas and measures are not giving good results. In so far as they are insufficiently sensitive to current Romanian realities, they require modification. The plan produced by CASPIS integrated these concerns, and is now in the implementation and monitoring phase.

It was particularly encouraging that, in this context, and for the first time since the Revolution in 1989, experts from the University of Bucharest, the Institute for Quality of Life Research, and various Ministries had the opportunity to work closely with the experts from the National Institute of Statistics (INS – <http://www.insse.ro>), which is in charge of all official statistics. The significance of this relationship is that the INS has data sets that are far more comprehensive than those produced by ordinary social research. As in other countries, integration of national statistical and survey research data is a major objective of RODA.

European cooperation: some cursory notes

There has been significant international interest in developing this kind of data-oriented activity, with particular reference to Eastern Europe. The comments here merely summarise briefly some of the relevant events as well as some technical issues raised by cooperation.

The first meeting where a possible Eastern European network was discussed was the “New Archives Forum” at the May 2001 conference “A Data Odyssey – Collaborative Working in the Social Science Cyberspace” organised in Amsterdam in the Netherlands by the International Association of Social Science Information Systems & Technology (IASSIST) and IFDO. At the forum, which was convened by UNESCO and GESIS, new and emerging data archives from the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Latvia presented their state of the art, their plans, and their aspirations to improved services.¹ The convenors stressed the need for a follow-up meeting to strengthen the basis of this network. One month later, at a meeting in Berlin again convened by UNESCO – which provided financial support – and GESIS, the East European Data Archives Network (EDAN) was launched with a view to applying for funding under the 6th Framework Programme of the European Commission. On this occasion, the network was strengthened by the inclusion of partners from Ukraine, Bulgaria, Poland, Yugoslavia, and Lithuania. Each participant presented a paper, either outlining new initiatives or reporting on achievements since Amsterdam. There was general agreement that much work is still required, and that it would be particularly useful to run a dedicated hands-on-computer workshop. The papers of the Berlin meeting have been published (Hausstein & de Guchteneire 2002). RODA’s main objective in participating in international networks is to enhance communication with partners in both East and West on the basis of common standards. The emergence of new data archives offers, in particular, a perfect opportunity for the adoption of common procedures and software, as indeed the experience of RODA shows.

In September 2002, in collaboration with EDAN and the *Zentralarchiv* in Cologne, RODA hosted in Bucharest an international workshop on new standards in data archiving, with hands-on-computer exercises on how to install the Nesstar software and to connect and communicate with other network data archives. The purpose of this workshop, which was largely self-funded, was to introduce the DDI (Data Documentation Initiative) standard and to bring all EDAN members to the same level of knowledge in

data archiving. A common language for production and storage of meta-data will be a major factor in enhancing future cooperation. Interest in such collaboration was indicated by the attendance of participants from the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Ukraine, Russia, and Romania, as well as Portugal, where at that time no data archive existed.

Equally important is the interest shown by CESSDA members in the DDI workshop. In conjunction with the Bucharest workshop, RODA also organised the annual CESSDA Expert Semi-

nar, where CESSDA members meet to discuss the latest standards and software in data archiving. Many of the participants (from Germany, the United Kingdom, Sweden, Finland, Norway, Switzerland, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Spain) also made presentations to the DDI workshop. This three-day event was probably the first time data-archiving experts and trainees from West and East sat in the same room sharing their experience and opening up new perspectives for European integration, at least in the field of data services.

Note

1. The conference papers are available at http://www.gesis.org/en/data_service/eastern_europe/news/NAF2001.pdf and were published in the *IASSIST Quarterly*, 25(2), 2001.

Reference

HAUSSTEIN, B. & DE GUCHTENEIRE, P. (EDS.) 2002. *Social Science Data Archives in Eastern Europe: Results, Potential and Prospects of Archival Development*. Berlin–Cologne–Paris: Fergar Verlag.