CESSDA Expert Seminar 2006

Sum up of the seminar proceedings

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The CESSDA Expert Seminars have traditionally been workshops of specialised staff with the purpose of exchanging ideas and arriving to solutions for everyday –hands on-matters in the work of Archives. This year's seminar was about the issue of *OPEN ACCESS TO DATA,* discussed in the practical terms of *ANONYMISATION, DATA PROTECTION & CONFIDENTIALITY.* Although in all Organisations there is a certain amount of legal restrictions and/or formal directives as to the protection of data, the variability was evident. The target of this seminar was not to find ways to smooth this variability, but to make introspection into issues which, at first glance, may seem self-evident or easy to be handled and to describe the existing norms, ethics and procedures underlying the life cycle of research and its data.

The concepts: *confidentiality, data protection, open access, research ethics,* have been discussed; more concepts were raised, along with their working definitions. It appears that these concepts reside in the space between **social, cultural**, **research norms** and **personal ethics**.

It was shown that in the actual day-to-day research practice, the question "*what is and what is not **confidential**?*" cannot be easily answered. It is even more difficult to answer "*what is and what is not **confidential in sociological research**?*" And then, questions as: Who is the person to adjudicate upon the subject?, are consequently raised. Is it the scientist who poses the original research questions and designs the tools, or the field researcher, or the analyst(s), the data processor, the data distributor? At the end of the day, who is the agent for Data Protection? Safe approaches to ensure confidentiality were described: data depersonalisation, complicated coding procedures, aggregate handling of data, etc. We all expressed though, that these laborious procedures come with a prize at the level of usage, validity, reliability, scientific precision, insight, handling costs.

As comparative research in sociology and data archive practices increasingly enhance a *data sharing culture*, the subject of this seminar becomes more relevant with design of specific technical applications, with discussions on international agreements, with the application of educational programmes, with ideas for refinement of methods for data sharing, with integrated work on recommendations possibly organised as an initiative by the CESSDA Archives.

We are all witnessing the development of a technology which has the potential of *unlimited communication*. And this unavoidably dictates our philosophy in terms of handling social data. The original concern, expressed during the opening of this seminar, about preoccupation with confidentiality against the opening of knowledge, while being alert for the misuse of social data, is still hanging on the air.

The original questions posed at the Agenda remain, and can be epitomised to two main issues:
-can we, as a Network of Archives arrive to homogenised practices for data handling and dissemination?
-what is the role of the European Archives in response to an *Open Access* movement in technology?

The term *Open Access* refers to the corresponding emerging philosophy, which dictates tools and methods, or, is it the other way around? Shall we value and promote open access, simply because we can build the tools for it? This is a question which concerns not only the Archives, but anyone who is dealing with Information Technology, as well. The Data Archives for sociological and humanities research must be clear on our ways of action, because our activities raise the subject of norms and ethics of research as an equally important issue as the technical, methodological and administrative issues. This issue must be part of the research infrastructure for the social sciences and humanities, and we must work extensively towards incorporating it.

I shall attempt to pinpoint the basic issues and needs/demands raised from our discussion during the two days, but since they come from my poor notes, I am sure each of you will have more to add to the list:

- The Data Protection Directive(s) mentioned do not fully cover the needs for data protection practices on research relevant to the Archives.
- We must work towards **demystification** of problems, which are supposed to arise from distribution of data; the first step is to put the subject into open discussion among the agents who are occupied with data; we must start this from **inside**, from our own Archives.
- Anonymisation takes human effort and is time consuming; one way to deal with this is to incorporate it in the research process. The following actions might be considered:
  - o Education/training of researchers and/or officials who deal with data;
  - o Incorporate anonymisation procedures in the financing of research;
  - o Enhance the role of the Archives in the research production process. They must play a role during the whole life-cycle of research –from the design to archiving.
- Data sharing and data sharing culture is the key issue, which is connected both with the Archival practices and with comparative research, which is the essential type of research promoted and funded by the EU.
- As we already stressed, this seminar was about concepts, and it was full of concepts; particularly the concepts: **consent** and **informed consent** were put to discussion on several occasions and need to be further discussed, particularly with **sensitive** data –which, by the way, is another concept needing to be extensively discussed.
- Anonymity is not the end of the story in terms of data dissemination. The question *what lies beyond anomymity?* is raised, once we deal with - anonymised- data for homogenisation, and once we come to the issue of

using the data files for comparative purposes; there have been illustrations of this issue with the examples given in terms of the geographical conditions hindering the anonymity of data.

What we ***did not discuss*** is a possible working hypothesis on the possibilities of entering the "Hot" subject of open access into a technologically applicable procedure within the procedures of building Research Infrastructures, in a holistic hosting environment of Archival practices. But this is as far as this expert seminar went, and I am happy that there was a strong attendance, both in terms of physical presence by Archive delegates, and in terms of mental contributions.

I hope that we shall all return home with those pieces of valuable experience and knowledge collected during the two days of the seminar, to use for the opening of an international –multicultural discussion on norms and procedures in handling the products of social research.

Thank you.