The role of research data repositories in social and cultural informatics and the wider open data ecosystem

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Social and cultural informatics is a trans-disciplinary field of research and practice, which studies the use of Information and Communication Technologies in cultural and social contexts, in this case Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences (HASS) scholarship.

The Social and Cultural Informatics Platform (SCIP) is the first informatics platform at the University of Melbourne to support research in the Humanities, Arts, Social Sciences and the Visual & Performing Arts.

SCIP brings together a number of experts active in the digital humanities sector to provide services that focus on the integration of technology with the dynamic, specific requirements of HASS and VPA research. SCIP supports partner faculties at a project and faculty level, with services including research data management training and grant support, research tools and services support, and training and network development opportunities.

Working with researchers on their informatics needs and through a detailed analysis of survey results, it was found that it was more beneficial to researchers to achieve more within a single system, rather than having to cycle data through a number of informatics tools and processes such as: acquiring data storage, developing separate web interfaces to individualise data collections, and exporting data into different informatics tools for further review and interrogation. This is particularly problematic for researchers after a funding cycle is complete, where maintenance of a number of systems and services must continue if data is to remain available for reuse.

SCIP therefore, incorporated plans within the project to develop a prototypical data repository called the ‘SCIPtorium’. The repository provides HASS researchers with the capability of securely storing data, of describing data and providing contextual value, and sharing data in a distinct way with the wider academic community.

In order to inform the selection process, we examined research data management systems from traditional research environments within universities and research organisations, but also looked to the public sector where large amounts of data are being released under the banner of Open Government.

The concept of Open Government is a worldwide phenomenon that promises greater transparency, efficiency and innovation by publishing Open Government Data (OGD) on the web. To this end, OGD is now widely disseminated through Open Data repositories. At the time of writing the Open Knowledge Foundation lists 417 open data portals at federal, state and local government level [1]. Australia is currently ranked number 5 in the world in terms of the openness of the data it releases.

Alongside the Open Government movement, large amounts of research data generated by universities and research organisations are being exposed through research data repositories. The register of research data repositories currently list 1260 repositories of which 1066 are considered open access [2].

While there is considerable overlap in the motivations, philosophy and technology of these two groups, there are also significant differences. Publishing OGD has generally been motivated by the ideals of transparency, efficiency, democracy and innovation, whereas research data is generally made available to support and verify published findings, and as a service to future researchers, who can build upon previous work [3].

In this presentation we explore some of these similarities and differences and look at what each group can learn from the other.
REFERENCES
1. http://dataportals.org/
2. http://www.re3data.org/

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Peter Neish

Peter Neish is a Research Data Curator at the University of Melbourne where he works with researchers on a wide range of research data management projects. Before that he worked at the Victorian Parliamentary Library using his background as a researcher and computer scientist to make databases and parliamentary information more available, standards-based and linked. Before Parliament, he worked at the Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne integrating botanical information and biodiversity data systems, and he has contributed to national and international biodiversity initiatives and data transfer standards.

Abbey Murray

Abbey Murray is a socio-informatician in the Social and Cultural Informatics Platform. Prior to this Abbey worked as a systems librarian with an array of experience working with digital collections in broadcast and academic environments including technical administration, project management, information architecture and design, and metadata analysis. Prior to moving to Melbourne, Abbey worked at the University of New South Wales in technical support, project coordination, and repository development. She also took part in The Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) Digitisation project, which involved the digitisation of 17,000 hours of archival footage. Abbey has a Bachelor's degree in Fine Art, and a Post Graduate degree in Information Management.

Leo Konstantelos

Dr Leo Konstantelos is Manager of the Digital Scholarship program in the University Library at the University of Melbourne. His role involves the creation, management and implementation of services that optimise the digital transformation of scholarly practice through partnership with researchers and scholars at the University and beyond. Before moving to Australia in 2013, Leo was a researcher in the Humanities Advanced Technology & Information Institute (HATII) at the University of Glasgow; and a research fellow at the University of Portsmouth, UK. His research interests focus on the management, curation and preservation of born-digital, complex manifestations of new media art, software art and video games. Leo holds a PhD in Digital Humanities; and a MSc in Information Technology, both from the University of Glasgow.