User Support

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Abstract: In considering "users" of social science data archives, the temptation is to count only those who are conducting secondary analysis of data. However, the definition of "users" can be widened to include any groups and individuals who have regular or systematic contact with a data archiving and dissemination service. In this paper I identify six distinct categories of users: data creators and potential depositors of data; depositors of data; those enquiring about re-using data; those who are re-using data; those who have re-used data; and those who have an interest in acquiring knowledge about the workings of or procedures used by a data archive. I discuss in turn the requirements for providing user support across each of these areas.

I conclude that a well-directed, managed, forward-thinking and monitored program of user support can enable a data archive to keep one step ahead of users' needs and to raise its own profile. As such, the pay off is a good reputation, a solid funding base, an enhanced culture of sharing and re-using qualitative data, the production of high quality incoming data and documentation and spin-off funding for new products and cross-national initiatives.

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1. Defining the User Communities

In considering "users" of social science data archives, the temptation is to count only those who are conducting secondary analysis of data. However, my experience of running a Qualitative Data Service (Qualidata, http://www.esds.ac.uk/qualidata/) and the UK Data Archive (UKDA, http://www.data-archive.ac.uk/) Users Service section suggests that the definition of "users" can be widened to include any groups and individuals who have regular or systematic contact with the service. For the purposes then of discussing the pivotal role of user support, I identify six distinct categories of users. These are:

- data creators and potential depositors of data;.
- depositors of data;
- those enquiring about re-using data;
- those who are re-using data;
- those who have re-used data;
- and those who have an interest in acquiring knowledge about the workings of or procedures used by a data archive. [1]

Taking each of these in turn, I provide an overview of the support required to meet the needs of these communities. The nature and level of support leads us to consider: the staffing component—in terms of level and skills base—and information, promotional and outreach strategies. [2]

2. Support for Creating and Supplying Data

2.1 Data creators and potential depositors

A Data Archive's acquisition strategy typically sets out the extent to which data falling under its remit are identified, selected and evaluated for potential acquisition. The article by Louise CORTI and Gill BACKHOUSE in this volume provides a detailed discussion of acquiring qualitative data and about the Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC) data sharing, Datasets Policy. [3]

Before the Datasets Policy was revised to include qualitative data, previously excluded, Qualidata's work in supporting potential depositors was primarily reactive—in response to enquiries resulting from Qualidata surveys of qualitative researchers and from unsolicited offers of data. This workload could be handled by the small staffing component in place at the time. In 1996, the extension of qualitative data into remit of the Datasets Policy meant that grant holders needed to be supported in order to meet their contractual obligations in offering their own data for archiving. Qualidata was assigned the role of handling support for qualitative data under this Policy, while the UKDA handled survey deposits. As such, the need to devote help desk support and focused activities for data creators became apparent, and a request to the funding body to support a new part-time member of staff was agreed. [4]

In the first year this post of "researcher support officer," held by a bright young post-graduate, was used to initiate two main activities. The first was to draft advice for ESRC data creators, guidelines on research strategy, confidentiality and copyright, and to help build a set of web pages devoted to data creation. Advice centered around helping applicants fill in their applications forms and primarily focused on: advising of existing data sources that might overlap with the proposed data creation; financial budgeting for the preparation of data for archiving; best practice in project and data documentation; transcription and anonymization; technical advice, on data format and audio recording interviews etc; and gaining participant consent required that could enable the future re-use of data. The second was to go out to Program meetings and groups of active researchers to allay concerns about sharing data and to promote best practice in data preparation. The Qualidata team further initiated a series of workshops focused towards supporting these users—by introducing and facilitating discussion on ethical, legal and practical issues of concern to researchers. [5]

These days, Qualidata supports data creators by offering: a telephone help desk; a suite of Web pages on *Creating Data* which provide up to date information on all the issues of relevance to researchers; and proactive support in the form of meeting attendance and the hosting of seminars and training days. Since 2001, the researcher support post is combined with acquisitions, and a single part-time member of staff supports both data creators and depositors. [6]

2.2 Depositors and data suppliers

Both Qualidata and the UKDA Qualidata have long-standing experience of dealing with all aspects of acquisition and data collections management, including licensing agreements, working with academic award holders in the process of depositing data, and established relationships with other data producers. [7]

Incoming data should be deposited to a standard that would enable the data to be used by a third party. Support for depositors involves direct liaison at or near the point of deposit to ensure that data are received in appropriate formats, are complete, fully supported by adequate documentation, and that confidentiality, data protection and copyright issues have been addressed. The main aim is to make the transfer of materials as transparent as possible for depositors and to ensure that any problems are resolved at an early stage. In cases where there are likely to be problems for archiving qualitative data, individual advice and guidance is often requested. [8]

Support for depositors is generally provided through a suite of web-based guidelines and notes on preparing data for deposit. The Qualidata "*Depositing Data*" web pages have been designed with easy navigation in mind so that users can locate information on guidelines for documentation, anonymization, data format and data transfer. Support also extends, where desired, to individual email or telephone communication with investigators and visits to less confident depositors. Finally, a more proactive role is also useful in working to promote the importance of sharing and preserving data within the social sciences and actively

alerting award holders to their obligations. Finally, it is worth noting that a more mandatory and formalized data management plan at the application or short-listing stage for an ESRC grant would help to pre-empt many of the more problematic queries coming to the help desk. [9]

3. Support for Using Data

On average the UKDA and Qualidata currently receive approximately 1,200 enquires per year relating to using data. These can be broadly categorized into three key groups: general enquires, pre-data access and post-data access queries. The first include non-specific queries about the availability of data, the registration process and methods of accessing data; the second concern more specific enquires about the availability and ordering of specific datasets; and the third usually relate to the specific use and interpretation of data and documenta-tion. The UKDA has two units that support accessing and using data—a User Services support team and specialist Qualitative Data User Support staff. [10]

3.1 Those enquiring about re-using

Resource discovery tools and promotional materials are primary ways of both encouraging and facilitating potential users in their search for data. Web pages and, in particular, an online catalogue of holdings is the first port of call for most users seeking data resources. In order to maximize relevant information retrieval, finding aids should have both simple and advanced searching (with thesaurus help) and browsing functionality (such as by subject area or kind of data). An appropriate and recognized metadata schema should be used to enable inter-operability with other related collections held in other locations. Qualidata pro-vides a detailed study and data description in its *Qualicat* records, and provides links from each record to freely available and downloadable online documenta-tion, user guides, specific notes on usability, and digital data samples. [11]

Equally, simple guidance on how to conduct searches are found to be useful, as are links to any software that may be required by users to read online literature, such as Adobe PDF viewer or an unzip facility. Besides the online catalogue, Qualidata also hosts web pages on how to locate data in specific subject areas. So far, the information mounted describes research resources available for criminologists, health researchers and oral history. In its set of web pages on *Re-Using Data*, Qualidata further introduces approaches to re-using data and links to published studies on re-use. The bibliography contains some articles that are available on-line, for example the *FQS* journal issue on Text. Archive . Re-Analysis (CORTI, KLUGE, MRUCK & OPITZ 2000). In recognition of the fact that the culture of secondary analysis of qualitative data is still nascent, Qualidata is in the process of compiling case studies to demonstrate ways of using data. [12]

Behind web-based or printed information or promotional literature, must lie a help desk service. Qualidata and the UKDA have years of experience of providing user support in terms of accessing and using data. All queries are logged and monitored. [13]

Finally, introductory workshops and presentations are lucrative ways of attracting new users. Typically, Qualidata has hosted thematic workshops. One held in 1999, centered on the availability of criminological data sources and re-use applications, attracted more than one hundred participants. Subsequently, we saw a surge in enquiries about crime-related data. [14]

3.2 Those re-using data—research

Above, I introduced the importance of good web content, finding aids, a user support team and outreach activities. Users of data also require these types of information and services, but in addition, benefit from having quick and easy access to data and associated documentation. In 2000, the UKDA implemented a centralized web portal, registration and data access function, based on today's online e-commerce systems. Prior to accessing data users require help desk support to deal with data registration and ordering queries, particularly with reference to forgotten passwords and service charges. [15]

Creating high quality metadata and data documentation can help the user interpret raw data sources. Three pieces of documentation are crucial to both enable discovery of relevant data resources and informed re-use. The first is a systematic *Catalogue Record* that provides a detailed overview of the study, the size and content of the dataset, its availability and any terms and conditions of access. The second is an online *User Guide* that brings together key documentation from the research that contains information on how to use the data, how the data were collected, the original topic guides, personal research diaries, end of award reports, and publications. Documents such as the original grant application, end of award report, interview schedule or topic guide, diary format, details of the investigation and interviewers, communication with informants relating to confidentiality, and references to publications and reports based on the study all provide context to the data and the research investigation. The third key item of documentation for qualitative data is the *Data Listing*, detailing the key characteristics of the data and, where appropriate, of interviewees. [16]

Users typically request qualitative data in word-processed format, via a particular delivery method, for example, on a CD-ROM or via an instant web-based download facility. After accessing data, users consult staff on matters such as: how to download or open data files, the content of the files received; which documentation to use, any problems discovered in data; and sometimes on how to use data. The complexity of larger more complex data is often a major barrier to re-using data. As such the level of support for new users may prove to be significant. The UKDA typically provides front-line support rather than in-depth substantive support, and more complex analytic queries, for example on longitudinal datasets, are typically relayed back to the data creators who are best placed to resolve them. Answers to repeated queries are formulated in the FAQ section of the support web pages and information can also be added to the relevant study's User Guide. Finally, where clear "clustering" of query types is observed, explicit training days in a specific area are considered. [17]

Users of data are kept in touch regularly via the Service's up-to-date news and events web pages, and via articles published in the UKDA's regular newsletter and other outlets. Discussion lists can also help users to keep in touch with an organization, and with each other. However, in reality the majority of lists run by the UKDA and Qualidata are not used to discuss substantive or analytic issues, but are primarily used by the organizations as news posting forums. Where there already exists a high quality and well used discussion list in a related area, for example the qual-software list run by Nigel FIELDING's CAQDAS Networking Project, it is constructive for both user support staff and users to join the list. Responding to list members' questions and raising data analysis issues can sometimes generate constructive debate. [18]

Qualidata and the UKDA host a program of workshops aimed at re-using data that range from generalist introductory sessions to user-focused workshops concentrating on detailed areas of research interest and methodology. Such workshops invariably aim to bring data producers and researchers together to share and impart expertise. Inviting prominent academics, depositors and users to speak at these forums normally ensures that such events are well attended. Data confrontation workshops are described under the section on teaching and learning. [19]

Users' needs must be monitored, and services adapted to meet both the changing technical climate and trends in thematic priorities in the social sciences. In 2000, in order to ascertain demand for data and across which fields, topics and formats data would be most useful, Qualidata conducted a national survey of academics and researchers. Over 550 responses were received from a range of user communities, of which 92% wanted to see datasets, mostly in electronic form, available for both research and teaching, across a range of disciplines (health, criminology and social policy being most popular). As a result, Qualidata has begun to focus its work on disseminating digital data and creating online products, and over the next few months will be establishing user-based working groups to help formulate and test new developments. [20]

The format and mark-up of digital qualitative data to some extent determine the usefulness of a collection. There is a debate about the long-term value of coded data, mainly because the coding process is subjective, often geared towards specific themes, and therefore may not be applicable to the secondary analyst's topic of investigation. For larger studies, however, there is a stronger case for retaining coded data, in order to aid the user in searching within and navigation through voluminous bodies of text. The "Edwardians Online" project currently being undertaken by Qualidata has utilized existing coding to provide navigation through a huge bulk of text—some 50,000 pages of interview transcripts from a single project. [21]

The Edwardians On-line project is one way that Qualidata is addressing its mission to enhance access to data. The digitally formatted, multi-media, online resource is based on an original collection of 500 life history interviews, originally archived by Qualidata in paper format. The paper-based archived collection has

attracted high usage for a variety of research interests and is a significant research and teaching resource, despite its relative inaccessibility compared to electronic texts. The importance of this collection for secondary use lies in the diversity and broad scope of the interviews and the scale of the collection. The new freely available online resource integrates a wealth of existing primary and secondary material relating to the interviews: the original text transcripts, thematically coded analysis of the interviews; contemporary photographs; digital sound-bites of the original audio tapes and background material. [22]

3.3 Those re-using data—teaching and learning

Archived qualitative data are a rich unique yet often unexploited source of research information for teaching and learning. Whilst the culture of sharing and re-using has become far more widely accepted in the UK, largely promoted by Qualidata, surveys suggest that specific training resources on re-using data are sought after and would be welcomed. It is unfortunate then that provision for these communities was explicitly excluded from Qualidata's remit, by its funders. In spite of this, Qualidata user support staff have always been highly receptive of approaches from users who require data for teaching, and have prepared specialist sets of interviews for teaching on a variety of courses: introductions to CAQDAS packages; oral history; discourse analysis; and general research methods courses. [23]

Qualidata hosts web pages on using data in teaching and learning. While published information can help students to confront data, it is evident that students are demanding users. Many of the queries tracked by both Qualidata and the UKDA could be, potentially, highly resource intensive in terms of staff time if they were answered in full. For example, many postgraduates ask very specific questions that often reflect the title of their thesis, such as, "what analyses would I have to undertake to measure gender inequalities in health?" At best, support officers can direct them to relevant sources of data and suggest types of analytic strategies, but are briefed to refer demanding students back to their tutors, or to advise them to sign up for training! [24]

Creating and delivering more visible and packaged online electronic resources is a key way to facilitate both the usage of data and training in methodological skills among students. In order for these products to be of most benefit, they need to be accompanied by: substantive and methodological commentary on the project and data, hands-on exercises; the availability of face-to-face training; and finally they need to follow through with individual support. In order to pool expertise and maximize the use of available resources, such deliverables are best achieved via collaborative initiatives. The UKDA already has experience in this task in relation to both TRaMSS (Teaching Resources and Materials for Social Scientists, http://tramss.data-archive.ac.uk/) and the RDN, and seeks to build closer links with other training initiatives in the social sciences, such the recent UK ESRC's Research Methods Program. In 1996, Qualidata prepared a teaching pack based on the Edwardians data that described oral history methods and presented ways of re-using this data collection. The pack was well regarded and widely used in

teaching. The new Edwardians On-line resource will build on this concept and will feature freely available associated training exercises geared towards a wider range of educational levels. [25]

Training facilities further enhance the methodological and substantive understanding, and secondary analytic potential of archived qualitative data sources. Hands-on "data confrontation" workshops and associated web-based learning materials can provide students with the opportunity to learn about many fundamental aspects of qualitative research, in addition to gaining first hand experience of re-analyzing, comparing and critiquing data from a variety of sources. Indeed the concept of re-using of data becomes tangible once time is spent examining data-rich collections. An appreciation of research methods employed in "classic studies" can also be better grasped when examining the contextual information about the study, such as topic guides, field notes, analytic notes and resulting published and unpublished reports. Learning about the work of researchers who have made a significant impact in their field allows young researchers to take the best practice elements from this work and further develop them in their own research work. Moreover, by illustrating the importance of planning data collection and management with future re-use in mind, they may be more inclined to archive and share their data further down the track, and also to think imaginatively about re-using their own data. [26]

Over the next five years, the new Qualidata Data Service has written into its mandate a program of training events based on introductory, thematic and methodological approaches to using qualitative data, such as confronting crime data and working with mixed methods data. Samples of data used for these purposes will be interwoven with appropriate learning objectives. [27]

Running a series of workshops aimed at "training the trainers" is a good way to support teachers. Aimed at social science lecturers with a remit to teach both methods or substantive courses, the emphasis of trainer workshops is to: introduce collections; train in secondary data analysis; demonstrate how data resources can be used in their own teaching; and to encourage the dissemination of good practice in qualitative methods. [28]

In conclusion, reactive and proactive support for student learning is vital for maintaining user numbers. In terms of promotional and support strategies, I would recommend:

· targeting key departments/relevant discussion lists with promotional and training materials;
· offering/agreeing to talk to post graduate students locally and in other key social science departments across the country;
· liaising with local and national learning and teaching organizations;
· publishing in teaching and graduate outlets;

- seeking specific grants to produce dedicated teaching and learning materials; and
- encouraging teachers to get involved in evaluating training resources. [29]

3.4 Those who have re-used data

Once data have been analyzed researchers may require further support. Typical questions focus on issues of copyright and the form of citation to be used in publications, details of which are available on the web site. Users are also asked to supply detail of all publications arising from use of data for inclusion in the study's catalogue record, collected via email or via a simple structured web form. [30]

Additionally, those who have re-used data are expected to deposit value-added data products arising from the use of data. In the case of qualitative data, re-transcribed, digitized material or coded data can add value to a set of original raw data. [31]

Finally, past users are often called upon to talk about their experiences of re-using data at user events. Many are usually responsive towards these invitations. Feedback tells us that talks revealing what went on "behind the scenes," alluding to both problems and solutions, as well as presenting results, are well-received by workshop participants. [32]

3.5 Peer support—those wishing to provide access to data

Since its establishment, Qualidata has featured as a focal point in Europe for groups wishing to start up a qualitative data archive. Equally, the UKDA has led the way in providing a forward thinking, web-based social science data service. The simplicity and intuitiveness of its system is attractive to users interested in considering bringing their own data services into the 21st Century. As such, the UKDA receives many virtual communications and visitors from across the world, who request advice and support for helping establish their own initiatives. While such attention is undoubtedly a positive asset for any organization, in many respects it can be also be highly demanding of senior staff's time. [33]

One resourceful way of offering advice is to mount downloadable versions or take-away copies of published reports, procedural documents and guidelines relating to the workings of the organization. Fact-finding groups have found the following types of literature from the UKDA and Qualidata to be of most use: organizational brochures; annual reports and strategic plans; regular newsletter; data processing and data documentation procedures; preservation policy; and mounted power point slides on specific projects. [34]

Finally, there already exist excellent support networks for the broader data archiving community and for qualitative researchers. The Council of European Social Science Data Archives (CESSDA) and the International Association for Social Science Information Service and Technology (IASSIST) facilitate co-

operation on key archival and data dissemination procedures, technologies and strategies for re-using data. The ESA Qualitative Research Network, the ISA Social Science Methodology Section RC33 and *FQS* (discussed in this volume by Katja MRUCK) further provide networking, support and debating forums for qualitative researchers. [35]

4. Conclusion

A user support strategy should be both reactive and proactive to a wide range of communities, from those in research, teaching and learning, to archivists and professional social researchers seeking training and advice. [36]

Whilst the culture of sharing and re-using qualitative data has become far more widely accepted in the UK, promotion, publicity and training are the areas that most benefit both the receipt and uptake of data. Qualidata has found that both the quality of incoming data and maximum usage of datasets is almost directly a result of the efforts put into creating high quality information and offering staff support to back it up. [37]

The Internet is typically the first port of call for users. High quality and easy to locate web-based information can provide much of the support that users need, and as each new issue arises, so the user support teams must work quickly to incorporate new advice, guidance, or technical solutions into their information and FAQs. Web pages need to be well-designed, navigable, digestible and have key information in a printable/downloadable format. Activities to supplement web support include: email/telephone help desks; email discussion lists; workshops, seminars and individual meetings; and online training materials. Holding joint promotion and training events with sister research resources is also an excellent way of providing users with joined-up social science information and support. Finally, it is beneficial to conduct regular surveys to monitor the needs of users and to circulate consultations on newly proposed strategies. [38]

However, these strategies can only be successful with the right staffing component in place. It is critical that staff are highly trained, can offer one-on-one support and are willing to initiate and take part in outreach and training activities. I believe that the highest quality user support can be offered by teams that comprise a combination of skills that include:

· a sound knowledge of social science research design, data collection and preparation, data analysis and other methodological considerations;
· an excellent in-depth knowledge of the data collections held by their own organization;
· strong communication and diplomatic skills;
· good authoring, design and web mastering skills;

- the confidence to interrogate complex data;
- having experience of teaching and understanding the demands of the learning communities. [39]

The support team and program of work can only be pulled together with good leadership, management and forward-thinking to keep one step ahead of users' needs. Monitoring user support is a helpful activity, allowing the service to evaluate and where necessary, re-deploy resources in the areas of greatest need. [40]

Support activities, whether reactive or proactive, raise the profile of a research resource-based organization. High class support pays off in terms of yielding: a good reputation; a solid funding base; an enhanced culture of sharing and re-using qualitative data; the production of high quality incoming data and documentation; spin-off funding for new products and cross-national initiatives. [41]

Finally, it is evident that centers that combine both data distribution and active research on the data offer the best opportunities for users. I would expect that the competence centre model for qualitative research under discussion here in Switzerland, with an appropriate structure, direction and management, staffing component, and partnerships with related areas of national research expertise, will be nothing less than a great success. [42]

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