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Archiving of publicly funded research data: A survey of Canadian researchers

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Abstract

During the 2004–2005 fiscal year, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) awarded $252,654,341.97 in grant money to 6,958 research initiatives submitted by Canadian researchers working in academic settings. The results of these initiatives are reported in published papers, books, articles, and other forums. A question of concern is how much of the data being produced in the course of this research is being archived? What are the attitudes and concerns of the researchers themselves towards ensuring their work is preserved for the future? Results indicate that Canadian researchers in the humanities and social sciences actively share data. On the whole they are supportive of initiatives to preserve data but have thus far not systematically ensured preservation of their research materials. Researchers expressed concern over issues of confidentiality in providing access to their research data. Further dialogue is needed between researchers and other stakeholders to overcome impediments pertaining to preservation and access to research data on a national scale.

Keywords: Research data; Archive; Archiving; Policy; Institutional repositories; Researchers; Public funding; Canadian; Preservation; Access

1. Introduction

Each year between 5,000 and 7,000 research projects are funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). Over the ten-year period from 1991

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to 2001, very few data sets produced as a result of these funded projects are known to have been archived for preservation and shared access, despite the fact that SSHRC has had a data archiving policy in place since 1990 (SSHRC, 2002a). The reasons for this discrepancy are not fully understood. Additional research is required to examine the attitudes and concerns of researchers regarding long-term preservation of these valuable resources.

In recent years, various articles have highlighted the need for libraries and other information resource centers to develop strategies to ensure the preservation of information in a digital age. Libraries and archives worldwide are grappling with the issues surrounding archiving and accessing scholarly research. During the past several years, a number studies have been undertaken in order to address the needs of these institutions and to explore methods by which preservation can be ensured (OCLC/RLG Working Group on Preservation Metadata, 2002; OCLC/RLG PREMIS Working Group, 2004; Patel, 2004; Shearer, 2004; Simpson, 2004). Many of these studies have based their investigations on the planning strategies of the participating institutions (Shearer, 2004). Libraries have embraced the concept of establishing institutional repositories as a means of protecting digital materials and encouraging in-house scholarly publishing (Crow, 2002; Lynch, 2003; Peters, 2002; Yakel, 2004). A recent survey by the Canadian Association of Research Libraries reported five universities in Canada had operating repositories, seven more were in the initial implementation stage, and eight others were in the final stages of repository planning (Shearer, 2004). Since this report was published several new repositories have come online.

Of particular importance in these discussions is the issue of the preservation of original research materials resulting from publicly funded research conducted in academic settings. Currently, there is no comprehensive mechanism in place in Canada with which to record or preserve original research data created from public funds. As a recent signatory to the *Declaration on Access to Research Data from Public Funding* (OECD, 2004), Canada should move quickly to establish national policies and standards for the archiving of research data. Through consultations involving stakeholders, granting agencies, such as the SSHRC and the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC), have been investigating the needs of researchers and research institutions in Canada in order to determine steps needed to move forward (SSHRC, 2001, 2002a; Canada, Task Force, 2005). The main recommendation emerging from these reports has been a call to launch a national data archive in Canada with a mandate to establish standards and policies related to data archiving. Granting agencies would be encouraged to create or to reaffirm and monitor data-archiving policies as part of the funding process. These policies would require grant recipients to deposit one copy of their research data into an institutional repository upon completion of research conducted under public funding (SSHRC, 2002b). Movement on this recommendation appears to have stalled.

The term "research data" used in the context of this research paper refers to original research materials including

> "...any information that can be stored in digital form, including text, numbers, images, video or movies, audio, software, algorithms, equations, animations, models, simulations, etc. Such data may be generated by various means including observation, computation, or experiment" (National Science Board, 2005, p. 4).