

Development and Prospects of the Data Bank of Sociological Research

Description of the Data Bank of Sociological Researches

The Data Bank was established in the Institute of Sociology of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR in 1985. In the first place, the Bank's principal purpose was the storage of empirical data from sociological studies in a way suitable for repeated use. In 1987 the data bank was given the All-Union status under the sponsorship of the Soviet Sociological Association. The Bank was set up by a number of organizations interested in the joint use of accumulated empirical data. These organizations represented practically all regions of the former Soviet Union. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the territorial scope of the Bank was reduced, and new organizational and financial problems appeared. However, the material accumulated by DBSR reflect more than 30 years of the society's life and therefore it is of tremendous scientific and practical value. Since 1992, because of the political developments and the resulting breakdown of communication links between the former Soviet republics, the Data Bank had to confine itself to Russia only. It still contains essential information on the Russian society as well as on the other parts of the Soviet Union, from Central Asia to the Caucasus as well as on the Baltic states, Moldova, Ukraine and Belarus. Today taking into account the fundamental changes which have swept our society since 1991, we consider that these data are unique and have historical importance. The secondary analysis of them will allow researchers to trace and locate the origins of many social and economic processes in modern Russia.

In contrast to tendencies of isolation shown by some sociological research centers, our goal is to preserve and improve old links and establish new ones with former member organizations of the Data Bank in other countries. Our position is that scientific and informational space that was formed in the course of many years must not be torn apart by the requests of individual politicians.

The creation of DBSR was preceded by years of methodological studies and applied scientific research into questions of the accumulation, storage and use of sociological information. These problems are reflected in the works of major Russian scientists such as V.G. Andreyenkov, V.I. Molchanov, and others. These studies were conducted in

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co-operation with leading foreign experts in the field such as R. Bisko, G. Heiman, D. Nasatir, G. Marx. E. Mochmann, G. KJabb etc. Therefore a concept has been developed that has the idea of consolidation and integration of sociological data at its core. This is the principle on which the Bank is based.

Consolidation refers to the accumulation of a large quantity of empirical data, which provides the basis for conducting secondary and comparative analyses of data sets produced in various sociological research centers. It opens wide opportunities for social modeling, numerical experiments, verification and evaluation of methodology, formulation and solution of methodological and methodical problems.

Data integration requires the integration of separate data into a system of interdependent indicators, describing the society as a whole and in its parts. In spite of long drawn-out discussions on the structure of the indicator system for separate sociological phenomena, many problems of methods and methodology remain. The Bank possesses expertise in establishing the systems of indicators.

The problem of storing empirical sociological data has arisen in our country in the late '60s at a time when the first large-scale sociological studies were carried out. Only in the early '80s however, with the wide spreading of computers, the question of automated information system to serve the needs of sociologists moved into the practical realm. The problem was solved when the fundamental principles of data banks as integrated information systems had been worked out.

"The Data Bank of Sociological Researches" refers to multi-functional information and analytic systems aiming at one goal: the accumulation of various sociological information in a systematic form, including empirical data, for increased efficiency in its use. Among the Bank's many functions we emphasize the following ones:

- improvement of methods, means of accumulation, and analysis of sociological information;
- methodological research with the aim of standardizing the methods and separate blocks of

indicators for subsequent comparative analysis of the data obtained at different times, from different territories and in different social and cultural environments;

- information and reference resource for sociologists;
- co-ordination of sociological research by informing users of recent research and new empirical data;
- exchange of primary empirical data access;
- providing conditions for secondary and comparative data analyses;
- calculations, based on commercial agreements, including sociological modeling, experimenting etc.

During the development of the Data Bank various factors such as technological progress, continuous increase of the information volume to be stored and growing information needs of sociologists were taken into account. The Bank's goals and functions determine how information is stored. It consists of the following three databases:

- summaries of studies (topic, time, methods of gathering data, sampling procedures etc.);
- summaries of documents (forms, questionnaires) used in gathering data
- data from empirical studies, stored in computerized form (at present these data do not form one database, but the system in use still allows an unlimited access to this information).

DBSR's users are research groups conducting theoretical or practical work in sociology. They provide the Bank with materials from their own research and obtain in reverse information they require. In addition, the Bank informs its users about new data received by the Bank and publishes a frequently updated reference: "Bank of Sociological Data" (Bank sotsiologicheskikh danniykh).

The files of empirical data are divided into three classes based on their accessibility for users. Authors wish to reserve their rights to the results of their studies for a period of time, after which their data are placed into a more accessible class.

More than 650 studies conducted by the Institute of Sociology and other research centers from 1966 until 2000 are stored in the Bank. These include over 20 union-wide studies. This research reflects all aspects of society's life, including the political and structural changes that have taken place over the last few years.

The DBSR encompasses investigations of social tension, national conflicts, stratification of society, emergence of new classes, strata and groups, problems of the transition to a new political and economic structure, problems of family

and children, the status of women, problems of youth and education, structural changes in society, ecology, and demography etc. Most of these data sets are available to those investigating Soviet and post-Soviet periods of the society.

Prospects

With advances in the information science and computers as well as the communication technology getting ground, geographical distances are no longer barriers to the communication between researchers from different countries and continents. Modern technology has given a great impetus to the modernization of the Data Bank. The improvements which are being planned are based on conceptions of universal services with interactive access.

These improvements will stimulate the researchers' interest in developing a national network of sociological information and attract investments. Modern communication technology between various research centers will reduce the costs of creating and maintaining archives. Thanks to it researchers will have access to the Bank's computing and information resources.

The main efforts in the course of the practical implementation of the above conception will be directed towards the following goals:

- universal and accessible services for users: the creation of an information search system, the establishment of a special database for registered studies, the implementation of interactive information access facilities;
- mobility of data, which presupposes the observation of the storage standards, permitting input, retrieval and information exchange as well as the protection of intellectual property;
- unified telecommunications network connecting various centers where sociological data are stored and analyzed and giving access to the powerful technical and informational resources of DBSR;
- international co-operation and co-ordination of the effort aiming at including the Bank into the world-wide network of archives and banks of sociological data.

Achieving these goals will allow the modernization of the existing system which serves sociologists' needs, eliminate incompatible database formats, create a network infrastructure for the collection and distribution of knowledge on the society.

Let us discuss some of these goals in greater detail.

Accessible service

Reaching this goal will ensure a convenient and efficient interactive information access and exchange. It will

revolutionize the information search and permit easy access to information resources. It is intended to achieve these goals by creating an interactive information retrieval system.

Yet, well-organized resources and effective means of access can yield the expected benefit only when every researcher is sure that he will find the requested information. For this reason the existing three-level access system of DBSR will be reviewed and changed in favor of greater accessibility (while observing the authors' rights). Business-like openness of DBSR is the principal idea of universal services.

The information environment is quite variable. Data from empirical studies come in different amounts and in a variety of types. Code-books with distribution tables are also stored there. The machine-readable catalogue connects all types of information contained in the Bank.

The consolidation of stored information and its integration into a database gives full and coherent information on any of the registered projects. Such an environment supports many types of information objects and establishes connections and relations between objects easily discernible. This approach is based on the strategy towards an open architecture of the DBSR, which refers to a collection of a variety of independent information sets united in integrated databases and to the ready access to this information and automated search. An information retrieval system is intended for serving the integrated information environment.

Data mobility

Creating the integrated system requires the unification of the information stored. This can be achieved by developing standards for new data and adjusting the existing data to make them conform. The specifications for the standards for new data is based on established world standards, and this standardization is an impetus for an extensive information exchange. The mobility of data will allow the distribution of initial and secondary analysis in the telecommunication network. Users are thus guaranteed a conflict-free interface. The new standards will cover the elements of the catalogue and the elements of databases making up the integrated medium. First of all, the standards are applied to research data stored in the DBSR as SPSS portable files exported from the mainframe to a PC in a wrapped-up format. The new standard must take into consideration various software options, allow reliable storage and presentation of information, and assure compatibility with the world standards for free export and import of information. In this paper we do not try to describe the particulars of standard levels, but only remark on the range of problems in standardizing data and on the general direction of realizing such a project.

When it comes to ensuring the mobility of data, the question of authors' rights and the related issue of regulating the access to data is another important consideration. Registration and identification of users, as opposed to the three-level access system, seems to be the most constructive approach.

The mobility of data will promote international cooperation which will in turn, significantly improve the DBSR's position in Russia.

International co-operation

At the core of all foreign and Russian information centers is the idea of international cooperation. It is especially relevant for Russia, where the support for DBSR's efforts in transforming data to conform to international standards and following the strategy of the Bank's development will allow the preservation of unique data on the society in the socialist period and about its subsequent transformation.

International cooperation will be of great benefit for the process of collecting new empirical data on the formation process of the society and will play a decisive role in the integration of local national centers.

References

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