

# Making use of Data on Social Science in Slovakia - First steps to a national Data Archive

Quantitative research is a standard instrument for testing hypotheses, and in the social science in Slovakia one can say, a most frequently used strategy for collecting empirical evidence. The recent development in the area of information technology and the advance in computer assisted statistical analysis, also contribute much to a considerable increase in the quantitative analysis of the electronic data.

At present, in Slovakia there are many potential machine-readable data sources suitable for the secondary analysis. Data are produced mostly by academic and educational institutions, institutions of the state administration, for-profit agencies of public opinion and market research, different non-for-profit foundations and associations.

At the same time, it is possible to observe a growing demand for older research data, for example in the academic environment, forasmuch as a comparative and longitudinal research design increasingly predominates. The Institute for Sociology of the SAS is also a member of several research networks with the focus on a large-scale comparative research (such as the ISSP - International Social Survey Program, the EVS – European Value Study and so on).

Participation in such networks becoming increasingly important, it enables to evaluate the position of Slovakia within Europe (with respect to a different subject matters) in a broader and more complex perspective. Additionally, the co-operation with the partner institutions leaves space also for an exchange of the experiences and knowledge, which, generally, helps to increase professional standards of the scientific investigations and integrates the Slovak scientists within the international scientific community.

An interesting example of the transfer of knowledge is a diffusion of the national data archives within Europe, during the recent forty years. The main ideas of this practical endeavor give many inspirations and useful stimuli to us. This was the starting point to think about the shift from current informal practice of storing the research data in Slovakia to more complex and standardized archiving methods and procedures.

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Comparing the benefits of the two approaches to archiving of the research data (the informal and the standardized), there are no doubts about the merits of the latter. The major benefits of data infrastructure are particularly on the following dimensions:

## **The archive as an instrument for an easy and independent access to research data**

Nowadays, in Slovakia an informal way of the social data storage is prevailing which makes an access to the relevant datasets too sensible in respect of time and staff changes in a research team. To acquire the dataset assumes to make own search for the history of the relevant research and search for the datasets in the memory of the researchers, than contact the research team which produced the relevant data and negotiate with the researchers about an access to these data. However, this time consuming activity is still not the guarantee to get the data in adequate format and quality, and appropriate for the use in a secondary analysis.

General characteristics of a systematic archiving of available empirical research data (such as: access to a catalogue of the primary data containing the sufficient documentation of the datasets, access to the data itself, datasets are concentrated in one place and in compatible formats, quality check of the data, data security – no inadequate changes or loss of data, transparent rules for data access, exchange and distribution of the datasets and so on) sound really promising for the mastering of the shortcomings mentioned before.

## **The archive as an instrument for the control and improvement of the social research**

One of the basic ambitions of the scientist is to support his or her hypotheses with evidence, and to do it in a clear and transparent manner. However, there are several examples of the scientific misconduct in history, that brought forward the problem of the validity and reliability in the social sciences. An independent access to the primary data will enlarge the options for the verification of the results and the testing research instruments or methods, employed in the secondary analysis of the research data. Therefore, the issue of archiving is very topical in Slovakia.

## **The archive as an information and communication channel**

The summary of available empirical research data will provide the users with the overview of the subject areas of the research in the country and the researchers engaged in the research projects. This indirect information enable to establish new contacts within the scientific community and enhance the direct co-operation in the field of comparative research.

Newsletters and bulletins, which provide the news about the current research projects, the supply of available data or the offers for a co-operation, these all we see as efficient channels for the information about what has been done and what is new in the area of the empirical research.

All in all, these are the main characteristics, which draw the attention to the problem of the usage of the research data in Slovakia. The recent practical endeavor in this area results in the new project proposal of the Institute for Sociology of the SAS.

The research project 'The Slovak Archive of Social Data' will focus on creating a primary data catalogue, and furthermore on a systematic documentation of the existing social science datasets. The catalogue of social data will enable the domestic as well as foreign researchers to orientate in the field of an existing fund of the Slovak primary data, and moreover will simplify the access to the required datasets.

As we are only at the very beginning, we cannot foresee all the problems connected with the establishing of a data archive. In the preparatory phase, our endeavor is focused on increasing the public understanding of the data archive mission. The task seems simple, we need to inform the scientific community (via journals, presentations etc.) and bring the words "archive" and "archiving of social data" in domestic social research vocabulary. Researchers who work with quantitative data and are engaged in the comparative projects, usually understand, and appreciate the mission of social data archive. However, there is a large group of researchers who are not so familiar with secondary analysis, and we need to introduce the mission to them in more details.

The fact is, that the archiving of the social data has no tradition in Slovakia and its benefits are not obvious for everybody. These days, the positive examples of already established and functioning archives in Europe are greatly helping to illustrate the actual profits. Later, when the work on the proposed project will start, the newly established archive itself should serve as a telling example.

We believe that the integration of the new Slovak data archive within the existing network of the social science data archives will open wider opportunities for the co-operation and exchange of the information within the scientific community.

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