

Qualitative and Qualitative Longitudinal Resources in Europe:

Mapping the Field and Exploring Strategies for Development by Bren Neale and Libby Bishop^{1 2}

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INTRODUCTION

In April 2009 the UK Timescapes Initiative, in collaboration with the University of Bremen, organised a residential workshop to explore the nature of qualitative (Q) and qualitative longitudinal (QL) research and resources across Europe. The workshop was hosted by the Archive for Life Course Research (Archiv für Lebenslaufforschung, ALLF) at Bremen and funded by Timescapes with support from CESSDA (The Council of European Social Science Data Archives, Preparatory Phase Project). It was attended by archivists and researchers from 14 countries, including 'transitional' states such as Belarus and Lithuania. The broad aim of the workshop was to map existing infrastructures for qualitative and QL data archiving among the participating countries, including the extent of archiving and the ethos of data sharing and re-use in different national contexts. The group also explored strategies to develop infrastructure and to support qualitative and QL research and resources, including collaborative research across Europe and beyond.

Background and Context

The Bremen workshop can be seen as part of a much broader effort to co-ordinate research resources across Europe. The impetus for the workshop was provided through CESSDA, a distributed research infrastructure that provides access to European research data and supports their use. CESSDA is currently a federation of national data dissemination and support organisations spread

across Europe, with a small, voluntary elected distributed executive. Collectively they serve over 30,000 researchers, provide access to more than 50,000 data collections per year, and facilitate the exchange of data and technologies among data organisations through common authentication and access, cross-European resource discovery, secure data facilities, and the adoption of inter-operable metadata standards. A major upgrade is necessary, however, in order to strengthen and widen the existing research infrastructure and make it more comprehensive, efficient, effective and integrated. This was the key argument for placing CESSDA on the European Strategy Forum for Research Infrastructures' (ESFRI) Roadmap in 2006. Work is now underway to establish and expand an upgraded CESSDA as a legal entity under the European Council Regulation 723/2009 as a European Research

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Infrastructure Consortium (ERIC) (CESSDA 2011).

To date, however, the data available through the CESSDA portal are predominantly quantitative (QN), including official government census data, social surveys, and quantitative longitudinal and cohort studies. While all the current infrastructure initiatives are vital, regardless of data format, there has been little development in building and harmonising infrastructures specifically for qualitative or QL data, and little account taken of the distinctive requirements for archiving and re-using these data. Human data

of the sort embodied in qualitative and QL research are challenging simply because they are endlessly varied, fragmented, complex, dynamic, multilingual, and historically, politically and geographically situated. Preserving and disseminating the products of human culture and society is difficult and expensive, particularly for qualitative data. Even so, new digital resources, including software and e-networks, are influencing the production of human records and how these are understood and communicated.

It was in the context of this shifting European picture that the idea for the Bremen workshop was first conceived. The workshop was framed in terms of identifying existing qualitative and QL resources and exploring ways of building a European network of qualitative and QL researchers and archivists committed to preserving and organising qualitative data resources for sharing and re-use. The endeavour was seen as complementary to the work being undertaken under the first phase of CESSDA. The ESFRI Roadmap (2011) indicates the enormous potential of data—of all kinds—for understanding the profound social, cultural, political and economic life of Europe, including social continuity and change. The Roadmap also reminds us that the first step in developing such infrastructure is networking and co-operation, and it was in this spirit that the Bremen workshop took shape.

The Bremen Workshop

The workshop participants were asked to produce a country report that would set out the nature of existing infrastructure for qualitative and QL archiving, policies and ethos for data sharing, an overview of key resources and collections of qualitative and QL datasets, and priorities for and barriers to future development. The reports were tabled at the workshop and, for the purposes of presentation, were grouped into three broad categories (from most to least developed in terms of infrastructure). One representative from each of the three groups presented a brief overview of developments within the group, pointing out areas of commonality across the countries, and important circumstances and features that distinguished them. The afternoon breakout sessions mixed members from all three groups. They were tightly focused on development planning and structured around these questions:

- What enables and constrains data sharing?
- How effective are existing models for sharing or archiving data?
- What are the pros and cons of having a mixed infrastructure of data archives and collections, centralised and distributed, generic and specialised?
- Is there a case for developing separate infrastructure for qualitative and QL data resources or for merging these resources with existing quantitative and longitudinal resources?
- What are the best ways of getting an archive started and what issues arise in developing and sustaining the resource?
- Would a European wide network for qualitative data archiving be beneficial and if so, how would archivists and researchers prefer to participate?

We present here an overview of developments across the three groups of countries, the insights emerging from our workshop sessions, and some pointers for future developments

Group One – Finland³, Ireland and the UK

This group has established national archives for social science data that include qualitative collections (ESDS Qualidata in the UK funded from 1994, The Irish Qualitative Data Archive (IQDA) from 2008, and the Finnish Social Science Data Archive from 2003). In each case the archives include primarily interview data (with focus groups and other textual sources) and documentation. All three also have, or are planning to add multimedia formats (e.g., sound, images, and moving

images) and analytical files. Although funded as national resources, the three countries are characterised by patterns of decentralisation; in the UK, ESDS Qualidata, for example, is a specialist service of the Economic and Social Data Service, led by the UK Data Archive, and qualitative data is fully integrated into its holdings. The qualitative collection is the most important but not the only hub in a vast network of independent and proliferating collections held by a wide range of organisations that are rarely co-ordinated. This 'mixed' infrastructure with specialist and generic resources existing alongside each other was seen as inevitable; though it may pose co-ordination challenges, there is also potential for innovative collaborations. QL research and resources are well represented across these three countries. In the UK a specialist Timescapes Archive for QL data, funded from 2007 by the Economic and Social Research Council, and developed at the University of Leeds, has been established. It is based on a close integration of QL research, archiving and re-use and is useful as a platform for training in the secondary use of QL data.

At the national level, the three countries in this group have policies promoting data sharing. There was growing awareness of qualitative datasets as important research outputs in their own right, and a growing appreciation, therefore, of the need to produce high quality data outputs for sharing and re-use. Key national funding bodies in these countries all require data management planning and recommend archiving or data sharing as a condition of funding.

Despite these developments, however, support for data sharing in these countries remains uneven; complex issues surrounding data sharing have emerged that need to be taken into account. For example, in Finland there is no established culture of promoting qualitative data re-use and an assumption remains that primary researchers are the only ones to understand and use the data correctly. In the UK such views are much less prevalent and researchers are beginning to explore the potential for combining primary and secondary data analysis in their work and, thereby, increasing the robustness of their evidence base. However, there are ongoing issues around balancing secondary access to data with the need to protect confidentiality and also to allow sufficient time for primary analysis to take place. In contrast to large scale survey and cohort data, qualitative and QL data are not generated solely for secondary use; they are generated, at the outset, by and for primary analysts to address particular research questions. The originating team therefore faces the challenge of balancing the potentially competing tasks of data gathering and analysis with that of preparing data for archiving. For QL research, where projects may run for many years with ongoing waves of data gathering and complex temporal analysis by the originating teams, this may prove a challenging task. The drive to archive in this context may be diminished unless sufficient incentives are provided by funders. Whatever the ethos surrounding qualitative data re-use, these issues have important implications for the timing of archiving and the resources needed by originating teams for data preparation tasks. In the context of qualitative and QL data, then, it is clear that both primary and secondary use need to be accommodated and balanced in the strategic development of research practices and the provision of data infrastructures. Priorities for development identified within this group of countries included technical development of the archives to include multimedia data, and the development of the specialist curation, data discovery and preservation procedures needed for QL data. Despite the advances in these countries a need was identified in each case to build the culture of data sharing and re-use, and to strengthen policies and develop initiatives to support this aim, for example, through funding for secondary analysis of qualitative and QL data. In the UK, one encouraging move has been the Economic and Social Research

Council's announcement of a major strand of funding to support secondary analysis (2011). A need was identified for greater co-ordination of data resources across the mixed infrastructure, so that specialist and distributed collections could more easily be identified, searched and accessed. Finally, funding was relatively fragile and there was a need to secure longer term funding to facilitate this work and make its outputs sustainable.

Group Two – Austria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Norway and Slovenia

Not surprisingly, this group was highly diverse with some members resembling Group One in many dimensions, but others being more like Group Three. Generally speaking, there is infrastructure in place for quantitative data archiving; all but the Czech Republic have existing National Archives. In most cases, some fledgling effort is underway for these predominantly quantitative-orientated institutions to begin handling QL data. Austria, for example, began archiving qualitative data at WISDOM (Wiener Institut für Sozialwissenschaftliche Dokumentation und Methodik) in 2007 and the Danish Data Archives began handling qualitative data in 2009. The Norwegian Social Science Data Services in Bergen, Norway is planning to incorporate qualitative data and the Social Science Data Archive in Slovenia is in a similar situation. But these national infrastructures capture only a small amount of activity, as there are numerous qualitative and QL resources widely distributed in smaller institutions, departments, and held by individual projects. Many of these are attempting to archive qualitative and QL collections, and some are seeking to form alliances or collaborations with quantitative institutions, where they exist.

As with infrastructure, the situation regarding data sharing is also ambivalent. In terms of actual archive-mediated data sharing, levels of activity are rather low. But there is growing visibility of the issue and other indications of changing attitudes. Formal feasibility studies (for archiving qualitative data) were done in Austria, Denmark and Germany, revealing surprisingly positive attitudes toward both sharing data and using data collected by others. However, hurdles exist in translating these attitudes into more positive actions. Where archives do exist – in Denmark and Austria for example – few datasets have been deposited and the rate of new deposits is low. Major challenges remain in numerous areas: concerns about ethics and confidentiality; researchers' continuing belief in exclusive ownership of data; technological and financial resources constraints; and complex infrastructure models.

Development priorities reflected the national situations, but all pointed to the need for networking with other institutions and countries. Locating stable funding sources was also a high priority, as was engaging in activities to bring about cultural acceptance of data sharing—finding exemplar cases and teaching methods for re-using data, especially to post-graduate students. There are, perhaps, at least some reasons to be optimistic – in Germany, the feasibility study, as well as publications and an annual workshop on secondary analysis, has encouraged more active debate about data archiving and sharing. And the commitment to developing appropriate infrastructure for qualitative and QL data and finding ways to harmonise datasets to facilitate wider re-use was evident across all the workshop participants in this group.

Group Three – Belarus, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland and Switzerland

Members of Group Three reported only minimal infrastructure for curating qualitative or QL data, though there was obvious enthusiasm for developing such infrastructure among a subset of the academic community. Of the five countries in this group, there are only two with national institutions for data archiving, the Lithuanian Humanities

and Social Science Data Archive (LiDA) and the Swiss Foundation for Research in Social Sciences (FORS). Where laws exist (e.g., in Switzerland), these are general ones on archiving and data protection, with no specific provisions for qualitative or QL data.

The culture of sharing is weak to non-existent, at least for qualitative and QL data. In Poland, there is 'no academic tradition' of sharing qualitative data, perhaps partly because of a very strong prevailing positivist tradition in social research, although encouraging new initiatives began in December 2010. In Hungary, there are some existing archives for particular surveys, but data sharing is not common, and the culture of re-using data is not widespread. In the case of Belarus, there is no national infrastructure for archiving. Data that are retained are held by individual organisations. Secondary analysis is rare and occurs only after personal negotiations among primary and secondary researchers. In many cases, research data are not retained at all, even by primary researchers. The recent political climate has, in part, contributed to this situation. In contrast, Lithuania does have some national policies promoting sharing, and in addition to LiDA, there is now access to online research data via Electronic Information for Libraries (eIFL.net), but this focuses more on research outputs and not raw data.

As might be expected within this group, the list of development priorities is long and wide-ranging. Basic work in establishing infrastructures is needed, with the concomitant requirements of appropriate technologies and financial resources. Practical examples of archiving policies and procedures would be highly beneficial, and even with the adaptations required for specific national conditions, could avoid a great deal of work being reinvented. Administrative advice is also needed, for example on the staffing of archives and what levels and specific skills of staff are needed. Specifics include collections strategies (deciding what to archive), and rights management (consent, anonymisation, access controls, IPR, etc.). In one area, however, there was strong unanimity in Group Three, and across all the groups for that matter: the desire and need for stronger international knowledge exchange, joint projects, and resource sharing.

Workshop Outcomes

The Bremen workshop produced an impressive collection of outcomes in three areas: short-term activities, agreed goals and objectives, and a strategic plan for future action. Some aspects of the strategy outlined below have emerged in subsequent communications among the workshop participants.

Short-term activities

The top priority arising from the workshop was to produce this publication, based on revised versions of all the country reports. Additionally we have:

- Set up a network for qualitative and QL archivists across Europe, known as EQUALAN (European Qualitative Archiving Network).
- Created forums for digital communication, including the Bremen workshop webpage <http://www.timescapes.leeds.ac.uk/events-dissemination/past-events-presentations/bremen-workshop/>
- Produced a distribution list for the members of the network in Methodspace, http://www.methodspace.com/group/timescapesqualitativelongitudinalresearch?xg_source=activity.
- Revised a list of international data providers on the ESDS website—this is in progress here: <http://www.esds.ac.uk/qualidata/access/internationaldata.asp>.
- Published a list of all QL collections and resources provided in the country reports—this has been developed through the Timescapes Website (www.timescapes.leeds.ac.uk) and will become available in the resources section of the site in the first half of 2012.

- Investigated specific funding sources, including developing a proposal for infrastructure funding through EU Framework Programme 7, and a proposal for a panel at an international conference in 2012.
- Organised further meetings, including sub group meetings at IASSIST in June 2010 and a further workshop in Brussels (October 2010), with funding from IQDA in Maynooth, Ireland, and Timescapes.
- Agreed to produce case studies from the most developed archives (IQDA, Finland, UK, and Germany)—we are currently seeking funding to publish these reports.

Agreed goals and objectives

There was broad agreement on the overarching goals and objectives of the network, as set out below. Clearly, action in many of these areas is not specific to this network, and it was further recognised that many of these objectives need national or international co-ordinated action. Nonetheless, the group felt it important to articulate explicitly how qualitative and QL archiving should become an integral part of these wider developments. Strategies for pursuing this include the following:

- Active networking, in some cases with better-resourced quantitative partners and institutions.
- Promotion of metadata standards, including specific standards for qualitative and QL data, and encompassing new multi-media formats that characterise these data.
- Development of metrics for re-use and the technological systems to collect data for re-use.
- Lobbying funders for specific policy changes, including mandatory data deposit, funding for preparing datasets for archiving, and according equal merit to secondary analysis projects in funding decisions.
- Changing research output and reward systems to incorporate the production of qualitative and QL datasets. This requires reference and citation credits when using archived data; acknowledgements for data creators as joint authors; assigning Digital Object Identifier (DOI) numbers to archived datasets; and the inclusion of Research as outputs within formal research review procedures (the Research Excellence Framework in the UK and European equivalents).
- Promoting activities to accelerate a cultural shift toward data sharing. This may be achieved through work with professional associations; training and capacity building with postgraduates and early career researchers; and direct engagement with ethical debates over the re-use of data and the balancing of primary and secondary research.

Strategies for Future Development

While all the above goals are vitally important, it was recognised that in most instances, these goals are not specific to qualitative or QL data. As noted above, CESSDA (both in the preparatory phase and in ERIC) is addressing areas of harmonised legal environments, a multiple language thesaurus, secure access to ethically sensitive microdata, and much more. What this makes clear is that EQUALAN is well positioned to define and address issues that are particular to qualitative and QL data.

When devising a strategic plan for archiving qualitative and QL data in Europe, the central question is: in what ways are qualitative and QL data the same, or broadly similar, to quantitative data, and therefore able to be harmonised with existing data infrastructures to enhance comparability and enable different kinds of data to 'speak' to each other? Conversely, in what ways are they distinctive, and thus potentially in need of customised treatment? Answers are emerging from several directions. The Timescapes Initiative has built a specialist QL Archive, and in doing so, is uncovering the special needs of QL data. In this instance, QL data archiving is being integrated within QL research

practice and methodological developments through a stakeholder model of researcher and archivist collaboration. This is not simply a matter of bringing researchers to the archive but taking the archive into the world of research in a way that has had a significant impact on the impetus to archive and to cultures of data sharing and re-use (Neale and Bishop 2011 forthcoming). The experience of the UK Data Archive is also relevant because it was a well-established archive for quantitative data and incorporated ESDS Qualidata into its existing infrastructure, proving that qualitative data can be processed in standardised ways. These experiences, along with related experiences in Ireland, Finland and Germany, point to similar lessons learned. Broadly speaking, qualitative and QL data are distinctive from quantitative data in three areas: metadata requirements, ethical considerations, and cultures of generation and re-use. In terms of the Open Archival Information System (OAIS) model, the intermediate processes of Data Management, Archival Storage, Preservation Planning and Administration are broadly similar regardless of data format. Of course, provision needs to be made for different formats, large video files being one challenge. However, the processes for handling all data are broadly similar. It is in the early and later phases of the data life cycle where qualitative and QL differences matter most. Two of these, metadata and ethics, lie in the Ingest (or pre-Ingest) phase while the culture of re-use falls within the Access phase. By no means are these the only topics that could be chosen, and future strategic planning sessions may lead to a refinement in this list. However, the idea of defining distinctive aspects of QL and qualitative data, and the implications that follow for developing archiving infrastructures that support such data but also allow for harmonising with existing initiatives, seems like a sensible way forward.

The first challenges posed by qualitative and QL data are for adequate metadata collection, in part because of the complex file formats involved. Data need more extensive metadata and contextual material to render them "independently understandable" (a requirement of the OAIS standard) for those re-using the data. Unlike much structured quantitative data with relatively standardised formats, qualitative research data and documentation are highly diverse. It is also generally accepted that qualitative data need extensive contextual information to enable effective resource discovery and re-use. Much of this may fall into familiar metadata categories, but ideally context should also include information about the project background and the social and institutional conditions in the wider environment that might have shaped project design (Bishop 2006; Irwin and Winterton 2011). Ethics is the second area that distinguishes qualitative and QL data from quantitative data. On the one hand, ethical standards for the curation of much qualitative data appear relatively straightforward. Consent for sharing is usually readily obtained and data can be protected through varied forms of anonymisation and controlled access. However, ethical concerns remain a major factor in debates among researchers about the re-use of qualitative data and every participant at Bremen raised some topic related to ethical use of data. Typical issues include: can consent be said to be informed when the topics of research for re-use cannot be known in advance? Are there risks to participants if re-used data may be exploited or participants' views misrepresented? Are researchers exposed to unfair criticism when their work is made visible by archiving or where secondary interpretations contradict or challenge primary interpretations? These factors have the potential to limit the availability of data for archiving in the short term, even where consent has been obtained from research participants. In a QL context, this has implications for the way archivists work with researchers and suggests the need for involvement in the development of a research project from the outset to facilitate ethical archiving (Bishop 2009) and the development of mechanisms to enable researchers to remain engaged in the re-use of data that they

have generated (for a comprehensive review of debates on secondary analysis, see Irwin and Winterton (2011).

Despite rapid change in recent years, it is still the case that the culture of data re-use is weaker and less widely accepted for qualitative and QL data than it is for quantitative data. This is decidedly the case in the Group Two and Three countries, as the country reports reveal. It also continues to be the case for Finland, Ireland and the UK, although as noted above, the focus of the debate in the UK seems to have shifted recently to the more practical issue of how best to balance the needs of primary and secondary research, particularly in the context of QL data. For data archives, the resource implications are that more effort and resources are needed to promote the re-use of qualitative and QL data. These range from preparation of focused outreach materials to the need for training and support that is customised to distinct audiences. Nevertheless, successful qualitative and QL archiving is most important in this respect, because it plays a decisive 'demonstrator' role in alleviating researchers' concerns and normalising the culture of archiving and re-use.

Future initiatives

The Bremen participants have stayed in regular communication since the workshop, primarily focused on revising articles for this special issue of IASSIST Quarterly. Informal meetings, usually conferences where a sub-group was attending, have taken place to exchange knowledge and explore future funding options. One such meeting was held at IASSIST in June 2010 at Cornell University, where we mapped a strategy for a more formal meeting in Brussels in October. The latter event was co-ordinated by the Irish Qualitative Data Archive and co-funded by the National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis (NIRSA) at NUI Maynooth, Ireland, and by Timescapes. Participants from nine countries were in attendance and efforts focused on developing an application for funding.

The Brussels meeting, and its aftermath, have provided significant progress toward our goals. At this meeting, we formally constituted EQUALAN, our European Qualitative Archiving Network. The remit of the network is to facilitate international data sharing and re-use by developing and implementing strategies for preserving, organizing and harmonizing qualitative and qualitative longitudinal data resources across Europe (EQUALAN 2011). More importantly, the formal constitution of EQUALAN has given visibility to the network with the potential to bid for funding. To date the group has devised work packages for two FP7 funding initiatives for research infrastructures, working with DASISH (Data Service Infrastructure for the Social Sciences and Humanities) and building on collaborations between archivists and social science researchers⁴. The work packages which cover areas such as metadata, ethics, and promoting a culture of re-use, can be tailored to specific funding calls. These are significant developments in a field where qualitative archiving has hitherto commanded little presence.

EQUALAN will use its considerable expertise to work across a range of local initiatives such as those below:

- To develop standards for qualitative and QL metadata: several Bremen participants are members of the DDI Qualitative Data Working Group that is developing a DDI compliant schema for qualitative data.
- The Timescapes Initiative has produced a guide to the ethics of QL data archiving and re-use (Bishop and Neale, Timescapes Methods Guides series www.timescapes.leeds.ac.uk). This needs further input from international sources, and the addition of international case study examples. Additionally, the stakeholder model of archiving QL data, designed to build collaboration between researchers and archivists and encourage deposit of longitudinal

data during the lifetime of a project, could be piloted and evaluated in a broader European context.

- Much technological development is still needed to create the complex access controls required for highly sensitive and confidential data. Fedora software is under development and promises a more robust access system. There is a need to assess existing projects and work out strategies for further development. Such work on access controls needs to remain aligned with ongoing work on similar services (such as the Secure Data Service at the UK Data Archive) that are intended to enable sharing of potentially revealing microdata.
- Capacity building is needed for teaching the next generation of scholars about the benefits of data archiving and substantively grounded methodologies for conducting secondary analyses using qualitative and QL data.

Conclusion

The development of a European wide network of qualitative and QL archives and resources that could fall under the CESSDA umbrella would be a step forward, with shared good practice for practical and technical development of resources (e.g., standards such as OAIS), common protocols for data sharing and kite-marking data, and portals that link qualitative and QL datasets internationally. It would be beneficial to investigate the large range of activities that are already underway in Europe regarding digital repository infrastructure (DRIVER 2010). Strategies for advancing such a network could be developed, again with the support of organisations such as CESSDA and IASSIST. This could involve EU funding for shared activities or low cost alternatives such as web based networking through blogs or discussion lists. Qualitative data is abundant across this mixed infrastructure, and has obvious value and potential as a knowledge base for addressing a range of social questions. Realising this potential will depend on finding the means to more effectively manage and co-ordinate these rich resources of data.

The Bremen and Brussels workshops have been highly fruitful, opening up a new and vital area for research archiving that is currently underdeveloped for the social sciences in Europe. These efforts have highlighted the need to both recognise the unique situation of every archive, and also much shared intent over preservation, data management, and dissemination standards and practices. Extending this to encompass the full range of data across the spectrum of the social sciences, with initiatives to create connections across diverse datasets, would be a significant step forward. The creation of the fledgling EQUALAN, with a broad remit to put qualitative and QL archiving firmly on the map, is the first step towards this long-term goal. FP7 or European Science Foundation funding is a critical next step in securing resources and recognition for qualitative and QL data archiving. Given the complexity and diversity of qualitative and QL data, the mixed and highly distributed infrastructure currently in existence, and the varied cultures of data sharing and re-use operating across the countries of Europe, different models for the growth of qualitative and QL archiving and data sharing are undoubtedly needed. But notwithstanding these challenges, making such data 'count' in the spheres of archiving and secondary analysis will do much to enrich understandings of the social world.

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Notes

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2. Acknowledgements:

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3. Because the Finnish Social Science Data Archive website provides much of the information addressed in the country reports, the article from Finland takes a different format. It focuses on challenges to archiving and contributes significant new evidence in the form of research participants' positive views of archiving data.
4. DASISH aims to support social science and humanities infrastructures by providing solutions to common challenges relating to data quality, data archiving, data access and legal and ethical issues. DASISH is funded under FP7 and brings together all five SSH research infrastructure initiatives on ESFRI's Roadmap (CESSDA, ESS, SHARE, CLARIN and DARIAH).