

# Mapping Out Qualitative Data Resources in Norway

by Gry-Hege Henriksen, Maria Bakke Orvik, Trond Pedersen<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

In Norway, history is the research field that has the most experience with digitizing and

ing qualitative data, several Norwegian historical milieus have established infrastructure for qualitative data collections.

In addition, *Data on the Political System* at Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD) is an example of a large collection of qualitative resources, however thematically limited. A more general central archive for qualitative social science research does not currently exist in Norway. There are many examples of scattered qualitative longitudinal projects, but as far as we have learned no large archives/collections are made available. NSD is about to increase focus on data acquisition and storage of qualitative data by expanding its archiving routine to all data that are digitally storable, starting by concentrating on the projects financed by The Research Council of Norway. A majority of these projects have an obligation to deposit research data at NSD. One possible direction for NSD in the future is to establish general archiving agreements with major research institutes. Whether project research data can be stored and/or reused is to a large degree determined by what the respondents have consented to prior to the data collection. Therefore it is important that researchers are aware of the possibilities for archiving and reuse early in the research process. The Privacy Ombudsman for Research is in direct contact with a large share of research projects in their initial phases to give advice both with regard to the development of questionnaires and interview guides and formulation of information letters to respondents, and can play a role in this respect. Privacy protection is a challenge, especially for qualitative data

archiving. NSD envisages a common solution for archiving quantitative and qualitative data. Existing routines for collection, documentation and presentation of data will be expanded to include qualitative data. A challenging, but rich new area for NSD, as we see it, is first and foremost, to offer qualitative data prepared for analysis.

**Keywords:** archiving; qualitative data; qualitative longitudinal data; data sharing; secondary use; Norway Introduction

The content of this article was presented as one of the country reports at the Bremen Workshop held at the University of Bremen, Germany, on 24th of April 2009<sup>2</sup>. The main aims of the workshop were to map out qualitative datasets and resources across Europe and to develop plans for a European network of qualitative data collections, researchers and projects, with particular focus on qualitative longitudinal resources. Delegates from data archives, universities and institutes across Europe attended the workshop representing 14 countries. A few countries, i.e. Finland, Ireland and the UK, had quite extensive experience in central archiving of qualitative data, while the rest divided themselves equally between the groups of “developing resources” and “potential resources”. Norway placed itself in the “developing” group.

As far as we know, in Norway no feasibility study regarding archiving of qualitative data has been conducted. Therefore comprehensive knowledge within this area is limited. However, Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD) (n.d) is about to launch an initiative concerning this issue

The Research Council of Norway (n.d) is promoting a national data archiving policy based on the OECD guidelines (OECD, 2007) that state that all publicly funded research data that can be digitally stored should be archived for future dissemination. The Research Council supports these guidelines by requesting that a majority of the projects they finance should be contractually obliged

to archive data. Data from the research projects shall, as a default, be archived at NSD within two years of the projects' termination.

These contract terms give NSD the legitimacy to actively collect data from already finished research projects. Central in the collecting process are emails to project leaders reminding them of their obligations, including uploading of metadata via an online archiving form. This is a routine that covers both qualitative and quantitative research data. Sharing research data is relatively well developed in Norway for projects financed by The Research Council of Norway. Until the project leader or data owner has published his or her findings, the data are usually under embargo.

### Existing qualitative archiving infrastructure

History is the research field that has the most experience with digitizing qualitative data, and Norwegian historical milieus have established infrastructure for qualitative data collections. Examples of these are The Digital Archives, Museum of Cultural History, The Norwegian Historical Data Centre and The Documentation Project<sup>3</sup>.

*Data on the Political System*<sup>4</sup> at NSD is an example of a large collection of qualitative resources, which focuses thematically on various aspects of the Norwegian parliament, government, political parties, civil service, etc. To our knowledge, a more general central archive for qualitative social science research does not exist in Norway as of today.

NSD is now about to increase its focus on data acquisition and storage of qualitative data by expanding its archiving routine to all data that are digitally storable, starting by concentrating on the projects financed by The Research Council of Norway. We will also update the information about archiving and the archiving form at NSD's homepage.

Archiving of qualitative data can, technically, use the same routines that today are used for quantitative data. But adapted metadata, standardising actions and new tools for analysis and processing are needed. Routines for updates and maintenance will probably stay the same. Preliminary intentions are to use DDI or a modification also for this kind of data (Data Documentation Initiative, 2009)

### Qualitative longitudinal data

There are many examples of qualitative longitudinal projects but they are decentralized. Several of these have youth as a central group for study: e.g. their life stories, participation among youth with disabilities, youth and violence/abuse. The life cycle is another central theme. However, as far as we have learned there are no large archives or collections of data made available – nor is there national cooperation at this point<sup>5</sup>.

### Development and planning

Within social sciences and humanities, the share of qualitative research is considerable. For instance, 35% of the 216 projects in the Norwegian Programme on Welfare Research (1999-2008) used qualitative data, either solely or in addition to quantitative data. Of these, the in-depth (and semi-structured) interview was the most frequent method, used in almost 90% of the qualitatively oriented projects. One quarter of the programme's qualitative projects were anthropological studies.

Qualitative research takes place in different milieus in Norway – one example of a fairly large research institute is NOVA - Norwegian Social Research<sup>6</sup>. One possible direction for NSD in the future is to establish general archiving agreements with major research institutes like NOVA.

Such a general agreement will include both quantitative and qualitative data – and the "data catch" will be expanded accordingly. In a longer perspective it is important for the data archive to encourage more research institutes to archive data at NSD. Archiving research data is a topic that is discussed at national level with The Research Council of Norway taking the lead (see their work to implement the OECD guidelines).

Whether a project's research data can be stored and/or reused is to a high degree determined by what the respondents have consented to prior to the data collection. Therefore it is important that researchers early on in the research process are aware of the possibilities for archiving and reuse. In Norway, the Privacy Ombudsman for Research is in direct contact with a large share of research projects in their initial phases to give advice both with regard to development of questionnaires and interview guides and formulation of information letters to respondents. The main task of the Privacy Ombudsman for Research (2011) is to disseminate knowledge of the legal and ethical guidelines regulating research

Privacy protection of the respondents is a challenge, especially for qualitative data archiving. Projects that have not obtained consent from the respondents for long term archiving with identification have to anonymise data before archiving. Anonymisation will, in many cases, reduce the utility of data when it comes to reuse. This is especially an issue for longitudinal data.

Up until now NSD has mainly focused on archiving quantitative data. One reason for this is technology – quantitative data have to a higher degree than qualitative ones been suited for digital archiving through well-developed technology and metadata standards. As the technology has evolved, it is now possible to digitally store large quantities of text, photos and video. There is also a lot of development when it comes to tools and software to analyse this kind of data. NSD envisages a common solution for archiving quantitative and qualitative data. Existing routines for collection, documentation and presentation of data will be expanded to include qualitative data.

NSD uses Nesstar<sup>7</sup> as a presentation utility; this gives NSD a wide range of options regarding how to present data. Data can be published as part of a portal solution for all available data at the archive, as a research programme specific server, or as a separate qualitative collection. The Welfare Web Portal (2011), which is under construction, will be an example of a research specific programme server, with many different types of data, texts, qualitative interviews and quantitative data. A public server will mainly be restricted to metadata, as this kind of individual micro-level data requires an elaborate security system.

The challenge for NSD, as we see it, is first and foremost to offer qualitative data prepared for analysis, as we do not yet have much experience in this field. What is meant by prepared qualitative data? What is the routine of other archives within this field? The specialised competence that is required has to be defined and developed.

NSD is a member of, among others, CESSDA (Council of European Social Science Data Archives) and some members of staff have joined the IASSIST (International Association for Social Science Information Service & Technology)<sup>8</sup>. Through these memberships NSD seeks to stay informed about developments pertaining to technology as well as maintenance of qualitative data (software, organization and routines). These organizations have also secured agreements among the archives regarding access to and exchange of data that benefits the users. In

addition, more specialised initiatives focusing on qualitative data, both acquisition and curation and dissemination are of interest and are welcome.

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- The Welfare Web Portal. (2011). [Online]. Available at: <http://www.nsd.uib.no/velferd/>. (Note: Only in Norwegian)

## Notes

- Gry-Hege Henriksen\*, Norwegian Social Science Data Services ([gry.henriksen@nsd.uib.no](mailto:henriksen@nsd.uib.no))
  - Maria Bakke Orvik\*, Norwegian Social Science Data Services (formerly at NSD)
  - Trond Pedersen\*, Norwegian Social Science Data Services ([trond.pedersen@nsd.uib.no](mailto:trond.pedersen@nsd.uib.no))
- \*The content of this article was originally presented at the Bremen Workshop held at the University of Bremen, Germany, on 24th of April 2009. The authors Gry-Hege Henriksen (Adviser) and Trond Pedersen (Adviser) work at Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD), Harald Hårfagres gate 29, N-5007 Bergen, Norway. E-mail addresses: [gry.henriksen@nsd.uib.no](mailto:gry.henriksen@nsd.uib.no), [trond.pedersen@nsd.uib.no](mailto:trond.pedersen@nsd.uib.no). Maria Bakke Orvik is no longer employed at NSD.
- For further information see, <http://www.timescapes.leeds.ac.uk/about/bremen-workshop/>
  - For further information see, <http://www.digitalarkivet.no/cgi-win/WebFront.exe?slag=vis&tekst=meldingar&spraak=e>; <http://www.khm.uio.no/>; <http://www.rhd.uit.no/indexeng.html>; <http://www.dokpro.uio.no/engelsk>
  - PolSys, a collection with search possibilities for Norwegian political party documents includes election programmes, press releases, statutes and the political parties' platforms. Note: Only in Norwegian. [http://www.nsd.uib.no/polsys/index.cfm?urlname=parti&lan=&institusjonsnr=3&arkivnr=9&Menuitem=N1\\_3&Childitem=&State=collapse](http://www.nsd.uib.no/polsys/index.cfm?urlname=parti&lan=&institusjonsnr=3&arkivnr=9&Menuitem=N1_3&Childitem=&State=collapse)
  - BIBSYS (<http://www.bibsys.no/norsk/english.php>) contains information on projects and publications, but not data. Contact information to researchers/research milieus (NOVA or others) is easy to find.
  - For further information see, <http://www.nova.no/?language=1>
  - The Nesstar Server is built as an extension to a normal web server. As well as providing all the usual facilities for publishing web content, this server provides the ability to publish statistical information that

can be searched, browsed, analysed and downloaded by users. This is done either by using a standard web browser or using Nesstar WebView. See more at <http://www.nesstar.com/>

8. For further information see, <http://www.cessda.org/>; <http://www.iassistdata.org/>