



Contribution ID: 25

Type: Talk

Risky business: Research data at risk in a dynamic and evolving multidisciplinary research environment

At-risk data is an unfortunate research reality and can be present in all data formats in a range of research disciplines. Research data at risk are defined as data that are at risk of loss due to factors including deterioration of the media, lack of accompanying explanatory documentation, or data existing in non-digital formats, and often involve historic and irreplaceable data. With continued access to older data being associated with a range of benefits, the factors placing valuable data at risk are cause for concern.

This paper reports on a multi-method study comprising a survey and interviews and reports on the results of a case study into data at risk at a leading albeit relatively resource-constrained South African multidisciplinary research institute. In conducting research, development and innovation for the past seven decades, the institute had over time undergone a multitude of dynamic, progressive and often interruptive changes. This case study describes the prevalence, nature and causes of factors identified by research group leaders (RGLs) as threatening the continued access and usability of research data. The paper also reports on the challenges encountered by RGLs when addressing at-risk data.

Several recommendations and strategies are put forward to address identified risk factors. Besides the obvious recommendation that a data rescue project be launched, suggestions include awareness training around data at risk, involving the Library and Information Science sector in data rescue, continued efforts to acquire a dedicated institutional data repository, and ensuring the scope of project risk management includes data considerations. It is anticipated that the combined implementation of recommendations will ensure the accessibility and usability of older at-risk data and lessen the odds of current and future data becoming compromised.

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Session Classification: Session