blog

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Hervé L'Hours, Repository & Preservation Manager at the UK Data Archive recently took part in the first FAIRsFAIR project workshop, which he looks back on.

Re-reading a draft from February about travelling to offer face-to-face support seems like a million years ago now. Though we're all moving to purely online modes of support the need for FAIR and Open research data in trustworthy repositories is clearer than ever. The most important point is that these infrastructures are ultimately made of people.

Back in February I was part of the first FAIRsFAIR project workshop to support ten European Repositories in meeting the CoreTrustSeal Requirements for trustworthy data repositories (TDR) . This is part of a range of FAIR and Trust related work, not only from FAIRsFAIR through the SSHOC project which is working across the social sciences and humanities.

Matthew Woollard, Director of the UK Data Service started our involvement in setting community standards and supporting assessment with the international board of the Data Seal of Approval, which then cooperated with the World Data System through the Research Data Alliance (RDA) to create the CoreTrustSeal process and requirements.

A wide range of organisations worked together to identify sixteen 'core' requirements to demonstrate the trustworthiness of data repositories. The requirements are a great start to internal repository conversations that touch on all levels and roles of the organisation. The self-assessed responses are then peer-reviewed by previous CoreTrustSeal recipients and the repository is either certified or offered guidance and support for improvement. CoreTrustSeal's assessment process is, by design, a community grown carrot, not a stick.

Our FAIRsFAIR workshop followed this community approach. Though I'm supposed to be on the 'supporter' rather than the 'supported' side of the equation, that's not really how these things work. As usual the repositories bring a wealth of expertise about their own data, processes and tools to the table. We learn from each other when discussing the organisational, technological and digital object management geekery of CoreTrustSeal.

And FAIRsFAIR, as subtly indicated by the name, has its own angle on repositories and trust.

The FAIR Principles originated by Force 11 and discussed in a 2016 Nature paper have been adopted through RDA UK and are one of the key factors in setting the expectations for the Europan Open Science Cloud.

The FAIR acronym contains terms that will be pretty familiar to those working in data creation, curation, access and use over recent decades: Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reusable. The acronym hides layers of operational complexity, but I see it as a catchy opportunity to communicate what we get up to, and as a chance to contribute to making it better. All 15 of the FAIR principles make good sense but we're still in the process of defining how they should be applied in the real, heterogeneous world of data management and services.

The UK Data Service partner that provides the trustworthy digital repository function is the UK Data Archive, at the University of Essex. But the distributed partnership of the Service is an exemplar of the complex partnerships that data management, access and preservation depend upon. The service model, and other data infrastructure contributors, from AWS and Azure to Zenodo and Figshare, all depend on interoperability between organisations as well as data. Work like the EOSC, the UK node of the RDA and Enabling FAIR Data/CDF Repository work in the US all depend on communication and cooperation.

The many advances in technical data management are an understandable priority for adoption. But this depends on more than workflows and tools. It's the domain and disciplinary expertise that continues to drive the advancement of scientific research data management practice. The evolving definitions of FAIR data and the community-driven requirements of the CoreTrustSeal both provide the chance to embrace technical opportunities while making sure that the humans creating, curating and re-using these digital assets remain at the heart of scientific data.

The UK Data Service actively cooperates and contributes in the evolution of data infrastructure, but we also rely on the expertise and insights of all our stakeholders.

You can feed back on the FAIRsFAIR deliverables, comment on the FAIR metrics, read or apply for the CoreTrustSeal, or simply email me at herve@essex.ac.uk.

Hervé L'Hours is the Repository & Preservation Manager in the Digital Preservation Systems and Security team at the UK Data Archive.

He works on repository support and maturity models for Trust & FAIR within FAIRsFAIR and on related work within the SSHOC (Social Science & Humanities Open Cloud) project. He worked on the UK Data Archive's test audit against the ISO16363 standard for Trustworthy Repositories, is current vice-Chair of the CoreTrustSeal and past Chair of the Data Seal of Approval.

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