Open Science Monitoring

Impact Case Study – The Social Science Open Access Repository
Author information and acknowledgements

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The Social Science Open Access Repository

Summary

The Social Science Open Access Repository (SSOAR) is an openly accessible database of social science publications. The main rationale behind the creation of the SSOAR was to address the need for a structured, open access database to make social sciences literature easily accessible.

SSOAR provides open access to content in accordance with the Berlin Declaration on Open Access, which has been signed by nearly 300 research institutions, libraries, archives, museums, funding agencies and governments. By enabling self-archiving, SSOAR supports the ‘green’ route to Open Access, whereby the author self-archives the published article or the final peer-reviewed manuscript in an online repository, acting as a second publisher of quality-controlled literature (European Commission 2016). This means that preprints and post-prints of journal articles and publishers’ versions of published works archived on SSOAR are made openly accessible on SSOAR, while being simultaneously published in academic journals.

SSOAR has received increasing interest from social science researchers and publishers. Currently the repository contains about 34,000 full texts and grows by about 5,000 documents per year. Additionally SSOAR has achieved an international reach as universities and libraries in many different countries, including in the USA, the Netherlands and India encourage their researchers to use SSOAR to archive their publications in open access.

As part of the Alliance of Research Science Organisations in Germany, SSOAR has also influenced copyright policy changes at the national level. As a result of these changes in the law, all journal articles published in Germany can be archived in an open access repository 12 months after publication.

Background

SSOAR was built between 2006 and 2008 to address the need for a structured, open access database to make social sciences literature easily accessible (Gebert, pers. comm. 2016). Demand for the database came from individual researchers and institutes, and particularly from libraries.

SSOAR includes publications in such fields as sociology, political science, social policy, social affairs, social history, population research, employment research, communication studies, education, social research methods and gender research (SSOAR 2016a). It includes four kinds of publications: journal articles and contributions to edited volumes; contributions to working papers and working paper series (grey literature); monographs and edited volumes; and theses and dissertations. Most publications are in English or German (with decisions about whether to include publications in other languages taken on a case-by-case basis).

In 2016, the repository contained about 34,000 full texts, and it has been growing at a rate of about 5,000 documents per year. Based on 2013 figures, 50-55% of the texts are journal articles, 30% are monographs and 15% are contributions from collective editions and reviews. In 2013, SSOAR averaged about 25,000 downloads and 14,000 users per month. It is smaller than the Social Science Research Network (SSRN), another open access repository for social sciences and humanities, which accepts text in all languages and currently contains about 700,000 research papers.

SSOAR is hosted and maintained by GESIS (organisation for social science infrastructure) – Leibniz institute for the social sciences, which is an information infrastructure institution for the social sciences in Germany. It is staffed by a team of three librarians and one software
developer. GESIS is part of Germany’s Leibniz-Institut, which links the 88 Leibniz institutes – publicly funded research institutes working across disciplines (Leibniz-Institut 2016). SSOAR is now fully owned and funded by the Leibniz-Institut, though it has also received funding from the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (German research foundation; DFG). The repository is expected to remain free and openly accessible in the future.

**Methods and the role of open science**

GESIS has a tradition of engaging with open science principles, and it has a department specialised in developing open source computer code. The institute is working with the SSOAR team to develop an open data feature for SSOAR that links publications in SSOAR to the data cited (Gebert, pers. comm. 2016).

Documents uploaded on SSOAR must respect copyright rules; SSOAR can only upload publications that have been previously designated open access. Therefore anyone who submits documents for publication in SSOAR (via self-archiving or bulk deposit) is personally responsible for ensuring that the provision of open access to the works in SSOAR does not violate any copyright or rights of use (SSOAR 2016a).

When a document is uploaded to SSOAR, GESIS is granted a non-exclusive right of use of the work in accordance with copyright law. This allows GESIS to store the full text, make it available to the public for online use (to view, download and print), and convert it to other data formats for the purpose of long-term archiving. Additionally, via the terms of use agreement (for individual researchers) or cooperation agreement (for institutions and publishers), GESIS is granted the right to use the full text for the purpose of information science research and text- and data-mining activities. This allows the repository to link full texts to underlying research datasets (ibid.).

The documents archived on SSOAR are indexed using controlled social science vocabulary relying on the Klassifikation Sozialwissenschaften (social science classification), which enables the SSOAR team to classify each publication and ensure the discoverability of publications and higher rankings in search engine queries. Additionally, publications are assigned metadata to allow the full text to be found by Internet search engines (ibid.). To further improve the visibility of the content, SSOAR metadata is made available to the Open Archives Initiative (OAI) service providers, such as the Bielefeld Academic Search Engine (BASE) and other portals, for example SOWIPORT (short for sozialwissenschaftliche Fachportal, or social science professional portal); the Deutsche Digitale Bibliothek (German digital library; DDB); and the Leibniz-Institut’s bibliographic database, LeibnizOpen (ibid.). Furthermore, each electronic document is assigned a uniform resource name, or URN, which is a persistent identifier (PID) that enables permanent access to the publication and its scientific citation. When researchers self-archive their publication on SSOAR, they can choose controlled keywords from the Thesaurus Sozialwissenschaften (thesaurus for the social sciences; TheSoz) or assign keywords themselves. The publication is then classified by the SSOAR team using the social science classification (ibid.).

The repository is built on the basis of the open source software DSpace. A personal URN is assigned to each publication, linking each publication to metadata. In all cases, important metadata, such as the abstract and keywords, must be provided in either German or English. The team working on SSOAR at GESIS checks the metadata before uploading the publications and adds a classification. Once the publication is released on the platform, it obtains a personal licence and becomes citable (ibid.).

SSOAR aims to develop its content from the social and political sciences through intensive collaborations with editors, publishers and research institutions. Dr. Agathe Gebert, who is a research associate at GESIS – Leibniz-Institut für Sozialwissenschaften, has been working over the past seven years on building collaborations with publishers and research institutes.
Collaborating with publishers is essential for SSOAR because the publication copyrights owned by the publishing companies makes it difficult for researchers to decide whether they can archive data or a publication in a repository and therefore impacts on the content of the repository. Gebert negotiates with publishers who own the copyright to present them the marketing advantages of cooperating with SSOAR and making the content open access. Once the collaboration is in place, the SSOAR team collects the content from the publishing companies and imports it into the database (Gebert, pers. comm. 2016).

SSOAR has developed several models for cooperation with publishers. Those collaboration models were originally developed by the Fachportal Pädagogik (German education professional portal, known as peDOCS) and were then introduced to SSOAR and EconStor (the German disciplinary repository for economics and business studies) to support the development of collaborations with publishers in their fields (ibid.), using the following models (SSOAR 2016c):

- The ‘selective access’ model provides access to individual contributions to edited volumes or to individual journal articles.
- The ‘delayed access’ model makes published works freely accessible to the public online after an embargo period (often more than one year).
- The ‘out-of-print works’ model makes available out-of-print works such as complete monographs or collections of older journal volumes).
- The ‘retrodigitisation’ model digitises content in exchange for an open access licence.
- The ‘open access direct’ model involves simultaneously publishing the print and digital open access editions.
- The ‘staff publications’ model provides a way for institutions to make the publications of their employees accessible to the public in order to comply with research funders’ open access requirements.

The SSOAR team also engages with individual researchers to encourage them to self-archive in SSOAR. The SSOAR team devotes a large part of its time to explaining open access and the function of the repository to researchers and to clarifying the legal considerations. Gebert makes presentations at large disciplinary conferences as well as smaller conferences and seminars; she also meets, speaks and corresponds regularly with university researchers and librarians. The main argument used to engage researchers is the simplicity of using the repository and the fact that researchers can simply send their papers to the SSOAR team, who will then upload them to the repository.

The DFG indirectly supports the SSOAR team in its engagement activities by appearing with and presenting joint work together at conferences (e.g. at the annual Open-Access-Tage, the biggest conference on open access in the German-speaking region, including Germany, Austria, and Switzerland (Openaccess.net 2016)).

The SSOAR team also works frequently in coordination with other research institutes and repositories in Germany to exchange good practice in both content acquisition and the use and management of metadata. SSOAR performs coordination and consultation work with other actors via the web and also through international repository conferences and open access working groups in the DFG.

**Outputs and findings**

Universities and libraries in many different countries – including in the U.S. (e.g. Washington University in St Louis (2016) and Boston College (Boston College Libraries 2016)), the
Netherlands (e.g. Zuyd Library in Maastricht (2016)) and India (e.g. the Centre for Economics and Social Studies (CESS) library in Hyderabad (2016)) – encourage their researchers to use SSOAR to archive their publications in open access. They also encourage their students to use the repository to find information by stressing the steadily growing collection of full-text social science documents that can be freely accessed.

SSOAR could reinforce communication among researchers and more widely by making research results more visible and accessible. Indeed, SSOAR’s main benefit is that it brings together international publications in the field of social sciences and humanities and reduces fragmentation of the publication landscape, increasing visibility and accessibility of the academic literature (Freie Universität Berlin 2016). The national and international reach of SSOAR gives more visibility to publications in the repository, especially to individual researchers self-archiving their work, and could therefore lead to the development of an increasing number of research collaborations in the future. Additionally, SSOAR’s individual cooperation model with publishing companies and libraries allows archiving in open access literature that would not have been accessible otherwise due to copyright restrictions.

SSOAR also plays a role in the acceptance of open access for scientific publications in socio-economic sciences and humanities among researchers and other actors (ibid.).

SSOAR affected the people who developed it at GESIS. Repository librarians had to learn new data management techniques and how to address copyright issues, and had to adapt to the new software as well as different ways of storing data and metadata (i.e. using persistent identifiers assigned to every full text, engaging with the Dublin Core Metadata Initiative (DCMI 2016) and other OA standards for metadata, and enabling external upload processes and licences to be assigned). An open access database requires completely different skills from other databases. People working on SSOAR – librarians in particular – received training to acquire the necessary skills (Gebert, pers. comm. 2016). Acquiring these skills enhances librarians’ career development and professional mobility, making them more valuable within the organisation and to other public research institutes (ibid.).

**Impacts**

SSOAR, as part of the DFG (i.e. the union of the most important research organisations and its repositories), took part in influencing copyright changes at the national level (ibid.). As a result of these changes in the law, all journal articles published in Germany can be archived in an open access repository 12 months after publication. The alliance and its associated repositories influenced the changes by raising awareness about the importance of open access (ibid.).

The DFG is currently pushing for a stronger open access mandate (ibid.). The DFG does not currently require that publications resulting from research it funds be published open access, although this requirement is becoming increasingly widespread among European funders.

**Sources**

**Interviews**

We gratefully acknowledge the following interviewee, who provided information for this case study: Dr. Agathe Gebert, Research Associate, Open Access Publishing, GESIS – Leibniz-Institut für Sozialwissenschaften.

**Bibliography**

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