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Perspectives on paradata: Research and practice of documenting process knowledge

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In this anthology, the concept of paradata – simply put, data on how data comes to be – is explored through a series of contributions from an appealing variety of disciplines and perspectives. The authors of the multifaceted chapters seek to discuss and describe paradata in terms of process knowledge regarding information and data; as procedures and practices related to knowledge production. Aiming for both theoretical and practical contributions, the objective is to scout and scrutinise how paradata can be handled in a multitude of settings, and how paradata can support information and knowledge management.

The anthology – spanning 14 chapters in total – incorporates reflections on, approaches to and perspectives for the exploration of paradata. Disciplines and fields such as archival studies, archaeology, statistics, scholarly editing and textual scholarship, museum studies, informatics, and legal studies are represented. Considering this variety, the anthology explicitly does not seek to stipulate a single definition to paradata. Rather, it suitably stresses the multiplicity of the term and provides a conceptual and practical exploration of what paradata is and can be.

Still, in the introduction, the volume's editors propose using 'data on processes' as a working definition, 'following the seminal use of the term in survey research' (p. 2). Therefore, it makes sense that one of the initial chapters of the anthology, 'Paradata in Surveys' by Schenk and Reuß, contributes with an overview of paradata in survey methodology and a prompt for its conceptualisations in other fields. It is discussed here that paradata can shed light on knowledge processes – since such data, the authors argue, can serve to monitor interviewer performance and data quality as well as correcting data biases – and that paradata should be seen accompanying other tools rather than replacing them.

In their chapter, Packalén and Henttonen argue that paradata is a suitable term for the information collected about archival records throughout their lifespan. The chapters forming this volume show that it is an apt expression for other fields too. Several of the chapters attend to paradata intricacies in the preservation or production of digital representations of cultural works. Papadopoulos, for example, deals with paradata in 3D scholarship and argues that knowledge processes come with imbued biases that need to be recognised instead of seeking a standardised approach to the production of paradata. In a similar vein, with reference to Barad (2007) and Haraway (2016), Dawson and Reilly notably adopt a diffractive approach to art and archaeology when emphasising embodied paradata as means for disclosing embodied knowledge carried out when recording artefacts. Dillen, in his chapter, moreover, discusses the need for convening with human agents for understanding digitisation processes and how digital scholarly editions come to be.

Other contributions address yet tactile questions in the handling and generation of paradata. Set in the context of a research project examining data re-use of material accession in UK archival institutions between 2007 and 2020, Jones and Bunn reflexively depict the difficulties occurring when combining datasets from various information systems. The concept of paradata is here used to understand how the original data had been collected. However, paradata – the authors state – also originated in terms of how the researchers compiled the data into a single set, as well as through any additional information sought to be able to do so.

Similar lines of thought – while referring to recommendations on how to make computer code useful as paradata – arises from Bilderbeek's chapter. Here, applied suggestions are presented in terms of the use of version history systems, code documentation and the preservation of code through containerization. Related, Rayburn and Thomer explore paradata reconstruction in a study of memory institution database maintenance. While complexities ensue in the upkeep of long-lived data systems, the authors describe, narrative case reports emerging through interviews can serve to disclose drivers of change. Attending to qualitative methods can thereby provide promising documentation of systems developing and changing in the long run.

A tenet shared by several chapters is the notion of paradata as a means for algorithmic accountability, which is topical. Trace and Hodges reason that fact sheets, model cards, datasheets, data statements and dataset labels can be utilised to provide algorithmic transparency and understandability. Similarly, in Enqvist's chapter, it is stated that paradata can ensure that automated recommendations and decisions concerning legal knowledge management are carried out in line with the law. Cohen et al., moreover, describe in their chapter how a simulation model created for an emergency services communication system can be understood as an embodiment of paradata, and argue that there is a need for expanding the archival understanding of context, provenance and creation.

Yet another point of interest is that of controlled vocabularies, as mentioned in two chapters. A feasible entry point for an additional chapter would have been paradata materialising during the construction of controlled vocabularies in general, and librarians' work with creating and maintaining thesauri in particular. Such a chapter would have served as a fitting contribution to the anthology.

An especially compelling idea, emerging from the anthology, is that paradata can serve pedagogical purposes. As stated in Buchanan and Huntsman's chapter, archaeology can be made more accessible to newcomers of varying experience levels or abilities by way of paradata. Likewise, Dawson and Reilly discuss embodied paradata as pedagogical boundary objects. These are interesting takes, and it would be possible to couple such ideas with the theoretical concept of epistemic objects as knowledge information (Knorr Cetina, 2001).

The concluding discussion by Huvila, Andersson and Sköld fruitfully amasses the anthology's contributions in the grander scheme of things that are information and knowledge management. It also delves into an aspect of paradata that is surely touched upon in – but not the sole focus of – several of the chapters, which is that of ethics. Transparency and ethics are here balanced, and the issue of “paradata-washing” is brought up to illustrate the potential misleading or even harmful ways that paradata can be utilised to “distort the public image of a certain process or practice” (p. 261). While the editors certainly do a thorough job in problematising ethical dimensions in the scope of the volume, a chapter dedicated to discussing even more perilous perspectives on paradata would certainly have been a very interesting addition to the anthology. Still, the emphasis on further theoretical, practical and methodological discussions for future research is a promising one indeed.

The present anthology provides a stimulating collection of conceptual as well as practical reflections on process knowledge for the management of information and data. Emerging from,

and written for, an assemblage of disciplines, the anthology showcases the complexities imbued in paradata as a concept and provokes food for thought on how data are produced, the possibilities of documenting such processes in the array of disciplines depicted, and beyond.

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