RDA: a place to connect and find a community

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Open science travel blog from the Research Data Alliance Plenary organised in Gothenburg 20-23/3/2023. The blog gives a short introduction to the Research Data Alliance's working methods.

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RDA: a place to connect and find a community

The 20th RDA Plenary celebrated the Research Data Alliance's 10th anniversary in Gothenburg, where the first plenary took place ten years ago in 2013. The RDA is primarily a grassroot organisation – a collective of experts, who collaborate internationally for the advancement of open science and open & FAIR data. RDA builds on the idea that open data and shared data make science better, and this has a global dimension. RDA is a place to connect and find a community, or as one of the speakers, Natasha Simons, said at the opening plenary session: "I have found my tribe".

As a first timer at RDA Plenary, I needed to familiarize myself with the organization's working methods. These are some thoughts about what I've learned about the RDA.

The RDA currently has over 13 000 individual members, including research data specialists, open science specialists, software developers and researchers. In the RDA, you can join a working group or interest group, which meet online between the plenaries. Groups are formed around common interests, e.g., national policy, but are based on international problem solving. The RDA working groups and interest groups develop outputs that can be adopted and adapted. The outputs are technical and social infrastructure solutions that should be adaptable and interoperable. Some outputs are designated as RDA recommendations, which are endorsed by the RDA. In the open science movement, many national initiatives are developed locally, which may result in a duplication of efforts. In one of the conference sessions, someone mentioned, e.g., that they had charted over 600 metadata standards, many of which had the same content. The message at RDA Plenary was: Don't build anything only nationally – your solutions need to be global.

One of the sessions I attended was "Sensitive data contexts and disciplines: A look at different approaches". As a social scientist, I have an understanding that most of the research we do involve sensitive data. Most of sensitive data concern personal information and confidentiality – which are common barriers to opening data. The Sensitive Data Interest Group currently develops a glossary of the terms and vocabularies used to discuss sensitive data. The session discussed common misconceptions in relation to management of sensitive data, but also mentioned that human genome researchers generally are "sensitive data literate" by being aware of informed consent, ethics approvals, data access controls, authorisation, etc. By attending this session, I did not get any quick solution for how to manage sensitive data in large international consortia, which is one of the challenges I work with. However, by attending the plenary, I found new perspectives and useful resources, and I might join an interest group to learn more and become involved.

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