Written by María José López Pourailly
Monday, 09 January 2012 00:00 -

Launched in October 2009, COAR, the Confederation of Open Access Repositories, is uniting 59 institutions in 23 countries from Europe, Latin America, Asia, and North America. Its mission is to enhance greater visibility and application of research outputs through global networks of Open Access digital repositories.

That goal of improving global visibility of research outputs through networks of Open Access Repositories (OAR) is strongly shared by RedCLARA, that is not only a member of COAR, but is also fostering the creation of OAR in Latin America by managing the IADB funded project "Regional Strategy and Interoperability and Management Framework for a Latin American Federated Network of Institutional Scientific Documentation Repositories", supporting the strong CoLaBoRa community and participating in new initiatives with COAR. In order to better know COAR and really understand the importance of the OAR, we talked to Prof. Norbert Lossau, President of COAR and Director of the Goettingen State and University Library, Germany.

COAR promotes infrastructure interoperability and a joint global data store of Open Access repositories to enable and support the re-use of data by service and portal providers. Currently, COAR has three working groups, each with its own set of responsibilities, objectives, and related activities. COAR aims to enhance the visibility of research outputs, pave the road to interoperability, foster knowledge exchange on repository issues, and strengthen international open access implementation.

Probably the better way to describe what COAR is trying to do is by saying that they are putting all their effort in order to ensure the successful sharing of research worldwide in the best possible form, harvesting regional and national efforts all over the world. And when it comes to a region, COAR's President has a nice view of what is going on with Latin America: "I think the collaboration with Latin America is one of the most promising developments to facilitate the building of global research infrastructures, based on Open Access and digital repositories". That opinion was shared with us the day we asked him for the interview that we invite you to start reading now:

In the context of the Information Society almost every day a new concept or way of producing content (sometimes knowledge) is born. It is difficult to manage the information avalanche and, of course, the result is disinformation. In this particular scenario and from your position, how would you explain what the Open Access Repositories are and what they are for, to people who are not experts in this matter?

Before the Internet was created, we had libraries, museums and archives to collect, structure, make accessible (through catalogues) and preserve information and knowledge resources. In the library world we had also international library loan to provide books and other library materials from one place to the other. Outside this cosmos of traditional infrastructure providers we had numerous further sources of information (sociological surveys, data captured from instruments or in laboratories, audio, film etc.), often hosted by research institutions themselves. The World Wide Web and digitisation of all types of information and knowledge resources have provided the platform and the potential to link and network all this information, removing barriers between content providers and databases. Open Access repositories are the libraries of the online world, securing open and long-term access for any type of information source.

Which would be for you the best possible way to share research worldwide?

A global system of Open Access repositories, serving the same protocols and being compliant with data and technical standards, which allow service providers to build discovery, filtering, profiling, data-mining, visualisation and multiple other services on top of these data. From the end-user perspective those services would offer seamless access to a global virtual knowledge base which can be (re)-used and enhanced following good scientific practice (e.g. by giving credit to the content producers).

Why is interoperability so important?

Without interoperable technologies, protocols and interfaces we could not use the data network worldwide. Your e-mail would be refused when you send it to a colleague in another country and communication would become very patchy. Try to access all research articles in a discipline or all digitised collections from the Latin-American region in one pass. You would fail in the current environment. COAR wants to make access and (re)use of information sources as easy as plugging into the data network, independently of their physical location. In our recently published paper "The case for Interoperability for Open Access Repositories" we have described why interoperability is so important and how we can achieve it, whether on system, data, semantics or policy level (see: http://www.coar-repositories.org/files/COAR_Interoperability_Briefing.pdf   , Editors: Eloy Rodrigues, University of Minho, Portugal and Chair of the COAR Working Group on "Repository Interoperability" and Abby Clobridge, Clobridge Consulting, United States).

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COAR is a very young Association. Could you please tell us how it was born and which are the fundamental needs that the people behind its creation wanted to tackle by forming the Association?

The idea to create COAR was born during the course of the European DRIVER project (Digital Repository Infrastructure Vision for Europe). DRIVER had been very successful in building a European repository Community of Practice and a virtual repository network. The DRIVER guidelines had been translated into Spanish, Portuguese, Czech and Japanese. Some DRIVER consortium partners felt that the Open Access repository community would lose seriously momentum if the project funding was to run out. This concern was shared by more and more institutions also outside of Europe (i.e. in Japan, China, Latin-America, Canada, U.S.) and led to the founding of COAR, an organisationally very lightweight, legal not-for-profit-Association according to German law. The initial objectives, which are still valid, have been to lobby for repositories, their networks and repository based e-Infrastructures at the national and international level, the development and support of interoperable standards for national aggregation of research content in open access (OA) repositories, support and coordination of global collaborative efforts towards high-quality OA data and interoperable systems, to have a reference point for repository standardization efforts, the repository community platform, and a venue for discussion and meetings working towards streamlining OA repository developments, the promotion of an increased rate of self-archived deposit with as little burden as possible on the researcher and to advocate for consistent policy formulation on institutional repository development.

What are the synergies that you would personally like to see functioning between COAR and RedCLARA's OAR initiatives?

Norbert Lossau, President of COAR: "The success of RedCLARAs OAR initiative would also be a success

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The data network, maintained by RedCLARA, is, like the European GÉANT data network, only useful when they are connected and bits and bytes can be sent without barriers. The mission of creating a global, interoperable network of Open Access Repositories, where services can be built on top of them (see under 2.), can only be achieved together. Expertise can be exchanged among practitioners on very, concrete topics like "How do I have to implement my repository in order to be internationally compliant", "What are successful ways to approach researchers, funders, ministries", "Are there ways to modify licensing agreements with publishers", "How will we link publications to research data". The success of RedCLARAs OAR initiative would also be a success for the international OA repository movement.

In your own words, why does Latin America need an OAR?

Latin-American countries collaborate in many areas, including economy, culture higher-education and of course RedCLARA to provide a seamless data network. And you share the same language, Spanish with a close relation to Portuguese in Brasil ("Portunol"). Apart from the rather homogenous language in the Latin-American region there are quite some similarities to the European region. It creates many opportunities for synergies if countries in a region work together: you can jointly apply for funding, share work e.g. in developing training materials, exchange best practices, build critical mass of research content (in particular compared to other regions), get more influence in addressing other stakeholders (such as publishers). And there is another, very research-oriented reason to create cross-country networks: because many of our researchers already work in communities beyond borders. And their expectation is to work with an infrastructure that is equally regional, resp. international.

Why is it important to foster collaboration and synergies between COAR and a Latin American OAR?

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See above my dedicated vote for an international OA repository infrastructure. How would this work without Latin-America? And at the same time, how would the Latin-American community and network work without the rest of the world? Global communities need a joint organisational backbone, supporting systematic collaboration across all regions. This is the role where I see COARs (International) responsibility. But the international organisation needs to build and rely on actors in countries and regions which are rooted in their own culture, research and infrastructure system, political and legal jurisdiction, economical environments. And they need of course to translate into their own languages.

Finally, when at the end of the day you realize that all what you are doing in COAR (as what we do in RedCLARA) is to work and collaborate in order to generate new knowledge and to share that knowledge, what is the specific weight that you assign to the marriage between the words "knowledge" and "sharing"?

Knowledge and sharing are inseparably connected. "If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants" is a citation from Isaac Newton (1676), which has been used as motto for the Open Access pilot of the European Commission (2008). Open sharing of knowledge can be competitive compared to closed knowledge production cycles, as the Economist Heidi Williams from MIT has proved in her article "Intellectual property rights and innovation: Evidence from the human genome" (2010). And with respect to the benefit of our Society, the Vice-President of the European Commission, Neelie Kroes, Commissioner for the Digital Agenda in Europe points out: ""Scientific information has the power to transform our lives for the better – it is too valuable to be locked away. In addition, every EU citizen has the right to access and benefit from knowledge produced using public funds." (Ghent, OpenAIRE Launch event, 2 Dec. 2010).

More information:

- COAR: http://www.coar-repositories.org/
- IADB Project "Regional Strategy   and Interoperability and Management Framework for a Latin American Federated   Network of Institutional Scientific Documentation Repositories":   http://www.redclara.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=articl e&id=533&Itemid=504&lang=en
- CoLaBoRa Community: http://www.redclara.net/index.php?option=com_content&vi ew=article&id=847&Itemid=691&lang=es