RAD-UNAM: Genesis and evolution of a repository administrators group

Gunnar Wolf

Open Repositories 2013

1 RAD in UNAM

Our aim with this talk is to present RAD-UNAM. Before doing so, a primer on UNAM and its reality is needed, so that the whole makes sense. UNAM (*Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México*) is the largest university in Mexico, and in all of Latin America. With over 300,000 enrolled students and over 35,000 academics[1] UNAM's size makes it quite a unique case.

Although our University has, of course, a strong vertical administrative hierarchy, stemming institutional projects and reporting vertically all the way up to the Rectory, in no small measure due to its size, it also works in a very organic, *bottom-up* fashion, and can also be seen as a federation of schools, faculties, research centers and institutes, departments and other academic and administrative units.

RAD (*Red de Acervos Digitales, Network of Digital Collections*) was born as a research project back in 2005, and has slowly progressed first to become a true working group. Through this talk, we will present what we believe makes RAD an interesting success case.

2 Organizational weaknesses

UNAM, as a publicly funded knowledge production body, has all reasons to interested in setting up a strong set of repositories. Several points in its organization (many of which are clearly a consequence of its makeup and history) should be highlighted to understand the needs RAD tries to fill, and the reason why it is done in this way.

2.1 Specialization and lack of specialization

Due to the University's decentralized structure, while a large proportion of its constituents excel in their respective area of knowledge, the lack of specialized

---

[1]Equidad de Género en la UNAM: un diagnóstico; Jorge Martínez Stack, http://orienta.org.mx/AYGJMS.pdf, 2006

people in technical, operative areas is very large. The fact that Mexico is a developing country cannot be downplayed: Economic resources are very often scarce, even more so at a public university, and more often than not, people in charge of systems administration tend to be either the younger academics who have some computer "intuition" or even interns hired on short terms to keep things *just working*.

Bringing it down to Earth, and bringing it in line with *Open Repositories*, it means that, although faculty members in the different areas have long requested precisely what standards-abiding repositories offer (availability of Web-facing space to push copies of their academic materials, both published and not, long-term preservation of the material at a stable place, properly categorized and fully indexable), too many ad-hoc and home-brewn sites have emerged, deserving more the title of *data dumps* than of *repositories*. Those data dumps often require logging in in an attempt to gather usage statistics, and we have observed this practice leads more to *hiding* the information than to making it findable.

2.2 Cultural ossification

It should not come as a surprise to the target group of this presentation that it is hard to promote the ideas of academic repositories with Open Access licensing terms to long-term professors. The reality in our university, we believe, is even somewhat harsher: The average age of our professors is 46 years old[1], with some active professors up to 90 years old. This is in part due to the liberal hiring schemes the university followed through the 1970s and 1980s, and the difficulty of new positions opening up since the reforms in the 1990s.

The age of our professors, together with the strict and mostly anachronic evaluation mechanisms which until recently denied formal recognition to on-line publishing (often leading to academics believing their visibility and ratings would be *lowered* were they to make online-available copies of their peer-reviewed and formally published documents) has made it hard to assure the most important resource of useful online repositories: Academic documents published by recognized academics.

3 RAD as a bottom-up answer

Starting in 2005, as a research project in the General Direction for Computer Services for the Academy (DGSCA), a group was formed for[2]:

- Increasing visibility of UNAM's digital collections, aiming to promote its discovery through external search engines
- Offering a digital infrastructure to the University's areas, helping storage, administration and dissemination of their digital resources

---

[2]*El manejo de los acervos digitales en la UNAM*; I. Galina, J. Giménez, G. Chávez, Congreso BIREDIAL, http://eprints.rclis.org/15474/, 2011

- Helping digital collections' creators to improve the utility, functionality and applicability of their collections through the creation of tools (such as data mining, visualization and others)

- Proposing metrics to assist the evaluation authorities on the relevance of acknowledging the academic work invested in the creation of high quality digital collections for UNAM

3.1 Repository specialization

The RAD working group has since then grown as a network of repositories each of them autonomous and specialized not only in the area of knowledge that corresponds to the research center, faculty or unit that hosts it, but also specialized in the type of media it hosts.

Although all of our currently nine online repositories host published books, articles, reports and other "generic" academic publications, some have much more specialized material, for example:

- The Biology Institute's repository, through its *Irekani* collection,[3] has thousands of georeferenced photographies documenting not only the aspect but the location of many of the nation's species (including several safeguards, such as not publishing the exact location for endangered species, to protect them from poachers or collectors

- The Social Research Institute offers the {Indigenous Mexico photographic archive}[4], where tens of thousands of photographies of native Mexican indigenous population, taken since the 1930s, are available.

- The Economic Research Institute has the full archive of its radio program, *Momento Económico*[5], and is currently working on the digitalization and categorization of its historic magazines and publications.

Each of the repositories, of course, has a different approaches regarding deposit policies; some are oriented towards requesting interested researchers and professors to self-deposit their works, while others have people devoted to digitalization and catalogation of whole collections, reflecting their respective needs and reality.

3.2 RAD as a working group

Having a group of like-minded repositories should not be very surprising in the Open Repositories community. What we believe that identifies the RAD group is how it has become, while working inside a very formal and rigid organization, an example of a self-governing shared knowledge administration group.

---

[3] http://unibio.unam.mx/irekani/
[4] http://ru.iis.sociales.unam.mx/dspace/handle/IIS/43
[5] http://ru.iiec.unam.mx/view/collections/prog=5Fradio.html

From the teams repsonsible for the different repositories, few have formal systems administration or programming backgrounds, however, advice (both in the form of informal recommendations and of written guides and manuals) is provided, both to group members and interested outsiders. Likewise, few in the group come from a bibliotecological background, but emphasis is given to all repositories to use the right descriptors and classification codes.

As an important starting point for the project was to enhance our university's online visibility, RAD also has an umbrella harvester[http://www.rad.unam.mx/], with people working on refining its presentation (both human- and machine-oriented), seeking to make the collective resources better indexed, organized in more relevant ways.

4   The road ahead

The working group has face-to-face meetings with monthly or bi-monthly periodicity, where advances and work is shared, to help each other and to push for clearer institutional recognition and committment. In the last year, important milestones have been achieved: The university as a whole has recognized, following the global trend towards Open Access, that works carried out in a public university and with public resources should be available to the public — So, although we have not yet reached the adoption of a formal institutional mandate for Open Access, the impact inside several of our centers has been to effectively adopt it.

Secondly, the formal structure of the university has recognized the need for having a set of repositories following international standards, as we have been doing. In January 2013, the creation of the Coordination for Digital Universitary Collections (CCUD) was announced[6], and the RAD group is working with the newly appointed group merge our efforts and formalize the work that has been ongoing for the better part of the decade.

Members of RAD-UNAM have advised other academic bodies in Mexico and in Central America set up Open Access, OAI-PMH enabled repositories, although we have not incorporated such repositories to our working group, as an important part of our group's definition is that is made up by repositories *inside UNAM*. Even though part of what gives RAD-UNAM its strength is being as varied as we are, trying to over-reach would probably result in becoming a project too ambitious to see fruition; we see the creation of CCUD as a very important hit, which probably would not have been achieved otherwise.

---

[6]http://www.dgcs.unam.mx/boletin/bdboletin/2013_122.html