

Qualitative Research Networking: *FQS* as an Example¹

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Abstract: If one thinks about accessing and reusing qualitative data with an international and interdisciplinary perspective, this topic also contains organisational and networking tasks beyond the field of qualitative archiving in the narrow sense—some of them necessarily relying on the Internet and its tools. I had the chance to gain experiences within international networking while editing the online journal *FQS* and I would like to summarise some aspects, hopefully helpful also for the planned networking of qualitative archives within INQUADA. So let me first shortly introduce *FQS*—its origin and its current state—, and afterwards I will stress some opportunities and also some challenges, *FQS* and similar networking projects confront.

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1. What Had *FQS* Been, and What is *FQS* Actually?

A first and very vague idea of *FQS* arose while I started surfing the Internet in the beginning of '99, being myself a part of a marginal academic culture—qualitative research—and additionally belonging to an Internet Third World country—Germany.² While surfing, I discovered many helpful and some times thrilling online resources. Especially impressive within the field of qualitative research at this starting point had been

1 A former version of this contribution was prepared for presentation at the Fifth International Conference on Social Science Methodology, University of Cologne October 3-6, 2000.

2 The Internet not only provides interesting possibilities for a marginal academic culture like qualitative research and for an Internet Third World country as for example Germany, but also for a group, still marginalised in most parts of the academic world, namely the group of female researchers: Towards the use of the Internet for qualitative research it is in my opinion impressing, how many women are prominently involved in providing resources and organising networking: Worth mentioning besides many others are e.g. Jude PREISSLE, *QUALRS-L* list owner, and Jan MORSE, Director of the International Institute for Qualitative Methodology; Bobbi KERLIN I just mentioned; Judy NORRIS and Louise CORTI participated in this issue as well as Susann KLUGE, who did a lot of important work for networking qualitative archives in Germany.

- the mailing lists [QUALRS-L](#) ("Qualitative research for the human sciences") and [Arlist](#) ("Action research mailing list"), and also lists like [qual-software](#) (revised link, FQS, Nov. 2002) or—dedicated to one special program—[atlas.ti](#);
- link collections such as Bob DICK's [Action Research Resources](#), [Qualitative Research in Information Systems](#), edited by Michael D. MYERS within Isworld, [Qualpage](#), provided by Judy NORRIS or Ron CHENAIL's [Qualitative Research Resources](#), as well as
- the [Qualitative Report](#), also edited by Ron CHENAIL;
- the Qualitative Research Web Ring, providing access to some of the before mentioned web sites and organised by Bobbi KERLIN, and finally
- institutions, e.g. [CAQDAS](#) ("Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis"), the [Grounded Theory Institute](#), the [International Institute for Qualitative Methodology](#) or [Qualidata](#) ("Qualitative Data Archival Resource Centre"), which are accessible worldwide via the Internet. [1]

At that time, there had been hardly any German language online resources for qualitative researchers, and so—besides other online services—I initiated the online journal *FQS – Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*. In the beginning German publishers and also some colleagues at German universities were rather sceptical against such a foolhardy idea, while many Non-Germans I met during my internet travels were very interested and supportive. In the meantime the little *FQS* team was organised and it was decided that *FQS* should be a bilingual-German and English-journal. Since January 2000, fulltexts belonging to the first *FQS* issue—[Qualitative Research: National, Disciplinary, Methodical, and Empirical Examples](#)—are available online for free. In June, the second issue—[Qualitative Psychology](#)—followed. The third issue—Text . Archive . Re-Analysis—is now available. [2]

So compared to the initial ideas, first of all *FQS* became

- a "normal" online journal. [3]

Besides, *FQS* became

- an online journal with a rather large international and interdisciplinary audience: The feedback we received tells us that American and Indonesian students are reading *FQS* as well as German professors and marketing research managers from Japan or Mexico. Talking about a qualitative online journal quantitatively: By end of November, we counted 801,463 accesses—342,051 so called page impressions (requested HTML files)—from 30,200 different hosts.³ [4]

But visitors do not only read or download texts: we are asked for support and for co-operation among other requests and one important result of such requests is

³ Short information also about monthly accesses to our server are available at the [FQS starting page](#) within the "About *FQS*"-rubric.

that actually together with Latin American colleagues we are also working on a Spanish *FQS*-version. Insofar, *FQS*—world wide accessible for free—became

- an important centre for qualitative researchers, and besides online publishing, we are doing a lot of information, communication and co-operation work, offline as well as online. [5]

Therefore we actually together with different partners are developing *qualitative-research.net*, the domain name *FQS* is accessible at, into a network for qualitative researchers in the sense of systematically providing resources also in the field of information and communication. [6]

2. What May Other Networking Projects Learn From Our Experiences?

If I sum up what in my opinion has been most important for our work on *FQS* and also for our actual efforts towards *qualitative-research.net*: we try to develop—a better term might be: invent—these projects around the concrete needs, requests, suggestions and critiques from all persons involved. This provisional character and the continual creative work in my opinion is part of an orientation, also important for doing qualitative research. One might say that we try to transfer an approach we learned during interviewing or field research also towards using the Internet for qualitative networking. [7]

Doing this, we recognised some difficulties and some chances, probably also important for networking efforts within the realm of qualitative archives. I would like to differentiate four perspectives, most of them closely connected: a social/cultural perspective, an institutional, a technological, and a personal one. [8]

2.1 The social/cultural perspective

If a project provides a minimum of quality, competence in the field of qualitative research, and knowledge about the use of internet tools—for conceptualising, realising and distributing web sites etc.—the Internet very soon will allow a great number of contacts amongst members of different nations, disciplines, sub cultures and institutions. When one meets someone from a different background, one confronts his/her own limits of knowledge, terminology, and scientific routines and rituals one is familiar with. Vice versa, the other person is also influenced by his or her respective national, disciplinary, and sub cultural background. So there are many chances for understanding as well as for misunderstanding. My own advice (also to myself) for co-operating in a successful AND satisfying manner is: be as curious, tolerant, and open as you can, and be friendly towards others' mistakes as well as your own. [9]

Nevertheless, this openness is sometimes difficult within any field, and also within the field of qualitative research, considered as an interdisciplinary and international project: there is openness, curiosity and co-operation on the one hand, and there is ethnocentrism, rivalry and mistrust on the other hand. And the

openness has some additional preconditions, especially important for networking with the Internet. [10]

2.2 The institutional perspective

The enormous speed of communication among researchers possible with the Internet will demand an enormous investment of time and work. Therefore, it will be very important, the way such a project is institutionalised and that resources are available to maintain it. According to my own experiences managing *FQS*, this is the point where I am rather sceptical: Very soon we were aware that *FQS* has a good chance to become a real helpful and thrilling project, and with time many others also agreed. But till today we are struggling for financial support—with different partners during the time. [11]

The reasons for the struggles projects like *FQS* face—all of them in my opinion arise from the difficult relationship between traditional (scientific) institutions and their routines for decision making etc. on the one hand, and the innovative potentials of the Internet and Internet projects on the other hand:

- A project, flourishing like *FQS*, soon became rather attractive also for the different German academic players, who are used to securing their projects by writing an application to large public funding institutions. As qualitative research—not only in Germany, but also in Germany—does not seem to be a field of predominant interest for these funding institutions, trying to get financed by them is a rather risky and conflicting procedure: The most common way is that someone writes a proposal, describes the background of the project, stresses its necessity and usefulness, summarises the expected time effort and costs. Afterwards one has to wait for some months for a response, eventually positive, though the actual experience with *FQS* is that revisions are asked. They must be fulfilled, further months, etc. Such a procedure is very dangerous for an existing project like *FQS*, and it is inadequate in terms of the Internet. A lot of time and work is necessary to fulfil the rituals of applying and of proving that the project should be (further) funded, time and work in this way not available for other issues important for (the development of) the project.
- Additionally, funding institutions often are not too familiar with the Internet, its enormous speed and its special tools: the reviewers most times are the reviewers just available, and only a few seem to check for example, mentioned URLs more intensively (if ever), never mind if they are prepared to do link-checks and other procedures to evaluate the quality of web sites.⁴
- Another centre of conflict—at least in regards to *FQS*—is that the rather formal and hierarchical structures predominant in many German qualitative academic institutes hardly fit with the very quick and low hierarchical structures characterising many internet projects: conflicts are necessarily programmed. [12]

4 Link-checking software helps to identify so called "dead" or "broken" links and also allows to get an idea of the way web sites are maintained; see e.g. [Xenu's Link Sleuth \(TM\)](#) or [webmasterplan](#).

Trying to cope with these difficulties on the one hand—besides our efforts for public funding—we are developing models also to co-operate with commercial partners and sponsors, and in this way trying to keep projects like *FQS* free of costs for its users world wide. On the other hand, close and reliable co-operation with other networking projects—a kind of networking the networks—seems necessary, including the sharing of resources (for example language and technical skills) and also fair and consensual arrangements to avoid unnecessary redundancies. [13]

2.3 The technological perspective

For a project like *FQS*, the Internet provides new possibilities of using time and space: We are operating with almost unlimited space resources, it is possible and often makes sense to publish also the empirical base of research (e.g. interviews) and detailed descriptions of the research process. Additionally we are prepared to include new kinds of data, besides textual ones also audio and video files. And we operate rather quick, contributions might be published as soon as they passed peer review and are prepared as HTML and Adobe files. But—and this is an important danger I am facing time and again: In view of this expansion of time, space and media, as qualitative researchers we have a special responsibility towards the often times rather sensitive data we get from research participants: Many interviewees are not aware of possible consequences of Internet publications, when they do allow the use of their data within scientific publications. Additionally, many researchers are also not aware: often colleagues had been rather surprised when I told them what I knew about them and their work, sometimes things they would not have liked others to read but it becomes available online if a search engine like *Google* sends its robots through the Net. They never heard about "robots.txt"-files or the "disallow"-command to prevent such automatic accesses.⁵ Insofar, the technological dimension is closely linked to a social, an ethical and a personal one: such projects do need persons, familiar with qualitative research as well as with the Internet and with Internet technology and its development, and who act responsible towards data protection and related issues. [14]

2.4 The personal perspective

Let me end with a kind of warning, addressed to future actors or managers of such projects: Qualitative networking and using the Internet in many respects takes place between exploitation (this also often means to exploit one's own resources), the pleasure of invention, diligence and a lot of frustration, as well as having the tolerance to bear the frustration. If I take a look at myself, I am sometimes afraid that I am out of my mind, being engaged for such a long time

5 "A robot (or an agent) is a kind of software "spidering" the Internet according to defined criteria. Robots for example are used to search web sites or news groups and to collect all information possibly interesting along this pre-defined criteria" (<http://www.netlexikon.de>, my translation, K.M.). The file "robots.txt" helps to control such automatic accesses: Using the "disallow"-command a "Robot Exclusion Protocol" defines the paths, robots are not allowed to access. For more information and for possibilities to download the "RoboGen software" see <http://www.rietta.com/robogen>.

and under the current conditions in a project like *FQS / qualitative-research.net*. Or the other way around: Maybe I just lost my heart ... So last of all my warning is accompanied by a desire: Hopefully I will meet many people as crazy as I am also in the future, and hopefully also in the field of qualitative archiving! [15]

3. In Which Way May FQS Contribute to Other Networking Efforts?

FQS and *qualitative-research.net* may be useful for other networking projects—and in this special context: for *INQUADA*—towards the following aspects:

- We may inform our readers continually about *INQUADA* development and invite them to join the discussions concerning qualitative archiving and familiar topics;
- we invite *INQUADA* for further exchange of competence and experiences, relevant for an international and interdisciplinary networking and for
- the shared use of technical, language and other resources, as well as
- to co-develop concepts of data protection, increasingly important with the growing use of the Internet for scientific inquiry and publishing. [16]

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