Providing (Online) Resources and Services for Qualitative Researchers: Challenges and Potentials

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Abstract: The increased acceptance and use of qualitative research methods led to different national efforts to provide services for qualitative researchers. In this article it is argued that at least three kinds of services appear to be essential, integrating online and offline tools in some ways: a) supporting the archiving of primary data and the access to databases for re-analysis of qualitative data; b) consulting in questions of qualitative research and teaching; and c) providing information, communication and publishing bases and possibilities of knowledge sharing, management, and distribution. Since qualitative research is truly a transdisciplinary effort, a close collaboration beyond disciplinary borders is necessary. Additionally—in view of scarce resources and possible synergy effects as well—it is suggested to intensify already existing networking between different national centers, i.e. to inform each other about the state of work and future plans, to share and coordinate resources and services already available, and to delegate some tasks that are expensive if provided on a national level for an international audience.

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1. Introduction

After decades of methodological divide, in recent times the use of qualitative methods has increased tremendously in the social sciences, as can be seen in the academic context as well as in commercial sectors such as market and media research (see KÜHN, MARLOVITS & MRUCK 2004 for Qualitative Market, Media and Opinion Research and past *FQS* issues on qualitative methods in various disciplines, for example psychology, cultural sciences, criminology, and sport sciences). [1]

The increased use of and request for qualitative research methods led to different national efforts to establish institutionalized infrastructures providing services for qualitative researchers. The kinds of services regarded as especially important, the way in which such institutions should be integrated in the national landscape of existing service institutions for social scientists and similar questions are discussed in different ways depending on the respective national states of institutionalization of qualitative research and on specific national discourses. [2]

In Germany, important services such as those provided for some decades by the local centers of the German Social Science Infrastructure Services (Gesellschaft Sozialwissenschaftlicher Infrastruktureinrichtungen, *GESIS*)—the Social Science Information Centre (Informationszentrum Sozialwissenschaften, *IZ*), the Centre for Survey Research and Methodology (Zentrum für Umfragen, Methoden und Analysen, *ZUMA*) and the Central Archive for Empirical Social Research (Zentralarchiv für Empirische Sozialforschung, *ZA*)—have been limited to quantitative research methods. Comparable services had been overdue in the field of qualitative research. To close this gap, during 2002 qualitative researchers from different German universities started to share their resources to establish a German "Competence Centre for Qualitative Research and Information Management"[1]. This decision was partly due to the networking power of the Internet: in 1999 the on-line journal Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research (*FQS*) was initiated in Berlin. The main idea behind *FQS* had been from the very beginning to promote discussion and cooperation between qualitative researchers from different nations and social science disciplines by using the unique attributes of the Internet and by providing open access for all persons interested (see MRUCK 2000a; MRUCK & GERSMANN 2004; MRUCK, GRADMANN & MEY 2004). Apparently the idea worked: the authors and readers come from all social science disciplines and from many countries. Furthermore, they are not limited to universities, but an increasing number of social workers, teachers, market researchers and others have also joined. By the end of April 2005, about 5,100 persons had subscribed to receive monthly information about *FQS*. [3]

From the very beginning, reasons for contacting us were not limited to on-line publishing: various information and communication resources and services were also requested. In trying to adjust our services to meet these requests, the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG) has been funding the establishment of the on-line gateway "qualitative-research.net" since 2001. Though there was an initial idea as to what to provide while starting *FQS*, we had to learn quickly, and this was merely a starting point, and not a final one. At that time it was not possible to foresee that the partners, who are currently trying to establish a German center, would "meet in the Internet." The Internet played a crucial and very concrete role for the collaboration even among national agents, in addition to the well-known impact that the Internet has for creating, presenting, and distributing scientific knowledge worldwide (see e.g. JACOB 1996; OECD 1999; MRUCK & MEY 2002). And the Internet is not only a medium that supports the *exchange of concepts* and promotes the *networking of*

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1   Although an initial proposal to the German Research Foundation (DFG) was rejected, several grants have been received since 2003 which are important for the work described in this article. In 2003, the Life Course Archive (Graduate School of Social Science, University of Bremen) and the ZA started a feasibility study on qualitative archiving (funded by the DFG). Since May 2004, the DFG is also funding the integration of FQS into the national Social Sciences Virtual Library. In the course of this project, which is cooperatively organized by the Freie Universität Berlin, the project German Academic Publishers and the IZ Sozialwissenschaften, technology will be developed to support open access publishing (see GRADMANN, MRUCK & STEMPFHUBER 2004). FQS has been collaborating with ZUMA since 2003 to continuously provide workshops on qualitative research methods. So all in all, qualitative research received important acceptance and support, although further integrative steps will be necessary.

qualitative researchers beyond national and disciplinary boundaries, between the academic and the non-academic worlds. It is also a medium which allows to plan, to develop, and to realize—under a national as well as international perspective— innovative ways to directly *provide and share resources and services*. [4]

The latter characteristic will be especially important for organizing collaboration internationally. Partly close cooperation has already been established between different international agents, some of them have been providing services for qualitative researchers on a national level for many years (Great Britain), some have already started (e.g. Denmark and Finland), and others are currently working on the constitution of qualitative archives and/or centers (for example France, Germany, Japan, Mexico, Switzerland). [5]

Though it is not possible to precisely predict synergy effects resulting from this international collaboration, we may now start to think about sharing our resources more concretely and more systematically. This leads to the following questions: Which kinds of resources and services should be provided for a national audience, and which of these—by means of the Internet—should be provided collaboratively by partners from different nations? Which resources and services are actually essential for the field of qualitative research? Which should be provided off-line, and which on-line? [6]

To discuss these questions, I would first like to outline some components I regard as essential for any center for qualitative research, and thus should reflect the goals to be attained. In addition, I will try to give a brief overview of some possible on-line services such a center should provide. Afterwards I will mention examples of possibilities of international networking and resource-sharing. [7]

2. National Centers for Qualitative Research: Resources and Services

What is essential for establishing a national center for qualitative research? In my opinion it is absolutely necessary to define very clearly *what* resources and services should be provided and *for whom*. [8]

In summarizing *what* should be provided, in one way or another, three kinds of resources and services appear to be essential:

a. supporting the *archiving* of primary data and the access to databases for re-analysis of qualitative data;
b. consulting in questions of design and realization of qualitative *research* and in questions of qualitative *teaching*;
c. providing *information, communication and publishing* bases and possibilities of knowledge sharing, management, and distribution. [9]

All resources and services mentioned above should be realized on-line *and* off-line. In the case of a) *the why and how of archiving qualitative data*, readers will find many important experiences and arguments in the second part of this issue. I

would like to mention that an increasing amount of (non)textual documents are or will be provided in electronic form. Even though safe on-line access to databases and archives is partly already realized, it will definitely be an important and common part of our future as social scientists. Services in this field should not be limited to providing access to data archives, but should include assisting projects to archive and re-analyze data (for more detailed discussions and examples see the *FQS* issue on Text. Archive. Re-Analysis, edited by CORTI, KLUGE, MRUCK & OPITZ, 2000, and the *FQS* issue on Secondary Analysis of Qualitative Data, edited by CORTI, WITZEL & BISHOP, 2005). Such services may be provided on-line to a large degree. [10]

With regard to b) *consulting in questions of design and realization of qualitative research studies*, a center should provide qualitative method support for individuals and for groups, on-line and off-line. Consulting should not be restricted to questions of archiving and re-analyzing data, but should also deal with questions of research design, of decision for methods, of data collection and interpretation, of methods to evaluate and to improve the quality of research and its outcomes. As far as teaching qualitative methods is concerned, currently most courses and workshops are limited to traditional off-line ways of working, although the combination of on-line and off-line resources seems to be especially fruitful. Different suggestions for combining innovatively on-line and off-line forms of learning already exist (for information about "blended learning" see e.g. http://www.e-learningcentre.co.uk/eclipse/Resources/blended.htm). For example, in Germany in 2000 we started on-line working groups for qualitative researchers, which originated in a traditional off-line concept of a "project workshop for qualitative work" (MRUCK & MEY 1998) and which we tried to adjust to the special possibilities and requirements of the Internet. This means not only to integrate new ways of communication (using mailing lists, chat rooms, pin boards) to organize the work (the whole research process is accompanied by the groups), but also to address a wider community of scholars as the group meetings take place mainly on-line, including sporadic off-line meetings.[2] In 2005, we decided to organize such off-line meetings more systematically, and so in June 2005 the "1. Berliner Methodentreffen Qualitative Forschung" [1st Berlin Meeting on Qualitative Research Methods] will take place, organized by the Freie Universität Berlin in cooperation with *ZUMA* and the Hans Böckler-Stiftung. Moreover, annual follow-up meetings for the future are already in progress (see http://www.berliner-methodentreffen.de/). [11]

Finally such a center should provide c) *information, communication and publishing bases and services*. This means to inform users about news (literature, web sites, conferences, journals, mailing lists etc.) and networking possibilities, potentially interesting for them, and to support them to create on-line resources on their own for special sub-communities. In my opinion, these services in particular should be provided on-line, and they should be coordinated by different national and international centers. I will come back to this in the next section. [12]

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2   All groups are using the Blackboard e-learning technology for the place-independent on-line support of qualitative PhD students (see http://www.methodenbegleitung.de/).

The resources and services mentioned—a) data archives and support for researchers to use them, b) consulting services for qualitative research and teaching, and c) information, communication and publishing services for qualitative researchers—are momentarily the obvious tasks such a center should be able to fulfill. Additional tasks have already started to become visible, such as providing the means to combine, for example, on-line and off-line publishing.[3] After working intensively for some years with on-line media I am convinced that new needs and challenges will arise according to the enormous speed of the Internet development and use. [13]

Referring to the question *for whom* resources and services should be provided, disciplinary differences have to be considered and managed. So if—under a national perspective—the requirements of qualitative researchers from *all* social science disciplines should be addressed, on-line and off-line offers should meet their sometimes very different needs and "disciplinary languages." We currently have to confront the difficulty of doing this while trying to create a German thesaurus for qualitative research as a part of the on-line gateway "qualitative-research.net." We had to learn that what researchers from one discipline regard to be essential methods of data collection or interpretation, are sometimes rather unfamiliar to researchers from other disciplines. Even if, for example, a psychologist and an educational researcher are talking about narration and discourse, they are not necessarily talking about the same topic while they use the same words. Such problems of misunderstanding, such partly idiosyncratic discourses, are occasionally also important for researchers belonging to one discipline.[4] [14]

Therefore it will be important to create a center in close collaboration with colleagues from different disciplines and with their research organizations. It will be necessary—despite differences in methods understanding and use, despite rivalry for financial resources, despite fears against power concentration, despite complaints about "too much" vs. "not sufficient" standardization of qualitative methods etc.—*to actively invite all qualitative researchers into a shared effort*

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3   In a way this *FQS* issue may serve as one model for combining offline- and online-publishing: with the print version, published by the Swiss Academy for Humanities and Social Sciences in 2004, a national audience has been addressed rather systematically. As the topics are important for a broad international audience of qualitative researchers, we decided to publish this *FQS* issue. Similarly, in 2001 a close collaboration between *FQS* and the print journal Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung (*HSR*) began. The text On the Compatibility between Qualitative and Quantitative Research Methods by Nigel FIELDING and Margrit SCHREIER, originally published in *FQS* 2(1), was the first reprint, and many other texts followed. In 2005, *HSR* 30(1) contained 14 selected texts, originally published in *FQS* between 2000 and 2005 and now available also as a print version. This partnership is especially worth mentioning since it represents the effort to the gap between qualitative and quantitative methods: *FQS* is explicitly dedicated to qualitative research and *HSR* is the Official Journal of QUANTUM (Association for Quantification and Methods in Historical and Social Research) and INTERQUANT (International Commission of the Application of Quantitative Methods in History).

4   See e.g. HITZLER (2002) for the main perspectives in German interpretive sociology, each of them institutionalized and in a way isolated from the others: "[n]o one understands why no one follows the suggested way to collect reliable data, valid interpretations, relevant knowledge. Nearly everybody talks about methodological rules. Hardly anyone accepts the methodological rules others tried to establish" (paragraph 10; my translation). For more general introductions into the concepts and realities of interdisciplinarity, see e.g. KLEIN 1990; WEINGART and STEHR 2000.

which should be developed and realized as tolerant and open with regard to diverging interests and concepts. And it will also be essential *to invite quantitative researchers* to share their experiences, their resources and competence. Although shared knowledge between qualitative and quantitative researchers is still somewhat difficult to create (see e.g. FIELDING & SCHREIER 2001), it is obvious that mutual curiosity and cooperation has become everyday practice. So, for example, an editor of a quantitative core journal informed us in a private mail that the fact that this journal had been a

> "'flagship' among the 'tough quantifiers' [...] would in no way keep me from cooperating with FQS. Even the intransigent veterans of [my discipline] acknowledge today and after four decades of method divide at least (with a bad grace) the need of triangulation and 'method mix'." [15]

Nevertheless, trying to initiate, to moderate and to bring forward such processes will be a challenging and difficult task, but it will be a task any national center for qualitative research must manage. [16]

Not only is the notion of involving different disciplines challenging, but also the question of which *languages* should be used to provide resources and services. Should a national center only serve the needs and interests of its own national communities? What consequences will come from limiting oneself to just one language? If we had established *FQS* only in the German language, it would be a German journal, limited to a German audience. As we also wanted non-German colleagues to know about our work, join our efforts, and cooperate with us and vice versa, we had to face the language problem. What in our case had been a consequence of our idea of international exchange, in the case of some countries already exists as a kind of internal challenge: how to proceed in Switzerland, for example, where different languages—German, French, Italian, English, Schwitzerdeutsch—are used? If a center decides to provide (at least partly) multilingual resources and services, the "translation problem" must be dealt with, a problem surely as challenging as the "discourse problem" between different research cultures and schools within one nation. And also the question of sharing resources and competences internationally will arise, if one is not interested in developing offers isolated from what already exists elsewhere. [17]

3. Sharing Resources and Competences Internationally: Stay Close and Cooperate

If a center is really interested in providing useful resources and services, it will be essential that those responsible for such centers stay close to those they are working for and to their partly constant, partly changing needs. And they should stay close to others providing similar services. During the Cologne conference on social science methodology at the end of 1999, I suggested "to network the networkers" (MRUCK 2000b), and during the years, the necessity to do this has become even clearer. As far as *archiving* is concerned, it would be absurd with regard to the resources required, if qualitative archives are built without relying at least partly on the experiences gained by Qualidata (see CORTI in this book)

over many years. As Diane OPITZ and Andreas WITZEL (c.f. their contribution in this issue) mention, it will be necessary to closely co-operate with the Swiss SIDOS to "avoid unnecessary multiple developments" in the German language. While creating national *consulting services* in the field of computer-assisted analysis it will be important—in terms of sharing experiences and in avoiding a duplication of vast amount of resources—to not ignore the courses provided by the *CAQDAS Networking Project*. And it would be foolish to spend enormous amounts of money creating Internet-based learning and teaching platforms anew time and again, instead of sharing experiences and software already available for example at the Freie Universität Berlin (see Note 2). The same proves true for other resources and services: as far as our link collections are concerned, we are not interested in merely providing these collections as an isolated qualitative niche apart from the rest of the social sciences. Therefore a "Special GESIS SocioGuide: Qualitative Research" will be established cooperatively within the "GESIS' Link Collection SocioGuide." The technology (DBClear) used has been developed by the Social Science Information Centre, and it allows the management of resources also in languages other than German. Considering these existing technical resources it seems an appropriate offer to others to cooperate in using them. [18]

Finally, some remarks on the on-line journal *FQS*: trying to develop such a journal in three languages—English, German and Spanish—meant an enormous effort. Without many colleagues all over the world who joined us (by contributing to the journal, by reviewing, by copy-editing etc.) and who were convinced of the importance of such a forum, it would not have been possible. Today *FQS* has reached such a state that besides the individual support mentioned above, I would suggest providing and developing *FQS* in the future systematically and collaboratively in different languages with reliable partners in other countries, as a joint effort of national centers in countries such as Germany, Britain, Switzerland and France.[5] [19]

4. Conclusion

Summarizing the challenges of and changes to providing resources and services on-line leads to the following conclusion: with the Internet we have the chance to coordinate our efforts and to successively build up precious resources for qualitative researchers all over the world. My suggestion is that we closely *inform* each other about the state of work and the plans we are working on; that we *share and coordinate resources and services*, already available; and that we *delegate* some parts which cost too much if provided on a national base for an international audience. Hereby we would promote systematic access to relevant information, data and scientific communication—interdisciplinary and international. The international transfer of knowledge and the joint development of resources and services would be encouraged, and thus contribute to the

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5   Currently at the Freie Universität Berlin (*FQS* and *CeDiS / Competence Center e-Learning and Multimedia*) we are working with the *Social Science Information Centre* and with *German Academic Publishers* on the development of e-publishing tools, which will help to support the distributed work on the journal as suggested above.

advancement and institutionalization of qualitative social research. The more we are able to share resources and services in intelligent ways, the more we, qualitative researchers and qualitative research in general, will be able to profit. Using the words of Françoise CRIBIER (c.f. her contribution in this issue), we currently have the chance to create and secure "a legacy common to several disciplines" and nations, which should help to promote "the inventive thinking we need to understand our societies." What she says in regard to data archiving is fundamentally true for all other resources and services that help to support and to acknowledge qualitative research as an indispensable access in the social sciences. [20]

Acknowledgments

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