
Editing around the World

Publishing qualitative research: ten years' experience

Katja Mruck

Freie Universitaet Berlin, Germany; katja.mruck@fu-berlin.de

Günter Mey

University of Applied Sciences Magdeburg-Stendal, Germany; meyer@qualitative-forschung.de

If you have an apple and I have an apple and we exchange these apples then you and I will still each have one apple. But if you have an idea and I have an idea and we exchange these ideas then each of us will have two ideas. – George Bernard Shaw

Starting points

When in 1999 we started to think about using the internet for the social sciences – more precisely, for qualitative research – there were hardly any models and the very few examples that did exist were limited to North America. For example, an open-access journal, *The Qualitative Report* (<http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR>) – had existed since summer 1990 (published irregularly, and not using the label “open-access” at that time), and in September 1991 the mailing list *Qualitative Research for the Human Sciences* started (<http://www.listserv.uga.edu/archives/qualrs-l.html>). German qualitative research was more or less invisible, and only a small number of German social scientists were familiar with the internet and its possibilities (the same was true for traditional print publications: publishers at most provided rudimentary websites).[1]

Since that time we have established online resources for qualitative researchers – for example, a German-language mailing list (currently about 1200 subscribers), the platform *Netzwerkstatt* for supervising PhD students by means of the internet, the *Social Science Open Access Repository* (<http://www.ssoar.info/en>) with qualitative research as a starting point, and, from the very beginning, the online journal *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* (FQS; <http://www.qualitative-research.net>). In 2005 we founded the Institute for Qualitative Research (<http://www.qualitative-forschung.de/en>) to integrate these efforts.

As qualitative methods are used in many different disciplines, one main intention for starting our online journal has been to provide access to knowledge beyond disciplinary boundaries. Furthermore, we wanted to make the stock of German-language qualitative research accessible to an international audience; at the time these resources were rarely known because of language barriers. By the same token, we wished to improve access to international knowledge for German researchers, at that time limited to a few classic texts. To achieve this we needed at least a bilingual approach, English and German, and in January 2000 the first issue of FQS, with a total of 31 articles, was published.

Since that time FQS has expanded continuously. FQS issues are published in January, May, and September. Articles not directly linked to the issue topic are published every second month and announced in a newsletter (<https://lists.fu-berlin.de/listinfo/fqs-e>) we have been distributing since March 2002, which contains news about conferences and resources of interest to qualitative researchers, and news about open access. Thirty one issues of FQS have been published, with more than 1200 articles by around 1150 authors from all over the world (<http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/search/authors>). We will summarize some of our experiences in managing our journal over the past 10 years, keeping in mind the traditional German print market on the one hand and developments in the field of international qualitative research on the other.²

A publisher and an international collaboration network

When starting FQS we (the editors at the outset, mainly coming from [qualitative] psychology) had different experiences as authors, and some of us had served as members of advisory boards or in editorial teams, mostly for small German print journals. None of us had previous experience as a publisher or in using internet technology. We had to learn how to obtain an ISSN, and it was difficult to understand how to transfer a file from a local PC to the internet, etc. Our first steps were rather wobbly and extremely time-consuming (though at the same time exciting and informative). But soon – despite some initial distrust about the idea of establishing an online-only journal – colleagues from other disciplines and countries joined us. They were interested in the concept of FQS as a “Forum” for qualitative research: they became members of the editorial team, of the advisory board, authors and readers. Some of them engaged as a kind of ambassadors, bringing FQS to other places in the (scientific) world and in this way provoking further interest in this project.

From today's perspective the most surprising experience has been the extent to which “the project FQS” worked. Already by 2001 we had decided on a third language, and since then the complete website is available in English, German, and Spanish. Authors can submit articles in any of these three languages and all articles are then peer-reviewed. Those recommended for publication are copy edited by native speakers, and for articles available in only one language, abstracts are provided in the two other

languages.

To accomplish this we had to establish editorial teams, able and willing to organize all the necessary work. We learned to collaborate – beyond national and disciplinary borders – reliably, accurately, on time, and (most important) joyfully, as all editorial work is voluntary. Participating in FQS and its reach brings immaterial benefits. Even today we are amazed that we can send a text, for example, to Pittsburgh and immediately receive a response from a colleague with whom we have been collaborating closely for the last 10 years without meeting him or her face-to-face. Colleagues from different countries such as Mexico, Canada, UK, Spain, or Japan have visited us and we have enjoyed the talks and personal encounters, but there have never been any editorial real-life meetings – the workflow is organised virtually.

Keeping in mind the enormous output of more than 1200 published articles, this process surely needed some professionalization, starting by tinkering with HTML, followed by proprietary and non-innovative technologies, and finally ending with *Open Journal Systems* (OJS; <http://pkp.sfu.ca/?q=ojs>), a community-based open-source publishing software. That FQS, a rather large social science journal, decided to use OJS probably contributed to the improvement of the system. OJS was initially based on a North American science publishing model, and to transfer FQS to the OJS platform we needed a multilingual navigation tool that would allow us to switch between the different language versions. This was realized with financial assistance from the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (German Research Foundation; <http://www.dfg.de/en/>), and is now available from OJS version 2.2.0 upwards for all interested users. In order to manage files for the German version of FQS, we needed to properly translate the OJS peer review and publishing process, and this is work that we at Freie Universitaet Berlin are still involved in for version 2.2.2 and future releases (see <http://pkp.sfu.ca/ojs-languages>). Further work will be necessary to improve OJS and make it more suitable for publishing demands in the humanities and social sciences.

A well-rehearsed team and a reliable and innovative technology would not have been sufficient if FQS was not committed to the open-access paradigm from the very beginning (in 2002 we were asked to provide the initial German version of the Budapest Open Access Initiative, <http://www.soros.org/openaccess/index.shtml2003>). FQS articles are available free of charge for all the interested colleagues and the general public.

To demonstrate the enormous reach of open-access publishing, we provide a short example. Apart from FQS, two other journals for qualitative research(ers) were established in 2000, both of them print, closed access, and German only: *Sozialer Sinn. Zeitschrift für hermeneutische Sozialforschung* (<http://www.sozialer-sinn.de>) and *Zeitschrift für qualitative Bildungs-, Beratungs- und Sozialforschung* (<http://www.uni-magdeburg.de/iaw/zbbbs/zeitschrift>; renamed *Zeitschrift für Qualitative Forschung*) If you search Google for these journals (and many researchers use the internet and Google as a search engine) you will

get 711 hits for the first and 640 hits for the second journal – compared with 28,700 hits for “Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research”.

Such visibility has consequences for both the authors and the editorial team. Publishing in FQS and being involved in FQS means receiving requests for reprints of articles originally published in FQS, invitations for contributions to books and conferences, etc, as we know from authors’ responses and based on an evaluation done in 2008.³

Marvelous new worlds?

Are these marvelous new publishing and networking worlds? The answer is “to some extent!” The internet had already changed many daily scientific routines for German qualitative researchers, a clientele not too affiliated with new technologies. Our computers are getting faster and better; many of us are using computer-assisted software tools and provide our own homepages at our universities. Some provide texts within their homepages, some started with Web 2.0, and almost all are using emails and search engines. But deep inside there is an old and solid tradition which provides us with a kind of intuitive knowledge of what a scientific publication must be, what it should look like, who it is addressed to.

Especially in the first years of working with FQS, some authors were grateful for all the wonderful extensive peer review and copy-editing work done on their article (work that most small and also some large publishers do not invest in any more), as the result seems worthy of publication “in a real journal”. We have had to explain time and again why FQS is a “real journal” – a scientific journal, but online and open access.

Still, some publishers and editors of print journals dislike authors citing FQS and similar journals and resources. Old prejudices against online as “junk science” and reservations against open access – for different reasons – still exist. And this practice (and the old tradition) is also visible when a colleague on an international mailing list raises the question of which journals might be especially suitable and attractive: the good old names of good old print journals will be suggested, as if some Pavlovian reflex is at work.⁴

On the other hand, what really differentiates online journals from print journals – the unique characteristics of



internet publishing – are hardly used. In May 2008 an FQS issue on performative social science was published making extensive use of media besides traditional texts (<http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/issue/view/10>), but this still is an exception. All in all, FQS as a place open for innovation and experiments – for new ways of writing and presenting, for providing different kinds of data and media, for immediate discussion of articles, already published – still awaits discovery.

From a social scientists' perspective, the digital future has only just begun. But the process has started and it is not reversible, just as the idea to get back to stones to fix and distribute scientific knowledge after Gutenberg would not have been. The internet has already changed the traditional value chain of scientific information, communication, and publishing, and old and new agents will have to find their place within the future scenarios. At the time of writing, a sociology student from Nepal, a psychology professor from Serbia, a German doctoral student in the field of communications, and an Australian market researcher, all interested in a special group of research methods, are

accessing our site and looking for articles that will help them in their work. Ten thousand colleagues from more than 170 countries will receive our next newsletter pointing them to resources that didn't exist 10 years ago. And FQS is just one very small pixel in a developing scientific world...

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Correspondence

English as she is wrote

I was interested to read the comments of Stephen Lock and Sylwia Ufnalska on English as a foreign language. Lock has been fortunate in apparently only having encountered minor spelling mistakes and never a text that was “frightful”. “At worst,” he states, “commas may be left out.” By sheer coincidence, the day I received *ESE*, I also received a 20-page document for “language washing”. Here is the opening paragraph:

1. Introduction

The introductions of the triple helix as a concept in the end of 1990s boost development of new forms of tripartite structure between industry, university and governmental institutions. There is nothing new about university working in close relationship with industry as scientist has a long history and tradition of foster new ideas to be used in enterprise development. The new about this form of relationship is the scale and the systematically approach of stimulating industry to use knowledge based R&D to increase its innovation capacity.

It would be interesting to hear which adjectives Lock finds appropriate to describe the quality of this text. Considering that all PhD candidates have to show proficiency in English before commencing the course, one should expect a reasonable standard, certainly higher than this. Further, 90% of the literature in most fields is also in English. My book – using terms in Norwegian and English, illustrating pitfalls facing the Norwegian author – should have presented no problem for any Norwegian academic. I do agree with Sylwia that good translators are a rarity. But this places even more responsibility on the author and the pre-editor. When I find it necessary, as with the above text, to re-write virtually every sentence, this clearly goes beyond the bounds of pre-editing. As Sylwia rightly emphasises, there is a need for education of authors and scientific translators. It will be interesting to see what possible solutions emerge at Pisa.

John Taylor

Freelance translator, proofreader, court interpreter, Oslo
john@jgtaylor.com