### *FQS*—Idea, Realization, Future Perspectives

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## 1. Idea: The Creative Linking of Qualitative Research and the Internet

The idea for creating an online-journal for qualitative research arose in Spring 1999. Prior to this, I had taken first steps towards discovering the Internet and its instruments, a process which in retrospect can be seen as prototypical for the predominant state of German qualitative research at that time: I started "tinkering" with HTML, initially accompanied by unsystematically surfing of qualitative websites on the Internet. Working more systematically, it became evident to me that German qualitative research traditions and cultures which, when offline, are characterized by an impressing variety and heterogeneity, were represented in the WWW only rudimentarily, and that German qualitative researchers (myself included) were not very familiar with the online "rules" and practices. But at the same time, I was really surprised to become acquainted with so many qualitative researchers, communicating online all over the world, some of them for many years. Let me at this point mention the QUALRS-L mailing list, the *Qualitative Research Webring*, and the sometimes gigantic collections of links, which are more or less structured and updated and mainly in English. [1]

After these first experiences I tried to contact some of the colleagues who had developed these offers in non-German countries. Additionally, learning from these models, I started initiating German-language pendants: The mailing list QSF-L started along with a *Webring Qualitative Forschung* and a collection of information and links within the rubric Qualitative Sozialforschung, which is part of *psychologie.de*, a German language online service for psychologists. [2]

I also was very impressed by the journals which I discovered step by step, e.g. The Qualitative Report, edited by Ron CHENAIL. But by admiring these offers, I, at the same time, also had to recognize their limitations. In the end, though, it was these limits and the fascination with the medium Internet and its resources which inspired the "Idea *FQS*".

- Prevailing was a mere transfer of print media and their forms of presentation, organization, and distribution into the Internet (this often also proved true for journals not belonging to the realm of qualitative research).
- Especially, in some of the English language qualitative research, well established media offers have existed for many years: They are still being used as a proven remedy, i.e. in many cases in a way that was developed years ago. There seems to be little pressure to aim for innovation, and perhaps—in comparison to Germany, where our initiative stems from and which can be considered "underdeveloped" in terms of the Internet—there is no felt need for innovation.[1]
- Additionally, the information I accessed via the Internet made obvious how limited the reception of German-language qualitative research approaches beyond the "language-border" was. The same seems to prove true for other countries and scientific cultures, where researchers do not or do not mainly publish in English.
- At the same time, I experienced first hand the thrilling possibilities of communicating with colleagues all over the world: The Internet and its resources sometimes appeared to me as a kind of a creative *ou-topos*, allowing one to imagine new ways of experimenting with space, time, with ways of thinking, reading, writing, and interacting. [3]

Against this background the idea of *FQS* emerged—first as a German language, then as a bi-lingual, and in the meantime as a multi-lingual online journal—and soon, interested colleagues joined the *FQS*'-Editorial Staff. Above all, *FQS* was conceptualized as a *Forum* to help systematically support and develop information, communication and networking processes for qualitative researchers. The main pillars of this concept are:

- Interdisciplinarity and internationality
- The usage of online-resources (e.g. direct interaction, space, speed, multimedia, flexibility, etc., see also the *FQS* concept). [4]

Our wish to use, to integrate and to develop the special qualities of the WWW within a journal-project at first received ambivalent responses.

- Important German publishers, whom we contacted with an initial concept in April 1999, reacted very cautiously, perhaps due to the lack of experience with online journals and online publishing. The heterogeneity of our target

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1 It can be assumed that the announcement of *FQS* played a part in some of the changes that were observable during the last few months, especially since qualitative journals also are exposed to success rates and must stay competitive in terms of finding authors, readers, and so on.

audience was regarded as unfavorable for targeted marketing strategies, and the publication market was considered saturated from a print-media perspective. According to one source, who estimated that *FQS* could gain a max. of 50 subscribers, the project was "economically not defendable", etc.

- Some colleagues also answered with a kind of polite distrust ("Maybe we can talk about this in about one year?"). But at the same time we experienced a lot of interest, goodwill, and support—and to our surprise especially from the colleagues from other countries whom we had contacted e.g. with offers to join the *FQS* Editorial Board. We became acquainted with oftentimes very non-bureaucratic and warm ways of interaction, which at first were surprising when compared to the mostly formal and hierarchical ways of communication predominant in most German institutes. This made traveling between different virtual worlds sometimes rather confusing, but all at all, these contacts helped in developing the idea of a true "peer-culture", which is very important for *FQS*. [5]

With the members of the Editorial Board, within the Editorial Staff, with the authors and all people interested in *FQS* we started a process of learning, which led to the successive development of our concept, to different cooperation, products, experiences and future perspectives. [6]

## 2. First Steps into the Net: Successes, Disillusionment, Experiences

This process of learning is—for the *FQS* Editorial Staff—still continuing. Sometimes it has disappointing, other times encouraging effects, depending on the person(s), time and tasks involved. One important obstacle challenging our work, time and again, is the tendency (our own and that of others) to want to transfer offline experiences and habits into the Internet. This is mostly followed by unavoidable brain-storming; a phase where we try to find a way to integrate existing experiences with online peculiarities in a creative way. This tendency to do things "as usual" along with the effort to create new solutions proves true for all aspects of producing *FQS*—the technical and organizational ones as well as those concerning qualitative methodology. By referring to some aspects of the actual state of *FQS*, which certainly will continue to be a provisional one, I will expand on this point. [7]

### 2.1 *FQS* as a means for information, interaction, and networking

*FQS* has received a continual and a continually growing interest since we first started with the realization and then later announced our concept in the Internet in June 1999: This is very obvious e.g. when one sees the rising numbers of accesses to our server: Between the first placement of *FQS* pages into the Internet on June 2, 1999 and December 31, 1999, more than 3000 different persons from about 60 countries had visited our sites, mainly from Germany, followed by the United States, Great Britain, Australia, Canada, Austria, the Switzerland, Spain, the Netherlands, Sweden, Greece, Japan, New Zealand,

Finland, and Belgium. The number of contacts interested in cooperating, contributing, etc. also grew. [8]

The huge interest from German colleagues, which has in the meantime also developed, may indicate some changes in the recognition and usage of the Internet: Beyond the numbers of accesses, we have experienced this in a more direct way, when e.g. members of the Editorial Board ask us how to make manuscripts or other textual material available for readers on their own *FQS* websites. Others provide links to their institutional sites, and although the full text access upon payment won't begin until the second issue, some libraries have already subscribed to *FQS*. [Soon after this contribution was published we decided that all full texts should be available free of cost also in the future.] The fact that our idea of providing one's own work to an interdisciplinary as well as an international audience is accepted *and* realized is especially obvious in that nearly all German language contributors appearing in the first issue published both in German and English, in spite of the additional work required. [9]

Additionally, there is a recognizable tendency to go beyond the reduced understanding of the Internet and the WWW as a pure collection of websites and means for exchanging e-mails. Mostly surprising to ourselves is how short online contacts can lead to online cooperation (and sometimes friendships), some of them also producing offline meetings and cooperation: As we desired not only to provide a *concept* of interdisciplinarity and internationality, we took care to implement their very realization in all aspects *FQS* is concerned with. This effort was rewarded with many responses. As a result, every future *FQS* issue will be edited by colleagues from different countries and/or disciplines. With some of these colleagues we have started to organize workshops or conferences; e.g. in December, people from different German cities, from Denmark, and from the United Kingdom visited and brainstormed with us. [10]

### 2.2 Desire and reality: the actual state of *FQS*

Within a concept draft dated May 1999 the following is stated:

> "At first, *FQS* should appear twice a year, in the future four times a year. The content of one issue will, in the scope of *FQS* as an online journal, have more variety than is possible for comparable print journals. Translated into traditional media, we expect about 100 pages at the most for the beginning." [11]

In a similar way we tried to plan other features: Short contributions for the first issue should not exceed about 1800 words, manuscripts should follow *American Psychological Association's* Style Reference Guidelines (APA), etc. [12]

Even the idea to initially only publish *FQS* issues twice a year because of hampered work-load capacities, was soon untenable considering the subsequent rush of issue- and cooperation-ideas and suggestions. But now the 3 issue-solution we have agreed upon also requires us to plan future volumes beyond the year 2003; presumably, additional requests may lead to special issues, etc. In

regards to our suggestion for the length of contributions, we needed some time to recognize that our planning efforts were based on text- instead of hypertext-structures, on old space limitations instead of on available online-resources. If you take a look at the first issue, you will see that there are short contributions of about 1500 words as well as contributions of about 10.000 words, and that traditional ways of writing and efforts towards using hypertext structures exist side by side.[2] [13]

This successive adaptation of the *FQS* concept to the necessities and possibilities of the Internet, our desire to establish internationality and interdisciplinarity in the concrete work and issue design and planning, all lead to an enormous amount of work. So our initial delight in the resonance and number of submitted contributions for the first issue soon changed into fright upon realizing what huge mountains of texts this created, all awaiting review, and almost all needing to be read, commented and formatted in two languages! And instead of APA guidelines (as we had suggested), we met with nearly as many styles as contributors, simply because "the world of qualitative research" does not follow the rules of *one* discipline or country (and even for *one* country or discipline such uniformity cannot be taken for granted). [14]

Making things even more difficult, the Editorial Staff had to learn to cooperate (and will further have to learn) in defining the content and formal design/layout of *FQS*: To develop standards, to explain them and to convey them to others first needs an internal consensus and decision process. This process—like *FQS* itself—has just started. The actual state and some results can be summarized as follows:

- *FQS* issues will appear three times a year. Single contributions beyond the topics of these issues will be published as soon as they have passed peer-review (towards reviewing see PENICHE & BERGOLD in this issue). For the manuscript layout we agreed upon a concept based on our experiences in editing the first issue. It tries to combine the suggestions we made and some variations we accepted. This concept will be available in mid-February and it will supplement the information about publication guidelines that you can now find on our site. Additionally, we are preparing a users manual to give those readers who are not familiar with the Internet some orientation in using the online medium *FQS*. For example, you soon will find some remarks about citing from contributions with paragraph numbers, which substitute the page numbers used with print journals. In the case of *FQS*, you find these numbers at the end of some paragraphs in square brackets. (If, for example, you were interested in citing the previous sentence, the paragraph number would be "15".)

- Starting with the second issue, some parts of *FQS* will only be available to paying subscribers: This includes the full text of a contribution in an issue as

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2  Such hypertext-structures are hindrances in defining what belongs to a text and what not. This proves true e.g. for protocols of online-chats available at another server and for all links, accessing other internal and external URLs (also see Johannes MOES' interesting contribution, at the moment only available as a full text in German in this issue).

well as single contributions, [Reviews of media units](#) (books, CDs, films, journals, etc.), the possibility to comment on all *FQS* contributions directly by use of discussion boards (that can be accessed within every individual contribution), and to participate in online-chats that we will organize sporadically. [Soon after this contribution was published we decided that all full texts should be available free of cost also in the future.]

- Freely available will be the abstracts (in German and English at the very least), the *FQS* News rubric with conference and workshop announcements and reports, textual material and information provided by the members of Editorial Board on their *FQS* websites, and the possibility for restricted searching of the *FQS* archives. [15]

### 2.3 The question of financing *FQS*

Scientific communication through the Internet, once "the terrain which the Net of the Nets originates from", has become—so Richard SIETMANN (2000) in his contribution "Invisible Crossroads in the Cyberspace"—

> "a mere peripheral phenomenon. The niche is endangered as well. Scientific publishers have abandoned Gutenberg and migrated into the Internet, making scientific communication subject to the Cyber Economy. Through this, a structural conflict which has previously been invisible becomes obvious. It concerns the question of who in this system is paying for exactly what. Two concepts go against one another in an irreconcilable way: Pay-per-view or free-for-all?"[3] [16]

The question briefly raised here regarding a cost free access on the one hand, surely is supportive of our idea of an international and interdisciplinary networking, and, on the other hand, financing possibilities for *FQS* accompanied us from the very beginning. Beyond question was the aim to develop *FQS* as a "true online journal". Firstly, because we hoped to thus be more immune against the limitations and constraints of a print journal, secondly, because we thought online media to be less expensive. The costs for storing and distributing are reduced to a minimum and there are also easy and cheap ways of advertising e.g. by using mailing lists. [17]

Nevertheless, in view of the enormous amount of work, a financial safety-net is necessary for the fixed costs and, in the future, also for the personnel costs needed to maintain and to further develop the central anchoring points of the *FQS* concept (interdisciplinarity, multi-linguality, development of technology). To assure a financial minimum, we agreed upon a model of [subscribing](#), which allows *FQS* subscribers to reduce costs up to 1/10 of the initial price by

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3  Nevertheless one has to argue that the "body of scientific publication" never has been a paradise, open for all, and from which researchers are now in danger of being expulsed: Also the access to most print media was in the past and is still—in regards to publishing—restricted to those who accept the "rules of the game" of journals—, towards acquisition—to those who are willing to pay the set (and continually rising) prices. Insofar the remark that it "is not bearable for science to buy back their own products from the economic market" (BULMANN in SIETMANN 2000), does not take into consideration that researchers have been buying their own products for a long time (from publishers), and that publishing usually means handing over the copyright to the publisher.

continually recommending new subscribers. [Soon after this contribution was published we decided that all full texts should be available free of cost also in the future.] [18]

By using this system we hope to make *FQS* available for a broad audience *and* to realize a sufficient number of subscriptions needed for meeting some of the basic costs. Additionally, we are considering other possibilities for financing *FQS*, and we really would appreciate it if our readers joined in this discussion. Some of the topics we are discussing are:

· Advertising: It seems important to us that, on the one hand, the needs of possible customers interested in advertising are met, and that, on the other hand, advertising does not disturb the readers. This means that we will refrain from automatically fading in advertisements. Instead, advertising will be placed at selected places which are interesting for customers as well as readers.

· Sponsoring of single *FQS* issues by interested publishers

· Other forms of sponsoring by interested persons, institutions or enterprises [19]

## 3. Perspectives: *FQS* as a Deliberately Provisional Concept

> "It is an experimental project which means being an open project where *FQS'* content and formal design are developed together with all of its participants—readers, authors, editorial board members and editors alike."

This idea, being an important starting point of the *FQS* concept, is still central and programmatic for our work. This also means to learn and to accept that *FQS* is—and should stay—necessarily provisional. *FQS* as a deliberately provisional concept concerns all questions from style guidelines to financing up to organizing the peer-review process and to searching for a (again: provisional) consensus on criteria, the provisional identity of *FQS* as a product that is open (and willing) to change with its producers and their development. [20]

I mentioned previously some innovations already available in this issue, e.g. the different methods intended for Reviewing media units, possibilities for searches, users manual or commenting on contributions using discussion boards. We have also started talking with South American colleagues about publishing abstracts in Spanish. For the further development, an important part of our effort will be to contact colleagues from disciplines and countries that as of yet are hardly or not at all represented in *FQS*. In the long run, we also aim to help support the discourse between scientific and practically oriented cultures about the usage of qualitative methods. [21]

### 3.1 The idea of "prosuming"

The quality and perspective of *FQS* as a provisional—as a learning process open for mistakes and development which, insofar as possible, tries to be aware of and creatively active in the mere transfer of offline habits into the Internet—depends to a large amount on the participation of all persons associated with *FQS*. Together we would like to successively unfold and use all available online-resources for qualitative research. The term "prosuming"—that means being a producer and a consumer of *FQS* at the same time—tries to capture the mutuality we are aiming at. Supporting and encouraging this is one of our main concerns. [22]

### 3.2 From text to hypertext: technical and methodological challenges

Some technical challenges accompanying the usage of the Internet, the production of texts and hypertexts, were mentioned before in passing. Within the first issue you will find some first approaches towards this, in all, though, it is noticeable that we—as well as the members of the Editorial Board, authors and readers—only have just started learning what it might mean in the future to play with hypertext, multimedia etc. [23]

Issue one also touches on some methodological challenges, which are especially important to us as creators of an online journal and which will be discussed and developed in the future: Besides using online media (websites, mailing lists, webrings, chats etc.) within qualitative online research and besides presenting and discussing approaches for qualitative online teaching, there seems to be an enormous need for a more basic methodological reflection, which has only just begun and which is concerned with the question of what the move into the Internet, what the transition from text to hypertext may mean for all phases of qualitative research: In which (new) way is online data collection conceptualized, used, and reflected? What methodological implications and consequences must be taken into consideration, if hypertext instead of text becomes the empirical base of qualitative studies? What does this mean for the methods used for interpretation? In which way may our habits of writing, of reading and in this way of thinking change when we start writing hypertexts? And in most general terms: What consequences for qualitative designs and sampling strategies, for the communicative construction of data within the research process between researcher and research participants (e.g. Internet and process of countertransference), for criteria for judging the rigor or trustworthiness of qualitative research, and for newly emerging scientific reference (sub-) cultures (e.g. validation in virtual research teams), arise from using the Internet? [24]

## 4. The First Issue

The aforementioned questions are only a fragmentary collection. They point out some perspectives for content and technology which we regard as very important for *FQS*' future development, and which some of the single contributions in this first *FQS* issue deal with. Altogether, authors from 10 countries and 15 disciplines participated in the opening issue, bringing together about 30 contributions, most of them available in German and English (and one additionally in Spanish). These authors belong to different academic status groups, and they also differ in their familiarity with qualitative research methods. It was exactly these differences that we appreciated while composing this issue, because they allow one to get a general idea of the variety, of the common ground and also of important discrepancies that exist within the realm of qualitative research [25]

All contributions are available in HTML- and PDF-format. Readers may supplement, expand and/or comment on each contribution by clicking the discussion board icon at the beginning of the HTML-file. We now wish you all a hopefully interesting and stimulating reading! And, in the *FQS* spirit, we and our authors welcome and appreciate any comments and assistance which aid in the further development of this project. [26]

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## Citation

Revised 7/2008