

The Promise and Practice of Sharing Qualitative Data in Communication Research: Insights From the Qualitative Data Repository

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Submitted: 9 March 2026 **Accepted:** 23 July 2026 **Published:** 1 October 2026

Issue: This article is part of the issue “Open Research Infrastructures and Resources for Communication and Media Studies” edited by Silke Fürst (University of Zurich), Johannes Breuer (Center for Advanced Internet Studies / University of Duisburg-Essen), Erik Koenen (University of Bremen), Dimitri Prandner (Johannes Kepler University of Linz), Christian Schwarzenegger (University of Bremen), and Christian Strippel (Weizenbaum Institute), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.i504>

Abstract

As open science ideas gain traction in communication and media studies, qualitative researchers face unique challenges and opportunities in adopting transparent and reproducible practices. This article contributes to the growing conversation on open research infrastructures by introducing the Qualitative Data Repository (QDR) as a domain-specific solution for qualitative and multi-method data sharing. QDR is particularly well-equipped to manage data derived from human participants or existing media materials, both of which are widely used in this field. We explore how QDR's infrastructure, services, and ethical frameworks can be adapted to the needs of communication scholars. First, we briefly outline the benefits of qualitative data sharing—including increased transparency, methodological rigor, and pedagogical value—while acknowledging possible barriers such as ethical concerns, time constraints, and disciplinary histories. We then review practical developments that have taken place over the last five years by scholars practicing some of the principles for trustworthy qualitative communication research laid out by Humphreys et al. (2021). Using examples from a wide variety of projects where QDR has already facilitated data publication and annotations for transparent inquiry, we illustrate how similar practices can be adopted systematically in communication research. We also highlight QDR's support for researchers throughout the data lifecycle, from planning and consent to curation and controlled access. This article aims to demystify qualitative data sharing and encourage broader adoption among communication and media studies scholars by showcasing QDR's model and its alignment with findable, accessible, interoperable, reusable principles. We argue that embracing more open and transparent research practices not only enhances the quality and visibility of individual projects but also fosters a more inclusive and collaborative scholarly community.

Keywords

data repository; open science; qualitative data; research data sharing; scholarly transparency

1. Introduction

The goals and practices of open science have become a defining component of current conversations about how knowledge is produced, evaluated, and shared across many disciplines (Bamberger & Reeves, 2026; Ferguson et al., 2023; Tenopir et al., 2020). The arguments for open science and a variety of transparent research practices have also been summarized in a wide-ranging UNESCO report on the topic aimed at a global audience (UNESCO, 2021). They include documenting data collection and analysis in real time and post-project sharing of data. These efforts benefit scholarship by enhancing the credibility and reproducibility of research results and supporting interdisciplinary collaboration. Simultaneously, open science practices can foster giving back to participant communities, global learning and exchange, the opening up of scholarship to publics at large, and new rigor in methodological training. Communication and media studies—fields that rely heavily on qualitative inquiry—are increasingly drawn into this conversation (Shaw et al., 2021). Yet the norms, epistemologies, and ethical commitments that shape qualitative communication research complicate the adoption of open science practices that are often seen as designed with quantitative, experimental, or large-data work in mind. As a result, communication scholars may encounter uncertainty about what “openness” means or how it should be practiced for interpretive, context-dependent, and human-centered research.

This article is situated in that evolving academic landscape by introducing the Qualitative Data Repository (QDR; www.qdr.org) to scholars ready to think about the “how” of data sharing as an integral component of open science. QDR is a domain-specific digital repository based on socio-technical infrastructure capable of supporting transparent, ethical, and context-rich data sharing tailored for qualitative and multi-method studies. Hosted by the Center for Qualitative and Multi-Method Inquiry (<https://www.maxwell.syr.edu/research/center-for-qualitative-and-multi-method-inquiry>), a unit of the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University, QDR works with multiple constituencies across the academic landscape. For researchers who generate qualitative or multi-method data, it provides a professional data sharing and archiving platform, as well as tailored data consultations for individual projects. For research staff or librarians who support data management, it is a source of expertise, documentation templates, and training. By archiving and publishing data, it also serves funders or publishers who require data sharing for reproducibility. While QDR has already been serving the broader social sciences for more than a decade, it is still not well utilized in the fields of communication and media research. However, its model aligns closely with the needs of communication researchers, many of whom work with interviews, ethnographic materials, media artifacts, and other forms of qualitative evidence. By drawing on QDR’s experience, ethos, and recent developments in qualitative transparency, we outline how communication scholars can adopt open science practices that enhance rigor without compromising ethical commitments.

Our goal is not to prescribe a single model of openness, but to clarify the possibilities, constraints, and practical pathways available to researchers who wish to make the rich empirical data they collect accessible and reusable to others and thus enhance the transparency and trustworthiness of their work overall.

2. Open Science and Data Sharing Developments in Communication Scholarship

Communication research has historically embraced methodological pluralism (Roskos-Ewoldsen et al., 2007). This diversity of approaches has enriched the field but has also produced uneven expectations around transparency and reproducibility. As open science norms spread across other related disciplines such as psychology and political science, it is important for qualitative communication scholars to examine and reflect on how openness applies to their work. Similarly to other disciplines where the open science conversation started earlier, there may be a default perceived incompatibility between both the methodological and epistemological commitments of qualitative researchers and the calls for more open scholarship. Many worry that open science frameworks, especially those emphasizing preregistration, replication, or data disclosure, may be ill-suited to interpretive inquiry (Dutta et al., 2021; Fox et al., 2021). Others welcome these developments as opportunities to strengthen methodological clarity, public trustworthiness, and public access to research (Dienlin et al., 2021; Humphreys et al., 2021) and offer innovative ways to engage in a variety of more open and transparent communication scholarship (Strippel et al., 2023). These debates echo broader tensions in the social sciences, where qualitative researchers have long argued that transparency must be adapted rather than imported wholesale (Jacobs et al., 2021).

While some communication scholars have engaged organically in both the debate about and the practice of enhancing the transparency and openness of their field, the majority of researchers first encounter these new norms in the form of either funder or journal data management and sharing expectations. In fact, funders and particularly journals with a data sharing policy are especially effective “enforcers” of openness due to the structural incentives—such as funding and publication decisions—to which they provide access. To take one prominent example relevant in this field in the US, the National Science Foundation has had a requirement for grant applications to include a two-page data management plan since 2011. More recently, the National Science Foundation has both renamed that document to a data management and sharing plan (DMSP) and sharpened its guidance to highlight that the ultimate goals of appropriate data management during the course of a research project include making new data available to others after the end of the work. The degree to which this requirement was implemented, however, seems to have been largely driven by the choice of individual program officers and left to the individual researchers. In the European context, the funder data sharing requirements have become integrated on the national and even supranational level and seem to be implemented more consistently, but also scaffolded with both dedicated guidance and infrastructure financial backing. While this difference is an important part of the reality in which different scholars work, the European model where higher expectations embedded in legislation are matched with higher multi-level institutional support has set the standard for open scholarship for years to come (Wyber, 2026).

The most prominent journals in the broader communication and media field are published by three publishers (Taylor & Francis, Sage Journals, and Oxford Academic), which all have data availability requirements for published articles, although qualitative researchers often default to exceptions based on either ethical concerns or general infeasibility (Mozersky et al., 2021). The data sharing policies from both these “top down” sources can sometimes be perceived as unwelcome and burdensome by researchers even if they agree that the practice might benefit scholarship accumulation on a broad scale. However, data sharing can instead have a direct benefit as well, in improved research process and rigor of one’s final conclusions, as well as a more streamlined research process. This can happen when data management is planned for from the very beginning of a new project as part of one’s “real work,” just as the DMSP

expectation suggests. With a clear plan of how to organize, name, store securely, and document the analysis of the rich data they create, qualitative communication and media researchers can first and foremost benefit themselves and their own teams. As an additional benefit, if they do incorporate that approach from the beginning of their work, they will also have data in a form that allows for potential further sharing under any appropriate conditions needed.

It is important to recognize that the tradition of archiving and sharing communication scholarship is not actually unprecedented, even if it never became widespread. The most prominent long-standing social science repository in the US, the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research, and a similar one in the UK, UK Data Service, have been in operation for over six decades. They both include a number of data deposits with direct relevance to the topics of interest to communication and media scholars (Cohen, 2007; Forgacs & Gundle, 2010; Lummis & Thompson, 2009; Mass-Observation, 2019; Miller et al., 1984; Parker, 2012; Styers, 2022; Withey & Davis, 1992). UK Data Service is also a member of the Consortium of European Social Science Data Archives, which started in 1976 and hosts thousands of qualitative studies from national and university repositories across Europe. A variety of oral history and journalistic projects have made their accumulated treasure troves available online and not just in the single analog copy in a special collection where they might have originated. Newer repositories have emerged in the last two decades to address the evolving needs and possibly greater challenges of qualitative researchers in particular, among which nationally-based qualitative archives (the Irish and Finnish ones, for example), Databrary for videos from developmental psychology studies, TalkBank—a large corpus of audio and video recordings of communicative interactions alongside their transcripts and other linguistic data—and the QDR.

3. QDR as a Service for the Global Community of Communication Researchers

3.1. QDR's Specialized Focus

QDR is a specialized repository that curates, stores, preserves, publishes, and enables access to digital data generated through qualitative and multi-method research. It was established to fill a gap, especially in the non-European context, where there were few digital operations equipped to accept the wide variety of qualitative data researchers collect and create (<https://qdr.syr.edu/deposit/data>). While being innovative in its scope, it is an organization deeply integrated in the academic data publishing ecosystem, operating on an installation of and contributing custom code for qualitative functionality to the open-source Dataverse software (The Dataverse Project, 2018). It subscribes to DataCite's minting service for the digital object identifiers (DOIs; <https://qdr.syr.edu/guidance/doi>), which allow seamless citation and crosslinking to magnify the visibility of published data and ensure appropriate credit giving to the depositors. Its holdings are indexed widely, including in Google's Dataset Search, the DataCite Commons, and the Web of Science Data Citation Index. Scholars can thus easily track the impact of their data from citations in publications. The repository has also been continuously certified by the international peer-review-based organization CoreTrustSeal and satisfies all US federal technological and operational requirements for trustworthy digital infrastructures (Karcher, 2022).

Since its founding over a decade ago, QDR has been supported by grants from the National Science Foundation, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, the Institute for Museum and Library Studies, and the Mellon Foundation. More recently, QDR also developed an

institutional membership model (<https://qdr.syr.edu/membership>) for relevant university units, which are primarily libraries and social science research centers, as well as deposit and curation fees for deposits satisfying a funder-based data sharing mandate. This arrangement allows the repository to offer access to the data for free, in line with open science expectations. While charging for the costs of extensive curation services and ongoing storage is necessary for the long-term sustainability of the repository, QDR continues to use its resources to issue discounts or waivers in cases where dedicated data management funding is not available (<https://qdr.syr.edu/about/faq#curation-fee-and-waivers-institutional-membership>).

QDR offers qualitative and multi-method scholars a fully curated experience, where staff members who are themselves social scientists act as a potential secondary user, asking the questions someone outside of the original research team might have and helping depositors provide the answers. While QDR has a set of collection development criteria (<https://qdr.syr.edu/policies/collectionsdevelopment>), QDR's staff is also willing to explore novel solutions for specific items that might not neatly fit the "typical" qualitative project. Through this deeply human-led and flexible approach, QDR assists researchers in presenting their data in the most user-friendly way and in providing sufficient and well-organized metadata and documentation that complement the analytic richness qualitative data afford. The project- and data-specific customizable tiered access to sensitive data is also developed in support of the multi-faceted aspects of qualitative data. Technologically, QDR's developers have created full-text searching abilities directly within published text and PDF files, as well as lightweight media previewers for images, video, and qualitative data analysis software files which allow authenticated users to explore and otherwise interact with data directly on their browsers without needing to always download large source files. In addition to all these repository operations, QDR's staff is also involved in methodological innovations such as the Annotation for Transparent Inquiry (<https://qdr.syr.edu/ati>), deployed by qualitative scholars who want to provide more extensive annotations to their published works for greater transparency. These specialized features for qualitative research, as well as its ability to work with researchers from around the world, make QDR stand out among more general data repositories or those that have a narrower nationally-based remit.

Originally founded by a team of political scientists, the repository's mission always envisioned serving the social and humanistic sciences broadly conceived. This ambitious goal is based on the belief that the practices facilitating appropriate data-sharing by researchers and the responsible data stewardship by the repository apply in similar ways across a wide spectrum of substantive domains. The fact that, in addition to researchers from all traditions of social sciences, depositors come from the fields of medicine, law, computer and information science, business and management, and beyond, is a testament that this assumption is shared by researchers themselves. Communication and media scholars can easily see models for the type of work they are doing in the over 235 projects published in QDR as of mid-2026, as well as find in them potentially useful data for secondary analyses.

3.2. Published Data as a Resource for Pedagogy, Reanalysis, and Data Management

The data published on QDR have three primary use cases from which secondary users in communication and media can benefit. First, they can be used as authentic materials for pedagogical purposes. Learning quantitative methodology, both on the undergraduate and graduate level, has long been done by practicing on cleaned-up but otherwise real data. Qualitative data have typically not been available to be deployed for the same purposes, but now QDR-published data can be used to practice analytic techniques, whether

“manually” or with the help of qualitative data analysis software. Furthermore, the rich documentation which accompanies deposits (e.g., informed consent forms, interview questionnaires, focus group guides, codebooks) and which is fully open access can give students a much clearer idea of how qualitative social science is done, even if the data themselves require restrictions (more on this in Section 3.4). QDR maintains a list of projects particularly appropriate for teaching purposes at <https://qdr.syr.edu/guidance/teaching/data-for-teaching>. Pedagogical uses that enable students to learn from real-world data are among the most common, productive, and immediate ways through which both students and instructors can engage with the idea and practice of data archiving (Bishop, 2014).

Second, as the repository’s catalog has grown, the possibilities for secondary analysis of more comprehensive deposits have expanded as well. Direct reproducibility work is possible, but more importantly, scholars can ask new research questions of qualitative projects because of the depth of inquiry these data archives offer. Indeed, QDR has two recent examples of new insights and knowledge production by secondary users, not part of the initial research teams depositing the data. In one case, a sociologist in training wrote a Master’s thesis on the basis of a set of published transcripts from interviews with women who had taken part in prostitution diversion programs. The researcher identified new dimensions affecting the effectiveness of such programs and the likelihood of exiting prostitution, topics which the original data collector had not pursued (Mohd Hamdan, 2022a, 2022b). In another example of fresh secondary analysis, a research team working on communication functions in the context of palliative care used an existing set of interviews with bereaved caregivers of pediatric cancer patients. They discovered that negative communication experiences with medical teams limited the quality of end-of-life care for their loved ones, suggesting improvements with real-world healthcare implications. This team also invited the original researcher who had collected the data as a co-author, although this was not a condition for reusing the published data (Sisk et al., 2022). Communication scholars might similarly find a trove to explore for secondary analyses on a variety of substantive topics: presidential campaign ads from Latin American countries (Boas, 2015); public documents on energy transition projects in the US and Canada (Burke, 2018); full episodes of a popular Syrian sitcom with complete captions in English and permissions to use for non-commercial purposes (Wedeen, 2019). Many more such opportunities exist for mining the expanding range of projects being deposited from new disciplines. As more shared data accumulate, new intriguing connections can emerge as well, across multiple projects that might share a theme.

Third, currently published deposits can serve as direct models for primary research data sharing by communication and media scholars. Currently, QDR has one published deposit co-authored by several communication scholars: focus group data from youth participants responding to e-cigarette advertising and warning messages (Avery et al., 2023). However, numerous other projects also contain data on topics of direct relevance to media and communication researchers. A few quick additional examples are: a contemporaneously collected set of online cartoons/memes of the presidential candidates in the 2016 US election (Cassese, 2017); a two-part collection combining a wide-ranging state-by-state collection of communications by governors and departments of health during the early part of the ovid-19 pandemic, as well as select media responses over the same timeframe (Moore, Vitu, Fraizer-Bisner, Williams, Chun, et al., 2025; Moore, Vitu, Fraizer-Bisner, Williams, van der Merwe, et al., 2025); a big-team project comparing the concept of romantic relationship quality across five countries based on interviews with couples and relationship therapists (Silan & Ciruelas, 2026). Communication researchers can see connections to their own work in these and other already shared data and envision how they might become a depositor down the line.

Open science infrastructures have historically prioritized quantitative datasets and computational workflows. Qualitative researchers, by contrast, require tools and policies that can handle sensitive human-participant data, preserve contextual richness, support controlled access rather than full public release, enable annotation and explanation of interpretive decisions and, above all, accommodate diverse data types (e.g., interviews, ethnographic fieldnotes, broadcast, digital and archival media artifacts, social media content, and organizational documents). QDR is one of the few venues designed explicitly with these needs in mind. While based in the US, QDR serves an international community of scholars, both as depositors and as secondary users. In fact, in many instances, scholars from Global South countries have found a way to satisfy journal data-sharing requirements in particular by working with QDR in the absence of local infrastructure. For some examples, see Jasmine (2025), Joarder (2017), Matima et al. (2018), and Ruedin and Murahwa (2025). While not able to solve broader “hierarchies of knowledge,” which continue to exist in an unequal world, QDR is committed to actively seeking collaborative solutions with anyone interested in engaging in greater research transparency of their work. Qualitative communication and media studies scholars from anywhere in the world and from any epistemic tradition can find tailored guidance on copyright, privacy, and access issues that are relevant to the type of work they do and a staff who is deeply familiar with and attentive to the methodological idiosyncrasies of their work.

3.3. Ever-Evolving Practice to Meet Developments in Qualitative Research Needs

It is critical to acknowledge that data sharing must be ethically and legally done (Lewis, 2020). From its very beginning, the QDR was specifically designed to offer socio-technical infrastructure that directly addresses the key concerns that qualitative researchers have expressed about data sharing. From a variety of science-of-science work (DuBois et al., 2023; Fox et al., 2021), we know that the key barriers to more widespread data sharing are largely the same across disciplines. Researchers have ethical concerns about protecting participants, especially in sensitive contexts; they may lack disciplinary models and incentives for the new practice expected of them, and worry that preparing data for sharing requires additional labor and expertise; they might furthermore fear that the qualitative materials they share would be misused or misinterpreted. As summarized in Table 1, QDR’s suite of services—proactive data management consultations starting prior to embarking on a project, templates and customization of appropriate consent language for eventual sharing, highly interactive curation once the data are collected to prepare for publication, and the availability of nuanced and multi-tiered controlled access mechanisms where necessary—is designed to mitigate these challenges holistically (Kirilova & Karcher, 2017).

While we recognize that local or regional data repositories may in many cases be best (de Oliveira et al., 2021), the institutions and resources required for open data expertise, infrastructure, and stewardship may be prohibitively costly (Mannheimer et al., 2019). Thus, QDR serves anyone from any research institution who wants support in planning for appropriate data sharing. QDR was designed to evolve alongside the expanding practice of data sharing and the evolution of technologies that enable that. QDR’s staff members continuously keep abreast of developments in the policy, technology, and research spaces. Guided by a spirit of flexibility and innovation, they can address new use cases presented by the repository’s user community, even when these cases might suggest modifications to procedural, technological, or even policy choices. Due to the deeply interactive curation commitment, QDR is able to consider unique new challenges and often adapt more nimbly to develop specific steps to solve them than larger organizations. As one example, when the General Data Protection Regulation was enacted by the EU in 2018, the repository staff developed new expertise on how

Table 1. QDR services holistically address barriers to qualitative data sharing.

Barrier to Data Sharing	Description of Researcher Concern	Corresponding QDR Solution
Ethical concerns about participant protection	Risk of disclosure or violation of informed consent in sensitive qualitative contexts	Early-stage data management consultations and customized consent language templates
Lack of disciplinary models and incentives	Uncertainty about norms, rewards, and expectations for qualitative data sharing	Repository-based publishing model that treats curated datasets as scholarly outputs
Additional labor and expertise required	Time- and skill-intensive work of de-identification, documentation, and preparation	Highly interactive curation support provided by QDR specialists
Fear of misuse or misinterpretation	Concern that secondary users may misunderstand context or methods	Multi-tiered and controlled access mechanisms with contextual documentation

Source: Kirilova and Karcher (2017).

the regulation applies to research activities in particular. When presented with data collected from or by EU residents now, the staff uses an assessment checklist based on the law, which helps determine whether and under what conditions given data can be accepted for publication in the repository. Just as with non-EU-based data, the original informed consent details largely drive that choice. In the most straightforward case, QDR looks for explicitly documented consent that lists the cross-border transfer step, the publication, and the long-term archiving plan of the researchers (valid lawful basis), as well as research-appropriate safeguards (e.g., not collecting excessive personally identifiable details or de-identification for any potentially identifiable elements). Lastly, staff reviews the actual level of de-identification performed and, in certain cases, suggests access controls. For an example of data accepted under such review, see the French materials from Silan and Ciruelas (2026). This deposit also includes a data notice and informed consent addressing the General Data Protection Regulation expectations, as well as a data narrative that describes the justifiable non-inclusion of a handful of files.

Most recently, QDR has seen new requests for using the text-rich materials shared on the platform for a variety of large-language model projects. These novel applications are assessed on an individual basis to make sure that *only* uses compliant with the original terms of deposit are authorized. For example, most datasets are only authorized for scholarly purposes and never for commercial ends. A large-language model project might be approved for specialized model development, but not generic or large-scale artificial intelligence training on undifferentiated datasets. The new policy on AI-use for published data (<https://qdr.syr.edu/policies/ai-secondary-analysis>) is one example of how QDR continues to change and update its practices in light of advances in scientific work. Due to QDR's deep commitment to serve and collaborate with its communities of researchers, the more diverse data depositors and secondary users the QDR's staff encounters, the better its policies and procedures can reflect their varied perspectives and needs. In all of these dynamic developments, however, QDR's core commitment to appropriate and ethical data publication remains unaltered.

QDR was established to curate, preserve, and ethically publish qualitative data. Its operations are built around several core principles. First, data sharing should not be an all-or-nothing proposition; any movement toward more transparency of one's research process is beneficial and there could be graduated levels of sharing that

include possible restrictions on data publication and use, as long as they are well thought-out and justified. Qualitative data, even sensitive and personal materials, can be shared ethically, starting with clear informed consent. They need to be shared with rich documentation and metadata, not just to enhance findability, but also to preserve relevant context. Flexible access controls can be applied down to the individual file level, depending on the contents, sensitivity, and permissions obtained. In other words, research data should be “as open as possible and as closed as necessary” (European Commission, 2016, p. 13) and the right balance differs by research project and context.

3.4. QDR's Approach to Preventing and Addressing Common Barriers to Qualitative Data Sharing

To achieve the optimal level of appropriate data sharing, QDR staff provides research lifecycle guidance, from planning and consent to annotation tools and post-publication access requests and citation linking. These features make QDR well-suited to work with communication researchers, where data often involve personal narratives, proprietary media, or culturally situated materials. While making sure the data it publishes are findable, accessible, interoperable, and reusable (FAIR), QDR operationalizes these FAIR principles, in the parlance of information science (European Commission, 2016), in ways that respect qualitative epistemologies. Tools based on standardization and controlled vocabularies, such as completing as many structured metadata schema elements as possible, applying persistent identifiers to authors, entities, and data projects, referencing keywords shared across formal thesauri, and reformatting files for long-term preservation, for example, are thoughtfully balanced with rich narrative documentation, tiered access options and customized terms of reuse or annotation tools that enable meaningful secondary analysis or pedagogy. Rather than forcing qualitative data into quantitative molds, QDR adapts the FAIR principles to the realities of qualitative research without privileging any specific epistemological or methodological choices. Additionally, working with interested secondary users to highlight both the specifics of data most appropriate for a given secondary use task and the responsible conditions of access, especially in cases of restricted data (including refusing authorization if conditions are not met), QDR aims to continue enhancing responsible open science possibilities in all directions.

The lifecycle approach to data management and potential sharing is highly adoptable by qualitative and multi-method communication researchers, whose ethical and contextual considerations often evolve over time, as they define what data they might need to answer a specific question and proceed to collect them in the messy real world from authentic human interactions. QDR's know-how, while developed largely on the basis of work in cognate fields, is nevertheless applicable at every stage of common research processes, as described and represented schematically in Figure 1.

When planning their work, researchers can get feedback on DMSPs, whether required by a funder or composed purely for a research team's internal use. Crucially, they can workshop the right consent script for eventual sharing, as well as broader guidance on how to address relevant questions about secure storage and confidentiality in a protocol reviewed by institutional or ethics review boards. While collecting data, whether their field is online or off, communication scholars can follow the solutions recorded in their DMSPs for documentation and organization practices, resulting in time-saving gains. When ready to deposit data, researchers receive direct assistance from QDR staff with reformatting, de-identification protocol best practices, and formal metadata creation. When the data are published, they can count on the technological and policy-based application of appropriate access controls and assignment of DOIs as part of

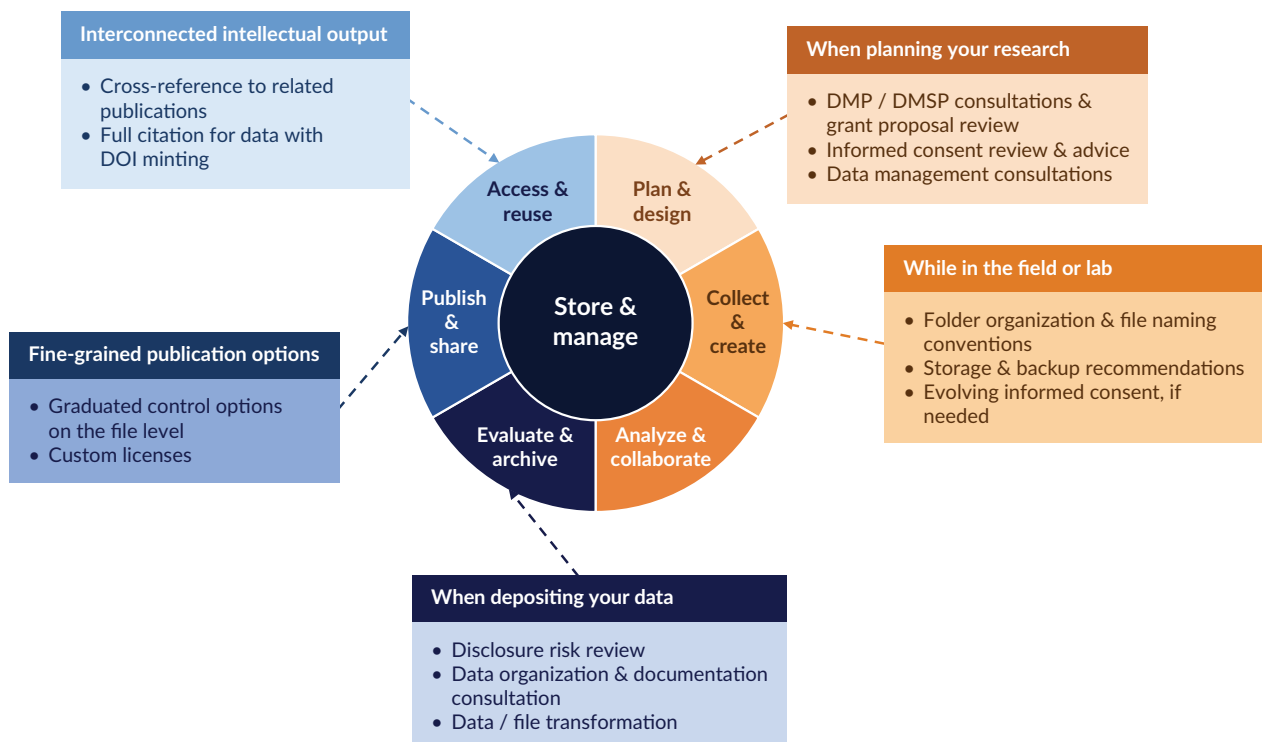


Figure 1. Possible QDR intervention points during a research data lifecycle.

recommended data citations. Over the long run, as the data remain durably preserved, they can enjoy being referenced and integrated in research or pedagogical projects by colleagues whom they might have never encountered otherwise. The consequent benefits of enhanced methodological rigor and transparency, scholarly visibility, and wide collaborative potential for researchers align with the broader call for trustworthy qualitative communication research, such as those articulated by Humphreys et al. (2021) and Bowman and Spence (2020).

While some communication scholars might assume that qualitative data sharing is inherently risky or incompatible with their methods, QDR's existence and the many published datasets from related fields referenced in this article demonstrate that most empirical data, including qualitative and even sensitive data types, can be shared ethically. Furthermore, researchers can see that even without full disclosure, more transparency can be achieved than the historical norm. Several practices that are part and parcel of responsible data publication help address common concerns researchers might have about qualitative data sharing practice. First, researchers do exercise control over how the data they publish are accessed and can specify legitimate scholarly purposes by setting appropriate reuse conditions if necessary. Second, the documentation they include alongside the data offers the necessary context and strongly influences how the data are interpreted by others, possibly even more than a publication based on the data can do on its own.

Drawing on existing data projects from political science, sociology, and information studies, we find a wide variety of practices that communication scholars can readily adopt:

- Interview or focus group-based studies that publish de-identified transcripts with the level of access promised in the initial informed consent;

- Media analysis projects that deposit coded datasets and extensive analytic memos;
- Ethnographic research that shares curated excerpts with extensive contextual annotation;
- Digital culture studies that publish metadata and analytic frameworks when raw data cannot be released due to copyright.

These cases demonstrate that qualitative transparency is not a one-size-fits-all mandate, but a flexible set of practices tailored to research goals and ethical constraints. In fact, the interactive curation process QDR engages in with each potential depositor addresses some of the key items in the “agenda for ethical, inclusive research” proposed by Fox et al. (2021). For example, to ensure that data is handled responsibly, QDR reviews the informed consent practice, not just the script, to ensure that the needs of participants are fully honored. In fact, QDR has refused the publication of data where the informed consent clearly precluded that option. In other cases, where the informed consent was simply silent on the possibility of data publication, QDR staff either worked with researchers to re-consent their participants with an explicit question about data sharing (e.g., Bleich, 2017) or to create an abridged, intentionally limited, version of the data (e.g., Jasmine, 2025). These are all examples of the “as open as possible, as closed as necessary” paradigm the repository follows in its human-curated practice.

Additionally, as part of QDR’s broader focus on ethical care for data, all materials are reviewed before acceptance and de-identification is verified. As a matter of intentional policy, no data are published under open access, instead applying basic terms that reinforce good data reuse practices. To ensure a critical focus on clear, informed consent for data sharing, QDR shares examples of qualitative data-appropriate informed consent language, scripts, and processes. Moreover, QDR provides clear data authorship, which enables giving credit to all those responsible for the actual data collection. QDR aims to encourage ongoing ethical training, reflection, and continuous learning on evolving research opportunities and issues.

3.5. Demystifying Qualitative Data Sharing in Communication and Media Studies

We recommend to any communication researcher contemplating the prospect of data sharing for their next project to start earlier than they might expect. The key to depositing data is early data management planning embedded in new research pursuits from the very beginning. Ideally, researchers should contact QDR during the project design stage, allowing repository staff to help craft forward-looking informed consent language in which the planned data sharing details are explicitly described. This scenario also allows researchers to integrate the plan for the post-project life of their data into broader considerations for within-project data management planning, as well as incorporate into their budget a reasonably accurate data management and publication quote. Early engagement enables guidance on file organization, substantive metadata creation, and the real-time capture of contextual documentation that will later support responsible reuse. Spending some time upfront (typically one to two hour-long remote consultations, depending on the complexity of the data collection effort) to make a plan of this sort is the best way to minimize any additional time or tasks that otherwise will need to be done just for data sharing purposes. The data management outlined in an advance plan becomes part and parcel of the daily work and the data then are already in good shape for archiving and sharing at the end of the project. Sometimes, however, scholars do approach QDR after data collection is complete and the repository works with them to make data sharing possible and compliant with any legal and ethical commitments inherent to the data in question. In these cases, QDR works with depositors to review existing consent materials or copyright constraints,

determine what can be appropriately shared, assess de-identification, and prepare the project for ingest through QDR's secure online platform. The structured deposit workflow then is the same for both cases: from initial consultation, to secure upload and transfer, to human-led curation, final review by depositor and final publication (<https://qdr.syr.edu/deposit/process>). Across both scenarios, the repository's process is collaborative and iterative, designed to ensure that qualitative materials are shared ethically, with appropriate protections, and contextual documentation, as well as in ways that maximize their long-term value for the research community.

We hope that communication researchers who are ready to realize the gains—both for their own work, as well as for the accumulation of rigorous knowledge in the field as a whole—of open qualitative practices will engage with QDR as a collaborative and interactive data infrastructure and know-how resource. Two easy mechanisms are sending an email to qdr@syr.edu or creating a free QDR account and initiating a placeholder entry in the system listing some basic details about the project and the data envisioned for sharing (types, number of items, overall volume, timeline for the data collection process) and a request for QDR staff to connect back. From the experience of other researchers who have engaged in this process more than once, we can confidently say that the learning curve of one's data-sharing effort flattens dramatically and each subsequent deposit takes less time and proceeds even more smoothly. Receiving more inquiries from the communication and media fields of study will further diversify voices and materials available for secondary use, showcasing a currently underrepresented discipline, and will strengthen public understanding and trust in the work that comes out of it.

4. Conclusion

Qualitative communication research stands at a pivotal moment. As open science continues to reshape scholarly expectations, researchers must articulate models of transparency that honor the interpretive, contextual, and ethical foundations of their work. QDR offers a compelling pathway: one that supports rigorous, ethical, and context-rich data sharing, while respecting the complexities of human-centered research, whether more positivist or interpretive. QDR relies on its community of users to continue making it a valuable entity worth supporting and developing in their service.

We also want to note that not all qualitative datasets can be shared. Some are so unique to particular contexts or events that there is no way to share data without impinging on the privacy of participants (Fox et al., 2021) who might not give consent for wider dissemination. Truly informed consent can also become challenging as often participants agree to share their experiences with a particular researcher or research team because they trust them and want to contribute to a specific study. While researchers can set data-level specific conditions for sharing, it can be impossible to anticipate and safeguard for all potential uses, thus challenging the requirement for fully informed consent. The current interest in LLM-based social science research using the text-rich data stored in qualitative repositories, for example, was not envisioned even five years ago. This is where the expertise and ethical commitment of QDR as a scientific infrastructure become essential to ensure trusted and ongoing stewardship of data preservation and appropriate access.

We hope that media and communication scholars make further use of this existing infrastructure and expertise and plan for the sharing of their—largely qualitative—data from the earliest funding proposal or conceptual stages. As part of training the next generation of researchers, they can also introduce the concept of data

sharing by showing models of appropriately shared data. By adopting QDR's available resources or other data repositories, scholars in the field can enhance the credibility, visibility, and pedagogical value of their work. More importantly, they can contribute to a more inclusive and collaborative research culture—one in which qualitative evidence is preserved, contextualized, and made accessible in ways that strengthen science and its public impact more broadly (UNESCO, 2021).

Open science initiatives cannot solve all hierarchies and inequalities in knowledge production (Dutta et al., 2021), but ideally they can help to mitigate these problems. When scientists share their research processes, protocols, and results with other academic researchers around the world, and in some cases broader publics, they foster greater international collaboration and lower barriers to knowledge access for the common good (UNESCO, 2021).

Funding

Dessislava Kirilova's work is supported by the National Science Foundation Grant Number 2116935. Publication of this article in open access was made possible through the institutional membership agreement between Cornell University and Cogitatio Press.

Conflict of Interests

Dessislava Kirilova is the associate director of the Qualitative Data Repository. Lee Humphreys currently serves on the voluntary Qualitative Data Repository Research Advisory Board.

LLMs Disclosure

Claude was used to create Figure 1 as a simplified visual appropriate for print, based on text and image contained in two existing presentation slides originally created by one of the co-authors.

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