

what is radically transparent research?

Radically Transparent Research is an emergent qualitative research methodology inspired by the radical realtime transparency practices of open communities such as Free and Open Source software, hardware, and content projects. It results in public and collaboratively constructed artifacts with the potential to broaden awareness of and participation in research while creating a compendium of stories that can be shared with other practitioners considering similar transformations to their own practices.

We began using it in our engineering education research as part of the [Xroads research group](#) at [Purdue University](#), but anyone can join in our projects (that's the point!) and go "radically transparent" with their own research. Here's what this means.

1. **Radical realtime transparency.** Release all work in an editable format under a [creative commons license](#) as soon as it's made. [This article](#) elaborates on each of those points in a bit more detail.
2. **Make work findable.** Have a central place where people can easily read the current status of the project in 1 minute or less, and where they can quickly navigate to all the materials you've created for it. The specific structure/format isn't as important as having a clear structure at all; pick a schema, stick with it.
3. **Make participation as low-barrier as possible.** Whenever possible, don't require logins or account creation. If you must use authentication of some sort, think about what accounts the people you want as collaborators are already likely to have (facebook? twitter/identi.ca? wikipedia? github?) and what platforms they're already likely to be familiar with (do they know version control? word processing? English?) and in general try to make it possible for someone to go from "stumbled across your project" to "made a contribution" in as few seconds and clicks as possible.
4. **Update in a regular rhythm.** Weekly is usually good, but for some projects it may make sense to cycle more quickly or slowly. For those who need a rule of thumb, I'll semi-arbitrarily say that you should have at least 5 updates throughout the life of your project, so a 2-month project might have weekly updates, a 2-week project would have daily updates, a 1-day project might have hourly updates, but a 1-year project might have bimonthly updates (though weekly updates will drive more participation). Pick a schedule, announce it, and stick to it; this is something that should be on the front of your "participation" homepage (from #2, "make work findable") so that new people coming in know when the "next thing" is coming up that they can jump in on.
5. **Reach out in backchannel to bring people to the public space.** Email, go to conferences, tweet/dent, blog, sit down at coffee shops, go to marketplaces... go where the people are, and engage with them in their spaces as long as it takes for you to help them feel comfortable coming to yours. Basically, private conversations are necessary, but they're necessary as a means towards the end of bringing people into a public and collaborative space. It's like opening a new physical location for something like a bar or a library; you want everyone to end up in your space interacting with each other, so you go out and have individual conversations with them aimed towards getting them there.

copyright mechanisms

A central part of the practice of radically transparent reserach is clarity around ownership and licensing of all the artifacts involved. Instead of the usual practice of

short version

Radically Transparent Research is what happens when you apply the principles and practices of free and open source (FOSS) and content communities to research.

projects that use radically transparent research

Changemakers

Sage on the Stage to Guide on the Side

radically transparent research resources

How to assign copyright to your interviewees

Copyright addendum generator

How to use a copyright addendum

analyzing confidential, de-identified datasets behind closed doors, we assign copyright of the interview transcripts to our interviewees, who then release "public" versions of their data under a Creative Commons license. We analyze only the public dataset and make our intermediate analyses and results available online under similarly open licenses, which allows our subjects and the communities they work with and within to see - and contribute to - the "source code" of our research, allowing populations to engage in research who may not otherwise even be able to participate in this side of academia.

why do radically transparent research?

Because we want more people to be able to see and engage in the process of research. Research is a black box to those outside it... and to some extent, those inside. For those involved in a project, the process of creation involves a rich and delightfully messy discourse, a conversation between teammates and technology, components, codes, analysis, and constraints. This conversation is situated in a particular context; one cannot learn "how to talk about research" through textbook memorization or reading university brochures any more than one can learn "Italian conversation" through vocabulary memorization or reading tourist guides.

However, for those not already involved in the creative process, that's the equivalent of what they're stuck with. The invisibility of "what researchers do" doesn't exactly encourage people to participate in research projects themselves, whether that's as subjects or as researchers. Understanding how research is produced is vital for the formation of a scientifically literate public. Showing people our processes whenever we can helps them trust our results. It can also help us become more self-aware as researchers; *why do* we do these things in certain ways? How do we assume the world works? What can we learn from people who may come from a completely different context?

Let's find out.

our inspiration

Free and open source software (FOSS), open hardware, and open content communities represent a counterexample to the usual "behind closed doors at all time!" research practices. By making not just their final outputs but their intermediate revisions, design discussions, technical reviews, and essentially nearly all their conversational and technical artifacts available, freely-licensed, and fully-attributable online, they enable access to legitimate peripheral participation to a higher degree than most research projects.

What if we could identify the practices of transparent communication in open communities, understand the processes by which these discourse-exposing practices scaffold the learning of novices, and then transfer these practices and processes to our own research projects? What will happen when researchers start allowing ourselves and others to eavesdrop on our "ordinary" conversations, and what are the barriers and benefits to doing so?

Let's find out.

benefits to research teams

We've found the practice of radically transparent research has enriched our dynamics as a research team as well, giving us a clearer way to talk about living the tension of having shared goals while honoring individual goals. A flexible and open participation structure is both possible and beneficial. As our team evolved with some members

joining and others leaving due to other priorities, the extensive documentation required for radically transparent research appears to support new members with catching up quickly and old members staying up to date remotely.

regarding human subjects research

There is little precedent for radically transparent research in terms of policies for conducting research with human subjects; Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) commonly have experience with creating public and identifiable datasets for non-research purposes as well as using existing public datasets for research, but doing both at the same time is unusual. We anticipate that our experiences can inform policies for research that sits at the boundary of research and practice.

we could change the world

The idea of "exposing the discourse" of research has implications for issues of access to research, because non-privileged groups (especially groups already underrepresented in the sciences) don't often get exposure to the "language" of the scholarly realm. It's a lot harder to speak a language you can't hear. It also touches on the notion of cross-disciplinary work; even within a university, researchers from one discipline have little opportunity to "overhear" conversations from another discipline (and thus intuit how or why they should collaborate with those departments). Learners with speech/hearing/language disabilities and non-native speakers may also be aided by the capture of transient information in textual or other concrete artifact formats. Finally, there is potential for dialogue on open access and the culture of academia as it relates to transparency, publishing, and attribution.

What are you waiting for? Let's get started!