



Repod – Access to scientific expertise

Guidelines for the support of scientific
policy advice

Alexander von Humboldt Institute for Internet and Society,
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	3
1 INTRO	4
A call for greater efficiency and resilience in scientific policy advice	5
What distinguishes Repod from a standard online search?	5
For whom is the repository made?	6
2 REPOD AS A RESOURCE FOR MEDIATION	7
Functions of knowledge brokers in the consultation process between science and politics	8
Repod as digital infrastructure at the interface between science and politics	9
More uniformity in the presentation of expertise	9
3 INSTRUCTIONS FOR UPLOADING DOCUMENTS	11
Define the form of a document	11
Standardize the type of claim	12
Types of evidence	13
Capturing a variety of perspectives	14
Clearly describe the quality assurance processes	15
Display uncertainties	15
Outline methodical approach	16
Use openness	16
Personal responsibility of researchers and users	16
Quality assurance checklist for Repod	18
4 LITERATURE	19
5 IMPRINT	21
6 CONTEXT	22

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Repod is a digital infrastructure to support knowledge transfer - a central repository for scientific expertise, prepared for political decision-makers. It provides important/critical technical resources, as well as offering a framework for quality assurance of expertise at the interface between science and political and social actors.

This guide contains specific instructions for uploading and using the available documents and pursues three objectives:

- Firstly, we want to demonstrate **the added value of a digital infrastructure** at the interface between science, political and social stakeholders.
- Secondly, to **provide guidance for the quality assurance of advisory documents**, listing specific criteria that researchers can use to ensure maximum reliability and transparency in the provision of advice.
- Thirdly, to **create a standardized terminology** with definitions for the classification and categorization of advisory documents.

The guidelines comprise eight specific steps that researchers can follow when uploading their expertise and preparing consultation documents. We recommend placing particular emphasis on presenting uncertainties as transparently as possible and describing types of evidence and the methodological approach in detail in the metadata of the uploaded documents. In addition, Repod offers political and social actors the opportunity to distinguish opinions from a descriptive presentation of research results. We would also like to emphasise that quality assurance cannot be completely taken over by the technical infrastructure; personal responsibility always plays an important role in the sharing and use of expertise. For societal and political actors, this tool opens up the possibility of gaining a deeper and more comprehensive insight into the scientific process of building knowledge.

1

INTRO

Global social crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic have recently highlighted the importance of scientific knowledge and evidence for political decisions. In this context, the question arises as to how an effective process of knowledge exchange between science and political and social actors can be practically and systematically organized and supported. Academic research is by no means the only source of knowledge that decision-makers rely on, however in many democratic countries it generally enjoys a high degree of trust compared to other sources such as expertise provided by commercial companies (Wissenschaftsbarometer, 2024). Scientific policy advice has earned this trust because of its strict quality assurance procedures, its autonomy and the transparency of the knowledge acquisition process (Pamuk, 2021).

Scientific expertise is used for different purposes and at all levels of the political process. The importance of scientific results ranges from determining the general strategic direction of political action in the run-up to decisions, to ex-post assessment of the effectiveness of political measures or for improvements in design or conceptions of new policy instruments. At the same time, the exchange of knowledge between researchers and political actors on scientific results takes place in many different formats such as through individual discussions, within permanent and temporary advisory bodies or via the media. Written documents are often used as a transmission channel, in which expertise is specially prepared to inform the political process and for use by actors outside the scientific community. Although there is a variety of channels and platforms for communication, written documents have retained a central role in the process of scientific policy advice.

The following guidelines provide a framework in which written documents containing relevant expertise for political actors can be prepared, quality-assured and shared publicly. Through this approach we introduce a new resource for archiving such documents: Repod, a repository that fulfills the function of a central point of contact for quality-assured scientific expertise on politically relevant topics. This source can be used by a diverse set of actors involved in the political process in addition to politicians and public servants, such as researchers, civic society organizations and journalists. The contents of this guide are the results of the accompanying research which marks the foundation of the development of the repository.

A call for greater efficiency and resilience in scientific policy advice

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries have been trying to improve their scientific policy advice mechanisms and make policy-making more efficient and crisis-resilient. In this context, calls have been made in academic and political circles for more transparency and collaboration between disciplines and different stakeholder groups. There is also a need to maintain the high level of trust in science. The search for suitable scientific expertise, especially under time pressure, can be laborious and time-consuming with results often scattered on websites and databases of different research institutes which cannot be specifically identified and processed. It is additionally difficult to assess the reliability of individual sources and their underlying expertise, as well as to identify and locate alternative sources of expertise.

Although research expertise is extensively used in policy-making, there are ongoing discussions on whether political decision-makers are sufficiently informed about the current state of knowledge and recent findings. In many cases, this conversation is obsolete, as there is already an abundance of information and expertise on many politically relevant topics. (Walgrave & Dejaeghere, 2017) This excess of inputs can overwhelm political and societal actors in the decision-making process, making it difficult to weigh relevant interests, values, and perspectives for their specific context (see Wesselink & Hoppe, 2020).

Even if it is “only” a question of pure research expertise, it is difficult to keep track of various research organizations as well as relevant thematic and disciplinary fields. Researchers themselves are increasingly expected to demonstrate that their work is socially relevant, yet even those who are proactively involved in policy advice, public relations and communication often lack professional skills, time, networks or incentives within the current science system (Emery, et al. 2015; Singh, et al. 2019).

Repod aims to facilitate the search for relevant findings and create a basis for assessing the underlying quality of expertise. In the following, we outline the role a repository can play in the advisory process and provide a number of tips for using Repod and for publishing advisory documents with the help of the repository.

What distinguishes Repod from a standard online search?

As a central point of contact for scientific expertise, Repod guarantees initial quality assurance. The repository contains documents exclusively from accredited academic and non-academic research institutions and provides relevant information on the work’s underlying expertise and the process of scientific production of knowledge. This may include information on the methodological approach, status of the research project and the applied quality assurance mechanisms.

For whom is the repository made?

The stakeholder groups anticipated to benefit from using the repository include, in particular, researchers from universities and non-university research institutions, politicians and public administration employees, journalists and so-called mediators who shape the consultation process. These user groups are able to access the Repod database for the following purposes:

- **Scientists** from universities, non-university research institutions as well as researchers from NGOs and think tanks can share their findings with non-academic stakeholders through a direct channel and add relevant information on the state of the underlying evidence, quality assurance processes and uncertainties. All uploaded documents are indexed, archived and assigned a DOI publication identity which makes them easily citable. In addition, Repod makes it easier for stakeholders to get an overview of policy-relevant documents.
- **Researchers** from NGOs and think tanks are able to make their results visible and explain underlying assumptions as well as the document's quality assurance measures.
- **Administrative staff** and **Political Decision-Makers** have a direct channel that helps them to access scientific expertise from a broad network, compare perspectives and classify the quality of findings.
- **Journalists** obtain additional sources of expertise from the scientific community.
- **Mediators** can use the repository to accumulate expertise, process it more efficiently and prepare it for the relevant target groups.
- **Interested members of the public** receive a publicly accessible source of expertise from recognized scientific institutions.

The aim of Repod is to bring together and address the different demands and expectations of these groups at a common interface.

2

REPOD AS A RESOURCE FOR MEDIATION

Mediation as a challenge in scientific policy advice and digital tools to support it

The role of Repod, in relation to political consultation processes, lies in the importance of the repository for mediation between science and politics. By mediators, we mean people or organizations that curate the communication process between researchers and policy makers; one whose main task is to put scientific findings into an easily understandable and usable form for political and social actors. In scientific discourse, this professional group is referred to by various terms, including “Intermediaries”, “facilitators”, “knowledge brokers”, and “boundary organisations”. (see Gluckman et al. 2021; Hoppe 2009; Howells 2006; Meyer 2010; Pielke Jr. 2007; Van Kerkhoff & Lebel 2006) Here we use the term knowledge brokers to refer to this group. Knowledge brokers are increasingly recognized as an indispensable group of experts who operate at the interface between science and policy. To curate such communication processes, knowledge brokers need a special skillset as well as a deep understanding of communication logics and the actors involved in scientific deliberation processes.

As an infrastructure for scientific policy advice Repod serves as a resource that supports the transfer of knowledge between policy makers and researchers. In general, knowledge brokers specialize in curating complex communication processes at the interface between science and politics, ideally in a neutral and transparent way without advocating for a specific political agenda. Repod helps to ensure this neutrality and transparency in the communication process and thus improve the quality of the exchange. The repository provides an infrastructure in which scientific expertise is not only added to a reputable archive, but also prepared specifically for non-academic, social and political actors who are active in policy making processes and political decision making. At this interface, Repod can help to achieve a balance between scientific credibility and political usefulness.

Functions of knowledge brokers in the consultation process between science and politics

Science and politics are independent areas with different mandates, procedures and quality criteria. Currently we are not aware of the existence of any systematic overview of relevant consulting processes that take place at this interface. The following functions are mentioned in the scientific literature (Meyer & Kearnes, 2013; Wesselink & Hoppe, 2020; Bednarek, et al. 2016):

- Assessment of the extent of political controversy over an issue.
- Assessment of the participants in a political discussion.
- Prioritization of scientific findings and messages that are relevant to specific policy discussions.
- Involvement of relevant parties over longer periods of time.
- Creation of clear and precise summaries of results for different target groups.
- Embedding the research results in the context of ongoing or emerging political discussions and scientific research.
- Consideration of the ability for different target groups to understand scientific information.

Many of these functions involve working with existing scientific expertise on a political topic. The aim is to summarize perspectives, understand risks, recognize contradictions, place them in the current social context and contrast them. This is where Repod positions itself as a digital infrastructure at the interface between science and politics and contributes to the fulfillment of the aforementioned functions in the context of curating communication between the parties involved.

Germany, with its highly decentralized, diverse and complicated scientific policy advice, is a good example to illustrate how challenging the search for relevant expertise and its consolidation can be. In Germany, there is no Chief Scientific Advisor or similar person responsible for keeping track of the numerous committees and advisory structures. According to a recent estimate (in 2022), there are more than 1000 academic and non-academic research organizations involved in scientific policy advice. (see Kühnel 2022) In the context of interface practices, this means that a knowledge broker should ideally search the databases and websites of all these institutions to find those that are thematically relevant to the proposed questions, identify and analyze existing expertise, assess uncertainties, review methodological approaches and assess their reliability. A structured presentation of existing knowledge that has been subjected to a basic quality review process and produced by respected scientific institutions is a first step in supporting information brokering activities at the science-policy interface.

Repod as digital infrastructure at the interface between science and politics

A digital infrastructure can support these mediation practices and help to archive an ever-growing corpus of expertise and maintain an overview of knowledge development. In academic research, an infrastructure is seen as a socio-technical system that provides a framework for communication and data processing between different communities of practice. Hanseth et al. (1996) and Larkin (2013) argue that infrastructures rely on a certain degree of standardization and compatibility if they are to function effectively.

Repod promotes the mediation of communication processes and facilitates the communication of relevant expertise to political actors. From a technical point of view, the advantages of Repod lie in the fact that advisory documents from the scientific community gain greater visibility and are made more quickly and easily accessible to political actors. The repository pursues the following objectives in detail:

- To make the advisory processes more transparent, smoother and faster.
- Create an additional channel for researchers to share expertise with policy makers.
- To present a comprehensive overview of the relevant scientific expertise on a political topic.

More uniformity in the presentation of expertise

In order to bring together all participating stakeholder groups, a standardized framework is needed in which similar content from advisory documents can be brought together and linked to each other. Section 3 describes three characteristics of science policy consultation documents and, building on those, outlines a total of eight steps that help to systematize content within Repod when providing (uploading) documents



What exactly is an advisory document?

Every research institution and every research team has the freedom to make this definition according to their own criteria. We understand an advisory document to be a written elaboration of in-depth or action-oriented specialist knowledge on topics of social interest addressed to politicians and administrators.

To support the curation of expertise, Repod has a uniform definition and categorization of the content that is uploaded. This facilitates a targeted search for relevant documents. In this way, extensive documents can be distinguished from shorter ones, enabling the user to see its form at a glance, for example whether the item is a presentation of the state of knowledge or a discussion of recommendations. The outlined framework could also be used outside of Repod at the interface between science and politics.

In the following, we provide a number of tips that help to make the expertise transparent, as well as its reliability and status when uploading documents. If authors follow these simple procedures and share detailed information about their work, their expertise can be communicated more accurately to socio-political actors. At the same time achieving a broader and more differentiated picture of the expertise and its underlying foundation.

3

INSTRUCTIONS FOR UPLOADING DOCUMENTS

In discussions with potential users of the repository, a number of characteristics have emerged that determine good expertise and a good advisory process. Repod can address some of these criteria, however, the process of quality assurance cannot be completely taken over by a technical infrastructure. Therefore, personal responsibility also plays an important role when sharing or using expertise, as is discussed below.

The following section outlines how Repod can support quality assurance in communication between researchers and political actors. The main aim is to provide transparent and detailed information that describes the knowledge process. For this purpose, we have defined concrete steps/instructions that enable such quality assurance.

We recommend the following procedure when uploading documents:

STEP 1

Define the form of a document

Repod contains four formats of consultation documents: Position papers, statements, expert opinions and reports. In terms of quality assurance, a clear distinction between the formats allows the status of the work to be assessed more quickly, allowing users to determine at a glance whether the results are preliminary (within a working paper) or based on a completed research project. This helps assess the document's level of detail and makes search more targeted by displaying comprehensive reports at a glance or by providing an overview of short position papers.



DOCUMENT TYPES

Policy Paper	A concentrated, science-based presentation of solutions to a political issue for a non-academic audience. Addresses a current and concrete political issue.
Position paper	A document that builds a case for a position on a socio-political event or issue on the basis of scientific expertise.
Working paper	A presentation of initial ideas on a complex issue with consideration of the fact that these can still be changed or adapted (in the course of the research project). According to the United Nations, working papers are preliminary works that aim to stimulate discussion and provide critical commentary ¹ .
Expert report	A document that was created as part of a commissioned project.
Report	Presentation of research findings that have arisen within a research project.

STEP 2

Standardize the type of claim

Repod offers researchers the option of indicating upon upload which types of claims are contained in the advisory text. This helps public administration representatives and political decision-makers see at a glance whether the document contains a normative part, i.e. whether it contains assessments and recommendations or whether it offers a presentation of current findings. This information helps to differentiate expertise and distinguish normative statements - such as assessments and recommendations - from descriptive accounts. Table 2 shows the content that can be included in an advisory document and according to which criteria it can be differentiated in Repod.

¹ <https://www.un-ilibrary.org/content/papers/25206656>



CONTENT TYPES

Assessments	Presentation of research findings that have arisen within a research project.
Empirical evidence	Consulting content that is based on one or more empirical studies or provides an overview of empirical findings on the effectiveness or impact patterns of specific measures.
Recommendations and/or options for action	Suggestions made by researchers on a specific issue.
Research overview	Overview of existing evidence on a specific issue.
Agenda-Setting	Impulses from science to make decision-makers aware of certain topics.

STEP 3

Types of evidence

In this step, Repod supports a uniform understanding of the types of evidence that can be included in an advisory document. In terms of quality assurance, this criteria facilitates insights into the type of evidence on which certain scientific results are based. Among other things, it is possible to differentiate between findings that are based on experience or expert knowledge of the subject area and statements that are based on completed research projects (qualitative or quantitative) or meta-analyses of bodies of work.



TYPES OF EVIDENCE

Qualitative empirical studies	Findings are based on non-standardized data.
Quantitative empirical studies	Findings are based on standardized data.
Data-driven causal analysis	Research into causal relationships based on research data.

Meta studies	Quantitative-statistical summary of other work in a defined field.
Literature review and theory	Further development of the theoretical basis and/or classification of a socially relevant topic on the basis of existing literature.
Informed opinion	Informed assessments based on empirical values or experience-based knowledge of a situation.

STEP 4

Capturing a variety of perspectives

As a central point of contact for scientific expertise, **Repod can contribute to better processing of knowledge** and continuously enriching the discussion with up-to-date expertise. Content is continuously uploaded, giving users access to findings on a specific topic that have not yet been published elsewhere. Repod also provides orientation in the research landscape and shows different perspectives in the findings on a policy-relevant topic by making all documents from relevant institutions centrally and easily accessible.

"I don't think it would be good to say that one organization is the only one that has something interesting to say in this field in Germany when there are 50 or 80 other researchers who are also all intelligent and have great ideas, but are unknown. And we are quite prepared to discuss things with them."

– Science policy representative

In terms of quality assurance, ensuring a diversity of perspectives can counteract the instrumentalization of knowledge. There is often a danger that findings are selectively incorporated into the political process in order to underpin existing views with expertise without taking other - sometimes contradictory - perspectives into consideration. In a practical sense, Repod offers the opportunity to quickly clarify whether there are scientific counterarguments to certain theses that are considered "scientifically based" in media or political circles. This feature broadens representation of policy-perspectives, contributing to increased legitimacy in decision making.

STEP 5

Clearly describe the quality assurance processes

“And I would always recommend doing a kind of peer check, i.e. trying to pitch the content to a peer, then to someone from another discipline and also to someone who is familiar with the subject area but does not come from the scientific system.”

–Science policy representative

Currently there are no proven or standardized quality assurance processes at the interface between science and politics. In academic research, on the other hand, peer review is largely considered the most suitable strategy for establishing the reliability of findings as far as possible, even if this is rightly questioned in various epistemic communities. Documents written by scientists and addressed to policymakers may go through a traditional peer review process, but are not required to. In many cases, there are alternative ways for quality assurance or inter-institutional procedures within the participating scientific organizations which makes transparency in quality assurance of great importance:

“[...] whether a deterministic view of the world is being spread or whether it is more of an evidence-based discussion in which the following is disclosed: “These are our data, these are the questions, this is the study, this is the study design, but the study design is linked to the and the assumptions”.

– Researcher

In our discussions with research institutions as part of the monitoring research, we found that internal review procedures which also involve peer reviewers are often used to review so-called “gray literature” or advisory documents. In order to make such practices and other procedures visible, Repod offers the possibility to openly describe quality assurance processes. This gives users the opportunity to see at a glance what kind of quality assurance has taken place, thus increasing transparency and trust in the presented work.

STEP 6

Display uncertainties

Repod offers the possibility to share a well-founded explanation of existing uncertainties. In this way, we want to counteract misconceptions so that scientific evidence does not suggest unequivocal certainty or be perceived as “the ultimate truth”. This feature is of specific importance as it enables researchers to raise the awareness of policy-makers and academia to areas where further research or data is needed.

STEP 7

Outline methodical approach

With the help of the “methodological statement”, the weaknesses and strengths of the methodological approach on which the document is based can be made explicitly visible. This step, as well as steps 5 and 6, ensure greater transparency in communication in terms of quality assurance. This methodological statement also includes a description of the initial situation on which an instrument or program under review is based.

“[...] often also the preparation of the program, i.e. preliminary studies in which they determine the need for intervention and identify instruments. And it is precisely this first step, which, yes, it is not always so transparent, but of course very relevant, so these are also documents, especially when it comes to evaluating a measure, you also have to understand how the specific selection of instruments came about in the first place [...]. I think we could create even more transparency with a repository like this”.

– Researcher

The provision of detailed information that describes the knowledge process makes it possible to take a more differentiated look at bodies of knowledge and to see at a glance to what extent there is a scientific consensus on a topic, or what kind of expertise the statements in the document are based on.

STEP 8

Use openness

In the metadata for an uploaded document, Repod shows from which institution and by which authors the document originates. The repository is open to all interested parties as a tool to access expertise. The ability to upload consulting documents is accessible to all recognized research organizations; there are no editorial barriers or paywalls when contributing/accessing expertise. In addition, all publications in Repod are given a DOI (digital object identifier) and authors can add their ORCID (Open Researcher and Contributor ID).

Repod thus utilizes the potential of Open Science to better link knowledge resources and contributes to the visibility of consulting documents from scientific work.

Personal responsibility of researchers and users

The quality assurance steps described above serve to provide a clear understanding of the expertise that Repod archives as a central Germany-wide contact point for politically relevant scientific expertise. As a technical infrastructure, Repod neither can, nor desires to, relieve

users of comprehensive quality assurance. As host of the repository, the ZBW carries out quality assurance of which organizations can upload to it. Users are responsible for avoiding a selective choice of research results and to be aware of content that in some cases represents contradictions in scientific findings or different assessments of a particular issue.

Thanks to a differentiated structure for the classification of evidence and its quality characteristics, Repod can collect and display relevant information on the quality of the underlying expertise in addition to the work itself. However, it is not possible to provide this information automatically, nor to check its reliability. The usability of the tool relies upon input quality. It is therefore important that researchers describe the individual quality characteristics as comprehensively and honestly as possible and explain their limitations.

Quality assurance checklist for Repod

DETAILS WHEN UPLOADING DOCUMENTS

Conceptual unit

- Specify the format of the document/assign category
- Add type of expertise (several possible)
- Differentiate and name types of evidence

Scientific quality

- Clearly describe quality assurance processes
- Communicate uncertainties clearly
- Outline methodical approach
- Outline political relevance
- Openness (in the source citation, publication of data, etc.)

ADVANTAGES OF USING REPOD DOCUMENTS

Conceptual unit

- Better understand the level of evidence: Is it a preliminary assessment or are the recommendations based on empirical findings?
- Clearly identify different types of evidence for further processing

Scientific quality

- Address multiple perspectives by looking at all accessible and existing evidence
- Recognize uncertainties and communicate them clearly during further processing
- Compare quality assurance processes of different documents and prioritize the expertise that has undergone a review process
- Observe the methodological approach and prioritize content where a clearly applied scientific method is recognizable

4

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5

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6

CONTEXT

The thesis paper is the result of research accompanying the development of the Repository for Policy Documents “REPOD”, which has been online since May 2024 (repod.zbw.eu). The joint project was funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) from February 1, 2023 to March 31, 2024. The Leibniz Information Center for Economics (ZBW) was responsible for project management and the development of the repository. The Leibniz Institute for Spatial Social Research (IRS), the Leibniz Institute for Media Research (HBI), the Alexander von Humboldt Institute for Internet and Society (HIIG) and the Leibniz Institute for Economic Research (RWI) were involved in the accompanying research. These guidelines are the result of cooperation between the HIIG and the RWI.

