

Evidence essay · Communities and governance

Open data, whose authority?

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Fictional author and institute · Editorial demonstration, not peer reviewed

ABSTRACT

Easy downloading does not establish authority to reuse a dataset responsibly. This essay reads the National Inuit Strategy on Research as connected commitments to governance, ethics, funding, data control, and capacity, not a transferable permission checklist. A hypothetical reuse of locally shared travel knowledge shows how combining or opening information can introduce risks even when names are removed. TCPS 2 Chapter 9 adds policy context while explicitly not replacing Indigenous peoples' own guidance. The discussion connects agreed authority to repository permissions, review processes, staff handover, and differentiated release terms. It also distinguishes public availability from unrestricted ethical reuse. Useful outcomes may include locally governed information or a decision not to disclose, but those outcomes must be defined with the relevant authorities rather than claimed by outside institutions.

Keywords: Inuit research governance · data authority · responsible reuse · research capacity · access conditions

Adapted from the Still North field journal. Original article. A source-based editorial text, not a report of original Still North research. Examples and imagery are illustrative.

A repository can make a dataset easy to download while leaving its governance difficult to see. Who decided that the material could be shared? Who can approve a new use? Who can correct a harmful interpretation? For research involving Indigenous peoples, technical access is not a sufficient answer to these questions. Data stewardship includes authority over what research is for and how its results travel.

This article addresses responsibilities for outside researchers and institutions. It does not speak for Indigenous communities, describe one universal system of Indigenous governance, or offer a permission checklist. Different peoples, institutions, places, and kinds of knowledge require their own decisions. An organisation cannot confer that authority on itself by adopting sympathetic language.

Read the priorities as connected commitments

Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami's National Inuit Strategy on Research identifies five priorities: Inuit governance in research, ethical conduct, funding aligned with Inuit priorities, Inuit access, ownership, and control over data and information, and capacity for Inuit Nunangat research. These are not five independent boxes that a project can satisfy by writing a data-management plan.

Control without resources can be nominal. A governing body needs time and capacity to evaluate proposed uses, maintain infrastructure, and act on its decisions. Funding that supports collection but not Inuit-led analysis may reproduce the imbalance the strategy challenges. Similarly, access to a large technical download is not equivalent to having usable information, tools, and authority for decision-making.

The strategy concerns Inuit Nunangat research. It should not be relabelled as a generic policy for every Indigenous people. Its scope and authorship matter. Out-

side institutions should begin with the relevant Inuit organisations and applicable local processes, rather than importing a familiar framework and assuming that it covers the project.

Follow one proposed reuse

Imagine an outside analyst wishes to combine environmental observations with a map containing locally shared travel knowledge. The original map might have been made for a limited audience and a specific practical purpose. Turning it into an open, searchable layer could expose routes, locations, or relationships that the original participants never intended to publish. Removing names may not remove those risks.

Before copying the material, establish its provenance, terms, and the decision process for further use. If that process is unclear, seek clarification through the responsible institution or authority before proceeding. The right outcome might be a different spatial scale, access under agreed conditions, a revised question, or no use at all. Those are governance decisions, not formatting obstacles to be worked around.

Public availability also needs careful interpretation. A file being reachable does not establish that every proposed reuse is ethically appropriate. TCPS 2 Chapter 9, a Canadian research ethics policy, distinguishes individual consent, community engagement, and the possible effects of research based on public information. It explicitly says that its framework is not intended to replace Indigenous peoples' own ethical guidance. Legal permissions and ethical responsibilities should be examined, not collapsed into one claim.

Make an agreement work inside the archive

A statement of principle is weak if the repository cannot honour it. Access permissions, review responsibilities, and release procedures should reflect the agreed governance. If different parts of a dataset have different terms,

retain that distinction. Do not release everything under a broad licence because the software offers only one convenient setting.

Record who is responsible for requests, what a prospective user must explain, and when the arrangements should be reviewed. Plan for staff changes and the end of the funded project. An agreement tied only to one researcher's memory will not reliably govern a new analysis years later. At the same time, do not publish private negotiation records merely to demonstrate transparency.

Broaden what counts as a useful outcome

A project may produce a public dataset, but usefulness could also lie in an Inuit-led question, a locally governed archive, training, or information delivered in an agreed language and form. Those outcomes must be defined with the people holding authority, not invented afterwards to make an outside institution look successful. A decision not to disclose sensitive information can be evidence of sound governance rather than failed openness.

Read *Communities and livelihoods alongside Open observations*. The two belong together. A technically polished data service should help users discover the conditions that make responsible research possible, including the point at which downloading is the wrong next step.

References

1. National Inuit Strategy on Research (itk.ca)
2. TCPS 2 Chapter 9 (ethics.gc.ca)