

Online text-based focus groups in journalism studies

Journalistica: The Methods Section

In this section, Journalistica puts a spotlight on research methods used in journalism studies and/or journalism practice.

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KEYWORDS

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1. Description of the method

Online focus groups refer to a family of methods that are related to offline (i.e., in-person) focus groups, but where participants can participate from a place of their preference. Online focus groups can be divided into text-based (e.g., chat) and non-text-based (e.g., Zoom) (e.g., Janghorban et al., 2014), and the former can further be divided into synchronous (i.e., live) and asynchronous (i.e., participants contribute with comments at a time of their preference) focus groups. This paper focuses on text-based synchronous focus groups. This type of online focus groups is usually conducted in an online chat-forum. Such a forum can in principle take place in accessible and familiar messaging services such as Messenger or WhatsApp. Similar to offline focus groups, the aim of the text-based online focus groups is to produce data about a given topic from group interviews where the discussion and interaction between group members becomes particularly salient and relevant to the researcher (Janghorban et al., 2014).

Like offline focus groups, the discussion is primarily based on a standardized question guide, supported by follow-up questions. However, vignettes (e.g., pictures or short news articles) can be included to stimulate the discussion. In general, creating a comfortable, unthreatening and stimulating setting for the discussion is important for all types of focus groups, since such a setting facilitates open and engaging discussions (Kitzinger, 1994). 6-8 participants

are generally considered an optimal number of participants for offline focus groups, as this number of participants balances diversity with opportunity for all participants to share their thoughts, feelings and ideas (Krueger & Casey, 2002). However, online text-based focus groups sometimes include a higher number of participants to increase the level of interaction. In this case, discussions may be less controlled by the moderator. Participants may initiate discussions of multiple topics simultaneously, which may be beneficial for some studies (Stewart & Williams, 2005).

2. Example of use

Schmitz Weiss and Higgins Joyce (2009) examined how globalization and technologies have changed how journalists are working using online synchronized focus groups in Latin America, North America and Europe. The authors used a chatroom called Tapped In. By choosing text-based online focus groups, they were able to collect data without having to travel across the globe. Furthermore, they could connect participants across cultures in the same focus groups, providing a novel approach to discussing the impact of globalization in journalism.

Thomsen et al. (In review) used online text-based focus groups to examine how practitioners can improve communication of pesticides and biocides. Pesticides and biocides may generally be a topic of low relevance to the general public, potentially leading to less interaction among participants compared to offline focus groups. However, online text-based focus groups allowed us to reach participants that lacked the time to participate in offline focus groups (people in rural areas, parents) or preferred the anonymity of text-based platforms (e.g., people with low degree of trust). The reduced cost also enabled us to include more focus groups than would be possible with offline focus groups. Furthermore, online text-based focus groups may reduce social desirability bias compared to offline focus groups, creating an anonymous environment within the text-based platform where participants could openly write how and why they used pesticides and biocides. To address the expected low level of interaction among participants, participants were exposed to vignettes (e.g., short news stories about pesticides and biocides) with sometimes conflicting information, aimed at stimulating discussion in the text-based online focus group.

3. Main advantages and challenges of using the method

There are three main advantages of using online text-based focus groups: 1) reduced resources (price and time consumption) in conducting the focus group(s), allowing for e.g. an increase in the number of focus groups (Stewart & Williams, 2005). Furthermore, as people answer and discuss in writing, less time, if any, is used to transcribe the discussions, although comments and notes of behavior (e.g., hesitations) taken during the focus group discussions can be added at a later stage; 2) Recruitment may be easier for certain groups. Offline focus groups often experience issues with non-attendees (Rabiee, 2004). Furthermore, recruitment of certain groups may be difficult due to lack of time or means for transportation. In addition, some participants may feel uncomfortable in an unfamiliar social situation (Stewart & Williams, 2005); 3) As mentioned above, sensitive topics can be easier to discuss in an anonymous, text-based chat (Woodyatt et al., 2016).

One important drawback of focus group interviews conducted as text-based chats is that moderators and other participants are not able to perceive the tone and body language of each other. Conducting online focus group interviews therefore carries the risk of misinterpretation. Compared to offline focus group interviews, non-written cues and interactions (e.g., verbal expressions) are therefore not available for analysis in online, text-based focus group interviews. The lack of non-written cues limits the possibility for a deeper and more nuanced understanding of participants underlying meaning. For example, it may be more difficult to capture irony or emotional responses, which may be particularly relevant for some studies. Although the automatically generated transcriptions initially saves time, themes and patterns often begin to emerge when the researcher transcribes the discussion (Rabiee, 2004). Therefore, analyzing online text-based focus group discussions often begins at a later stage compared to offline, in-person focus group interviews. However, analyzing such discussions may require more time for the researcher to become familiar with the material.

Another potential drawback is that text-based chat may lead to lower engagement or interaction between participants. To minimize such risk, discussion could be stimulated, for example by using vignettes (i.e., visual stimulus material) or by including more participants, as mentioned earlier. Furthermore, researchers should consider whether the given topic is of a nature that can generate discussion among participants in online text-based environments (e.g., relevant or sensitive to participants).

4. Ethical considerations

As in other studies, both qualitative and quantitative, the anonymity of participants must be considered, especially if platforms on participants' own devices, such as WhatsApp, are used. All participants can in principle take screenshots of discussions in the focus groups, providing little anonymity for people using their own name. Therefore, researchers should consider anonymizing participants during data collection, especially for sensitive topics. Furthermore, researchers planning studies using online text-based focus groups should examine legal (e.g., GDPR) and ethical requirements, and they should acquire informed consent from participants.

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