JOURNALISTICA
2025, pp. 255-260
https://doi.org/10.7146/journalistica.v19i1.158053

Dialing in with participants

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
recruitment, focus groups, cold calling, qualitative research, climate communication

1. Description of the method

Cold calling denotes the act of contacting people without a prior agreement to offer them something that they have not asked for (Merriam-Webster, 2025). Although cold calling is traditionally associated with sales and marketing, I argue that it is a viable way of recruiting participants for qualitative scholars within journalism studies. It is mainly relevant to qualitative researchers as they may have something to gain from forming a connection with potential participants. In addition, they tend to operate with modest sample sizes, which makes it manageable to reach out to all study candidates by phone. Cold calling is an alternative to other means of enrollment which involve either outsourcing the process to professional recruitment agencies, encouraging potential participants to contact the researcher via physical posters or social media posts, or writing letters or emails to eligible individuals directly. It is important to note that cold calling cannot stand alone. The phone calls must be supplemented by written material such as a project description and a consent form to guarantee the uniformity of information and to enable the participants to better comprehend the complexities involved.

2. Example of use

I used cold calling when recruiting participants for a large-scale focus group study with Danish climate journalists, climate scientists, and citizens, which centered on how they perceived their own and each other's roles in the public climate debate (Busch Nicolaisen, 2022; Nicolaisen,

2024). Being a trained journalist, I was comfortable talking to strangers on the phone. Besides, my schedule was extremely tight since pandemic-induced restrictions had postponed the data collection, and I believed that cold calls would be the most time-efficient way of recruiting participants. Using this method, I managed to recruit 76 participants in less than two months. The climate journalists were pinpointed with the aid of the chairs of the Danish Science Journalists Association (Danske Videnskabsjournalister) and the Association of Energy and Environmental Journalists (Foreningen af Energi- og Miljøjournalister). For the climate scientists, potential participants were identified by examining the websites of the Danish universities working on climate science. The participants from the citizen segment were located via two channels: Facebook groups and my network.

3. Main advantages and challenges of using the method

One of the key advantages of using cold calling in a research context is the establishment of personal contact. The phone calls provide a way to mitigate the alienation that some people may feel towards science and to immediately tackle any insecurities related to participating. In my case, they enabled me to build rapport with the climate journalists by emphasizing my journalistic background and engaging in discipline-specific discourse. Furthermore, they allowed me to demonstrate my thorough preparation to the climate scientists as I had tried to familiarize myself with their research.

Cold calling can also speed up the recruitment process as it is possible to receive an immediate indication of whether people want to participate. If potential participants are contacted via email, for instance, a significantly longer response time is to be expected.

While cold calling can be used for enrollment in a variety of qualitative studies, including interviews and ethnography, it has certain merits when it comes to recruitment to focus group research. The insights gained from talking with the participants can help inform decisions about the composition and optimal size of the focus groups. When hanging up, the researcher will likely have a well-formed impression of the communicative dispositions (Daly, 2011, pp. 144–147) of the person on the other end of the line as well as of their commitment to the subject in question. Typically, it does not take long to tell whether an individual is talkative, reticent or something in between. These observations can feed into the deliberations regarding how to organize the groups. Social dynamics are an integral part of focus group research (Belzile & Öberg, 2012; Halkier, 2010, p. 74; Peek & Fothergill, 2009, p. 33), so the interaction effect of the participants' personalities can have a vast bearing on the focus group discussions (Vicsek, 2007, pp. 26–27). It thus seems

essential to be aware of the participants' personality types when composing focus groups.

The main challenge inherent in cold calling is that not all inquiries result in an expression of interest in participating. Kristensen and Ravn assert that "the recruitment process is emotional work" and routinely entails plenty of embarrassment (2015: 725; see also Thomas et al., 2007: 435–436). My own experience confirms this observation. Getting five rejections in a row is undoubtedly psychologically taxing, not least when they are delivered straight into your ear instead of less directly through email. Calling participants without any prior notice is therefore situated at the far end of what Scott et al. term the 'cringe spectrum', which categorizes different research activities on a continuum according to the shame they may evoke and the associated risk of losing face (2012, pp. 721–722). Hence, it is worth noting that this modus operandi may be reserved for so-called 'non-shy researchers', who are comfortable with spontaneous interaction with strangers (Scott et al., 2012, p. 726).

Another concern related to this recruitment method is that researchers may place too much weight on the first impression formed during the phone call. This can influence how you moderate the focus group and potentially disrupt the natural flow of social interaction. For example, you may have formed a preconceived notion that certain participants are dominant or shy, which may affect how you engage with them during the session.

3. Relevance to journalism studies

Blanchett et al. (2023) hold that journalists are commonly unwilling to take part in research, as they are becoming more and more pressed for time. Moreover, Ray (Ray, 2017, p. 17) contends that there is a pronounced gulf between journalism and academia, as "journalists are at best dismissive of academics and, at worst, antagonistic." To counter this perceived distance, scholars may benefit from a more personalized approach. In their acclaimed work on qualitative researchers' membership roles in the populations they investigate, Dwyer and Buckle (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 58) describe how researchers' insider status can promote feelings of acceptance and trust among the participants that would not otherwise be present. When calling the climate journalists, I sought to leverage this insight by highlighting my journalism degree and my experience as a freelance writer for several media outlets. The tactic seemed to work. Once it became clear that I was "one of them", the conversations commonly went on to touch on stories they were currently working on or new developments in the Danish media landscape. Another factor that supports the use of cold calling in research involving

journalists is that they are accustomed to initiating contact with strangers, which may make them more open to receiving unsolicited calls themselves.

5. Ethical considerations

The main ethical concern connected to cold calling is that the people who are contacted might be caught off guard by the request and either feel pressured to participate or perceive it as an invasion of their privacy. According to Bredal et al., such foregrounding of the potential negative aspects of research participation is common in the modern era of qualitative inquiry, a spillover effect from the increasing regulation by ethical committees (2022, p. 3; Traianou, 2020). They adopt a critical stance towards this trend, as it does not align with their field experiences, which attest to "research participants' willingness and even eagerness to participate" (Bredal et al., 2022, p. 2). My attitude to recruitment was characterized by a similar emphasis on the upsides of enrollment. When I decided to initiate contact through phone calls, I essentially performed an act of phronesis, a judgment on the best course of action in a complex situation without clear-cut rules to follow (Traianou, 2018, pp. 166–167). Under such circumstances, one must weigh "what is likely to lead to success" against the probable benefits, risks, and harms (Traianou, 2018, p. 167). I thus deemed that the potential risks and harms were marginal compared to the benefits. In addition to the participants' contribution to the production of new scientific knowledge, I was confident that they would also gain something from their involvement. This reward can come in different forms, whether through exploring a subject of personal interest, satisfying their curiosity about academic work, engaging in social comparison, or enjoying the process in itself, according to the assortment of motivations for participating in qualitative research proposed by Clark (2010, pp. 404–407).

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