Focus group methodology

By Gina Masullo, Martin Riedl, and Ori Tenenboim,
Center for Media Engagement

To understand people's experience of digital public spaces and their thoughts about our proposed principles, the Center for Media Engagement conducted a series of focus groups. We contracted with an international market research firm[1] to conduct 10 focus groups in five countries: Brazil, Germany, Malaysia, South Africa, and the United States. Details about each of these countries are in the table below.

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1   Our contract with the international research firm requires that we not name the company in any published work.

Metrics for focus group countries

	Population (in millions)	Government system	GDP (in million $)
United States	331.00	Constitutional federal republic	20,544,343.46
Brazil	212.05	Federal presidential republic	1,868,626.09
Germany	83.78	Federal parliamentary republic	3,947,620.16
Malaysia	32.37	Federal parliamentary constitutional monarchy	358,581.94
South Africa	59.31	Parliamentary republic	368,288.94
	2019 Estimate	*2020*	*2018*

Notes: Data sources are United Nations Populations Division, CIA World Factbook, The World.

These five countries were purposefully selected. The Center for Media Engagement consulted international experts, including academics who study social media use globally and representatives from social media platforms. We also examined patterns of social media usage. The final selection reflects geographically diverse countries with relatively high rates of 3G penetration and Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and internet usage. The rates for the five countries are in the table below.

Inclusion criteria for focus group countries (in percent)

	Internet Use	3G+ penetration	Social media as a source of news	Facebook Use	YouTube Use	Twitter Use
Brazil	67.5	75.2	64.0	76.0	80.0	28.0
Germany	84.4	73.7	34.0	50.0	58.0	12.0
Malaysia	80.1	86.2	69.0	78.0	72.0	26.0
South Africa	56.2	87.4	72.0	80.0	73.0	34.0
United States	75.2	91.7	46.0	66.0	62.0	27.0

Notes: Data sources are International Telecommunications Union, Open Signal, and Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism for most recent years available; 3G+ penetration includes 4G or 5G.

Focus groups are uniquely suited for this type of research as they invoke personal experiences and diverse opinions while unearthing how participants allot meaning.[2] The focus groups were exclusively conducted in large cities: Berlin (population: 3.6 million);[3] Johannesburg (population: 9.7 million); Kuala Lumpur (population: 8 million); New York City (population: 18.8 million); and São Paulo (population: 22 million). Focus groups were conducted on August 28 and 29, 2019, and were all videotaped and transcribed. Each focus group was conducted in the dominant language of the country where it took place and translated into English by the research firm when necessary. Country-appropriate pseudonyms were assigned to each participant and are used whenever participants are mentioned. We asked people who had lived in the countries where the focus groups were conducted to come up with pseudonym names that were typical in that country.[4]

Participants and Procedures

Participants were 18 years of age or older and were incentivized and recruited through the research firm. They were required to use at least two out of three social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube) four times per week or more. Efforts were made to create a diverse pool of participants in regard to age, gender, education, and race.[5] A total of 82 people participated across the 10 focus groups. The sample consisted of 42 women and 40 men, ages 19 to 65 years.

After consenting, participants joined in-person focus groups carried out by a moderator from the research firm or a subcontractor who was in charge of leading the discussion. While discussions were held in different languages across all countries, they used one common discussion guide, a technique similar to one used by past researchers.[6] The moderators posed the same open-ended questions at each focus group, asking participants about their perceptions of social media and our proposed principles. Moderators introduced each principle and then invited participants to explain what they thought the principle meant and to assess whether they considered the principle valuable to improving social media. The specific questions the moderators asked are provided below.

Analysis Strategy

The Center for Media Engagement's goal was to make meaning from our data, so we

2   Lunt, P., & Livingstone, S. (1996). Rethinking the focus group in media and communications research. Journal of Communication, 46(2), 79–98.

3   Population estimates for each city were obtained from the CIA World Factbook and describe urban agglomerations including suburbs, https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/

4   We thank Dominique A. Montiel Valle, Ole Selebi, and Rachel Mourão for their help in this regard.

5   We only report the age and gender breakdown of the sample for the following reasons. Some of the countries (e.g., Germany) prohibit the collection of racial category data. Educational systems and income vary so widely in countries in our sample that trying to compare these variables would be meaningless.

6   Fletcher, R., & Nielsen, R. K. (2019). Generalised scepticism: How people navigate news on social media. Information Communication and Society, 22(12), 1751-1769.

adopted an interpretivist paradigm[7] rather than culling facts from the focus group participants.[8] Three researchers read all transcripts and discussed the iterative codes that emerged through analysis. This involved a constant-comparative process where we read through the transcripts multiple times, looking for commonalities in what people were saying about each of our proposed principles. We then grouped these commonalities into broader themes about each principle that assessed how participants understood the principle, whether they valued the principle, and whether they had any concerns about the principles.[9] Ultimately, we revised our categories multiple times, collapsing some categories that seemed to overlap. This process resulted in a summary of participants' assessment of each of our principles, including some key quotations from the focus groups that exemplified participants' opinions.

Institutional Review Board approval for this project was granted on April 9, 2019.

Focus Group Protocol

What follows are the questions each moderator asked at all focus groups in the order in which the questions were asked.

7   Brechin, A., & Sidell, M. (2000). Ways of knowing. In R. Gomm & C. Davies (Eds.), Using evidence in health and social care (pp. 3-23). Sage.

8   Johnson, K. (2000). Interpreting meanings. In R. Gomm, & C. Davies, (Eds.), Using evidence in health and social care (pp. 64-85). Sage.

9   This approach draws from some aspects of grounded theory. See Corbin, J., & Strauss, A., (2015). Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory. Sage; Charmaz, K. (2006). Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis. Sage.

Social Media General Perceptions

What social media do you use the most often? *For each social media platform people mentioned, these follow-up questions were asked: How often do you use it? What do you use it for? What do you like about that particular platform?*

What are the benefits of social media? Give examples. *Among these benefits, what is the major benefit of social media according to you?*

What are the drawbacks of social media? Give examples. *Among these drawbacks, what is the major drawback of social media according to you?*

If you think about your offline conversations and your online conversations, what do you wish your online conversations had that you get from your offline conversations? In other words, what is missing in your online conversations that you have in your offline conversations?

Tell us about a rewarding social experience; it can be online or offline. *How would you describe a rewarding social experience in general? What do you think made the experience rewarding? What key elements make the experience rewarding?*

On the contrary, how would you describe a social experience that is not rewarding at all?

If you think about the last three months, tell me an example of a rewarding experience you've had on social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, or other common forms mentioned by participants at the beginning of the group.

On what social media did you have this rewarding experience? Why was it a rewarding experience? What elements do you think made that experience rewarding?

Perceptions of Civic Signals

Participants were provided a list of the civic signals and asked to review the list and circle the ones they agree with and cross out the ones they disagree with.
The moderators then went through each signal and invited discussion about it:

Does this [civic signal] sound true for you? Why? Why not?

Is there anything that is missing from the list and that you would like to add as a positive outcome of social media?

On the contrary, would you remove any of these ideas?

The moderators then asked participants to review the list of civic signals again.

According to you, what are the three most important sentences of the list when it comes to positive outcomes of social media? Why are they important?