Conducting Focus Groups to Understand Local News Audiences

By Jessica Crowell and Kathleen McCollough

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INTRODUCTION

As newsrooms reinvent their business model, design new products and services, and invest in community engagement efforts, it is critical that they listen deeply to their communities. Focus groups are one model of listening that can be very effective in gathering feedback from a cross section of people who represent different voices and stakeholders in your area.

This guide is designed to give newsrooms a simple, step-by-step process to host focus groups with local residents. It is based on the work of Phil Napoli, Jessica Crowell, and Kathleen McCollough at the Rutgers University News Measures Research Project at the Media + The Public Interest Initiative. The research was funded by grants from the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, Democracy Fund, and Knight Foundation.

The Rutgers team hosted six focus groups in three very different communities across New Jersey, bringing together between eight to 12 residents to talk about their news habits, needs, and concerns. The focus groups were transcribed, and themes, patterns, and community priorities were identified in each of the three cities.

Those reports were given to local newsrooms that worked with the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation's director of Journalism and Sustainability to develop new revenue products and business strategies based on the needs and desires identified by local residents. Some newsrooms also used feedback from the community to assess editorial priorities and resource allocation.

The participating newsrooms reported back that frank, direct feedback from local residents was invaluable. In many cases, the feedback gave newsrooms the confidence to test new ideas and take risks that otherwise might have seemed like blind experiments. We believe that these kinds of focus groups can be important tools for newsrooms to listen to their communities, and we hope that this guide provides journalists with the tools they need to host such discussions.

Part One:
Understanding Your Audience

As consumer habits and newsroom economics shift, a deeper understanding of local news audiences is of heightened importance. Greater attention to local audiences can help identify potential solutions to many journalistic challenges and strengthen relationships between readers and newsrooms.

While newsrooms have an array of new tools and metrics at their fingertips — ranging from data on audience size, composition, and time spent on a site, to social media data on likes and sharing activities — this information generally does not permit deep dives into the motivation and behavior of news audiences.

Focus groups can add critical qualitative data to help newsrooms better leverage other metrics. Most commonly associated with market research, focus groups originated in the 1940s, when academics and media companies formed research partnerships that focused on media audiences.[1] We believe focus groups remain a very useful tool for understanding audiences in ways that cannot be achieved by other methods, such as surveys, server log analyses, or analyses of social media activity.

Focus groups offer a window into how local news audiences think and talk, providing a critical resource for “bridging gaps” between news producers and the community they serve. When focus group participants discuss their experiences with local news and information, they provide insights into their habits and preferences that go beyond what they click on or share online. The process of discussing and reacting to other participants’ ideas can produce a richer and more deeply refined set of findings than would be possible through individual discussion alone.[2] In the sections that follow, we outline the basic processes associated with designing and conducting focus group research on local news audiences.

Part Two:
Developing Your Questions

Your first step in planning a focus group is to design a focus group guide that includes the moderator's introduction and the research questions. Development of the guide begins with determining your project's research goals and desired outcomes.

STRUCTURED VS. UNSTRUCTURED

Planning the structure or design of the guide depends on the kind of information that you want to learn from participants. The design may range between more or less structured depending on whether the research seeks answers to specific research questions or insights into the group's interests or perspective on a topic. A more structured guide includes more questions, while an unstructured guide may only use three or four broad questions or topics for discussion.[3] Almost all focus groups begin with a broad (often autobiographical) question to allow each individual to feel comfortable contributing to the topic discussed.

QUESTION DESIGN

Broadly speaking, questions should be open-ended and easy to follow. Whenever possible, the order of questions should flow from general to specific and try to introduce positive inquiries before negative ones. The questionnaire must take into consideration the time necessary to answer each question sufficiently. For a moderately structured group, the number of questions can range from 8–12, depending on the time allotted and the number of participants. The "funnel" questionnaire design, for example, begins with 1–2 broad questions at the top, covers 3–4 topics in more detail in the middle, and ends with specific questions.[4]

TEST YOUR GUIDE

A pilot test of the guide often provides suggestions for improving its content and wording. After initial development of the questionnaire, you may choose to share the guide with research partners (journalists, foundations, or academics) and others. Their reviews will ensure that the guide reflects the concerns and questions of all research partners and potential participants. Early focus group sessions may also provide an opportunity to make minor changes in the wording or order of questions to improve their flow or clarity. Changes to the questions themselves should only be considered when a question is clearly not working.

Part Three:
Focus Group Recruitment

Recruitment planning is critical. The focus group's composition and, ultimately, its findings depend on the effective recruitment of participants.

WHO DO YOU NEED TO REACH?

Recruitment design derives from the goal(s) of the research. Who do you need to talk to in order to answer your questions and/or to explore and discover new insights? Do you want to hear from your current readership or would you like to talk to nonreaders to discover ways of reaching a larger portion of the community? The filters applied and the methods and approaches taken for recruitment hinge upon careful reflection on what group(s) or eligibility criteria will best address your goals and questions.

AVOIDING RECRUITING BIAS

When considering the method or means of recruitment, there should be careful consideration of possible recruiting bias. This bias occurs when certain individuals or groups are excluded from the focus group for reasons not specified in the research plan. For example, recruitment solely through online news outlets limits access to those who meet their news needs offline, such as the elderly, or those who cannot afford an internet connection. Another recruitment bias could be English-only communications that exclude non-English speaking groups. Depending on the goals and research questions guiding the focus groups, further recruitment efforts may be needed to reach excluded groups. These efforts might include reaching out to community centers or posting recruitment notices in coffee shops and other public places. To help reduce recruitment bias, random selection should be used whenever possible. This is discussed in more detail below.

REGISTRATION OUTREACH AND LOGISTICS

As recruitment is often the first time that participants are contacted, all communication should appear approachable and professional. This includes recruitment methods that call for public postings or advertisements. These notices should include the general topic of the focus group (such as "focus group on local issues and news"), the registration link and/or phone number, the date/time, and the incentive offered (often a monetary reward from $20–$100). Incentives not only generate interest in participation, but also build a sense of mutual obligation between researchers and participants.

A registration page can be created through Google Forms enabling for easy exportation of collected information into Excel (such as name, community live in, email, phone number, time available, preferred means of contact, and comments). While many may prefer an email informing them of their selection, some individuals may prefer to be contacted by phone rather than email. Elderly participants, for example, often ask to be contacted by phone. Depending on the recruitment method, you may want to add a line on the registration page asking for a preferred method of contact (phone or email). This shows consideration of participants' needs and helps ensure a successful turnout.

SELECTING YOUR GROUP

The registration page offers an opportunity to clarify the parameters of final selection by including such language as, “Completing this form does not guarantee you a position in the focus group. Final participants will be randomly selected from all responses. Thank you for your interest.” A random number generator (accessible online) should be used to help select the final group from those who register. Ideally, the final focus group should include 8–10 participants. While retention rates vary, depending on such circumstances as the type of people recruited, the amount of compensation offered, and even the weather, 11–12 participants should be selected and contacted to allow for possible no-shows.

Through initial interaction with potential participants, you may occasionally discover signs that a potential participant may be a disruptive or overpowering group member. If possible, we recommend excluding such individuals from a focus group because disruptive participants are harmful to the dynamic of the entire session. Overall, correspondence with selected participants should remain grateful and positive and provide critical logistical details (such as the room location, parking details, and a contact phone number) not included in previous correspondence.

LOCATION

Scout for a room that will fit a table (or set of tables pushed together) that will comfortably seat all of the participants. You may want to prepare signs directing participants to the selected room. The moderator should greet, welcome, and get to know participants, and the assistant moderator should help distribute and collect materials such as nametags, parking slips for validation, and forms to be signed. Any compensation should be provided at the conclusion of each session.

Part Four:
Moderating Your Focus Group

CREATE A WELCOMING SPACE

When moderating a focus group, you will want to be thoughtful about how to create a welcoming atmosphere that makes your participants as comfortable as possible. First, consider how your participants will be dressed and try to dress in a matching style. Second, if you have a list of the attendees' names, prior to the session, memorize them as well as any additional details you have access to, such as a participant's neighborhood, age, or job. Third, when your participants arrive, greet them warmly, shake their hands, thank them for their participation, and introduce them to attendees who have already arrived. These introductions ensure that your attendees become better acquainted with you and, more importantly, each other.

To facilitate discussion, the moderator should be seated in the middle of the circle or table where participants will sit. Notetakers or others assisting with the focus group should try to spread out evenly among the attendees. After the attendees have chosen their seats, the moderator should quickly sketch a seating chart and tuck it beneath the list of questions to refer to if names are forgotten or nametags removed. During the discussion, the moderator should use names as often as possible. This practice makes participants more comfortable and aids in the transcription of audio-recorded sessions.

GROUP INTRODUCTIONS

As the session begins, the moderator should introduce herself/himself to the attendees, briefly explain the research purpose, and thank the attendees again for their participation. It is critical to describe what a focus group is and to underscore the usefulness of hearing as many of points of view as possible. While attendees may not all agree, being respectful of others' views is essential.

Next, the moderator should go around the table and have each participant provide their name and a personal observation, preferably one that is relevant to the subject of the discussion. For example, we began our sessions by having attendees share a news issue important to them that is impacting their community. Moderators should also provide a detail from their lives, which gives participants time to think and makes them feel more comfortable. Notetakers or other attendees should do this as well and feel free to quickly engage with the group at points in discussion. Apparent "lurkers" in the room can make participants nervous.

FACILITATING THE DISCUSSION

As the moderator begins to move through the questions, it is crucial to keep in mind that the goal of the process is to hear as many opinions as possible and gather feedback from participants. Even though the moderator and assistants may be experts on the topic themselves, they should show an interest in all comments. Provide visual cues to demonstrate your interest, shaking your head, smiling, and making eye-contact.

One of the major challenges in moderating a focus group can be deftly guiding participant discussion in a way that simultaneously allows all participants to feel included and appreciated, and obtains the needed research information. In focus groups, one participant or a few participants are often very confident speaking in front of others and outspoken in their views. Other participants, however, are more reticent and do not readily voice their opinions. While you will not want a few participants to dominate, keep in mind that all attendees will be looking closely at how you interact with them. Remain attentive and respectful of everyone's opinion at all times and do not cut off speakers. One useful trick is providing attendees with positive reinforcement and then pivoting to an inclusive comment — for example, "Susan, thank you so much for sharing that. It's very helpful for us; it reminded me of Marion's comment earlier regarding news blogs." Or "Susan, thank you for sharing that. Marion, do you have something to add?" If a participant interrupts another speaker, you can quickly let them finish their point but then provide a subtle reminder of the need to hear from all voices — for example, "Susan, thank you for that. Marion, I think you were making a point, and we want to hear from you. Please continue."

MANAGING CONFLICT

If participants move off topic to a very personal or sensitive issue unrelated to a particular focus group question, do not quickly cut off the discussion, which can seem insensitive. Instead, listen for a few minutes, then steer the conversation back on track. Even though the content of the focus group may seem uncontroversial, participants can clash over a political or policy issue, and the conversation can unexpectedly turn heated. For example, in a recent focus group on local news access, one participant who made a disparaging remark about Fox News was interrupted by another participant who saw this as "bias." The first participant angrily stood half-up, remarking that she would leave if she was going to be "so personally attacked." In such cases, the moderator should intervene immediately and try to deescalate the situation by using a calm tone and reminding all participants of the challenge of focus group participation and the importance of respecting all voices. Do not appear to take sides or have an opinion on a controversial issue. If one or more participants leave the discussion, do not make an issue of it. Instead, thank them for their time and remind the remaining participants of how appreciative you are for their participation and insights.

When the focus group concludes, thank your participants again and, if possible, discuss how the information you gathered will be used. If they can have access to your report or be involved in some way in a future product, let them know. Shake all hands as they depart and be sure to use names. If you are conducting multiple focus groups on the same topic, take time after the first session to reevaluate the questions and consider how the discussion went. You may realize that some questions should be reworded, reordered, omitted, or added.

Part Five:
Data Analysis and Reporting

CODING THE INTERVIEWS

Once the focus group has concluded, you will need to transcribe your audio recordings for a detailed analysis of your participants' responses. To analyze your data, you will review the transcript or "code" it, moving line by line to take note of themes or concepts. For example, codes could be for specific topics such as "citizen journalism" or "Facebook news access" or broader ones such as "lack of trust in news." Coding should progress through two stages: "open coding" and "closed coding." Open coding is a stage in which you review data for any identifiable themes, no matter how disparate or unrelated to your research questions or goals. The second closed coding stage applies the specific themes that relate to your research questions or goals. The open codes can be analytically useful because they may reveal ideas that relate to your goals but were outside the scope of your initial questions. Some researchers choose to use "intercoder-reliability" — that is, have two coders review the transcripts independently and compare their notes to ensure the reliability of the codes.

As you move through the coding process, you may have to refine or revise codes. For example, an early code may be "positive news." But later you may determine that this code is too broad to capture the complexity of the issue. Therefore, you can create sub-codes under "positive news" such as "positive news about community events" or "positive news unrelated to crime." Rather than creating very specific codes, it is useful to consider loose, descriptive codes that may capture a broader — but important — dimension of a problem or question.

Finally, drawing on both open and closed codes, individual memos can be written to synthesize research findings. These memos can then be revised, edited, and integrated into a single collective narrative. When possible, your final report should include excerpts from participant quotes to reinforce particular analytic points.

USING THE DATA IN THE NEWSROOM

Once you have the coded transcripts and a narrative that draws out key themes, you have to decide how to use those findings in your newsroom. Acknowledging the likely mix of critical and constructive feedback in the focus group report, it is helpful to have advance buy-in from newsroom stakeholders. If people do not value this process from the start, it will be difficult to use community feedback for meaningful change in the newsroom.

The best focus groups produce useful lessons and themes for discussion across the newsroom, providing insights that have business implications, suggest editorial ideas, and raise engagement issues. Use the focus group report to host a series of strategic discussions with relevant departments, with a focus on creating action plans based on user feedback. Some departmental overlap may be worthwhile to ensure that conversations about the report are not isolated and that teams can work together on their responses. Keep in mind that one outcome from a focus group may be more information gathering to better understand a trend identified by the research discussions. In many cases, however, focus groups can give a newsroom enough information to begin testing prototypes of new story ideas, revenue models, and engagement strategies.

Part Six:
Conclusion

This focus group guide attempts to provide practical information on how to coordinate, plan, and run an effective focus group that yields greater insights into the information needs of local news audiences. The emphasis has been on the focus group process rather than how to use focus group information in your newsroom. Although every newsroom will use focus group data in different ways, we think this kind of audience feedback is especially important in developing new revenue and editorial products. Above all, we believe that your research goal for the focus groups should take center stage and that our suggestions may need modification to align with a particular project. If you plan to conduct more than one focus group, it may be helpful to review your process after each session, revise your questions or procedures, and add your own notes to this guide.

For more information on focus groups, their theoretical background, and history on their usage, a list of references has been provided. Also included is a focus group “checklist” of key points discussed in this guide. Finally, it is important to note that a well-planned, well-executed focus group can not only be a valuable tool to investigate the habits and practices of local news audiences, but also be a very enjoyable and rewarding experience for the research team and the focus group participants.

Appendix One: Focus Group Preparation Checklist

DEVELOPING YOUR QUESTIONS

- ☐ Determine the research goals, the purpose, and desired outcomes
- ☐ Create a moderator guide with introduction and questions
- ☐ Design questions to begin with broad (often autobiographical) question to allow each individual to contribute
- ☐ Order questions from general to specific and from positive to negative
- ☐ Test your guide — run a practice focus group

RECRUITMENT AND PLANNING

- ☐ Identify a room/space to use and decide on date and time
- ☐ Define your target — Who do you need to talk to in order to answer your questions and/or to explore and discover new insights?
- ☐ Design outreach to avoid recruitment bias
- ☐ Define and acquire incentives (gift card, etc.) for participating
- ☐ Create a registration page — consider all fields you need
- ☐ Produce and deploy promotional materials — ads, postings, emails, etc.
- ☐ Use a random number generator to select participants
- ☐ Invite 12 people for a focus group of 8–10 to account for no-shows

DAY-OF LOGISTICS

- ☐ Reminder email sent with date/time, directions, parking information, and contact number
- ☐ Directional signs (including tape or easel for posting)
- ☐ Check on proper arrangement of table(s) and correct number of chairs for each session
- ☐ Sign-in list/list of participants
- ☐ Parking validation for participants, if needed
- ☐ Name tags and/or a name plates for participants
- ☐ Markers/pens and notepads for participants
- ☐ Consent forms for interview/taping permissions, if required
- ☐ Compensation and receipts, if needed
- ☐ Water for participants and moderator
- ☐ Copies of focus group questionnaire guide for moderator and assistants

- ☐ Computer/notepad for note-taking for assistants
- ☐ Audio recorder with extra batteries (may need two recorders depending on size of table/group)

MODERATING

- ☐ Create a welcoming environment
- ☐ Seat staff strategically
- ☐ Request that all staff participate fully
- ☐ Use introductions to make people feel comfortable
- ☐ Value all interactions
- ☐ Manage conflict when it arises without devaluing people’s input

DATA ANALYSIS AND USE

- ☐ Transcribe the focus groups
- ☐ Code the feedback in the transcription, looking for themes
- ☐ Create a narrative of what you learned
- ☐ Convene newsroom stakeholders to share the data

Appendix Two: References

These sources were used as references for this guide and provide more information if you are interested in learning more about focus groups and local communities.

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