



Qualitative research through groups is needed for political communication

PH.D Guido Lara

This brief essay seeks to contribute elements for reflecting and comprehending the potential of qualitative research through groups discussions for political communication and the democracy.

I. Published opinion and the *public's* opinion

Public opinion consists of two types of opinions, *published* opinion and the *public's* opinion.

While *published* opinion is that reflected in communication media on a determined topic, the *public's* opinion is the citizens' point of view, emotions and feelings of on the issue.

Published opinion and the *public's* opinion are not the same, and to affirm it would imply that opinions of all social groups are reflected in a balanced manner (in quantity and quality) in communication media, which is obviously false.

Published opinion, as Balandier¹ has seen it, is a result of the “struggle between interests, convictions and expectations of politicians, researchers, analysts, consultants, publicists, political marketing advisers and journalists who give life to a ..., ¿public opinion? ..., that they themselves have created. This is, to a large extent, manufactured, plotted by agents and devices that compete to be those who express it; even though it gives the impression that they simply analyze it and make it clear”.

If we limit ourselves to knowing the *published* opinion without going out to the “field” without speaking to people, without listening to them, without understanding them, we run the risk of repeating stories like those experienced the now very remote 1994 presidential election during.

During the days before the election, we remember how nobody that was informed through the country's most prestigious printed and electronic communication media would have expected such an overwhelming triumph of the PRI. The voices that announced a very probable victory of the opposition were multiplied in these media

¹ Georges Balandier, *El poder en escenas*, Paidós. Barcelona, 1994.

(based more on their hopes and desires than on real quantitative and qualitative information).

Those who were expecting to win in that manner were the “PRIistas” themselves, sure of the results because of the large number of surveys and focus groups that supported their certainty².

Staying with the published opinion can be a very simple way of visualizing mirages. That is why it is indispensable that political players who fight for democracy use research methods and techniques that allow them to measure (quantitatively) and understand (qualitatively) *public* opinion, meaning that of the citizens.

In that context, to know the public’s opinion, it is necessary to go beyond what is published and beyond surveys- being in contact with flesh and blood people who are generating their opinion through qualitative techniques.

II. *Measuring is not the same as understanding*

In the major survey of August 21, 1994, the results were Ernesto Zedillo 50%, Diego Fernandez 26%, and Cuauhtémoc Cardenas 17%. But what is behind those numbers?

This magna survey allowed us to *measure* precisely the number of voters that wanted one or another candidate to be President of the Republic, but without a doubt, it does not allow us to understand why they voted like that. What were the reasons, prejudices, desires, fears, and hopes behind those votes?

While quantitative methods allow us to count votes, we can *understand* political perceptions of social groups only through qualitative methods.

III. **Group techniques (understanding) vs. quantitative techniques (measuring)**

I will go on by pointing out some methodological advantages of group techniques³ over quantitative techniques to understand public opinion.

Selection of the methodology should be based on the similarity between how data is produced and the way the phenomena is.

SURVEYS

² Adolfo Aguilar Zinser relates how he met with Esteban Moctezuma on the eve of the '94 elections, who said to him, “Adolfo, we’re going to win the election. The PRI candidate will get almost 50%, Cuauhtémoc will be in third place with 15 or 17%, and Diego would have less than 30%”. Adolfo Aguilar Zinser, *Vamos a ganar*, Editorial Océano, 1995, p.33

³ Discussion groups and Focus Groups are qualitative techniques for the production, analysis, and interpretation of what participants say in sessions. Discussion groups are characterized by being more open to controversy, while focus groups pay attention to opinions based on a determined topic guide. Discussion groups are of more use in understanding complex social problems. For example, expectations regarding the next Mexico City government, while focus groups are of more use for finding qualitative answers to specific problems (for example, perceptions regarding campaign advertising material). Discussion groups have more influence in Latin Europe: Spain, France, Italy, etc., while focus groups are used more in the Anglo-Saxon world (United States, Canada, England, etc.). Transnational North American companies introduced focus groups in México, which are those conducted most in the national market (but the research problem would often be studied more efficiently through discussion groups).

- Voting is like a “test”. The voter’s freedom is limited, as in a closed questionnaire:
- The voter is obliged to choose between a closed range of options. For example: PAN, PRI, and PRD.
- The voter does not choose or form options (they are given to him).
- The voter can vote for only one option.
- The questionnaire does not have the capacity to register any opinion given other than those indicated.

A statistical survey is much like voting, which is why it is the most appropriate technique for researching both voting trends and results of reading *exit polls*.

GROUPS

Public opinion is like a “conversation”. It is in what people say -put into action- that causes social perceptions to be conceived.

So-called *public opinion* is produced and circulated during informal conversations among members of a social group. The topics (“commonplace”) produced in these conversations reflect the consensus and agreements of the social group they belong to.

Since group techniques (discussion groups⁴ and focus groups) are much like public opinion, they are more appropriate for studying them.

In language, we will find an unbeatable subject to study for understanding public opinion.

SURVEYS

In a survey, we apply only the *referential* function of language to point out things or situations that indicate facts, so we can answer questions such as, What kind of car do you have? Did you watch television yesterday? Who did you vote for? etc. This happens because it relates to trans-linguistic facts that are not in language.

We will have serious limitations by trying to use a survey to know aspects formed inside language (structural function). It is inadequate for capturing the expression of emotions, opinions, desires, and beliefs of interviewees, as well as the esthetic, moral, and political connotations of their words.

Furthermore, there is a flood of uncaptured information.

- Stereotyping the existential linguistic framework allows only choppy answers (opinion disappears).
- Fixed questions contain their possible answers.
- Topics considered pertinent may not be just that and/or inhibit others from emerging.

GROUPS

The spoken word, produced in a group, is a privileged material of social research because we can identify and comprehend *collective subjectivity* through language.

⁴ Jesús Ibáñez, *Más allá de la sociología (El grupo de discusión. Técnica y Crítica)*, Siglo XXI, Madrid, 1986.

Conversation is the minimum interaction unit of social interaction, which is a type of *dialogical* language game. It is an open information game since the respondent could disagree with the question and ask other questions.

Every interlocution opens spaces to other listeners through which we can truly identify topics that interest the public and opinions each social group has of them.

Language is social. Society is a reality that talks, and with which we give a helping hand to *ideas and believes generation* during a group discussion.

We can accede to the public's mentality through associations, doubts, silences, affirmations, ambiguities, and contradictions arising during a group discussion. Because of that, recorded speech⁵ would be a very useful for interpretation and analysis of *public opinion*.

IV. Qualitative research and political communication

Information produced in discussion and focus groups can have numerous applications for the political world, among which we could mention:

- a) Creation of proposals and work programs with the public's point of view.
- b) Transformation of social demands into public policies.
- c) Identification of profiles of candidates up for popular vote.
- d) Design and preparation of communication strategies that respond to the public's interests and expectations.

We will pause on this last point to underline the potential offered by group techniques to generate effective political communication.

Information produced in groups is expressed in speech, in words: raw material of any communication strategy.

As Balandier⁶ has also pointed out:

Taking the words of everything a group recognizes assures a considerable advantage in power struggles. One of the most universal strategies used by professionals of symbolic power: poets in archaic societies, prophets, politicians and communicators consists in putting common sense to one side, and grasping words valued by the entire group because their beliefs are deposited in them. By comprehending how public opinion is structured, the transmitter will be able to design messages that talk to the receptor, speaking of topics that interest him in terms he understands, meaning according to his interests and in his own words.

However, be careful, our democratic life will lose a lot if political players use the information merely to make a cynical adjustment to the message and their political

⁵ As for their retention, these situations contemplate memory devices, registration mechanisms (audio recordings if what is said is the only interest, or videos if other significant elements must be incorporated, such as kinesic codes -gestures and proxemics- movements that distance or approach, etc.)

⁶ Balandier, *Op.cit.*, p.291

proposals. We will advance greatly if the information helps undertake a dialog process and the public's responsible conviction of their opinions, point of view and circumstances.

In democracy, it is fundamental that political players break away from their monologue and give way to a dynamic of conversation that listens to and values *collective subjectivity*. This type of labor is already seen at a political level with different social groups but it is essential to incorporate research techniques that produce systemized qualitative information.

The use of group techniques will be very useful in attending tactical, political communication problems (pre-test and post-test of advertising messages, evaluation of candidates' performance, etc.) but also to understand fundamental processes of our democratic process. (How much confidence is there in political players and/or electoral institutions? How much identification is there with democratic values? What is the image of a political party?).⁷

Therefore, with the future elections in sight, would be that all the political players, economic agents and civil society made systematized efforts by means of group techniques to understand the public's opinion and, in that manner, set up true social dialog.

⁷ In Mexico's market research file, Alejandro Garnica points out a gap between strategic vs. tactical studies. For example, advertising evaluation projects surpass the frequency of base studies 2 to 1. That means demand is still oriented to asking for answers to conjunctural questions more than generating knowledge of intelligence about people and markets. *Boletín de la Asociación Mexicana de Agencias de Investigación de Mercado y Opinión Pública*, no. 11.