Online Focus Groups: Selecting a Platform

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#### Abstract:

The evaluator in an online environment must make deliberate choices: she must craft a space and a mode of engagement that will elicit good information from participants. Whereas face-to-face focus groups draw on participants’ innate and rich capacity to exchange language and meaning in close proximity to each other, online focus groups must conceive of “proximity” and “exchange” in new ways. Moreover, in a world where technologies are constantly evolving, it is difficult to separate passing technology fads from lasting tools and trends. With these considerations in mind, this paper offers a framework for selecting an online focus group platform. It gives examples of both free and proprietary services that online evaluators may want to consider. It also emphasizes that the technology landscape is constantly evolving, and offers dimensions for selecting platforms that will be relevant across time, as platforms continue to evolve.

## Introduction

Technology occupies at least two types of “realities”--both of which will be of interest to focus group researchers who are hoping to harness the potential of technology to conduct meaningful social research. First--and most commonly discussed--is the “technical” reality: the access to hardware, processing speeds, Internet bandwidth requirements, storage capacities, and the like. This paper will focus primarily on these technical considerations.

The second aspect that deserves mention, however, is that technologies occupy very complex spaces of human emotion--ranging from excitement and curiosity to fear and skepticism. The focus group researcher is eminently involved in eliciting, observing, and understanding human emotional and social reactions. Particularly in the online realm, the ability to observe the emotions embedded in participants’ statements may prove tricky, but is important to accurately interpreting and understanding participants’ responses. The savvy online focus group researcher will learn to recognize barriers to expression--technical or otherwise--that their participants may be facing online, and look for ways to mitigate these barriers.

These complex realities should help dispel the myth that it is “easier” to conduct a focus group online--or that the face-to-face focus group structure can be translated one-to-one into an online platform. While many focus group researchers have developed an intuitive sense of how to elicit information-rich participation in face-to-face settings, putting focus groups online moves us into a realm where little can be taken for granted. It is difficult to create an online space that is as “transparent” as a face-to-face space, and that participants will universally feel comfortable engaging within. In a sense, the online focus group researcher cannot rely on “natural” participant instincts, and must deliberately craft an online space that is welcoming and creates room for meaningful social interaction among participants.

## The Technology Landscape

Perhaps the most certain thing we can say about technology is that it is always changing. This fact makes it difficult to give exact recommendations for what is the “best” technology or platform for conducting online focus groups at any given time and with any given participant group--now, or as the technological landscape evolves. Instead, it is more fruitful to give some orienting frameworks and fundamental questions for understanding *how* to think about and select an online focus group platform/technology, without giving any prescriptions for *which* platform/technology is “the best”. The specific technologies mentioned in this paper may fade in and out of use, but the framework will hopefully remain relevant.

Let us first consider a format that most social researchers are familiar with: a typical face-to-face focus group. Face-to-face focus group interactions consist of participants and moderator(s) gathered in the same physical space at the same time. We can think of this face-to-face scenario as one end of a continuum that varies along the axes of “space” and “time”. Different technologies can create a sense of time and space in different ways. Some may seek to replicate the feeling of “real-time” and “real-space” that exist in face-to-face situations, but some may create entirely different combinations of felt time and space. This leads to an interesting mental shift: online focus groups help us conceive of new styles of interaction that can yield data-rich participation, rather than assuming face-to-face conversation is the “gold standard” of participant interaction.

One key distinction for thinking about online platforms is the distinction between *synchronous* and *asynchronous* discussion platforms. This represents the ends of a temporal continuum we can use to classify different technologies available for online focus group discussions. This synchronous/asynchronous distinction, and the implications it has for the quality of human interactions online, is already being fleshed out in the literature on distance education and online learning.

*Synchronous* platforms allow participants to interact at the same time, but from different places. Phone calls, video conferences, and text chats are all examples of synchronous technologies. Synchronous platforms generally place more time constraints and Internet bandwidth requirements on participants. They do, however, allow for a real-time “back-and-forth” information exchange. Additionally, many synchronous platforms have some capacity to transmit non-verbal information, such as nuances of vocal tone or body language.

*Asynchronous* platforms allow participants to participate at different times, from different places, and/or at their own pace. Discussion boards, blogs, mailing lists (listservs), or even posting videos to YouTube are all examples of asynchronous technologies. Asynchronous platforms generally are the most flexible for participants with busy schedules or who reside in different time zones. Focus group researchers with fewer technology resources and experience may also prefer asynchronous platforms, since they require less “in-the-moment” troubleshooting support. See Table 1 for a summary of things to consider when weighing the benefits of synchronous vs. asynchronous online platforms.

*Table 1.* Considerations for synchronous vs. asynchronous platforms

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Synchronous (online at the same time)** | **Asynchronous (online at different times)** |
| * more closely approximates the flow of face-to-face conversation
* good for topics that require a lot of back-and-forth discussion and social engagement among participants
* opportunity for immediate clarification, which minimizes time spent addressing potential misunderstandings
* participants may feel rushed, or lose the conversation thread--particularly if they do not already have experience with the platform you are using
 | * good for participants who can’t connect online at the same time (due to time zone differences, works schedules, etc.)
* can facilitate a longer-term discussion, giving participants time for longer reflection and response
* leaves more time to resolve technical issues; doesn’t require fast, in-the-moment troubleshooting
 |

Another key distinction among online platforms is the extent to which they create a sense of *social presence*. *Social presence* has been defined as the “degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships” (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976, cited in Aragon, 2003, p. 59). The degree to which technology platforms support a sense of social presence can be mapped along a spatial continuum: “high social presence” technologies will replicate a sense of real, embodied space and “low social presence” technologies will feel “flatter” and give fewer visual and/or audio cues. Like synchronicity, social presence is an issue being explored in the literature on distance education and online learning.

Since birth, most of us have been taught how to engage and feel “present” in face-to-face conversations. As a result, we generally expect participants and moderators to naturally experience a high sense of social presence in face-to-face scenarios. When online platforms are used to mediate interpersonal communication, participants do not always experience a high sense of social presence. This diminished sense of social presence leads a communicator to experience a feeling of “psychological distance … between himself or herself and the object of his/her communication” (Gunawardena and Zittle, 1997, p. 9). Some technologies, such as voice and video features, can generate a sense of “high social presence”, and may mitigate some of this psychological distance by allowing participants to hear each others’ inflection, or see gestures and non-verbal cues. Consequently, this also becomes richer data for researchers--particularly when it comes to topics that are emotion-laden. Voice and video technologies, however, also come with a degree of risk: insufficient bandwidth or unreliable Internet connections may result in choppy video or a voice chat that fades in and out, quickly alienating participants..

Additionally, online focus group researchers also face a kind of trade-off between social presence and accessibility. “High social presence” technologies frequently require access to high-bandwidth Internet, and are hence less broadly accessible to participants. Older Americans and African-Americans are two groups who may be underrepresented as they may be less likely to have access to broadband Internet at home (Smith, 2010). Text-based technologies, on the other hand, typically convey only “low social presence”, but they also demand less bandwidth and thus can reach a broader and more varied participant base. Table 2 is a summary of issues to consider when deciding what level of social presence is most appropriate for a given research project.

*Table 2.* Considerations for high social presence vs. low social presence platforms

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **High social presence (voice/video)** | **Low social presence (text-based)** |
| * requires participants to have access to fast Internet speeds (for voice and video)
* participants will most likely not be able to remain anonymous and will need to accept a lower degree of confidentiality
* useful when it’s important to preserve differences in physical appearance, age, gender, ethnicity, etc. and their influence on participants
* the ability to transmit non-verbal and emotional cues allows for the collection of “rich” data
 | * works with lower bandwidth and slower Internet speeds
* can provide a high degree of participant confidentiality and/or anonymity
* can “mask” differences in physical appearance, age, gender, ethnicity, etc.
* generates easily-exportable transcripts
 |

Experiencing a feeling of social presence is complex and is not limited to the features or limitations of any given technology. Beyond the technological affordances of any given platform, participants’ past experiences with online technologies and moderators’ skill and effort will also play a role in the type of social presence participants experience in online focus groups. At the current state of technological development we see in the United States, adult users are already engaged in a diverse array of online activities. Online voice calls, video conferencing, posting media to sites like YouTube, and creating online profiles on sites like Facebook are all growing increasingly accessible and ubiquitous in our society (Trend Data, 2012). Online focus group researchers will want to tap into these kinds of pre-existing habits and comfort level with online engagement. Interestingly, there is also some evidence of generational differences in how people come to feel socially present online. Some teenagers and young adults who have “grown up tethered” may actually feel *more* socially present online than in certain face-to-face contexts (Turkle, 2011). There are also strategies that moderators can employ to foster a sense of social presence, even if participants are less facile with online platforms (see, for example: Lee & O’Brien, 2012).

Now that we have explored different approaches to time and space that online platforms can create, we can combine them to construct a technology typology that may be useful to online focus group researchers. If we put “time” (synchronous vs. asynchronous) on one axis, and “space” (high social presence vs. low social presence) on another, we create a dual continuum on which to map various social media technologies. Figure 1 is a rough mapping of technologies and a small group of platforms that are currently available. This should help researchers start narrowing in on potential platforms that can be adapted for online focus groups:

*Figure 1*. The technology “space-time” continuum



Online focus group researchers hoping to approximate the “feel” of a face-to-face focus group will want to look for platforms towards the upper right-hand quadrant in Figure 1. Researchers who are concerned with anonymity and privacy, or whose participants have limited access to Internet, will focus on platforms in the lower left-hand quadrant. Many of the platforms listed combine multiple features (text/video chat, photo and text capabilities, etc.) and do not always fit cleanly into the asynchronous vs. synchronous or low vs. high social presence dichotomy. Figure 1 is intended to illustrate some of this complexity, and hopefully provides a theoretical space to start thinking about your particular research question, your participant base, and what style of online interaction could serve them best.

## The Supporting Infrastructure

Once you have addressed the more theoretical questions regarding the types of platforms/technologies that may best fit your research question and the style of interaction you are hoping to create for your participants, it is time to get to the supporting infrastructure of it all. At this point, you may be weighing several platforms, or have little sense of where to even start. The most appropriate platforms for your situation/research questions can often be identified through a process of elimination. Platforms lacking even one necessary key feature or design element, and those requiring time-consuming and onerous work-arounds can easily be ruled out. A realistic hierarchy of needs associated with a research design can be a helpful tool for narrowing the field of social media options most appropriate for a particular focus group.

The rest of this paper addresses various supporting infrastructural issues, arranged roughly along a technological “hierarchy of needs”, and including important questions to be asked about each of them. The following questions are designed to help online focus group researchers start ruling out--and “ruling in”--which online platforms will meet their needs.

### Internet Bandwidth

* Who are my participants, and how do they tend to access the Internet?
* Who, among my participant base, will have the *most limited access* to the Internet? How do I design my platform to meet his/her needs?

The U.S. is an incredibly “wired” nation--but online focus group researchers need to remember that not all wires are created equal. Although it depends somewhat on the research question at hand, the “ideal” scenario for an online focus group is arguably a group of participants who have access to high-speed broadband Internet in their homes. This maximizes flexibility in scheduling and provides the potential to integrate voice, video, or other multimedia elements into the focus group experience. From an infrastructural standpoint, there is good news: as of 2010, approximately 66% of American adults enjoyed broadband Internet access at home, with only 5% connecting through dial-up. Note, however, that home access to broadband Internet is still not evenly distributed across our society’s demographics: the typical home broadband user will be a college graduate, living in an urban area and having an annual household income of over $75,000 (Smith, 2010).

The savvy online focus group researcher also cannot ignore the myriad other ways that participants are able to access the Internet. One prominent alternative to broadband Internet service at home is the mobile phone. By June 2012, 88% of American adults owned a cell phone, 55% of those cell phone owners used their phones to access the Internet, and approximately 17% did *most* of their Internet browsing on their phones (Smith, 2012). This carries *huge* potential, particularly for researchers reaching out to populations who don’t have access to high-speed Internet service in their homes.

The important thing to note about Internet bandwidth is that it must become a question of “lowest common denominator”. Think about the participant(s) in your group who will likely have the most limited Internet access: How will they be connecting to the Internet? Will it be through high-speed broadband at their home or office? At a library? On their mobile phones? In the park or at a coffee shop providing free wireless access? Design your platform with the participant with the most limited access in mind, and aim to create a welcoming environment for them. When in doubt, it may be wise to survey participants about their preferred means of accessing the Internet and design your platform accordingly.

As is frequently the case in questions of technology, the concerns of today will grow obsolete tomorrow. Concerns about Internet speeds may eventually become a thing of the past for online focus group researchers. What seems clear, however, is that to some extent, trends in online access evolve along age, race, and gender lines. Online focus group researchers who are reaching out to specific participant groups who don’t fit the home broadband user demographic will want to thoroughly explore the online habits and type of internet access their participants will have.

### Anonymity & Confidentiality

* Are there institutional restrictions (via IRB, HIPAA, etc.) on how I can collect and store research data?
* Is my research sensitive? Do I need to guarantee confidentiality and/or anonymity?
* What level of anonymity/confidentiality to I want to promise participants?
* What attitudes do my participants likely have surrounding data privacy online? Do they have a history and culture of sharing online (common among younger generations), or will they need specific privacy assurances to feel comfortable in the online realm?

If your research requires some level of anonymity and confidentiality, it will be important to understand the function of a server and *where* and *how* your research data is being stored. As a rule of thumb, if you must ensure confidentiality or anonymity, you will need to make sure you can conduct your focus group and store your data on a server owned by you or your institution. If data privacy is a large concern within your research, you will want to talk to technology administrators at your institution to understand what options are available for hosting your focus group and storing your research data and how it will be protected. Be cautious when using Google services or third-party online platforms--including those advertised as “cloud” services. Because data is frequently stored on servers in different parts of the country or world and replicated in multiple places, most of these services do not provide the capabilities to guarantee participants’ confidentiality and anonymity.

The way you approach data privacy can directly impact the quality of the data you collect: if participants feel confused or concerned about the privacy of the data they share, they may be reticent or avoidant during an online focus group. For whatever platform you choose, be sure to read the privacy policies carefully and be able to give participants fair and realistic answers about who can access their data and when. Often, simply being frank about the potential privacy limitations of a platform will give participants a stronger sense of agency and trust in what they choose to share. Have a look at the discussion provided by Sintjago and Longley (2012) for more detailed information on security concerns within online focus groups.

### Moderator Resources & Technology Expertise

* How many moderators are available for this focus group discussion? If only one moderator is available, stick to *asynchronous* platforms. If two or more moderators are available, consider both *synchronous* and *asynchronous* platforms.
* Is the moderator able to experiment with and test out the platform I’m using? Does he/she feel comfortable with it?

The number of moderators available will influence the types of platforms that are reasonable options. When deciding between synchronous vs. asynchronous platforms, it is crucial to consider how many moderators will be available and their comfort levels with technology. Attempting a synchronous platform with only one moderator presents a risky trade-off: every minute the moderator must spend troubleshooting results is a minute of good data collection wasted. As a hard and fast rule: **if you do not have *at least* two moderators, *do not* attempt a synchronous online focus group.**

Since technology introduces additional variables to the focus group equation, it is a good idea to “divide and conquer”. Ideally, one moderator should not have to juggle *both* technology troubleshooting *and* data collection at the same time. You may want to allocate a “talk-moderator”, who focuses on the more traditional aspects of the focus group interaction--welcoming the group, asking probing questions, eliciting participation from less engaged members, etc. In addition, you should consider allocating a “tech-moderator”, who helps with troubleshooting and is proactive in making sure all participants are able to access and contribute within the online platform. The tech moderator should also have ample opportunity to experiment with and understand the technology being used before the focus group event commences. And, while a single, dedicated moderator may be able to manage both the “talk” and the “tech” ends of an asynchronous platform, it definitely “takes two to tango” on a synchronous platform.

### Recording/Archiving Capabilities

* Is a written transcript needed?
* Are audio/video recordings needed?
* Does the platform have a built-in recording feature, or is an external recorder/recording application needed?

Text-based “low social presence” platforms have the advantage of generating easily-exportable written transcripts. Platforms with “high social presence”, such as video- and audio-enabled platforms, may present more difficulties for recording and archiving. For synchronous platforms--particularly video and audio platforms, which put a lot of strain on a computer’s processing power--it can be tricky to simultaneously operate the focus group platform and fiddle with extra recording software on the same computer. For example, if you are hosting a Skype focus group and running recording software in the background on the same computer, you may run into problems if one of the programs crashes or interferes with the other.

In general, it is best to run your focus group on a computer with as few applications and processes running in the background as possible, and with the maximum-allowable memory installed on your computer. You will also want to mute any internal speakers (to avoid feedback and minimize sound distortion) save for output to a pair of headphones, and set the recording microphone at the highest possible gain (while still keeping sound distortion and static at a minimum). If you still have recording problems, it may be advisable to use an external recording device (ex. a handheld digital recorder or a smart phone) with all applications save the platform muted and the recording device far enough away from the computer’s speakers so as to prevent feedback and sound distortion.

### Cost

Most of the platforms listed in Figure 1 are free or relatively inexpensive. Many universities and corporations also have pre-existing subscriptions to web conferencing services or course management systems (such as Moodle, Blackboard, etc.) that can be adapted for hosting online focus groups. It is a good idea to check with your institution first, to see if you have access to any institutionally-owned/subscribed services that appropriate for hosting online focus groups.

Table 3 roughly organizes the platforms/technologies from Figure 1 into three cost categories: free options, low cost options, and options that are high cost or require institutional support or a subscription. Note that as a general rule of thumb, the more expensive and commercialized an option is the more the vendor has invested in ensuring that the platform remains stable for a large number of simultaneous users, especially where high social presence is involved.

*Table 3*. Cost of popular online social platforms

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Free** | **Low-Cost** | **High-Cost /** **Institutional Subscription** |
| WordPress | Skype (Premium) | Adobe Connect |
| YouTube | Ning | Course management system (Moodle, Blackboard, etc.) |
| Google Hangout | VoiceThread | Telepresence |
| Facebook group | Online discussion board |  |
| E-mail list |  |  |

### Built-in Flexibility

* Does my platform offer multiple ways for participants to engage? For example, if their video chat isn’t working, can they still participate via text chat? If their Internet connection is slow, can they call in via cell phone, or submit an e-mail response?
* Does my focus group provide participants with a backup strategy to follow if there are any communication problems? For example: if a participant loses Internet connectivity altogether, is there a back-up plan?
* Does such a backup strategy exist and has it been shared with all participants?

Many of today’s online services combine a broad swath of features into a single platform. Fortunately, if planned well and communicated clearly to participants, this makes it easier to deal with potential technical difficulties. For example, Skype is best known for its video and voice chats, but also includes file share and text chat features. Ning, a create-it-yourself social networking platform, includes asynchronous discussion boards, user profiles, and blogs with synchronous chat features. Depending on the platform(s) selected: if a respondent’s video chat is not working, he/she can still participate via text chat; if a respondent’s Internet connection is slow or is not working, he/she can participate by calling in or submitting an e-mail response either at a later time when the Internet is working, or through the use of a cell phone. Taking time to get acquainted with the different modes of interaction that each platform allows will help moderators take full advantage of these tools during the focus group session.

Having multiple modes of engagement serves several purposes: 1) It helps participants continue to feel in control and engaged by providing alternative means of participating when technological difficulties arise, and 2) it allows participants to select ways to engage that fit their personal communication styles. Evaluators and focus group moderators are thus encouraged to be flexible in their evaluation methods and not limit themselves to one type of technology. They need to be ready and willing to adjust their methods so emerging technological changes can be used to create the most comfortable space to fit the participants and research questions at hand.

## Conclusion

The above discussion helps illustrate the substantial design effort that online focus groups entail. Before venturing into this realm, focus group researchers will want to question: is there a compelling reason to be online in the first place? Is it important--for reasons of distance, time constraints, anonymity, etc.--to engage participants online? If the answer is “no”, then the researcher should stick to a face-to-face format, or consider hybrid online and in-person solutions.

With that said, online focus groups bring new opportunities that are impossible in face-to-face spaces. They can span distances, open up cross-cultural discussions in new ways, and open up participation to those who might otherwise be excluded from face-to-face recruitment (see, for example, Turney & Pocknee, 2005). In short, they can allow for exciting new recombinations of participant groups and modes of social engagement that expand the kinds of inquiries focus group researchers can conduct.

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