

THE GROUP INTERVIEW AS AN AUDIENCE REACTION MEASURE*

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A technique for obtaining audience reaction data by means of group interviews is described, together with examples of its application to two ETV kinescopes. Malcolm S. MacLean, Jr.,

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THOSE WHO produce and direct educational television programs necessarily are concerned about their impact. How can one get more than the usual feeble information on audience response without going to a great deal of trouble?

The group interview may help to resolve this problem. With a little care, it can provide a fruitful means for learning how people respond to a program. Furthermore, since the producer and director can easily act as participant-observers in the process, they may more quickly derive benefits than they could through rigorous and extensive research. Most of them will likely find group interview results much easier to integrate into a humanistic orientation than the usual research report. Hearing a middle-aged grocer's wife say she simply could not get the point when the man in the picture was scraping the rock with his knife may suggest more to the TV or film man than a neat table of figures. Those who have resisted behavioral research may find group interviews helpful in bridging the gap to a real understanding of what such researchers might contribute and have been contributing to their field. Work with this relatively informal method may eventually lead to a continuing

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program of research combining both formal and informal approaches.

Developing a research project for the Educational Television and Radio Center at Michigan State, we conducted group interviews with eight different social groups following their exposure to two ETRC programs. Our aims were to:

1. Test out and develop techniques for the group interview method.
2. Attain richer interpretation of more quantitative techniques used in the study.
3. Help in the development of categories for content analysis by discovering which elements in the form and content of the programs were noted by the audience.
4. Reveal some of the variety and quality in response which might suggest hypotheses that could be more rigorously tested later.

The two programs we studied were "Age of Jackson," a lecture by a priest-historian-professor of St. Louis University, and "Making a Formula," a lecture-discussion-demonstration by a woman doctor and a public health nurse.

The "Jackson" program was a simple lecture with several slides from woodcut portraits, and a map of the U. S., used for illustrations. Father Bannon talked about the North-South, the Missouri Compromise controversy, and the views of important political leaders of that day. He discussed the increase in tariffs and gave a simple example of what this meant to the buyer of shoes. He briefed out the Peggy O'Neil scandal. Finally, he showed and recommended three source books on the period.

In the "Formula" program, set in a "kitchen" with an obviously false window and exterior, the doctor compared breast and bottle feeding, then introduced the nurse. Details of cleaning bottles and nipples, mixing canned milk and syrup, and sterilizing were all demonstrated. Then the doctor took over again to tell why cleanliness is so important.

PROCEDURE

What is a group interview? How is it conducted? Here is a description of what we did.

The interviews were semistructured. Although anything relevant mentioned by any member of the group was followed up, a

standard series of points was covered in every session. The interview always opened with the question, "*Now, what did you think of this last program?*" After general impressions had been explored, the viewers were asked what they had *liked best* about the program and what they had *liked least*. These questions were so phrased that any aspects of the program could be mentioned. Responses, in fact, covered the gamut from subject matter, organization, and performer to parts of the program and details of the presentation. In doing this we departed from the premise that in addition to those aspects of the program which add to or detract from its interest for most people, there are specific features whose effects vary from one subgroup to another. Throughout, panel members were encouraged to respond freely.

The next questions asked in our interview dealt with specific portions of the program. The audience was asked to recall parts of the program they particularly liked and disliked. In addition, in sessions in which a program analyzer had been used, the "high point" and "low point" of the profile were located on an outline of the program prepared for this purpose, and were described to the audience. Members were not told that these represented their own group's highs and lows but were asked to recollect their reactions to them. (Thus we could compare the parts they told us they liked with parts the analyzer showed they liked.)

The next question on the schedule asked about learning: "*Do you think you got anything out of this program?*" This was followed by a question about the performer, such as: "*What did you think of the nurse?*" Any performer characteristic mentioned in response to this question was carefully explored, since it seemed that one of the most important values of interviews might lie in providing insight into the cues viewers use to decide whether they like a performer or not.

After covering parts of the program and aspects of the performer, the interviewer asked about the subject matter, inquiring whether the audience felt that it was a worthwhile subject for educational television. Viewers were next told to imagine that they were "put into a position where it was your job to improve this program." They were asked: "*What do you think would be the first thing you'd do?*" The next question, which ended the interview, asked for judgments on the audience reaction device used in the session. The group interviews were all recorded and transcribed. The following excerpts may provide an idea of the responses.

WHAT THE AUDIENCES LIKED AND DISLIKED

For the "Making a Formula" program, most of the favorable comments dealt with format. Audiences in general liked the idea of demonstration, but did not like some aspects of the one in this show. Other favorable references were made to the subject matter, the props, the setting, and to specific behaviors of the performers ("I liked the way the nurse deliberately or indeliberately [sic] made the mistake in making the formula.") There was considerably more unanimity about what was wrong with the program. These are some typical comments:

Too much detail . . . something like washing dishes to me.

Instead of filling seven bottles, they could have filled one bottle and said, "Here's the way you fill it, see." They could have condensed the program again into about a 5-minute program instead of taking the complete 30 minutes.

It was boring, because there was so much lifting and placing.

Sumpin that kinda irritated me was sometimes they go into this minute detail about sumpin we already know about, like we were little kids or sumpin.

She mentioned about having your measuring cup at eye level, I believe, about three times.

I think she used too simple things, like setting the kettle off of the stove to cool it.

Here, then, was an aspect of this particular program which was of fairly universal concern. If one were to make a single recommendation with regard to this program, it might be that its level should be raised, possibly through condensation and the elimination of any details that might appear obvious. Other things mentioned by the audience as objectionable features were noise ("the kettles and bottles banging together"), performer characteristics, and camera technique. The audiences made specific suggestions concerning production details. One person observed: "It seems as if (the nurse in the program) wasted time by having to move that dishpan over to the counter. It seems as if that could have gone like most of your programs, like your cooking programs, they have someone who takes it from her, she doesn't have to hop all over the kitchen to get rid of it." Seven respondents felt a baby should have been used in the program. Several viewers noticed poor camera work, suggesting that the operator did not follow the movements of the performer sufficiently fast. Miscellaneous suggestions

included the need for more rehearsal, changes in the backdrop, and the addition of more visual aids.

For the "Age of Jackson" program, there was much interest expressed in the subject matter. The presentation of the subject matter, however, evinced both favorable and unfavorable comments. For instance, whereas several respondents observed that the program was very informative, there were 16 comments relating to the number of facts in the program, all to the effect that there was *too much* information. Eleven objections related to continuity. Five charged that facts were being presented too quickly. The following are typical of these types of comments:

Maybe I'm just not able to take those facts all at one time. It's all right to have the facts, but I couldn't remember them as he gave them.

All those names. He had all those names there. A lot of names. He gave a lot of . . .

Although everything was related, he seemed to go from one subject to another; I mean, he jumped. You sort of wondered how he gets to tariffs after he was giving you a whole list of people and everything.

With regard to visual aids, the picture was similar. Several respondents were favorably impressed by the maps and the slide or two flashed during the program, but a surprisingly large number (20) suggested the use of more visual aids. The consensus was that straight lecturing made the program relatively monotonous, and too much like a college lecture. In several instances "You Are There" was mentioned as an illustration of what could be done to bring history to life.

In both programs, poor camera work also came in for its share of comment. It was especially noticed that there was a lag in following the actions of the performer.

I didn't like the camera work at all. The man who handled it had it directed at their noses. After a while you couldn't know if they were human beings.

She would show the brush and the camera was focused on the bottle. They weren't coordinated.

Too late in coming in and showing the equipment she was working on.

One general observation possible from a look at some of the preceding comments is that the danger of too much or too little information is a very real one in educational television. Surely such audience reaction sessions as described here might help in arriving at a happy medium between oversaturation and insults to the audience's intelligence. It is also obvious from the above that many subjects mention production details when asked to explain

why they like or dislike a given program. Such flaws do not go unnoticed.

HIGH AND LOW POINTS IN THE PROGRAM

The afore-mentioned likes and dislikes are probably of most interest in relation to a content analysis of programs. It might be possible to define some of the items mentioned objectively enough to be able to determine them directly from the program. Another aspect of the interviews relates to audience reaction profiles. These are the references to specific parts of the programs which constitute "high points" and "low points" to the audience. Again, of course, it might be possible to specify these objectively if their characteristics were known. First, however, we must determine whether the parts which are mentioned in retrospect are indeed the parts which are favorably or unfavorably reacted to while viewing. This is not an easy task in the case of the two programs used in our study, since it developed that there were no real salient features in them. Not only were the profiles singularly flat, but the audience appeared to have difficulty putting their fingers on anything noteworthy. The "Age of Jackson" did appear to contain moments which stood out favorably in the eyes of the audience. Those repeatedly mentioned spontaneously in the interview were:

The introduction with its music (Yankee Doodle)

The discussion of the Missouri Compromise: Thought he did a good job . . . in setting up how the slave states originated. . . . He was touching on a very important subject—segregation—very timely. . . . When he drew lines. . . . When he was talking about the slave states and the free states.

The discussion of protective tariffs, using an illustration of a shoe manufacturer: Where he was talking about the shoes and I began to realize what his point was when he explained cost. . . . Using the board to explain it, about the shoes, I thought that was interesting.

A reference to the Peggy O'Neil scandal: That was interesting to me because I wondered whether it had any connection with the song, "Peggy O'Neil." . . . He did very well with just a little ordinary humor in it, he got our interest, like for instance when he started to talk about Peggy O'Neil.

A listing of possible readings toward the end of the program. Several members of the audience mentioned that they liked the part where "he suggested different books." "I liked the idea of bringing out the actual book and showing it," said one respondent. Another indicated that she "took down all the names of those books and when I go to the library I will proceed to get some." This reaction suggests that group interviews may be helpful in gauging experimental techniques in television production.

Turning to our audience reaction profiles we discover that in general the points discussed spontaneously in the group interviews to explain likes and dislikes correspond closely to those emerging in the program at points the profiles show were liked or disliked. Or, contrariwise, high and low points do acquire psychological meaning in terms of the interview comments. It is apparent that the interviews constitute an important link between reaction measures and content analysis categories, since they suggest *why* our audience liked or disliked what they liked or disliked.

JUDGING THE PERFORMER

Undoubtedly one of the most important determinants of audience reaction to television programs is the audience's reaction to the performer. Common sense and research evidence suggest that if a performer is disliked, the program will be disliked. This makes it very important to know the criteria used by audiences in judging performers, and the determinants of their likes and dislikes. With this information it would not only be possible to select the most promising candidates among potential instructors, but also to advise performers as to those actions and mannerisms which are likely to antagonize or attract viewers.

An examination of relevant comments by our audience shows a tremendous variety of responses. They range from personality evaluations and estimates of personality characteristics (which it might be possible to specify further through intensive interviewing) to rather minute behaviors such as looking at the camera and committing certain types of speech errors. We might illustrate the range of such comments best by quoting some of the phrases actually used. The following are some of the comments about the nurse in the Baby Formula program:

Interested in her job; didn't have enough interest behind her talks; could have had more facial expression, more hand expression; her voice on same tone; explained . . . very clearly; typical public service nurse; scared; bad grammar; unqualified, nervous, tense, and cold; knew her subject; would have come into your house and helped you out; we all knew she was a good nurse; human.

The public health doctor in the same program was referred to as follows:

Didn't really think she had something to put over; really didn't care; says "and a"; hasn't got enough talent; personable; very professional; seemed to have everything organized; interested in her job; interesting to

talk to; sort of simple; pleasant person; rather snobbish; capable; mannerisms weren't attractive; talked all on the same level; never was a mother; found her charming; interrupted the nurse; unpleasant, tonal quality; hovered over the other person; without expression; scared; at ease; had more experience; knew her subject; relaxed; tidy; nice smile; unimpressive; pleasant personality; not professional; steady monotone; talked too much.

The most recurrent favorable comment about the performer in "The Age of Jackson" was that he "knew his subject" or "knew what he was talking about." Eleven comments took this form. Other favorable comments were:

Relaxed; clear voice; professional; didn't talk over anyone's head; enjoyed what he was doing; had life to him; warm personality; I thought he was very—he was—personality; natural; he really meant what he said; I like the way he dressed; much like Bishop Sheen; he held my interest but I don't know why; he was himself; he was not an actor; it wasn't mechanical; typical good educator; actually talking in conversation; I felt as though he was in person; clear; audible and easily understood; very pleasant voice; stumbling only natural; he was looking at us; not wandering all over the place; human; right in the room; he was the instructor and we were in class; realistic; I liked his easy conversation; you could like very much, how he said "Hi!" as if he knew you; he could talk to the class all day and we would sit right there and listen to him; he went along with the subject matter with his facial expressions; sincere; he made it so much a living thing; he used gestures; I wanted to listen; he got your interest; magnetic; marvelous teacher.

The most frequent unfavorable comment about the same performer was the charge that he stuttered and stammered (nine mentions). There were also five instances in which viewers expressed a reservation about a priest teaching history. Other unfavorable comments were:

Lacked personality; I'd rather have a woman teacher for history; too serious; wasn't congenial acting; no facial expression; amateur; cold; not at ease; too many ah's and a's; moved around too much; lacked preparation; floundered around too much; kept his hands going too much; not relaxed; poor delivery; jumpy.

A rich and interesting area for further work appears to lie here. First, we can try to specify in a content code the characteristics of performance, speech, et cetera, which audiences take into account in reacting to a performer. Second, we can explore an audience's bases for such complex judgments as whether a performer knows his material, whether he is interested in people, whether he is friendly and congenial, or whether he has that mysterious set of qualities people refer to as "personality."

LIMITATIONS

While much of the material from group interviews may provide valuable illumination and suggest fruitful hypotheses, it can seldom be used for testing hypotheses or "proving out" any general principles.

Dominating, talkative members of an audience panel, unless special care is taken, may tend to discourage expressions of opinions divergent from their own. This may lead to a biased picture of audience reactions—we may get only a minority view—especially where the group interview method is not supplemented by others which allow a person to say privately how he feels.

Sampling problems arise, too. But these occur in any study where one must ask a small cross section of his potential viewers to come out of their homes, sometimes in unpleasant weather, ride in car or bus to a place he can use for the viewing session, and sit and view something which they ordinarily might not have chosen to view.

SUGGESTIONS ON TECHNIQUES

Line of Questioning

Where the producers and directors of films or programs can spell out the objectives of their productions, development of meaningful interview questions becomes much easier. General areas for consideration might include these:

A. Attention

- I. What kinds of people will your program appeal to?
- II. In what ways, if any, do audience members actually find it rewarding?
- III. If this production is one in a series, will attention to this lead to the desire to view others in the series?

B. Understanding

- I. Given a particular production, how much does it contribute to an increased comprehension of the subject matter with which it deals?
- II. For its intended audience, is its complexity level too high or too low?
- III. Within the production, which things seem to clarify, which to muddy or befuddle? What is found relevant, what irrelevant?

C. Attitude

- I. Some productions aim to reinforce or modify the attitudes of their intended audiences. Do the feelings expressed by viewing panel members toward the subject of the program or film reflect those desired by its creators?
- II. Productions may aim to develop the "self image" of the person who views. Does he feel that the particular production has done something for him, increased his self-assurance, given him the impression that he can be more worthwhile, expanded his view of the universe, raised his joy in living, et cetera? Has it given him new ways of looking at the people and things in the world around him? Has it even changed his "mood"?

D. Action

- I. A production may attempt to get its viewer to do something, to read a book or paint a picture or form an action group, for example. Is he aware of what it wants him to do?
- II. If he is aware, does he agree with the idea? Does he feel it is realistic to expect him to carry out the proposed action? How high does he estimate the probability that he will carry it out?

Sampling

Whose reactions should be studied? When those who conduct the study know at whom the production is aimed, they can draw an appropriate sample. For example, a sample of student and practicing nurses might be drawn to view a film dealing with nursing techniques. The researchers might select actual and potential union business agents, arbitration and mediation specialists, and industrial and business executives to view a television program on labor-management relations. When a program is intended for broadcast to the general adult audience, they might wish to get a representative sample of that audience.

One should try to imagine all the various kinds of people for whom the program or film might be useful. The labor-management program possibly is salient not only for the people mentioned, but also for their wives, for union members, supervisors and foremen, for college and high-school students in social science, and so on—

depending on what aspects of labor-management relations are emphasized. It is probably less costly to get more groups and find a few who do not see the production as relevant than to neglect some who might find it quite meaningful.

Since production people primarily want to learn the variety and quality of reactions, not their statistical distributions, relatively small viewer panels should suffice—say 10 to 20 persons in each group. While the study director can often more easily get the cooperation of an intact, organized group, he will usually not get the variety of response from such a group that he will from a group made up of one or two individuals selected from each of a number of intact groups. Generally speaking, it is better to take one or two members from a number of different union locals than all from the same local.

Will the sample be seriously biased since it only includes people from one community? Very likely some varieties of reaction will not be represented. But the researcher can use his knowledge of the community, how it compares with others where the production might be shown, to interpret the group interviews. In any case, these interviews provide suggestive materials, not conclusive evidence.

To obtain a group from the general population one might start with a large sample from the city or telephone directory, expecting that many persons cannot or will not come. Or, if program objectives suggest specific groups, membership lists of those groups may be used, particular members being selected by some unbiased system.

Aside from the audience information obtained, considerable publicity benefits may develop from this informal research activity. People dispersed through the whole community, in many different occupations, get to know the production unit and what it is doing.

Group interviews, in short, can serve several purposes, or combinations of purposes. They provide a relatively easy, inexpensive way of getting audience reaction data. They yield rich, quotable human interest material that appeals to people who are left cold or worse by statistical tables. They highlight the qualitative aspects of results obtained through more rigorous assessment techniques. Lastly, but not least, group interview sessions serve a two-way public relations function. They bring the producer and his audience closer together than other research techniques can do.