

*Divining Desire*  
*Focus Groups and the Culture of Consultation*

Liz Featherstone

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**I** am not sure how important focus groups actually are in politics. Their practitioners, of course, are in no doubt: for them focus groups are an essential part of the election consultants' playbook along with quantitative opinion polling. Focus groups have been used extensively in US politics since the 1950s and British politics since the 1980s. Bill Clinton said:

'There is no one more powerful today than the member of a focus group. If you really want to change things and you want to get listened to, that's the place to be.' <sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, Norman Lamont wrote:

'Margaret Thatcher certainly knew when to disregard market research. In the 1980s, opinion polls regularly showed that voters preferred public spending to tax cuts. Mrs Thatcher insisted on cutting income tax, and the voters rewarded her.' <sup>2</sup>

This dichotomy bedevils the modern politician: do they show a listening side uppermost ('If only you would listen to us!'), or are they strong leaders first ('This country needs a strong leader')? We expect politicians to be both, of course.

Bill Clinton's use of focus groups underlined the perception that he wasn't so much a conviction politician, but just liked to be liked. He used his charisma to retain power without a clear purpose, and his triangulation and Third Way politics underscored his policy vacuum. It seemed natural then that, wishing to emulate Clinton's election success in 1992, New Labour would ramp up the use of heavily US-influenced market research techniques prior to the 1997 UK election. This was 'the modernisers' way of doing politics and is most closely associated in the UK with Peter Mandelson and the late Philip Gould. After

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Deborah Mattison, 'The Power of the Focus Group' at <<https://www.totalpolitics.com/articles/culture/power-focus-group>>.

<sup>2</sup> Norman Lamont, 'Focus groups? I thought we elected politicians to make big decisions' at <<https://tinyurl.com/ydg6h6bu>> or <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/personal-view/3618142/Focus-groups-I-thought-we-elected-politicians-to-make-big-decisions.html>>.

Labour was defeated in the 1992 election, the party was repositioned under these guidelines. A 'thorough examination of the state of mind of Britain's voters' was commissioned by Mandelson. The report 'Labour and Britain in the 1990s' was stage one: the second was a policy review learning the lessons from stage one. What might have to be addressed in stage two?

'Among those who had abandoned us, there was a remarkable consistency in the reasons they said had driven them away. "Extremism" came top, followed by the dominance of the trade unions, our defence policy and finally "weak leadership."' <sup>3</sup>

It could be argued that the abolition of Clause Four of the Party's constitution had addressed those 'extremism' and 'weak leadership' issues. Clause Four had, of course, promised a general programme of nationalisation but I doubt anyone actually considered that a serious prospect. Nevertheless, this was newly elected party leader Tony Blair's moment and one can probably mark it down as a response to focus group input. Ever since then, at least in British politics, new leaders are encouraged to seek their own breakthrough 'Clause Four' moment: historic breaks with the past in which they can demonstrate their courageous leadership, while at the same time showing that they are in step with public opinion.

For Blair's successor, that moment never came – even with the aid of focus groups, of whose outpourings he was once an avid consumer:

'After becoming leader, GB [Gordon Brown] continued to seek the voters' views at every turn, calling frequently and emailing most mornings to share new thinking for policy ideas, speech-lines or other initiatives. I had checked focus group reactions to his first Cabinet, to the government of all the talents concept, to his healthcare policy . . . and to his education policy.' <sup>4</sup>

Later, Brown would cast his long-term pollster Deborah Mattinson out of his magic circle. She seemed too insistent on telling him things he didn't want to know, not least about perceptions of his character or the way he presented himself to the public. Perhaps Brown captures the dilemma of leadership. He had sold himself to the Parliamentary Labour Party as a man of vision, of far-sighted and deep intellect and sought publicly to distance himself from the perception of Blair as a lightweight, focus group-driven politician. So as a 'strong' leader, should he follow his own instincts, or trust in the views of small groups of individuals with no grasp of intellectual detail? Focus groups seek to

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Mandelson, *The Third Man*, (London: HarperPress, 2010), p. 105

<sup>4</sup> Deborah Mattinson, *Talking to a Brick Wall*, (London: Biteback, 2010) p. 214

find out how people feel about things, not what constitute the essential ingredients of successful policy making. In Brown's case his earlier appetite for focus group output ceased when it failed to confirm his own self-image.

Nevertheless, as the evidence demonstrates, focus groups do influence policy. Why else seek their input in healthcare or education? Politicians routinely deny that policies are poll or focus group driven; in which case, if they believed that, they could perhaps save their parties a lot of money. Instead, the rationale for using focus groups in politics is often stated as being merely a tool to hone communications. Politicians on the losing side are unable to say they lost because of poor policies. That would be an admission amounting to an existential loss of purpose. Rather, their excellent policies had simply not been communicated well enough. Politicians on the winning side naturally point to their superior understanding of the *zeitgeist*. In both cases the pollsters have a ready market.

Who are the focus groups? Featherstone's excellent study doesn't provide a clear picture, except perhaps to show that there appears to be no single standard of selection. Are they chosen randomly? Are they chosen because they represent a particular demographic or consumer type? Or are they people who, for want of a better phrase, are focus group junkies making a little money on the side for their time? Do participants follow the first and loudest speaker? Do they seek to please the facilitator or take positions just to be contrary? Are the right questions asked? How are the responses edited? (One wonders how focus groups lasting two hours, with perhaps eight participants, are accurately reported.)

It is precisely because focus groups are subjective that their reliability needs to be questioned – even more so in the political domain where complexity prevails. What we want politicians to deliver is usually going to be markedly different from what we want out of a can of Coca Cola. The underlying assumption of focus group research is that what (sometimes) works for consumer markets must be transferable to the political market place, since casting a vote is a matter of individual choice, like having a preference for a soft drink. Political focus groups are thus an important part of turning politics into a consumerist spectacle. On his own account, Peter Mandelson did not involve Labour Party members (or trade unionists) in his 'thorough examination of the state of mind of Britain's voters'. The study drew 'not only on polling and focus groups, but the work of experts in charting political, economic and social trends.'<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Mandelson, see note 3. In other words, the fate of a political party could not be trusted in its members' hands.

This is consonant with the view Mandelson expressed in 1997:

‘. . . when he told a meeting in a Rhenish schloss that ballot boxes and Parliaments were elitist relics. “Today people want to be more involved in government” via the far superior instruments of plebiscites, focus groups and the Internet, he said. “It may be that the era of pure representative democracy is slowly coming to an end.”’<sup>6</sup>

This is not the place to consider whether ‘the era of pure representative democracy is slowly coming to an end’ except to wonder ‘when was it ever pure?’ But let’s consider the new era of channelled democracy, which by definition has many more approaches than is possible by simply casting a vote every four or five years.

This is where Featherstone’s book comes alive to the more ominous use of focus groups. There have been some classic failures of focus group driven marketing, such as the Ford Edsel and New Coke. What this new Mandelson style marketised democracy offers, instead, is a sophisticated massaging exercise of that part of the public who feel alienated by the political elite.

‘Toward the end of the [20th] century, the “average” American’s opinions were avidly sought after, but they mattered very little. Ordinary people were eagerly listened to, but they had no power. Indeed, the focus groups were needed because actual ordinary people were so marginal to the political process; as politics became more controlled by elites, the gap between the political class and the average person grew. Thus the spread of the focus group was a symptom of the estrangement between politicians and the rest. While [a writer in 1992] saw the rise of the focus group as somehow at odds with – perhaps even contradictory to – the narrative of the ordinary person’s declining political power, it was not. The focus group was an elite solution to that problem. Ordinary people had been shut out of meaningful policy-making, but to win their votes, politicians still needed to hear from them.’<sup>7</sup>

There was a kind of thinking in the 1970s and 1980s which suggested that, if there was a ‘crisis of democracy’, it was that there was too much of it.

Featherstone identifies a source for that: ‘The Trilateral Commission suggested that the cure for this excess of democracy was a little less democracy, or as they put it, “a greater degree of moderation in democracy.”’<sup>8</sup> As a sometime

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<sup>6</sup> Nick Cohen, ‘New Labour in focus, on message, out of control’ at <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/1999/nov/28/labour.labour1997to99>>.

<sup>7</sup> Featherstone p. 156

<sup>8</sup> Featherstone p. 154

Trilateral Commission member, Mandelson's thoughts are clearly unexceptional. Where does this lead?

Carefully controlled exercises in market research will tell you – more than any kind of snapshot ballot can – what people are really thinking or feeling. Market research, in itself, is not about changing governments but allows the elitist's elision of the words democracy and consultation to deceive. Thanks to technology, we are being led to believe that we are more in control than ever. Using all the tools of the internet at our disposal we are, for example, turning into 'switchers' (not between political parties but between energy suppliers, banks, insurance companies, etc.). With the tools the internet provides we are encouraged to believe that we can change our individual lives more than any politician can; not least since the evidence of change will probably be far more immediate, albeit constrained by limits set by the market. Increasingly we are becoming consultees in a massive armchair/consumer/political paradigm which saves us from bothering too much whether our vote once meant very much. Perhaps being a petition signer on 38 Degrees, for example, fulfils some need to act politically. We are heading towards a click democracy.

As I write I have received an email from YouGov (the name possibly implies that 'You Govern'?) telling me of a new 'digital advertising platform' which:

'...is a blockchain-based platform and ad network that empowers users to choose which attributes they make available to advertisers. In exchange for sharing their data, consumers earn rewards. Advertisers using the platform gain access to known audience attributes, which enables more effective ad targeting and better campaign performance. Built by YouGov – since 2000 the globally trusted name in online personal data.'<sup>9</sup>

Here the key word is 'empowers'. The 'blockchain-based platform' empowers users to earn 'rewards' and to receive information (carefully selected by algorithms, no doubt) all guaranteed by a 'globally trusted name in online personal data'. (Later in the email YouGov claim your personal data will be anonymised so there's a red rag to hackers.) I assume that YouGov will sell its information to all-comers including political parties; so it will, like many other platforms, bypass the very need for learning from focus groups. Now the messaging is not aimed at a type of person, but a specific person. Not all individuals have signed up to this service of course but many (most?) have already unwittingly parted with enough information about themselves

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<sup>9</sup> <<https://direct.yougov.com/>>

elsewhere to make YouGov's offering look a bit behind the times. (I stand to be corrected as to YouGov's reach.)

New technology such as this moves us into territory which has led many to question the usefulness of focus groups in the future.

'By employing algorithms and data science to distil and surface naturally occurring themes and topics [marketers] can make use of the millions of genuine interactions within their categories, products, and brands taking place on platforms like Twitter. Adopting this technique enables researchers and marketers to surface unknown trends, via natural language processing (NLP) models, which can then be used to inform and define the qualitative research programme and identify questions researchers might not have known to ask.'<sup>10</sup>

Political campaigners have for years been using quantified consumer data to help them target 'prospects.' When the number of party activists was in steep decline in the 2000's, consumer databases helped fill the activists gap by identifying the most likely voter 'types' to seek out – the types, that is, who were profiled as likely supporters. The rest could be ignored: the object of electioneering after all is to win by finding supporters not opponents. There has long been a concept that a vote for one of the losing candidates in a 'safe' seat is wasted. With data-mining technology this can now be broadened to include anyone whose profile, even in a marginal seat, hasn't merited a canvasser's attention. Perhaps your choice of loo roll marks you out as not worth a door-knock. Or maybe something you revealed on Facebook. A notable use of this approach developed with the Labour Party's exploitation of Mosaic, which is sold as 'The consumer classification solution for consistent cross-channel marketing' by the consumer credit reporting company Experian. Their online brochure boasts of their classifying people into 15 groups and 66 types, based on 850+ million source records allowing for '450+ input variables for clustering and interpretation'.<sup>11</sup> I think I may be a D16, namely an 'Outlying Senior.'

Featherstone reports that growth in the market research industry continues at a pace, even if focus groups may in the light of this burgeoning technology seem a little analogue. Successful campaigns always give the new methods they use a magical aura of irresistible power:

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<sup>10</sup> Steve King, 'The Focus Group is Dead. Long Live the Focus Group' at <<https://tinyurl.com/y9596qs4>> or <<https://www.research-live.com/article/opinion/the-focus-group-is-dead-long-live-the-focus-group/id/5029312>>

<sup>11</sup> <<https://tinyurl.com/y83mszfp>> or <[http://www.experian.co.uk/assets/marketing-services/brochures/mosaic\\_uk\\_brochure.pdf](http://www.experian.co.uk/assets/marketing-services/brochures/mosaic_uk_brochure.pdf)>

'Barack Obama's 2012 re-election campaign was run by his online data analytics team which had an office the size of a football field. Rather than simply using polls, interviews and traditional focus groups to stand in for the electorate, Obama's nerds were able to track each potential voter as an individual and figure out what was likely to change their behaviour. David Simms, director of opinion research, explaining the importance of data analytics to *MIT Technology Review*, said "What that gave us was an ability to run a national presidential campaign the way you'd do a local ward campaign. You know the people on your block. People have relationships with one another and you leverage them so you know the way they talk about issues, what they're discussing in the coffee shop."<sup>12</sup>

It is hard to see the shift to database profiling stopping at the mere provision of information to human campaigners who may then act on it. Human activists can be avoided altogether:

'. . . political bots are the algorithms that operate over social media, written to learn from and mimic real people so as to manipulate public opinion across a diverse range of social media and device networks. Such bots are a variety of automated computer scripts that interact with other users on social media platforms such as Twitter and community-maintained sites such as Wikipedia. Political bots are deployed, for example, to boost follower numbers and to retweet the content of political candidates on Twitter, to attack political opponents on Facebook, or to drown out activists' conversations on Reddit.'<sup>13</sup>

Once we are defined simply as sources of data, then surely it will come as no surprise to find that we will form new relationships with algorithms. The much derided focus group-led politician may one day be but a vague memory from a more kindly time.

Focus groups still have a place, but the opinion measuring industry's failure to predict things correctly in recent elections means their output must be treated with much greater scepticism. That in itself, of course, is an invitation for the industry to push new technological methods into political campaigning. Focus groups will still be used by the media to create stories about what people 'really think.' When Jeremy Corbyn was having a rough start to 2017, focus groups were helpful in developing the theme of his uselessness.

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<sup>12</sup> Featherstone p. 246

<sup>13</sup> Samuel C. Woolley & Philip N. Howard, 'Political Communication, Computational Propaganda and Autonomous Agents', in *International Journal of Communication* 10(2016), at < <http://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/6298/1809>>.

The Huffington Post ran a focus group story which purported to show how voters in the marginal seat of Slough saw Corbyn as a 'wet blanket.' In spite of this, Labour's share of the vote in Slough rose by 14% in the subsequent general election. That Huffington Post report was enthusiastically echoed by Jonathan Freedland in the *Guardian* with a similar tale about focus groups in Birmingham.<sup>14</sup> Again it would seem contrary that the Labour share across the West Midlands then rose in every constituency – including the ones where they didn't win.<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps the marketing industry's ambition to algorithmise politics is meeting its match – not just in the shape of Corbyn, but Trump too. In Corbyn's case he can look to a huge army of Momentum members who are both social media savvy and also willing to revive the art of door knocking and face-to-face contact. If this is the case, the marketing industry will devise ever more sophisticated data mining and dissemination techniques to fend off the challenge. They won't let go, now that they have their teeth so firmly hooked into the profitable world of political campaigning.

## **Postscript**

**M**ost of this essay was written in March 2018 before the revelations about Cambridge Analytica's involvement in the U.S. presidential campaign of 2016 had been reinforced. Despite Cambridge Analytica's unwanted position in the limelight, there will be a Hydra's head of similar outfits seeking to climb on the bandwagon. The key question regarding such data-mining/message delivery techniques is to what extent they rely on subterfuge to be successful. In the same way that spin-doctors don't wish to become the focus of the news, or, in an earlier age, the Nazi propaganda machine sought to camouflage itself, this form of political messaging seeks to avoid public cynicism about politics by trying to conceal itself as 'normal chatter'. In the same way that successive attempts to bring transparency to political funding have been circumvented, the new age of political communications beckons a new regime of opaqueness, not least because the public generally don't seem all that bothered about it.

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<sup>14</sup> <<https://tinyurl.com/k8755vj>> or <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/may/05/jeremy-corbyn-blame-meltdown-labour-leader>>

<sup>15</sup> For details of all West Midlands election results, see <<https://tinyurl.com/y84t92a5>> or <<https://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/midlands-news/general-election-2017-every-result-13160408>>