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Opinion watch

Spotting emerging trends in public opinion

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Summary of paper

This paper deals with new methods in marketing or public opinion developed in recent years that spot emerging trends. The main property of such new tendencies is that they are weak indicators of attitudes and opinions and are not yet held by a significant proportion of population. Nevertheless, major trends frequently start at these low levels of intensity. Researchers should devote interest to these tentative public opinion trends, and use appropriate techniques for that purpose.

Several methods have been developed to spot this kind of weak indicators. These belong mainly to three families :

- methods based on expert views about new trends ;
- methods based upon many different information sources ;
- a mixture of both methods.

Once trends have been identified, pollsters have to apply their judgement in order to determine whether such trends are relevant in their own field of research, and in which way. This step requires the opinion researcher to exercise his expertise.

Finally, once opinion topics have been correctly addressed, pollsters –or opinion experts- have to collect existing opinion results which will either confirm or infirm their *a priori* analyse. In the end, the new hypotheses concerning emerging opinion trends will be translated into new questions to be asked to relevant samples of population.

The paper presents some of these techniques, and discusses in some detail one of them.

1 Introduction

The basic requirement

In order to clearly understand the need for opinion monitoring, we should start with the typical situation of preparing a new opinion survey, and examine the steps involved in this process by denoting what was done prior to preparing the survey.

- Public opinion surveys provide answers to topics which have been clearly defined
- Prior to this step, exploratory research will frequently have been undertaken in order to correctly assess the topics. Most of time it consists in qualitative research or desk research.
- Before this exploratory research, the institution or company dealing with public opinion matters will have identified a need for further research. This means that the attention of the researcher has been attracted by some specific facts.
- Opinion watching is the method for an organization, an institution or a company, to be aware of such facts.

Scope of the opinion watch

An opinion watch takes place prior to any specific research. That means that its scope is very wide, and there are many topics to be covered. In fact, the basic instruction is to maintain an open mind.

However, opinion watch is still research, and as such, it is necessary to define an area where the watch alert should be activated. This entails

- a list of topics of interest to the organization who requesting the research;
- the type of source material which deserves to be considered.

This point should be made more explicit. Opinion watch deals with social facts, it is a kind of sociological research that precedes opinion surveys. But, this definition is still too large to be used as a basis for efficient research. It has to be specified in terms that correspond to the original needs of research demander.

For example:

- if, for example, the demander is a marketing division of a large corporation, it is likely that research will be mainly oriented towards consumer behaviours and lifestyles ;
- if, on the other hand, the demander is a division in charge of human resources in a large company, it is likely that attitudes towards work, leisure, time pressure and time budget will be central ;

Following this lead, more examples could be easily imagined.

It is clear, in fact, that the initial definition of the field of opinion watch should be made with the research demander. The very first step of research is this clarification. We will come back to this later.

Main methods

The question of method is a crucial one. Given the breadth of the research domaine, precise choices must be made in order to avoid confusion. We have identified three main methods that we shall present separately :

- collecting information and advice from an expert network ;
- building up an opinion observatory;
- creating a monitoring team that meets on a regular basis.

Before examining these methods in detail, it should be pointed out that they are not antagonistic. They may be used together either sequentially (for instance first consulting experts followed by the setting up of an observatory) or interactively.

2 Expert network

Purpose

The initial premise is to assume that some people are aware of new trends before others. If we think to the classical diffusion of innovation curve, these people are the few who have first knowledge of new facts. They are defined sometimes as scouts because they see the field before the troops arrive.

The idea is to identify these people, and recruit some of them so that they can inform the opinion watch researcher or team of these new facts. The sequence is the following :

- define what kind of person is an expert ;
- find some of these experts and recruit them ;
- instruct them on the kind of information we are interested in ;
- gather information on a regular basis.

Types of experts

Experts may be many kinds of persons:

- Experts are frequently the users of a product category. For instance, a panel of children can be used as an expert for new games or candies.
- Frequently, experts are found in occupations such as advertising, media or fashion : their job make them aware of many new facts.
- Experts used for opinion watch may also be people very close to a specific target group. For instance if the research demand is oriented towards attitudes of young people, teachers or sport trainers can be quite interesting experts.
- Last but not least, social scientists are obvious experts in many cases, notably when the facts to consider are complex and combine many data.

It is clear that the selection of experts will have major consequences on the kind of material submitted to the scrutiny of opinion monitor. The researcher in charge of the opinion watch will have to very carefully select these experts. A mix of several kinds of experts is a minimal precaution to be taken.

Gathering information

Once the expert network is created and briefed, information collection has to be organised. Several options are possible:

- collect information among all experts on a regular basis, for instance every month, the advantage being that the opinion watcher keeps his network alert;
- let experts decide when they have worthwhile information to provide, the advantage being that they are less quickly tired by the exercise;
- combine both of the above and include incentives in order to maintain alertness and motivation of experts.

Evaluation of information

When the information has been gathered from the experts, it has to be evaluated. This mainly implies that it should be interpreted according to demander's needs. Here we return to the initial process of defining the field of interest:

- experts should have at least a vague definition of the kind of material likely to interest opinion watchers so that do not inundate them with too much information;
- the selection of appropriate information is the responsibility of the opinion watcher. Because he knows the focus of the demander's interest, he is able to decide what information to be retained for further examination and has to be rejected.

But the opinion watcher has to go further. Opinion watch is not simply a clever culling of relevant information. The information should be interpreted, i.e. analysed according to its potential consequences for the opinion watch demander. This is where the real job is done.

Experts can be consulted at this stage of interpretation by requesting that they attribute meaning to the facts or information, identify other related facts, and assume general tendencies. This consultation can be organised through a large meeting of all experts which is also a way to motivate them, interest them in the research.

3 Opinion observatory

Purpose

What I call opinion observatory consists of the collection of various social indicators which are followed through time. The purpose is to constitute time series and to interpret its form, i.e. whether it is linear or not, whether there are interruptions or not.

Sometimes, such time series are difficult to set up and consist, for instance of only three observations. In such a case, analysis of the time series must be replaced by a qualitative evaluation.

Both of these exercises, qualitative evaluation and through time analysis lead to the definition of trends. These trends are the basic facts that feed the opinion watch research. They are the bricks of which the house is built. We define a trend as a diagnosis of a set of empirical evolutions described by one or several indicators.¹

Selection of trends

We are still within the framework of research whose goal is to provide information for action. Opinion watch is part of a decision process. To be operational, an opinion observatory should work on selected trends. The watcher is not interested in just any trend, but only in some of them.

When starting to define the set of trends to be followed, the opinion watcher can work either on a purely empirical basis, or from a theoretical perspective. In the former case empiricism consists of reviewing recent literature about social change and selecting major evolutions which could be of interest for opinion watch demander. This method is quite relevant in many cases but suffers from the assumption that other researchers have already identified major trends and have done so correctly.

¹ Definition inspired from: Michel Forsé, *L'analyse structurelle du changement social*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1991

Working from a theoretical basis means that a model can be applied to the domain covered by the opinion watch. For instance, this could be a model describing consumer behaviour. With such a model, the selection of trends can be derived, which is far more satisfactory. However, this approach cannot be applied to any subject matter, simply because it is sometimes impossible to find a good model, to imagine one, or because the area being covered is too complex.

We recommend combining both approaches, i.e. prior to reviewing the scientific literature in order to define trends, the possibility of defining theoretical models should be evaluated. By doing this, the empirical approach becomes clearer, and it is even easier to establish the list of trends to be followed in the observatory.

At all steps, the opinion watcher working on an observatory should operate the selection of trends in accordance with the needs of the demander. Each trend is discussed with the client in order to check that it is relevant and therefore appropriate to follow its evolutions. Relevance, in turn, is determined by the potential consequences of the trend on client's area of action.

Definition of indicators and data collection

Indicators are the basic information used to evaluate trends. Usually, two types of indicators are distinguished: those based upon reactive techniques (interviews or tests for instance) and nonreactive indicators, i.e. those where behaviours are observed indirectly² (for instance rate of absenteeism, or number of accidents in a year, and so on). Each type of indicator is interesting. It is recommended that both kinds be included in the observatory.

Parameters of each indicator must be defined:

- its purpose and meaning;
- all dimensions measured in each indicator;³
- methods of measurement used.

² An interesting discussion of the collection and use of nonreactive indicators is found in E. J. Webb, D.T. Campbell, R.D. Schwartz and L. Seechrest, *Unobtrusive Measures: Nonreactive Research in the Social Sciences*, Chicago: Rand McNally, 1971)

³ For instance an indicator about permissiveness may include measurement of permissiveness for sexual behaviours, economic behaviours, environmental behaviours, and so on.

Obviously, at that step the opinion watcher should take into consideration economic issues. It is quite easy to imagine a large series of indicators which would provide perfect information on trends but is impractical because of costs. Taking this constraint into consideration data collection is organised in two ways:

- when indicators already exist, data collection consists in gathering of various information on a regular basis;
- when indicators do not exist, a specific survey or data collection effort should be set up.

Analysis and evaluation of data collected

Once data have been collected, the information is put into a data base enabling the observer to easily follow times series and to carry out appropriate data analysis. A control panel of experts can then be convened on a regular basis.

What is most important, again, is to appropriately evaluate the observed data. Time series analysis is obviously one of the basic tools to be used; but above all, what counts is that the opinion watcher provides meaning to the observations. She/He really has to take a position about the significance of the trend.

Trend analysis allows the observer to produce very concise presentations which help communicate the key decision parameters to the client. For instance, each indicator can be presented with a quite simple symbol such as green if evolution observed is positive for client, red if it is negative and yellow if ambiguous. Comments given beside the symbol introduce nuances into what might otherwise be an over simplified presentation.

Another approach to the trend analysis question may be to look at time series interruption. This involves analysis of time series for the impact of exogenous events or interventions and the assessment of the type of influence that they have had on the evolution of observed trend. There are many examples of the type of analysis such as introduction of more rigorous breath analysis tests and the trend in alcohol related traffic accidents or the introduction of the contraceptive pill on the trends in family composition.⁴ These techniques can be applied to series of either reactive (for ex. opinion) data or to nonreactive indicators like the two examples above.

⁴ See a discussion of this approach in the seminal work by D.T. Campbell and J. C. Stanley, *Experimental and Quasi-Experimental Designs for Research*, Chicago, Rand McNally, 1966 and in D. McDowal, R. McCleary, E.E. Meidinger and R.A. Hay, Jr., *Interrupted Time Series Analysis*, Beverly Hills /London, Sage Publications, 1980. Box-Jenkins methods provide a more rigorous mathematical approach. See, G.E.P. Box and G.M. Jenkins, *Time Series Analysis: Forecasting and Control*, San Francisco, Holden-Day, 1976.

4 Opinion watch group

Purpose

The third method identified for opinion watching consists of setting up of a work group that will frequently meet and discuss recent observed evolutions. A moderator prepares and manages the debate and provides further post session analysis, if necessary. This method is similar to the expert network but includes also specific inputs from the observatory.

We have been involved in such a process during the last twelve months, and instead engaging in theoretical discussion view of it, we would prefer to explain and comment on our experience.

The general topic around which the group was constituted was the dynamics of French society. Although public opinion was not the unique topic covered, debates frequently centred on these questions. When published polls and opinion surveys were available, they were used to feed the debate. When there was no poll available, the group pointed out topics where opinion research would be necessary.

People involved

The group was composed of three kinds of participants: a team in charge of moderating the debates, companies and institutions who needed to watch the evolution of French society, and experts.

The team of moderators consisted of two moderators and two assistants taking note of the debates. Moderators and assistants had the possibility to participate in the debate on the same basis as anyone else, but most of the time they gave priority to other participants.

Participants from companies and institutions demanding the research came from various functions: marketing division, human resources, communication, top management. People were mostly decision makers themselves, or someone very close to them. Most of them came to each of the monthly meetings.

Experts were invited to make a presentation on a specific topic such as work values, citizenship, consumption and so on. They were contacted one or two months prior to the meeting and the orientation of their topic was discussed with the moderators.

The meetings

Meetings were prepared in several ways. First of all, each participant in the group was invited to fill out a form about significant facts or events observed in the weeks preceding the meetings. "Significant" meant that these facts or events could shed light on future developments. Relevant documentation was joined to these forms. All that material was distributed to the participants at the beginning of each meeting.

Each meeting consisted of two parts. First there was a free discussion on the basis of the facts selected by participants and described on the forms. Each topic was discussed for twenty minutes or so. Discussion ended with a recommended follow up action under the responsibility of one of the participants, usually the moderators. The second part of the meeting was centred on the expert presentation with accompanying paper and discussion.

After each meeting, a summary of discussions was prepared.

It should be pointed out that discussion about the facts lead the group to postulate potential trends, i.e. trends to be confirmed or not by further analysis.

Analysis and reporting

The analysis and reporting phase has several goals:

- it should fill out the information concerning prospective trends,
- confirm their significance and evaluate their importance or social impact.

That means that the final trends are presented rather differently from the original facts. They combine several facts and include exogenous information.

During the eight months that the group met, 150 facts were selected by participants and presented on a form. 40 were discussed by the group. In the end, 15 to 20 trends were formulated and validated by analysis.

We chose to place analysis and reporting at the end of the cycle of meetings. There was no need to prepare it sooner, but, we can imagine a scenario under which a monthly report is prepared after each meeting.

The final trends are a new production which did not exist before the group meetings. They are validated and, by construction, fit the group's centres of interest. They can be used inside each of the companies participating in the group and interpreted according to specific views.

5 Actions to follow

Opinion watching has no meaning if it does not lead the demander into taking a decision. The opinion watcher report should not be the end of the process. Several means of encouraging the decision-making process can be imagined:

- presentation of the results of the opinion watch to the key decision makers in the organization demanding the opinion watch research;
- producing a synthesis report of principal recommendations to be distributed to the key decision makers ;
- convene opinion watch meetings on a regular basis with appropriate persons so that the information is adequately communicated in the company.

Another follow up action is a review of the research methods used by the opinion watcher. Opinion watch is a learning process. The act of discovering emerging trends in public opinion results in a new definition of opinion watch objectives. In other words, new avenues of approach to the subject may be opened. For instance, instructions issued to the expert network may be revised, or new trends may be included in the observatory. In the case of the watch group, each participant is stimulated by the views and the centres of interest of others.

In some cases, opinion watch techniques may lead to new opinion research, i.e. follows classical qualitative and/or quantitative paradigm. In this case, the work done by the opinion watch assumes the role of exploratory research. Pollsters may base their work from opinion watchers' reports and more correctly and efficiently address the topics to be included in the survey. In the end, new information will be translated into new questions to be directed at relevant samples of population.