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Mitverfolgen qualitativer Telefon- bzw. Internetbefragungen und die Nutzung von Streamingdiensten

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The Telephone Guideline as amended in January 2016 is unambiguous. Clause 8.1 provides the following: "Client representatives, too, have the right to convince themselves of the quality of data collection by listening to interviews on the premises of the research agency carrying out the scientific study or on the premises of the research agencies working together on it." After that the Guideline enumerates some additional conditions under which such listening is permitted which, however, are of no interest to us here. What is important is that the listening has to be done on the premises of the research institute.

However, in the last few years various research instruments and tools have been developed which work via the telephone or the internet and which make it possible to have longer conversations or discussion rounds, respectively, with target individuals who are far away from one another. In these cases, the sound and, sometimes, also the image of the respondent(s) are captured and transmitted. The users of research results, too, are often far apart from one another. The conversations in these cases are no standardized interviews but they are rather loosely structured by a discussion guide. In this case, following the conversations by the client is an integral part of the research project especially because the tone of voice, the intonation and sometimes also the body language are of importance. However: Following the conversation on the premises of the institute carrying out the study would cause travel costs that would be so high as to be prohibitive. How can we act in accordance with the Guidelines? This question also was a topic during this year's Weinheim Talks (Weinheimer Gespräch) of the four German associations ADM (Association of the German Market and Social Research Institutes), ASI (Working Group of Social Science Institutes), BVM (Professional Association of German Market and Social Researchers) and DGOF (German Society for Online Research).

A first result: The Telephone Guideline was developed for quantitative, structured interviews. Listening to these interviews here is not really a component of the research process but it rather serves quality-assurance purposes. In the case of the new research instruments and tools, however, it is about listening or observing as an element of the research process. This is typical of qualitative research. Given that the conversations and discussions in question in this case generally are of a qualitative nature, the German "Guideline Concerning Recording and Observation of Group Discussions and Qualitative Interviews" applies. It is true that said Guideline does not provide for the interviews to be followed via the internet, which may be explained by the fact that it dates back to 2006, but it governs both the observation of the interview through a one-way mirror and the passing on of a recording in form of a video tape.

It is admissible to apply the regulations set forth in the above-mentioned Guideline *mutatis mutandis* to qualitative surveys carried out via the internet. This means that observation via the internet is also possible if the prerequisites applying to the observation of e.g. a group discussion through a one-way mirror exist accordingly and that recordings can also be passed on to the client if the prerequisites for the passing on of a video tape are also adhered to accordingly.

In detail, this means the following for the observation of a conversation or a group discussion via the internet:

1. The respondents have to be informed that there can be observers, and they have to give their consent.

2. The observing individuals have to commit themselves to stopping observation as soon as they recognize one of the participating individuals. In practice this is going to work as follows: A market researcher from the client company obliges the observers from his company, e.g. by e-mail, and that the latter also accept this obligation.

3. The names of the individuals participating in the conversation or the group discussion must not be mentioned.

4. Finally, transmission of the audio and video data has to be made in a secure way in order to guarantee security similar to that in a market-research facility.

Passing on of the audio and video data is also possible with the same strict requirements as those stipulated in the Guideline having to be adhered to. In this case, the following has to be ensured:

1. The recordings are only used for research purposes, which means e.g. that they are not used in promotional films.

2. The recordings are not passed on to third parties.

3. No attempt is made to de-anonymize the recordings.

4. Every individual that is granted access to the file is obliged to adhere to the above-mentioned points

5. The file is deleted after three (3) months.

6. So as to guarantee that the points 1 to 5 above can be fulfilled, it shall furthermore be demanded that the file must be copy-protected and password-protected and that it must be stored on a server.

By the way, the above principle can also be applied to the observation of qualitative interviews or group discussions via a qualified streaming service (such as FocusVision®).

All in all, such an interpretation of the Guidelines results in practical solutions which make it possible to use the modern forms of qualitative market research while adhering to the Code of Conduct even if such instruments and tools could not be taken into consideration when the said Code was worded.

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