The Central Issue: Standards as Authority

The Formative Stages

In the beginning there was controversy about standards. The announcement of a "Second International Conference on Public Opinion Research," signed by Paul Sheatsley as secretary, summoned to Williamstown the pioneers who would found AAPOR there in 1947. The importance of standards is suggested by the inclusion of a Standards Committee as one of only four bodies designated on the letterhead.

The centrality of standards issues to the organization was further anticipated by the presence on the Standards Committee of Elmo Wilson, who was to become AAPOR’s second president. Indeed, a total of ten Standards Committee chairs are among the forty-four presidents of AAPOR through 1990-91, and one associate chair who was elevated to the presidency before he could chair the Committee. At least one Standards chair is known to have declined the presidential nomination. Six of these twelve individuals served (either as Committee chair or president) during the seven-year period from 1976-1983, when standards issues dominated much of AAPOR’s business.

It was the Standards Committee that had drafted a “proposed constitution for a national organization on public opinion research.” One of its members moved adoption and another provided the second, but “Claude Robinson suggested that before the constitution was adopted, there should be a thorough discussion of the proposed Board of Standards Described in the Constitution.” Robinson argued “that the proposal for a Standards Board was ‘authoritarian’ [and] offered opportunity for a small group of men to assume authority for the whole membership. . . . Attempts to impose standards . . . might cause disruption of the organization.”

The Committee members argued that they “had been appointed to meet the issue of standards and had merely set up a mechanism . . . to
deal with the problem,” that their proposed constitution gave the Standards Board “no power to impose standards on members,” that it would be “an instrument for thorough discussion of the question.” It would “attempt to codify the underlying principles governing scientific method in this work and to submit them to the membership. . . . To ignore the problem completely would be to invite unfavorable reaction from critics of opinion research.”

Proponents carried the day, although with a change of name from “Standards Board” to Committee on Standards” with an elected chair but appointed membership, like other committees. The meeting then went on to consider less inflammatory provisions, beginning with a name for the organization. Before adjournment, Philip Hauser was elected Standards Committee chair, the first of thirty who have held the office to date.

“It has been observed that this general dispute over standards authority amplified a specific controversy between those (mostly academics) who advocated area probability sampling and their (mostly commercial) adversaries who defended quota samples.”

Four decades of experience suggest that both parties to the controversy over standards at Williamstown had gotten hold of an essential truth—that monitoring research quality would be disruptive. In this debate, John Riley of Rutgers University was surely correct in arguing “that the question of standards was basic to the Association’s declared purpose of encouraging the development of the field of opinion research.” Claude Robinson of Opinion Research Corporation was equally correct in arguing that attempts to impose authoritarian rules governing survey procedures would disrupt the Association. In fact, the standards of performance that Robinson feared never materialized. Standards of performance have seldom, if ever, been a major concern of the Standards Committees, whose chief activities over the years have involved research ethics rather than research techniques.

At that conference, “Norman Meier and William Yoell expressed the belief that the ‘underlying principles’ of opinion research” that the Standards Board aimed to codify “were still largely unknown and subject to experimentation.” Cornelius DuBois added a note of experience, as well as of prophecy, in pointing out that “the American Marketing Association’s committee on standards could never agree.” In 1947, neither those who advocated AAPOR’s role as authority nor

1. Unless otherwise noted, quotations in this chapter are from the minutes of AAPOR business or Council meetings.
those who were alarmed by the "authoritarian" potential of the standards proposal could anticipate the Committee's evolving role in judging infractions of practice. The Standards battleground was to become one of conduct, not of technique; future committees would adjudicate ethics, not performance.

The incipience of this evolution, unplanned, unintended, and unrecognized, is apparent in the next year's annual business meeting in September 1948. Philip Hauser, as Standards Committee chair, moved that AAPOR "commend" (not adopt) the proposed "Code of Professional Practice" and the "Standards of Practice To Be Used in the Reporting of Survey Results," both of which had been prepared by a committee representing six private companies "engaged in survey research in marketing and public opinion." Hauser's report acknowledged that these two codes "consist largely of a statement of broad principles which only research, time and continued effort can convert into operational and procedural terms of an objective and definitive character." The report also "recognized that implementation of these proposals is entirely dependent on ... voluntary adherence, and the good faith and professional conduct of individual members." It was also pointed out in the discussion surrounding these two declarations that they were developed specially for commercial organizations, and hence more appropriate for a trade association than for AAPOR as an association of individual members.

"Mindful of the basic importance of its constitutional assignment to AAPOR and to its members," Hauser's report said, the "Committee believes that with this action, the way will be paved for the development and adopting [of] a code of detailed standards of performance in the various aspects of public opinion research," and goes on to list these as encompassing virtually the gamut of the survey research process: design and pretesting, sample design, methods of estimation and measures of precision, evaluation of validity, organization and supervision of field operations, and "analysis, interpretation and presentation of results." The committee also urged that "the Association, through its Committee on Standards, keep abreast of methodological developments." The motion was carried without dissent, but the years were to show that this never became the committee's function.

If the scope of this assignment now seems naive as well as grandiose, it should be noted that the proposed Code of Professional Practice was modeled on marketing research and political polling, not on the wide range of topics and techniques AAPOR now embraces. The issue of standards in surveys had up to that time been almost entirely overlooked by academia and therefore it seemed a proper, if ambitious, undertaking for a new association dedicated to the practice of public opinion research.

The standards for reporting survey Results, would on the other hand, receive increasing emphasis in the future. Despite the urge to proclaim and disseminate in textbook fashion the evolving methodological bases for the newly developed art of survey research, it was increasingly recognized that no one could really prescribe what constituted acceptable practice across the range of varying uses and applications. Instead, AAPOR moved in the direction of disclosure: no rules for conducting surveys would be pronounced but, in the tradition of all science, survey researchers should be required to describe adequately just what they did so that their findings could be objectively evaluated.

"Continuing his report for the Standards Committee, Mr. Hauser then brought up the question of the increasing abuse of interviewing techniques by sales people in door-to-door selling. Mr. Hauser then moved ... that the American Association for Public Opinion Research condemns the use of survey interviewing as a selling device and holds this practice to be a serious threat to the continued cooperation of the public in legitimate marketing and public opinion research." From the year of this first formal condemnation (1948), the phony survey, in varied manifestations, has plagued not only successive Standards Committees (as discussed later in this chapter) but all who practice survey research. Notwithstanding a few successful skirmishes, AAPOR and its sister associations have over the years been largely helpless in combating these abuses of the survey method.

Two years after this initial manifesto, in December 1950, Standards chair Stevens Stock reported seven possible "areas of activity" to be considered by the committee, first among which was "specifications [of] standards ... in which previous committees have worked looking toward setting down in some rigid rules what constitutes good and bad research...." But "since previous committees have had considerable trouble in getting agreement in this area, I shall not push this as an activity of the present committee."
Instead, Stock proposed several other projects. Some of these, such as recommendations for conference programs and curbing survey abuse, were already familiar to the body and are discussed elsewhere in this chapter. Three others, however, seem to have been new departures: (1) proposing standards for membership (although “it probably is not feasible at this time to write rigid standards ... in the senses that have often been proposed”); (2) collecting “folklore of opinion research ... on some of the techniques often accepted as standard;” and (3) establishing standards for research contracts, a detailed code for which was subsequently drafted and published in POQ. By 1951, the issue of technical standards had reached a stalemate so that Standards chair number five, Herbert Hyman, told Council in November that he had no report to make because “the major problem of the Standards Committee in the past [was that] the report was always either innocuous or disapproved.”

In keeping with this sense of frustration, the report of Hyman’s committee for the year 1951-52 acknowledged that its “function this year [was] one of appraisal and examination rather than activity,” concluding that “we are little further along in the level of standards operating in the profession than we were five years ago.” The report urged wider dissemination of technical findings as well as of codes but, acknowledging the limitations of voluntary adherence, nevertheless rejected “the alternative—the imposition of sanctions.”

Pursuing the trend toward reassessment, the 1952-53 committee, co-chaired by Don Cahalan and Joseph Hochstim, circulated to the membership the 1948 code and standards of reporting as preliminary to possible revision, but the records provide no indication of progress toward that end. Similarly, in 1954 Standards chair Dean Manheimer “agreed to review all past Standards Committee reports to see what has been planned and what has been achieved.” There followed at a Council meeting “considerable discussion about the role of AAPOR as mediator or umpire” not only between consenting AAPOR members as provided in the (by now) revised constitution, but also where one party is not a member “the Standards Committee might serve in an unofficial role and merely ask the disputants to explain their procedures [acting] as a disinterested third party.” Reported in Council minutes (November, 1954) as apparent “consensus,” this discussion pursuant to a committee report presaged the steady trend toward adjudication that would culminate in formal procedures first adopted in the 1970s.
The First Cases

Abstract deliberation gave way to stark reality early in 1955 with a letter from Walter Reuther, president of the United Automobile Workers of America and of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), addressed to all AAPOR members. Reuther complained that a biased questionnaire was being used in a study conducted among General Motors employees by Opinion Research Corporation of Princeton. The matter was referred to the Standards Committee, which referred it back to Council for guidance. Building on deliberations of several meetings, the case was formally presented to the AAPOR membership in nearly two single-spaced pages of the committee report to the annual business meeting in Madison, April 1955. Some items significant for the present history:

- In keeping with positions taken by its predecessors, the Standards Committee declined to pass judgment but presented relevant material so that “each member of AAPOR is free to make his own evaluation. . . .”
- “The Standards Committee has long held the view that the final report is the basis for an appraisal.”
- Since “future disputes might involve . . . sample design, selection and testing of interviewers, the manner of coding and classifying responses,” etc., “there are no limits to which the Standards Committee might be called on to act if it saw itself functioning as a policing agent for the profession.” The committee’s function was to improve ethical and professional standards but the committee was not “intended to serve as an enforcement agency” and even if it wanted to do so “no machinery exists” for that purpose.
- “As with any other professional body . . . the normal standards for criticism are . . . professional journals and private discussions.”
- AAPOR’s constitution provides for voluntary arbitration of disputes between members by an ad hoc tribunal. “Although Mr. Reuther is not a member of AAPOR, a member of AAPOR, under the Article in question, could elect voluntarily to represent his point of view, if arbitration were agreeable to other parties.”

The report closed by welcoming the opportunity to clarify the committee’s position. If we must surmise that the response was less than satisfactory to Walter Reuther, it appears to have been the most explicit statement to that date of the committee’s “function with respect to specific disputes.” Indeed, when the chair, Dean Manheimer, requested
clarification of the committee's function at the first meeting of the 1955-56 Council, he was referred to the statement to the membership presented in his absence two months earlier as "a model statement [that] can well serve as a committee charter."

Model or not, less than two years after avoiding confrontation on Reuther's challenge of biased question wording, Council took a more activist position at its meeting in February 1957 in response to Harry Alpert's presentation of an "ethical dilemma that often arises when survey materials are used in legal situations" when "the researcher has an obligation to shield the identity of survey respondents [b]ut when he does, the survey evidence is subject to being judged as 'hearsay' only." Alpert argued that "a responsible resolution, pointing out the researcher's responsibility and . . . a summary of precedents and citations in past legal situations could be useful both to the researcher and the court." The specific issue of respondent anonymity is discussed more fully below, but it is important to note here that it constituted the entering wedge for consideration of a comprehensive code of ethics. Council moved that Robert Ford, as Standards chair, be asked to draft the resolution, but when at a subsequent Council meeting he raised the question of a statement by AAPOR that would "bind members to protect the anonymity of survey respondents in legal situations," a question was raised as to the power of AAPOR to enforce such a resolution, if accepted. Also, it was pointed out that a resolution on this point would lead, inevitably, to a code of ethics. Daniel Katz reported that the American Psychological Association had a code of ethics that was actively enforced.

"The Council recommended that the Standards Committee prepare two resolutions: a) a brief statement expressing AAPOR's support for the protection of the anonymity of survey respondents to be presented at this year's business meeting, and b) a more extensive code of ethics to be presented by mail to the entire AAPOR membership. Discussion of the code and its possible adoption will be scheduled for next year's Conference."

The resolution on respondent anonymity was unanimously passed by the 1957 annual business meeting of the membership, at which Ford stated that he intended it to become a part of "a complete Code of Professional Practices & Standards" that would be developed by the committee and circulated to the membership for comment and suggestions before the next business meeting. A decade after the controversy over possible standards of performance had provoked a floor battle at the time of AAPOR's founding, no one seemed alarmed about the im-
position of technical standards because no one was arguing for them in these terms.

The question of enforcement was still lurking, however. Some favored it, some didn’t, but perhaps adopting a code seemed in itself so drastic that initially enforcement was not an issue. Committee member Ira Cisin, a persistent and conscientious objector over the years to any hint of enforcement, described the code as “appropriately pious and general.”

Indeed, this code, adopted by the membership at its 1958 annual business meeting in Chicago, consisted of one set of principles of scientific standards, one of improving standards of practice, and a third concerning obligations to “classes of people” including clients and sponsors, the public, and the Association itself. With its adoption, however, it was referred back to the membership and the committee for editorial changes.

Toward A Tougher Code

Meanwhile, Leo Bogart had succeeded to the Standards chair (1958) and, as he has written in a recent reminiscence, “we were faced with a growing number of complaints about malpractice” while the “original code was nothing more than a statement of good intentions.” The revised version was presented to the 1959 membership meeting at Lake George, this time with a resolution on implementation.

There was dissent from Cisin and from Shirley Star, another voice of conscience who frequently prodded AAPOR’s annual membership meetings, “who insisted that there was no one right way of doing things. . . . The debate went to the very heart of AAPOR’s function and character. Cisin honestly believed that AAPOR could never aspire to be a professional organization, because it set no criteria for membership other than ‘interest’ in the field. It was, to use his phrase, a ‘chowder and marching society.’ Some of the rest of us disagreed, and pointed to the code as a banner under which the organization could move to express its professionalism.”

The two points of view clashed with intensity like that of the initial 1947 debate, which it somewhat resembled, over whether the organization was to assume judgment of its members’ work. The question here was “whether the code was just to be an admonitory document framed and glaring down from the wall, or something with ‘teeth in it’ . . . a systematic procedure to review alleged infractions, and the possibility of real sanctions against organizations usually outside our own membership. This all came to a head when we faced our problems with
Gilbert, which began when I was still Standards chairman [1958-60]. . . . And his line with us was, 'I'm not breaking any law. Who designated you to say what's right and what's wrong?'”

Because the code had now become more controversial, the membership wanted time to consider these changes and the proposal was sent back for still further changes to “be circulated to the membership well in advance of the following year's conference.” Finally, it was accepted by the 1960 annual membership meeting in Atlantic City, including a provision that implementation was declared to be “a responsibility of the Executive Council. The Standards Committee will review any charges of violation . . . and submit its recommendation to the Executive Council.” This new code was published in the fall issue of POQ (without this implementation resolution) and, according to one account, became a model for codes adopted by the American Marketing Association and the Market Research Council.

With the new code in place and ready for implementation, the committee ran into a new problem. Seeking to confront the Gilbert Youth Organization, a research firm that was reportedly using its survey findings to compile lists of sales targets, Standards Chair Jack Elinson and a committee member were themselves threatened with a lawsuit in the 1962-63 business year. On advice of legal counsel, provided by President Joseph Klapper through the courtesy of his employer, CBS, Council was made aware of members’ exposure to damage suits and at its April 1963 meeting voted unanimously to recommend the incorporation of AAPOR as a means of protection in case “the Association is ever to take any action or express any opinions concerning any problems facing public opinion research.” With this protection secured, the membership at the annual business meeting in May, 1964, voted unanimously in favor of a “Resolution for Interpreting and Implementing the AAPOR Code of Professional Ethics and Practices” requiring the Standards Committee to accept, investigate, and review all complaints alleging infractions of the code and within ninety days to make a report with recommendations to Council.

The resolution was redrafted by Council according to the membership business meeting's motion and was adopted by Council in October, 1964. In the Council meeting that followed, Standards chair Bruce Neal questioned the feasibility of following up all complaints, in particular those directed at nonmembers, and thought more emphasis

3. The preceding quotations are from Leo Bogart's review of this chapter. The Gilbert case is discussed below.
should be placed on achieving the objectives by publicity. However, other Council members pointed out that a membership poll had shown overwhelming support for action against pseudo-surveys, for instance, and other code violations by nonmembers that threatened to impair interviewer access to respondents.

With this, the initial controversy between standards activists and those who feared imposition of authoritarian standards seemed resolved at last: No standards were to be prescribed, but practitioners would be held responsible for their work. AAPOR had embarked on an affirmative course, although the nature of its anticipated actions was left unspecified, to be developed ad hoc. This activist course was facilitated by the development and adoption of AAPOR’s standards of disclosure, a list describing elements of any survey, for example, sample size, question wording, dates of interviewing, that some members believed were essential to evaluation and interpretation and should therefore accompany the release of any findings.

The standards of disclosure were apparently prompted by “An Open Memorandum to the Standards Committee” prepared by Edwin Parker, William Nichols II, and Michael Phillips, referred to as the Parker Memorandum. This was introduced March 22, 1967 by Standards Committee chair Irving Crespi, at a meeting of Council, which authorized him to act on it. A draft was presented to Council, discussed at the members’ advisory business meeting in May of that year, adopted by Council in September, and in 1969 distributed by the Public Relations Committee “to AAPOR members, selected editors of major newspapers, magazines and TV stations, U.S. senators and state governors.” The purpose of this dissemination was to encourage both news organizations that carried polls and political figures who used them to be more discriminating in evaluating poll results sent to them.

These guidelines were descended from the 1948 “Standards of Practice To Be Used in the Reporting of Survey Results” promulgated by the committee of six commercial researchers referred to at the beginning of this chapter. As adopted by Council, these standards had remained for many years as a statement of desirable practice but, unlike the code, did not require membership approval or commitment until both were incorporated into the code revision two decades later. Similar standards were adopted by the National Council on Public Polls, also founded during the late 1960s, largely by AAPOR members who specialized in polls conducted primarily for media publication or broadcast.
In 1970, Manuel N. Manfield, a member of the Standards Committee, submitted a “Proposal for Supplementing the AAPOR Code of Professional Ethics and Practices.” Also descended from the 1948 Code of Professional Practice, this supplement pertained to honest business dealings in marketing research, forbidding such buyer practices as seeking preferential scheduling or “pirating” interviewers. It was rejected by Council on the grounds that purely business dealings were not appropriate for AAPOR concern.

Feeling the Way

Cases make law, and according to available records it was not until 1969, five years after the membership had required the Standards Committee to investigate alleged infractions, that AAPOR’s brave new direction was put to a test with the almost simultaneous appearance of four complaints. All four complaints involved the release of data advocating points that were challenged by opponents:

- A pro-armament group published an advertisement citing figures from a national poll by Opinion Research Corporation in support of the anti-ballistic missile—a poll that ABM opponents claimed was biased.
- Another ORC poll conducted for a group of Princeton alumni opposing the admission of women was challenged as biased by the University’s administration.
- A New York Post columnist wrote a piece that was circulated to Council by an AAPOR member, taking issue with George Gallup’s appearance on a USIA film that cited Gallup findings.
- A poll conducted for a private citizen’s group by Chilton Research Service on the Haynsworth nomination to the U.S. Supreme Court was said to be biased.

The Standards Committee presented the allegations in each case to the organization responsible and received a response from each. This documentation was presented in transcript form as part of the committee’s report to AAPOR’s membership at the 1970 advisory business meeting. They were also distributed (in the face of a libel suit threatened verbally by one of the subject organizations) as illustrative material for a session at the same conference titled, “Toward Responsibility in Reporting Opinion Surveys,” which was organized and chaired by the Standards Committee Chair, Sidney Hollander.
The next case on file (May, 1973) concerned alleged bias in a political poll by Market Opinion Research (MOR) of Detroit, but this organization declined to respond to the complaint without knowing the identity of the complainants. Anonymity of the complaint’s source was an issue that had been continually debated as the Code developed. Although Council member Cisin said that concealing complainants’ identities makes the Standards Committee party to a “security action,” the Standards Committee took the position that once a claim is accepted the committee itself becomes the complainant, just as the state and not the victim becomes the plaintiff in criminal law. In any case, “the Committee needs guidelines, especially for non-researchers” and “a document is being prepared.” This case was discussed in successive Council meetings while it was being pursued by the Standards Committee, but the absence of guidelines became increasingly apparent.

There was at this same time a sense of pressure from outside the industry for discipline, as public attention was drawn to self-serving polls and conflicting results. Council minutes for 1973 show that one member of Council who had presented AAPOR’s position to the U.S. congressional committee on “truth in polling” reported that one congressman had characterized AAPOR’s existing procedures as “piti ful.” In early 1974, some Council members began exploring what legal liability the organization might incur if it were to adopt stronger measures. The legal advice obtained recommended explicit procedures that could be applied uniformly as a means of minimizing the possibility of retaliation by liability suits.

The MOR case was reported by Standards Chair Hope Klapper in the 1974 report of the Standards Committee to the annual business meeting, referring to “three complaints about a firm [not named] which has a number of AAPOR members,” concerning release of survey findings supporting the position of the Nixon administration in a policy dispute with Congress. MOR acknowledged that some of its questions had been biased for the purpose of testing Nixon’s influence, but it had released the results without qualification and without reference to the sponsorship of the survey by the Republican National Committee. An ad hoc subcommittee had been appointed that “found the firm had violated our Code and Standards of Reporting and the firm was [so] notified by Council.” MOR, in turn, claimed that AAPOR did not have established procedures for dealing with infractions, declared the action discriminatory, and threatened suit for damages against Council as individuals. Acknowledging the absence of a codified procedure, Council agreed to push the outcome no further.
Formalizing Procedures

But process abhors a vacuum, and the committee report went on to say that in this instance, "the firm, the Standards Committee and Council all agreed that there should be a formally adopted, written document stipulating procedures and spelling out the range of action AAPOR could take against those judged to have violated the Code and Standards of Reporting." Accordingly, an ad hoc committee consisting of Standards Chair Klapper and two committee members (her subsequent successor, Mervin Field, and Burns Roper, who would later succeed to the chair), plus AAPOR President-Elect Herbert Abelson and a volunteer lawyer, developed a draft for submission to the membership.

This work was pursued vigorously in 1974-75 by Standards Chair Mervin Field, and the record shows six drafts produced and circulated to the committee and/or Council by the end of 1974. This took place at the same time that Council was revising AAPOR’s by-laws to include a revised code of ethics but not the companion standards of disclosure, although the latter could also be the subject of standards violations to be dealt with by means of the new procedures.

As portrayed in successive drafts and by specific criticism freely offered by Council members, the procedure was an elaborate series of some fourteen steps, at a minimum, before any kind of censure could be announced, if only to the concerned parties. The bodies involved, besides the complainant and the "respondent" (the term given to the alleged perpetrator of code violation), include at various points the chair of the Standards Committee, an ad hoc committee of the Standards Committee, Council, and an Investigating Committee also appointed by the Standards chair. The procedure is marked by promotion of fairness and elimination of self-interest; informing both complainant and respondent at several points and inviting their pleas; a final judgment made by the full Council; and protection of the respondent’s identity unless there is a final judgment of censure.

Criticisms noted in minutes and in extant memoranda reiterated the question whether the complainant has the option of remaining anonymous (decided in the affirmative); the burden of expense to both Council and the respondent; and whether decisions by Council and either of the specially-appointed committees can be made by mail or telephone canvass without exchange of views. Finally, at a Council meeting on March 21, 1975, Standards Chair Field presented the finished version, which was voted on section-by-section and passed with several amendments and deletions as Draft No.6, to be subsequently approved by the
membership. Thus, after nearly three decades the organization committed itself to a juridical if not a policing procedure. AAPOR would respond according to a stipulated procedure to complaints of dishonest or misleading presentation of surveys (or presumably any other opinion research), regardless of whether either the complainant or the respondent was an AAPOR member, and would publicly identify both the transgressor and perpetrator if fault was found.

The procedure did not wait long for application. Having no precedent in dealing with standards complaints, Council elected to put the new steps into use in April, even before their acceptance by AAPOR’s membership. A complaint had been received from a non-profit consumer organization, alleging that Opinion Research Corporation exhibited bias in a survey sponsored by a business group concerning the proposed establishment of a consumer advocacy agency in the federal government. The incident provided a showcase for the newly-minted regulations because the survey had earlier been presented to a U.S. Senate subcommittee that declared it “loaded to produce a predetermined conclusion.” One senator declared that it “involves questions of misrepresentation which should come within the ambit of . . . the Federal Trade Commission Act,” a type of scrutiny rarely, if ever, suggested for an opinion poll hitherto. After the issue had received some publicity, Harry O’Neill, Executive Vice President of the subject organization, “invited an AAPOR investigation and agreed to cooperate fully.”

The investigation, directed by Mervin Field, followed the prescribed steps, beginning with a three-person ad hoc Review Committee and culminating in a full review by a diversified panel of twelve AAPOR members. Nearly six months after receipt of the initial complaint, this Evaluation Committee issued a thirteen-page document that condoned some aspects of the criticized study but stated the questionnaire was “probably biased,” and found some “interpretations which do not appear to be supported by the data made public.” The committee report was submitted to Council, which accepted it with one abstention and subsequently issued a news release summarizing the findings, including that ORC was “in complete conformity with AAPOR’s standards of disclosure.” The release also stated that one committee member (Ithiel de Sola Pool) dissented, and his dissent, as well as a rebuttal to the findings by O’Neill, was issued with the full report. Pool’s dissent noted that any question reporting on public approval of a legislative act necessarily focuses on limited aspects of the measure, and so to find bias in singling out one aspect or another is a subjective rather than an ethical judgment.
This case is notable as the first to be submitted to the full procedure, and it was also the first in which a reprimand was issued based on perceived bias, even when full disclosure had been made. In justifying this unprecedented use of standards applied to performance, Field wrote (in a personal letter to Pool acknowledging and rebutting his dissent): “I enthusiastically support...your reservations about the tyranny of collective thought (in committee form) regarding methodological matters. However, I would hope this does not mean...that a practitioner can be shielded from criticism by his peers when they believe he has been intemperate in reporting his results to innocent audiences.”

In addition to reaching definitive conclusions concerning the adequacy of the subject survey, the Evaluation Committee advanced several fundamental and penetrating questions regarding the role of survey research in public policy issues, including the “absence of minimum methodological standards of practice.” It noted “a vast literature on every phase of survey research methodology, but this is scarcely acknowledged by the existing AAPOR Code...Standards of scientific competence are referred to...without further explication.” A code of ethics is inadequate, the committee reasoned, because “we suffer more from the work of incompetents than from the knowingly unethical” and “the Committee wishes that AAPOR had a better mechanism to handle the former.” Thus, even in the first full demonstration of its ability to deal with an alleged infraction of ethics, the investigating committee in an obiter dictum observation still sought standards in the sense initially conceived by some of AAPOR’s founding fathers, feared by others, and never seriously formulated by the organization’s governing body. Indeed, dissenters on the Evaluation Committee questioned the organization’s right to criticize and reject such research, short of outright falsification of data, so long as the entire procedure was adequately described. This position was later supported in a volunteered protest by Burns Roper, a committee member later to become a Standards chair and an AAPOR president.

Encompassed within the time span of the landmark ORC investigation was an example of a similar situation that took a different turn. In July of the same year (1975), a complaint was received regarding a publication of Planned Parenthood of America citing Gallup Poll data. A Preliminary Review Committee was appointed, which called the matter to the attention of both organizations and received a prompt apology from Planned Parenthood to Gallup for the error and a promise to revise the offending publication before reprinting it. In August, George
Gallup, Jr., in turn, acknowledged "certain errors in presentation of the data."

**Shortcomings and Second Looks**

Although these two contrasting examples could be taken as vindication of the procedures the committee had laboriously brought forth under Field’s chairmanship, the smoke was still lingering on the battleground in January 1976 when the Council minutes report: “Field suggested that AAPOR review its stance on Standards,” apparently due to fear of an overload of complaints. Field also reiterated the need for liability insurance. In these respects he anticipated later concerns: his successor, Reuben Cohen, cited liability risks as one of two major concerns in his annual committee report to the membership in May 1977; and later that year Council decided on a less than full procedural investigation of another complaint against Opinion Research Corporation, in part because of the anticipated work load. The liability risk was finally dealt with in 1980 when insurance coverage was obtained.

Another aspect of code development is that much of it took place simultaneously with a revision of AAPOR’s by-laws, and the two were linked in a requirement that signed acceptance of the code be a qualification for AAPOR membership. This revived some protests of thought control and, more pointedly, provoked objection by Council member Albert D. Biderman, who chose to resign from AAPOR rather than sign, on the grounds that at least portions of the code did not apply or would obstruct some kinds of research activities that could not reasonably be regarded as unethical. As examples, he pointed to qualitative opinion research of elites whose opinions are singular and can be attributed; or the use of deliberately biased questions for experimental purposes, whose findings are not to be set forth as indicative of public opinion. Such objections led to some code modifications in the 1979-80 term under chairmanship of Donald Hughes, and also to a provision that permitted acceptance of the code with stipulated reservations.

Despite such accentuation of diversity among AAPOR members and their practices, the idea of performance standards continued to erupt. Early in 1978, Council considered and rejected the idea of "certification of practitioners." A few months later, "the sense of the Council was that the Standards Committee continue its investigation of technical guidelines."

While further revisions were considered off and on, complaints were received and processed under the existing procedure as reported in
March, 1981, and January and December of 1982. One of these complaints, directed at an AAPOR member, resulted in a new tactic in keeping with the times: the minutes of March 1983 record that the “accused has communicated with AAPOR through his law firm only; B. Bailar and E. Weinberg [Standards chair and AAPOR secretary-treasurer] have received threatening phone calls from the lawyers.”

A case in 1983, regarding a candidate poll by the Cambridge Survey Research organization, challenged the practice of drafting questionable statements about other candidates as measures of strength or vulnerability. One such statement used in the questionnaire was based on information supplied by the client about another candidate’s marital infidelity, which proved to be somewhat overstated although generally based on news items reported years before. According to CSR executives, the purpose of the questions was to ascertain how reminders of these incidents would affect the contest if a third candidate were to revive awareness of them. Those appointed to review the case were strongly divided. Some claimed that the deliberate recounting of sensational misbehavior, particularly when it was exaggerated, constituted unethical behavior even though it was disseminated to only a few hundred survey respondents. Others found no fault with setting up what was essentially a hypothetical situation for testing opinion, particularly when the entire procedure was made known according to AAPOR standards of disclosure.

The full investigation procedure was applied and the case was presented in late 1983 to Council, some of whose members favored a strong reprimand. Others did not, either because they thought adequate disclosure was all that mattered, because the case had dragged on too long, or because they wondered how AAPOR could defend itself if sued. In the face of a divided Council, it was decided to issue a full statement on the matter, without reprimand, and a minority dissent, which were eventually published in the AAPOR Newsletter.

Another complaint directed against CSR was submitted by environmentalists favoring a “bottle bill” in Maryland. The complainants objected to an opposition leaflet citing CSR research that failed to include the facts required by AAPOR’s standards of disclosure. However, the environmentalists’ case was eclipsed by the earlier, more sensational one, which had strained committee and Council energies and resources. Initial investigation by a subcommittee found grounds for pursuing the new complaint, but the research organization had meanwhile split into two independent components, delaying the committee’s attempts to deal with it. By the time communications had been restored,
the committee believed its case had been so weakened procedurally that it decided to drop the complaint rather than adjudicate on its merits.

As mentioned earlier, the amateur historian is struck with the tendency of Standards chairs and their committees to redefine the task with each new administration. This appears to be based on a mixture of accumulated experience, changing conditions, and ignorance of the past. Because of the Standards Committee’s ambiguous mission and its multiplicity of activities, some of which were not truly standards issues but were nonetheless assigned to the committee, this tendency is probably more pronounced for the Standards Committee than it is for any other AAPOR committee. Like many of her predecessors, Standards Chair Deborah Hensler took a fresh look when she succeeded to the office in May 1983, and “asked for direction from Council concerning the agenda for the Standards Committee in the coming year.” Hensler’s perspective was undoubtedly sharpened by her being the first to have served a preliminary year as associate chair under the new by-laws. Hensler observed that the Standards of Disclosure, while fundamental to the committee’s function, were not part of the code and that in their scope and origins they were applicable primarily to published polls rather than to what most AAPOR members do. She also noted that there was no code provision one could cite in opposition to abuse of surveys for fund-raising, which for many years had occupied much Standards Committee attention.

Council therefore encouraged Hensler’s suggestions for further code revision, so that these and similarly grounded suggestions led to a thorough editing, consolidation, and revision of the code. The culmination of this comprehensive undertaking occurred under the chairmanship of David Sills when, on January 17, 1986, Council certified that the new code had been overwhelmingly approved by a mail ballot of the membership.

## Standards of Quality

**Groping for Standards of Performance**

The code, lately encompassing standards for reporting and the schedule of procedures for dealing with infractions, constitutes the core of the Standards task as it evolved over the years. The preceding section of this chapter has shown that the initial advocates of a standards committee apparently believed it would become an authority
and reference source for techniques in accomplishing each stage of the survey research process. Quite apart from the apprehensions of those who feared this would be "authoritarian," no committee ever undertook to "codify the underlying principles governing scientific method in this work." As we have seen, this was not done largely because no one really knew how to do it.

Nevertheless, the task of promoting (if not enforcing) standards of quality was not neglected by AAPOR, although it was not carried solely by standards committees. As this history has shown, the annual AAPOR conference was recognized early on, together with POQ, which is older still, as a means of advancing standards at a time when academia had little to offer in our field. Thus, at the 1948 business meeting, "the Committee arranged for a panel discussion on standards as part of the program for the annual meeting" and in 1949 began the "author-meets-critic" series that would constitute an important conference feature for many years.

Two decades later, the annual conference again became a vehicle for Standards concerns. In 1969, a consensus in the Standards Committee feared that the glamour of sophisticated analytical techniques was leading to neglect of the basic task of data collection in the field. Consequently, it planned "a working conference, chaired by Paul Sheatsley, on the day preceding the... Conference [as an] informal review of various field problems. Participating will be representatives of interested organizations such as the Market Research Trade Association, the Advertising Research Foundation, the American Marketing Association and the Manufacturers Research Association." And at the annual business meeting that year, "the Committee recommends that all future AAPOR Conference programs should include a session on field problems" as it was believed had been done in the past.

More recently, didactic sessions have been offered at the annual conferences, sometimes also in advance of the regular program sessions, and, though not customarily a responsibility of the Standards Committee, they seem closest to the founders' ideal of a body to promote the scientific aspects of survey research.

The 1951-52 report to the annual business meeting by the committee, prepared by its chair Herbert Hyman, appears to be the last one to consider a comprehensive program for the advancement of technical standards in addition to ethical ones. Besides recommendations for conference sessions, it proposed that "the Standards Committee exert some influence on editorial policy" of POQ, and that the Standards chair serve ex officio with the Program and Publications and Member-
ship Committees. It also recommended that the Standards Committee "engage in the collection and dissemination of materials that will improve technical skills of the membership, such as manuals for interviewers or coders, inventories of new techniques, and the like."

In fact, this report’s expansionist goal did not stop at AAPOR’s borders; it noted that “other professional bodies are more and more entering into social research without necessarily having the required technical equipment... for example... clinicians and psychiatrists who are extending their horizons into social research. We recommend attempts to participate in the professional meetings of such groups and other interdisciplinary activities so that the general level of social research will be improved wherever it is undertaken.” In the same vein, “we also stress the desirability of a Standards Committee working with academic groups now formulating plans for formal training in social research.”

It is this last sentence that provides an explanation for what seems, from the perspective of the 1980s, to have been extravagantly ambitious empire-building for AAPOR itself, to say nothing of a single committee. The key is that academia was then only “formulating plans” for formal training of the kind we would now unhesitatingly say belongs to the university, not to a professional association. Acknowledgment of this transition is seen in a Standards Committee report to Council two years later in 1954. “At their first meeting, Mr. [Robert O.] Carlson [Committee member and subsequent AAPOR president] agreed to look into the problem of the integration of courses in research methodology in various colleges and universities.” We have no record of what, if anything, came of this attempt.

Otherwise, Standards Committees over the years appear to have dealt with performance standards sporadically, as occasions thrust them into view and not with the earlier zeal to become the technical/methodological arbiter of all survey research. For example, the 1950-51 committee “received and considered a ‘Standard breakdown for population data in media and market surveys,’ a joint recommendation of the American Association of Advertising Agencies, the American Marketing Association and the Association of National Advertisers.” Far from any hint of an authority role, the committee decided merely to “call it to the attention of the membership” and tell them where they could obtain copies. (The same procedure was followed in 1968 when the Research Committee of the American Association of Advertising Agencies made a similar proposal for standardizing demographic data in population surveys.) There is no indication that the 1950-51 com-
mittee members or any other AAPOR members at that time took part in the inter-organizational formulation of the standard classification, or that the committee considered the proposed standards substantively. However, five years later, at a Council meeting in September, 1956, the minutes report that “Bureau of Census has invited AAPOR to participate in a Council of Population and Housing Users” and that President Wiebe appointed Ira Cisin, a member of the Standards Committee, to serve as AAPOR representative.

Conserving Our “Natural Resource”

A decade later, in March, 1967, Council considered a letter from Manuel Manfield “concerning the dangers of breakdown in interviewer access to the public [because] certain current field validation techniques are destroying the public’s good will towards opinion and market research.” Here, Council took initiative in sending copies to four other organizations as well as to every AAPOR member, and asked Manfield to present the subject to the next annual business meeting. Serving as “a one-man subcommittee of the Standards Committee,” he presented a “study of the problems related to validation of interviews” at the annual business meeting in May, 1968. This report was reproduced and distributed by the Market Research Trade Association (now Market Research Association) and after further consideration and revision by the committee was published by POQ in the winter issue, 1972, as a guide to standards in that aspect of data collection.

Interest in validation procedures was also spurred by the development at about this time of “FACT,” a service for interviewer quality control offered by the Advertising Research Foundation. This service was analyzed by the Standards Committee in 1968, and the Standards chair represented AAPOR in deliberations at ARF.

Although data collection is but one of several major steps in survey research, it is the one with which Standards Committees have been most concerned over the years. This is in large part because the interviewing process has important ethical aspects that have demanded Standards’ attention in several ways over the years and up to the present. Because respondent anonymity in field procedures was long a principal ethical (hence standards) issue, AAPOR has tended over the years to assign to its Standards Committees all field matters, such as those concerning administration or legislation. Thus, in the period 1969-71, the Standards Committee also responded to a concern for field work quality by requesting training materials from all members who conducted interviewing, with the aim of compiling a definitive manual.
Like most other attempts to establish performance standards, this one foundered. The reasons appear to have been a low response (partly because such information is often regarded as proprietary); differences of opinion; and, as with all AAPOR attempts at establishing quality standards, the sheer volume of work required. Acknowledging in its 1970-71 report that “this hope proved fatuous,” the committee offered to serve as an exchange between those who wanted to see such material and those willing to have it released. It appears that none did.

At the first Council meeting for 1971-72, the outgoing Standards chair warned that “we are continuing to waste our natural resource of public goodwill through abuse of the privilege of interviewing” and relayed a suggestion of Mervin Field that attempts be made to “compute any trends in yields of probability samples.” This appears to have been the first record of committee concern about yields, a topic to be addressed by AAPOR and other associations, jointly and severally, in the ensuing years.

Not long afterwards, the American Statistical Association received a grant from the National Science Foundation for an interdisciplinary and inter-organizational study to improve response rates. Field represented AAPOR and he also attempted an informal exchange of yield information from other survey organizations before his election as Standards chair in 1974.

Pseudo-Surveys

Another data-collection issue that AAPOR addressed was the distinction between survey research and straw polls. From time to time some AAPOR member has had occasion to say in an official capacity that cut-out-and-mail-in ballots, subsequently dignified as “media-based balloting,” do not constitute an acceptable technique any more than they did in the Literary Digest poll of 1936. An electronic descendant of the straw vote appeared in the early 1980s in the form of the telephone company’s “900 numbers” as a medium by which the public could express its opinions by calling (for a fee) to a broadcaster or newspaper on one side of an issue or the other. This was brought up in a Council meeting in December 1980, at which the subject was linked to “Qube,” described as a “two-way interactive TV service in Ohio.” The following October the Standards Committee, having met by conference call, recommended that a letter be widely disseminated pointing out the difference between this activity and acceptable opinion polls. In January 1982, Standards Chair Barbara Bailar reported that the letter, revised in accordance with Council’s suggestions, was ready
to go. She also announced a new committee member, Gary Schmermund of AT&T, who had been recruited to help deal with the 900 issue. The subject was discussed in Council again in November 1983. No action was taken, but it was noted that the telephone company was promoting the technique as a valid survey procedure and would not likely be deterred by an AAPOR reprimand. Besides, “900 surveys” do not violate any provision of the AAPOR Code of Ethics.”

Rejection of Technical Standards

Except for this continuing concern about methods of data collection, there appeared to be no concerted interest in improving the standards of practice from the 1950s until February 1978, when Council minutes show that “a technical standards subcommittee, headed by Walter McCullough, is investigating the feasibility of AAPOR’s establishing technical standards.” When the subject was brought back to Council’s final meeting of the year, in June, it was greeted with a cacophony of objection: that not enough is known about the basics like question wording, that the Advertising Research Foundation offered technical guidance, that AAPOR lacked the capabilities, that it was preferable for individuals rather than a committee to be free to offer opinions on technical matters. Perhaps the response was best summarized by AAPOR’s outgoing president, Hope Klapper, who noted: “Council had never asked the Standards Committee to develop technical standards and... might not want them.” Although “the sense of the Council was that the Standards Committee [should] continue its investigation of technical guidelines,” the rebuff seems to have settled the question and the subject does not appear again in the records. Probably nothing better illustrates AAPOR’s aversion to issuing technical standards than its response to requests for them. In 1973 an academic-in-residence at the Federal Trade Commission asked AAPOR for guidance in evaluating the mounting number of surveys conducted by the commission, or by parties to a commission action, in such matters as restraint of trade (are specified commodities seen as interchangeable?) and consumer protection issues (what do consumers infer from a package or an advertisement?). He said that economists had arrived at a standard on the degree of permissible industry concentration in monopoly proceedings (that is, how much concentration constitutes a violation of the Antitrust Act), and so reasoned that survey researchers might do the same with respect to standards for sample size, method of selection, interviewing medium, and the like.
Again Council's response was varied: decline to consider the request; find out how close the inquirer is to FTC policy-making; educate the FTC to AAPOR's reliance on disclosure rather than performance; refer the inquirer to basic texts or reference works; join with other organizations in developing a response; urge that surveys be conducted directly for the court rather than by adversaries; respond in a "negative constructive" way to forestall "any arbitrary or unrealistic standards." Council's decision in this case was to 1) suggest "standard reference works;" 2) meet with the inquirer to help define the problem; 3) focus FTC procedures on "criteria and not standards." Coincidentally, in the same Council meeting (September, 1973) at which the FTC request was first presented, the Standards chair also asked for guidance in responding to a request (also sent to the National Council on Public Polls) from the Federal Fair Campaign Practices Committee "to help combat polling activities that are in violation of the spirit of the FEPC guidelines." The suggestion was made at this Council meeting that a statement be developed, and added to other components of the Fair Campaign pledge that would "condemn the release of opinion poll results to the public unaccompanied by information about polling procedures" that would permit evaluation of the findings. This contrast between responses to two federal agencies neatly reaffirms AAPOR's and its Standards Committee's rejection of standards of practice in favor of standards of disclosure.

Standards as Advocate and Defender

Respondent Anonymity

This final section will consider several roles assumed by the Standards Committee over the years, some not strictly related to the ethics and standards functions described in the first two sections. Why, for example, should it have been this committee's function to represent AAPOR's opposition to spurious surveys whose real purpose is selling or fund-raising? The classification of field interviewers under wage-and-hour legislation? The admissibility of surveys as legal evidence?

4. It is worth noting that in 1976 the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) set 75 percent as an "expected response rate" in approving federal data-collection activities irrespective of the purpose or respondent universe. Expected rates of 50-75 percent would require "special justification" and "proposed statistical data collection activities having an expected response rate of less than 50 percent will be disapproved."
The connecting link here, as in the preceding discussion of data collection procedures, seems to lie in Standards' ethical responsibility for respondents, most particularly with respect to respondent anonymity. It appears that once the respondent was placed under the protective wing of Standards, other fieldwork questions—even operational matters like interviewer wages and hours and local ordinances affecting doorbell ringing—seemed to incline in the same direction. For purposes of this history, however, the latter issues have been placed with governmental matters where they logically belong, and not with Standards, where they were conveniently assigned by successive Council deliberations.

Although some kinds of social research, such as experiments in social psychology, follow a patient model with the clinician in charge, survey researchers are more inclined toward a transactional model in which the respondent voluntarily provides opinions in exchange for a number of considerations variously described: the respect accorded to one's authority, the satisfaction of sounding off in non-threatening discourse, the opportunity of influencing events (a political or commercial outcome), or in some cases a material reward of product or cash.

AAPOR is not alone in its ethical concern for keeping intact the mutual exchange implicit in this relationship. All the major professional and trade associations dependent on the sample survey are on record for maintaining the confidential nature of the process and the need for preserving anonymity. As distinct from the common ethical values of honesty in scholarly pursuits and in contractual obligations, this mandate is the one that distinguishes survey research ethics as expressed in AAPOR's Code, and for good reason: apart from any moral considerations, it is considered necessary to deal respectfully and in good faith with respondents in order that the flow of opinion continue. To refer to Mervin Field's analogy cited above, the willingness of the public to respond to our questions is a natural resource that we deplete or pollute at our peril.

The AAPOR code, in common with others, has included a pledge of respondent anonymity and Standards Committees have been zealous in their protection of it. Indeed, as shown above, the 1957 impetus toward developing a comprehensive code derived from and was coupled with a resolution on respondent anonymity, and there is evidence that interest in one case that year was sufficiently widespread to have attracted the attention of the American Civil Liberties Union. The threats have generally come from two sources: first, the occasional disclosure of survey data to identify individuals as targets for sales or other solic-
itation; and second, the incessant recurrence of sales activities that use the survey approach simply to gain access and initial attention by telephone or at the door before turning to a direct sales pitch. The first is found among research practitioners and when it occurs is regarded as a Code infraction, sometimes involving differences in Code interpretation; the second is usually perpetrated by those who have no interest in survey research, are impervious to AAPOR reprimand, and thus can generally be dealt with (if at all) only with the help of other organizations (including government agencies). Other abuses, including some variations of these two, have similarly occupied the Committee’s attentions over the years, beginning (as noted above) with the annual report of the first Standards Committee in 1948.

The initial six-organization “Code of Professional Practices,” which was “commended” by the 1948 conference, contained no reference to respondent protection. Nevertheless, to those of us who may have thought that abuse of the survey approach is a relatively recent phenomenon piggy-backing on growing recognition of the survey itself, it is a revelation to find that in his report to the annual business meeting (September, 1948), Philip Hauser, the first Standards Committee chair, “brought up the question of the increasing abuse of interviewing techniques by sales people in door-to-door selling.” He noted that the National Better Business Bureau had received many evidences of this and that a representative of the bureau was present to answer any questions that members of the audience might have about the nature of the abuses. The following resolution was then adopted:

Be it resolved that the American Association for Public Opinion Research condemns the use of survey interviewing as a selling device and holds this practice to be a serious threat to the continued cooperation of the public in legitimate marketing and public opinion research.

Further, the Association instructs the Standards Committee to keep abreast of developments in this area, to cooperate with the National Better Business Bureau and other organizations concerned with improving standards, and to call the need for corrective action to the attention of the Association members as necessary.

Pursuit of this aim by “encouraging the work of the Better Business Bureau and other such groups” was reiterated as an aim of the 1950-51 Standards Committee, which stated in its annual report:

The Committee continued the work of an earlier committee on ethical standards through cooperation with the Better Business Bureau’s program for curbing abuses of research. The Bureau reports that the elimi-
nation of the frequency [sic] of the survey-approach by door-to-door salesmen has been greatly reduced. The results have been so good that the Better Business Bureau plans to dissolve its division of research activities (the formation of which was backed by the AAPOR) at the end of the year, and to absorb this work into the general staff.

But the Better Business Bureau was concerned not only with abuse in data collection, but also with honesty of reporting results.

The Bureau had proposed to an earlier Association committee a plan for the curbing of abuses of research. The first 7 points of this program, which are concerned with salesmen posing as interviewers, were approved by the earlier committee. The last 3 points, which dealt with the use of the findings of research in advertising, were not agreed to by the committee. The argument was that the members of the American Association for Public Opinion Research would prefer not to have some other organization checking up on the use of research in advertising. . . . The problem of the misuse of research in advertising is receiving further attention from this committee.

The committee is also considering drafting a proposal to the Association which would ultimately contain an official statement to the effect that no research firm should turn over to a client the names and addresses of the people interviewed, except by permission of the respondent. The Bureau would like to quote such a statement verbatim, in an effort to stop the practice of follow-up for the purpose of selling.

At the next annual meeting (1952) the Committee report referred to “two new areas in which ethical considerations . . . begin to call for attention.” The first was violation of respondent anonymity, revealed in an instance that appears unique in the annals of survey research, and which one would like to believe could have taken place only in that McCarthy era:

An old and experienced interviewer . . . realized on the basis of his answers that a respondent in a survey was a Communist . . . and she informed the [research] agency that she had reported him to the police. The interviewer was discharged and the total staff was instructed on the problem. . . . We regard such practices not only as involving ethical norms, but also as patently unwise in relation to the continuation of effective research. The widespread occurrence of such practices would mean the end of respondent cooperation, our essential resource.

The second incipient area of attention for a Code of Ethics involves research practices which by their very nature may have injurious effects on respondents . . . merely by virtue of their participation in an interview. Insofar as public opinion research loses its superficiality and penetrates in the future into more significant and deeper layers of experience . . . we
shall be forced to take up the problem [as] has been the case with psychologists who seek to protect their experimental subjects from anxiety or injury created by the mere conditions of experiment.

What catapulted respondent anonymity into AAPOR’s Code, however, came neither from the vigilantism of an interviewer nor from “anxiety or injury” resulting from experiments, but from a new source: the use of surveys as legal evidence. First mention of this as a Standards concern is found in a report to Council in September, 1954 stating that Jack Elinson, a committee member (subsequently Standards chair and AAPOR president), was to pursue an offer by Hans Zeisel “to look into the problem of legal expectations” when survey data are used as legal evidence.

This is the initial mention of a subject that returns in changing form intermittently to the present. That it was not new even in 1954 is indicated by a parenthetical note in the minutes: “Mr. Zeisel agreed some time ago to follow this matter up.” Hans Zeisel, whose career led from opinion research to the faculty of the University of Chicago Law School, has long been regarded as an authority on this topic, both before 1954 and since.

The issue is whether anonymity can be preserved when surveys are used in legal proceedings. For years, survey research findings were barred in most courts under the rule of hearsay evidence, on the grounds that the opinions were presented at second hand through interviewers and survey analysts. This led to pressure to reveal identities so that the evidence could be introduced directly, which would have meant total abandonment of anonymity. Any survey respondent in such a case could be subpoenaed or deposed. This possibility was clearly untenable for research professionals who anticipated what the effects would be if it became known that replying to a questionnaire could earn one a summons to testify under oath.

As one example (from experience, if not in the records), a lawyer requested a commercial researcher to record replies to the questions he, not the researcher, had formulated, together with respondent names and addresses, in a bound notebook so that the court could see that any replies unfavorable to the case had not been removed. When the researcher demurred on ethical grounds, the lawyer expressed his intention to find someone more compliant, or if necessary, to hire interviewers himself.

As reported above, it was Harry Alpert as past president in 1957 who urged a “responsible resolution” on respondent anonymity, which
was then coupled in a Council resolution with "a more extensive code of ethics." Alpert's proposal may have been spurred by the case of AAPOR member Arthur Greenberg, who offered to face a contempt charge, if necessary, rather than reveal the names of those responding to a survey he presented as evidence in a Federal Communications Commission hearing.

In response to this charge, in the committee's report to the 1957 annual business meeting, Ford presented the following resolution, which was unanimously adopted: "We will protect the anonymity of every respondent and hold as privileged and confidential all information which tends to identify the respondent, except when the respondent specifically authorizes disclosure of such information. We recommend that this resolution be printed in our official minutes."

In discussion following the introduction of the committee's resolution, "Several members from the floor reported incidents in which the anonymity of survey respondents had been supported in ... judicial proceedings. It was recommended that a record be made of these events which will serve as precedents in future legal situations."

The subject remained an open one over the years, recurring in POQ articles and conference programs. Fifteen years later, the report of the Standards Committee to the 1972 annual business meeting replayed the scenario: "A judge was encountered last year who wanted all respondents' names and responses. Hence the Standards inquiry on experience with surveys in evidence. Members sent helpful strategies, articles they have written, etc. Hans Zeisel has written much on this, including a useful bibliography." Such "helpful strategies" have included destroying records of respondent identities as soon as the data have been validated and entered; further, Mervin Field subsequently wrote an article recommending that this procedure be used for all surveys, whether or not used for legal evidence, because it might be regarded as contempt if done only in litigative situations, and also because it further fulfills our commitment to anonymity for all respondents.

Other developments included an overture by the AAPOR president (Hollander) in 1973 to the American Bar Association in the hope of gaining acceptance by the legal profession of survey research ethics with respect to anonymity, but nothing came of this. In 1981, however, after another round of interest in this topic, Standards Chair Michael Rappeport told Council that he and Irving Crespi (former Standards chair and AAPOR president) were preparing an article conveying the concept of survey ethics to the legal profession via the authoritative
publication, *Trademark Reporter*. An even more hopeful sign was reported at the same Council meeting (January, 1973) by Ira Cisin, who "noted that Selma Monsky has a current survey project which is being done for a court, in which the judge brought the opposing attorneys together to get them to stipulate in advance whether they would accept the survey findings. He [Cisin] pointed to this as the way to go."

While the court-ordered neutral survey, which is ideal from the researcher's viewpoint if not the lawyer's, has failed to find general acceptance, over the years respondent anonymity has come to be respected by legal precedent, and it is now embodied in the federal legal code. The judicial opinions most frequently cited no longer seek corroboration of survey evidence by direct validation of survey response, but with increasing sophistication take notice of such factors as sample universe and size, respondent selection, method and conditions of data collection, possible biases, and even reputation of the survey firm, as well as its independence of sponsor influence in the particular study. Further legal recognition of respondent anonymity in opinion surveys is found in federal legislation granting privileged status to replies given by respondents in studies of drug abuse.

While AAPOR's expressed commitment to respondent anonymity was precipitated by the litigative challenge, it has been continued on other fronts. Early support from Better Business Bureaus, cited above, has been renewed intermittently over the years, augmented by efforts of other associations interested in survey research, by the Direct Mail/Marketing Association, by the Federal Trade Commission, and by other governmental units.

In March 1956, it was reported that "an organization calling itself American Business Research is using a survey-making approach in direct door-to-door selling in Washington, D.C." Two AAPOR members in that area were "to investigate and report to the Council for possible protest," but the records indicate nothing further. Again, minutes indicate that Shirley Star, "pointed out to the 1964 membership that the Better Business Bureaus were largely ineffective in combatting malpractices arising from 'pseudo-surveys' and moved that AAPOR Council take legal action against any such practices called to its attention." Although "the motion was unanimously carried," there is no indication that such action has ever been taken, and there is ample evidence elsewhere in this chapter to show the formidable obstacles to initiating such proceedings.

These difficulties were reiterated at the 1965 annual business meeting by Standards Chair Bruce Neal, who
drew a distinction between unethical activities engaged in by AAPOR members, which he said could usually be resolved without difficulty on an informal basis, and unethical activities by non-members. Outsiders who commit such practices, he said, do not subscribe to the AAPOR Code and they regard their activities as both legal and effective. The Standards Committee does not have the time, staff or funds to investigate every complaint. It is difficult for us to prove that our access is harmed or that people's rights have been infringed. In his view, AAPOR should move very carefully in trying to police the field and should place more emphasis on explaining its point of view through informative articles in the mass media.

This view was challenged by several members who noted that in the recent self-survey, 79% of members answering said that the most important thing for AAPOR to do was to fight pseudo-surveys, and that a main reason for incorporation was to permit legal challenge of unethical practices. Others pointed to pending legislation which threatens telephone interviewing, to local ordinances restricting interviewing activity, and to an increasing outcry against abuses of the survey approach. It was variously urged that AAPOR go on record against practices which endanger access to the public, that particular test cases be selected for legal action, that Council retain permanent legal counsel for advisory purposes, and that AAPOR work with other interested associations and agencies such as the Better Business Bureaus, Federal Trade Commission, American Marketing Association, and Market Research Trade Association.

Neal was speaking with personal knowledge and feeling about difficulty in acting against non-members. During his chairmanship (1964-66) he found himself entangled in an unfortunate coincidence unparalleled in this organization's history: his own employer, Ford Motor Co., sponsored a massive "survey" of automobile owners in major markets whose results were unabashedly used for sales solicitation. Rather than resign his chairmanship in the face of what appeared to be a clear conflict between his responsibilities to his employer and to AAPOR, Neal, according to one observer, upheld the principle of anonymity to the point where he "put his job on the line." Ethics prevailed and he was eventually able to report that he had succeeded in having the practice discontinued. Although his predicament is not fully documented in the records at hand, minutes of a meeting in early 1967 tactfully report that "Council commended the Standards Committee on its handling of a request by the Ford Motor Truck Division of the Ford Motor Company, related to wording of a proposed sales canvass."

In his report to the 1968 annual business meeting, Crespi reported that the Magazine Publishers' Association had established "some kind
of code which purports to control use of the survey method for sales canvassing...[but with] inadequate assurance of preventing misuse” and “hopes that further contact can be developed between the AAPOR Standards Committee and the Magazine Publishers’ Association. He feels we must be sure that the magazine code is improved and enforced by the magazine industry.”

Survey Abuses

Later in the same year, the matter of survey abuses was brought to the attention of the federal government by means of a paper delivered in person by the Standards Chair (Hollander) at the Federal Trade Commission’s Consumer Protection Hearings. Council minutes report “the Commission’s interest in curbing survey abuses if a good case can be made for such control,” although subsequent feedback from some FTC staff revealed antagonism about the use of consumer protection resources to advance what some saw as a vocational interest. Meanwhile, in 1971 New York City enacted Consumer Protection Law Regulation 12, which made it a “deceptive practice” to solicit a purchase at a residence without informing the prospect “that the purpose of the contact is to effect a sale.” “Falsely representing that the salesman is taking a survey” is named as one of the deceptions prompting the need for Regulation 12, but there is no reference to AAPOR or other survey research advocacy in gaining consideration for it.

The committee’s report to the next advisory business meeting (1969) recommended that field interviewers requesting in-person interviews present identification cards modeled after the “Memo to the Public” slip developed some two decades earlier by the national Better Business Bureau, to acquaint prospective respondents with the difference between a legitimate survey and a sales pitch. Members were also requested to be vigilant about survey abuse in their own areas, especially in monitoring “local advertisements offering instruction in interviewing when, actually, sales canvassing is involved.”

In further action against survey abuse, the Standards Committee sent a request to all members to report instances in their own areas and to encourage their interviewing staffs (often the first to encounter such abuses) to report them. Minutes of a Council meeting in early 1970 show that only three such transgressions were returned to the Committee for follow-up. However, an inhouse survey of all Opinion Research Corporation interviewers “found that half of them report instances of such abuse” according to the committee’s report to the 1971 annual business meeting. And when a similar request went out to the
membership in 1971-72 it "got a good response." The 1971 Standards Committee report mentions abuses in six states, saying "we look into all, but in fact can't do much besides ask perpetrators to stop."

One case singled out for special mention was that of World Field Research whose "abuse is not the conventional phony approach... They use the research approach to collect fees from prospective interviewee-panelists to whom they hold out promise of payment for testing merchandise... For a while the Committee was receiving weekly complaints or questions about them..." But in the early 1970s the law caught up with them as both New York state authorities and the U.S. Post Office were charging them with fraud. Help was also sought from other organizations. According to the committee's report to the 1971 annual business meeting, "The Code of the Direct Selling Association [later renamed Direct Marketing/Mail Association] also explicitly condemns this abuse but their code, like ours, is voluntary... They were helpful in one instance reported to us. The National Association of Better Business Bureaus is also responsive to our complaints. We also maintain close relationships with our opposite numbers in the American Marketing Association and the Market Research Association. But even as this mobilization was taking place, according to the same source, a new form of abuse was noted for the first time: "Several members submitted to us copies of a mail solicitation from the pro-military American Security Council which contained a straw vote ballot slanted toward greater armament expenditure. Recipients were asked to mark their opinions... and return it with a financial contribution." This practice of poll-and-solicit, apparently at first a tactic of right-wing organizations, has evidently been so successful that it is now used by the entire range of the political spectrum as well as for nonpolitical fundraising. It involves no misleading claims and is so blatantly self-serving that by now only the most unsophisticated person could regard it as an attempt to measure public opinion. AAPOR's objections, therefore, have been limited to a statement that the Association would challenge the results if such a straw vote were ever publicized as representative (so far, there is no record of any) and that use of the words "poll" or "survey" as part of a fund-raising appeal tends to diminish confidence in legitimate surveys—on which, incidentally, many of the offending organizations find indispensable in their work.

Successive committees have received similar complaints and responded with similar frustration. Thus, in his report to the advisory business meeting in May 1977, Standards Chair Reuben Cohen referred to "the usual mixture of 'phony surveys,' particularly, those sponsored
or endorsed by members of Congress.” In October, 1981, Standards chair Barbara Bailar, reported “a fair number of letters… from AAPOR members objecting to the kinds of surveys they receive in the mail. [She] replies with a letter and a copy of the Standards. It is difficult… [to determine] what they are doing that others are objecting to, that is covered by the standards…” And to the first Council meeting of 1983-84, chair Deborah Hensler added that “much of the work of the Standards Committee involves responding to complaints concerning polls used for fund-raising and other improper uses…. The AAPOR Code of Ethics does not address [this issue and so] appropriate revisions in the Code would provide a firmer basis for responding” to such complaints.

The record does show rare instances in which AAPOR’s importuning appeared to gain results: In late 1973 and 1974 the Standards Committee received four complaints about the use of a subscription solicitation by the Columbia Journalism Review accompanied by a questionnaire purportedly “trying to get the views of a representative group of intelligent people.” A letter from the Standards Chair (Hope Klapper) brought a telephone response from the editor. According to the Standards Committee report to the membership in May, 1974: “Phil Davison [faculty member of the Columbia School of Journalism and former AAPOR president] and I have not really convinced them they erred, but they have agreed to consult Phil on any future surveys.”

In 1978 a member of the Standards Committee informed Donald Hughes, as chair, that he had complained to the Union of Concerned Scientists in protest against the same type of solicitation. They ceased thereafter, but there was no word on whether the decision was in any way influenced by the AAPOR complaint. Similarly, an AAPOR member who is also a member of Public Citizen (more familiar as the Ralph Nader organization) made the same complaint to that body which, after due consideration, replied that it would cease using that misleading form of solicitation in order to uphold its own ethical standards.

Other interesting items on respondent protection are scattered through the record. In 1979 Donald Hughes, as Standards Chair, successfully sought to have the Direct Mail/Marketing Association add mail solicitation to its code which already declared it unethical to make telephone solicitations under the guise of a survey. “As an experiment” he also sent AAPOR’s Code to “action line” newspaper columns in nine major cities, offering AAPOR’s help in any survey-related complaints, but no returns were forthcoming. As Director of Market Research for Sears, Roebuck, Hughes used his membership in DM/MA
and in the Manufacturers Market Research Association to advocate ethical standards prohibiting abuse of the survey approach.

Over the years, abuse has proliferated, with more types of mail solicitation masking as surveys and with the growth of tele-marketing activity. AAPOR and the other organizations concerned with the problem continue to fight a rear-guard action, registering objections to some solicitors or occasionally referring a flagrant example to a Better Business Bureau or to postal authorities. On another front, some of these organizations and many AAPOR members support the “Your Opinion Counts” campaign, which publicizes the value of legitimate surveys and encourages public response to them. AAPOR was asked to join in supporting this effort when it was first organized in 1983-84, but declined because a majority of Council was not convinced of its effectiveness and feared that it could be used to protect surveys of questionable standards. The quest for AAPOR support was renewed in subsequent years and rejected each time, with commercial members generally favoring AAPOR participation while academic and government Council members opposed it.

What Is Anonymity?

Although AAPOR has been unwaveringly committed to respondent anonymity since 1957, in years following some attention was demanded of successive Standards Committees, as well as Council, to an operational determination of just what anonymity is. For example, at an Executive Council meeting in 1968, Burns Roper (later AAPOR president) raised a question about possible violation of respondent anonymity when a research firm provides respondent identities for purposes of validation. The same question was posed by “several members” in 1980 to Standards chair Donald Hughes, who described it as “who is ‘we’” when the Code pledges that “we shall protect the anonymity . . .”? In other words, if validation is conducted by a firm independent of the one that conducted the interview, requiring that respondent identity be transmitted, is anonymity still maintained? In his report to the membership in May, 1980, Hughes said he had “taken the broad interpretation” permitting the identities to be transferred under limited conditions and for specific purposes.

Perhaps the most penetrating consideration of this question was set forth by Mervin Field, then Standards Chair, and Peter Sherrill, vice-president of Field’s firm, in an article in the June, 1975 Marketing Review: “Are Survey Respondents Really Anonymous?” The article
points to five conditions under which "true respondent anonymity is being breached regularly by conscientious researchers."

1. Interviewer validation, requiring that identifying data are passed for another interviewer, sometimes another firm, sometimes the client, to permit validation or spot-checking.

2. Ad hoc panel studies, in which individuals with certain characteristics or offering certain replies are urged to provide further information in another interview (sometimes a focus group interview).

3. The sampling universe is so restricted that respondent characteristics will identify some individuals (as might happen, for instance, in an employee or an executive study).

4. Providing completed questionnaires (with identifying data) to a client group of researchers for further analysis.

5. Providing survey evidence in a court of law that might exercise subpoena.

The issue raised in item 4 became considerably more than academic in 1975 in a battle of media giants and two audience measurement services that evidently gave inconsistent results. In this instance Field, writing "as an individual research practitioner, and not in my capacity as Chairperson of the Standards Committee" strongly criticized both the measurement services and Time, Inc., as client of one, in two letters to the editor of Advertising Age. Referring to a report that Time "offered complete disclosure of all elements of the study to anyone interesting in proving...[including] the list of respondent names" he emphatically declared that respondent anonymity and privacy should take precedence over attempts to validate the findings for the purpose of showing which service's findings were more nearly correct.

Other Respondent Protection

Another aspect of the respondent protection issue was raised at a Council meeting in 1970 by the Standards chair (Hollander), who said that "our AAPOR Code...provides anonymity, but not much else" in the way of respondent protection. "He felt at least we should pledge ourselves not to lie to respondents." Noting that informing respondents of the entire purpose of a survey will often bias the response, he advocated a code provision requiring literal truth if not the whole truth. Two years later, the Standards Committee report referred to the honesty issue as "a continuing concern; suggestions welcomed." Three years after that, in February, 1975, an honesty provision was approved
by Council and took its place alongside a revised statement on anonymity. Both are included in the latest revision.

One more respondent protection incident flashed across the scene in late 1975 when the editor of the National Observer learned from an inquisitive reader, who had placed his questionnaire under ultraviolet light, that a survey sent to a sample of its subscribers by a prominent mail-survey firm had been coded in invisible ink, making it possible for the research firm to identify respondents. The Observer's editor replied indignantly with an editorial disclaiming the practice as a "slick trick" and a Wall Street Journal columnist applauded this condemnation with an article that attracted much attention. In the public controversy that followed it became apparent that the practice was widespread and regarded as benign in the research community, since it was never used for any purpose other than to identify non-respondents for follow-up mailings. Ironically, the FTC, which had remained unmoved by earlier evidence from AAPOR and others of direct intrusion by salespersons posing as interviewers, took a sudden interest in the invisible ink tactic when it was used by researchers themselves.

The response of the Standards Committee, then in the throes of its first full-scale application of procedures for dealing with code violations, was decidedly restrained. Mervin Field, as Standards Chair, sent a memorandum to Council in January, 1976 saying that the practice was not uncommon and suggested the subject for inclusion in a membership poll under consideration to ascertain the extent of its use and member attitudes regarding it. But even this proposal was questioned on two grounds: first, because at least one Council member believed the Standards Committee should set policies and submit them for approval rather than develop standards by membership poll; and second, because it would result in unfavorable publicity to opinion surveys if it was found that many AAPOR members used and/or approved a practice then being widely criticized.

The emergence of this "invisible ink caper," as it was termed by the National Observer editor, and the furor it aroused, seem to have reflected a mood in the profession as well. Although a proposed survey of AAPOR membership on standards issues was never carried out, Field's successor, Reuben Cohen, appointed a subcommittee, chaired by Irving Rosenthal, to develop "guidelines on desirable practices for treatment of respondents and for the protection of research sources and data." According to Cohen, "The high priority accorded this task stems from the increased sensitivity of the general public, social scientists, and government groups to problems related to personal data col-
lection and data storage. The Committee and other members have suggested that the AAPOR Code needs to be strengthened by a more extensive written discussion of the issues."

Unfinished Business

In June, 1977 Roschwalb produced a comprehensive and documented draft based on considerable secondary research that outlined the problems and alternative solutions in some detail, and called for a membership survey as mentioned above. This was discussed by Council in February, 1978 without action. Lack of funds was cited as one reason; "philosophical objections" were also mentioned. These were unexplained, but may have referred to the reservations expressed two years earlier concerning possible embarrassment if the use of invisible ink in mail surveys should turn out to be widespread. Enthusiasm was also diminished by the inevitable loss of momentum and change of emphasis under a new Standards Chair, and by a new ethics complaint to be dealt with.

This derailment may be compared to similar frustrations mentioned in the first two sections of this chapter. For example:

(1) In section I., "Standards as Authority," an Evaluation Committee noted the "absence of minimum methodological standards" in Mervin Field's laboriously crafted procedures for dealing with alleged code infractions, even though we have seen that every move toward establishing such standards from the very beginnings of the organization had been rejected on practical as well as philosophical grounds. Too, we have seen that action under the code has been discouraged, if not paralyzed, by pragmatic obstacles such as work overload and threatened legal retaliation, which did not loom as large under earlier and simpler conditions.

(2) Section II., "Standards of Quality," reveals similar frustration, including Council's summary rejection of the "Technical Standards Subcommittee" and also Council's reluctance to respond to government agencies' requests for practical assistance. Again, objections to action were both conceptual and pragmatic, the latter similarly due to existing or potential work overload required of member volunteers.

In summary, the history of the Standards Committee has been riddled with discontinuities and punctuated with tabula rasa appraisals—sometimes with indifference to, if not ignorance of, what has gone before. Consequently, we have sometimes been condemned to repeat our history. Such are the hazards of a membership organization dependent on volunteers, whose officers in charge of dealing with standards issues
are constantly changing with each election. Then, too, the world in which AAPOR members operate is not that of four decades ago, when the practice of opinion research was dominated by the same few conspicuous leaders who founded the organization. The practice of opinion research has proliferated and dispersed, and its practitioners are no longer a tightly-knit and collegial fraternity.

As for the Standards function, we have seen that the initial idea of a committee to promulgate, if not enforce, standards of practice has justified neither the hopes nor the apprehensions of those who first debated it. Since then, it has been tacitly recognized that no person or group is competent to prescribe methodology, particularly as the scope of our field has broadened and its related academic disciplines have flourished. AAPOR’s contribution to method and performance has come not, as initially conceived, from a “Board of Standards,” but from the POQ and our conferences. Indeed, as we have seen from the beginning, the committee has focused on standards of ethics, not of performance, and our principal canon has been that of disclosure.

In the wider world, AAPOR’s major role in standards has been that of respondent protection. In this it has paralleled, and sometimes joined, the work of other organizations concerned with consumer protection and survey research. Together, we seem to have had great impact on professionals in our field, but have found no effective way to protect the public from the floods of inquiries made not for research but for sales exploitation. In these respects, as well as others referred to in this chapter, our influence has generally been brought to bear not by committee or organization action, but by the diffusion throughout the domain of opinion research and its sponsors of practitioners imbued with standards and ethics acquired from AAPOR.