

The Absorption Rate of Ideas

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This article is based on the author's Presidential Address given before the 1955 meeting of the American Association for Public Opinion Research. Dr. Gallup relates some ideas in public opinion sampling, education, and political science to his absorption rate concept.

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THE INTELLECTUAL world has always assumed that merit alone determines whether an idea gains acceptance. It isn't that easy. Merit is important in the life or death of an idea, but its acceptance in the market place depends upon many other things. Even after an idea has been accepted intellectually, there is normally a long period of time before it is incorporated into the thinking of the person who has accepted it, and ready for his use. This time lag, which holds for the individual, is even more pronounced for groups.

This period of integration, following acceptance, can be described as a period of absorption, a period of gestation, a period when the idea in some mysterious way becomes incorporated into the thinking process. The absorption rate of ideas is a fascinating subject.

It is important, from the point of view of our profession, for the simple reason that time is a definite and positive factor entering into the acceptance and use of research methods and research findings.

Probing into the fate which has befallen ideas of different types in different fields brings to light the factors which seem to be of greatest importance in this process. Knowledge of these factors enables us to devise a time-table to predict the widespread acceptance and use of ideas *of all kinds and shapes*—whether the idea be a new vaccine for poliomyelitis, a new school of art, a new way to market refrigerators, a new school of philosophy, a new gadget for killing mice, a new copy research method, or “cool” jazz.

What are these factors which, at this early stage in our examination, seem to determine whether an idea will be put to work tomorrow, or whether a period of fifty years must elapse for its maturation? Probably most important is the *complexity* of the idea. If it is abstract it faces a real struggle against mental *limitations* and mental inertia. Next comes the simple factor of *difference*. If it follows usual and accustomed patterns, its absorption rate will be faster. *Competition* with prevailing ideas, particularly if these ideas seem to meet current needs satisfactorily, may retard by years or decades the acceptance and widespread use of a new idea.

An idea which is susceptible to *demonstration* and *proof* can take all the short cuts to recognition and popularity.

Persons with *vested interests*, if there be any, will see to it that mental road blocks are put in front of every new idea which deprives them of prestige or power, or which in the language of one columnist, requires them to "turn over in their grooves". New ideas will obviously be accepted more swiftly in situations where there is a *felt need*, a continuing awareness of a problem which needs to be solved. Finally, the *frequency* with which the public is *reminded* of an idea is an important factor in setting the time-table of its popularity.

This list of factors is by no means complete. The character of the group most closely concerned or identified with the idea will be an important factor in determining how fast it gets into the blood stream. In some areas of life people are conditioned to accept change, in others to resist it. One of the early conclusions that one can safely reach is that the absorption rate of an idea is longer than you think. The gestation period for an elephant is seven years. For ideas it is likely to be a lot longer.

In discussing this whole subject with Dr. Morris Fishbein, former editor of the *AMA Journal*, I discovered that he had come to the conclusion that the time lag between the acceptance of a new treatment or a new drug by the experts in the medical field and the time that it is put to general use by the doctors of the country is about fifteen years. As I recall, the time lag in establishing a new farming practice, the time between its successful demonstration and its general adoption, is normally about twelve years.

By the way of contrast, many of the ideas with which we, as researchers, deal are made of a different stuff. To establish this point I should like to talk about ideas in three fields in which most of us are interested—the fields of public opinion sampling, education, and political science,—and to discuss these ideas in relation to this time-table concept.

PROGRESS IN PUBLIC OPINION SAMPLING

This year marks the twentieth anniversary of the regular publication of the results of public opinion polls based upon sampling procedures. Reports of the public's views on political, social, and economic issues have appeared every week, without exception, in the intervening years. I think it is fair to say that no single major issue of these two decades has been ignored, and that a veritable mountain of data have been gathered for future historians of this period.

What is the status of this field? Has this idea of polling the public regularly gained acceptance and use as fast as we hoped it would? In some respects our time-table was too slow, in other respects, too fast.

If some reporter or student had asked me twenty years ago to predict the probable future of polling over the next two decades, I would have been wrong in two important areas.

I would not have guessed that polling would be so popular in other countries. Today, as you know, there is a polling organization in every important democracy from Finland to Australia.

On the other hand, twenty years ago I would have guessed that political scientists and politicians in this country would have displayed far greater interest in polling and polling methods than they have.

A great many Congressmen have reached the point of believing that they should make some effort to discover the views of their constituents. But almost without exception these efforts have taken the direction of mail questionnaires with all the faults inherent in the Literary Digest procedures of 1936 and earlier. With guidance, and a certain amount of prodding, these gentlemen will probably come to understand the great advantages of present-day sampling procedures.

Another, and a continuing problem to people in our field, is the relatively greater interest displayed in the prediction of elections than in the day-by-day measurement of public opinion on major issues. And yet the exponents of public opinion sampling are virtually unanimous in their belief that election forecasting is the least useful of the polling projects.

We should like to speed up the acceptance of the many other things which polls can do. For example, polling agencies can today report *what people think* with about the same speed and accuracy as the existing news agencies and services can report the events of the world or *what people do*. Just as a world-wide news agency can alert its hundreds of correspondents throughout the world when the occasion requires, so a polling organization can alert—in a matter of hours—some 3,000 to 4,000 interviewers.

Polls have added new types of information which heretofore have been unavailable or unreliable.

For example, polls can and do report regularly on the popularity of the President. They can measure the size of the following for any national figure whether this happens to be a Senator McCarthy, a John Foster Dulles, an Arthur Godfrey, or a Marilyn Monroe.

Polls can, and do, record the changing attitudes toward internationalism or isolationism, toward liberalism or conservatism, toward states' rights or federal control. Polls can keep a barometer of the fears and hopes of the people in respect to unemployment and war. They can determine the political strength of a party at any given time and even indicate the probable strength of a new one. They reveal the composition of the political parties and the changing views of every segment of the voting population.

Polls can rehearse elections many months in advance of their being held, and can discover which of many candidates is most likely, at a given time, to be successful. Polls can gauge the strength, and report the views of the group which holds the balance of power in American politics today—the independent voters—who, incidentally, have no party machinery and no official or unofficial spokesmen.

Most exciting of all, to me, is that polls can conduct a nation-wide referendum on any current issues of the day, and can reveal almost exactly the same division of sentiment which would be found if the same question had been put to all voters of the nation at the same time.

This list of tasks which polls can perform is by no means complete. But it is enough to underscore the fact that we still have a long way to go before we can expect the average citizen to appreciate fully all the opportunities inherent in modern sampling techniques.

As practitioners we ourselves may wish to see what is ahead. First, let us look at election forecasting. In a paper which I read at Yale in April, 1948 I said:

“A careful study of the many factors which are chiefly responsible for errors in election forecasts suggests that during the next ten years accuracy will be increased still further, and that, in the period immediately ahead, the average error will, in all likelihood, not fall below 2%. Improvement can be made in many departments of sampling, but there will always be factors outside the control of the polling organization which will stand in the way of reaching accuracy greater than this.”

I said this in April, 1948 and I must have had a presentiment as to what would happen to polls in the election six months later. Actually, the 1948 election proved a blessing in disguise. It prodded us into examining our methods and our notions about election polling. And out of this soul searching and experimentation came a method which in some three national elections in this country, and one in Canada, has established a fine record. In fact, we have bettered our own time-table laid out in 1948 with precinct sampling.

Throughout the last twenty years we have become increasingly aware of the problem of discovering how much the public knows about a given issue—in addition to recording the division of opinion. The quintamensional design, and its modifications, has proved successful in dealing with complex issues and since it is a simple and practical design, I think it is safe to predict its continuing use in the decade or two ahead.

The natural expansion of polling, I believe, is in the direction of state and local polls. In addition to knowing how people think about the major national and international issues, local polls have a wonderful opportunity to discover what people think should be done about their schools, high-

way and traffic problems, housing, health, taxes and the countless other issues which are to be found in nearly every community in America.

And there is ample evidence of the reader interest in the views of one's fellow townsmen. Readership studies have shown the great and continuing popularity of Inquiring Reporter and Vox Pop columns. These features attract many readers but they always leave unanswered the question of how typical the views are. You may recall the famous legend of the three tailors of Tooley Street who addressed a plea to the King, subscribing themselves, "We, the people of England."

HOW RESEARCH CAN IMPROVE EDUCATION

The only discouraging aspect of public opinion polling is the discovery of the low level of interest of the public in many of our major issues, particularly those dealing with foreign affairs.

Within the last month, for example, we have polled on the highly controversial policy of whether to commit ourselves to the defense of Quemoy and Matsu. And just to make certain that the people we questioned knew some of the basic facts of this issue, we required them to answer two simple questions: What country now controls these two islands, and how far are they from the mainland of China?

I believe you will agree that these two questions are basic to an understanding of the issue, and I believe that you will also agree that any one in the United States who has spent even a few minutes of time reading the front page of his newspaper, or listening to news or radio or TV should know the answer. Actually, only 10 per cent of those questioned were able to give even approximately right answers.

I could cite many other similar instances. The sad part of it is that many persons who have attended high school and college are as ignorant about the happenings of the world as those who never went beyond grade school. Certainly when those who have had the advantage of a higher education do not bother to keep up with the news of the day, we can hardly expect those who have not had these advantages to do so.

In a study for the International Press Institute, we discovered that the amount of time that a reader spends daily on the important news of his country and the world is less than four minutes. He spends ten times as many minutes on such material as sports, local gossip, and comics.

From the time John Doe arises in the morning and turns his radio on, or opens his morning newspaper, until he turns his television set off at night, he has had a chance to vote a hundred times for entertainment or for information. The choice, as you can probably guess, is so overwhelmingly for entertainment as to pose a problem with which all Americans should be concerned.

While many influences are responsible for this almost studied attempt on the part of a large segment of our population to avoid anything that is informative, whether it be on the radio, in the newspaper, or on television, I am inclined to place the major blame on our educational system. In saying this I do not mean to indict our teachers; my quarrel is with the educational system.

Nearly every one in the United States labors under the delusion that learning and formal education are synonymous. As a matter of fact, I have never heard an educator in this country speak, in any but a casual way, about *self-education*. And yet self-education is really the only education that matters. The hours spent in the classroom or in preparation for classes are but a small part of the total free hours in one's life.

The process of learning is one that begins at birth and ends with death. As Sir Richard Livingstone of Oxford put it: "Who can suppose that spiritual and intellectual growth ceases and knowledge and wisdom are finally achieved when a university degree is taken, or that the need of knowledge does not grow more urgent with the passing of the years?"

I once proposed facetiously that college graduates be required to return to their alma mater at regular intervals after graduation to be re-tested to make certain that they had carried on this process of learning. As time goes on I am not so certain that this idea isn't worth serious consideration. I think that you will agree that there is a general tendency for teachers as well as students to assume that any one has gone through college has "had it".

There are many disturbing evidences of the low level of intellectual curiosity on the part of our high school and college graduates. One is to be found in the reading of books. A typical person in England, one who finished his formal school at age 14, reads as many books as our high school and college graduates, and in this comparison I am taking full account of pocket-size books. Today, in this country, there are only about 1450 book stores which carry a fairly complete line of books. If we had as many in proportion to population as Denmark, we would have not 1450 but 23,000. Yes, you may say, but we have a lot of public libraries. If we had as many libraries in proportion to population as Sweden we would have not 7,500 but 77,000. And magazine reading isn't the answer either. The magazines with the greatest circulation in this country—Reader's Digest and Life, would have to have far greater circulations than they have now to equal the per capita circulation of many magazines published in Europe.

As a one-time college professor I have come reluctantly to the conclusion that the enemy of learning at the university level is the *text book*, the *classroom lecture*, and the *course and credits system*. Our text books,

for the most part, consist of bits and pieces of knowledge cannibalized from other text books. The professor usually repeats, in his classroom lecture, material already covered in the text book. And the student, once he has memorized and then regurgitated the text book material in a true-false quiz, can promptly forget the whole dull business.

I have never yet had any one give me a sensible explanation for the course system and the concentration required in junior and senior years—except, of course, in the case of students in professional fields. To me, this policy of requiring a “major” for students in liberal arts colleges is often a matter simply of learning too much about too little. I would much rather be reasonably well informed in twenty fields than to be filled with a multitude of unimportant details in two or three.

Well, what does this all have to do with research, and with the timetable concept which I discussed earlier?

I believe that a very simple research program can have a mighty influence on the whole educational system.

The research needed is not so different from what many of us have engaged in for many years. It would attempt to measure the success of the educational system on the basis of the quality of the product of this system; in short, by testing graduates and former students.

You will discover, as I have, a wide area of agreement as to the goals of education. For example, most educators will agree that the educational program should fit students for citizenship. All right, let's see how much our graduates know about the structure and function of government, how much knowledge they possess about the major issues of the day. To what extent are they participating in elections and in government?

Most educators will agree that another primary goal of education is to instill an interest in learning. Success in this respect can be measured easily by determining how much serious reading, listening, or studying our graduates do.

A person who has had the advantage of a high school or college education should be reasonably well informed about the world of yesterday and the world of today. He should know something about science and the humanities. Knowledge in these areas can be tested rather easily—in fact studies are being made at this time of the comparative cultural level of the United States and England.

Another basic aim of education, most will agree, is that our schools should teach students to *write better* and to *think better*. Here, the research is more difficult but not so difficult that it can't be done.

Finally, in this age of insecurity, I think most educators will agree that students need to be better oriented to the world and to the changes which have come so swiftly—with the end of enabling them to lead happier

lives. And even in this respect I am confident that a testing program can be devised to measure the success of the school program.

Out of this research program which could be inaugurated anywhere and for relatively little money, I am confident that a new conception of education would evolve—and one far better suited to the present needs of the nation.

What about the time-table? The present educational system was fairly well set by the beginning of the century. Will we reach the year 2000 before changes of real importance are undertaken? Perhaps—unless research reveals the startling inadequacies which I think it will.

“THE PUBLIC PHILOSOPHY”

After twenty years of polling the American public on issues of every type it should be possible to draw conclusions as to some of our basic theories of democracy. How sound is the judgment of the people? Has public opinion proved a good guide to legislation? Was the faith of Lincoln, Jefferson, and Wilson in the common people justified?

In these twenty years an impressive mass of facts have been assembled. This span of time embraces the pre-war years when domestic problems predominated, the war years, and the post-war years when foreign policy issues have been uppermost. The quality of public opinion can thus be tested against a varied background of problems.

Such an examination is timely because of the charges made by Walter Lippmann in his new book, *The Public Philosophy*. Lippmann notes that “Mass opinion has acquired mounting power in this country. It has shown itself to be a dangerous master of decisions when the stakes are life and death.” He goes on to say: “The unhappy truth is that the prevailing public opinion has been destructively wrong at the critical junctures.”¹

One may criticize the people for being uninformed in many matters pertaining to foreign affairs, but Lippmann’s main argument that the public has imposed a mass veto at critical junctures when their elected officials knew what policy to follow, just doesn’t square with the facts.

Let’s take a look at the record. And let’s start with the last world war to which Lippmann makes reference. In his book, *What America Thinks*, William Lydgate cited evidence to show that the people are very often ahead of Congress.² He, for example, quoted poll material indicating that the voters wanted the embargo provision of the Neutrality Act lifted nine months before Congress took action, and that the majority of the people led Congress by a full three months in favoring conscription.

¹Lippmann, Walter, *Essays in the Public Philosophy*, Boston: Little Brown, 1955.

²Lydgate, William, *What America Thinks*, New York: Crowell, 1944.

A recital of such instances could be extended ad nauseam. In fact, the times when this has not been true in these twenty years are so few as to warrant special study. Mr. Lippmann is wrong in making the fatal assumption that Congressional action mirrors or reflects public opinion. The fact is that the public is almost invariably ahead of Congress.

Experience gained with nation-wide polls squares with the conclusions reached by Professor Max Radin of the law faculty of the University of California who studied the results of 115 referenda issues in the state of California. Radin concluded:

One thing is clear. The vote of the people is eminently sane. The danger apprehended that quack nostrums can be forced on voters by demagogues is demonstrably non-existent. The voters display much better judgment in rejecting crack-pot legislation than their representatives in the state legislature."

Although the Voice of the People cannot be taken as the Voice of God, the soundness of their judgment and their willingness to be led is impressive.

The death struggle of ideas goes on for a much longer time than their birth struggles. The Hamiltonian ideas—now nearly two hundred years old—still crop up in unexpected places. Perhaps in another two decades the weight of evidence will be so overwhelming that those who fear and distrust the people will begin to wonder if Talleyrand wasn't right when he said:

"The only thing wiser than anybody is everybody."