

# Must a Researcher Tell the Truth?

BY FREDERICK F. STEPHAN

This paper is the Presidential Address which was delivered before the Thirteenth Annual Conference on Public Opinion Research in Chicago, Illinois, on May 10, 1958. The original, written and spoken with frequent resort to the first person plural, loses something of its earnest tone when translated into a more conventional style for publication but it still calls for constructive criticism of current opinion research and effective preparation to meet the increasingly exacting standards of the future.

Frederick F. Stephan was President of the American Association for Public Opinion Research for the 1957-1959 term. He is Professor of Social Statistics at Princeton University.

THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION for Public Opinion Research was founded in the desire of the charter members to learn from each other and to work together in order that they might make opinion research more trustworthy and more valuable. This desire has remained the central interest that binds the members of the association into a vigorous and growing organization. It vitalizes each annual conference. It sustains the members in their activities between conferences.

The central principle of the Conference is to take a broad look at what is being done in opinion research and to think more deeply about its meaning for clients, the public at large, and researchers themselves. In furtherance of this purpose the author chose as the title of the address on which this paper is based, a simple but serious question.

The question is "*Must a Researcher Tell the Truth?*" If it sounds a bit cryptic, the reader should be patient while its implications are developed. If it sounds provocative, that is what it was intended to be, but not in any unpleasant way. Its function is to provoke curiosity and stimulate our thinking. Its goal is to see what the future may open up to researchers in various fields. What problems will call for their services? What important discoveries will they make? What kinds of information will they need in their research enterprises? Will they be able to establish the truth or falsity of their information and discoveries or, granting that perfect truth will never be attained, will they be able to gauge the degree of accuracy and inaccuracy of their research results? Finally, how well will research be communicated to the ultimate users so that the results are not degraded in accuracy and impaired in usefulness? These questions are always important but it seems well to take a more serious and far-ranging look at them than has been taken heretofore.

"Must researchers tell the truth?" This question may appear ridiculous

or mysterious but in a poll a large percentage of respondents would immediately answer "Yes." In fact the question might be dismissed by a resort to theoretical definitions: "Of course researchers must tell the truth, or else they certainly wouldn't be researchers." But when it comes to actual practice how can researchers be sure they *are* telling the truth? What tests are there of the validity of their findings, what check on the soundness of their conclusions? Is it just from blind confidence researchers claim what they report is true or do we really know?

#### TESTING RESEARCH IN THE COURTS

These questions have increasingly appeared in the courts when opinion research results have been offered in evidence. As long ago as 1952, the Association had a session devoted to problems which had arisen in attempts to introduce opinion research findings in a variety of legal proceedings. Recently the Advertising Research Foundation published a comprehensive study of a much larger number of cases. At a round table at the Chicago Conference the reports of progress in the study of these problems were very impressive. Especially so was a description of the meticulous care with which each step of the survey procedure was prepared, controlled, documented, and presented in court by the Food and Drug Administration in some of its cases. If, to establish the truth, the courts find it necessary to subject every step in the preparation of research results to severe and thorough scrutiny, should researchers not make exacting tests outside the courtroom to assure themselves that they really are telling the truth? Since they address many kinds of executives and specialists as well as many different audiences, should they not also test the final stages of communications by which results reach the ultimate users?

The first question that arose with respect to the use of materials in court was whether it should be admitted as evidence. In many cases the courts have refused to admit survey results on the ground that they are hearsay, holding that the evidence should be offered directly by the interviewers or even by the respondents so that they could be subjected to cross-examination in order to test the reliability of the proffered testimony. Such a procedure is clearly impractical in large surveys. Some courts have conceded that under appropriate conditions the summary tabulations of survey data could be admitted in lieu of individual interviews.

While survey results may thus be admitted, the weight given to such evidence always remains to be determined in the subsequent proceedings of the court. In this determination, account is taken of the methods used to obtain the evidence, including sampling and interviewing procedures. The researchers who were responsible for the planning and supervision of the work may be called to testify and be cross-examined. Other considerations also enter into the determination by the court of the extent to which the evidence tends to establish facts pertinent to the issue under trial.

Professional societies and similar organizations can help the courts in their assessment of the weight to be given to evidence, especially through the establishment of standards and recommended procedures. A notable beginning has been made for the sampling phases of surveys by a committee of the Society of Business Advisory Professions, Inc. The interviewing and analysis phases, as well as the problems of opinion measurement peculiar to the field of surveying, have not emerged from the initial period of occasional discussion but they too may soon be brought forth for serious attempts to formulate standards and develop recommended procedures. To be accepted by the courts and more generally by practicing researchers such standards must be based on thorough research and sound judgment. Hence there may be a long period of study and discussion before an adequate set of standards can be established to aid the courts in their determinations of the weight to be given the results of opinion research in particular cases.

All of this is in its early stages. The legal position of survey evidence will, no doubt, become clearer as experience with its use is accumulated in additional cases. Especially important is the prospect of increasing use of opinion researchers as expert witnesses for each party in the case and even as advisors to the court. This is likely to happen at an increasing rate during the next decade or so. Are researchers fully prepared to submit their research to such uses in which, since the decisions in important cases may rest on it, it must first be subjected to the test of rigorous cross-examination? Must they not first examine their work more carefully and make many improvements during the next few years?

#### TESTING RESEARCH OUTSIDE THE COURTS

What lies ahead for the use of opinion research results in situations that do not employ the legal procedures of introducing testimony, cross-examining witnesses, and evaluating evidence? Is there any less reason to scrutinize the results and check the steps by which they were obtained? Can they be used effectively in making important decisions if they have not first been rigorously examined to determine their pertinence for the problem and to assess their dependability? In the next decade or more, the users of opinion research will increasingly call for help in doing this. Clearly researchers should prepare now to meet the more exacting demands that will be made of opinion research in the future. They may also expect a great expansion of work that imposes less exacting demands, but this should not obscure their view of the increasingly rigorous standards which will be required for their more important studies.

One reason researchers must work to satisfy ever higher standards of quality and dependability is that opinion research will take its place with more advanced types of research in a joint attack on major problems of

national life. Even now there is a desperate need for a thorough study of public attitudes toward education and analysis of the views of various groups on many questions which are being asked about education today. Perhaps these emerging issues about the schools and colleges will come to rank in history with Women's Suffrage and Prohibition among the principal political and social issues of this century. Certainly desegregation, foreign aid, and the organization of defense are current issues of transcending importance. Automation, nuclear energy, and space travel may become the outstanding issues in a few years, perhaps sooner than we think.

The current recession is an issue of great, but transient importance. William Dwight, the retiring president of the American Newspaper Publishers Association, was quoted recently in a *New York Times* editorial as saying, "Our national problems cannot be solved by a citizenry that does not know what the score is." A population with no confidence in its information is sure to be a market which can be readily unsettled by rumors or events it does not understand. Executives, public officials, and managers who are inadequately informed about public attitudes and consumer wants can also be a source of instability. More accurate and dependable information is needed all around to prevent needless oscillations in the economy and strengthen the public confidence that is essential to strength and stability. Here again opinion research will have a greater job to do than it has ever done before.

On any of the great issues, whether they be chronic or acute, the formation of opinions by the public will increasingly depend on the scope and quality of information that flows to the public. They will also depend on the effectiveness of free discussion and independent thinking in shaping well considered judgments and avoiding a mere parroting of ideas that happen to be popular at the moment. Studies of these opinions once they have been formed will fall short of what is greatly needed unless there is an improvement in the quality of all phases of research, unless keener methods are developed and used to meet higher standards, unless the dependability of results is established by appropriate tests. Amazingly little has been done to put reports of opinion research through a procedure of verification comparable in its rigor to the experiments and crucial observations by which the established sciences build up dependable knowledge.

It is easy to call for improvement. There are no easy answers to the question, "All right, tell us what we have to do." More is required than perfecting methods and procedures. Something of the skill of the artist, the perceptiveness of the detective, and the genius of the inventor is needed. Usually the answer can be found if the search is carried far enough. The importance of continuing the search til the full answer is found may be inferred from the following story.

In the course of the usual proceedings of naturalization, a young woman was being examined by the judge on her knowledge of American history

and her understanding of our Constitution. He was so well impressed by her answers that he asked her if he might go on and ask her a few more questions merely to satisfy his curiosity about her remarkable knowledge of the basic law of the land. As he progressed he became more and more astounded at her success in explaining some of the details and fine points that might trip up even a smart lawyer. Finally he asked her one last question, "Is it possible for you, young lady, to become President of the United States under the provisions of the Constitution?" She thought for a moment and then replied without even a hint of uncertainty, "Why, yes, your Honor, that is possible." "Aha," he said, "I was about to give up but at last I've found a flaw in your understanding of the Constitution. You probably thought I meant to ask whether a woman could become President. Haven't you overlooked the article that provides that only a native born citizen may become President?" She dropped her eyes a moment and then looked up and said, "I beg your pardon, your Honor. I did recall that article, but I also remembered the article that provides that the Constitution can always be amended."

#### HOW CAN OPINION RESEARCH MEET THE MORE EXACTING STANDARDS OF THE FUTURE?

If in the future, researchers are to study increasingly more important problems requiring ever more exacting standards, what is necessary to permit them to tell the truth?

First they must find it. This calls for better cooperation from respondents since they are the original source of the information that is sought. One tends to forget their great contribution to opinion research, almost wholly without compensation in any form. In the future will they not be asked for more time, greater candor, and even a good deal of work in recording information? This has been true of family expenditure studies for many years; will it not be needed for opinion studies also?

A number of times in the past responses obtained in surveys have been tested against records known to be substantially accurate. Some examples are the studies of Savings Bond redemptions by Hyman and election registers, automobile registrations, library card files, and Community Fund contributions records by Parry and Crossley in Denver. There are all too few such tests. Those that have been made suffice to give warning that while some reports of a factual nature may be accurate, others are quite inaccurate. More work should be done to discover why this is so and to find ways to improve accuracy. When better accuracy is attained it will doubtless require greater cooperation from the respondents. How will this greater cooperation be obtained in the future? Employees and soldiers are given time off to be interviewed or to fill out questionnaires. Will other kinds of respondents be paid, say, as interviewers are now paid for their efforts? What else will be

necessary? And will not questions about opinion require steps fully as careful as those that are taken to get accurate answers to questions of fact?

As the pressure for accuracy increases, how will researchers determine what accuracy they achieve? There are no dependable records suitable for testing responses to questions about opinion. May they not be compelled to determine attitudes and opinions for special subsamples of people by methods of repeated observation and supplementary questioning, with additional active steps of cooperation on the part of respondents to firm up the determination of just what opinions they hold? Will the development of the theory of attitude formation and opinion change lead to the discovery of effective indirect measures of opinion? Will basic variables be found which enable one to predict opinions without asking direct questions? Will verbal responses decline in importance and other behavioral variables provide a more accurate substitute? How far can one go toward the goal of greater accuracy in discovering and measuring the true attitudes and opinions of people? Will efforts to reach this goal arouse resentment among respondents? Can they be safeguarded from all possible adverse consequences of the disclosure of their inner natures? How can the associated ethical problems be resolved?

Second among the requirements if the researcher is to tell the truth, the interviewers or other intermediaries in the assembling of data must perform their functions more effectively. The problem of cheating was discussed some time ago in several issues of this *Quarterly*. Much more important are the subtle disturbing influences and limiting effects of interviewing, as considered, for example, in the books by Hyman and by Kahn and Cannell. Moreover there are additional problems that will arise with the drive for higher standards. The more exacting surveys may well require a new type of interviewer with greater training, perhaps genuinely professional. This whole procedure of interviewing may be moved to special offices or meeting places. Doorstep interviewing will not be good enough for the more exacting opinion research of the future.

Third, of course, is the accuracy needed in the various stages in which the responses are processed, coded, and analyzed. Tests of these steps made by Woodward, Durbin and others have been very instructive. Such testing should be a routine procedure; doubtless it will be in the future. Without it one would not know how much of the truth contained in the responses actually filtered through to the report. Analysts are in a position to distort the truth by selecting their material, by failing to make needed allowances and corrections and by slanting their preparation of the text of the report. Other writers may also have a hand in molding the words that communicate the truth if it passes through to the user at all. They can also communicate error. In the future, will there not be additional precautions to insure the dependability of these steps? Will there not be new procedures for testing and controlling not only the processing but also the analysis? Will not the

same concern be shown for the accuracy of the words in a report that is now shown for the accuracy of the numbers?

Fourth, and finally, the user or recipient of the results must understand them correctly if the truth is to be told. Misunderstanding may be quite as serious as deliberate misquoting. The risk of error in use will be reduced if the user has respect for the efforts of the researcher to communicate, if he gives the report a patient and careful reading, and if he even does some checking of his impressions with other readers or with the researcher to make sure he does not misunderstand it in any vital part. Likewise the risk of error in use is diminished if the researcher is equally careful and skillful in communicating to the user the principal parts of his own understanding of the results.

There has been an improvement in the presentation of reports to clients and other users. This is another example of advances to be continued in the future? May we not researchers expect to participate more frequently in the early stages of the launching of a project? May they not receive from clients more explicit information about the purposes and problems for which the research is proposed? May we not expect users to have a better understanding of what research can and can not do, a better preparation to accept what is reasonable under the circumstances and demand no more? In turn, should they not learn to see problems more clearly from the users' point of view and discover how to communicate our results to him more effectively?

These are major requirements if the researcher is to discover, prepare and communicate the truth. Some other things are necessary as all can see. There must be adequate time to do the job. All the supporting services must perform their functions well. The problem being studied must not be an unscalable mountain or a dead-end street.

There are many people who think it unwise to ask these questions. They would counsel, "Don't be so critical. You will only stir up trouble, Let well enough alone." This is dangerous advice. It not only leads down the way to mediocrity but it will ultimately plunge one over the brink of catastrophe. Postponing the correction of weaknesses only increases the risks and the severity of the crises that arise from time to time. The author has had the good fortune to serve as a consultant to several organizations that have not shrunk from a careful check of the accuracy and effectiveness of their work. While they were often distressed by some of the weaknesses they found, they ended up by being confident because they *knew* many inadequacies had been corrected and they could go ahead fully aware of the limitations that remained. They found that while frank publication of the defects in their work might temporarily weaken their financial support, it ultimately strengthened their support by engendering solid public confidence. There was a more realistic understanding of what they could and could not do, some degree of immunization against the shock of unsuspected errors when

they come to light, and great respect for the way in which weaknesses were being sought out and corrected. From their experience one can be sure that it is short-sighted and foolish to ignore or to cover up the shortcomings of our research. It is a wise investment to seek them out and, so far as one can, to overcome them.

The answer to the opening question is now clear. The researcher must tell the truth as well as he possibly can since his aim in life is to discover significant information and communicate it. He can not do this unless all stages of the research venture contribute as they should to the progress of the truth from its initial sources all the way to the users' understanding. Opinion research like other kinds of research calls for fertile imaginations, a great variety of skills, good management, and most of all full cooperation by everyone involved in the enterprise. It calls for faith in one's associates coupled with respect for the precautions and checking that are the mark of good workmanship. It calls for a vigorous search for information coupled with careful preparations and pretesting beforehand, thorough control and testing during the search, and penetrating analysis and critical review before the results are communicated.

Finally the researcher should seek explicit formulation of his standards and procedures. The code of ethics adopted at the Chicago Conference is a good start. Robert Ford and the committee on Standards did a splendid job of drafting it. He would be one of the first to insist that it should be revised as experience with it develops. Still it is a great step forward. In its way it is also a definite answer to the question, "Must a researcher tell the truth?" In hailing it, the author acknowledges that he has changed his own opinion about adopting a code of ethics. At Williamstown in 1947 he was a member of the panel that discussed the proposal and held that the Association was not ready to adopt a code of ethics because it could not make it effective. Now he believes firmly that AAPOR is ready and can make it effective. Certainly no code can be effective unless it is supported wholeheartedly by the predominant opinion of the full membership. I am confident that there is such support for the principal objectives of this code.

The future will bring improvements in this code and further support for it. It can become the symbol not only of concern with the proprieties but, greater still, of a primary devotion to truth wherever it can be found. Thus as the future development of opinion research extends before us, researchers must find ever better ways to do their work and better ways to test the validity of their results so that they can communicate them with assurance that they are actually passing on not a bundle of error, but a distillate of tested information which others can trust because they understand it and know both its limitations and its usefulness. In this way they will fulfill their calling as researchers and make their contribution in the years ahead.