

HIGH NOON IN THE RESEARCH MARKETPLACE

BY ROBERT O. CARLSON

In the sociology of the professions there are fascinating problems concerning the relationships between physicians and their patients, lawyers and their clients, and artists and their patrons. Similar questions remain to be explored in the relationships of public opinion researchers and the people they serve. With his unusual perceptiveness and the depth of understanding of the relationship that comes from having been a client as well as a researcher, Robert Carlson examines the marketing of public opinion research in its broadest implications. This is his presidential address to the members of the American Association for Public Opinion Research and their guests at the Sixteenth Annual Conference held on May 6, 1961, in the Claremont Hotel in Berkeley, California. The Proceedings of the Conference over which he presided appear elsewhere in this issue.

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THIS PAPER deals with some of the problems and consequences that arise when public opinion research is bought and sold. Surprisingly little has been written about this topic, perhaps because it is thought too crass a subject for serious study or perhaps because it is felt to be too controversial. The thesis I offer for your consideration this evening can be stated in simple terms. It holds that the ultimate fate of a piece of research in our field frequently is determined not so much by the excellence of the data collected as by the nature of the relationship that evolves between the client and his research organization. I shall discuss some aspects of the relationship between buyers and sellers of research in an effort to identify the common interests as well as the divergent points of view which each brings to this association.

I begin with a rhetorical question: Why have scholars in our field paid so little attention to the impact of this research relationship on the kinds of problems studied and the kinds of analysis employed and the degree of success achieved? Certainly social scientists have shown little reluctance to study the reasons why other kinds of relationships succeed or fail. They have commented upon the many nuances of interaction between the employer and his employee, the merchant

and his customer, and the communicator and his audience. I believe the relationship between the buyer and seller of public opinion research has not been studied in greater detail because each is unclear as to his self-image. Most of us would agree that the researcher is far more than a mere collector and analyzer of data, and that the client is a good deal more than simply someone in search of an answer to his problem. Yet we often operate on these relatively naïve bases.

For example, clients are likely to bring to the research relationship a wide assortment of expectations. Some are sophisticated and others are virginal in their outlook on research. Some are anxious to act on results and others are not. Some are convinced of the intrinsic value of research and others have serious doubts about it or see it, at best, as a kind of window dressing. Some have a good deal of money to spend and a willingness to part with it, but the typical client has limited funds, unlimited anxiety, and a slightly queasy feeling that he has wandered into a mysterious, dimly lit, academic world. Candor compels us to note that research agencies may vary almost as much as clients in the degree of sophistication and dedication which they bring to their task.

Thus, when the statistically average client encounters the statistically average research agency, we may expect certain chronic problems to emerge. Since I have been both a client of public opinion research agencies and a researcher, I offer these comments with full knowledge that I speak of a difficult and tremendously sensitive area. This paper singles out six propositions about the client-researcher relationship that seem relevant for understanding the cross-pressures on each. It offers them in the hope that we may take constructive action on them.

1. There often is a lack of clarity on the part of both client and researcher as to their mutual roles, obligations, and responsibilities.
2. The client and the research agency may bring different time horizons to the study of a problem.
3. Breakdowns in communication within the client organization, as well as faulty communication between the client and his agency, contribute to disappointing research studies.
4. The client-researcher relationship represents an ever-changing distribution of power, and this shifting of power affects the way research problems are structured and the extent to which research findings are accepted and utilized by the client.
5. There is considerable evidence that clients and researchers employ different criteria in evaluating a completed study, and seldom do they communicate these judgments to one another.
6. Finally, both researchers and clients are disturbed by charges that

the field of public opinion research is not a true profession, that it lacks standards for membership and performance, and that its work must therefore be viewed with a decent amount of reservation and question.

THE ROLES OF CLIENT AND RESEARCHER

We turn now to the first of these propositions, that which asserts that both client and researcher need to define their roles more clearly. Let us translate this somewhat pretentious statement into a concrete bill of particulars. We begin by asking: What is the correct posture for the research agency to assume vis-à-vis its client? This question obtains whether we are referring to a government research bureau in Washington, a commercial office high on Madison Avenue, or the research bureau on the reputedly quiet and untroubled lane of a college campus. To what extent is the research agency something more than a mere collector of data with which its customer may do as he pleases? To what degree should it assume the role of a consultant—an advisor on action and strategy? Is its objectivity lost when it turns to policy making, or should clients expect that the implications of complex research findings will be translated into action programs for them?

An attempt to answer the foregoing question raises many more. Should the researcher try to indicate the likelihood of success before undertaking the study of a problem for his client? When the study is completed, does he have a responsibility for pointing out that his data differ in important respects from previous studies of the same general problem? Is it appropriate for him to editorialize in any measure on the implications of his findings, or does this constitute an unwarranted intrusion into the client's realm? Is the best researcher one who "just reports the facts" or is he one who deliberately tries to place his findings in a wider framework than the highly specific problem assigned to him?

There are other aspects of client-researcher relationships, almost too delicate for public discussion, which yet seem to have profound implications for the future growth of our field and must be confronted. We know, for example, that some research agencies, serving the same client for years, become confidants of management. From the purely tough-minded view of management, what are the pros and cons of retaining the same research agency for many years? Are the obvious advantages of its greater familiarity with the management's problems outweighed by the possibility of complacency and a tendency to view new problems in conventional ways? On the other hand, will calling upon a new research team actually bring in a fresh point of view or will it take up valuable time in educating the new team?

To what extent is it proper for clients to solicit a number of bids from different research groups before deciding who gets an assignment? Government, business, and foundations are conditioned to the concept of competitive bidding in granting contracts for other services. On the other hand, most researchers will argue with spirited conviction that the professional client-researcher relationship is like that between doctors or lawyers and their clients, and that competitive bidding is contrary to the ethos of a professional group. Does this contention, if it is upheld, imply that opinion research has a standing comparable to that of the medical or legal professions? Does it then become reasonable for consumers of our research to demand that we define criteria for membership in our profession and that we spell out standards of training and the manner in which we propose to enforce our standards and codes of ethics?

Regretfully, we can only raise such points as examples of the unresolved issues which cloud the self-image of both the buyer and the seller of public opinion research. Hopefully, if each recognizes them as problems, we have taken a first step toward answering them. Certainly there is considerable evidence that specialists, whether in our field or in others, are likely to be drawn increasingly into policy-making positions as they win acceptance of themselves and their disciplines, and all indications are that we in the communications research field will be increasingly cast in the role of consultants to our clients.

TIME HORIZONS FOR THE STUDY OF A PROBLEM

There appears to be a connection between the foregoing problems and point 2 of this paper, which asks whether the client and the researcher may not operate with rather different concepts concerning the time and scope appropriate for the study of a problem. By the very nature of the financial and manpower limitations under which he works, the researcher finds himself under pressure to limit the scope and the time he gives to a project. To make optimal use of his manpower, even as one research project starts he must give thought to the way his personnel and other resources will be employed when that job is completed. The deadline looms large in his perception and planning. Does this pressure ever lead him to make snap judgments or superficial decisions during the analysis of data? How often are intriguing byways of analysis left unexplored by an agency which feels impelled by economic reality to follow a safe and familiar course—one that gives promise of meeting the deadline but is almost certain to be pedestrian in its results. Too many studies in our field are produced with half-analyzed data. Can the client help to resolve this dilemma?

The question of meeting a deadline is not so much a problem as it is a symptom of a more serious matter. Seldom can the client and the researcher foresee, at the time they are developing a study design, what promising avenues of investigation will open. Pretests attempt to anticipate major substantive areas of interest, but such tests have only limited use in predicting the kinds of findings which may emerge as analysis of raw data proceeds. The client may do himself a disservice by placing too much importance on the deadline. The study deadline becomes an end in itself rather than a means. I believe that there may come a time about midway through a study when the researcher gets a gnawing feeling that, in its present form, the study just is not going to produce very interesting or useful information. I believe he should be encouraged to report these misgivings to his client, and that the client should be prepared to accept this as one of the legitimate risks of research. To the extent that a neatly bound research report presented on a given date becomes an end in itself, it probably does a disservice to both client and researcher by encouraging banal or even misleading conclusions on questions that deserve to be restudied from a new and fresh view.

COMMUNICATION

A third factor which helps to explain why some public opinion research studies appear to be more productive than others is that familiar word, "communication." Two aspects of the problem influence research results: the nature of the communication network within the client organization and the effectiveness of communication between the client and his researcher.

Frequently, research is authorized by one level in a client organization (usually a top policy-making body) but its implementation is left to persons on a lower echelon. These people are the ones who sit down with the research agency and spell out the precise definition of the problem and the universe which is to be studied. Too often, incomplete information from the policy-making level may force these people to guess at the precise reasons a project has been authorized and the use to which its data will be put. As a consequence, they may feel that a research report has fully met the needs for which it was commissioned, discovering its deficiencies only when the report reaches top management.

Until those who make policy in an organization are involved in defining its research problems and forced to translate them into a concrete study design, there will always be a fuzzy quality and a sense of remoteness to public opinion research. Only by requiring top-level approval of decisions in this area, as in the financial and legal area,

can a research project get the serious thought and criticism that are needed from those in authority. When management is put in the position of having to offer better alternatives, it may appreciate the technical problems we face in our work and make more explicit the uses to which it hopes to apply research findings. It may also be forced to face the question of its motives for commissioning the research, including the possibility that it is using research to delay decisions, to spread responsibility for decisions, or to legitimize actions which it has already decided upon.

If the foregoing problems sometimes occur, as I believe they do, we must also recognize that at other times the nature of the research process generates situations in which failures to communicate clearly between client and researcher are almost inevitable. This is particularly true in cases such as the following: when the client is called upon to visualize the kind of information which will be forthcoming from projective questions or depth interviews, when a crucial part of the analysis depends on the construction of indexes, when the study results involve the use of ideal models, and when understanding the survey findings requires a knowledge of sampling theory. It is virtually impossible for the average client to comprehend these technical procedures fully, much less to hazard a guess as to whether they will meet his operational needs. The client is forced to make an intuitive judgment about the study design offered him or else to place his trust in the professional skill of his agency. He has still another alternative, of course. He may consider research sufficiently important to have a full-time research technician on his staff to counsel him on study design and evaluation. At some point, however, the client will have to surrender control of his project to his research agency, and this leads us to a consideration of point 4 of this paper.

DISTRIBUTION OF POWER IN THE CLIENT-RESEARCHER RELATIONSHIP

In theory, all power initially rests with the client, for he can decide whether or not to buy research. But even at this point appearances are deceiving, for the mores of the research profession are such that the prospective client may be inhibited from shopping around for the best buy he can find. Usually, he must decide which agency he wishes to approach. He then describes his problem to that group and learns whether they can and will undertake a study for him at a cost he finds reasonable.

Having selected his research agency, the client encounters a new aspect of the power complex. He is free to reveal as much or as little about himself and his problem as he pleases. More important, in addi-

tion to defining his problem he may also hint at what he thinks or hopes the research will demonstrate. The researcher, in such cases, must be on guard lest this revelation subtly influence his study design and analysis.

Once a research design has been agreed upon and work begun, the balance of power shifts clearly in the direction of the researcher. As work continues, he makes a whole series of critical decisions without consulting the client. These include decisions about how to code answers and how to combine them into scores and how to classify respondents into meaningful analytical categories. Seldom does the researcher call upon the client's knowledge at this stage of the analysis. Yet a strong argument can be made that, if the client has a role to play in helping set up his study design, he has an equally valid role to play in helping interpret data collected for him. I feel we in the research field should consult far more frequently with our clients during the collection and analysis of survey data. Too often we expect them to be good boys and sit with folded hands on the sidelines while we "professionals" study their problems. How different this is, for example, from the constant communication between the lawyer and his client in a legal action.

Still another aspect of this power relationship calls for comment. Too many researchers feel they must give the impression that they never entertained doubts or misgivings during the entire time they carried out a study. I suggest that the finished research report give an account (in the appendix, perhaps) of the hunches and bright ideas that did not work out. I have a feeling that the client will be almost as interested in these false starts as in those ideas which eventually paid off. The client often receives a full report on all aspects of a research project in the physical sciences, including those experiments which did not work, because this warns him of avenues of investigation that are blind alleys. Researchers in the field of human relations, perhaps lacking the public acceptance of their colleagues in the physical sciences, are more reluctant to confess that they too make false starts and at times pursue fruitless lines of inquiry.

The delivery of the finished research report represents the complete shift of power from client to researcher. At this stage, the researcher knows things about the client's problem which the client himself does not. The client, upon reading the report, may be pleased or not, the findings may be congruent with his needs or not, but it is too late for him to do much about it. He may, of course, withhold future business or even actively discourage others from patronizing the agency in question, but this, at best, is an unsatisfactory means of expressing

his displeasure. This possibility, however, does lead us into a consideration of a fifth aspect of the client-researcher relationship.

CRITERIA FOR EVALUATING A RESEARCH STUDY

In practice, the most widely accepted criterion of success or failure of a project has been whether the client says he likes the finished job. This criterion makes sense only up to a point, however, because the client really is not in a position to know whether the study meets his needs until he has had a chance to translate some of the findings into action. In fact, the client's initial reaction to a study may change—it may grow more or less favorable as he has time to live with the findings, to think about their relevance, and to test out their bearing on his day-to-day operations. Yet how often are these latter-day judgments communicated by the client to the researcher—or, for that matter, how often are they solicited? We hear much about the values of secondary analysis of survey research data, and few would argue this point. But I feel we are guilty of doing too little in the way of secondary analysis of client reactions to a study—one, two, or even three years after delivery date.

Still another factor may complicate a client's efforts to evaluate a finished research report. Usually the sponsorship and supervision of a project resides with a particular individual or a department within the client organization. In a very real sense, the delivered research report will be an important basis for passing judgment on that individual or his department. This judgment by management may create pressures for the individual or his department to cover up and excuse a shoddy job of research or else face rebuke from above. It is an exceptional boss, I'm afraid, who is told by an individual or a department that it has commissioned a research job which, upon subsequent examination, turns out to be second-rate. It is also an exceptional boss whose subordinates authorize research studies which may reflect on the soundness of his judgment and prior actions. Here I confess I have no remedial suggestions to offer.

It has already been argued that management's evaluation of a research study often depends on how it feels the study contributes to the development and improvement of a specific program of action. But this is at best a rule of thumb. The danger is that many clients do not have the slightest idea how to translate research findings into action. More than one client has decided that a research study was not useful to him when, in fact, his real problem was that he did not have the personnel or the energy or the imagination to translate its findings into a program of action. And, of course, it is a rare researcher indeed who is ever given an opportunity to observe how his data are applied

to specific programs. More often he is left to worry that they may be ripped out of context and applied piecemeal by an overenthusiastic client who wants action and wants it fast.

PROFESSIONALISM OF PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH

Moving now to the sixth and final point of this paper, it is clear that a discussion of the client-researcher relationship would be incomplete without recognizing that our clients are increasingly looking for a clearer statement from us as to the professional standards to which we lay claim. Nor are they alone in this interest. Anyone who has attended the annual AAPOR business meeting knows how lovingly we agonize over this problem in public each year. One gets the impression that this annual rite-of-spring serves to blow off steam and permits us to put our worries back in a mental deep freeze for another year, but little else happens.

Critics of public opinion research, both among our clients and in the general public, are not in short supply today. There are, for example, the predictable attacks made on election polls every four years in spite of the remarkably good record of our colleagues over the past decade. More serious, perhaps, are the efforts to pass restrictive laws in a number of states. These include bills which would require interviewers to be licensed and fingerprinted, bills which would require television and radio rating services to reveal the identity of their respondents, local ordinances prohibiting any kind of door-to-door interviewing, and a host of similar harassments. Inevitably, our clients turn to us for comment on these attacks.

It is fair to say, I think, that we in the public opinion research field are being scrutinized, castigated, defended, and misunderstood almost daily in the press, in business circles, and in the academic world. We are charged with subtle manipulation of people's minds and actions or, worse yet, with turning the force of popular opinion into a bludgeon with which to intimidate the individual. We have in the last twenty years emerged from shadowy and little-known beginnings, and we stand today in the glaring light of high noon. As president of AAPOR, I have been concerned that we show signs of drifting in this warm and comfortable light, unwilling to acknowledge that our mission, as well as the ranks of our critics, has grown in the last decade, and unable to see the thunderclouds gathering on the horizon. I fear we too easily dismiss our critics as being captious and ill-informed and that we continue to delude ourselves into thinking that restrictive legislation simply cannot happen to us. We are so pleased with the informality and good fellowship of our society that we cannot believe that others outside our ranks entertain suspicions and doubts about us.

As to whether our field of public opinion research is or is not a profession at this time, this strikes me as being a bad question, for it assumes that we are dealing with an all-or-nothing situation. Quite the contrary is the case. Professions develop slowly, painfully, and often without any conscious effort. Professions are not created by legislation or by public relations gimmicks or by drawing up codes of ethics and conduct. The history of the Western world indicates that they attained this status only as they successfully met social needs with dignity and common sense. I defy anyone to state when medicine or law ceased to be bodies of specialized knowledge and emerged as professions.

This paper has detailed some of the factors that complicate the relationship between clients and research agencies. It does not suggest that these difficulties are found in every research relationship or that much has not already been done to educate both the client and the researcher to a more realistic view of each other's needs and obligations. As a field becomes professionalized, its practitioners gain self-esteem, and I see many signs that we are moving in this professional direction. The level of sophistication in both commercial and academic research is improving rapidly. More clients are spending more money each year for research to guide them in policy making and to help them evaluate programs of action. The number of university-sponsored research centers devoted to training students in public opinion research continues to grow, and the diversity of projects they undertake to study is truly impressive. Our members are moving into important policy-making posts in government, universities, and business. Our research methods are spreading with brush-fire rapidity to all parts of the world, and, as you know, some members of AAPOR are not with us tonight because they have been called to Poland, Africa, India, and Japan to help these countries develop programs of research.

All things considered, the prospects for our field are bright—as befits a view taken at high noon. On every side we see evidence of professional growth and self-assurance. With that growth I hope more of us will indulge in one of the prerogatives of maturity—the right to be a little sentimental and moralistic. Earlier I referred to some ambiguity in our self-image as researchers. Sometimes I think we pride ourselves too much on being hard-headed researchers, dealing with statements of statistical probability and busily dissecting our respondents and putting them back together again. In reality, this is but one facet of our work and its professional satisfaction. We are likely to forget that in our public opinion research we are dealing with a tradition as old as Greece and Rome. We seek to understand the concept of consensus, and the forces which facilitate or impede it. In trying to

capture that elusive thing called "public opinion" we are joining in a labor which has engaged some of the best minds of our Western civilization—Plato, Rousseau, de Tocqueville, Dicey, Lowell, and Lippmann, to name but a few. Whether our research problems are as limited as determining consumer preferences for a product or as all-embracing as attitudes toward disarmament, we are dealing with a prime force in the lives of individuals and nations. It is the force for change in a world where change is exploding upon us from every side. Industry, labor unions, government, foundations, and individual scholars are seeking to discern and understand this force which changes men's allegiances, hopes, and fears. By some curious turn of history, we find ourselves in the spotlight of high noon, expected to provide some of the tools and the theories to explain these changes in the attitudes and values that men live by.

Most of you would feel embarrassed and uncomfortable if you were told that, as researchers, you have been cast in a heroic role, so I'll not tell you that. Instead, in closing, I shall be more sober in my judgment and simply remind you that, in an era when too often emotion and stereotype thinking is found in high places, the information you provide your clients, and the degree of trust and confidence you earn from them, will determine whether or not thoughtful counsel and pertinent facts are brought to bear in the making of public policy. Surely this is a task worthy of our best thought and effort.