

PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH AS COMMUNICATION

BY W. PHILLIPS DAVISON

Survey research can be seen as one component of the social communication network. This perspective highlights several aspects of the role played by polls in our society. It also suggests some problems in the present and some directions for the future.

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ON ANY SINGLE DAY, the chances are one in several thousand that you will receive a visit or a telephone call from a special kind of stranger.¹ If you ask him what he wants, he may reply: "I'm collecting standardized information from a sample chosen to represent the component units of a predefined universe."² Or he may say: "I'm taking a poll." In either case the content of his message is the same.

But what do this interviewer's activities signify for society as a whole? Or, to bring the question closer to home, what role do we as public opinion researchers play within the social organism of which we are a part? It is obvious that we provide a mechanism for describing, and sometimes explaining, certain opinions, attitudes, and behaviors. Our services are used, at one time or another, by practically all organized groups and interests. Still, to recognize that survey research provides information that has a wide range of utilities does not tell us

¹ Data on the total number of persons polled in the United States are surprisingly sparse. POQ Polls Editor Hazel Erskine reports that her files show very few questions asked of nationwide samples that might indicate the probability of any particular person being polled on a particular day. In October 1964, the Opinion Research Corporation found that 29 percent of 2,053 adults remembered having been interviewed "at some time" by a legitimate research firm. A 1966 survey by the Sperry and Hutchinson Company obtained similar results: 35 percent of a national cross-section reported having been interviewed at some prior time. This figure included mail questionnaires (mentioned by 12 percent) as well as face-to-face and telephone interviews. (Cf. Elizabeth L. Hartmann, H. Lawrence Isaacson, and Cynthia M. Jurgell, "Public Reaction to Public Opinion Surveying," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 32, 1968, pp. 295-96.)

² Apologies to Charles Y. Glock, ed., *Survey Research in the Social Sciences*, New York, Russell Sage Foundation, 1967, p. 5.

what kind of social role we are playing. How would society as a whole differ if we were not a part of it?

A thorough exploration of this question would require a more extensive inquiry than I am able to undertake, but I can suggest one perspective that may provide partial answers. We can think of public opinion research as part of the communication system of our society and of the world community. A communication system is one of the mechanisms, and perhaps the most important one, that holds groups, subcultures, and nations together. How well communication systems function has a lot to do with how smoothly social systems function. The question then becomes: What do we, as public opinion researchers, contribute to these communication systems?

Before attempting to deal with this question, let us look quickly at the structure of society and the way communication systems operate within it. Here a simple model may be useful. If you think of a society or a nation as a pyramid you will recognize that it is segmented horizontally into several sections. At the top are the decision-makers, or the elite. Below them come one or more layers of the sub-elite, those who exercise direct influence on the decision-makers and who help them carry out their decisions. At the broad base of the social pyramid are the masses, those who are affected by decisions made elsewhere.³

Of course, this is a highly simplified view. One could also see our society, at least, as an amalgam of several different pyramids. A member of the political elite may be a voiceless member of the mass when it comes to cultural questions; or a member of the business elite may rank, when it comes to politics, as part of the sub-elite. But, by and large, the pyramidal picture of society is a useful one for analytic purposes.

Within this structure, one can visualize communications moving in different directions. *From* the elite *to* the sub-elite and the mass go laws, instructions, exhortations, and so on. One might also include here certain products, dress styles, and scientific information. *From* the mass and the sub-elite *to* the elite come expressions of needs, desires, preferences, and grievances. These upward-moving communications have been defined by some scholars as public opinion. As Hans Speier puts it: "Public opinion . . . is primarily a communication from the citizens to their government."⁴ Within the three main segments of the pyramid, one can also visualize lateral communications,

³ I am indebted for this concept to Hans Speier. Cf. "The Historical Development of Public Opinion," in *Social Order and the Risks of War*, New York, George W. Stewart, 1952.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 324.

linking together different groups within the elite, the sub-elite, and the mass.

Public opinion research contributes in no small measure to each of these communication flows. Most obviously, it helps to inform decision-makers about currents of thought and behavior in all sectors of society. Almost every day, we provide information that goes from the mass to the elite—on acceptance of products, policies, or political personalities; on hopes, fears, and aspirations; on crime, drug abuse, and poverty; and on many other subjects.

This part of the upward flow of communication, for which we are responsible, performs at least three functions. The first is that it helps to explain public opinion on any given issue, putting it into context, defining who is involved and why, explaining whether this aggregation of opinions represents a small minority or a large wave of popular sentiment. This function of survey research has often been discussed.⁵

Second, our research provides a feedback mechanism to decision-makers. How many people are informed about a given issue, and to what degree? Are the pronouncements made by governmental or other leaders understood? What are the reactions to policy decisions? The feedback function of public opinion research has also received frequent attention.⁶

A third implication of our work for the upward flow of communication is less well understood and poorly documented. This is that we may, on occasion, provide a *substitute* for public opinion. Such a proposition, baldly stated, may appear to involve a contradiction in terms; it becomes more plausible if viewed in historical perspective. When scholars first began to concern themselves with the study of public opinion during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they noted that it was a process that could be likened to a gathering storm. First there were soft whispers, many of them blowing in the same direction. These merged with each other, to form a stronger current, which, feeding on itself, gained in intensity. Other air masses were drawn in from outside the center. The force and volume of the disturbance increased, with the result that the government, the church hierarchy, and members of the aristocracy suddenly saw the roof blown off.

To express the same idea in a different way, the decision-makers of

⁵ Cf., for example, George Gallup, "Polls and the Political Process," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 29, 1965, p. 548.

⁶ One of the first systematic studies in this area was that of Herbert H. Hyman and Paul B. Sheatsley, "Some Reasons Why Information Campaigns Fail," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 11, 1947, pp. 412-23; see also Martin Kriesberg, "Dark Areas of Ignorance," in Lester Markel, et al., *Public Opinion and Foreign Policy*, New York, Harper, 1948.

that era usually learned about public opinion *after* many individuals had become confident in their own positions through knowing that others shared them. This public opinion was then expressed through mass demonstrations, riots, boycotts, or other forms of popular expression that could be more or less violent. It is no wonder that most eighteenth-century rulers looked upon public opinion with something akin to terror.

Of course, we still have mass demonstrations, riots, and rent strikes, but I submit that, without public opinion research, we would have had many more such disturbances, and more violent ones. Indeed, when violent expressions of public opinion occur, we should look carefully at our own performance and ask whether, in some respect, we have failed to do our job. We may be partially responsible for disturbances that interfere with the productive division of labor on which our civilization is based.

Our responsibility derives from the fact that we have the capability to identify grievances, inequities, and resentments in all sectors of our society—before they become acute enough to be manifested in widespread suffering or in violent and disruptive behavior. Of course, we may do our job and the decision-makers may not pay attention to what we say. But it is certainly a blot on the escutcheon of survey research that it was left primarily for journalists to describe the extent and cruelty of the grinding poverty that was widespread in this country during the prosperous postwar era.⁷

Our role in regard to the plight of the black population may have been somewhat better, but not much. The first national poll question dealing in some way with race relations seems to have been asked by the American Institute of Public Opinion in March, 1939. At that time, 67 percent of a cross-section said they supported Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt in her decision to resign from the DAR because of this organization's discriminatory practices.⁸ In May and June of 1942, the National Opinion Research Center used two batteries of questions about race relations, but none of these questions appear to have been cross-tabulated by race: we are given only the marginals reflecting, essentially, the opinions of the white majority.⁹ Only in 1946 do some cross-breaks by race appear. At this point, NORC asked: "Do you

⁷ One thinks of Michael Harrington's *The Other America*, and such television documentaries as "Hunger in America" and "Harvest of Shame."

⁸ Hadley Cantril and Mildred Strunk, *Public Opinion: 1935-46*, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1951, p. 988.

⁹ It is possible that cross-breaks were made, but were not picked up in the Cantril/Strunk volume or by the "Polls" section of the *Public Opinion Quarterly*. In that case, the question becomes: Why were they not considered important enough to pick up?

think most Negroes in the United States are being treated fairly or unfairly?" Two-thirds of the white cross-section replied "fairly;" somewhat surprisingly, one third of the blacks in the sample agreed. In a review of polling on race relations, Hazel Erskine has pointed out that questions about this subject were rarely asked until after the Supreme Court decision on public school segregation in 1954.¹⁰ This is not a very good record. We could have done more to give a comprehensive picture of the situation of minority groups.

These observations about our past shortcomings in identifying the needs of specific groups within our population, and communicating these needs to decision-makers, suggest that we may be failing to identify other needs and other groups at present. In a society that is now changing as rapidly as ours, strains and dislocations inevitably develop. If we can determine the nature and extent of these at the level of the individual, before they aggregate into a body of unhappy or angry public opinion, we may be able to contribute materially to new solutions or corrective policies. To the extent that we do this, we are serving as a communication channel from the mass to the decision-makers, and are substituting for public opinion in the classical sense.¹¹

By looking at public opinion research as a mechanism that sometimes can substitute for public opinion, we may be able to clear up at least partially a rather old controversy. In a paper given at the 1947 meetings of the American Sociological Society, Herbert Blumer sharply criticized polls. He maintained that public opinion was an organism, and that one could not sample an object matter that was a complicated system of interacting parts.¹² His paper drew rejoinders from Julian Woodward, an associate of Elmo Roper, and also from Theodore Newcomb of the University of Michigan, both of whom vigorously defended the utility of sampling individual opinions.

I think that both Blumer and those who criticized his reasoning were essentially correct: polls cannot by themselves describe the complicated process by which individual opinions become aggregated, but, insofar as they convey the attitudes of the masses to the decision-

¹⁰ Hazel G. Erskine, "The Polls: Race Relations," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 26, 1962, p. 137. To be fair to those researchers engaged in national sampling, it should be noted that academic students of public opinion did no better. In the 17 volumes of the *Public Opinion Quarterly* that appeared before the Supreme Court decision, there were eight articles having something to do with race relations; in the next 17 volumes there were 26 such articles.

¹¹ One could also argue that survey research may be dysfunctional for society if it leads not to the alleviation of grievances but merely to the imposition of new controls. (Cf. Arthur L. Smith, Jr., "Life in Wartime Germany: Colonel Ohlendorf's Opinion Service," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 36, 1972, pp. 1-7.) Even when research is misused, however, it still serves as a communication channel.

¹² "Public Opinion and Public Opinion Polling," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 13, 1948, pp. 542-554.

makers, they themselves may properly be regarded as a manifestation of public opinion.

Thus far, we have been examining the role of surveys in the upward flow of communication within the social pyramid. Opinion research plays an important part in the downward flow as well. Much of the work we do is devoted to helping decision-makers formulate policies or create products. In addition, we advise decision-makers on how to reach certain publics: which media to use, and how to express an idea so that it will receive attention and be understood. We are heavily involved in providing inputs to advertising, public relations, political propaganda, and mass persuasion in general. This role of public opinion research has drawn substantial criticism in recent years, on the grounds that it can provide a basis for manipulative communications.¹³ It is also the role that is perhaps most familiar to us, so I shall not discuss it further at this point.

Our contributions to lateral and diagonal flows of communication in society have received less attention. They deserve more, since opinion research is one of the most important mechanisms through which people can become acquainted with their extended social environment.

Within our immediate circle, we can make direct observations about our friends, neighbors, and co-workers. But we are coming to rely more and more on surveys to inform us about groups outside this circle. The further removed these groups are, the more we have to look to polls to find information that goes beyond superficial characteristics, stereotypes, and political slogans. The news media tell us what the leaders of other countries say and report major events involving other peoples. Through opinion research we can also learn that inhabitants of far-off lands share certain common values with us, differ with regard to other values, and give their attention to some issues and not others. We can become acquainted, at least to some extent, with the shape of the daily life of the "average" person. The late Hadley Cantril's study, *The Pattern of Human Concerns*, was based on sampling national populations totaling more than one third of all the people in the world. It not only revealed significant differences among nations, but also highlighted certain aspirations that seem to be shared almost universally.¹⁴

Within our own national borders, we are increasingly dependent on survey research to become better acquainted with our fellow na-

¹³ Some of these criticisms have been embodied in popular literature: for example, Vance Packard's *Hidden Persuaders*, and Joe McGuinness' *The Selling of the President*.

¹⁴ New Brunswick, N.J., Rutgers University Press, 1965.

tionals who live in other geographical regions, belong to other ethnic groups, have a different socioeconomic status, or are separated from us by a generation gap. The recent book by Daniel Yankelovich on changing values among college students is an excellent example of the way opinion research can interpret one segment of society to other segments.¹⁵

We contribute to the lateral flow of social communication when we provide data on other populations for books and journal articles, but even more when we serve as part of the infrastructure of the general press. Students of the mass media point out that journalists gather relatively little of their information by personal observation, or by interviewing those who participate directly in newsworthy events. Most of the information carried by the media is prepackaged or aggregated in some way, and furnished to the journalist in semi-finished form.¹⁶ This infrastructure, on which the journalist depends heavily, is composed of: news releases, which may be issued by almost any individual or organized body; local newspapers, especially when it comes to international reporting; experts, who are able to package information on a given subject when interviewed; and various other sources. Among these other sources, the survey organization occupies an important place. Without the information provided and prepackaged by opinion researchers, the mass media would have a far more difficult job of reporting social trends and interpreting one sector of society to another.

Lateral communication in our society, and particularly the role of survey research in such communication, has been studied surprisingly little. There are few hard data to which reference can be made. Nevertheless, it seems probable that this mode of communication performs a number of vital social functions. For one thing, it enables one group to shape its opinions and activities in the light of what other groups are doing, thinking, and feeling. As Leo Bogart points out in *Silent Politics*: "Opinion research forces this kind of awareness by illuminating the differences in values and goals among different sections of society."¹⁷ Intergroup communication by itself rarely solves problems that are rooted in social differences, but without it such problems are even less likely to be resolved.

Another function of lateral communication is to enable organized public opinion to form—to make it possible for like-minded individuals to offer each other mutual encouragement and support. It seems

¹⁵ *The Changing Values on Campus*, New York, Pocket Books, 1972.

¹⁶ Bernard Roshco, "The Phoney Issue of News Management," *Interplay*, April 1970.

¹⁷ *Silent Politics: Polls and the Awareness of Public Opinion*, New York, Wiley, 1972, p. 208.

probable that polls and surveys play an important part in this process, by which individual opinions are aggregated into larger units. In theory, at least, opinion research can help public opinion to form by letting individuals know that they are not alone; that appreciable numbers of others share their attitudes on given issues. These individuals are therefore more likely to let their voices be heard; they will be encouraged to search out and join others who share their attitudes. I believe, although I cannot prove, that public opinion on such issues as population control and the environment has formed so rapidly in part because surveys showed that many individuals shared common attitudes on these issues.

A NON-SERIOUS LOOK AT THE FUTURE

To identify our work as serving important functions for communication flows in our society is merely a first step toward inquiring how these functions might be served better. Here one enters a dangerous area—that of prescription and recommendation. For self-protection, I am going to adopt a device skillfully used by a distinguished predecessor. Twenty-one years ago Julian Woodward delivered an AAPOR presidential address entitled, "Public Opinion Research, 1951-1970." He was speaking, of course, in 1951, and prefaced his remarks with the following caveat: "What I propose to do is to engage in a few serious and a few not-so-serious predictions confined to the field of public opinion surveying, with the serious and non-serious so carefully mixed that I later can say that the predictions that did *not* come true were not seriously made and that the ones that did were clearly the result of superior scientific foresight and imagination."¹⁸

Following President Woodward's excellent precedent, I shall also take an irreverent look into the future in order to discover what kind of role public opinion research might play in the years ahead. At this point, one might recall the parody of a familiar remark by Lincoln Steffens: "I have looked into the future—and it does not work." But, disregarding such discouraging thoughts, let us press on. I shall take 1984 as the year from which to look back, since Paul Lazarsfeld, also in an AAPOR presidential address, concurred with George Orwell that 1984 was an appropriate historical cutting point.¹⁹

By 1984, opinion researchers were fully conscious of their role in the social communication system. Consequently, their procedures differed markedly from those that had been used as little as twelve years earlier. For one thing, it was no longer fashionable to issue brief

¹⁸ *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 15, 1951, p. 406.

¹⁹ "The Obligations of the 1950 Pollster to the 1984 Historian," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 14, Winter 1950-51.

news stories, larded with percentage distributions, or to present a client with a report consisting largely of charts and tables. Instead, leading opinion research firms included departments that produced tapes and films. Here, professional actors were used to replicate survey findings in dramatic form. Quantitative values were reflected by such factors as intensity of voice and length of time on screen; qualitative values, of course, came through clearly. These tapes and films were able to give the client or the public—a *feeling* for public opinion, not merely a distribution of replies to individual questions.

Cassettes depicting the conditions and opinions of all major subgroups in American society were standard equipment in the schools, and no child was allowed to graduate from the eighth grade until he or she had achieved a satisfactory score on an empathy test, thus demonstrating an ability to understand the problems and points of view of people in very different ethnic and socioeconomic strata.

At times of international tension, it was common for worldwide television to carry dramatized public opinion surveys from the various nations involved. These were broadcast directly from satellites to home receivers, and almost invariably led to a situation in which publics in all countries agreed that there was something to be said on both sides.

Print was still used to communicate survey findings, but the statistical scaffolding had retreated into the background. Instead, emphasis was placed on the people behind the numbers. By this time, both clients and the public had learned that it was not terribly important whether 10 percent, or 25 percent of a given population was suffering from some condition, or had an unfulfilled need. The significant point was to know that the condition or need was widespread, and to understand its nature.

On the other hand, statistical inference achieved importance in new fields, and survey researchers were instrumental in bringing about certain long-overdue constitutional changes. You all remember the headline from the 1980 election: "Senator Blowhard Fails to Achieve .05 Confidence Level Election Thrown into House of Representatives."

Recognizing their responsibility to facilitate communication among the various segments of society, opinion researchers changed their approach to sampling and interviewing. Samples of from 800 to 2,000 cases, formerly popular because they produced marginals with a satisfactory degree of statistical reliability, were less frequently used. The interview of from 30 to 60 minutes also became a thing of the past. It was more common, and no more expensive, to conduct 16,000 five-minute interviews via phonovision. These quickie inter-

views enabled researchers to identify members of social subgroups, certain personality types, or people with particular problems or needs. Persons so identified, sometimes as few as 50 or 100 in number, would then be interviewed intensively for periods of four hours or more, and would be paid a fair price for their time.

It was two-stage research of this nature that enabled the Acme Music Corporation to develop the product that since has proved so popular among left-handed clarinet players. Similar research designs made it possible to establish the relationship between specific forms of psychopathology and resulting patterns of political behavior. This discovery led to the requirement, which we all now take for granted, that candidates for political office devote at least 15 per cent of their campaign communications to therapeutic messages.

Perhaps the greatest change in opinion research during the past decade has been the shift from a primary focus on measuring popular reactions to a new focus on discovering needs and preferences. In 1972, it was common for an interviewer to confront a respondent with an existing situation, a product, or a personality who was already well known, and to ask for an opinion with regard to this situation, product, or personality. By 1984, researchers had learned how to enter societal processes at an earlier stage. They were providing decision-makers with more information about the kinds of social institutions that were needed and the types of candidates who should be persuaded to run for political office. They also furnished explicit guidance to the mass media with regard to the kinds of information that were required by various segments of the population to protect and promote their legitimate interests and to live a fuller life. In other words, the emphasis had shifted from assisting decision-makers in framing their downward communications, to promoting upward and lateral communication.

A particularly interesting development was in the relationship of survey research to advertising and marketing. Prior to 1974, advertisers and marketers had used research primarily to sell more products and services. But in the following years, emphasis began to be placed on producing as few items as possible. This was because of the rise of consumerism, growing concern about exhaustion of the earth's basic resources, and increasing realization that the United States would have to reduce its disproportionate consumption of the world's raw materials.

At first, the advertising and marketing fraternities were dismayed, but then they began to see the silver lining. With fewer products being produced, it became more and more important to match the product to the individual. Marketers found that they required more information about the needs and preferences of the diverse elements of our population. For this, they turned to the researcher. Advertisers found

that each individual, before he would pay the staggering prices characteristic of the late seventies and early eighties, insisted on far more information about a product than he had previously wanted. For instance, before buying his lifetime ballpoint pen, a person in 1982 demanded to know 17 facts about it, in contrast to the average of one and one quarter facts that he had wanted ten years earlier. Naturally, advertising revenues soared, and equally naturally, survey researchers were kept busy finding out what kinds of product information were most needed by consumers.

One result of this intensified marketing and advertising activity was that shoddy goods disappeared from the market. TV sets were ordinarily sold with a lifetime guarantee, while automobile sales contracts commonly included a grandfather clause, providing that worn-out parts would be replaced free of charge as long as the owner was not more than two generations removed from the original purchaser. A concomitant development was that survey researchers were employed to identify products and services that were no longer necessary and could be dispensed with.

At the same time, all exaggerated and deceptive advertising was squeezed out of the communication channels by the public's insatiable demand for factual information. The creative departments of advertising agencies gave up attempts to develop attention-getting devices and emotional appeals; instead, they became adept at increasing the information content per square inch of advertising space by the use of double exposures, runic inscriptions, and concise algebraic formulae.

A BRIEF RETURN TO THE PRESENT

Beneath this overlay of fantasy are a few notions that might be stated somewhat more baldly. If public opinion research is a significant component of our national information network, then it follows that we should constantly seek ways of communicating our findings more clearly and making them accessible to wider circles of nonspecialists. We should take care that our statistical tools remain our servants rather than becoming our masters, and should not allow them to obscure the human values implicit in our work. Experimentation with new techniques for the presentation of survey findings is desirable.

We should try to ensure that our communication system is an open one; that as many groups as possible have access to it. This implies not only diversification of sponsorship but also working with larger samples that will enable us to discover and describe population categories that have not previously been heard from.

Communication is a two-way process. We should be on guard

against pressures that would make survey research primarily a tool that helps the elite manipulate the mass, and should make full use of our capabilities to serve as a communication channel from the mass to the elite. This involves constant attention to identifying wants and needs, problems and expectations, within all population groups. We should also keep in mind our responsibility to inform various segments of society about each other.

Finally, as part of a national and international communication network, we should be jealous of our independence. Controls over survey research, whether imposed by political, economic, or other interests, carry with them many of the same dangers as controls of the press. We must be largely self-regulating. This means not only establishing high professional standards, but also maintaining competition. The most effective cure for low-quality or one-sided research is better research, just as the cure for poor news reporting is better news reporting. We will be of greater service to society in the years ahead if we think of public opinion research as one of the institutions responsible for ensuring the free flow of ideas.