

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

THE BUSINESS OF RESEARCH

BY HERBERT I. ABELSON*

The business of research is the business of most AAPOR members, of any who are responsive to, and resolving the strains between, the rhetoric of scholarship, with its traditional deliberateness, cool neutrality, and systematic curiosity, and the rhetoric of enterprise, of services for remuneration, with its baggage of classical economics, and the self-correcting democracy of the competitive marketplace.

My observations are intended to apply to most AAPOR members, to buyer and seller, to client and agency, to the funder and the funded, whether in government office, academic setting, large corporation, or small research bureau. Some elements of research as business are common to all. This paper examines a selected few of the ways that the activity of research and the activity of business have impacted each other and, by such examination, seeks to illuminate the never-tiring topic of who survey researchers are and why they sometimes behave so curiously.

First, consider what it is that makes survey researchers so special. In this connection, two characteristics are particularly worth noting. One is an often justified belief that our work has an effect on national policy, on allocation of funds for social programs, on much of what citizens believe, and on the comforts and quality of everyday living—comforts that may be related to what is on television, or what is in the supermarket, trivial in the individual instance, but considerable in the aggregate effect. Whether conceit or reality, most of us think that what we do is important. That's number one.

A second characteristic of survey researchers is that although much of the substance of our work is advocacy work—there are not many neutral issues that someone wants to spend research money on, and companies want to sell more of *their* brands, not someone else's—both researchers and their publics demand of survey research a kind of exquisite neutrality. The ethic of neutrality and its violation have been recognized in research from the time of ancient astronomers to more recent times

* The author, President of Response Analysis Corporation, was President of the American Association for Public Opinion Research in 1974–1975. This is a slightly adapted version of his presidential address at AAPOR's thirtieth Annual Conference in Nordic Hills, Itasca, Illinois.

when it became a subject for investigation as an artifact of experimental method. Neutrality is worth another look in the context of survey research, with its involved practitioners, its visible end-product, its highly subjective methodologies, and its setting in a competitive advocacy system.

Thus, two characteristics of survey researchers: belief in the manifest importance of much of the work, and the demand for neutrality in an advocacy setting.

Before expanding on this matter of advocacy in survey research and how we handle it, I would like to comment on other consequences of research as business in three areas: (1) the *uses* of survey research, a subject area introduced to me some years ago as, "Alfred Politz gave us the 12-ounce Coca-Cola bottle; what have *you* given us?"; (2) the search for liquidity, acquisitions, and mergers in the research game, whose subtitle, "Where are all the suppliers' yachts?" was discouraged from appearing in the printed program by Conference Chair Biderman who observed, unnecessarily, that hardly anyone is old enough to appreciate the reference; and (3) the overworked learning model in research reports or, otherwise stated, why are we so often advising clients to give the public more information?

Back to the 12-ounce Coca-Cola bottle. The business ethic has defined the purposes of research in terms of end-use orientation, and has imposed this context upon the researcher. Research provides decision options; the user puts the findings to work to help bring about a desired effect. This is the mutually understood legitimacy of research, especially for, but not limited to, studies of products, services, and consumers. Some years ago, in *Viewpoints*, a Market Research Association publication, I speculated on the peculiar nature of client satisfaction—that such satisfaction, and coincident reduction of need, appears to take place at any one of three different times in the research process:

When the client need or tension appears to maintain itself through the period of investigation, through the phase of reporting, and well into the application of findings to the purposes for which they were sought, then we have the legitimate-for-business-purposes instance of research for concrete end-use.

When client satisfaction seems complete at the time of report, and the report itself is never seen again, then one might suppose that a study had been commissioned to arbitrate between opposing views in an organization, or perhaps to settle an otherwise disagreeable personnel decision in a way that maintains organizational viability, or perhaps to satisfy some higher and invisible management who had asked penetrating questions at a staff meeting.

And third, there *are* occasions when buyer satisfaction seems complete on the day that the research is authorized, which makes the report an awkward relic of the research process. But of course this situation could reflect a use of research to buy time, postpone a decision, maintain a fluid state of affairs. The sense of surprise and denial with which our administrations in Washington have received reports of some national commissions set up by themselves or by an immediate predecessor suggests more than a little of this flavor.

Researchers can and should accept the legitimacy of a variety of utilities for studies which are commissioned. There may be economic waste, but not irrational motive in these alternative purposes. But researchers *like* the end-use ethic, just as many clients do, and in subtle ways each party often helps to discourage the sharing of the full agenda.

Next item, about the suppliers' yachts. Some calculations based on *Ad Age* from a year ago suggest that—leaving out the A. C. Nielsen Company—more than two-thirds of commercial survey research is carried out by companies that have outside, that is, nonemployee, owners.¹ Among the real and imagined consequences of this shift in ownership—emphasis on short-term financial performance, generation of packaged services to be sold off the shelf to many clients, synergy of subsidiary with parent company, providing liquidity for company founders—one notable implication is clearly an aspect of the research *business*. Companies change ownership in order to generate infusions of fresh capital for technological improvements, for new types of services, for intelligence gathering that reaches beyond current survey research methodology. Will conceptual, as well as technological, leadership now be increasingly assumed by commercial firms? It could happen. Or will more commercial research just be concentrated in fewer hands, and more syndicated services marketed by lower-level help with less depth of background?

As of now, new capital has gone and will probably continue to go first where the leverage is greatest: data collection itself. As capital investment often dictates the product line, and that which has the highest fixed costs is sold the hardest, it is possible to see the definitions of problems changing to accommodate even more to data collection efficiencies, just as the structure of questionnaires and the nature of analysis have already accommodated to electronic convenience.

Turning to the learning model as an overworked explanation and a basis for advice to sponsors and users, why do so many reports choose to conclude that the solution is to give the public more information—information about your brands, your corporate image, your industry; information about free enterprise, health care, needs of higher education?—cognition alone as panacea, rather than as an element in a more complete communications dynamic.

Researchers do know better. AAPOR members among many others have illuminated this area in past years; for example, Herbert Krugman, looking into the puzzle of the effectiveness of low-salience advertising, and Joseph Klapper, in describing the baffles and filters between communication and recipients.²

¹ Jack J. Honomichl, "Research Top Ten: Who They Are and What They Do," *Advertising Age*, July 15, 1974, pp. 24 ff.

² Herbert E. Krugman, "The Impact of Television Advertising: Learning without Involvement," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 29, 1965, pp. 349–356; and Joseph T. Klapper, *The Effects of Mass Communication*, Glencoe, Illinois, Free Press, 1960.

Hopefully, we are investigating a dead horse. It is more likely that, because we know better, we assume that we take the trouble to share what we know. It is in this area, of researchers assuming responsibility for providing perspective and understanding for data, that we have too often imposed convenient simplistic explanations on our sponsors and funders. With respect to the case in point: it isn't your product, or your ideology, or your good intentions which need examination—it is simple and easily correctable ignorance. For just one nonproprietary example, think of the money that has been poured into economic education programs for employees, for consumers, for other publics, over the past thirty years, and the survey research from several auspices which concludes that, because the public vastly overestimates corporate profits, the trick is to make sure to tell people what corporate profits actually are.

Having sampled a few specimen outcomes of the interaction between a research ethic and a business ethic, let's turn to one more such consequence: this is the area of objectivity, neutrality, impartiality, advocacy—all different facets of the same preoccupation. I propose that researchers, either knowingly or unknowingly, expend considerably more energy than they or anyone else would have supposed in dealing with the demands of neutrality. This is so because nearly everything that we do has in it the *possibilities* for partiality. In referring to partiality or advocacy, I include both the not unknown desire to ingratiate oneself with the sponsor of one's work, and to the more substantial and more subtle partisanship in the issues themselves which are being investigated. The test of the latter may be fairly easy. Think of whatever research you may be most involved in at the present time. Imagine yourself a reader of the report from that research, someone who has had nothing to do with the effort itself. Would you *personally* be more satisfied by one set of outcomes than another?

Why so much preoccupation in AAPOR with issues related to responsibility? It is tempting to assume that as we ascend to the levels of abstraction appropriate to public address, there is the theme of responsibility waiting for examination. Not entirely true. In fact, I believe that we invest so much in responsibility because it has been our only institutional defense against our own partisanship, partisanship which we sometimes recognize and often do not.

Fred Goldner sat through some 60 hours of AAPOR Council meetings this year. Fred generously accepted an invitation to observe AAPOR in his role as an organizational specialist. In a preliminary report to AAPOR Council, Fred said that he was particularly struck by the emphasis of Council in directing so much of its effort towards instruments for affirming professional responsibility, to the exclusion of other promising pursuits at least equally beneficial to the membership and the public, such as research techniques themselves.

Of course, advocacy and impartiality are only one aspect of responsibility. Advocacy is not the same—to my mind—as larceny. The larcenies of research: the creatively defined response rates, the corner-cutting implementation of sampling, the inappropriate but knowingly applied reliability formulae—these are among the manipulative disservices to ourselves and others, the hypocrisy of research. We can be and *are* objective without necessarily being impartial.

A number of researchers have been in and around this artifact of advocacy, each somewhat differently. Sidney Hollander included it in a paper on public opinion and social change.³ Robert Bower has identified the adversarial as one of three broad categories of research, and reminded us that he has found no evidence for survey researchers being immune to adversarial passions.⁴

Leo Bogart has discoursed on the curious nature of polls: the peculiar restriction of choice inherent in questions designed for machine processing; the elicitation of opinion without prior determination of whether the respondent *has* an opinion, the mechanistic quality of our instruments, by contrast with the fluid and subtle nature of public opinion.⁵

Paul Sheatsley, in addressing a recent PAPOR conference, pointed out: “We like to think of ourselves as free spirits, as impartial investigators, even as do-gooders, but to the people whom we approach for interviews we usually represent the Establishment.” In commenting on the increasingly evident alienation of the public from its Establishment, he suggested that: “These attitudes have, of course, been strengthened by people’s observation of much survey research: political surveys which have been used to manipulate them or appeal to their selfish interests, commercial surveys which have been used largely for competitive advantage, social surveys which have promised large public benefit, but which the respondent never hears of again once the interviewer leaves.”⁶

Syndicated polls for newspapers are, of course, nothing if not advocates of the Establishment, which is not to suggest any lack of good will among their number, although it might suggest some long-term disservice to their audiences. That I applauded the polls for their early discovery of national mistrust of the Nixon administration, and that I was impatient with their slowness in reporting on the difficult process of uncovering disenchantment with Vietnam, speaks to *my* advocacy as well as

³ Sidney Hollander, Jr., “Public Opinion and Social Change,” *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 37, 1973, pp. 428–436.

⁴ Robert T. Bower, “Some Observations on Research Sponsors and Professional Standards,” *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 34, 1970, pp. 432–441.

⁵ Leo Bogart, “No Opinion, Don’t Know, and Maybe No Answer,” *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 31, 1967, pp. 331–345.

⁶ Paul Sheatsley, “Beyond the Bicentennial,” keynote address, 15th Annual Conference of Pacific Chapter, American Association for Public Opinion Research, Westwood Village, California, March 22, 1975.

theirs. Studies of attitudes towards Vietnam were a veritable laboratory for looking into advocacy.

In the academic sector, Herbert Schiller has commented on this question which has been used by a commercial organization in its work for a public relations arm of the television industry: "Do you agree or disagree that having commercials on TV is a fair price to pay for being able to watch it?" In a spirit of illumination by example, Schiller offered an alternative question as follows: "Do you agree or disagree that having commercials on TV is too high a price to pay, and that a different means of financing might be preferable?" Apparently not content to conclude that one question should not make a poll, he actually seemed to like *his* question better by noting that his question "considers not only different ways of covering costs, but at least the possibility for an entirely different socio-economic arrangement for U. S. television."⁷

I am not quite suggesting that we carry Rosenthal's discussion of the experimenter as artifact to the point of demanding of published survey data that it be presented as follows: the XYZ survey research company, which has recently found for abortion on demand, the decriminalization of heroin, and the abolition of the right-to-work committees, has just announced findings from its latest poll on public attitudes towards the depletion allowance.⁸

This is what I *am* suggesting:

First, that we consider with renewed respect the prevalence of advocacy desires and opportunities in *most* survey research; that we really, truly test the myth of the transparent researcher and see if it isn't the myth and not the researcher which is transparent. We have not gone far enough in acknowledging and appropriately dealing with the extent of our personal investment in our findings.

We can test the assumption of the transparent, or at least semi-transparent researcher, by pitting against it some other widely held beliefs—for example, that the data do not speak for themselves. Show me one self-evident finding from any work of survey research. From the time that we redefine a public or social or consumer issue so that it is within the domain of our skills to the time that we redefine our findings back into the domain of the original problem, researchers are intimate participants in the whole of the research process.

Let's go one step further in hastening the time when no one among us still says the *data* show this and the *findings* show that. I suggest that any competent survey researcher can produce a set of findings which points in

⁷ Herbert I. Schiller, "Polls Are Prostitutes for the Establishment," *Psychology Today*, July, 1972, pp. 20 ff.

⁸ Robert Rosenthal, "Interpersonal Expectations: Effects of the Experimenter's Hypothesis," in Rosenthal and Rosnow, eds., *Artifact in Behavioral Research*, New York, Academic Press, 1969, pp. 181-277.

any one of several directions of outcome, and can do so with a spotless design, a magnificently neutral questionnaire, a conventional and defensible analysis, and a conservative set of interpretations. To do so deliberately is possible and despicable. To do so innocently may be worse.

So, first, we are not the transparent brokers of self-evident truths. This conclusion is hardly worth mentioning, *except* that our beliefs are imperfectly matched by our practices.

Second, a recognition of the extent of partisanship in our work suggests a possible new importance for some simple tactics of procedure: at least occasionally, for surveys about issues which are strongly held, pass out a few blank questionnaires to some knowledgeable types who do not happen to know who is funding the work, and ask them to suggest who the client might be, and why. Or find out more about how interviewers themselves feel about the substance of what they are asking, much as was done in some of the early studies of interviewer bias in quota sampling.

Perhaps among the most promising procedures is the routine debriefing of respondents. Martin Orne, in a related field, has commented: "It never fails to amaze me that some colleagues go to the trouble of inducing human subjects to participate in their experiments and squander the major difference between man and animal—the ability to talk and reflect upon experience."⁹ Except for that time in Berkeley when the AAPOR Conference overlapped with a meeting of the Simian Society, we may need more reminders of our good fortune.

In debriefing respondents at the end of exhaustive interviews on experience with illicit drugs a few years ago, the same proportion of our sample said that they had exaggerated their consumption as said they had underreported it. Demand characteristics can tell us about ourselves as well as our work. These are tactics which we can apply as individual researchers.

Third, there are other checks on advocacy which get us back to research as business. One is competitive bidding for contracts, which can provide the sponsor over a period of time with an array of perspectives on similar subject matter. I was once participant in a situation in which two research organizations, neither aware of what the other was doing, were asked to bring in a recommendation about the viability of a dramatically new kind of home entertainment center. Both groups brought their final reports to the same meeting and listened to each other's presentations before company management. One report said it would sell, and proved it. The other report said absolutely no way, and also proved it. If the sponsors had not been so unhappy, we might have

⁹ Martin Orne, "Demand Characteristics and the Concept of Quasi-Controls," in Rosenthal and Rosnow, eds., *op. cit.*, p. 153.

gone on to learn some more that day about the posture of neutrality in research.

The other business-related check on advocacy has to do with sharing findings, all the findings, with anyone who would like access to them. But we are still a long way from proprietary studies being made available—even after a suitable lapse of time—to the publics who are most affected by, and who are often the subjects of, the work.

Fourth, so far I have been dealing with advocacy as a social disease, and neutrality as a valued remedy, neutrality—in Oppenheimer's words—as “the glue between cause and effect.” This next point is made hesitantly for fear of being misunderstood. It is that there are occasions when we can enjoy, revel in, benefit from, and exploit our own *non*-neutrality for the greater power of the research itself. When we understand our advocacy, we can utilize its meaning to us as a basis for a more penetrating development of issues, or framing of questions, or over-all design. Or, to communicate the idea in another way: If we do not identify with at least some of our clients' purposes, our work is likely to be shallow and brittle; if we identify too fully, our work is likely to be self-defeating in its careless construction and invitation to criticism.

And finally, there is a code of ethics and publications standards as prescriptions for our faithfulness to sponsors, respondents, the larger public, and ourselves. The AAPOR code has been recently revised with respect to both content and method of implementation, and is currently subject to membership approval. The code has served us well, and should serve us better in its present state of evolution.

Dag Hammerkjold once advised: “Never, for the sake of peace and quiet, deny your own experience or conviction.” All else is commentary.