

# **PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS**

## **IMPROVING THE PUBLIC'S OPINION OF PUBLIC OPINION**

---

J. RONALD MILAVSKY

Paul Lazarsfeld's AAPOR Presidential Address, delivered 37 years ago, was entitled "The Obligation of the 1950 Pollster to the 1984 Historian." His central theme was that although public opinion research had arrived in universities with a physical presence, it had not shown its larger significance. His advice to the profession was to keep the future historian in mind when designing studies, being sure to provide a record of the social attitudes in the 1950s that would greatly enhance understanding of a past age. For the first time in history, history itself could be written with knowledge of what people had actually thought.

Certainly that theme struck a responsive chord in the AAPOR audience, many of whom were thinking along the same lines. That is why we now have facilities like the Roper Center, which archive public opinion data for anyone to use. Unfortunately, though, not many 1984 historians heard Lazarsfeld's speech. Advanced study of the communications process has taught us that there often are severe communications problems when you talk to people who haven't yet been born. Consequently, there are few historians who use our kind of data in their work.

So we still need to work on establishing the social significance of our kind of research. And whereas the worldly Lazarsfeld was primarily concerned with esteem on the campus, we, less worldly than he, have to be concerned with respect in a much larger arena. We need the public's esteem.

J. RONALD MILAVSKY, Vice-President, News and Social Research, National Broadcasting Company, was president of AAPOR in 1986-87. This is a slightly revised version of his presidential address at AAPOR's 42nd Annual Conference, Hershey, Pennsylvania, May 16, 1987. The author thanks the following people for helpful comments on a previous draft: Eric Cardinal, Adam Clymer, Barbara Collins, Barry Cook, Peggy Einnehmer, Herbert Gans, Josephine Holz, Kenneth John, Dennis Kerr, Bertha Means, Phillip Meyer, Burns Roper, William Rubens, Eleanor Singer, and Horst Stupp. Their comments do not imply endorsement of the views presented. And the author thanks the National Broadcasting Company for allowing the time for preparation of the address.

We need it for several reasons:

1. We need the public to answer our questions. Response rates to surveys are dropping. In reviewing the research on reasons for refusing to be interviewed, at least one solid truth emerges: refusal is inversely related to the prospective respondents' respect for the research for which they are being solicited.
2. We need the public to respect our research enough to want to learn about it. The more interested they are the more the media will report it and the better informed the public will be about its value.
3. We need legislators to have both a respectful and a clear image of our work, so that they will not cripple legitimate research efforts when they draft legislation that shoots at junk phone calls.
4. Finally, it is a matter of belief for many of us that research reporting public opinion should play an important role in the implementation of social policy in a democracy, and it is a matter of self-interest to us that public and private decision-makers consider the information we provide an essential part of the management and production process.

We have thought about our credibility and public value before, and we have acted to raise consciousness about phony polls and unethical telemarketing practices. We now ought to look for opportunities to affect the public's view of our work more positively.

How do we find such opportunities? Perhaps we will find them by examining the critical points of contact between polls and the public—the points where information about what we are is transmitted to the public.

I want to discuss three of these points of contact today: (1) between interviewer and respondent, (2) between stories reporting polls in the media and their audience, and (3) between poll data and policymakers.

### **Contact Point No. 1: The Interviewer–Interviewee Exchange**

Of all the exchange points, the one between the interviewer and the interviewee has thus far received the most research attention. Nevertheless a lot more is needed.

One inference from the existing research on that initial point of contact by an interviewer is that even before prospective respondents assess the importance or utility of the research, they assess the person initiating the interaction.

Just to give you an idea of the amount of contact there is between interviewers and respondents, consider that a survey done by the Council of American Survey Research Organizations found that the 46 of its 150 member organizations that responded reported 1.4 million "responding contacts"<sup>1</sup> in September of 1985. Now, start adding weights for the nonresponding companies, the non-CASRO members,<sup>2</sup> and the rest of the year, and you will get a very large number, albeit a very soft one—conservatively 70 million person-to-person contacts per year.

Truly, the interviewer is survey research's first line representative—the most direct and personal transmitter of our image to the segment of the public that means the most to us, the respondent. But how much thought are we giving to the selection and training of our interviewers?

Because of the telephone, we have seen a change from personal interviews to impersonal methods of interviewing. Many of the early reports of polls in the late 1930s appeared first in *Fortune* magazine, then were reported once again in the pictorial *Life*. The reports in *Life* always showed pictures of real respondents, and often pictures of the interviewer. It was clear that these were real flesh-and-blood people who had well-defined, important roles. Today the typical situation involves a phone contact by a person carefully and deliberately trained to sound and act like a tape recording. Is it any wonder that some clients see nothing wrong with saving money on telephone interviews by using computers programmed to sound like people?

Part of the problem lies in the social and organizational distance that has developed between analyst and interviewer. The interviewer is too often the socially undervalued, invisible part of the research process. The analyst has had more schooling and training and wants nothing to do with all the problems that can arise when the data are being collected.

Organizational distance between analyst and respondent is increasing as more and more specialty field and tab companies enter the business, becoming subcontractors and creating whole new organizations the analyst can take for granted. Such enterprises often are run as businesses by business people. In fact, some of these research companies may have no people with formal training in research methods in their management structure.

This has many implications for the quality of research,<sup>3</sup> of which

1. As they define this, a "responding contact" is a person answering the phone when an interviewer is calling.
2. I estimated at least half as many organizations as in the CASRO memberships. This very probably is a low estimate.
3. For example, what happens to the quality of data when things like assignment of sample, selection of random starts, rotations, administration of split-forms, and call-backs are guided by principles of efficiency rather than research logic?

only one concerns me here: what we have to guard against is cost cutting that leads to deterioration of interviewer staffing and training, which is exactly what will happen if we continually turn our backs on this critical group. The research shows that we need literate and personable interviewers. We won't get them if we don't pay attention to how they are hired, compensated, trained, and supervised.

What can we do to insure that interviewer quality is kept up? Because the decision to refuse an interview occurs most often at the beginning of an interview, we need to focus our attention on its first twenty or thirty seconds, making sure that we find out all we need to about what they project to the respondent. We can hire and train interviewers to supply that quality. If it costs more, those of us who employ interviewers must explain to clients why the costs are necessary. Those of us who contract with research companies for interviewing services need to listen in on some interviews to satisfy ourselves that the company is paying as much attention to what the prospective respondents hear when they pick up the phone as is paid to other, more visible components of the research process.

So one way to improve response rates is to convince the prospective respondent right up front that the interviewer is worth spending a little time with. But even if we can accomplish this, we still need to work on understanding and improving the general image of our work that is communicated to the public. Such communication takes place whenever the public is exposed to our findings. Since much of this exposure occurs in the media, we ought to take a good close look at that critical point of contact as well.

## Contact Point No. 2: Polls in the Media

We have always devoted considerable attention to poll reporting in the media because polls have been considered newsworthy since the beginning of polling. Much of the attention has centered on standards for reporting methodology as a way of insuring that the public not be misled. Today I want to look at the substance of what is being reported rather than the methodology. I will focus on newspapers. That medium does the most extensive reporting of polls, and as a result I am making the assumption, for present purposes at least, that the image surveys have in the public mind is more directly linked to such reporting than to what is reported in the other media. I realize that others may consider television's use of polls more influential. They may be right, but I will not adopt that premise here.

Much of the reporting one finds in the daily press is of polls designed and conducted by news organizations themselves. One also finds

stories reporting results of studies done by others. These are quite different cases and need separate discussion. First, the stories reporting results of the news media's own polls.

This sort of reporting presents both an opportunity and a risk to us. The opportunity is to demonstrate to the public what polls are worth in educating both the public and policymakers. The risk is there because print and electronic journalists are the ones who are doing the actual reporting. I am going to argue that the way journalists report poll data does not take full advantage of the opportunities presented.

I recently asked three major daily newspapers to send me every news story based on original poll data in 1986, which they readily did. I want to share some of my observations about them with you. In general, they are similar to observations that have been made by other more systematic content analyses (Paletz et al., 1980), but I have looked at these stories from the perspective of an audience researcher, which is what I do in my other life. That is, I have looked at them not to try to measure the formal content objectively but to try to form some hypotheses about what messages readers may or may not be getting from these stories and what the messages may be worth to them.

The range of subjects one finds covered is quite broad, although one of the publications concentrates on political polling considerably more than the others. In the other two publications, the range of social issues covered, like AIDS, welfare, race relations, housing, and health, are not only subjects of high interest to diverse audience segments but are also ones the public considers important. It therefore seems reasonable to expect that readers would appreciate much of the information such stories are providing. In addition, taken as a whole, these data are an invaluable addition to the historical record and will document what Americans thought about a great variety of subjects for future generations.

One finds a great range of story lengths, from a few paragraphs to some that are more than 4000 words. Some of the longer pieces go into a considerable amount of depth on a given subject, reporting many percentages. Usually, but not always, the longer pieces appear as special feature articles in weekend editions. Even in day-to-day reporting, they go beyond reporting marginal distributions. One often finds cross-tabulations, and sometimes even trend data are reported.

There may be some problems here, though. Dense data content does not always yield high information value.

Often I found no apparent logic or narrative thread in the stories. The lead paragraph was generally the most important newsworthy finding. Only rarely was the stage set by explaining why the study was done. Many of the studies were pegged to recent news events, like terrorism after the Karachi hijacking, patriotism for July 4, and religion

at Easter, and it was assumed, therefore, that there was no need to explain. It might be worth reexamining that assumption, however, since there are often general issues as well as specific ones that are addressed by these studies, and a story can be given additional meaning by describing the general issue. For example, a study of attitudes toward the different factions in Nicaragua could be positioned as also speaking to the amount of knowledge people had about who the players were, and this could have been described as relevant to judging whether Americans know enough to think intelligently about any policy there.

Each paragraph after the lead can be interesting, but one can shuffle the order of paragraphs considerably without affecting the meaning of the story as a whole. A host of facts are presented with little connection between them. Because there is little narrative logic, the obligatory sentence reporting sampling error can be placed almost anywhere in the article. One of the publications often makes it the last sentence in the third or fourth paragraph. This always has seemed arbitrary to me. I was informed that they aim at placing the sentence at the end of the first paragraph in which the first percentage is reported. But inspection shows this is not always the case. I still think its placement is often arbitrary, and that this contributes to the sense that there is little logic in the progression of the story.

Anomalous findings and contradictions sometimes occur within a story and across stories. A story on racial attitudes in the wake of Howard Beach reported differences between blacks and whites. Later the article also reported the extremely valuable information that there were "significant" differences related to race of interviewer and race of respondent on one item. No mention was made of interviewer effects on other items. If they were also affected, and there was no apparent reason why they should not have been, the information value of the whole study would have been undermined. Was there good information about racial attitudes in that article, or were the findings more relevant to understanding interviewer effects? I could not tell which.<sup>4</sup>

Contradictions may be especially puzzling when they occur across stories.

This headline appeared in one of the papers on 14 January 1986: "Reagan Opens Ceremonies for King: Recent Polls Show President's Popularity Rising Among Blacks." This one was in the same publica-

4. This example is illustrative of the great difficulties sometimes involved in reporting poll data within the space and time constraints inherent in any news medium. To do justice to this sort of interviewer effect and the implications for the rest of the story, much more space probably would have been required. Not spelling them out, however, may affect the impact of a story on the reader in ways the writer would want to avoid.

tion four days later, on 18 January 1986: “Reagan Rating Falls in Poll of Blacks: 56% Say President Is a Racist.” Two of the three papers had this same problem of sorting out where blacks stood on Reagan at about this same point in time.<sup>5</sup>

The most serious possible problem from our point of view is that generally the stories rarely interpret the enormous amount of data provided the reader. In addition, they provide little context or history. Often, the only conclusion the reader gets is the headline. In fairness, there is some variation on this point across the publications, with one of them providing more than the others. But perhaps all of them should do more than they do.

When writing a poll story, journalists tend to do what they do in any news story—stick to the facts, reporting them in rank order of importance. In this, they are doing their job as they have come to define it—reporting the facts as objectively as they can. That’s what’s important to journalists, and the public generally appreciates them for doing a good job in reporting the facts and being objective.

In fact, my own experience studying audience reactions to news programs suggests that the journalist’s aversion to interpretation within a news story is understandable. The public sees interpretation of facts as editorializing, and when the journalist’s interpretations occur together with reportage, the journalist is seen as opinionated.

In short, poll reporting as journalism is and probably will remain different from poll reporting as survey research. One aims at providing opinion as news, the other views opinion as elucidating a more general social process. We cannot, nor should we, expect the journalists to do what we do. But we can encourage journalists to change a little. After all, as Phil Meyer has told us, those who report on polls are “precision journalists.” Since they are designing and conducting studies, they really need to be both journalists and pollsters. And we can also try to supplement what the journalists do.

Before going into what we can do, I need to mention another type of story dealing with polls that occurs in the media, that is, the reporting of surveys not done by the media but by other, sometimes interested parties, and often with the express purpose of gaining media attention.

If the problem in reporting opinion research collected by journalists themselves is that interpretation is left out, the problem in reporting research commissioned by outside interested parties is that they emphasize interpretation and that it is often misleading. Interested parties

5. All the factors that led to this disparity are unclear, but one major factor is that the earlier article rested on studies in which blacks were sampled in their proper population proportion within national samples, resulting in small numbers of blacks in the samples and very large sampling errors, while the later article was based on a study of a large number of blacks in which the sampling errors were much smaller.

can always be relied upon to stress the meaning of their data in their press releases. If the reporter does not take special pains to check the interpretations, the story can be one-sided. When this happens, the public is sometimes subjected to reports of subsequent studies, conducted by interested parties on the other side of the issue that contradict the previously reported studies.

Both kinds of stories—those based on media-collected data and those reporting others' data—may cause the public to undervalue polling. News poll stories contain so many facts about what Americans think, see, and do with so little about what they mean that their impact is bound to be less than it could be. It may well be that people don't understand much of the stories, and perceive many perplexities and contradictions. These contradictions may lead to feelings of cynicism about either the motives, the seriousness, or the competence of survey researchers.

In short, there are plenty of reasons to be a little concerned that the image of polling that emerges from media conducted polls is not as positive as it could be. And even more reason to suspect that the additional impact of reporting surveys done by outside interested parties may be worse.

What can we do about this situation?

The first thing we can do is try to understand better how stories reporting poll results actually are perceived by the public. We can go beyond content analysis, which only allows guesses about what the public gets out of that content, and actually study what messages people are getting or not getting from all that reporting. We need answers to the same basic sorts of questions that communications researchers ask about other types of communications media. First the facts about exposure: What stories are attended to by whom and with what degree of attention? Is nonreading due to lack of interest, lack of credibility, or lack of perceived value? Second, what is being communicated? Are the facts absorbed? Are the contradictions noted? What do these contradictions lead people to think about the study's methodology and about its motives? Third, what are the uses and gratifications of such stories? What do readers get out of the experience? What significance do they attach to it? Do they consider the information useful or otherwise valuable? And, yes, let's not forget to find out what the plus or minus 4% statement actually is saying to the reader.<sup>6</sup>

Feedback from the research on such questions to poll reporters and editors may enable them to make their reports more intelligible and

6. Some of these studies can be done with very small budgets. Much can be learned from simply asking people to read a particular story and then asking questions systematically about their comprehension, etc.

increase their impact on the reader. We will gain from this kind of research a sense of what the public is missing from news stories about polls. It will identify subjects on which longer feature articles could fill a need by supplying the history and context missing from the specific news stories. And some of us who are not journalists might try to write some of these for a variety of popular media.

### Contact Point No. 3: Polls and Policymakers

If part of our work is aimed directly at increasing the public's understanding of social process, another part is aimed at increasing policymakers' understanding of what the public knows and thinks about. The third crucial point of contact that is extremely important to us, then, is the interchange between polls and policymakers. It is important for two reasons. One is that we like to think that information about what the public knows and thinks should be important in a democracy. And second, if that function were in fact a real one, the public's assessment of the importance of survey research might be enhanced. This is a very large and complicated subject about which I want to make only a few points.

I find it useful to think about two kinds of policymakers, those in private jobs and those in public jobs. Among those in public jobs it is of further use to consider two separate uses of polls which parallel the two imperatives such policymakers have in a democracy. First they need to become or remain policymakers, and second they need to make policy. Our work, then, potentially has a dual utility. It can assist in formulating the strategies for gaining or remaining in a policymaker position, and then it can assist the formulation and effectuating of policy.

As between these two functions, my guess is that the public would think survey research to be more important if it thought we were useful in the making of social policy than if its use were seen primarily as helpful to politicians to gain or remain in office. But it is the strategic role of survey research in public life that receives most of the attention, not the policy-making role. Public opinion surveys clearly are useful for planning election campaign strategy, but their uses in governance is not at all clear.

Here is where we could use those historians who did not hear Paul Lazarsfeld's talk, for lack of being alive at the time. Polls bearing on important national issues have been done at least since the 1930s, when Franklin Delano Roosevelt had to face strong isolationist sentiment at home while war was developing in Europe. We know that every administration since has had to face decisions of similar importance with

more and more data available about where the public stood on a host of issues relevant to these decisions. But we do not yet know much about how these administrations used such information.

A recent article by Bruce Altschuler (1986), based on documents in the Johnson Library, revealed much about President Johnson's uses and misuses of polls. But the examples given have to do with polls assessing Johnson's popularity, with the information used primarily for strategic purposes, e.g., when popularity was high, Johnson wielded the data like a club to keep up support for the war. According to Altschuler (in a personal communication), examples of polls being used in a policy-making role by the Johnson administration have thus far eluded his search.

We await efforts of other historians digging into the presidential files residing in their respective libraries to reveal to us how uses of polls varied across presidential administrations. Such studies will tell us a great deal about the uses and the abuses of survey research by the chief policymakers. Studies on the congressional, state, and local levels will serve a similar purpose. They will help us to understand better what public opinion's contribution to governance has been. Knowing what it is is a prerequisite to being able to improve its value and to communicate it to the public.

Uses of survey research in the commercial sector are a little less mysterious, at least to those of us who work in that sector. But even here, data on the role of research tend to be anecdotal, rather than systematic. The feeling one gets is that research generally is seen as useful and necessary by corporate managers, but there is little information about specific uses in the development of specific policies, products, or services, largely because this sort of information is proprietary. The more such knowledge we can collect, the more convincingly we will be able to speak to the public about why it is worth their time to answer our questions.

The job of documenting the uses of survey research probably is easier in the commercial sector than in the public sector. That is fortunate because one inference we can make from research on refusal rates is that people hold research done by commercial companies in lower esteem than research done by universities or government. One way to increase the perceived value of research done by the commercial sector is to try to increase the public's understanding of the improvements in products and services that might be traceable to such research.

## What Can We Do?

We clearly need to know a lot more than we do about what our real and perceived value is to the public. But we should not delay taking some

positive actions until all the facts are in. Indeed, we already have started.

For example, AAPOR recently has become more involved with other associations who share the same need to convince the public that they should support survey research—specifically, the Council of American Survey Research Organizations (CASRO) and the Market Research Association (MRA). We should continue to strengthen these relationships because we face the same problems and can share resources.

And a new department of our journal, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, starting in the next issue, will publicly scrutinize and will provide an objective analysis for the public record of studies commissioned by interested parties and reported primarily, sometimes only, in the news media. Our hope is that sooner or later the existence of this forum will put everyone on notice that using survey research to get self-serving points across to the public is not completely free of risk.

And we can and ought to do more.

Perhaps the time has come for AAPOR to try to find a way to enter the public debate about such social issues in a more active way than we have in the past. As a minimum, this would involve urging individual members with specialized knowledge in subjects which are treated in media polls, like race, sex roles, aging, AIDS, nuclear power, and so on, to build closer relationships with reporters and editors.

If reporters feel they cannot do much interpretation of data themselves, they do sometimes ask others who know the subject for their interpretations, which they print. We can increase the extent to which they do this by increasing their contacts with individuals who know about the subjects they study and write about. That ought to be a two-way street. Reporters' names appear over their articles. We can take the initiative and call or write them to discuss their work as well as our own work. Most reporters are quite willing to listen to sensible suggestions and are eager to use additional resources. We should not forget the wire services on this score. They, too, have science reporters who cover the social sciences as well, and are always looking for interesting material.

And the more reporters get to know us, the more likely it will be that they will call one of us to check on an interpretation presented in one of those done-for-publicity studies.

Finally, in some specific instances involving policy issues of national importance, like AIDS, AAPOR might consider arranging a conference to which reporters, legislators, or their staffs are invited to question researchers who know a great deal about where the public stands on the issue, what it knows about the issue and what it doesn't, what the emotional reactions are and how to deal with them. We have arranged

conferences before to discuss methodological issues. We ought to consider now doing one on a substantive issue in an effort to make a contribution to its public understanding and its consideration in governmental policy-making.

## Conclusion

In sum, we need to start paying more attention to the public's estimate of the worth of survey research, and to how estimates of that worth are formed. We need to study the image that is projected by interviewers and by the media to see if we can improve that image. And we need more objective information than we now have about the uses of public opinion data by the public on the one hand and by public and private policymakers on the other.

I hope it is clear that my basic assumption is that our image can be improved only if the performance on which it is based improves, and not merely through flash-and-smoke image campaigns.

We know we provide a good and useful product. But this product owes its existence to the public who provide its raw material. If they are going to continue to provide quality data, we are going to have to convince them that they are receiving something of value in return. The job ahead is to do our best to be sure we are delivering the goods and then to make sure that the public knows that we are.

## References

- Altschuler, Bruce E. (1986)  
"Lyndon Johnson and the public polls." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 50:285-299.
- Lazarsfeld, Paul F. (1982)  
"The obligations of the 1950 pollster to the 1984 historian." In Patricia L. Kendall (ed.), *The Varied Sociology of Paul F. Lazarsfeld*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Paletz, David L., Jonathan Y. Short, Helen Baker, Barbara Cookman Campbell, Richard J. Cooper, and Rochelle M. Oeslander (1980)  
"Polls in the media: Content, credibility, and consequences." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 44:495-513.