

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

TRASHING THE POLLS

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While I was preparing this talk, I was interrupted by at least five different phone calls, all of which began: "Hello, Mrs. Black? How are you today?" Now, I've learned to recognize that seemingly sincere concern about my welfare as the standard opening of a sales pitch. My stock answer expresses my appreciation for the caller's concern, even as I hang up the phone: "Too busy to talk, but thanks for asking."

Millions of Americans, besieged with phone calls, often at their busiest times of day, have developed defensive responses to another familiar opening—"Hello. I'm conducting a survey . . ." It really doesn't matter much whether the caller is selling or fund raising or conducting a legitimate survey. For many Americans, these words seem to trigger an immediate desire to get off the phone as rapidly as possible. In self-defense against a myriad of intrusions, Americans have revised their standards for when rudeness is acceptable—it's no longer taboo to hang up on strangers, even when they are being polite to you.

Many in this audience are able to ride on the shirtiltails of respectable institutions—government agencies, and universities—to gain access to, or at least to pique the curiosity of, respondents. But in the corridors of the Advertising Research Foundation, of the American Marketing Association, of the Council of American Survey Research Organizations, and of the Market Research Association, there is renewed interest in developing something like a Good Housekeeping seal of approval, backed by a major advertising and public relations campaign, to distinguish legitimate surveys from telemarketing.

A seal of approval isn't a new idea. At the first AAPOR conference back in 1947, Harry Field proposed a seal of approval for *this* association that would be carried on press releases of member polling organizations, with a public relations campaign to convince editors and the public of its meaning. Releases would be examined, and repeated violations of standards agreed upon by the organization would be grounds for removing the stamp of approval.

The idea behind the 1947 proposal was to distinguish reputable surveys from fly-by-night polls which many felt would bring disrepute upon the entire industry. The program never got off the ground.

The proposal currently under discussion at ARF has no provision for distinguishing surveys on the basis of their quality, although the proposal does provide for registering specific surveys and an 800 number for respondents to call to check the legitimacy of a survey or to make complaints about an interview.

But are we kidding ourselves if we think the problem is how to distinguish ourselves from telemarketers? Maybe people actually have a pretty good idea what it means to be interviewed and are making an informed choice when they refuse. Depending on where you live, from 21 percent to 31 percent of households with telephones were selected to be surveyed in a recent 12-month period, according to a report in the *New York Times*. Maybe the people we're trying to reach have already been bored by an interview that didn't seem relevant to their interests and have been turned off by press reports about how the results were used.

Increasingly, respondents bring to the door, to the phone, or to the questionnaire that arrives in the mail their own preconceived notions of the value of surveys and the costs involved in participating. Long gone are the days when surveys had novelty appeal. Or the days, before women's lib, when nonworking housewives greeted the interviewer who appeared on her doorstep as a welcome excuse to escape the monotony of housework, a rare opportunity to talk to an adult who valued her opinions.

A guest editorial that appeared in the *Washington Post* last November begins with this startling statement: "The time has come to trash the polls." The author goes on to say, "One theory for the growth of non-cooperation and lying is that a growing segment of the public regards pollsters as 'them'—the enemy, the establishment, the problem and not the solution. Another is that those questioned view the poll-takers as authority figures, and shy away from stating opinions or giving answers that stray from conventional wisdom or are not 'politically correct.'" The editorial ends with this call to arms: "Draw inspiration from the instinctive reactions of the public. Say no to poll-takers, on principle. Or, for the adventurous, lie like a bandit. It's the least a politically correct citizen can do."

While these views are, I trust, extreme, they should still give us pause. More and more people have tried our product, and if it leaves a bad taste in their mouths, slogans and jingles will do very little to improve the flavor. Our first responsibility is to make the product—the interview, the client report, and the findings we place in the public domain—the very best we know how.

I'm talking about each and every one of us reaching for new standards of excellence to combat: (1) lack of interest in being a respondent, and (2) cynicism and disillusionment about poll results.

First, to combat lack of interest in being a respondent, we can pay more attention to the respondent's needs, making the interview itself a more rewarding experience, and making sure we keep our promises. This may involve lots of small steps made one at a time and by each of us.

Questionnaire Design

We can give more space to questions that give respondents an opportunity to express their intent in their own frames of reference rather than restricting their choices only to those which our clients think are important. This is true for both political polls and market research surveys—we need to make sure we give respondents an opportunity to do more than simply respond to the client's project or to the problem as defined by political elites. We can add more open-ends—they give us qualitative information to enrich our interpretations, as well as giving the respondent a sense of being able to express himself in his own terms.

Of course, structured questions have an important place in survey methodology, but we must be careful that respondents feel their true feelings are reflected in the choice of alternatives.

We can take pilot testing more seriously, requiring the project director, the survey analyst, and the questionnaire designer (when they are not the same person) to have hands-on involvement. We can pilot test even when we think we know the issue cold and plan to include only questions that we've used before and know to be reliable. Then, at the end of every pilot interview we can ask: "Did these questions let you tell me what you think is important? What did we miss that would give us a better picture of your point of view?"

Interviews don't have to be boring—we can pay more attention to questions that respondents enjoy because they learn something about themselves, or because they are amusing, as a game would be. Pacing is important. And we must be careful that no respondent feels stupid or put down because they can't answer one of our questions.

I suspect one of the major reasons we haven't solved problems with how the interview is experienced by the respondent is that many of the people who write the questions, analyze reports, and rise to the top of the survey research hierarchy keep a great distance between themselves and the respondent, believing, in their heart of hearts, that field work is beneath them. I'm sympathetic with those who feel their talents lie elsewhere, but I submit to you that any survey researcher who thinks interviewing is *beneath* him picked the wrong profession.

If each of us spent 10 percent of our time interfacing with the

respondent—monitoring interviews if not interviewing ourselves—we'd have all sorts of innovative solutions to the problems caused by questionnaire design.

Field Work

While it certainly doesn't apply to *all* telephone interviewing, I suspect that more researchers than we'd like to acknowledge treat telephone interviews as a commodity, giving their contracts to the lowest bidder. In return, suppliers find that to remain competitive, they must become the employer of last resort, setting up phone banks in regions of the country that were economically depressed to begin with. Bad as some of the telemarketers are, they're still a rung higher on the employment ladder than the telephone interviewer.

We ought to give interviewers much higher status, better training, higher pay and benefits, job security—whatever it takes—and require greater commitment, empathy, astute listening skills, and top-notch social prowess in return. Interviewers are our front lines, often our only interface with the public. Considering the current standards for a lot of the field work, isn't *that* a frightening thought?

Keeping Our Promises

We often make promises to gain cooperation, and it is important to keep those promises. If the interviewer promises a 2-minute interview, for example, busy respondents who cooperate may easily feel cheated when they are still on the phone 20 minutes later.

Many years ago when I was chairing a committee of a local community board in Manhattan, I agreed to be a respondent in a study about how the local boards operate. The request came in a letter signed by a faculty member of a local university informing us that the borough president, who had appointed us, urged our cooperation. We were promised confidentiality and a copy of the report.

Two years later I came cross the letter, looked up the faculty member, whom I didn't know, in my AAPOR directory, and wrote asking for my copy of the report. The faculty member was very apologetic and explained that they had run out of funds before they were able to complete the respondent's report. The borough president may have gotten his report, but there was no money left to fulfill the promise to the respondents.

Now that may be an adequate excuse for the client who's paying for the study, but I submit that if we gain cooperation with the promise

of a report, we're obligated to deliver that report even if we have to do it on our own time with our own money. Keeping promises to our clients is *essential*, but promises made to respondents have a prior claim.

Confidentiality is a promise, even when it is not explicitly stated. The public has been told over and over that confidentiality is one of the qualities that distinguishes surveys from other requests for information. AAPOR has paid attention to this issue, most recently with several standards cases which found that political phone call operations that had every appearance of being a "survey" actually were collecting names for campaign purposes without obtaining the respondent's informed consent.

Anyone who conducts surveys that might someday be used in litigation has a special responsibility to make sure the names and identifying information of respondents cannot be subpoenaed as part of the litigation. There are legal precedents for how this can be accomplished, and researchers must inform themselves about what steps they must take to protect respondents before the contract is signed.

Respondent Expectations

While I believe that many AAPOR members are attuned to issues of confidentiality, I wonder if we pay enough attention to what the respondent expects from the interview? I'm reminded of a story that Sidney Hollander told some years ago about a panel study that had been conducted by his firm among residents of low-income housing in Baltimore. Time after time when the interviewer returned for the second interview, they were confronted with the respondent's disappointment or anger. "We answered all your questions and told you about our problem, but nobody came to fix it." Or "Why haven't we been moved to a better apartment?"

Most of us concentrate so much attention on aggregating answers and protecting the confidentiality of our respondents that we may miss important opportunities to build good will for the survey process—and for our clients—by conveying the concern of the individual respondent to the person best able to address the complaint. With the respondent's permission, we can make sure his concerns are addressed—as an *individual*—rather than as just one more faceless actor in a Greek chorus.

In studies where we can identify the sponsor without biasing the findings, we can offer respondents an opportunity to have someone from the client call them—assuring them, of course, that all other information will remain confidential. And we can say who the sponsor

is more often in marketing studies—ask ourselves, “Will it really bias the answers on this specific study?” Why can’t we say who the sponsor is at the end of the interview and get feedback we can send on to the client?

Cynicism about Survey Results

We don’t have control over what gets covered in the media, so it is difficult to tackle cynicism directly. But if members of the public fail to recognize themselves in press reports of surveys, they are unlikely to think highly of the ability of polls to clarify public issues. We can establish more credibility by sympathetically portraying each segment of the public—at least in *our* reports.

Suggestions that respondents have begun to lie to pollsters when there is a racial aspect to the campaign, or when the candidate they plan to vote for is not socially acceptable, are especially disturbing. It’s up to us to give voice to the reasons for minority positions and to beliefs that are not “politically correct.” Granted, we may have to expose points of view we wish did not exist, but if we are going to increase public confidence in surveys, voters will have to find themselves more accurately—and indeed, more sympathetically—portrayed by our research. When we have clear-cut racism, for example, which I hope we all deplore, we can reach beyond labels to explore why voters are angry and what it is they fear.

Another problem is the use of polls for advocacy. Surveys are now so widely accepted that all sorts of special interest groups are conducting polls to show that the public supports their side of an issue. Sometimes that means bringing new information to the debate, but often it means a survey that was slanted to reflect only one side of a complex issue.

Public Opinion Quarterly has taken one small, but important, step to rectify this problem with its section on poll reviews. These reviews grew out of the recommendations of an AAPOR committee appointed to study the problem of advocacy polls. The committee felt peer review was the best antidote, and suggested a new section in *POQ*. When Howard Schuman became editor, he instituted the poll review section, under the direction of Seymour Sudman and Stanley Presser, with even-handed reviews of both good and bad surveys in the public domain.

Mindful of due process, *POQ* gives every opportunity to the poll under review, if criticized, to respond to its critics. The most important by-product of this review process may well be the way in which it raises the consciousness of the researchers who conducted the poll in

the first place. No one likes to be confronted by the published criticism of their peers—it tends to focus attention on the issues involved. When there are shortcomings, researchers may become more cautious in how they approach the problem the next time. Hopefully, the certain knowledge that anyone of us can be reviewed may serve to curb some of the excesses.

When you see an advocacy survey that you think is a blatant example of stretching the truth to serve the ends of the sponsor, send it to the editor of *POQ* as a candidate for review. And when you see a survey whose virtues should be better known, nominate it for review as well.

Supporting High-Quality Surveys

We can make sure that high-quality longitudinal studies continue to be in the public domain and part of the discussion when describing how the public is changing. If we cling to the notion that good research will someday drive out the bad, we have to make sure that quality surveys conducted in the public interest make it through the federal funding process. The National Science Foundation funds the three major longitudinal surveys: the National Election Studies and the Panel on Income Dynamics, both housed at the University of Michigan, and the General Social Survey, housed at NORC. This is the year that the GSS comes up for funding.

Funding pressures threaten the General Social Survey. The 1991 survey is the last one funded—there will not be a 1992 survey. Limited funds at the National Science Foundation and the steady increase in the cost of fielding such a project mean that the GSS may face major design changes that could reduce its scope or quality.

Herbert Hyman predicted the value of such studies in a 1957 essay entitled “Toward a Theory of Public Opinion.” “Obviously what would be desirable would be to extend public opinion research from the ad hoc description of whatever part of the current social world is hot to the systematic description of both the hot and the cold . . . And if these same areas were dealt with over long spans of time, providing trend data, a theory of public opinion formation and change would be well on its way to formulation.”

Although there are other excellent surveys, the General Social Survey is the best single source for social and attitudinal data covering the United States—and the most widely used. As the major sponsor, the National Science Foundation has made an extremely valuable contribution to the social sciences, helping scholars, students, research-

ers, and the public at large improve our understanding of public opinion.

In the 20 years that it has been in existence, many scholars who do not have the resources to collect data themselves have been able to test their hypotheses using GSS data—over twenty-two hundred scholarly publications have cited the GSS as a source. It is a major teaching tool in the social sciences, increasing students' familiarity with survey data.

As this audience knows well, the GSS has been a major source of methodological research and innovation, most notably, experiments on context and working effects. Many examples have been published in *POQ* and discussed at methodological sessions at AAPOR conferences over the years. Because of these experiments, all of us have been able to improve our understanding of the techniques at our disposal. Many of us have turned to the GSS code book for a question wording which we knew we could count on.

I understand that staff members on the Hill say they never hear from anyone in support of these programs. Members of Congress have only a vague notion of what it is that survey researchers do. They need to make the connection between the findings that they rely on to inform policy and the source of those findings. They have no idea, unless we tell them, how many of us rely on these surveys to inform our own work.

A show of support for NSF research budget in general, and the budget for the General Social Survey in particular, would be especially helpful this year. Specific, concrete examples of why you value the GSS would help.

In closing, I encourage you to commit yourself anew to the mission of survey research with all the zeal of the original pioneers.

We can combat the lack of interest in being interviewed by increasing the amount of time we spend thinking about the needs of the respondent. We can make the interview a more enjoyable and rewarding experience. We can make sure our questions give respondents a chance to say what they feel needs to be said.

We can pledge at least 10 percent of our time to being with the respondent, thinking of ways to improve the interview from *their* point of view.