Reporting Poll Results Better
By Frank Newport

A major challenge facing the survey research industry continues to be the search for better ways to disseminate and report survey results to the public.

The quality of scientific research is typically controlled through the process of publication and replication. The press has tended to follow this lead in terms of reporting hard-scientific results, usually picking up and reporting on research only after it has been recognized and legitimated using some type of scientific review. A review of the science section in a recent New York Times, for example, shows that the articles typically rely on scientific results which have first been published in such carefully-controlled journals as Nature, Science, and the Journal of the American Medical Association. These publications serve as a filter before the findings reach the general public.

"This reliance on survey results to help guide the ship of state necessitates that polls be trustworthy and reliable when they are first published."

Frank Newport is editor-in-chief, the Gallup Poll

Interpreting Poll Results Better
By Howard Schuman

The evolving body of scientific knowledge can ultimately ignore research that doesn’t meet scientific standards, even if it has already been published and disseminated to the public. But there is a key factor which differentiates public opinion research from other sciences: the public is intended to be its main audience. The power of public opinion polling to illuminate the attitudes and behaviors of the citizens of a democracy is one of its primary virtues. This reliance on survey results to help guide the ship of state necessitates that polls be trustworthy and reliable when they are first published.

The burden of accomplishing this goal lies both on the survey research industry and media. In coordination with media gatekeepers, more mechanisms can hopefully be developed to discourage the use and dissemination of polls that don’t meet high standards. There should also be more review by journalists before publishing survey results; asking such questions as how the findings compare to other poll results on the same topic, how was this poll done, and what criteria can be used to evaluate it? If journalists can’t take on this burden, they should make use of a peer review process before results are reported to the public.

Validity is the largest continuing challenge for survey research. By validity I do not mean the usual definition of measuring what one intends to measure. A better definition is knowing what one has measured even if it is partly or even entirely different than intended, and also understanding the limitations of one’s measures.

Validity is primarily a problem for survey professionals and scholars rather than for the survey industry as such. The industry seems to thrive regardless of the validity of the reported data. The power of the sample survey method is so great, so fully accepted, and so difficult to replace by any other method that even the most egregious blunders committed in its name have little or no effect on its further use. From the fiasco of the Truman-Dewey poll forecasts through the latest embarrassing mispredictions, nothing has stood in the way of ever-increasing calls for survey results. Indeed, the most vociferous critics of polls typically end up doing polls themselves at some