

To the Editor

## Final Disposition

Melissa J. Herrmann's article, "Managing Privacy Managers," [November/December *Public Perspective*] presents some very valuable information on the technology of privacy managers, their growing prevalence, and outcomes if telephone numbers guarded by them are redialed. However, the article misrepresents the meaning of the final disposition codes used by the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR).

Herrmann states, "If we considered privacy managers as a final disposition, according to AAPOR standards, they would be allocated as unknown households. In all actuality, these sample pieces may be more productive than fresh sample..." She goes on to show that in a five-week poll, only 5% of the initially blocked cases remained blocked, and 27% were converted into completed cases after recontact attempts.

However, AAPOR's *Standard Definitions* does not automatically call for assigning such cases to any final disposition code. AAPOR assumes that almost all surveys make multiple attempts to reach sampled numbers and that the final disposition codes are those assigned after all attempts have been completed.

AAPOR's final disposition code for technological barriers would not be used for all cases encountering a privacy manager, but only for those eventually unable to get beyond it. Thus, in Herrmann's discussion, it would only be the 5% "still blocked" that would get this code.

Tom W. Smith  
NORC  
AAPOR's Standard Definitions  
Committee

Note: AAPOR's *Standard Definitions* is online at [www.aapor.org](http://www.aapor.org).

## Stories to Tell

By Karen Donelan

For all of us who have sight, our days have been marked by film-like images—crystal blue skies changed to inferno-ing towers, piles of twisted metal and rebar and glass. To those of us whose lives and work are about listening, the hope engendered by rumors of ringing cell phones was visceral—who otherwise would hear the silenced voices buried within those piles, who would tell their stories? They are now the stories of the lost, told by those who lost them.

On September 12, I walked into my office and visualized my world in the wreckage of those buildings full of modern work life—metal desks and beige cubicles and lateral files and computers and rolling chairs and jokes and calendars and school pictures of small children.

In Kabul and Kandahar we have been shown images of a different kind of beige and gray rubble—mostly crumbling clay and concrete. There are few wires and very little evidence of urban work life. We are told, though, that Osama Bin Laden's cave has a laptop for communicating with his network of soldiers.

In common we have the loss of innocent lives, children become orphans, immeasurable human suffering, silenced voices. Ashes and dust.

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks, I was sent the *Public Perspective* article on measuring the impact of war around the globe. This is amazing work. Probability sampling and high tech electronic data transfer, and the best technology that is now available to the wired and the wireless, made this work possible. We have data as reliable as ever from lands where nothing is certain.

This is what we do as survey researchers—we use our science and new technologies to bring the voices of the public to the public ear and eye. We allow people to look at themselves both as whole nations and as people set apart by their divisions.

I was stunned (mostly by the irony of the timing) by a finding in the article reported prior to September 11—that Americans were more tolerant of the loss of innocent civilian lives in times of war than the people of nations that had actually experienced such loss.

And now here we are. The loss is ours and is here and is tangible. On that day in September, dazed and dust-covered people clung to their cell phones, and were found by email, and remained glued to television sets that miraculously kept broadcasting.

Dot com-ers became fond of the term "high touch" over the past few years. We wondered, how do we take these technologies and give them life and feeling?

We know now. We found our families and our friends and the people we should have been calling for the last five years or so, and we said, "Are you okay?" A friend in Vienna received a wireless transmission of the news on his cell phone before I heard it in my car because I listen to CDs in my car, not the radio. People called home from crashing planes to say, "Tell our story"; "This is what happened"; "I love you."

At ground zero, of course, high touch had a whole different meaning that most of us will never know or experience. But as we are farther away we try to find other ways to understand the experience of others, as we are grateful for our own lives. We listen for those voices and those stories. We are haunted but mesmerized by anecdote, not data.

In 1990, I traveled to Aranyapatet, on the border of Thailand and Cambodia, to work with a team of researchers on an area population survey in Site 2, a refugee camp that had been home to more than 50,000 Cambodians since they had fled the Pol Pot regime more than a decade before. We were trying to develop population-based assessments of the long-term impact of trauma and disability on a people haunted by their memories of war and torture.

We brought with us only the paper tools of our trade—bilingual questionnaires, interviewer training materials. Laptops and modems and scanning software and cordless telephones were in our mind's eye as tools we could probably use in a few more years, but not yet then. Then, we could not bring any electronic equipment devices, not even cameras, through the armed checkpoints.

At Site 2, the contrasts were shocking to me. Miles of hard packed earth with open sewers were studded by the occasional flourishing gardens of orchids and herbs. In the dirt-floor hospital, adults and children lay on hammocks, suffering from cholera and dysentery and traumatic amputations from landmines outside the camp; meanwhile, a sophisticated public health system provided education on sanitation, nutrition, and reportable disease, and scientific approaches were taken to disease control. In the evening, the shelling sounded like fireworks just a few miles away as we ate quiet, starlit dinners in the village.

I have thought a lot about those days since September 11. We told the people of Site 2 that we had come in an effort to tell their story to the world. It was a story of immeasurable, unimaginable human suffering, of the loss of

home and scores of loved ones. It was a story of terrorized people.

We worked with local health professionals and earned people's trust and interviewed them privately in their homes. We had good instruments and clinically validated measures of mental and physical disability; we had outstanding scientific methods and informed consent; and we did the best job we could. Here is the story we had to tell:

People do monstrous things to each other. They destroy families, they kill and maim and torture. The human spirit survives and thrives again when it can get back to the work of daily life—tending a garden, caring for children, digging ditches, feeding the hungry. Communities can be reborn on streets of dust when people remember that music and dance and art and religion and poetry and literature can bring them together and nourish the soul that is isolated by fear. For most, the nightmares will end in time.

It is our job to care for those whose nightmares will not end.

Listen to the voices of populations and you will hear the fear, the vengeance and the faith, the hope and the love that live around this earth. Then listen to the advice of Mayor Giuliani, that man whose political redemption has come by recognizing that there comes a time to save our own lives.

There are stories to tell that will touch and teach people. Get back to work. ●

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### Correction

In the November/December issue of *Public Perspective*, the biographical note for the authors of "People on War" was incorrect. The bio should have read, "Stanley B. Greenberg is chairman and CEO, and Robert O. Boorstin is vice president, Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research." *Public Perspective* regrets the error.

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