

## **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.

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The way in which survey research is reported today, on the other hand, often misses a great deal of the checks and balances developed as part of the scientific process. Unlike other scientific endeavors, public opinion polls can be conducted with relatively little investment, at low cost, and quickly. Studies are conducted and released essentially without review or context. Media outlets often publish survey results as received, without scrutiny, and assuming that designation of the source and sponsor are enough to absolve them (the media) from responsibility for the report's content.

Many of these “direct to the media” polls are conducted conscientiously and meet exacting standards of science. Others do not. The public has no way to consistently evaluate the survey research results it sees. The public is not protected by peer review and most often is not protected by journalistic fact finding. Savvy consumers of polling results can engage in their own review and synthesis, comparing across publicly-released survey results—but this is too much to be regularly expected. The public can also, with some justification, rely on well-established media outlets who sponsor their own polls to provide high-quality research. Most citizens do not, however, constrain their news consumption to a handful of major newspapers and networks, and even these outlets often publish other survey results in addition to their internal polling.

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.

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

## **Interpreting Poll Results Better**

By Howard Schuman

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

## ***The Biggest Hurdle for the Polls is...***

point because there is no other widely accepted way to represent a large population in systematic terms.

Instead of endangering the viability of the “polling industry,” the issue of validity concerns the use and misuse of survey data in addressing serious scientific and policy questions. Experienced survey professionals know that poll results are shaped by subtle aspects of questioning, by the nature of interviewing, by sample bias as well as sampling error, and by many other factors typically ignored by the public and, more importantly, by those wishing to use survey data to their advantage.

For example, a recent commentary in *Slate* cites data purporting to show that “only 1% of whites would move if blacks became their next-door neighbors,” without any indication of the difficulties of interpreting such an absolute figure. Similarly, “factual data” often vary considerably for methodological rather than substantive reasons, especially (but not only) where inquiries concern illegal behaviors like drug use or require extrapolation from extremely small subsamples as in studies of wealth.

Part of the problem is the proclivity to report percentages

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as though they are absolute when we know that such results are subject to response effects of all kinds. But even where results are reported comparatively, as with trends over time or differences between subgroups, we all need to devote more effort to validation.

Such validation can take several quite different forms. One useful approach is to explore interpretations of questions through open-ended inquiries asking, for example, respondents to explain their answers more fully. Such efforts now go under the rubric of “cognitive interviewing” though they were often practiced by sophisticated pioneers of survey research like Hyman, Lazarsfeld, and Stouffer.

At the same time, survey results should be tested whenever practical against other systematic methods of data gathering, especially including behavior outside the self-reporting context of the survey. Thus, we need to know what actually happens in various situations when “blacks become... next-door neighbors” to whites, drawing as far as possible on guidelines from sampling theory. Still another approach to learning the meaning behind survey data is the split-sample experiment where specific features of questioning or inter-

viewing are varied with all else held relatively constant.

From a larger standpoint, validity sometimes calls for widening the focus of interpretation. Thus, if blacks often do not move into white neighborhoods because they fear rejection by “1%” of the neighbors, our survey questions should ask about it and our discussion of results should take it into account.

The point is not to test whether the original survey data are literally “valid” or “invalid,” for they can almost certainly be valid for some purposes as part of a national trend or in some other comparison. Rather, the aim is to understand as well as possible what we have measured and how it can best be interpreted in the larger world of which surveys are one abstracted part.

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## ***Tempering Our Arrogance***

*By Kathleen A. Frankovic*

Survey research faces many serious problems including declining response rates, maintaining confidentiality, and the confusion of pseudo-polls with legitimate survey research. Our greatest threat, however, is the hardest to fight—it’s our own arrogance! Even when we know our methods cannot produce precision, we allow those who read or use our results to think they do.

Ostensibly, the American public and media dislike polls: response rates are down and many people decry the manipulative possibilities in polls. Yet polls are also beloved: they have become institutionalized as the “best” source of information on public attitudes and opinions.

The 1994 Republican Contract With America was justified by reference to poll data; performance artists Komar and Malamid paint a picture they call “America’s Favorite Painting”; major news media, interest groups, and foundations promote their own polls; and, businesses base their marketing strategies on samples and focus groups.

Of course, the Contract With America research was mainly a test of question wording; “America’s Favorite Painting” tells more about the public’s trust in polls than its taste in art; and, campaign analysts make too much of changes in horserace percentages that are well within the range of sampling error, assuming a far more volatile public than probably exists.

However, what is more risky for survey practitioners are news reports studded with phrases like “polls say,” “polls indicate,” and “polls have shown,” even when those “polls”