

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.

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Note: AAPOR's *Standard Definitions* is online at 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.