

**A CHALLENGE FOR CAMPAIGN '92:
TRAINING REPORTERS AND INFORMING THE PUBLIC**

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Getting meaningful survey reports to a reporter and ultimately to the public is something akin to the childhood game of telephone. You remember how it's played: One child whispers a message to his nearest neighbor, who in turn whispers it to the next child, and so on until the last child repeats the message out loud. The garbled end result is compared to the original, usually to the amusement of all.

That is the paradigm I have in mind for the reporting of survey results to the public. Far too often there is very little resemblance between the researcher's findings and the journalists' and public's understanding. The reports of Ross Perot's popularity with the voting public during May and June are a good case in point. Perot was a creature of voter discontent with the other candidates. It is doubtful that his following was as substantial as news reports would have had you believe. We will come back to this example. I would like to continue with this child's game of telephone as a model for what I believe has been an almost futile attempt by survey researchers to educate the press and they in turn to inform the public. Let me explain.

Survey researchers have tried promoting disclosure of methods, self-help courses for journalists, newsroom guides about surveys for editors and

reporters, discussions with all who will listen about what is wrong with particular surveys or pseudo-survey approaches. There is no end to the number of such efforts. And here I am today. Doing it again. And with you, the converted.

Journalists, on the other hand, hearing today's plaintive wail, may perhaps write a story about it (but more likely not) and then continue doing what they always do. They write stories about surveys by repeating numbers. They don't draw conclusions from the numbers. It is easier for them to just cite the numbers and let the reader draw the conclusion. And they don't try to assess the quality of the survey research unless something is suspicious. It is my experience that reporters of campaign politics will usually take numbers, usually uncritically, and repeat them. They have some regard for disclosures about sample size, source and sponsor of the survey, dates and method of conducting the survey, question wording and sampling error. However, there is very little evidence that the methods disclosed form a basis for inquiry or skepticism about the meaning of the numbers reported. It is as though disclosing methods by the researcher and the media are the equivalent of the Good Housekeeping seal of approval. Somehow, if methods are disclosed by the press the survey is thought to have validity.

Of course, nobody here believes that. It would be our

notion that the journalist, once he or she hears the facts, should evaluate the survey. The journalist, not to be outdone by the researcher, passes these disclosures to the listener of a broadcast or the reader of a newspaper. Now it is up to the public to do the interpreting.

Doesn't it seem as though something is wrong? The researchers and the journalists have all done their jobs of disclosure and still almost no one has made a clear interpretation or evaluation of the research for the public.

Most disclosures are not very useful beyond being an article of good faith between the researcher and the public. Disclosure implies that the researcher has nothing to hide. It argues for the credibility of the researcher. It does little for serious evaluation.

Let me suggest why I think disclosure alone is not adequate to improving the reporting of surveys. First, it requires the journalist or the public to reach a level of expertise that is better left to a researcher. The burden of interpretation might best be carried out by a statistician. Not by a journalist! And not by the public!

There is another equally important reason why disclosure alone is inadequate. The requirements for disclosure, as stated by many professional survey research groups, (other than the ASA), are a minimal list of disclosures at best.

Here is why I have trouble with each of the items usually disclosed: Let's start with the sample design. They usually refer to the sample design by the single word "probability" or some variant such as a "modified probability" selection, whatever

that means. But this is not sufficient information. We don't know if there are biases or gross inefficiencies in the selection.

For example, the typical media election survey of the nation leaves out Alaska and Hawaii, non-telephone households, and most of the population living in quarters other than housing units. Sometimes there is a bias when the weighting does not account for multiple residential telephone numbers reaching a person. And all too frequently there is a bias when the weighting does not reflect the unequal probabilities of selecting a person within a household.

If we had full disclosure we might reveal these details. But knowing these details still won't provide useful information to the public. What we might better know, at a minimum, is the size of the population excluded or misrepresented. Does this add up to 10% of the population, 20%, 30%? And do they vote differently or have different opinions on issues or any other characteristics measured in the survey?

Sample size is my next item. Sample size is only useful if one assumes simple random sampling. It tells us little about the size of the subgroups or the effects of clustering for these subgroups. For example, in an election day poll of voters leaving the polling place, the clustering of sample voters by polling place will produce a much larger sampling error for minorities than for most other subgroups of the same sample size. In a RDD telephone survey, the size of the cluster within a working block can have order of magnitude effects on the

sampling error for minority subgroups.

As for disclosing the name of the organization conducting the survey, it is useful for making judgments about the work of well-known companies, but do you know the names: Political-Media Research, ARG, Potomac Research, Mason-Dixon or KRC? They conduct most of the political surveys you read or hear about in local newspapers and television stations. Do you know anything about the state surveys done by the University of Connecticut or the University of North Carolina? If you did, you would likely have respect for their current work, but one of them, a decade or more ago, did highly questionable work.

The dates when the survey was conducted are not useful, except for the most current polls. What we need to know to make survey dates meaningful is a current events context. If a recent political poll was conducted before or after the Democratic Convention it will have a very different meaning.

But how about a political poll before or after November 4, 1979? Two significant events that changed the course of the upcoming presidential election happened that day. One was the taking of hostages at the American embassy in Iran. The other was the Roger Mudd hour-long documentary on CBS about the life of Ted Kennedy. Both events destroyed Kennedy's challenge to President Carter for the Democratic Presidential nomination. Before November 4th, Kennedy was leading Carter by 2-to-1 in the polls. Their positions were reversed soon afterward.

The same problem exists for studying unemployment surveys without knowing a current events

context for the dates.

Significant economic events like a stock market crash or a change in the income tax laws can influence employment rates. The introduction of a drug or vaccine can influence health surveys. The point of all this is that dates alone, without context, place the burden back on the journalist or the public to find out for themselves whether events could have changed the meaning of survey results.

Disclosure of the question wording has often been suggested. It is generally useful, but it is not practical. Most news stories do not have the space either in print or on a broadcast to include the question wording. Besides, the question wording is often not meaningful unless you know the questions that preceded it. Context effects may be more important. I have an example later on that expands on this point.

Sampling error seems to be the most controversial of all the disclosure items. It is usually misleading and misunderstood. What you usually hear in political polls is a crude approximation of a sampling error for a 50 per cent characteristic based on the whole sample, where the researcher assumed simple random sampling. This is frequently done even when the sample is a non-probability design, which may be a useful approximation, but only to a handful of people.

I would rather have a news story where I know that all comparisons that implied something changed, or that one variable is more or less than another variable had been tested for statistical significance. We

should not leave the reader or listener with the responsibility of conducting their own significance test.

Having said why I think disclosure as we know it is not nearly as useful as it might be, I would like to offer an alternative approach for your consideration. Survey researchers have struggled with this problem over the years. I hope my suggestions are the starting point for further discussion by other survey researchers. My alternative approach has two parts: First, the researcher should try writing his or her own press release. And second, the researcher should do his or her own evaluation of the limitations of the survey.

Writing a press release may be a new burden for some researchers. I know others of you have done it before. It's value is to shift the burden to the researcher for presenting the most reasonable interpretation of the news worthy findings of the survey research.

The researcher's press release should be no longer than two or three pages. It should be aimed at a lay audience. And it should draw whatever conclusions you want the reader to draw from the results. If anyone wants more details there should be a more complete report available.

Notice, I did not include disclosure. I didn't necessarily mean to exclude relevant details. What I want is authoritative interpretation of the relevance of background facts in the researcher's press release. Tell me the affect of the disclosure on an interpretation of the results.

I will even accept from the researcher informed speculation,

if it is properly identified as such. For example: Bill Clinton's lead over George Bush in many polls following the Democratic Convention was over 20 percentage points. I would accept a statement from a researcher which said: "Even though challengers usually lead presidential incumbents between party conventions, my experience suggests that the size of Bill Clinton's lead at this time makes him a better than even money bet to win the election in November."

The researcher's opinion is a legitimate part of the press release. It would not be acceptable for a reporter to offer his or her own opinion as part of the news story, but they can quote the researcher. A recent front page story in the New York Times compared the New York Times/CBS News Poll's 1992 post-convention jump in the public's preference of Bill Clinton for President to that recorded for Dukakis in 1988, Mondale in 1984 and Carter in 1980. The reporter did not offer his opinion or cite an expert's opinion about what the results might portend for November. You, gentle reader, were left to draw your own conclusion.

While that would not have been difficult in this example, I believe the reader will generally be better served in most survey reports with more interpretive assistance. Let's face it. The point of the story was the likely effect in November and not the current level or the change in support.

I believe survey researchers can write good press releases. They can probably do it more readily than a journalist can learn enough statistics to interpret a research report.

That does not mean that the

researcher's press release will be published in the newspaper or broadcast on television. It likely will not. But it will provide the reporter with a much better starting point. It also will force the researcher to separate the newsworthy portion of the research from the scholarly material that is out of place in most news stories. The press is not a substitute for a more complete exposition in a journal or report.

The second change I would like to see calls for a new type of disclosure that would require both professionalism and judgment on the part of survey researchers. Journalists should not have to ask a third party to evaluate our research. Evaluation should be an integral part of the research report.

I am asking the survey researcher to explicitly state the limitations of his or her work. Rather than the familiar disclosure of a few details about the conduct of a survey, the researcher should discuss the qualifications about the conclusions that can and cannot be made from the data. This is the most important point I want to make in my presentation today. If we can start here on the road to interpretation, I believe we can make a real improvement in the reporting of surveys.

I want to continue an example I started earlier: the portion of the potential voting population excluded from election surveys. I suggested that we might get the researcher to tell us the portion of the public excluded from most media telephone surveys. My guess is that it is approximately 13% to 15% of the population.

A researcher might know from previous work the likelihood of

these people going to the polls and casting a vote, and something about their voting behavior. Are they more Democratic or Republican than the voting population included in the survey? A statement that said, hypothetically, that "15% of the population had no chance of selection in the sample, and that they likely would comprise 9% of the voters, and could be expected to increase the margin between the Democratic and Republican candidates by 2 percentage points at most."

I would submit that this is a much more useful statement than the one usually made. All that would typically be said is: "In a national survey..." etc., with no mention of the under-representation of certain groups in the sample.

Or how about saying: "We limited our results to the 55% of the residential population that seemed to be the most likely to vote. We know that all of them will not vote, perhaps 20% will not. And, we know from other research that about 15% of those thought not likely to vote will go to the polls and vote. These two misclassified groups could affect the margin between the candidates by from 3 to 7 percentage points." Now that's disclosure!

Similar statements can be made about the dates of the survey, sponsorship, sampling error, question wording and question order effects.

Let's look at question order effects on the presidential preference numbers reported in the first half of June of this year. Those were the good old days when Ross Perot was leading in the polls, Bush was second and today's front runner, Bill Clinton was third in most but not all polls. As a matter of

fact there was widespread confusion among most journalists and the public about the size of Perot's lead or whether he was leading at all.

Each news organization with its own poll reported its results as though they were gospel. Other journalists, without a poll of their own, reported each new poll as though there was some remarkable shift in public sentiment from day to day. The truth of the matter is that most differences in these polls were probably due to question order effects. Most of the researchers conducting the polls were aware of this problem.

In an op-ed piece on June 27th in The New York Times, my former CBS News colleague, Kathy Frankovic, explained some of these differences. Questions asked prior to the presidential preference question changed the results. CBS and the Times first asked a question about favorable or unfavorable views of all the candidates. Many people did not know enough about Perot to express such a view. As a result, Perot was third in presidential preference in this poll.

Time/CNN first asked: "How well do you think things are going in the country these days...?" Perot got his biggest lead in this poll and Bush was last. Gallup first asked for respondents' preference between Bush and Clinton, and then asked about presidential preference among all three candidates. Perot did better when the questions were asked in this order.

The underlying reason for the conflicting results is because the majority of voters knew very little about Perot and only a little more about Clinton. They

all knew Bush, and he was dropping in almost every measure of his job performance.

Frankovic concludes her analysis with this statement:

Pollsters are not asking the wrong questions, but journalists and politicians are focusing on the wrong answers. This is not the time to concentrate on "Who's ahead?" The apparently conflicting poll results on the horserace masks the non-conflicting results of public dismay and confusion about this year's election. Those are the responses journalists and politicians -- and pollsters -- all need to concentrate on.

A CBS poll, reported on June 22nd, would have been much more useful for journalists and the public if it had included Frankovic's subsequent views expressed in her op-ed piece five days later.

Meaningful disclosure can best come from the people doing the surveys. I hope this point does not get limited in your thinking to political surveys. The rationale applies to all survey research. The researcher is the one to evaluate the limits of the survey results. Not the journalist! Not the public! They are ill equipped to do this. The researcher is not.

I would like to conclude with a few other things that I believe can be done to improve the reporting of surveys.

News organizations can do several things. They can train a reporter, a newspaper editor, or a television producer to

understand the rudiments of survey research, at least enough so that they can ask insightful questions. Hopefully, they will know enough to get guidance from an experienced researcher.

Another thing news organizations can do is develop guidelines or news standards before they publish someone else's survey. CBS News did this many years ago at the urging of its then-president, Richard Salant. The survey reporting standards were published in an internal book of standards governing all news broadcast by CBS News. It required minimum disclosure as part of the on-air report, the use of generally accepted survey methods and broadcast approval by the head of research.

Salant asked for an up-to-date evaluation of the methods used by all survey companies conducting public polls. The guide was strictly for internal use and it characterized surveys as acceptable, questionable, or not acceptable for broadcast by CBS News. If a survey organization's work was of questionable quality it was subject to case-by-case review. This approach kept a lot of bad work off the air. I recommend it to other news organizations.

This next suggestion is something that professional associations like ASA, AAPOR, NCPP and others can do. They can create advisory groups that will give *ad hoc* assistance to journalists when they have questions about surveys. What journalists want is someone they trust to answer their questions about surveys. There is no reason, other than concern for lawsuits, why such groups couldn't be set up and made known to journalists.

The advisory group must be

prepared to give evaluative answers to direct questions and on short notice. This does not mean that the group must do the journalists' work if additional information is required. The journalist can and should be told what he or she must acquire in the way of information to facilitate an evaluation. It is not necessary that an advisor be identified in print or on the air. The comments of an advisor can be for background purposes only and not for attribution. You should know, however, that most journalists would prefer your assistance on background to no assistance. But they also would prefer attribution to no attribution.

The rest of what I have to say deals with some notions that I hope will make it easier for survey researchers when they advise journalists about other researchers' work.

First, it is more important for an advisor to clarify what can be said based on a survey, rather than doting on what cannot be said. News stories are not written about why a survey's findings should be rejected. Anything negative that comes out of an evaluation is only useful in defining the limits of what can be said positively.

Next, generalizations about the survey process are not nearly as useful as specifics. The researcher's evaluation is not a tutorial on survey methods. It is a pointed appraisal of specific findings.

I cannot end without a word about jargon. I once was verbally assaulted by a somewhat eminent statistician for using the term "margin of error." To satisfy this man, I should have said "two times the sampling error" or maybe he would have preferred "two sigma." It

doesn't matter! I submit that the man was wedded to jargon. Words that do not have a common meaning for many journalists and the public. If there is a simple way to say something, try it, even if it is not exactly the correct phrase among statisticians.

A "mean" can be an "average." A "median" can be the "halfway point," or some other notion of the midpoint. How about "related" instead of "correlated"? Or, something is "very likely" instead of "statistically significant." Or, "not different" rather than "the difference is not significant." Statistics has a language of its own, but journalists and the public do not speak it. It should be easier for statisticians to say it more simply than it is.

These next two points are obvious, but I want to say them anyway. Criteria for evaluation should not be absolute. If they were, we would have a good case for enforcing performance standards. The evaluation depends on the purpose of the survey. For example, I do not employ the same statistical criteria on election night to conclude a candidate has won an election as I do for reporting an estimate of his or her winning percentage.

For announcing a winner, I want a maximum risk of 1 chance in 200. For announcing the percentage, I will accept a risk of 1 in 10 that the estimate is within 3 percentage points. These are not comparable risks.

Similarly, a survey report that simply states the share of the public that supports an issue does not require the same precision as determining if public opinion has changed on a key variable. A survey may be

adequate for one purpose but not another. Survey evaluation should fit the complexity of the problem.

My last point is to ask you to assess the audience for all this survey enlightenment. Some people can take more enlightenment than others. Others need more but can't take it.

CONCLUSION At the start I said the child's game of telephone was the model of the past, that is, the way we have been dealing with journalists and they in turn with the public. I hope the discussion today will help ungarble the end result of our research. I believe we can do this if we begin by shifting our emphasis away from disclosure, as we have practiced it.

Second, that we write our own version of a news story.

And third, and most importantly, that we tell the journalists the scope and the limitations of our research.

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