

## DISCUSSION

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KEY WORDS: media polls, education

These two papers present interesting, often complementary views about the problems and potential for creating a fully informed citizenry that is able to interpret and evaluate survey research based information in the news. I would like to comment upon some points raised in each of these papers and then extend more broadly some of the proposals they make.

There is a temptation to contrast these presentations by noting that Hess and Tanur address the central question from the perspective of practicing, full time survey methodologists who do not have direct experience in making the news, while Mitofsky's approach is as much that of a news maker as a methodologist. But that would result in ignoring the several views they share in common and result in an oversimplification of their differences. There is a set of ideas presented here that should be combined, discussed, and supplemented; and there is the potential for a multi-pronged program with distinct and different goals that should be developed and sustained over an extended period of time.

The soundness of the arguments about the need for full disclosure of methodological details in the Hess and Tanur paper is irrefutable in principle, but it is virtually impossible to achieve in the real world of news writing and production. In the framework of discussing the "making of the news," the space or time will just never be available for what they want done. However, it may be time to extend the disclosure principles by formulating new standards and then indicating simply that additional information is available for those who are interested. News organizations and others who produce survey results would have to agree to making additional information available, but the details would not all be presented in the news story. In other words, very little additional time or space would be taken up by informing a knowledgeable audience member that additional details are available, but organizations would be on call to provide them if asked. The major news organizations could take a lead in this area, as they have in archiving computer-readable versions of their raw data for secondary analysis. If such a principle were adopted, an additional statement could be added to the standard methods "box" used

for disclosure indicating "Full details of the survey methodology are available upon request."

Mitofsky essentially discounts the prospects for additional disclosures because they would not be utilized in constructing news stories due to time and space constraints. I agree that in the short term they would not be used. But if we could move to the point where such information could be made available routinely, if later, then over time the methodological credibility of various data collection agencies or organizations could be called into question. This may reflect my bias as an academic, but in the long run public vetting and peer review will serve us well in improving data quality. A chapter on Louis Harris in a recent book by David Moore, entitled *The Superpollsters*, is a good example of how this might be done.

Asking researchers to practice writing press releases is not a reasonable goal, based upon my observations of my colleagues. They don't necessarily have a well developed sense of what is newsworthy, and they aren't trained to write in the style of press releases. But many universities have substantial public information operations staffed by people who routinely produce press releases. And academics could be asked to sit down with them to evaluate press releases that are created about their research. I think this would satisfy the ends that Warren has in mind but is more likely to result in a usable product.

Establishing groups of individuals who would be on call to talk to reporters is probably one of the best ways to help reporters in the short term. My experiences in AAPOR suggest there are many who would volunteer for such service. And these consultants/advisers would do a better job for reporters than their current reliance on such sources as a candidate or a pollster from the opposing campaign, or an advocate from a special interest group on the other side of an issue - although such individuals have an important role to play in ensuring a balanced presentation of information in the news.

Training journalists how to conduct, interpret, and evaluate survey research is a long term investment, both in terms of their formal education as undergraduates and graduate students, as well as an important function for their continuing

education. We have tried various continuing education formats at The University of Michigan, and we are in the early stages of trying to develop a regular graduate course on reporting social science.

The public has got to be trained in the same way, starting at an early age. This can be done through the social studies curriculum as well as the more traditional math and science curriculum. While I am not familiar with the ASA programs cited in the Hess and Tanur paper, I know there is a substantial push being made in the federal government through America 2000 to improve the scientific and mathematical literacy of the American public, beginning with K-12 education. Nowhere in the materials that I have seen is there any discussion of either the quantitative social sciences, as opposed to the physical sciences, nor of statistics as opposed to mathematics. This is an important series of initiatives in the sense that they are being used to organize federal funding across agencies in the next decade, and survey research and public opinion studies should be an important part of this effort. This is obviously a long run concern that needs to be initiated and then sustained.

In this regard and as an illustration of the potential, I was contacted in the spring by a PBS children's television show called Newton's Apple. They are producing a segment for this fall on survey research for elementary and junior high school kids. I have seen a preliminary script for a segment that they will do on election polling around a contest between Isaac Newton and Albert Einstein. It will touch briefly on issues of probability sampling and questions of bias in selection and question wording. This project suggests to me that there is an interest and a great deal of potential for introducing survey-based content into the K-12 curriculum.

These examples suggest the range of programs and the amount of effort that will be required to create an audience of knowledgeable consumers of survey research data. It will be a difficult task, but it is obviously an important one. And the ASA, as well as other professional associations, can play an important role in these developments. One significant way to evaluate and monitor such efforts would be the establishment of a periodic survey of public knowledge about survey research and how it changes over time in response to educational efforts and improved reporting in the media.

## REFERENCES

Moore, David W. 1992. **The Superpollsters: How They Measure and Manipulate Opinion in America.** New York: Four Walls Eight Windows.