

A Look at Some Preliminary Results of Evaluating the Census 2000 Integrated Marketing Strategy

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INTRODUCTION¹

The Census Bureau's goals for its Census 2000 marketing strategy were to increase mail return rates, improve cooperation with nonresponse followup, and reverse a long term decline in response rates since 1970 (Miskura, 1992). To evaluate the effectiveness of the integrated marketing strategy, the Census Bureau contracted with the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) to conduct surveys before, during, and after the marketing campaign. This paper reports some preliminary results of the evaluation, and also draws on results from a series of fast reactive surveys conducted to provide immediate feedback on public awareness and attitudes during the census (Nie and Junn, 2000).

BACKGROUND

The Census 2000 Partnership and Marketing Program (PMP) combined promotion and outreach activities to generate clear, consistent, and repeated messages about the importance of participating in Census 2000. The program included five components: paid advertising, partnerships, media relations, promotions and special events, and direct mail pieces.

Paid Advertising: For the first time ever in a decennial census, the Census Bureau contracted for a paid advertising campaign to implement the Census 2000 integrated marketing strategy. Young and Rubicam, Inc. (Y&R) and its partner agencies received \$167 million to develop and deliver a multi-tiered media approach for the general public and for populations historically undercounted. They designed advertising messages to educate and motivate the public to participate in Census 2000, and strategically placed the messages on television, radio, newspaper and magazine print ads, and billboards.

Research conducted by Roper (1999) and Y&R indicated that the campaign needed to dispel beliefs that the census is big government and instill beliefs of personal and community benefits. Therefore, advertising stressed the benefits of the census to communities for education, transportation, and other programs. Advertising was intended to convey a clear and consistent message - complete and return the census form.

Partnerships: The Census Bureau partnered with approximately 140,000 private industry, government and non-government organizations to encourage census participation. The Census Bureau sought organizations

with access and credibility in historically undercounted populations to form Complete Count Committees, publish articles about the census in organizational newsletters and other publications, develop product tie-ins using Census 2000 logos and slogans, distribute and display promotional materials, and enclose promotional messages with bills and employee paychecks.

Promotions and Special Events: The Census Bureau sponsored the Census in Schools project for teachers and students, the "How American Knows What America Needs" project for local elected leaders and their communities, and the Census Road Tour, which set up exhibits in malls and other places across the country.

Direct Mail Pieces: The Census Bureau mailed an advance letter, questionnaire, and reminder postcard directly to U. S. households to inform them of the upcoming census and encourage their response (Dillman, 1978). The direct mailings incorporated icons illustrating census benefits, and contained several key messages: expect a form in the mail (in the advance letter), the law mandates response (on the envelope and in the cover letter of the mailing package), and the law mandates that the Census Bureau keep census data confidential (in the cover letter).

Media Relations: The Census Bureau complemented the paid advertising and partnership activities by ensuring that positive and educational stories about the census received coverage through electronic and print media.

METHODS

We draw upon two sources of information about public response to the Census 2000 PMP: the Census Bureau's formal evaluation of the program, and a series of private surveys which addressed census topics.

The Evaluation of the PMP. The Census Bureau sponsored and NORC conducted three cross-sectional surveys from nationally representative samples which oversampled areas with high concentrations of African-American and Hispanic households.² NORC used three sampling frames: an area probability sample, a random-digit dialed (RDD) list-assisted sample, and a sample from the Decennial Master Address File (see Calder, et al., 2001).

¹This paper reports the results of research and analysis undertaken by Census Bureau staff. It has undergone a Census Bureau review more limited in scope than that given to official Census Bureau publications. This report is released to inform interested parties of ongoing research and to encourage discussion of work in progress. We thank Nancy Bates and Darlene Billia for helpful comments.

²Supplemental samples of Asians, Pacific Islanders, and American Indians were also interviewed. Only results from the core sample are presented here.

Interviews were conducted using computer-assisted telephone interviewing with personal visit followup for non-telephone households, telephone refusals, and (in the baseline survey) the area probability component of the sample. In each survey, the intended respondent was the person in the household who opens the mail or who was most likely to open and answer the census form. Results reported here are weighted to reflect sampling probabilities and adjust for nonresponse, and are controlled to 1990 census counts of households by race and ethnicity.

Data from the first NORC survey, conducted in Fall 1999, establishes a baseline for census awareness, knowledge, and attitudes before promotional activities began. The second survey provides measurements after the advertising campaign began but just before census forms were mailed on March 13-15. The third survey provides post-census measurements. Table 1 shows the outcomes from the three surveys.

The Census Bureau sponsored similar evaluations in earlier censuses and the 1998 Dress Rehearsal, and NORC's evaluation is built in part on these prior studies, using similar research designs and questionnaires. See Moore (1982), Fay, Bates, and Moore (1991), Bates and Buckley (2000), and Roper Starch Worldwide (1999).

Knowledge Networks Tracking Surveys: The Census Bureau participated as a partner in the Knowledge Networks³ project to gain experience with Web surveys and obtain immediate feedback on whether the Census Bureau's promotion strategy was reaching the intended audiences. Knowledge Networks (KN) conducted a series of 5 cross-sectional surveys under the sponsorship of several private foundations⁴ between March 3 and April 13, 2000. Households were recruited into the panel using a RDD sample. KN provided free hardware and Internet access to households agreeing to participate (about 57% did so), allowing the survey to be administered using a Web browser and to include multimedia content. The sample excludes non-telephone households, and areas without access to Web TV service. KN collected baseline data on non-census topics in late February, then assigned each household to one of five tracking surveys conducted at different stages of the census process. The response rate for the baseline survey was 81%, and 58 to 83% for the tracking surveys. (See Table 1.) Respondent characteristics correspond fairly closely to population data from the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey, except that the tracking surveys slightly over represent whites and under represent individuals with less than a high school education (InterSurvey, 2000). The surveys were self-administered using web TV. The same core instrument was

used in each tracking survey. Results are weighted to reflect sampling probabilities and adjust for nonresponse.

Thus, the NORC surveys anchor the before-after endpoints of our data series, while the tracking surveys allow us to examine changes in public awareness and attitudes at specific points in time during the course of the census. We are interested in learning whether the two surveys provide consistent results and lead to similar conclusions about trends. We hope that, by using two imperfect but independent sources of information, we can reach more robust conclusions than we could reach using either source alone.

Table 1. Survey Outcomes

Survey	Field Date	Completed Interviews	Response Rate
NORC:			
Baseline	9/1-11/1/99	1536	34%
Pre-census	1/17-mid-March 2000	1227	54%
Post-census	4/17-5/17/00	1989	59%
Knowledge Networks:			
Baseline	2/25-3/8	7334	81%
KN 1	3/3-9	993	83%
KN 2	3/10-16	973	82%
KN 3	3/23-31	719	61%
KN 4	4/1-7	1004	58%
KN 5	4/7-13	948	64%

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations may affect our use of these data to assess trends in awareness, knowledge, and attitudes over the course of the census. First, sample differences may affect results: the NORC surveys include non-telephone households, while the KN surveys exclude them and under represent households with unlisted numbers. Second, as shown in Table 1 both surveys have relatively high nonresponse rates (the cumulative KN response rate is about 30%) and there is evidence that nonresponse affects their interviewed sample compositions. Both surveys appear to over represent voters, compared to more representative samples. Because voting is highly correlated with census participation, both surveys probably also over represent people who pay attention to and participate in the census. Thus, our results probably overstate levels of awareness. However, we believe that, for each survey, measures of trends over time should be

³Its name at the time the surveys were conducted was InterSurvey

⁴Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Annie E. Casey Foundation, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Ford Foundation, Russell Sage Foundation, and Carnegie Corporation of New York.

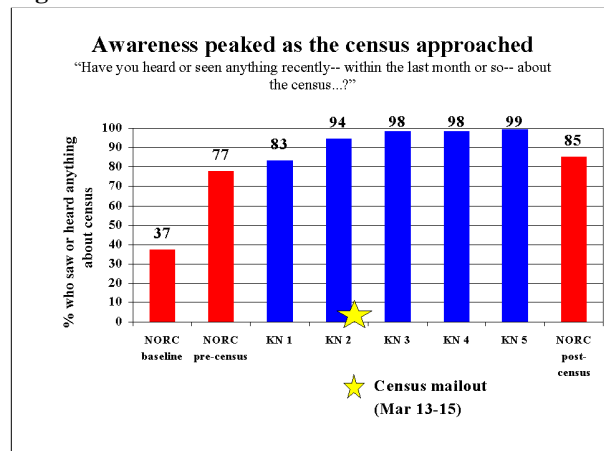
valid. Third, both surveys employ very different modes and methods of administration, which may affect their results. (Nonresponse bias may affect the two surveys differently, because different sorts of people may be comfortable and willing to participate in surveys conducted over Web TV than surveys conducted over the telephone and in person.) Fourth, in both surveys errors of recall and confusion about sources of exposure may affect respondents' reports of their exposure to information about the census. Fifth, comparable questions and response categories were used in both surveys, but the KN and NORC questionnaires differ, possibly resulting in context differences.

RESULTS

We first discuss sources and trends in census awareness. Second, we provide some preliminary evidence on the content and consequences of exposure to census information.

Sources and Trends in Census Awareness

Figure 1



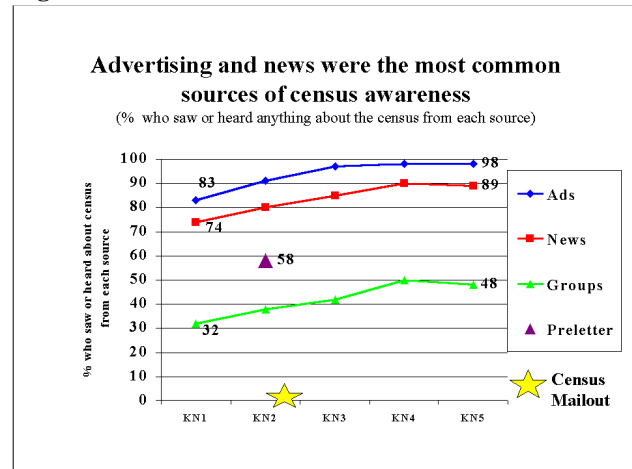
The fraction of the public who had heard or seen something recently about the census grew dramatically from 37% in fall of 1999 to 77% in Feb.-March 2000, according to the first two NORC surveys (see Fig. 1). Thus, at about the time the main census advertising campaign began, a large majority had already heard or seen something about the census.

This fraction grew during March, and by Census Day nearly everyone (98%) reported awareness of the census, according to the surveys. (Note that these levels are probably biased upwards, because of sample and nonresponse biases discussed earlier.) The NORC post-census survey shows a somewhat lower level of awareness (85%) which probably reflects the later timing of the survey (April 17-May 17), when the main advertising campaign began to wind down. (It may also reflect differences in composition of the interviewed sample noted above, rather than a decline in awareness.)

Fig. 2 shows that, of the four major sources of census awareness, exposure was most extensive through

advertising, with news a close second, the census advance letter third, and community-based activities fourth.⁵

Figure 2



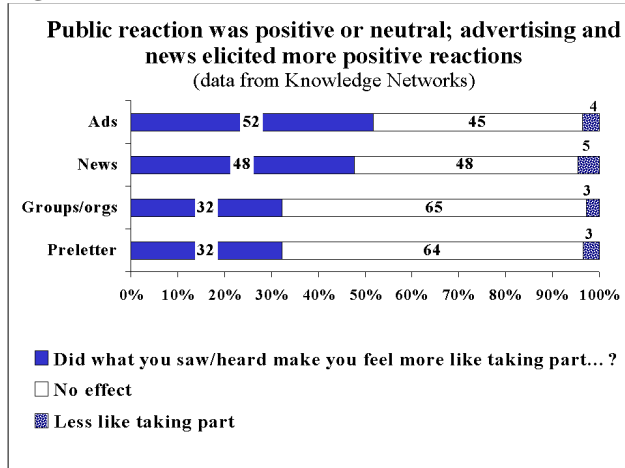
Exposure increased through March, and by early April, 98% of KN respondents reported exposure to census advertising, 90% to news about the census, and about half saw or heard about the census through community activities, schools, churches, or speeches. The advance letter was mailed out March 6-8, and 58% of KN respondents reported they received and read it. By early April, the vast majority of KN respondents (88%) reported exposure to two or more sources, with only 4% exposed to no source of information about the census. Although advertising was the dominant source, all sources contributed to increased awareness (results not shown).

Reaction to all four major sources was positive or neutral, with few negative reactions (Fig. 3). About half of KN respondents said that what they saw or heard on advertising or news made them feel more like taking part in the census, with fewer positive reactions to either the advance letter or community activities. Interestingly, reactions to news were almost as positive as reactions to advertising, even though the news included some stories that might not reflect positively on the Census Bureau.⁶ (Fig. 3 combines results for the 5 tracking surveys.)

⁵ The proportion exposed through a particular source is defined as follows: (1) Advertising includes TV commercials or public service announcements, radio and newspaper advertisements, (2) News includes radio news stories or interviews, television news stories or interviews, and newspaper stories or editorials, (3) Community activities include meetings of a religious group or at a place of worship, activities of a community or government organization, things children brought home from school, school-related activities in support of the census, a speech made by a government official or community leader.

⁶ Other analyses (Martin, 2000) show that privacy concerns increased during Census 2000, especially among people exposed to news about the long form controversy.

Figure 3

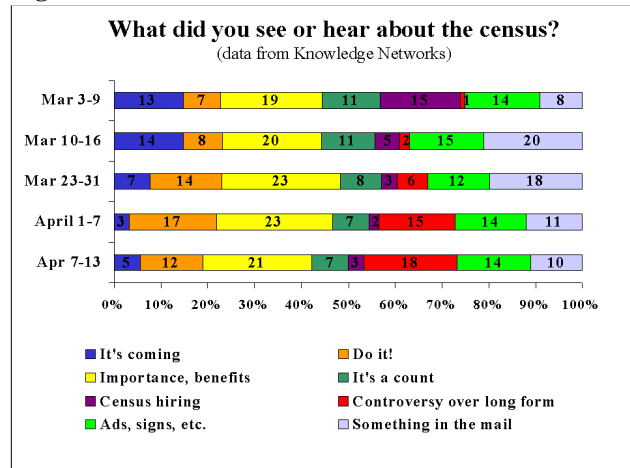


Content and Consequences of Exposure to Information about the Census

Results presented in the previous section indicate that the partnership and marketing program and other publicity and news created broad public awareness of the census, with generally positive reactions to the information. What did the public learn about the census, and did exposure to advertising and other sources of information result in changes in public attitudes or motivation to participate in the census?

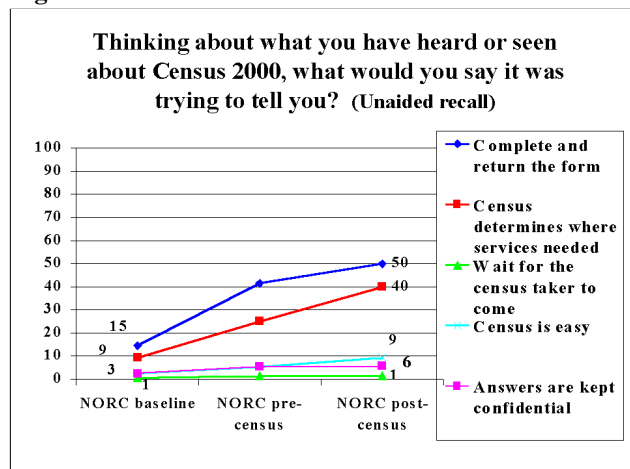
What the public saw and heard changed as the census progressed. We coded responses to an open-ended question, "What did you see or hear about the census?" asked in each KN survey. As seen in Fig. 4, in early March respondents heard that the census was coming (13%) and hiring workers (15%); these mentions declined as the census got underway. Throughout the census, about 20% mentioned the main advertising theme of the benefits of the census, and another 15% or so mentioned seeing ads or signs about the census. After mid-March, about 20% of respondents mentioned receiving their census forms in the mail. After the census forms arrived, the controversy over the long form became increasingly salient, with 18% mentioning it by early April.

Figure 4



The NORC surveys asked an open-ended question focused more specifically on what respondents thought the partnership and marketing program was trying to tell them. As shown in Fig. 5, the dominant message the public received was to complete and return the form, mentioned by over 50% of respondents in the post-census survey. Nearly as dominant was the message that the census is used to determine where programs and services, such as education, job training, and health care, are needed. Other messages--that the census is easy and confidential, or that people should wait for the census taker--registered with relatively few people, and did not increase over time. (The latter notion is a misunderstanding the Census Bureau wanted to dispel.)

Figure 5

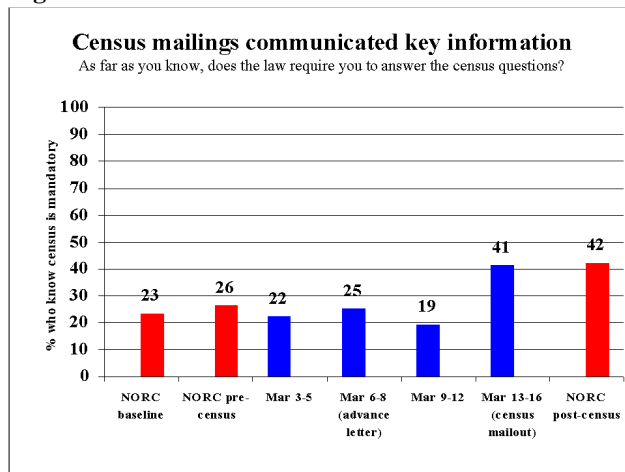


Direct mailings were an important source of information about the census. After receiving the advance letter, people had a better idea of how the census would be

conducted. In early March, about half of respondents were expecting a form in the mail. This fraction increased to 69% after the advance letter was delivered and 84% by the time the census form arrived. This expectation is useful to create, since people who expect a form in the mail are more likely to complete and return it (Bates and Buckley, 2000).

The Census Bureau deliberately did not advertise the legal requirement to participate in the census, and prior to receiving their census forms in the mail only 20-25% of respondents in either survey realized their response was mandatory (see Fig. 6). After the forms were delivered and people noticed the bold message on the envelope (“U.S. Census Form Enclosed YOUR RESPONSE IS REQUIRED BY LAW”), this fraction jumped to about 40%. This figure is low, suggesting that only a minority ever understood the census is mandatory. (In 1990 when there was no bold message on the envelope, there was an almost identical increase, from 25 to 46%, in awareness of the legal requirement (Martin, 2000; Fay, Bates, and Moore, 1991).

Figure 6



In contrast to increases in knowledge and information about the census, several measures of attitudes about the census remained relatively constant before, during, and after the marketing campaign and the census itself. For example, Fig. 7 shows that 73% of NORC respondents agreed in Fall 1999 that “filling out the census will let the government know what my community needs.” Thus, the overwhelming majority started off with positive attitudes, which may have become slightly more prevalent over the course of the census (as suggested by the NORC surveys) or may have remained constant (as suggested by the KN surveys).

Figure 7

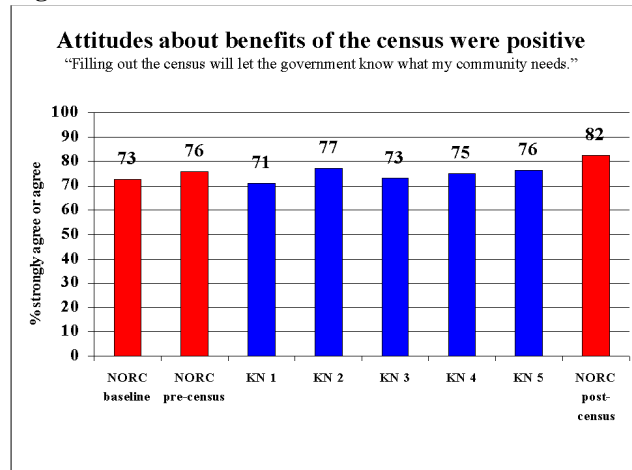
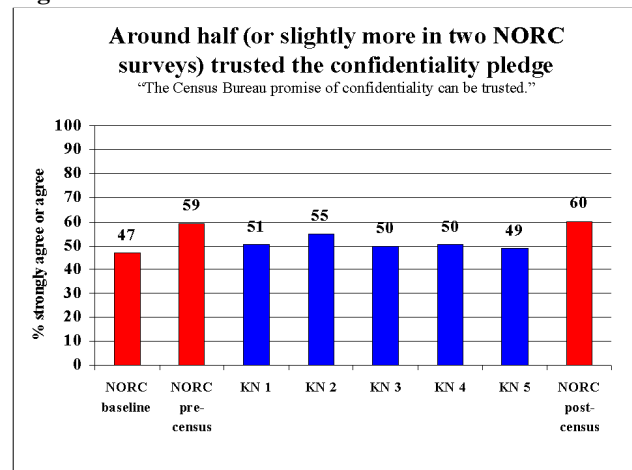


Fig. 8 does not show a strong trend in trust in the Census Bureau’s confidentiality pledge. The increase in trust from 47% in the NORC baseline to 59% in the pre-census survey is statistically significant. However, there are no significant differences among the tracking surveys, or from the precensus to the postcensus NORC survey. Between half and 60% express trust in the Census Bureau’s pledge. Thus, neither the advertising campaign nor the census mailing package resulted in any overall increase in public confidence in data confidentiality. (Of course, it is possible they prevented any deterioration in already high levels of confidence.) More detailed examination of trends within subgroups is needed to evaluate whether the

Figure 8

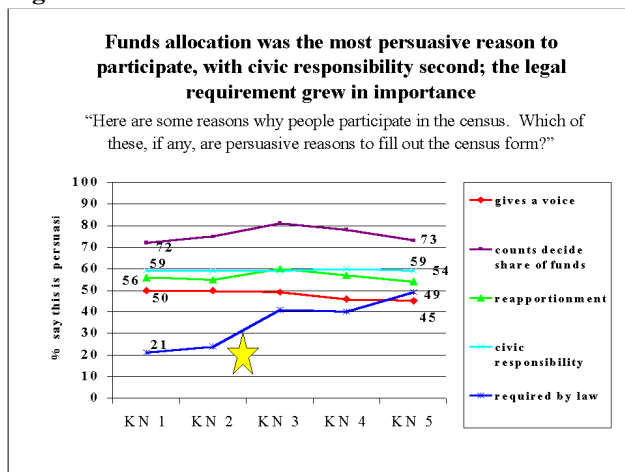


targeted advertising may have communicated this message to groups for which it was an important part of the ad campaign.

Finally, respondents were asked, “Here are some reasons why people participate in the census. Which of these, if any, are persuasive reasons to fill out a census

form?” The reason which dominates all others is that “Census counts decide a community’s share of \$180 billion in federal funds for schools and other programs,” which about three-quarters of respondents found persuasive throughout the period of the census. The second most persuasive reason was, “It is our civic responsibility to fill out the census,” closely followed by reapportionment (“The census determines the number of representatives in Congress each state gets.”) About half of respondents thought that “The census is a way to give every individual and community a voice” was persuasive. The legal requirement (“The law requires everyone to participate in the census”) was initially regarded as persuasive by only 21%, but this increased dramatically to 49%, no doubt as more people realized the law did in fact require them to participate. The legal requirement is the only reason that became more persuasive over the course of the census.

Figure 9



CONCLUSIONS

Preliminary results from these entirely independent sources suggest that the Census 2000 integrated marketing strategy:

- increased public knowledge and awareness of the census,
- communicated the key message of community benefits and
- resulted in most people hearing or seeing something about Census 2000 from multiple sources, including TV, radio, organizational activities, news, and print.

Furthermore, the data provide evidence that the direct mail pieces communicated that census participation is required by law and that a census form is coming, a correlate to actual participation (Bates and Buckley, 2000). There is no evidence that direct mail increased public confidence in confidentiality.

Our preliminary examination suggests that attitudes about benefits of the census were already positive and remained so. However, before drawing conclusions about trends in attitudes, we must examine a wider number of

attitude measures and changes within subgroups during Census 2000. It is noteworthy that the evaluation of the 1990 census promotional effort also found increased awareness, but few changes in attitudes in response to publicity and outreach (Fay, Bates, and Moore, 1991).

We caution that nonresponse bias affects both sources of data in ways that almost certainly overstate levels of public awareness, although we believe the data accurately reflect trends over the course of the census. Despite the differences in the methods used by NORC and Knowledge Networks and the fact that the NORC data and results are preliminary, the data are largely consistent.

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