

Protecting the Integrity of Survey Research

Presentation by Gary Langer
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Good afternoon. While my topic is protecting the integrity of survey research, I want to talk first about a little of my professional background because it informs how I came to the mission in which I want to enlist you.

I've been a survey research practitioner for nearly four decades and a news reporter before then.

I produced polling first at The Associated Press, then for 20 years at the ABC News Television Network, and since then at the custom survey research firm I founded in 2010.

As a newsman covering the beat of public opinion, I learned pretty quickly that survey research is not only powerful but indeed is uniquely essential to the functioning of society.

Yet – at the same time – I found that surveys can be highly problematic. Many crossed my desk that were manufactured, not to inform but to manipulate our judgment and policies alike, to promote commercial products, or just to make a fast buck.

I recognized three ways surveys go off the rails:

- Problematic methodology, including approaches that do not support valid and reliable inference;
- Biased questionnaire design – whether intentionally, through malice; or unintentionally, through incompetence; and
- Cherry-picked analysis, where predetermined conclusions drive the data, rather than the data driving the analytical outcomes.

Frankly I was and remain offended by these practices. To a newsman, misrepresentation is a cardinal sin. So I made a commitment to get in front of it. And I recognized that the antidote can be expressed in a single word: Transparency.

If you want to make research claims:

- Disclose your methods
- Release your questionnaire
- Share your data

I instituted poll reporting standards at ABC News nearly 30 years ago that remain in place today.

Twenty years ago I took the position of disclosure chair at the National Council on Public Polls and led a rewrite of its Principles of Disclosure.

Subsequently I joined successive quadrennial code review committees at the American Association for Public Opinion Research and advocated for its expanded Standards for Disclosure.

Next I took on the position of transparency chair at the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research at Cornell University and reconstituted its acquisitions and disclosure policy.

And most recently I came to be invited to join a group that produced a paper that I want to talk about today.

What it is

The paper is called “Protecting the Integrity of Survey Research,” published last March in PNAS Nexus, the second journal of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences.

It’s the outcome of discussions among a group of senior people who produce and analyze surveys in the United States. Folks from academic, nonprofit and commercial perspectives alike.

The group was convened under the auspices of the National Academy by Kathleen Hall Jamieson, director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania, and Skip Lupia, professor at the University of Michigan and former assistant director of the National Science Foundation. They were lead authors of the report.

I do want to mention and recognize the additional the members of this group:

- Marcia McNutt, president of the National Academy of Sciences.
- Ken Prewitt, former director of the U.S. Census Bureau and professor at Columbia University.
- David Wilson, dean of the School of Public Policy at the University of California.
- Professors Henry Brady, also of Cal; Lynn Vavrek of UCLA; Joshua Clinton of Vanderbilt; Sunshine Hillygus of Duke; Tasha Philpot of Texas; Doug Rivers of Stanford and John Lapinski of Penn.
- René Bautista, who runs the General Social Survey at the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, and David Dutwin, chief methodologist at NORC.
- From the nonprofit world, Courtney Kennedy of the Pew Research Center; her colleague Ashley Amaya; and Danny Goroff of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation.
- And representing commercial practitioners, Jill Dever of RTI, Michael Link of Ipsos Public Affairs and me.

What’s the need?

I think it’s clear to all of us that the survey research enterprise has not gotten especially good press lately. This chiefly reflects controversies over inaccurate estimates of vote preferences in some pre-election polls.

The reality is that pre-election vote-prediction polls represent a very narrow slice of what surveys set out to do. They are the proverbial flea on the elephant. Controversies over those polls need to

be clearly addressed, but also to be put in context, because they put at risk the broader, essential enterprise of trying to measure what people think and do.

Indeed, if you follow the media you'd think that surveys were simply all about predicting elections. Hardly.

In the U.S, the unemployment rate comes from a survey. The inflation rate is known from a survey. Rates of teen drug abuse are measured in surveys. Adults' health practices and risk behaviors are measured in surveys. We've learned invaluable public health information about the COVID-19 pandemic through surveys.

Public preferences on policy issues deserve a place at the policymaking table – and they're known from surveys. Even in pre-election polling the fundamental goal is to understand elections, not merely to predict their outcome.

And while our group focuses on public policy, the biggest slice of surveys measure product preferences, marketing strategies and consumer experiences. Also highly useful to businesses and consumers alike.

So across countless domains, a vast amount of the information we have about our society, our communities, how we think, how we live – comes from surveys. These data drive policy decisions and influence billions of dollars in spending by governments, foundations, universities and businesses alike. Without it we'd all be driving blindfolded.

One thing we need to do – as an industry – is to open people's eyes to the vitally important work that the survey enterprise produces. It's more than just in our interest – it's in the public interest – for people whose lives are informed by surveys – which is all of us – to recognize their value. That's one message I'd ask you to reflect on and carry forward.

But while we want to send that message, the main focus of our paper is to encourage survey producers and analysts themselves to step up to the plate by adopting measures that will enhance the credibility and understanding of their work.

The plan

We identify three areas: Transparency, clarity and correcting the record. Each is a cornerstone of scientific inquiry.

Herding survey researchers is like herding cats. There's a wide range of views on various practices, from collecting data to processing it to analyzing it. But we come together on these points:

- We need to be transparent in describing our work, so our colleagues in the research community can independently assess our methods and our research claims.
- We need to be clear and precise in describing our work, including its limitations.

- And we need to be willing to issue clarifications and corrections as needed and openly engage in discussions about the research we produce.

How this needs to work is straightforward.

People who produce and who disseminate surveys need to be clear about where these numbers and percentage signs come from.

How were the data obtained?

If from interviews, how were the participants selected, what were they asked, when and how?

How were the data processed and analyzed?

We encourage transparency every step of the way, down to disclosure of the raw datasets on which research claims are based.

And those claims need to be clearly and accurately presented and clarified or corrected as needed.

Beyond our own actions, we want to encourage academic journals, news organizations and research sponsors to recognize and participate in these standards.

Quite a few of our recommendations build on excellent, existing resources. These include the AAPOR Code of Professional Ethics and Practices, AAPOR's Transparency Initiative, and the Roper Center transparency guidelines. But what's really needed is a change in the cultural norms of our community – to a place where transparency is not the exception, but the expectation.

Paths forward

Tim Johnson blazed this trail at AAPOR but there's much more to be done. I'm asking you to join this transparency movement and to encourage others to do so. Because at the end of the day, the survey research community itself is responsible for the quality of our work and the way in which it's presented to and received by the public.

WAPOR has not been a leader in these efforts, and it's time to address that. Disclosure of datasets, for example, is a topic on which the WAPOR Code is silent. Yet datasets are necessary for replication, and replication is necessary for validation. The Code should be updated.

And there's IJPOR. While other respected journals have put strict disclosure requirements in place, WAPOR's International Journal of Public Opinion makes only toothless recommendations. Look instead, for example, at the disclosure requirements at PS, the flagship journal of the American Political Science Association. Authors are required to post survey instruments, interview guides, codebooks, datasets and syntax on the Dataverse cloud. Not encouraged. Required.

Beyond catching up, WAPOR could step into a leadership role. Imagine that for every paper based on data that's being presented at this conference, the authors had been urged to share that data and all related materials in an online conference archive. Maybe next year, in Seoul.

Ideas are welcome. Action is necessary. We need to get there. By dedicating ourselves to transparency, clarity and correcting the record; by showing our work and being responsive to informed critiques; by increasing awareness of the important insights surveys provide across so many domains, we together can strengthen the integrity of the survey research enterprise and take important steps toward restoring the trust it deserves.

Thank you very much.