those in power to publish phoney polls and suppress more accurate ones. Fortunately the international media, particularly the American media, can have considerable influence. Most governments and politicians care how the international media portray them. They want to be seen as democrats, not as corrupt officials clinging to power by manipulation and fraud. Local leaders and the media will repeat reports from leading US newspapers. Worth noting, it was a British, not a French, paper that exposed the manipulation of the polls in France.

Humphrey Taylor is chairman and CEO, Louis Harris and Associates, Inc.

Achieving Quality Control in a New Pollsetting

By Lance Tarrance

Since the scientific measurement of public opinion gained general acceptance over 30 years ago and the industry grew into one of the more important parts of the US political economy, there have been many challenges to the industry. One that bears watching is how the industry has evolved into a "manufacturer-supplier" organizational structure, thus significantly departing from the first generation of private survey research companies. The term "full service research firm" needs redefinition and perhaps reexamination particularly from a quality-control standpoint.

Today we are seeing a new generation of pollster-strategists who not only ignore membership in the older, more traditional professional associations like AAPOR, but also use a network of "suppliers" for their sample construction, their field interviewing, and even their computer coding and processing. This departs from the first generation of survey research companies that believed in an integrated "in-house" organizational structure to control non-sampling errors and supervise quality control (although most large firms decentralized their phone banks more than a decade ago). In a word, the industry has moved from one that was largely "vertical" in operational theory to one today that is more "horizontal" or even "spoke-wheel" in management style. For example, a typical new generation research company has a small staff (five or less) but works with a client in Chicago, has a sample designed by a company in Connecticut, has the study fielded and collected by a firm in California, and has the data processed by still another company in Atlanta.

This new generation of researcher-strategists "farm out" to selected suppliers for a variety of sound economic and business reasons, but it is nonetheless a concern for the industry. In the past, most professional survey firms never used "outside" suppliers unless over-booked and time-constrained. This management notion to avoid subcontractors was well ingrained because it raised costs, delimited quality control, and unleashed security problems. Today, things have certainly changed as low-overhead polling firms, usually "spin-offs" from larger companies, have emerged almost overnight to perform data analysis for clients from a network of trusted suppliers who may be located almost anywhere but at the company's place of business.

> ***"'Farming out' research components to diverse suppliers needs evaluation by the industry and deserves more focus by people who serve on standards committees."***

This trend has its benefits and even may be just a logical part of the globalization of the technology revolution. Some of the advantages are lower initial risk or start-up capitalization costs, "marketplace" cost competition between niched suppliers, and self-acculturation of new technology in equipment and learning. In addition, these "new" pollsters perhaps can save time and thus extend their consulting, strategizing, and developing of new clients. On the other hand, there are dangers as well: less quality control management, more dependence on an outside network of unconnected suppliers, nonconformity of scientific standards, data security concerns, split field work, and less accountability for detecting and correcting non-sampling errors. And lastly, costs will most likely keep going up.

There is hope that this supplier model of management can work in the future. There appears to be more trusted technically-trained suppliers who are also spin-offs from larger companies, there is an acknowledged need for a designated "inside research director" with the technical skills to work with the various suppliers, and there are more people entering the labor force who have mid-level training in quantitative methods who can staff the supplier companies.

However, "farming out" research components to diverse suppliers needs evaluation by the industry and deserves more focus by the people who serve on standards committees.

Lance Tarrance is managing director, Burson Marsteller

Looking for Answers in Less-Lighted Areas

By Murray Edelman

There is an old story of a woman observing two men on their hands and knees under a street light, looking carefully at the sidewalk. She asked what they were looking for and was told that a ring dropped in the dark area where she was standing. She responded: "If the ring dropped over here why are you looking over there under the street light?" One of the men answered: "Because there is more light over here."

The Biggest Hurdle for the Polls is...

Survey research, like most forms of scientific inquiry, tends to focus on things that can be most easily measured. But this can be a problem when we ignore the more difficult dimensions. The challenge before the survey industry is to shift its focus to the lesser-known area of non-sampling errors and, in particular, the bias from non-response.

> ***"While increasing response rates is an important challenge, quantifying their impact on survey estimates and developing a handle on the bias is actually more important."***

The value of a properly-conducted survey over other forms of data collection lies in the ability to generalize from estimates based on a sample of respondents to characteristics and opinions of the population as a whole within a measurable range of sampling error. The assumption behind this statistical inference is that each element of the population has a definable chance of being in the sample. But this assumption is rarely met and the "margin of error" provided is only part of the total error. In a sense, we not only act as though the part of the sidewalk covered by the light is the whole sidewalk, but we also use the margin of error as the only measure of the accuracy of our description.

There are not clear standards for documenting a survey's response rates and it is rare for an organization or publication to do so. Most organizations have reported serious drops in response rates and there is little on the horizon to head off this decline. The low rates affect the credibility of survey estimates. Few will be interested in paying for survey estimates that can't even be generalized to half of the population.

However, just increasing the response rate is not necessarily the answer. Last year in Voter News Service exit polling in New Jersey and New York City, we experimented with different ways of increasing our response rate. We made a small increase in the response rate but found that it also increased the bias in our estimates within the precincts. Thus, while increasing response rates is an important challenge, quantifying their impact on survey estimates and developing a handle on the bias is actually more important.

Many organizations use some form of non-response adjustment based on demographics such as age and education. It seems reasonable to assume that these procedures improve the data because they make the survey demographics look more like the population. However, we really don't know how much the adjustments improve the data. In fact, we don't have a good way of describing the potential bias from non-response or any way of evaluating a correction for it.

The increasing use of the Internet for surveys may bring the issue of accounting for bias and total error more into focus. The cost of survey administration on the Internet is low and the potential population is large but limited in scope. These surveys will have low-sampling error because large samples are easy to obtain, but they will likely also have a high non-response rate in addition to poor coverage of the US population. Should these methods be immediately rejected because they are biased? Or can we ask the more honest question: how much more bias is there? Perhaps in this dialogue we will develop better methods of measuring bias and correcting for it.

We will make better comparisons of methods and better use of data when the "error" being used is the *total* error of the survey. Even though the entire sidewalk is not as well lit as it is under the street light, our vision may improve as we broaden our scope to include the dark areas—we may find something of real value there.

Murray Edelman is editorial director, Voter News Service

Scrutinizing Our Accepted Practices

By Warren J. Mitofsky

Many things we do, whether in survey research or in other parts of our lives, we do almost by rote. We do them without question, without doubt, and without wondering if there is a better way. And for the most part, that's probably the way it should be. But not always. Once in a while it helps to take the most ordinary things we do and ask if there is a better way.

The same goes for our survey research practices. Ordinary things need to be questioned. For example, when biased survey designs, like those used by the Ohio mail-in postcard poll and Zogby International's political polls, produce relatively consistent election estimates, rather than dismiss them as flukes, it seems better to look for the reason why. While I would not, at this time, advocate designing a political poll the way these surveys are designed, both are doing something pollsters should learn from. It seems clear that they are doing something right, even though it differs from currently accepted practices.

The key to progress, innovation, and development of something better is approaching familiar problems with methods we have not used before, or tackling problems we could not solve before. If something significant seems impossible then it is worthy of attention.

I have included a few examples of accepted thinking or practices we might challenge. These are not intended necessarily as the most significant problems. Instead, they illustrate different ways to look at familiar subjects.