PUBLIC OPINION QUARTERLY, 2002–2008
THE DISCIPLINES, TECHNOLOGY, AND THE PUBLISHING BUSINESS

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Abstract This article, prepared for the 75th-anniversary issue of Public Opinion Quarterly, observes some trends in the articles published in the journal from 2002 to 2008 and examines marked shifts brought about by changes in academic publishing. Methodological publication trends include a major focus on nonresponse in sample surveys and mode of survey administration. Trends in substantive articles include a focus on homosexuality and gay rights, on public opinion–policy linkage, and on historical analysis of public opinion. Changes in publishing led to fully electronic manuscript processing and publication, space for supplementary content, and a fully accessible electronic archive containing all issues of the journal. These developments and a new AAPOR-publisher relationship enable POQ to better fulfill its mission to advance the field of public opinion research.

The content of Public Opinion Quarterly (POQ) from 2002 to 2008 was shaped by what might be called “routine” developments in academic disciplines and by unprecedented changes in the world of academic publishing. In the “routine” category, there was continuity in the overall balance of published substantive and methodological articles, but new emphases were evident in both types of papers. In the publishing sphere, changes in technology and business arrangements made possible a remarkable expansion of opportunities for readers and contributors. The work of editing issues of POQ was also transformed by the addition of electronic to the traditional print format.

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Noteworthy Trends in the Field

As Davison (1987) has noted, academic journals venture into different content areas because of the growth, decline, and changing direction of the fields they serve. In the case of *POQ*, a number of the social sciences are involved—communication, computer science, economics, journalism, political science, public health, public relations, psychology, sociology, and statistics. The newer field of survey methodology draws on aspects of several of these for its problems and for the theories employed to solve them.

Competition from discipline-specific journals, as well as shifts in the “normal science” of the disciplines, has led the number of *POQ* submissions from each of them to wax and wane. When *POQ* was founded, there were many papers examining issues in communication, journalism, and public relations. Most of these papers now find homes in other journals. By contrast, *POQ* has become a more significant outlet for papers from political science. I call such changes “routine” not because they are not profound, but because shifts like this have occurred throughout the journal’s existence. In contrast, the steady growth and persistence of survey method contributions to *POQ* in the past several decades result in large part, I think, from the fact that inherently interdisciplinary methodological contributions do not find a ready, prominent home in discipline-specific journals. We have thus become accustomed to tracking publications in *POQ* in “methodological” and “substantive” categories, where the “substantive” contributions come from a wide, changing set of fields.

My thoughts about articles published during my editorship focus on trends in groups of papers rather than individual contributions. I beg the indulgence of authors whose interesting work is not mentioned here.

Methodology

Here, then, are some observations about shifts in *POQ*’s corpus of articles between 2001 and 2008, considering the methodological papers first. The implication of nonresponse for survey estimates was the signal methodological theme during my editorship. A significant number of individual articles and a special issue on this topic (Singer 2006) were published. We can note a progression in these papers from demonstrations of declining response rates, to inductive demonstrations of the difference between nonresponse rates and bias in survey estimates due to nonresponse, to theory-based demonstrations of when and how much survey estimates are affected by nonresponse.

Curtin, Presser, and Singer’s (2005) tracking of the response rate in the Survey of Consumers over 25 years is exemplary of the first type of article. Their showing of a marked decline in response rates for this important survey and their gloomy conclusion about the future of telephone interviewing illustrate the prominence of nonresponse as the central concern for the field in the first decade of the 21st century.
Keeter et al.’s (2006) replication of an earlier study comparing the estimates from two telephone survey designs—one aimed at achieving a higher response rate through more expensive field procedures—exemplifies the second category of nonresponse papers. Here, the message is less gloomy, since the authors showed that many estimates for the higher and lower response rate surveys did not appear to differ much. More importantly, this kind of paper drew attention to the inferential gap between the undeniable decline in survey-level response rates and the quality of measure-level survey estimates.

But such inductive studies cannot identify the mechanisms connecting nonresponse to bias in estimates. Inevitably, some investigations will show no relationship and others will show significant connections, and neither finding offers an explanation. The issue facing the field is not whether survey nonresponse affects individual estimates, but under which circumstances and to what degree. Tackling these matters requires a theory-based, deductive approach. Groves, Presser, and Dipko (2004) began this important work with their experimental study of the role of topic interest in survey participation. Groves (2006) followed with a more general discussion of causal models of nonresponse and survey design elements needed to understand it.

Concern with the nonresponse phenomenon is closely tied to methodological research on modes of data collection. As Dillman (2002) predicted, survey investigations have become increasingly multimodal, in large part to deal with nonresponse and the attendant costs of soliciting cooperation. Two special issues of POQ were devoted to new mode concerns during my tenure—cell phone methodology (Lavrakas 2007) and Web surveys (Couper and Miller 2008). A new emphasis on research concerning features of self-administered questionnaires attended the growth of mode investigations (e.g., Smyth, Christian, and Dillman 2008; Couper, Tourangeau, and Kenyon 2004; Tourangeau, Couper, and Conrad 2004). Interactive voice response technology (also known as T-ACASI) was a focus of a variety of papers on social desirability bias across modes of administration (e.g., Kreuter, Presser, and Tourangeau 2008; Moskowitz 2004; Currivan et al. 2004). Although we tend to treat “methodology” and “substance” as sturdily independent categories, contributions by Villarroel et al. (2006) and Turner et al. (2005) demonstrate their actual interdependence. Here, methodological research on interactive voice response technology makes an important contribution in estimating the prevalence of same-gender sexual behavior in the United States.

Substantive Papers

I was interested in several subject-matter trends in papers published during my term. Attitudes toward homosexuality and gay rights were the subject of a number of “substantive” papers that garnered substantial reader interest (Herek 2002; Lewis 2003; Brewer 2003; Brewer and Wilcox 2005; Price, Nir, and Cappella 2005; Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2008; Martinez, Wald, and Craig
Another interesting development was a set of articles that combined survey findings with content analysis to explore the connections between public opinion and public policy (viz. Cook, Barabas, and Page 2002; Gilens 2005; Jerit and Barabas 2006; Druckman and Jacobs 2006). Schuman, Schwartz, and D’Arcy (2005) also employed survey evidence and content analysis (of children’s books) in their often-cited historical analysis of public opinion toward Christopher Columbus. These investigations—involving the assembly and sophisticated analyses of large corpora of survey questions and text—illustrate again the essential linkage between methodological and theoretical advances in public opinion research.

It was also interesting to see Schuman and Rodgers (2004) and Schuman and Corning (2006) join Davis (2004), Tessler, Konold, and Reif (2004), and Harding and Jencks (2003) in examinations of how historical period, age cohort, and aging shape public opinion. The question of how experiences in adolescence and young adulthood shape attitudes in later life was a major focus of these papers. It is a difficult matter to definitively parse the individual contributions of period, cohort, and aging effects, but these articles offered illuminating efforts.

**Publishing Technology and Business**

I happened into the editorship of POQ at a moment in academic publishing when technological change began to reshape every aspect of the journal. When I began the job, manuscripts arrived by mail in triplicate and were distributed to reviewers in the same way. Reviews arrived by mail some weeks later. Then decision letters, sometimes with requests for revision, were sent through the post office. After a time, revisions in triplicate arrived by return mail and were sent out again for referee comments. Ever larger file folders filled with mutating manuscripts and correspondence. Meanwhile, mailed correspondence was carried on with the production and copy editors at the publisher. Final manuscripts were sent and proofs were received, reviewed, and returned. Copies of proofs added to the burgeoning mass of paper in the file folders. Sometime during each quarter of the year, an issue of the journal, around 140 pages of paper, was sent to libraries and individual subscribers. A nascent electronic version of the issue was also available, but little noticed.

Paper page limits began to be challenged in the third issue of 2002, with the publication of an online-only appendix, the first in the journal’s history, detailing the elements of an “ideodynamic model” employed in an article by Shah et al. (2002). A substantially larger foray into the electronic world was undertaken in the first issue of 2003, in which several hundred pages of supplementary
material (media and Congressional reports) accompanying a symposium on the exit polls of 2000 were preserved for readers (Guterbock and Daves 2003). The practice of using online space to go beyond printed page limits gradually increased.

By 2004, Oxford University Press had become our publisher. This change not only made handling supplemental electronic material easier, but it also began the more profound transition to electronic manuscript submission, review, and publication. The transition took nearly two years to complete and was accompanied by considerable stress brought on by a sharp rise in the number of submissions (roughly double what it had been) and the inevitable problems attendant to adopting a new way of working. The benefits have accrued over the years, with a faster review process, easy communication with a worldwide pool of reviewers, pre-print publication of accepted papers on the journal’s website, further expansion of space for contributions, and a more accessible and user-friendly archive. We finally reached a goal I had set when I became editor—to make it possible for an AAPOR member to access electronically any issue of POQ back to 1937 through the Association’s website.

The new publisher contract also made POQ a revenue producer for AAPOR, rather than a financial encumbrance. The AAPOR council wisely decided in 2005 to invest some of the journal income back into POQ, funding an extra, fifth issue of the journal each year. These special, themed issues have focused on methodological and political matters. They are offered free to anyone interested. They have also become the focus of annual workshops sponsored by DC-AAPOR.

Because of its long, distinguished life, POQ was in a position to take full advantage of the major technological and business changes in academic publishing. Its high standing among competitors, tracked electronically in the Institute for Scientific Information (ISI) rankings, is now a significant draw for potential contributors and a source of pride. During this period, the journal became a more important means through which AAPOR can fulfill its mission to advance public opinion research.

References


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