PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH IN THE NEW CENTURY
REFLECTIONS OF A FORMER POQ EDITOR

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Abstract This article takes note of trends shaping public opinion research at the turn of the twenty-first century, as reflected in the pages of Public Opinion Quarterly. Three trends in particular are discussed: (a) refinement in understanding the nature of the survey response; (b) concerns over changes in communication technologies, and the challenges and opportunities they present to opinion research; and (c) worries about the quality of mass opinion, and especially the ways it might be shaped by subtly persuasive processes such as attitude priming.

Public Opinion Research in the New Century

Four years can seem like quite a long time to an absorbed journal editor, but looking back today on my term at the helm of POQ, I can’t help but regard it as a mere snippet of the journal’s long and distinguished run. Brief though it was, my editorship nonetheless marked a quite interesting moment, as two volumes (62–63) were products of the twentieth century, and two (64–65) were of the twenty-first. My even briefer reflections here on the field at that particular moment, then, might be charitably read as a commentary on the state of public opinion research as it crossed the millennial threshold. 1

In looking for good snapshots that capture the life of the journal at the time, we might first widen the focal range just a bit, and frame the work within broader trends that were then shaping the field. Three such trends are noteworthy: first, expansive growth in our understanding of the survey response; second, a growing awareness that rapid changes in the media of communication posed both great challenges as well as new opportunities for opinion research; and third, increasing concern with the quality and rationality of modern public

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1. This review follows in places the outline of Price and David (2004).

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opinion, and the ways it could be effectively swayed by political elites through subtle priming of attitudes or group identities.

Understanding the Survey Response

The decade leading up to my term at POQ had seen considerable advances in researchers’ grasp of context and response effects in surveys. The field had moved considerably beyond documenting these effects, which had been well known for many years, and had advanced successful theoretical models to explain and predict them. Influential work on the “cognitive aspects of survey measurement” (or CASM) sought to organize disparate studies of survey measurement under unified models of the way people respond to survey questions, drawing heavily from theories of information processing (e.g., Schwarz and Sudman 1992, 1996; Groves 1999; Tourangeau, Rips, and Rasinski 2000). These frameworks detailed systematic influences on survey responses that result from characteristics of the instrument or interview (context effects), as well as those stemming from characteristics of the respondent (response effects). While differing in their details, the models draw from a common set of theories related to memory processes, schema accessibility and availability, cognitive elaboration, and language comprehension.

By the time I stepped into my editorship in 1998, the cognitive aspects of survey research were front and center in methodological research. Across a range of applications, from political surveys to studies of health behavior and census research, contributors to the journal were actively leveraging cognitive theories, particularly those related to schema accessibility, to both explain and better manage the survey-response process. Among the issues illuminated in the pages of POQ were the ways respondents systematically misinterpret seemingly straightforward questions about the physical characteristics of their residences (Conrad and Schober 2000); how the order of names on ballots affects election outcomes (Miller and Krosnick 1998); how early questions in a health survey can alter subsequent reports of physical disability (Todorov 2000a, 2000b); and the ways using landmark events to anchor retrospective reports of behavior can bias results, owing to respondent tendencies to displace events in time, both forward and backward (Gaskell, Wright, and O’Muircheartaigh 2000). Whereas the bulk of the research explored effects stemming from the instrument or the interview, a number of articles probed influences stemming from characteristics of the respondent, for example tendencies of people from different cultural backgrounds to exhibit acquiescence bias (Javeline 1999). Others addressed the potential for context and response effects to interact, as when response order effects might vary with education or age (Knäuper 1999).

The image gleaned from a perusal of POQ during this period is that of a community moving energetically to put cognitive science in service of better
controlling the survey response. Several articles directly compared and contrasted alternative measurement strategies aimed at improving, for example, the accuracy of reported voting intentions (Box-Steffensmeier, Jacobson, and Grant 2000), differentiation of personal values (McCarty and Shrum 2000), or long-term retrospective reports from memory (Belli, Shay, and Stafford 2001). Practical gains, it must be reckoned, were incremental. Several particularly vexing and long-recognized problems—for example respondent overreporting of having voted in elections—received careful attention and experimentation (e.g., Belli et al. 1999; Bernstein, Chadha, and Montjoy 2001), and yet, for all the effort, improvements remained elusive.

Challenges and Opportunities in the New Media Environment

If one could characterize the mood of the field as optimistic with respect to wrestling down problems of measurement, it must be said that the new century arrived amid several deepening concerns as well. Among the most pressing worries was that survey non-response, always a fundamental concern for probability-based sampling (Groves and Couper 1998), was looming as an increasingly serious problem for the field, particularly given its established dependence on the telephone survey. A widely shared perception that response rates were declining precipitously in the 1980s and 1990s spurred a flurry of efforts to curb nonresponse, including rigorous interviewer training to convert initial refusals, offering respondents incentives, and aggressive callbacks (Brehm 1993).² Concern over nonresponse and its implications for survey quality led, in 1998, to the release by AAPOR of its first Standard Definitions report, which sought to establish common methods of calculating and reporting response rates; in the following year, POQ requested that contributors employ one of the AAPOR formulas and distinguish between contact, cooperation, refusal, and response rates.³

More generally, the rapid growth of new communication technologies—cell phones and the Internet in particular—spurred considerable uncertainty about how the field might adapt to these new realities. Electronic-mail and Web-based surveys were becoming widely used in both academic and commercial research settings. These new survey modes permitted economical and rapid data

². There is some debate as to whether perceptions of rapidly declining telephone response rates were justified. At least one investigation (Steeh et al. 2001) found that, although response rates in two long-running surveys had indeed declined over the final decades of the century, the decline was actually modest between 1980 and 1999 (under 7 percent, as compared with a decline of nearly 12 percent between 1952 and 1979).
³. The initial Standard Definitions report limited its analysis to RDD telephone surveys and in-person household surveys, but was subsequently revised six times and now includes mail and Internet surveys of specifically named persons (American Association for Public Opinion Research 2011).
gathering, along with potentially powerful enhancements to measurement, owing to video and other multimedia capabilities and to social-networking capacities. At the same time, they introduced potentially severe complications, particularly surrounding nonresponse and respondent self-selection.

As the field crossed into the new century, its publications reflected intense concern with these issues. Indeed, four of the 10 most cited articles appearing during the years I edited POQ focus on Web-based, e-mail, or computer-assisted surveys (Couper 2000; Couper, Traugott, and Lamias 2001; Schaefer and Dillman 1998; Wright, Aquilino, and Supple 1998). Three of the six most cited articles focused on survey nonresponse (Keeter et al. 2000; Curtin, Presser, and Singer 2000; Groves, Singer, and Corning 2000). The studies by Keeter et al. and Curtin et al. were particularly noteworthy—and rather disquieting—in that they searched carefully for, but failed to find, the expected changes in survey quality with declining response rates. Cautiously worded in their conclusions for fear of ennobling less-than-diligent surveys (which were everywhere at the time), these were the first of several studies that called into question the long-accepted positive association between response rates and quality. There remains today no consensus as to why surveys with short field periods and low response rates might fail to manifest more response bias, but that is for no lack of effort over the intervening decade.

Evolving digital technologies, while they challenged survey researchers to seek new ways of plying their craft, at the same time opened up new analytical opportunities for students of public opinion. High-capacity electronic data storage and retrieval systems enabled the routine collection and easy dissemination of very large volumes of polling data, government statistics, and increasingly wide arrays of media content. The accessibility of such data consequently permitted increasingly sophisticated modeling of overtime trends and the mapping of correspondences between public opinion, media coverage, and governmental processes around particular issues (just as Hyman 1957 had imagined in the pages of POQ half a century earlier). The journal reflected these emerging opportunities in time-trend analyses of public opinion and public policy (Monroe 1998) and the origin and effects of the public’s trust in government (Chanley, Rudolph, and Rahn 2000), and in methodological pieces on deploying presidential polls as a time series (Erikson and Wlezien 1999), tracking issue attention dynamically over time (Henry and Gordon 2001), and reducing sampling error in survey time series (Green, Gerber, and DeBoef 1999).

One cannot escape the clear impression of a field looking forward with excitement, but not without undercurrents of true worry, as it began to grapple in earnest with seismic changes in communication and survey technology. For the journal itself, the moment similarly called for adapting to the rapidly changing world: Halfway through my tenure as editor, appropriately enough in the first issue of 2000, POQ published for the first time electronically on the World Wide Web.
Understanding the Foundations of Public Opinion

The ascendancy of cognitive theories in the years leading up to my term at POQ was not only reflected in work on survey measurement. It had more broadly and profoundly shaped theory and research in public opinion, communication, and political psychology (Beniger and Gusek 1995). The cognitive turn was long in evolving and actually spanned several decades. For instance, following work in the 1950s and 1960s that largely failed to find much by way of direct persuasive influence of the mass media, emphasis had shifted by the 1970s to indirect learning, such as forming ideas about which issues or problems are important based on the volume of media attention given those issues (McCombs and Shaw 1972). By the mid-1980s, studies moved beyond documenting these agenda-setting effects, to begin focusing on ways those perceptions of issue importance could subtly prime political evaluations, including how well incumbents were performing in office (Iyengar and Kinder 1987). This research on “media priming” was in turn joined by studies of “issue framing” effects—that is, the ability of news, depending on the way it is presented, to systematically highlight some aspects of an issue rather than others and thereby alter the kinds of considerations people use in forming many opinions (e.g., Iyengar 1991; Price and Tewksbury 1997).

So, as the dawn of the twenty-first century approached, the cognitive models that had informed our understanding of the survey response had also shed considerable light on the ways public opinion is shaped through schema accessibility and availability. Analysts understood that many surveyed opinions are superficial and unstable, reflecting a “top of the head” sample of impressions rather than a thoughtful review of relevant beliefs or underlying information. Stable and interpretable responses—the signal emerging against a background of survey noise—stemmed from those people with strongly felt attitudes readily accessible across many contexts; from small segments of the population motivated to carefully evaluate and respond thoughtfully to opinion questions; or from systematic cues in the media environment that evoked salient responses across discernable population groups, which served to align their otherwise disparate impulses. The articles in POQ reflected this understanding. For example, Valentino’s (1999) study of local crime news and the priming of racial attitudes found that news portraying minorities as crime suspects activated attitudes about welfare and thereby affected support for then-President Clinton.

The Valentino (1999) study illustrates not only the period’s focus on cognitive processes, but also the emergent interest in group-based priming and its role in shaping critical alignments and divisions among the population, especially within the electorate. Articles and poll-trend pieces alike reflected fascination with the lines of cleavage that seemed to define national politics of the time, including religion (Bishop 1999; Severín-González and Torres-Reya 1999; Bolce and DeMaio 1999), gender (Trevor 1999; Norrander 1999; Huddy, Neely, and LaFay 2000), and especially race (Krysan 1998; Mohai and Bryant...
1998; Tuch, Sigelman, and MacDonald 1999). Arguably, the focus on these particular trends was prescient, as they appear to have reached their full political influence in subsequent years, embodied in the candidacies of Barack Obama, Hilary Clinton, and Sarah Palin, and the rise of the Tea Party.

The general picture that emerges from the pages of POQ as it entered the new century, then, is somewhat like that of a person in adolescence, when certain adult features are present but cannot yet be reliably discerned. Having now barely completed the first decade of that century, it is still probably too soon to say whether the preoccupations of the moment were ephemeral or, as I suspect, more enduring. At any rate, the moment found us struggling mightily to make sense of profound change, and we can be confident that neither change nor our need to understand it will recede anytime soon.

References


