

RESEARCH AND THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT

**Nothing Seems As Foolish As A Fundamentalist
Who Has Lost His Fundamentals.**

Truth is dead and faith is lost along with misdirected emails. There's is no certainty in survey research, only probability samples. And hasn't been one of those in decades.



Stubbornly statistical

Still, the research clerics circle the wagons to defend the faith. Their doctrine remains stubbornly statistical. Probability sampling and high completion rates separate the *clean* from the *unclean*.

Place Your Bets

Statistics has a strange provenance for Holy Writ. It was invented at the gaming tables of 17th century Paris to calculate the odds. This gambler's friend grew into the mathematical underpinnings of most survey research. But human behavior is more rowdy than roulette and people are less docile than dice. And therein lies the problem.



Most of our research polls people on behavior, testing that fraction of the population we hope will mirror the whole. For example, we expect our Nielsen sample of 11 thousand to tell us what 272 million are viewing. Flim-flammy as it seems, it works if it's the right 11 thousand.

But for the Nielsen sample to ring true statistically, each person in the US must have an "equal or known probability" of being chosen. That is the deal-breaker. More than half of the people chosen for the Nielsen sample don't participate, so the basic principle of sample-based research is in a word, "twaddle."¹

The Narcotic of Standard Error

Researchers have stamped the coin of this deceit by not admitting to the problem. Most studies still come packaged with "standard error" tables, which work only with probability samples. These irrelevant estimates of reliability serve as a narcotic to numb us to the awful truth. We really have no idea how good, or bad, the numbers are. All we have is hope.

¹ I don't mean to pick on Nielsen. They try harder than most. Today cooperation rates cluster in the low 20 percents. MRI is remarkable with a cooperation rate of 70%. But to achieve this they're forced to break yet another rule-of-best-practice by paying some respondents big bucks.

It would be more honest to mark the pages “reliability unknown.”

Imaginary Facts

Then, apart from the sample, there is the equal issue of the validity of the measurement itself. Facts reported in audience surveys are imaginary “facts.” They appear to be much more than they are. All we know for certain about an NSI-reported viewer is someone in the household made a mark on a line in a diary. All we know for sure about an NTI-reported viewer is someone pushed a button. All we know conclusively about an MRI-reported reader is they answered, “yes” to a readership question.

These acts -- marking, pushing and nodding -- are far removed from the viewing and reading interpretations we give them. Researchers refer to the difference between what we want to measure and what the research is actually measuring, as “validity.” It is the problem of constructing an appropriate operational definition for the abstraction “audience.” Different definitions can produce vastly different numbers; witness the new Arbitron PPM measurements of TV and Radio.

Tiresome Carping?

Why is this tiresome carping important? A small example. If the half of the population not in the sample views differently from the half that is, we may be buying the wrong programs. And right off

we know they behave differently in some ways because these people, unlike other people, choose not to participate.

If the techniques we're using aren't measuring what we think they're measuring, then the search for accountability may be drowning in disinformation.

If we're selling bad numbers to clients, we're part of a con.

But I go too far. We don't want a cure that kills more than the cold. Research is not supposed to be Truth, just information. Some good, some bad, but much of it useful. It was always that way. What Samuel Johnson wrote about dictionaries 250 years ago describes surveys today, "*...like watches, the worst is better than none, and the best cannot be expected to go quite true...*"



The only way to cope with this muddle is to walk around it. Discard some of the old rules of best practice, since they are badly broken, and think about the many ways there are to collect data and judge its usefulness.



Help's not on the way.

Internet-based research is a fine example. It is fast and cost-effective. I don't see how we can dismiss it out-of-hand because it's "biased" as most of us are prone to do. All research is biased. Here at least, the infirmity draws attention.

The Census uses small high-quality samples to interpret its large-scale data. ComScore uses the same method to calibrate its Internet sample.

Another example. "Quota sampling" is not blasphemy. It's essentially what we do when we sample-balance our non-probability samples.

The diary is *dreadful*, (you can almost feel the knees jerking). That's true enough for television with 75-plus channels and short-interval viewing. But it's a cost-effective technique to collect limited habitual behavior, like radio listening or commuting patterns for outdoor.

Argue With Research

And it's all right to argue with research. It's not about Truth. It's about reducing risk. When the risk is low, don't sweat it. But when the risk is high, don't buy the book either.



Research

ARF's Jim Spaeth points out that we rarely do a study without knowledge from prior research, but we seldom apply it as well as we should. He suggests we use what we already know to judge what we're being told. Search out patterns instead of chasing aberrations. More and more we need to "triangulate" using several sources and experience.

And let's get past our sanctimonious certainty. Today using research is like having sex with a stranger. You have to think about it and be careful.

I wish I had better answers, but there is no easy fix.

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Yes it's uncomfortable, but a good time for smart people to be alive.

Erwin