Editorial
Survey Research: A Time for Introspection

As the partial listing in Table 1 indicates, there are many ways to collect data. Some of these methods involve direct interaction with people, whereas others do not; some result in self-reports and others reflect actual use patterns, behavior, and preferences. Regardless, research within library and information science has shown a clear preference for survey research—predominately the use of a mailed questionnaire—although it does seem that the use of focus groups is increasing. At the same time, more libraries and other service organizations are attaching surveys to their home pages, gauging user (or buyer) preferences and satisfaction. As Hamilton (1999) points out in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*,

> Over the past four or five years the amount of social-science research conducted on the Internet has increased exponentially. More than 100 World-Wide Web sites now invite visitors to participate in a wide variety of scientific research, or in activities that resemble scientific research, including personality tests, intelligence tests, and opinion surveys. (p. B6)

Despite the frequent use of survey research in library and information science, there is still much to learn about its application, especially at a time when the number of requests for each of us—personally and professionally—to participate in studies is enormous. Why do some people agree to cooperate and others refuse? Is the number of those agreeing shrinking? If yes, will we see a decline in return rates and greater acceptance of the fact that respondents may not reflect the population surveyed? In fact, for surveys aimed at remote users of library services, there may be no *knowable* population. A population, for instance, may not be limited to the faculty, students, staff, and administration of a particular academic institution; rather, the population might be anyone able to access a home page.

A critical issue relates to "how researchers can get those individuals whom they want to study to participate." In other words, what can be done to get a sufficient number of respondents? Thus, how can we frame the imposition to gain cooperation? A related question is "What is an acceptable return rate for those situations in which the population cannot be determined?" Even when

Direct all correspondence to: Peter Hernon or Candy Schwartz, Graduate School of Library and Information Science, Simmons College, 300 The Fenway, Boston, MA 02115-5898 <peter.hernon@simmons.edu> or <candy.schwartz@simmons.edu>.

TABLE 1
Examples of Methods of Data Collection*a*

Bibliometrics (e.g., Citation Analysis)
Content Analysis
Concept Mapping
Discourse Analysis
Field Notes
Historical Research
Operations Research
Participant Observation
Queuing Patterns
Reading (Evaluating) Open Letters (Wylde, 1994)
Self-evaluation (self-ratings)
Sketch Maps (Horan, 1999)
Social Judgment Analysis
Survey Research
  • Questionnaires distributed by mail (postal or e-mail) or in person
  • Telephone interview
  • In-person interview
  • Focus group interview
  • Structured, unstructured, and semi-structured interviewing
Transactional Log Analysis
Use of a Test
  • Obtrusive or unobtrusive testing
  • Use of a national standardized test or a locally developed test
User Completed Logs or Diaries

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a See also Powell (1999).
References: Horan (1999); Wylde (1994).

the population is known, insufficient attention has focused on return rates and whether the population is truly represented.

Some other issues meriting serious discussion include accuracy and honesty in survey responses and the need for greater concern about the ethical guidelines for those engaged in the conduct of Internet surveys.

ACCURACY AND HONESTY IN SURVEY RESPONSES

Hamilton (1999), who appears to question the "research" conducted by commercial and entertainment Web sites, notes that "such sites may lead Web surfers to believe that it is not important to respond accurately or honestly to on-line tests, questionnaires, or surveys—or even to respond only once. Were participants in on-line scientific experiments to take the same approach, the data they provided would be of no use" (p. B7). A key (but unanswered) question is "Does their attitude toward online surveys affect their response behavior

to non-Web surveys?" Accuracy and honesty, however, are not issues related only to online surveys. With everyone receiving so many requests to participate in surveys (regardless of how they are delivered) how many will take the time to answer questions truthfully and accurately? Even the U.S. Bureau of the Census should be concerned about this issue for its decennial census of population.

RESEARCH ETHICS

Hamilton offers an important discussion of ethical issues and the types of guidelines needed to guide Internet-based surveys. He states that:

> At a minimum, the guidelines should require all on-line researchers to provide information that would permit participants to contact the researcher, a means for obtaining participants' fully consent, full disclosure of any risks to their confidentiality, a post-experimental debriefing page, and a way for the participants to learn about the results of the study. The guidelines also should include up-to-date information on the technologies used to conduct on-line research, and a set of criteria for evaluating the technical aspects of proposed on-line studies. (p. B7)

His hope is that ". . . the guidelines would standardize on-line research in a way that would help Internet users to distinguish academic-research sites from other kinds. It would also be useful for I.R.B. [institutional research boards] to maintain a list—on-line, of course—of on-line studies that they have approved" (p. B7).

Clearly, Hamilton's guidelines are intended to aid the public in distinguishing "legitimate, scientific-research sites from commercial or entertainment sites" (p. B7). Nonetheless, he says that graduate students and their academic advisors may be unaware that the I.R.B. has jurisdiction over their research.

His guidelines offer excellent reminders for those libraries placing surveys on their Web sites. A quick perusal of some academic and public library home pages that ask constituent groups to respond to a survey shows that they lack key elements of the proposed guidelines. Herein might be a study for some researcher(s). Such studies should also examine whether the privacy rights of respondents are adequately protected (e.g., whether the site uses "cookies," as even some federal government sites do).

A final observation is in order. Hamilton believes that academic sites, for instance, are necessarily "legitimate;" we would not quarrel with this. The more important question is "How does the public decide what is 'legitimate'?" Let us illustrate why we raise the question; importantly, the example does not deal with the online environment.

Anyone interested in the research conducted on tribal reservations will note that tribes are often asked to participate in research conducted by doctoral students and faculty, but the true intent of that research might be to expose a problem or to uncover the extent of profit that the tribe makes from gaming. Furthermore, some researchers want to develop names for themselves, but, hopefully, not at the expense of those studied. Some researchers wanting to study those individuals living on reservations (as the editorial in the next issue will state) may be insufficiently informed about the tribe and may believe that they can make quick entry to that population, collect the data, and report the results to their dissertation committee, the press, or a peer-reviewed journal. In fact, to gain entry they might have to expend considerable effort in getting to know the population and to offer those studied something (intellectual or educational) in return. This is particularly true in view of the fact that the population may have had bad earlier experiences with "legitimate" researchers.

Too often, researchers—not just those doing online investigations—take but do not give back. They impose on those surveyed and, at most, offer respondents a summary of the findings. How sufficient is that? Why should people be willing to accept an imposition on their time? Might they "play games" with the researcher, telling the person what he or she wants to hear or telling stories and expecting the researcher to separate the "truth" from the "fiction?"

CONCLUSION

Although survey research has been in frequent use since at least the 1920s, it is entering a new era—one presenting new challenges to researchers and the credibility of their findings. Now is the time for studies that probe the types of issues raised here. We need to move away from a mere focus on findings and invest more time and resources both in improving methods of data collection and in building on the work of Piper (1998). She reviews the problems of Web-based research and identifies some topics in library and information science most conducive to the online environment. Clearly, we should all value research into the research process, but that research needs not to limited to the online environment.

Peter Hernon & **Candy Schwartz**

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