The Public Opinion Research Correspondent

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THIS contribution is meant to develop further some ideas that Philip Meyer set out in his book *Precision Journalism* (1973) and which Everett Carll Ladd has elaborated in his article "Polling and the Press: The Clash of Institutional Imperatives," in this issue of *Public Opinion Quarterly*. I would like to extend Ladd's analysis and also show that Meyer may be underestimating the difficulties journalists have with public opinion research. Finally, I want to describe a relationship that my institute has developed with a leading German newspaper, *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, which breaks some new ground in journalism.

Sore Spots in a Delicate Relationship

In the Federal Republic of Germany, the two partners in this delicate relationship, public opinion research and journalism, have been plagued for 25 years by survey results from one institute that diverge grossly from findings of other institutes but which obtain great publicity in the mass media. In 1978, in a lengthy article,[1] the leading newsmagazine *Der Spiegel* described specific instances where this institute either based its surveys on only one-tenth of the purported 2,000 interviews or made results "plausible" on the basis of arbitrary assessment. This disclosure did not, however, keep news agencies,

[1] *Der Spiegel*, No. 40 (Oct. 2, 1978), 97–118.

Abstract This essay outlines a contract concluded by the leading German newspaper, *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, and the Allensbach Institut für Demoskopie which breaks new ground in journalism by creating the position of the public opinion research correspondent.

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papers, and TV journalists from accepting offers to publish—free of charge—the survey results this institute put at their disposal.

One of the fundamental principles of the news media is to check the reliability of the sources upon which their reports are based. Why is this principle not adhered to whenever survey results are reported? Does it apply only in cases where it is possible to establish that a piece of news was incorrect? If this were true, one would have to add to the problems that Ladd outlines the fact that the mass media treat survey results as second-rate information, for which the assessment of the quality of sources is unimportant because an incorrect result does not collapse as would a faultily constructed bridge. The imagery is not overdone, for the proof of having published a faulty piece of news ought to be as embarrassing to a journalist as the collapsing of a bridge is to a contractor.

In the public debate in Germany, the subject of quality control of survey results is only discussed as part of a general critique of the method as a whole, and at an utterly elementary level, focusing on questions such as whether respondents tell the truth or whether researchers manipulate their findings. Because there are bound to be great differences in quality for activities that are partly scientific and partly artistic, it is quite striking that there has essentially been no attempt to evaluate researchers or institutes according to quality. This is all the more surprising inasmuch as several decades have passed since survey results first entered the mass media as pieces of topical news. Handling election forecasts also has to be seen in this light. They are not really examined with regard to when and how they are presented to the public by various institutes, nor are they checked for accuracy over longer periods of time with respect to each institute. All of this would certainly be necessary if election forecasts were to be used as a basis for assessing the forecasters as sources of news.

Instead, the tendency is to assess the reliability both of individual results and the method as such by the degree of agreement existing among the results achieved by various institutes. This procedure can be recommended for its simplicity, yet it reduces the information value. Whenever results stemming from different sources clash, this should serve as a signal to journalists that something important is going on, perhaps some progress or variation in methodology that deserves attention. But it could also be a warning; exactly what it means can only be decided in the context of long-term, systematic observations of the institutes publishing the results.

But this is rarely done in Germany, and Ladd's essay in this issue helps us to understand why this is so. He notes how important it is for the mass media to be quick, while public opinion research, as a consequence of its method, is slow, and also how the mass media concentrate on topical subjects of the day and strive for brief, simple, unambivalent, sharply focused news coverage. Using the key concept of "institutional imperatives," Ladd highlights the criteria that must be met if journalists are to find survey results worth publishing. What gives rise to these requirements is, above all, the confidence journalists feel in knowing what will secure the public's attention.

There is no point, therefore, in suggesting that journalists use other selection criteria, no matter how well-meaning the advice is, as Ladd makes clear. He could also have referred to Walter Lippmann, who, in his book *Public Opinion* (1922:220, 222), defined these institutional imperatives as "news values." In addition to the items Ladd mentions, Lippmann and communications researchers who investigated news values systematically beginning in the 1950s regarded conflict, sensation, and surprise as values the journalist looks for and which, in his eyes, make a news item worth publishing. Serious public opinion research is not necessarily surprising and sensational, which constitutes a handicap in the relations with the mass media. But whenever results are extraordinary or surprising, journalists can rarely resist them, no matter from which source they come.

Harnessing Social Research Techniques: Precision Journalism

Philip Meyer (1973) was perhaps the first to deal extensively with the relationships between journalists and public opinion research, which had until then hardly been touched upon in the scientific literature. He created the term *precision journalism* to describe this novelty. The term, incidentally, did not please German journalists, who construed it as an attack on traditional journalism—as though they had not always striven for precision! Therefore, I changed the term a little bit for German usage and called it *data precision journalism*.

To recall Meyer's argument, it can be said that we have a new social science, but we do not yet have a new journalism. Social research and journalism are closely related to one another in many respects. Both endeavor to register facts that influence people's lives, to recognize their significance, to interpret. Social research has made great progress in the past 20 years; it has developed powerful new tools for finding facts and analyzing their significance. Among these tools are sample surveys, computers, analysis techniques, panel surveys, scale and factor analyses.

While social research has changed a great deal—has become much more efficient—little has changed in either journalistic research or analysis techniques in the past 20 years. German journalism hardly makes use of the newly developed tools. For this reason, today's journalism is not as good as it might be. Meyer gives five examples of what he sees as the weaknesses of the old-fashioned journalism, which does not keep up with the actual possibilities of the profession:

1. Journalists may misinterpret events, particularly in the case of voting, as the results of social research indicate.

2. Journalists often recognize developments too late, despite the fact that social research is able to provide data obtained by an early diagnosis. For example, in the Federal Republic of Germany the attitude that petty theft in offices, plants, shops, etc. was not a serious misdeed spread rapidly in the population, as shown by survey research. This change of attitude, however, escaped the notice of journalists until crime statistics were published that revealed a grotesque rate of increase in actual theft.

3. Many changes escape the attention of journalists. Only when developments run a different course than expected—and thus simply cannot be explained by previous assumptions—do journalists become more attentive.

4. Journalists accept examples or anecdotal evidence as proof, although much better investigative procedures have been available for a long time.

5. Habitual thinking—in the guise of "common sense," wishful thinking, prejudice, selective perception, selective reporting and interpretation—is not corrected by the results of social research which contradict them.

As a corrective strategy, Meyer makes some recommendations to editors which I would qualify somewhat:

1. Continually scan the results of empirical social research even when they are almost hidden by publication in scientific journals. This material must be made systematically accessible to editorial work. Science journalism in the Federal Republic of Germany barely makes use of the information provided by the results of empirical social research. Reports about findings of social research take a back seat: A study by the Center for Interdisciplinary Research of the University of Bielefeld in 1975 revealed that only 6 percent of reports on science referred to social research.

2. Train journalists to become experts, with a knowledge of methods and the qualifications to make critical use of the sources as well as the capacity to write about public opinion research subjects. They would in time become our survey research "correspondents." This, I think, should be done in collaboration by journalists and researchers. In contrast to Meyer, I do not see the task of a public

opinion correspondent as one for journalists only: journalistically gifted researchers can also become correspondents. In the early stages of training, it will be an open question whether the career to be followed will be in journalism or in public opinion research.

3. Commission social research and surveys; don't wait for partisan or special interests to take up matters that require clarification.

It is evident that public opinion research and empirical social research have pioneered a development that, sooner or later, will have a strong impact on journalism. My thesis is that journalism can be improved by harnessing the new efficiency of social research. It can be made more realistic, quicker, and more discriminating in reporting and interpreting. But there are some difficulties in using social research that will have to be confronted and resolved.

Difficulties That Are Not Readily Apparent

Paul F. Lazarsfeld entitled two of his books *The Language of Social Research* (1955; 1972). Not only does social research have a language of its own, but its methods and modes of thinking are in many respects utterly alien to journalists, and this fact poses serious problems for the concept of precision journalism.

Meyer recognized a number of these difficulties. In his book, he tries to acquaint journalists with handling numbers. He explains the principle of the law of large numbers and the idea of interviewing a representative cross-section which is derived from that principle. But I am convinced that he seriously underestimates the difficulties of bringing social research and journalists together. The method of survey research has peculiarities that clash with habitual thinking, or in other words, that defy common sense.

Meyer states triumphantly that the academic social researchers had, for years, dreamed of "firehouse research," quick research touched off by current developments, but that did not make much headway because of their academic pedantry. Instead, they continued to work at a snail's pace. Journalists would probably be more inclined to seize the chances of firehouse research. Formerly, people had described journalism as "history in a hurry"; soon they would talk about it as "social research in a hurry."

In fact, the first reaction to the idea of precision journalism was that quite a few papers resorted to taking their own polls. This step alone indicates a misunderstanding. Let me try to explain in what ways journalists have difficulties in understanding survey research. The discussion is also a catalog that indicates where, in the future education of journalists, universities will have to focus their efforts in order to avoid misunderstanding and misusing social research as a source of information.

Here are five areas of difficulty:

1. The idea of *measuring* is not understood, nor are the conditions which must be satisfied in order to be able to measure something reliably.

2. The significance of *prognoses* in social research is not understood. *Measurement and Prediction*, the title of one of the four volumes of the famous American study "The American Soldier," unites both ideas (Stouffer et al., 1950). This sounds so easy and yet hardly any journalist is able to understand its full significance.

3. The *interview* as a method of collecting data is misunderstood. Journalists believe that they know well enough what an interview is. But the interview in journalism and the interview in social research have almost nothing in common. Here lie the roots of two particular misunderstandings concerning the questionnaire and the interviewer organization.

4. The whole process of *using statistics* to acquire knowledge is poorly understood. Journalists are not used to thinking in terms of probabilities and acquiring knowledge from systematic comparison.

5. Understanding the *difference between correlation and causality* poses difficulties. This is a serious problem because journalists take a particular interest in finding explanations, in uncovering connections between cause and effect, and they are therefore easily tempted to interpret every relationship in terms of causality.

The greatest problem is that these difficulties do not always appear to be difficulties. Most journalists, even if they muster all their good will, may be unable to see why the points I have listed should cause them any trouble. I shall comment on these five difficulties in more detail.

THE IDEA OF MEASURING AND RELIABILITY

If a social researcher were to say in a conversation with journalists, "I prefer not to use questionnaires. I think I have a better chance of finding out what workers think, for instance, when I sit in a bar with them and they just speak frankly," this would immediately make sense to journalists. The same would hold true if a social researcher said, "I think it's wrong to prescribe the wording of an interview to an interviewer. Many words have different meanings in the various social sectors of the population. One has to *adapt* oneself to their usage."

However, no matter how convincing these arguments may sound, they violate the paramount principle of measuring in empirical social research—research which satisfies the demand for scientific methods, that is, the possibility of replicating and validating the findings. You can only measure and count after having established to the highest possible degree the homogeneous character of what is to be counted and the consistency of approach to the collection of data.

Measuring and counting involves the application of a method of acquiring knowledge which makes it possible for different persons to arrive at largely identical results. Subjective influences originating with the persons taking part in the research process are reduced to a minimum. Only then is cumulative science possible, that is, for one social researcher to be able to base his findings on the research findings of another.

So we are faced with the need to balance conflicting views. It may very well be that in a beer-parlor conversation things are said that simply would not come out in an interview based on a questionnaire. It may also be that a particular interviewer is especially talented in adapting his language to that employed in various social sectors. But what is lost at the same time is the invariance or consistency, the prerequisite for counting. In the language of social research: reliability is lost. When the investigation is repeated under absolutely identical circumstances, dissimilar results are produced. Different researchers arrive at different results. With such methods, social research would never have achieved the great progress it has made in the past 20 years. And it is this progress upon which data precision journalism wants to capitalize.

The establishment of the greatest possible invariance as the prerequisite for measuring and counting exacts a price whose character will become evident when I discuss the questionnaire and the interview.

PROGNOSES AS QUALITY CRITERIA

Many journalists view an election prognosis as an exciting game. They do not consider the difference between early diagnosis (which could be used as a synonymous term for prognoses) and soothsaying. They associate prognoses with reading tea leaves or consulting the Delphic oracle. In science, however, good prognoses are an indication that scientists understand the laws according to which events proceed and that their instruments are in working order. Journalists who have difficulties in assessing the quality of social research should check on various prognoses over a longer time span in order to become able to judge the quality of different research institutes.

THE INTERVIEW IN JOURNALISM AND IN SOCIAL RESEARCH

The journalistic interview is focused on the individual case, just as is the consultation of a physician with his patient. Depending on the subject of the interview, the thoughts, motivation, and mentality of the individual person are brought to light as much as possible. Ideally, the individual interview stands as an entity on its own.

The social research interview is designed to gather information with the greatest possible invariance on certain aspects of *groups* of persons. The goal is to arrive at a sum of answers on a certain subject which can be analyzed according to different characteristics of the respondents. This accounts for the peculiar role of the interviewer in social research, which is prescribed by the wording of the questionnaire and which even includes such details as the emphasis on words. The principle is that it is not the interviewer but the questionnaire that is clever. This is why an interviewer does not need extensive training if he or she receives a good questionnaire; it is also why he or she should only work part-time and only have to conduct a limited number of interviews in one survey. Otherwise his or her work will become too monotonous, as is shown by a comparison of the performance of interviewers who conduct very few interviews with those who conduct a large number.

One thing is clear about the questionnaire: after unstructured preliminary stages, the questionnaire *must* to a large extent be structured in the main stage. It must be structured in all the details of its wording and in the sequence of both questions and response alternatives—and it must be structured in order to achieve invariance. Structuring enhances homogeneity; differences in the way interviewers proceed are thus kept as limited as possible. Differences in the ability of individual respondents to express themselves, and differences in the frames of reference used to answer a question are minimized as far as possible, thus helping increase reliability. If the interview is repeated under similar circumstances, the result will be the same.

Obstacles to cooperation between social researchers and journalists arise because many facts and situations which a social researcher wants to investigate do not lend themselves to direct questioning, perhaps because the individual is entirely or partially unaware of them. People are essentially unaware of motives and effects; upon being questioned, an individual cannot talk about them as if they were facts learned in school. There are difficulties like poor memory or the tendency to idealize reality. This is where the indicator problem of social research originates. The social researcher looks for empirical equivalents—and generally for several of them—of the information he is trying to elicit. These equivalents are called "indicators." An example: Social friendliness is to be measured. In the interview, a story is related, "Supposing you are standing in line at the ticket counter. A button on the coat of the person standing in front of you is loose and is likely to be torn off at any moment. Would you tell the person or would you prefer not to?"

Journalists have written hundreds of articles to ridicule indicator questions, because they did not understand that these questions are not an end in themselves, but merely an empirical equivalent of the information actually being sought. Therefore, the entire validity problem of social research has remained unclear to journalists. To social researchers, validity means that a question actually measures what it is designed to measure. The validity problem arises, above all, when indicators are used because the desired information cannot be attained by direct questioning. As a rule, bundles of indicators are used in order to reduce the uncertainty about whether the indicator is on target or not. But as long as they take the questions as ends in themselves rather than as indicators, journalists are liable to find all indicators ludicrous: "Do you like it if little boys are taught to bow (little girls are taught to curtsy) when greeting grown-ups, or would you say that is now outdated?"[2] "Many things that were very common formerly have become rare today, a flock of sheep, for instance. Do you regret the fact that there are so few flocks of sheep today, or does that make no difference to you?"[3]

Because they are unaware of indicator questions and analysis techniques which can also help solve response difficulties, such as scale or factor analyses, German journalists reduce survey research largely to straw polling, that is, *voting*, by interviewing a representative cross-section. Example: "Are you satisfied or not satisfied with the policy of Federal Chancellor Helmut Schmidt?" Such polling questions do not constitute more than one-tenth of all the methodological possibilities offered by social research. Nine-tenths of them will remain inaccessible to journalists if they do not receive better training in social research.

THE PROCESS OF ACQUIRING KNOWLEDGE IN STATISTICS

Unlike natural science, social research is essentially unable to command results that are entirely precise; it can only make observations with a higher or lower probability of accuracy. This is something

[2] As noted in the *Der Spiegel* article cited earlier, p. 113.
[3] *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, No. 25 (Jan. 25, 1980).

journalists abhor. They feel that the best article could be ruined by the cautious probability observations of social research.

The way social research *gains knowledge* is just as ponderous and journalistically unattractive. It obtains most of its results by comparing numbers: 37 percent in group A as opposed to 26 percent in group B. However dramatic the finding might be for group A, it is not enticing material for journalists. On the other hand, the information that one-third of all people under 30 years old cross streets against traffic lights suits them very well. It provides a banner headline and a subject for concerned commentary on today's youth, even if one-third of all other age groups also cross the street against the traffic lights.

CORRELATION AND CAUSALITY

Problems of providing statistical proof can just be touched upon here. Of course, journalists are familiar with the saying that literally everything can be proven with statistics. But most of them are not familiar with how the validity of statistical evidence can be assessed. Controlled experiments, the superior method used for several centuries by natural science in the investigation of cause and effect, or causality, appear strange to them when used in social research. Just as alien to them is the whole problem of spurious correlations, which change or dissolve when antecedent or intervening variables are added to the analysis. Nor do they know how such false inferences may be avoided. None of this has been part of journalistic education up to the present. Hence, when journalists receive statistical information, they decide in accordance with their own wishes and expectations what to acknowledge as causality, and where to apply the saying that everything can be proven with statistics.

The Voracious Little Brother

In the late 1940s, the cofounder of the Allensbach Institute, Erich Peter Neumann, himself a journalist, talked about the sworn enmity that exists between journalism and survey research. At the celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Allensbach Institute, the editor of *Der Spiegel* magazine, Rudolf Augstein, said in his speech about the attitude of journalists toward survey research: "Well, as you know, we have come to terms with the voracious little brother . . ." (Augstein, 1974: xviii).

The obstacles to an unbiased use of survey research as a source of information for journalists are not only linked to the intractabilities of statistical method. The relationship of journalists toward survey research is burdened and even irritated by other factors.

The voracious little brother has stripped journalism of its century-old privilege of being the mouthpiece of public opinion, of expressing the prevailing opinion. Journalists might feel undermined by survey research in yet another respect. It was their privilege to determine which events, which arguments, and which persons are important and deserving of general attention by selecting and choosing the method of presentation, thereby exercising the "agenda-setting function" (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). Today, survey research has interloped into this field; by making a person, an event, an argument the object of a survey, it can trigger public debate.

Defining the Role of a Public Opinion Correspondent: A Model Contract

The same conditions that have created animosity and misunderstanding could also be the basis for an alliance, namely, data precision journalism. However, the approach of attaching small survey units to the newspapers, which some editorial offices appear to consider the most obvious solution, would have to be avoided. Experience has shown that this usually reduces survey research to its simplest form, that is, to elementary polling questions. Unexpected developments are not uncovered this way, erroneous interpretations are not prevented, early diagnoses are not given, social research results contradicting assumptions and expectations are not found.

As one suggestion, let me outline a model contract for the collaboration between journalists who want to learn more about survey research and the director of a survey research institute who is a former journalist. The collaboration is designed to produce public opinion correspondents in the newspaper as well as in the research institute.

1. The institute conducts six surveys per year for this paper, partly within the framework of representative population surveys or as questions included in omnibus surveys with an average of four questionnaire items, and one or two surveys among special groups, such as students, self-employed persons, teachers.

2. At least six articles are written by the director of the institute; they are not necessarily restricted to the results of exclusive surveys commissioned by the paper but also analyze long-term trends or interpret election results or comment on survey results from other sources.

3. Assistance in the editorial evaluation of the results of surveys

conducted for this paper is provided in all cases where staff members or freelancers assigned by the editors write about this material.

4. At least one conference a month is held in which the director of the institute takes part, dealing with subjects proposed by the editors or the institute about tendencies observed or possible interpretations of events; criticism is offered by the editors about the wording of survey questions, and explanations are provided about why interpretations published in this paper contradict available survey data. Informational and critical discussion of public opinion research findings from sources other than the contracting institute also takes place. In addition to these conferences, communication is maintained by phone, telex, and mail.

5. Access to the institute's archives is made available upon the editor's request.

6. Contacts are encouraged with members of the editorial staff who want to specialize in and comment on this kind of news material, to stimulate their interest and contribute to their education. If desired, a period of training at the institute is offered to newsroom staff members.

The contract does not commit the institute exclusively. It may conduct research for other media and may also publish in other newspapers and magazines articles that were offered to the contracting newspaper but rejected.

Practical Experiences

A contract of this type concluded between the leading German daily newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine* and myself as the director of the Allensbach Institute for Demoscopy has been in force since January 1979. What impact has it had? The number of articles dealing with public opinion research results has increased markedly, not only on the editorial pages of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* but also in the competing daily newspaper, *Die Welt*, and in others as well. "Ambivalent" results are fully represented, while a subtle comparison of different methods of reaching an investigative goal is not only accepted but expressly solicited. The publication of essays about indicators or spurious correlations, about multilevel analyses or Guttman scales may also soon be possible. (In fact, these can be exciting subjects if presented by means of concrete examples.) The number of editors evincing an interest in writing articles based on survey material is gradually increasing. At each of the monthly conferences, there are one or two of the total of five to seven participants who take part for the first time, listen to the introductory briefing, and begin to show an interest in survey research findings as journalistic material and, hence, in the method as well.

The use of graphs showing results of survey research, forming a kind of counterweight to the essays, has increased markedly. It is the editors who have taken the initiative here and who make use of access to the Allensbach archives. Some of the things done for this newspaper, for example, were a survey among students, a survey about the image of entrepreneurs, about the new German (no-fault) divorce law, about legislation on parental rights, about German-American relations, about religious attitudes, and about expectations for the 1980s. We have yet to deal with the task of using material from abroad on a current basis; it would appear important to exercise caution here and not to deluge the paper with survey research data.

This model is outlined here because it is an already established practice, a response to the "clash of institutional imperatives." Facilitating a continuous direct encounter between journalists and researchers is an important structural element. There should be no interpreters between them because this way the least information value is lost and the conviction of a common cause grows, as does, in the best circumstances, sympathy between the two. After all, for both of them, being communication experts is a hallmark of their professional competence, and as such they are used to adapting themselves to the modes of thinking of others.

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