No more Groundhog Day? How qualitative work can augment polling insight

By Suzanne Hall, head of the Qualitative Social Research Unit, Ipsos MORI

Any pollster would be forgiven for thinking that, lately, they had been starring as Punxsutawney Phil in their own personal Groundhog Day, with little to show for it. The various election results have placed polling under scrutiny, with a steady barrage of comment pieces declaring polling to be dead, that researchers are just another bunch of experts who can’t be trusted, and that the findings are ‘fake news’.

Despite this, there remains huge interest in what polling can tell us. And rightly so: the polls did, in fact, tell the story of the 2017 general election campaign from the decline in the Conservative’s fortunes to Theresa May’s personal struggles and Jeremy Corbyn’s rise. Consequently, news coverage favours information about ‘who is up or down in the polls’ with this demand driven by consumer appetite. In response, our colleagues across the industry work with tenacity and skill to deliver these findings under time and budgetary constraints. What’s more, if polling takes the ‘pulse of democracy’, as George Gallup claimed, then it’s invaluable for showing when a party is suffering the electoral equivalent of a cardiac arrest as it did in this most remarkable of elections.

But what has been particularly heartening is the increased media interest in qualitative methods as a means of augmenting polling insight. Political qualitative work has not always had the best of reputations: the pitfalls of focus groups were superbly skewered in ‘The Thick of It’ which covered professional participants (‘Dial-An-Opinion, is this, send me three liberals, two ... mavericks and a racist?’) to anodyne findings (‘There’s no point in asking people what they think. They either don’t know what they think or they think that you should bring back hanging for traffic wardens’).

The tide is turning, however. Alongside Ipsos’ own qualitative work, many other agencies regularly published their qualitative findings on the election. This reflects a growing understanding that, in order to understand how people feel about electoral events, we need to be ‘more open to new sources of information’. Away from the ballot box, Trisha Greenhalgh’s open letter (signed by 76 academics) to the British Medical Journal advocated that a more ‘proactive, scholarly, and pluralistic approach’ be taken to research published in the journal to counteract the existing bias against qualitative work (Greenhalgh et al, 2016). Asking people what they think is not enough: it is also important to listen and be guided by the issues they raise and the language they use. This was highlighted by Katherine Cramer’s work in Wisconsin prior to the US presidential election: ‘I’ve found that the best way to study how people interpret politics is to listen to them talk with people they know in their own settings’ (Sommerhauser, 2017).
It was by doing just this – in curry houses in Halifax, pubs in Bedford and social clubs in Eltham – that helped us pick up on the factors driving public opinion. From these conversations, we knew that the Conservatives’ talk about the reintroduction of fox hunting had made much more of an impact with voters than was perhaps appreciated at the time, and was seen as being symptomatic of a party that was out-of-touch with the concerns of ordinary people. We also heard, time and again, that people had reached a tipping point with austerity: it wasn’t that they necessarily agreed with – or even liked – Jeremy Corbyn but he at least provided a positive vision for their future. And we can do so much more. Other approaches, involving biometrics for instance – we tracked participant’s heart rates as they watched clips of the leaders’ speeches – can help us get closer to what people think and feel.

As social researchers, our job is to make sense of the world around us, and to provide a voice for those who take the time to participate in our studies. But in these increasingly baffling times, we can only do this effectively if we reach for all the tools at our disposal.

References

Suzanne is a plenary speaker at the SRA annual conference on 6 December.

See Julia Clark and Chris Jackson on page 10 for more on election polling methods...

Wales social research awards

By Faye Gracey

The SRA, in partnership with the Alliance for Useful Evidence, is pleased to announce the launch of the Wales Social Research Awards to recognise outstanding research undertaken by social science researchers. The awards aim to help social science research gain the recognition and profile it deserves. Please do nominate the talented researchers you know who are committed to undertaking broad, innovative, timely and exciting social science research in Wales or about Wales. For more information see: http://the-sra.org.uk/home/sra-cymru/

Keep 7 December free in your diaries for the award ceremony in Cardiff Bay.

Thanks to Rachel Hughes (head of insight, Sport Wales) and Richard Thurston (deputy chief research officer, Welsh Government) who had the idea and have been developing the award with support and advice from the SRA, Alliance for Useful Evidence, Beaufort Research, Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research, Data & Methods (WISERD), Academy of Social Sciences, The Learned Society of Wales and others.

Please do keep in touch on Twitter: @SRACymru, LinkedIn: SRA Cymru – always great to hear from you. If you are interested in getting involved, we would love to hear from you: faye.gracey@wales.gsi.gov.uk

NOMINATIONS by 25 September 2017 – http://the-sra.org.uk/home/sra-cymru/

SRA RESEARCH MATTERS: SEPTEMBER 2017: 2
I recently attended the European Survey Research Association (ESRA) conference in Lisbon. It has taken place every two years since its inception in Barcelona in 2005, and is now a major event in the survey methodologist’s calendar. Although we are regularly told that the social survey is withering away in the face of the onslaughts of big data analysis, both the quality of the contributions and enthusiasm and energy of attendees strongly indicate otherwise. However, what the conference did highlight was how much the social survey is changing in nature. After decades during which survey methods have been dominated by single-mode data-collection approaches, three major, and related, shifts are occurring. First, the use of web-based data-collection in serious social surveys is growing rapidly. Second, more and more respondents complete web questionnaires using smartphones and other mobile devices. And third, the simple single-mode survey no longer dominates as it once did: more and more surveys are mixing the modes they use to collect data and also those they use to contact sample members.

I was personally involved in a double session organised by my colleague, Gerry Nicolaas, which was devoted to the rapidly emerging area of web push surveys – surveys which attempt to recruit high quality (usually) general population samples for web surveys using traditional contact modes (usually post, but sometimes telephone). In many countries, this method is the only way of carrying out random probability web surveys because sample frames don’t include comprehensive email contact details. And yet, despite its cumbersomeness – using letters/phone calls to persuade people to complete web questionnaires – the method has now been used with surprising success in many countries, including the UK. Of course, response rates are lower than for many traditional methods, but when the method is combined with web survey non-respondent follow-up using a separate data collection mode (usually a mail questionnaire), it can deliver high quality data at considerably lower cost than traditional gold-standard face-to-face interviewing methods.

To my mind, these and related developments presage an exciting future for the survey method. Contrary to what some analysts claim, the method will not be rendered redundant by organically generated (‘big’) data, but rather will evolve rapidly in the face of the changing environment: high quality surveys will adapt and survive but in so doing will often look very different from the surveys we are used to.
The ethics of writing

By Helen Kara, SRA trustee

Most professional writers believe that the way we think and feel influences the words we choose to write, and they understand that the words we choose to use can influence the thoughts and feelings of others. We need to become, and remain, aware of this, or we risk misusing our authorly power.

A generation or so ago, English terminology in common use reflected the dominance of men in Western society. As late as 1978 in the US, a woman could be fired for being pregnant, and, as late as 1982, UK pubs could refuse to serve women. But at the same time, women had begun to take roles traditionally assigned to men, which led to some linguistic oddities. I remember feeling rather uncomfortable with being designated the ‘chairman’ of a committee, in the late 1990s, when ‘chairperson’ or simply ‘chair’ would have served.

There were fierce arguments between those who did not accept that language influences thought (still a contentious hypothesis1), and those who believed that traditional language use supported the discriminatory status quo and, therefore, should be challenged. Some people went further than I thought was sensible, such as by replacing ‘history’ with ‘herstory’ (I can see the point of that kind of change in some circumstances, but the etymology of ‘history’ suggests it’s much more about the ‘story’ than the ‘his’) or ‘woman’ with ‘womyn’ (I didn’t get that one at all).

This kind of terminological tinkering led to the phrase ‘political correctness’ being used to discredit all attempts to replace sexist terms with existing, sensible, neutral terms. I still wince when I see reports of women ‘manning a stall’ – what’s wrong with ‘staffing’? But it’s now quite usual to speak of a ‘police officer’ rather than ‘policeman’ or ‘policewoman’, and a ‘flight attendant’ rather than an ‘air hostess’ or ‘steward’. These changes in terminology have moved in parallel with increasing opportunities and equality for women in the Western world.

However, there is some newer terminology that I think is unhelpful for some sections of society. For example, in the Guardian a couple of years ago, the non-fiction writer Steven Poole gave a thoughtful analysis of the unintentional difficulties caused by the phrase ‘first world problems’2. He showed how the reductive use of ‘first world’, with its implicit opposition to the ‘third world’ (itself an unfashionable term these days), enables some people to condescend, patronise, humblebrag, sidestep compassion, and generally dehumanise pretty much everyone else. Another one is the new-ish way of designating something as somehow poor by saying ‘it gets old really fast’. I am getting old, rather faster than I would like, and I am becoming increasingly aware of the discrimination and difficulties experienced by older members of our society. I would prefer colloquial usage of the word ‘old’ to have positive connotations. And several chaps of my acquaintance have objected to ‘mansplaining’, not being proponents of the phenomenon that that clumsy construction purports to name. Terms like these swiftly become stock phrases, akin to clichés. And clichés are evidence of lazy thinking. All this has implications for us as writers. Writing is a creative process, and that includes writing for research. Stories must be told, words and structures chosen, and these processes involve a lot of decision-making. Researchers of all kinds earn our livings with our brains. I would argue that we have an ethical responsibility to avoid the lazy clichés and to express our new thinking in fresh language. Also, we should try to remain aware of the potential effects of our creative choices on our readers. My examples have focused on gender, socio-economic status, and age; other terminology can be demeaning to other groups such as people of colour or people with mental health problems. It is our responsibility to ensure, as far as possible, that we don’t use language in a way that supports any discriminatory actions or practices.


Understanding photography ethics in social research

By Savannah Dodd, visiting research associate, Queen’s University Belfast

Two years ago, I attended a photography exhibition that featured images from the aftermath of the 2013 tsunami in the Philippines. One attendee, noting the anguished faces in the images, asked the photographer, ‘How did people feel about you photographing them when they were suffering?’

The photographer disappointed me in his response. He said that he did not know or care how they felt; that his responsibility is not to know how they feel, but to take their picture. He swept across Manila taking pictures of the destruction without any engagement with, or consent from, the individuals he photographed.

Although this is an extreme example, it highlights some of the cornerstones of photography ethics: dignity, power and consent. Further, it raises the question: what is the responsibility of the photographer? What responsibilities do we have to the subject and to the viewer?

PHOTOGRAPHY IN SOCIAL RESEARCH

Research has seen a growth in methodologies that use photographic data, including the study of ‘found’ photography, the production of photographs by researchers or by interlocutors (‘photovoice’), the use of photographs in interviews (photo elicitation), and the representation of research through photography (Pauwels, 2015).

Photographic methodologies have enabled researchers to access different kinds of information (Harper, 2002), to record ‘thick description’ (Kharel, 2015), and to break down power relationships between the researcher and the interlocutor (Niskač, 2011).

The democratisation of photography and its increased use in research represents an exciting opportunity for conducting and presenting research in new and innovative ways. It also, however, raises challenges.

UNDERSTANDING PHOTOGRAPHY ETHICS

The foundations of photography ethics are essential to all types of research. The question is: how can we apply them to a visual medium? Going further: how do questions of research ethics change when applied to photography?

Take, for example, the idea of responsibility to accurately represent your subject. Now imagine that you are looking at a photograph you took of a street on which you conducted fieldwork. When you took the photograph, you did not notice the rubbish heap in the bottom right corner, so, before adding this image to your report, you crop it out of the frame. Is this an accurate portrayal, or are you deceiving the viewer? How can we accurately portray any scene when we are always cropping reality with our lens? In what ways does this type of selection differ from the selection we do in our writing?

This simple-seeming example speaks to the fundamentals of photography ethics. We face these questions of representation and selection in every picture we take. And there are dozens of ethical considerations that should be considered if we want to make use of photography in our research.

Consent is another foundational ethical question. While forms present consent in binary terms of yes or no, in reality, consent is a constant negotiation: are people consenting to be photographed only once, for five minutes’ time, or for a whole day? Are they consenting to be photographed candidly, or only when they are aware of the camera? If they receive some bad news and are distressed, do you still have consent to photograph?

GOING FURTHER

There is no singular way of thinking about photography ethics. Research photographers find themselves having to make ethical decisions on the spot, taking into consideration many variables, including method, subject, context and intent. Rather than attempting to outline what is unequivocally right or wrong, there is greater value in familiarising researchers with the ethical arguments to enable them to think critically about how they use photography in their work.

The SRA is considering the possibility of a workshop on this topic; readers with an interest should email the SRA office (admin@the-sra.org.uk), attn. Graham Farrant.

References
Survey researchers use diary methods to capture information on people’s behaviour, such as diet, travel and expenditure. The diary is usually a self-completion document (paper and/or digital) that requires survey participants to record details of the behaviour of interest over a specified period, in a pre-specified way. The length of the diary recording period depends on the behaviour being measured: how frequent the behaviour is, how much detail about it is required, and to what level of accuracy. Time and money are factors too of course.

PROBLEMS WITH DIARIES

Whilst the diary has long been seen as the gold standard method for capturing behavioural information, researchers know that it is not without its problems. The method can change the behaviour it is trying to measure (the Hawthorne effect). Diaries can be burdensome for participants to complete, and this can put people off taking part in the diary element of the survey. Those who agree to complete it can tire of filling it in, leading to a decline in the amount and quality of information recorded. Diaries can also suffer from recall error because they are typically completed retrospectively.

As researchers, we try to tackle some of these problems by making changes to the design of the diary study. For example, to tackle diary fatigue and the drop-off in information recorded over the diary recording period, we can reduce the length of the diary keeping period. However, tackling one source of error runs the risk of exacerbating another. For example, reducing the length of the diary recording period may reduce diary fatigue among participants but can increase problems for analysts as less frequently occurring behaviours are no longer captured (in sufficient numbers), increasing the variance around estimates. More research is needed to understand these design trade-offs.

ALTERNATIVES

Researchers are looking at alternatives to diaries for measuring behavioural data. One approach is to ask survey questions about the behaviour of interest. Studies comparing expenditure data from diary and recall questions in the Canadian Food Expenditure Survey (Ahmed et al, 2006) and the US Consumer Expenditure survey (Bee et al, 2015) find that estimates of food expenditure are, on average, higher using data from recall questions than from diaries. These findings have led some economists to argue that recall questions may produce more reliable expenditure estimates than diaries.

Another design option involves digital technology, with participants being asked to scan barcodes (a strategy used for several years in market research), wear or carry a sensor (for example GPS or accelerometers) or upload photographs of expenditure receipts (a recent experiment with members of Understanding Society’s Innovation Panel involved this). Using these types of data is not without its challenges, including gaining the co-operation of participants to make use of digital devices to collect data; ethical issues; and the quality of data that such devices collect, for example the accuracy of sensor data. As the technology continues to develop, and more people use digital devices and services, so co-operation rates will likely improve. Further exploration of the potential of such strategies is needed to help survey funders assess the benefits and costs of incorporating digital technology into existing diary surveys.

ARE DIARIES THE GOLD STANDARD METHOD FOR MEASURING BEHAVIOUR?

It depends on the level of detail required, of whom and for what purpose. There are alternatives to survey diaries, such as asking survey recall questions and using digital tools, like sensors and cameras, but these sources are not without their problems. Improving the evidence base on which we make decisions about how to collect data on behaviour will help us make better use of the methods available.

References

Upholding the three pillars of statistics

By Ed Humpherson, director general for regulation, UK Statistics Authority

It would be easy to think that the proposals we’ve made to refresh the Code of Practice for Statistics1 (https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/osr/code-of-practice) are a minority-interest subject. Perhaps, people might think, they’re important for social researchers who work within government on official statistics; and possibly for researchers who advise government. But beyond that, the code is not really relevant.

I want to demonstrate that statistics are far from a minority sport; that the code is relevant to the whole social research community; and that we need your contribution to our consultation.

It all revolves around the reasons we want to refresh the code: to modernise it, and to position and contextualise it to address some major challenges.

MODERNISATION

There are several strands to modernisation. We want to support the shift to a more unified analytical function within government. This shift recognises that, at present, there are a series of different professional groupings in government: statisticians, social researchers, economists, operational researchers. They all do important and distinct work, and their conceptual and professional approaches are valuable precisely because they are different. But all the analytical groups share a huge amount of DNA: what we’re now aiming for is a code for statistics and numerical information that starts with universal principles – trustworthiness, quality and value – which underpin all good analysis:

- By trustworthiness, we mean that the analysis should be produced by professionals free from the pressures of vested interest (of their employers)
- By quality, we mean that the analysis is a reasonable reflection of the real-world phenomena that it is seeking to explain, and is not materially misleading
- By value, we mean that the analysis helps society answer important questions

Since the previous code was published, in 2008, we have seen a huge growth in data of all kinds in the contemporary world – data has become significantly more widely available and easier to use. The idea of focusing just on a sub-category called official statistics seems out-of-date: the public aren’t likely to distinguish between different categories.

People see numbers emerging from government, and expect high standards to support them. These high standards are what the three pillars of trustworthiness, quality and value are all about.

We also want to modernise the code to reflect changes in how statistics are derived and presented. The new Digital Economy Act is likely to increase the use of administrative data and big data to produce statistics: this presents huge opportunities but also challenges, such as understanding the quality of these new sources. More generally, we want the new code to encourage innovation, including in how statistics and numerical information are made available to decision-makers and the public, and not to be seen as prescribing a right and a wrong way of doing things.

STATISTICS MATTER

The most profound reason to refresh the code is the importance of statistics in public discourse. We live in a time of anxiety about truth, post-truth and fake news. The analytical community fears that trust in evidence is reaching a tipping point, a point of no return.

The good news is that there is widespread recognition of the dangers in this mistrust, and a collective drive to fight back. We see the code as part of the fight back. At its heart, it emphasises that statistics and analysis are a public asset, part of the fabric of democratic debate and decision-making.

That’s why the code isn’t about the minority sport of statistics. It’s about upholding the value of all types of data and analysis.

1 The Code of Practice for Official Statistics applies to all UK bodies that produce official statistics. It encourages and supports them to maintain their independence and to ensure adequate resourcing for statistical production. It helps producers and users of statistics by setting out the necessary principles and practices to produce statistics that are trustworthy, high quality and of public value.
**SRA Scotland update**

*By Sophie Ellison*

We are pleased to host a re-run (with Scotland-based perspectives) of the SRA’s random probability event (see p8 for details).

In August, the committee participated, along with other organisations involved in the social sciences, in a meeting organised by the Campaign for Social Sciences to discuss potential for joint projects. We are sad to see former branch chair, Julie Carr, step down from the committee after many years’ involvement. We’d like to thank Julie for all that she’s done for the SRA in Scotland and wish her the very best for the future. Do keep an eye on the SRA website, follow us on Twitter (@SRA_Scotland) or join our LinkedIn group ‘SRA Scotland’s network for social researchers’ to find out about upcoming training and events in Scotland.

---

**SRA Scotland: where now for the random probability survey?**

**Thursday 14 September, Edinburgh**

2pm to 5pm, followed by wine reception

**SRA members: £25**

Booking at www.the-sra.org.uk/events

Face-to-face survey fieldwork is widely perceived to be in crisis. Do ever-dwindling response rates signal the end for traditional probability methods, and if so can alternatives such as quota sampling or probability panels take their place?

This SRA Scotland event explores the options available to research commissioners seeking rigorous findings, and identifies the trade-offs in terms of cost, bias and timeliness.

This event ran successfully in London this summer, and we’re delighted to bring it to Scotland – with many of those expert speakers, plus others from Scotland:

- The context: with Patten Smith, head of Research Methods Centre at Ipsos MORI and SRA chair, and Keith Bolling, head of national and official statistics at Kantar Public
- The case for quota sampling with Roger Mortimore, director of political analysis, Ipsos MORI
- Random probability adaptations: online random probability panel with Paul Bradshaw, Head of ScotCen; from PAF to online panel with Joel Williams, head of survey methods at Kantar Public
- The scientific assessment: expert views on bias/representativeness with Patrick Sturgis, director of National Centre for Research Methods
- The clients’ perspective: how do research commissioners view their options? with Sarah Martin, head of surveys, Office of the Chief Statistician, Scottish Government

**Chair: Lindsay Paterson, professor of education policy, University of Edinburgh**

---

**SRA Ireland update**

*By Kieran O’Leary*

We’re planning a course on creative methodologies (delivered by a leading survey methodologist) which will likely take place in October. Further information coming soon.

We’re sorry to be losing Naomi Feely from the Irish committee. She has provided great energy in helping develop the SRA in Ireland over the past few years, and we wish her well with her new ventures. We’re always looking for people to get involved in helping the SRA in Ireland. Ideas always welcome. Please do get in touch! See the SRA website for further details of events.

Email us on SRAIreland@the-sra.org.uk or follow us on Twitter @SRAIreland.
Factchecking the snap election

By Amy Sippitt, research and impact manager, Full Fact

Full Fact came back from the Easter bank holiday to rumblings of another election. As BBC presenters warned of a ‘major announcement’ from the Prime Minister, we dug out our snap election plan, and braced ourselves to factcheck the UK’s fourth major vote in three years.

Eight weeks later, we’d published 100 factchecks and explainer articles, raised £100,000 through crowdfunding, live-factchecked seven leader debates and scrutinised the launches of the Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat, SNP, UKIP and Green manifestos. We briefed journalists on newsworthy facts, particularly after the London Bridge terror attack when armed police numbers came under the spotlight.

We also ran a project with the global news verification specialists First Draft, which had just finished a project working with 37 newsrooms in France to debunk misinformation during the French election. With six weeks to polling day, we aimed to run a slimmed down version of this. Our sophisticated monitoring operation tracked what was trending (or ‘pre-trending’) around the internet, including hyper-partisan sites, mainstream media and social media.

We factchecked and verified a surprising mix of claims, often images. There was a collage of missing people circulating after the Manchester attack which had been altered to include pictures of uninvolved people, a misleading claim about the Conservatives’ plans to relax regulation of the ivory trade, and a story about Gina Miller conning her clients out of £800,000 (but not Gina Miller the anti-Brexit campaigner).

DOES IT MAKE ANY DIFFERENCE?

For the past few years, factcheckers outside the US have had to settle for evidence of impact that is more anecdotal than scientific. Despite the boom in factchecking around the world (Duke Reporters’ Lab recorded a 150% increase in the last three years), relatively little is known about the impact of factchecking on voter beliefs and political actors’ behaviour. Much of the existing research has been carried out in the unique political context of the US, and some is based on experimental studies which don’t necessarily reflect how we absorb and use facts in our daily lives or how factcheckers work in the UK.

We have numerous examples of specific corrections which are probably (but not definitely) attributable to Full Fact either contacting government directly, publishing a widely-shared factcheck, or actively asking for a correction. Last year, for example, the Prime Minister made a Hansard correction to an inaccurate claim about the number of schools in the UK. We have obtained corrections from almost every national newspaper, as well as broadcasters, MPs and a select committee, and secured changes to statistical releases and publication processes.

We have seen factchecking becoming a staple of public debate particularly during elections, with the BBC setting up Reality Check, and Channel 4’s FactCheck ramping up. Then we have our online-reach figures. We’ve seen a fourfold increase in unique site users since 2015. On Facebook, our reach has grown from 46,000 for the 2015 election to 12 million for the 2017 snap election.

While it’s useful to get a sense of the growing online demand for factchecking, it’s very rare that we get robust evidence about whether people’s beliefs are more accurate because of our work, or whether politicians are more careful with facts. Last year Ipsos Mori ran its EU Perils of Perception survey which found that towards the end of the referendum campaign, almost half of people believed the widely-rebutted inaccurate claim that we send £350m to the EU each week. We need more information like this to do our jobs properly.

We also need more information which goes beyond defining factcheckers’ impact as simply whether we change people’s beliefs. We need to take account of the potential impact of our broader activities like corrections and education programmes. This is why we’re developing a research agenda with factcheckers in South Africa and Argentina to plan for actionable research to help us better understand how our audience, the wider public and public figures, consume information, and our broader role in the systems and societies in which we operate.

Contact amy.sippitt@fullfact.org to find out more.

We also need more information which goes beyond defining factcheckers’ impact as simply whether we change people’s beliefs.

While it’s useful to get a sense of the growing online demand for factchecking, it’s very rare that we get robust evidence about whether people’s beliefs are more accurate because of our work, or whether politicians are more careful with facts.

Last year Ipsos Mori ran its EU Perils of Perception survey which found that towards the end of the referendum campaign, almost half of people believed the widely-rebutted inaccurate claim that we send £350m to the EU each week. We need more information like this to do our jobs properly.

We also need more information which goes beyond defining factcheckers’ impact as simply whether we change people’s beliefs. We need to take account of the potential impact of our broader activities like corrections and education programmes. This is why we’re developing a research agenda with factcheckers in South Africa and Argentina to plan for actionable research to help us better understand how our audience, the wider public and public figures, consume information, and our broader role in the systems and societies in which we operate.

Contact amy.sippitt@fullfact.org to find out more.
Public opinion is more than survey results

By Julia Clark, senior vice president and Chris Jackson, vice president, Ipsos Public Affairs

The recent run of ‘shock’ elections (UK 2015; US 2016; Italy 2016; UK 2017) prompted a new round of debates about the accuracy of public polls. Despite some outstanding poll performances (Canada 2015; France 2017; Netherlands 2017; UK Exit Poll 2017 and 2015), many commentators continue to try to learn the lessons of missed elections by imposing their preferred methodological approach on the industry. However, this risks mistaking the trees for the forest. We believe that the future of public opinion research lies not in the pursuit of perfection via a single, specific approach (for example only a specific type of survey-based polling) but rather in bringing multiple indicators together to produce a holistic representation of public sentiments. This can mean multiple methodologies, historical trend data and non-survey inputs such as models.

Looking past phone vs online

So, what is working and what isn’t? Online polling was lauded for its accuracy in the US in 2012, but – like the phone polls – got it wrong in 2016. British polling (both phone and online) in 2015 and 2017 failed to predict the correct winner, but the exit polling – carried out by two of the companies doing deep-dive polling among typically under-represented groups and working class suburban voters.

Despite the varied successes and failures of both phone and online methodologies of late, the debate persists between advocates of traditional telephone or face-to-face surveys and the more modern online polls. At the crux of this debate is coverage and representativeness: how well does each approach succeed in true national coverage in an age of declining landline usage and rising internet access? The answer is a moving target, and attempting to determine a pattern even by country or by election-type proves futile. Putting all other methodological considerations aside, this track record should suggest that the fix for election polling does not rest solely on picking the right way to interview voters.

What is clear is that survey data alone – no matter the methodology – is not always enough. We believe the future lies in using a range of inputs beyond simple poll data: introducing model-based projections that use survey data in addition to the core voting question to reach a clearer picture of the state of public opinion.

Using models in polling

While the polling data failed to predict the correct winner in the US in 2016, models based on historical trends and government approval ratings suggested as early as 20151 that Trump had a good chance of winning2 (although others suggested the reverse3). The same model also predicted Obama’s 2012 win in the US and the Liberals’ 2015 win in Canada. While there is no substitute for polling data, there is also a clear logic for looking at these opportunities for improved outcome prediction.

Unlike the ‘point in time’ insights offered by polling data, models allow us to look for patterns in existing datasets and to use those patterns to predict future events or behaviours.

In political polling, the objective is to predict how the electorate will vote, and so models naturally focus on data related to vote intention – but without explicitly asking about voting behaviour.

The model referenced above, for example, uses just two variables (incumbency and approval ratings of the current government) to predict with over 80% accuracy the outcome of an election. Of these two inputs, one also relies on survey data capture – on aggregate – to drive the model. Other election prediction models are entirely independent of any survey input, looking at factors like the makeup of a parliament; population demographics; historic election trends; and election systems.

We posit that, despite proclamations about its demise, political polling is not dying but rather evolving. The information age has created a multitude of new data sources and provided the computational power to develop advanced mathematical models. The future of election polling and forecasting lies in understanding what these new sources of information tell us about the public, and how best to use these new tools.


Adventures in heritage science

By Cath Dillon, independent researcher

A SOCIAL RESEARCHER MEETS A CHEMIST
A few years ago, I took on the challenge of working on an interdisciplinary project called Collections Demography – could heritage management be improved by thinking of collections as populations of objects, like populations of people? I met with a chemist to learn about how data on object health (in this case, paper) is generalised to predictions about whole-collection health. I learnt how ‘samples’ of historic paper would be artificially aged in order to estimate time to ‘end of life’. I asked the chemist how many pieces of paper would be tested, and she replied, ‘Two, maybe three’. That day, I learnt that the word ‘sample’ doesn’t mean the same thing across disciplines – nor ‘significant’, ‘condition’ and ‘survey’. The effort required to understand other disciplines and communicate about my own has since paid off through several productive collaborations in heritage science.

THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS
Up to this point, moving into the heritage sector seemed a natural progression. I had worked for a children’s charity for several years, conducting service-user research. When later compiling evidence of the social outcomes of a funding programme for the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (which no longer exists), I found many shared points of reference in policies, strategies and evaluation frameworks. However, working with conservators and heritage scientists made me see the sector from a new perspective: no longer as a visitor, but from the viewpoint of those tasked with managing large collections in a time of austerity and global challenges, such as climate change. There often appeared to be a great distance between the highly skilled work of collections care professionals and the need to demonstrate the social and economic value of collections.

WHAT QUESTIONS DO HERITAGE SCIENTISTS HAVE FOR SOCIAL SCIENTISTS?
There was a call for heritage scientists to engage more with visitors and other stakeholders, and I found a niche for someone with social research skills. I could help with some familiar questions. How do I design a questionnaire? How many people do I need in each experimental group? How many interviews is enough? How do I analyse all this text data? My answers to these questions have evolved into one- or two-day workshops on research methods for Masters-level students in heritage science and conservation, in the planning stages of their dissertation research.

LINKING HERITAGE SCIENCE TO SOCIAL IMPACT
One exercise from my teaching asks students to plan for stakeholder engagement using a mock research question. This can draw out the benefits of engagement, particularly for linking heritage science research to wider social impact. I like to stay in touch with the social research community to maintain my knowledge about those links, keep my skills up to date, and provide context to my own research. For example, I have been involved in several projects about how visitors value and think about the future of collections. Excitingly, on a project called Coming Clean we have been exploring ways of crowdsourcing conservation needs using photo surveys, helping to bridge the gap between the essential work of collections care and visitor impact.

SOCIETY REPRESENTED IN THE MUSEUM
While I was collecting data in a museum recently, two young women dashed past asking, ‘Crime and Punishment, where is it? We need to find it before the museum closes.’ Young people in a museum of their own free will, on a Saturday afternoon, learning about the history of society. This is one example of why I strongly believe that we should care for collections: to help us transfer our combined knowledge (that is, our culture) from one generation to the next. Collections provide alternative ways of learning, a connection to the past, context to current events, and inspiration for the future. Research with visitors and heritage practitioners can help us make best use of collections, and shape the stories about society being told in heritage institutions.
SRA board awayday

By Helen Kara, SRA trustee

On a sweltering July day, the 14 SRA trustees and chief executive gathered at the Kings Fund in central London. Our aim was to consider the results of the last members’ survey and to plan the strategic direction of the SRA for the next three to five years.

We were particularly pleased to welcome Kieran O’Leary, our colleague from the Republic of Ireland. The Irish Sea rather gets in the way of us meeting face-to-face most of the time, so it was great to have him with us.

The day began with SRA chair, Patten Smith, giving a rundown of progress made as a result of the first board awayday in 2015. For example:

- Training and events held outside the capital cities
- Access to academic journals through EBSCO on a six-month trial
- Supporting organisations that work to raise standards in research such as Full Fact (rather than trying to duplicate their work ourselves)
- More trustees on the board with better representation across the sectors
- Work to standardise and improve our treatment of SRA volunteers, including production of a volunteer policy (almost finished)
- Creation of a digital communications strategy which will see us recruit for a digital communications officer in the very near future

In preparation for this awayday, we had analysed the results of the members’ survey, including responses to open questions. We found that there were four main areas for discussion: extending our reach, advocacy and public affairs, online/digital strategy and brand identity, and membership benefits.

For extending our reach, we discussed three main questions: where we want members from (geography); who we want those members to be (sector); how many members we want. This session raised rather more questions than answers, but we began to consider important topics such as: how international we want and need to be; the importance of retaining existing members as well as recruiting new ones; and how to champion the professional identity of social researchers.

The advocacy session addressed the questions of which issues we should focus on and how we might work with other organisations to do so. Members’ top priorities were: research quality, the use of social research in policy-making, and maintaining funding and infrastructure for research. Our discussion proved useful in exploring where we should put our energies; the next step is to put our priorities into action.

The online/digital strategy and brand identity session began by revising the recruitment advert for the new digital communications officer, and planning their induction to the SRA. Then we looked at what members want us to do in this area, and made sure those dovetailed with the plans for the new member of staff. Finally, we talked about branding, and came up with some themes: principled, intelligent, truthful, quality, independent, vocal, visible, recognised, stature, diverse, open, all-inclusive, and supportive community. We didn’t have time to go further, so the next step will be to work out how to develop these themes.

The final session, on membership benefits, considered what we do for existing versus new members, and whether we think about membership as transactional (member pays money and gets services in return) or relational (member has relationship with SRA). Comments on the members’ survey, and SRA activities, suggest that membership can be both or either.

We came back to the topic of professional identity, and began to consider whether the SRA could create, or help to create, some kind of certified or chartered professional status for its members. This is a very brief account of a very long and full day. We worked hard to capture all the ideas and comments on flipcharts, laptops, post-it notes and tablets. Our next steps are to write prioritisation papers for the September board meeting, at which we will decide what actions to take, how and when. Watch this space!
Doing real research: a practical guide to social research

Charles Laurie and Eric Allen Jensen
SAGE, 2016
Reviewed by Amy Edwards, research and policy analyst, National Children’s Bureau

This useful book takes the reader from planning a research project, right through to reporting, and every step in between. Unlike conventional social research text books, Laurie and Jensen focus on the application of research in the ‘real world’, acknowledging that the ideal and the practical are constantly in competition. This practical and honest approach means that this book does not leave my desk!

Covering everything from confidence intervals and p values to ethics, sampling strategies to storing data, Laurie and Jensen have ensured you can pick up the book with virtually any query and come away, not only with an answer, but an understanding of why it’s the most practical solution, and how to implement it in your research.

The most useful tips were about reminding researchers to explain the research in a simple way. It can be so easy to get caught up in the project or the subject that we sometimes need a reminder to explain things in a way that will make sense to prospective participants.

As well as their key tips, their real-world examples make the theoretical underpinnings of the book come to life, and help the reader to see problems being overcome. These include examples of recruiting participants, sampling and data analysis across social research disciplines and topics. They give practical advice that readers can learn from.

This book is beneficial to anyone working in social research, serving as a reminder that we all face the same challenges in our research, wherever we are in our careers. This book is your manager: offering knowledgeable and practical advice; and also your colleague: offering informal and non-judgemental support to help you design and carry out valid, reliable and ethical research.

Web survey methodology

Mario Callegaro, Katja Manfreda and Vasja Vehovar
SAGE, 2015
Reviewed by Mari Toomse-Smith, senior research director, NatCen Social Research

This is an invaluable review of current best practice and research evidence in web survey methodology. Unlike many other books on web surveys, it comprehensively covers all aspects of the survey research process, and brings together both theoretical understanding and real-life application. The latter is a particularly valuable feature of this book, and makes it stand out among survey methods literature. It includes many detailed practical recommendations over a wide range of topics including how to format questions; how to send email invites; and what to consider when selecting survey software.

The authors also make a point of not just summarising methodological findings, but making recommendations about what these findings mean for practice – very welcome, especially for research practitioners. It was also good to see a discussion of issues such as non-probability samples and the acceptance that, while not the methodological gold standard, this type of approach can be good enough in some situations (and what these situations could be!).

The book is targeted at a broad audience ranging from students to research professionals to researcher commissioners. As such, it covers both basics of general survey methodology as well as issues specific to web surveys. This means that not everything will be relevant to all readers, and may make finding what you need more difficult. It is also a long read. There is little to break up the text despite material that could easily have been used for this purpose, such as visual examples of best practice in questionnaire layout.

Those looking for quick answers may also have appreciated a bullet point summary of dos and don’ts at the end of each chapter.

Overall, however, this is a welcome addition to survey methods literature that marks the coming of age of the web survey field.
Evidence-based policy making in the social sciences: methods that matter

By Gerry Stoker and Mark Evans
Policy Press, 2016
Reviewed by Christine Bertram, Ecorys UK

The authors argue that the social sciences have a lot to offer to policymakers, by creating evidence of what works based on rigorous social research. The book is aimed at university academics, but is of use to anyone interested in producing robust, evidence-based research relevant to policymakers. The introductory discussion of the relevance of the social sciences to policymakers is interesting, and would make a great book on its own. This discussion focuses on the struggles to align the priorities of academia, such as the production of peer-reviewed, often theory-driven research, with the needs of time-poor policymakers, who need to know, within a comparatively short space of time, what works. However, the book goes far beyond this debate, and offers an insightful overview of a diverse range of methods that can be applied to all stages of the policy cycle.

The authors show that the research methods available to policymakers do not just consist of commonly-used techniques such as reviews, qualitative interviews and econometric modelling. They also include, for example, creative and co-creation methods, data mining approaches, randomised controlled trials, and storytelling, opening up new avenues for generating robust insights. The authors use guiding questions to help the reader determine which methods are most appropriate for which type of study. Real-life examples bring the methods to life, and help to increase understanding of how they work and their limitations; explaining them to readers who may be less familiar with them. The book attempts the difficult balance between outlining highly complex methods clearly and succinctly while providing sufficient detail to understand what the method can do and how. Some contributors manage this well, providing a comprehensive but critical overview of where and how these methods can be used (for example the chapters on big data or randomised controlled trials). Others provide a more technical introduction (for example qualitative comparative analysis or cluster analysis) which, while still basic, may be difficult to follow for readers without specialist knowledge.

Overall, the book provides an excellent overview of a diverse but select set of qualitative, quantitative and creative methods relevant to developing robust evidence to inform policymaking. It is a great addition to the bookshelf of any researcher interested in gaining an understanding of the range of methods available with further signposting to more technical literature. Overall, the book provides an excellent overview of a diverse but select set of qualitative, quantitative and creative methods relevant to developing robust evidence to inform policymaking. It is a great addition to the bookshelf of any researcher interested in gaining an understanding of the range of methods available with further signposting to more technical literature. It also provides a starting point for connecting policymakers and social scientists by highlighting the need for wider debate about how to better align the diverging needs of policymakers and researchers.

We’re hiring!
Digital Engagement Officer

The SRA is seeking a self-motivated, creative and experienced Digital Engagement Officer to develop and lead an expanding digital strategy for the organisation. The role will encompass marketing and communications, community building, web editing, digital strategy and multimedia. It’s a new initiative for the SRA and we need an enthusiastic and proactive candidate who can grow into this role, with potential for advancement as the organisation’s digital strategy develops.

Your activities will include a wide range of content generation, content management and platform management, liaising with SRA staff and volunteers.

The job is based in our central London office as part of our small team. Salary in the range £16,200 – £19,200 for 3 days a week (full time equivalent: £27,000 – £32,000).

We’re looking for someone with experience of:

- Social media scheduling software
- Managing a social media presence across multiple platforms
- Copy editing for the web and social media
- Managing blogs and working with external contributors

Please read the job description on our website for full details of the role and the person spec. This and the application form can be downloaded here: http://the-sra.org.uk/jobs/jobs-with-the-sra/

Deadline: 5 October 2017
‘Social Research in a Sceptical Age’

Wednesday 6 December 2017 at the British Library, London

The current climate of scepticism towards ‘experts’ has put many research practitioners and users on the defensive. Is it enough simply to assert the value of rigorous methods, or should we be checking, sharpening and improving our tools? If ‘post-truth’ carries real meaning then the pressure is on researchers to find a positive response – such as clearly communicating our findings and why they matter; and demonstrating how high standards in design, conduct and analysis are built in to our research.

The SRA annual conference is the only forum the UK has for bringing together social researchers from all sectors and disciplines to share knowledge and ideas, to debate our most pressing professional issues, and, of course, to meet and talk.

PLENARY SPEAKERS

› KEYNOTE SPEAKER: John Pullinger, National Statistician
  ‘Distrust is earned: reporting from the front line where high quality research meets public debate’

› Will Moy, Director of Full Fact
  ‘Research in a time of “truthiness”: Using mixed methods to connect, cut through and change’

› Suzanne Hall, Head of Qualitative Research, Ipsos MORI
  ‘Meaning, validity and expertise: Lessons for social research from the era of post-truth’

› Professor Tim May, Deputy Director, Sheffield Methods Institute
  ‘Another voice with David Walker’

Workshop presentations on:

› Involving research participants
› Getting the message across
› The value of narratives
› Policy evaluation
› Qualitative innovation
› Quantitative innovation

And more...

10% early bird discount

Book your place on the SRA website: www.the-sra.org.uk/events > Prices from: £65 to £130 for SRA members. Non-members £175
## SRA RESEARCH MATTERS

**EDITORIAL POLICY**

We welcome submissions for articles on any subject of interest to the social research community. Please email admin@the-sra.org.uk and ask for the Research Matters guidelines. Views expressed by individual contributors do not necessarily reflect those of the SRA.

**PUBLICATION DATES 2017**

SRA Research Matters will be published in December. Copy deadline: **6 October**.

**EDITORIAL TEAM**

Sarah Butt, City, University of London (commissioning editor) sarah.butt.1@city.ac.uk
Graham Farrant, SRA
Diarmid Campbell-Jack, Ecorys
Yulia Kartalova, SRA Ireland
Peter Cornick, NatCen Social Research
Sumi Rabindrakumar, Gingerbread

The Social Research Association (SRA)
Tel: 0207 998 0304
Email: admin@the-sra.org.uk
www.the-sra.org.uk

Keep up to date with the latest news online at [www.the-sra.org.uk](http://www.the-sra.org.uk)

### SRA: TRAINING

**LONDON**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Instructor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21 September</td>
<td>Cognitive interviewing for testing survey questions</td>
<td>Dr Pamela Campanelli</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 &amp; 22 September</td>
<td>Designing and moderating focus groups</td>
<td>NatCen Social Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 September</td>
<td>Introduction to qualitative research</td>
<td>NatCen Social Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28 September</td>
<td>Introduction to evaluation</td>
<td>Professor David Parsons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29 September</td>
<td>Advanced evaluation: options and choices in impact evaluation</td>
<td>Professor David Parsons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 October</td>
<td>Questionnaire design and testing</td>
<td>Dr Pamela Campanelli</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 &amp; 5 October</td>
<td>Cognitive interviewing: theory and practice</td>
<td>NatCen Social Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 October</td>
<td>Designing a qualitative study</td>
<td>Liz Spencer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 October</td>
<td>Introduction to grounded theory</td>
<td>Professor Karen O’Reilly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 October</td>
<td>Qualitative interviewing</td>
<td>Liz Spencer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 October</td>
<td>Conducting focus groups</td>
<td>Professor Karen O’Reilly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 October</td>
<td>Qualitative data analysis</td>
<td>Liz Spencer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 October</td>
<td>Interpreting and writing up your qualitative findings</td>
<td>Liz Spencer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 October</td>
<td>Research with children and young people</td>
<td>Louca-Mai Brady and Berni Graham</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 &amp; 27 October</td>
<td>Depth interviewing skills</td>
<td>NatCen Social Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 November</td>
<td>Ethnographic methods</td>
<td>Professor Karen O’Reilly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 &amp; 7 November</td>
<td>Analysis of qualitative data</td>
<td>NatCen Social Researcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 November</td>
<td>Introduction to data visualisation and infographic design</td>
<td>Lulu Pinney</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 November</td>
<td>Advanced workshop: research with children and young people</td>
<td>Louca-Mai Brady and Berni Graham</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 November</td>
<td>Qualitative data analysis</td>
<td>Liz Spencer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 November</td>
<td>Interpreting and writing up your qualitative findings</td>
<td>Liz Spencer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 December</td>
<td>Reporting qualitative data</td>
<td>NatCen Social Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 &amp; 5 December</td>
<td>Basic statistical analysis for social research</td>
<td>NatCen Social Research</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**MANCHESTER**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Course</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 November</td>
<td>Introduction to evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 November</td>
<td>Advanced evaluation: options and choices in impact evaluation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**MANCHESTER**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Course</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20 November</td>
<td>Introduction to evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 October</td>
<td>Advanced evaluation: options and choices in impact evaluation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**EDINBURGH**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Instructor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14 September</td>
<td>Introduction to evaluation</td>
<td>Professor David Parsons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 September</td>
<td>Advanced evaluation: options and choices in impact evaluation</td>
<td>Professor David Parsons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 September</td>
<td>Introduction to data visualisation and infographic Design</td>
<td>Lulu Pinney</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 October</td>
<td>Designing a qualitative study</td>
<td>Professor Karen O’Reilly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 October</td>
<td>Qualitative interviewing</td>
<td>Professor Karen O’Reilly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 November</td>
<td>Focus groups</td>
<td>Professor Karen O’Reilly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 November</td>
<td>Analysis of qualitative data</td>
<td>Liz Spencer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 November</td>
<td>Interpreting and writing up your qualitative findings</td>
<td>Liz Spencer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28 November</td>
<td>Questionnaire design and testing</td>
<td>Dr Pamela Campanelli</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29 November</td>
<td>Cognitive interviewing</td>
<td>Dr Pamela Campanelli</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 November</td>
<td>Understanding statistical concepts and basic tests</td>
<td>Dr Pamela Campanelli</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 December</td>
<td>Sampling and introduction to weighting</td>
<td>Dr Pamela Campanelli</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

**SRA member discount**: make sure to use your promo code.

More information: Lindsay Adams, training co-ordinator: lindsay.adams@the-sra.org.uk
Full details of all SRA courses and booking at: [www.the-sra.org.uk/training](http://www.the-sra.org.uk/training)