

A Quick Guide to New Survey Methods

The methods for conducting surveys of public opinion are undergoing a period of rapid and potentially fundamental change. Most major media and academic research organizations rely on telephone surveys that use humans to conduct live interviews with a random (and therefore representative) selection of individuals. Two new methods are now being widely used – automated-surveys by such firms as Rasmussen and SurveyUSA, and Internet-based surveys by such firms as Zogby and Harris Interactive.

What are automated surveys? What are Internet surveys?

Automated surveys rely on a computer-dialed automated recorded voice to ask questions; the answers are recorded by a computer program. This method is referred to variously as interactive voice response (IVR) surveys or as “robosurveys.” Internet surveys utilize the Internet for the delivery of survey questionnaires; respondents complete the survey without the help of an interviewer.

Why are survey organizations moving toward automated and Internet surveys?

There are some technical advantages associated with these two new methods: They eliminate well-documented influences that live interviewers can exert on respondents, as well as diminish the tendency of some respondents to offer the socially desirable answer (e.g. some respondents may exaggerate their potential to vote because they know this is expected of them). But the primary reasons driving the proliferation of these new survey methods are money and speed: They are much less expensive than the traditional telephone surveys, and they can be done in a matter of hours compared with the 2 or 3 days that customarily used for phone surveys.

What issues should be considered when examining data from an automated or Internet survey?

There are significant concerns about the representativeness of automated- and Internet-surveys. Here are some of the factors to consider when evaluating automated and Internet surveys:

- How was the respondent selected for participation in the study? Is the sample representative of the population of interest? Automated surveys often interview the first person to answer the phone. This method is unable to check who is answering for the household; it may interview a 14-year old daughter rather than an adult who is eligible to vote. Internet surveys are often conducted among a group of individuals who originally “opt-in” (that is, self select) to be members of a panel. The results of the new survey methods may be distorted by problems in securing a random sample of interviewees and collecting reliable information about who is interviewed.
- Are the survey questions easily understood by the respondent? Unlike surveys conducted by humans, respondents to automated surveys cannot ask for questions to be repeated nor request clarification of particular questions. Similarly, most Internet surveys do not provide respondents with a means to request clarification about a question or set of response options.

- The downside of speed: Automated- and Internet- surveys can be readily conducted in a day or less. Although this may better meet the demand for information, it may also distort our understanding of public opinion following a major event or the release of important new information. It can often take several days or more for the public to digest major new information; a poll conducted in the hours following an event may turn out quite different from views collected over 2 or 3 days. In addition, it's more difficult to include hard-to-reach respondents in some of these new kinds of modes, and that may affect the results to the extent that hard-to-reach respondents are different from those who were interviewed on the topics of interest.
- Is the methodology used in the study transparent? The description of the methodology accompanying the release of data should include discussion of sample selection, mode of questionnaire delivery, response rates, dates of data collection, and, if applicable, information concerning the weighting of data. Unfortunately, the information made available by automated and Internet surveys is uneven and incomplete (as is too often the case with live interviewer surveys). This lack of transparency makes it difficult to judge the quality of the research.

How can a respondent distinguish between an automated survey and an automated “push poll?”

A push poll is an insidious form of negative campaigning. In the guise of a scientific public opinion poll to measure the attitudes of voters, it feeds respondents damaging information about a particular campaign for the explicit purpose of changing (or “pushing”) the views of voters. Push polls have adopted IVR technology as a way to quickly reach likely voters. It is difficult for most respondents to distinguish between automated surveys that are legitimate and those that are designed to push voters and attempt to influence an election. They can do extensive harm by contacting thousands of potential voters. See AAPOR’s statement concerning push polls: www.aapor.org/pdfs/2003/2003pushpollstatement.pdf

What is the position of the American Association for Public Opinion Research on Automated and Internet Surveys?

The reality is that automated- and Internet-polls are part of the information environment. They clearly respond to a strong demand among some Americans for political information and they can do so quickly and at relatively low costs. For immediate and frequently updated information on one or two critical questions (such as which candidate is ahead in an election), they may well provide a reasonable new technology, one that may sacrifice some quality assurance for gains in speed and cost. On the other hand, automated surveys and the Internet for data collection are an emerging technology and will be the subject of ongoing analysis. The proven reliability of human-based phone interviews remains an essential component of efforts to track public opinion and the evaluations of voters; the reliability and accuracy of the new modes is yet to be understood, and should be interpreted with caution.

A valuable review of research and debate on survey methods can be found in Mark Blumenthal’s article, “Toward An Open-Source Methodology” in *Public Opinion Quarterly* published in 2005 (volume 6, no.5, pp.655-669). Blumenthal runs the popular and reliable blog, “Mystery Pollster.” www.pollster.com/blogs/