
 PUTTING THE “PUBLIC” BACK INTO PUBLIC OPINION AND MARKETING RESEARCH



Keith Neuman

One often reads in these pages about the many challenges facing marketing research today, but the industry overall is clearly alive and well. The most recent estimates of economic activity in 2013 totaled \$600 million in Canada and over US\$40 billion worldwide. This is a significant industry by any standard, and owes its success to having demonstrated its value in supporting the marketing and promotional activities of almost any organization and institution you can name; companies selling every type of product and service, charities promoting causes, and political parties and governments pitching candidates and policies. Marketing research has indeed become an essential part of our economic and political systems, and those who work in this industry can take some pride in being part of something so important.

Yet there is another role for this type of research that seems to have been almost lost in the process, and especially in Canada: the application of social research and analytical tools to the broader purpose of contributing to a better society and addressing the collective problems for which solutions seem elusive. It is research with a goal to benefit all, rather than a particular company, sector or political agenda.

Social research in the public interest is by no means a new or even contemporary idea. The earliest foundations of survey research can be found in mid-18th century England, when social reformers (known as the Victorian statistical movement) pioneered the systematic collection of social data on populations suffering from the impacts of emerging industrialization. This movement was concerned first and foremost with improving the social conditions of society, and focused on collecting information in a systematic way for the purpose of bettering the human condition for everyone, especially those most in need. These early researchers were advocates first, and convinced that empirical evidence on social conditions would lead the way to a better society.

Fast forward to the mid-20th century when the development of probability sampling vaulted survey research into a new position of prominence as a means of measuring public opinion on important issues of the day. Dr. George Gallup actively promoted the newly emerging field of survey research as an important institution of democracy, through effectively taking the pulse of citizens in a way that was never before possible. In his 1940 seminal book *The Pulse of Democracy* (co-authored by Canadian Saul Rae, father of Bob Rae), Gallup made an impassioned case that “public opinion can only be of service to

democracy if it can be heard.” This sentiment is later echoed eloquently by U.S. political scientist Sidney Verba who wrote, “Surveys produce just what democracy is supposed to produce – equal representation of all citizens.”

Gallup’s lesson was not lost on others, and the power of social research was recognized and applied in an ever increasing scope for marketing and communications. But the vision of the 18th century reformers and Dr. Gallup has largely disappeared over the past few decades, and particularly in Canada.

Only a small – and declining – portion of the research spending in this country is now categorized as other than commercial marketing research. In previous decades, much of what might be considered public interest research in Canada was funded by the federal government, but in the past few years this stream has dried to a trickle. Federal government spending on what it classifies as “public opinion research” dwindled to \$4.9 million in 2013-14 (down from \$31 million in 2006-07), a good portion of which was spent on testing awareness of government advertising campaigns. Statistics Canada does very little research on attitudes and opinions, and even this modest work has been reduced in scope through budget cuts. Provincial and municipal governments across Canada have limited budgets for public interest social research, and there are few private foundations or other non-profit organizations that invest in survey research in a sustained way.

This stands in sharp contrast to such countries as the U.S. and Germany that have an established infrastructure and commitment to the development of social knowledge about public attitudes and priorities on an ongoing basis. A 2012 analysis published by the Environics Institute revealed that national government spending on public opinion research per



capita was \$12.88 in the U.S. compared with only 19 cents in Canada. The respected Pew Research Center in Washington, DC, conducts a comprehensive research program of national and international surveys – conducted to the highest standards and fully published – to generate important knowledge and insight about opinions and priorities of citizens on the most current and important issues of the day. The Kaiser Family Foundation performs the same public function on issues pertaining to health and health care, while a similar program of sustained research on public opinion about climate change is carried out by the Yale Climate Project at Yale University.

Why is there not more public interest research being done in Canada? Part of the reason lies in the absence of non-governmental institutions that can step up when governments choose not to do so. There are numerous foundations and charitable organizations in this country that do essential work, but their focus is directed toward bricks and mortar initiatives and program interventions aimed at specific issues or segments of the society.

A different model

It is this absence of public interest research that prompted Michael Adams to establish the non-profit Environics Institute for Survey Research in 2006, with the mission to survey those not usually heard from, asking questions not normally asked. The impetus came from a desire to contribute meaningfully to the emerging national dialogue about the existence of the country's large and growing Muslim population (numbering over one million at the time). In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the subsequent arrest of the so-called "Toronto Eighteen" group in Mississauga, there was heated debate about Muslims in this country, mostly by experts and media commentators and next to nothing from Muslims themselves. The institute's initial project was the first-ever national survey of Muslims in Canada to understand their perspective and experiences in this country, coupled with a complementary survey of the general population on their views about Muslims. The results revealed a picture very different from the dominant media narrative of religious extremism and desired isolation from broader Canadian society. The CBC joined as a media partner, and the survey results were widely publicized, helping to correct misconceptions and contribute to better understanding.

Subsequent projects conducted by the institute have focused on other poorly understood parts of our society, including aboriginal peoples living in our cities, and the black community in the Greater Toronto Area. Another stream of research looks at Canadian public opinion on important issues not being addressed by anyone else, such as what it means to be a good citizen in this country.

Given the absence of an existing institutional framework for independent public interest social research in Canada, a new one had to be invented. The approach developed by the institute starts with first identifying an important social issue not being addressed by other sectors, for which social research can play a meaningful role. The institute then seeks out one or more organizations that have unique knowledge about the issue to join as an equal partner in the project. The partners then seek sponsors to fund the research costs, with the understanding that sponsors do not influence the research design or analysis, but have confidence that the research will be done properly. Once the research has been completed and fully analyzed, it is publicly released for everyone's benefit, typically in partnership with one or more media organizations prepared to invest in telling the story (rather than simply reporting on it).

As with most forms of social innovation, this model of public interest research is not easy to pull off. Funding is the biggest challenge, and no more than half of the institute project concepts are able to secure the resources needed to launch.

Why public interest research matters

Survey research is not a solution to the many pressing challenges facing society today, but it does have a unique role to play.

There are many important sources of knowledge about our social realities: our direct experience, through our friends and informal networks, through media, and through literature, art and music. Survey research is not more important than any of these, but it does offer something unique. It offers the power of collecting individual stories that, when combined, produce a collective story that is more than the sum of the parts. The power of this "technology" is threefold:

- It provides a voice to individuals to express themselves privately, without the direct influence of group and normative pressures (unlike town hall meetings or focus groups).
- It harnesses the power of statistics and the scientific method to

combine those individual voices into a collective voice that is credible and widely accepted as representative of the group or population covered.

- It makes it possible to examine and understand how individuals within the collective are similar or different across definable subgroups, such as where they live, their particular lived experience, and their social values. This last point is particularly important because one of the most problematic distortions in how public opinion is often presented is the notion of a unified public view. That there is a singular attitude or opinion that Canadians or Torontonians all have about topic X or Y. Take for instance the headline: “Canadians express little desire to reopen abortion laws in their country.” Does this accurately capture the opinions of all Canadians, or simply the most common among many viewpoints recorded on a survey? The media may need a simplified snapshot of public sentiment, but it is equally if not more important to understand the range of views held by citizens.

As Michael Adams put it: “A representative sample of a larger population is a powerful means of giving voice to ordinary people, and, despite its imperfections, is one of the most accurate means we have of understanding our society and the subgroups that constitute it.” As well, learning about survey results helps individuals place themselves in the society in which they live, how they fit in, and how they are similar or different from others.

Surveys provide a means of fostering introspection and empathy with others who they may not have had direct contact, and this is especially important in a country as large and diverse as Canada, which lacks a central defining character as other countries such as the U.S. and France.

The trend in marketing research today is customization and ever more sophistication in targeting audience segments to discover distinct homogeneous markets, whether for media, product customization or politics. There is also a compelling need to discover what we as citizens also share in common, and for this knowledge to be communicated publicly so everyone can learn from it. The research industry is highly focused on improving the precision and efficiencies of its methods and tools to help clients and build business. Innovation is also needed to identify how to utilize the power of research for contributing to the broader collective goals such as addressing wealth disparities, ethnic tensions and social stigmas (e.g., mental illness), to name a few. There is plenty of scope for work in this area, and room for as many as want to play a part. Come join us.

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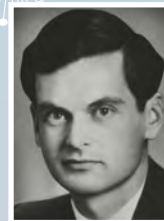


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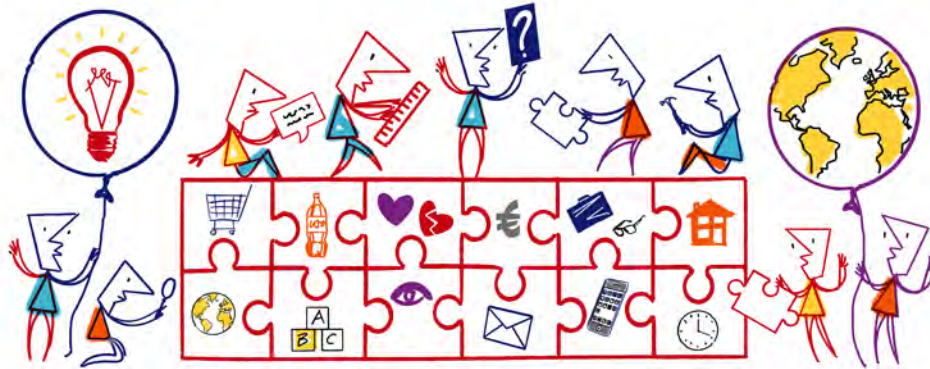


At Kingston, Ontario, April 19th, 2015 in his 93rd year. Beloved husband of Primula Bull. Dear father of Catharine, Avril and Owen. Grandfather of 7, and great-grandfather of 9.

Uncle of 2 nephews.

Memorial Service will be held at St. George's Cathedral, Kingston on Saturday, May 23, 2015.

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