

TAKE A POLL

A doorway to the issues

IN A SUBJECT AS VAST AND AMORPHOUS AS race relations, finding a lead, that fundamental task of reporting, can be difficult. A good tool for that task is a poll. New statistical data can help frame topics and issues that otherwise might be difficult to define.

Issues concerning race can also stir up strong feelings; polls can provide a dispassionate source for such emotionally charged information.

“One thing we constantly get is ‘Oh, you’re just out there stirring up trouble; you’re *making news,*’ ” said Robert Moore, managing editor of the *El Paso Times*, which conducted an early 1998 poll for the series “Attitudes and Answers.” The series looked at the generally harmonious relations between Hispanics and whites — or Anglos, as the poll identified them — the two largest ethnic groups in El Paso, Texas. Polling identified a major rift on the issue of language.

The poll found that 79 percent of Anglo residents favored a law making English the official language of the United States, compared to 42 percent of Hispanic residents. Furthermore, 47 percent of Anglos confessed to being bothered when people speak Spanish at

work compared to 9 percent of Hispanics. And 53 percent of Anglos felt English speakers should learn Spanish, while 95 percent thought Spanish speakers should learn English.

This dichotomy was not a surprise, said Moore, but it was helpful that the paper and its partner, KVIA-TV, an ABC affiliate, could quantify it through a poll.

“Now, armed with scientific data, we were able to say language is an important issue that affects this community. We have to at least talk about it,” Moore said.

Moore said the poll also gave people a way to talk about the use of Spanish or English without becoming emotional. “The survey thrust it into almost an academic area, so people found a safe context to discuss it,” explained Moore. “It really wasn’t the kind of issue I’d seen discussed in El Paso before. And it’s no more comfortable now than it was then but when people talk about it, they talk about it in the framework of that study.”

WTVJ, the NBC station in Miami, used polling to a similar end for the 1998 series “Can We Talk?” focusing on the language rift. In vibrantly Hispanic Miami, there was ample anecdotal evidence that non-Spanish speakers felt economically and socially disadvantaged by



The El Paso Times launched its "Attitudes and Answers" series with a poll of whites and Hispanics.

get a very good reading of what people were really thinking," said Haddix. "We recognized that people might not be as honest and forthcoming talking directly to a reporter who was going to put their name in the paper as they could be talking anonymously to someone over the phone."

Part of what *The Dispatch* elicited through the poll were candid answers to open-ended questions, such as "Tell me, in your own words, what you think about when you consider how your race affects your life?"

The paper ran samples of the answers in a box with the main story, identifying the speakers only by race.

"I'm black and I have to be twice as good as my white counterpart to get ahead and even then I make less money," said one respondent.

"I am the true minority: I am a white, working, non-homosexual," asserted another.

"That gets at a certain mentality that's out there," Haddix said, "and allows people to see that that mind-set is out there."

the ever-increasing pervasiveness of Spanish. But it was such a polarizing issue that then-news director Ramon Escobar says he knew he needed "real data."

With *The Miami Herald*, the station conducted a poll comparing the views of Spanish- and non-Spanish speakers on the issue of language. The findings formed the basis for a lively town meeting and a series of reports — beginning with a segment called "Does Anyone Here Speak English?" — that won critical acclaim and a sizable share of viewers.

GETTING CANDID RESPONSES

People may also feel safer with a poll and thus respond more honestly to questions than they would in an interview with a newspaper reporter. Doug Haddix, project editor at *The Columbus Dispatch*, said his paper decided on a poll for its 1999 project "The Color Chasm" because it wanted to get to the deeply held beliefs and attitudes of people in central Ohio. "On this topic, in particular, we wanted to



The Columbus Dispatch previewed the eight parts of its "Color Chasm" series, which included a poll of 1,018 adults in central Ohio about their attitudes on race.



© THE KANSAS CITY STAR.

The Star worked with a black-owned paper, *The Call*, for its 1999 series "Piece by Piece." It was able to compare a new poll with a poll taken 10 years earlier to show progress in race relations.

COMPARING OVER TIME

Papers that have the luxury of comparing how poll answers change over time can gather even more interesting data. In Charlotte, Akron and Kansas City, the major papers used polls in the late '80s and early '90s to explore the issue of race relations. They reaped an extra dividend when they revisited the issue with projects in the late '90s.

"If you trust your polls, it gives you a way to compare: Are you better, worse, the same, the same in some areas, better in others," said Steve Shirk, managing editor of *The Kansas City Star*. *The Star* worked with *The Kansas City Call*, a black-owned weekly.

The Star and *The Call* had a complicated task. *The Star's* 1989 poll was prompted by a school desegregation case.

"We had asked a lot of questions (in

1989) based specifically on news of that time," said Shirk. "We wouldn't ask all the same questions now. So we had to spend a lot of time checking to see: Is it valid? We felt comfortable that what we were doing with the poll 10 years later was statistically real."

The papers were able to demonstrate that race relations had actually improved over time. Black respondents felt less discrimination in education and the workplace and more optimism about the future. Whites showed greater acceptance of integration in housing, education and relationships. This sort of news simply could not be told without statistical evidence.

"That's a sensitive area to write about," said Craig Nienaber, *The Star's* project editor.



© THE KANSAS CITY STAR.

“White newspapers don’t want to seem like Pollyannas. But the poll showed, across the board, significant improvements in how closely blacks and whites looked at Kansas City and the way they related to each other.”

Nienaber said working with *The Call* helped put the numbers in perspective. He acknowledged that it was a little tougher to make a splash with the good news than it had been in 1989, when poll findings were “a little tragic,” showing the resentment felt by both black and white respondents to the court-ordered desegregation of schools.

The newer poll findings made “a little blurry of a headline,”

said Nienaber. “It’s more thought-provoking but not in your face the way the project was 10 years ago.”

Shirk emphasized that an important element of *The Star’s* approach was to use the poll as a jumping-off point to explore the issues, not as the final word. “The poll was important, it’s a

valuable tool,” he said, “but it doesn’t really capture the human side, the human condition. It gave us the starting point.”

Some news organizations have done separate poll stories, detailing all the findings at once, while others have incorporated poll results in separate stories.

CONTROLLING EXPENSES

A note of caution: As tremendously useful as they can be, polls may not be for every media organization, particularly those in smaller markets. One reason is the expense — polls are costly.

In fact, polling on race relations sometimes turns out to be more expensive than other kinds of polling because such polls often compare the responses of different groups. That means — in addition to adding

another layer of analysis to their findings — pollsters must find statistically reliable samples of each group.

The *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* found out how difficult targeting the right group could be in 1996 when, to poll 300 randomly dialed black families for its series “The Race Question,” pollsters had to dial 25,000 telephone numbers.

Some papers work with partners to share the cost and the Pew Center for Civic Journalism has provided financial support for polls, including the one conducted by the *El Paso Times* and KVIA-TV. Beyond the expense, however, there are other issues.

The *El Paso Times* also ran into difficulty finding black families for its poll. It ended up with too small a sample to be reliable and the paper received complaints that it had ignored blacks in its focus on Hispanics.

In 1999, the *Portland Press Herald* tried to get out in front of a shift toward more diversity in the overwhelmingly white Maine city. But it wound up with so few non-whites, it was hard to draw conclusions from its poll.

Some news organizations have gotten around these problems by making good use of national polls in the public domain. *The Times* in Trenton used data from a number of sources for its 1999 series “The Comfort Zone.” They included the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, Gallup, the Census Bureau and other news organizations, including Time-CNN and *The Washington Post*.

These polls didn’t necessarily address the attitudes of people in Trenton but the stories did. *The Times* interviewed minority employees at local Trenton companies and found great improvements in hiring and atmosphere for non-white employees over the years. Illustrating the story was a graph of a Time-CNN poll showing that African-American teens report far less discrimination than older African-Americans.

Added to solid local reporting, national statistics can serve the same purpose as local polling, particularly when used as *The Star’s* Shirk suggests — as a starting point for reporting the human condition.



THE KANSAS CITY STAR

Kansas City Star managing editor Steve Shirk finds polls valuable but says they don’t “capture the human side.”

THE PROJECTS

St. Paul Pioneer Press: Casting a Multilingual Net

By now, most Minnesotans have become aware that their state is home to the largest concentration of Somali immigrants in the United States. In the spring of 2000, however, there was still a good deal of tension surrounding the issue.

Having already absorbed an influx of Asian and Hispanic immigrants, some Minnesotans found this new population, with their dark skin and traditional Muslim dress, startling, and some civic leaders feared a backlash.

The *St. Paul Pioneer Press* brought immigrants themselves into the discussion of the issue with its 2000 series “The New Face of Minnesota,” using an innovative poll in five languages that editors believe is the largest ever conducted across immigrant communities.

“Instead of a poll about what Minnesotans think of immigrants, we decided to do a poll about what immigrants think of Minnesota,” said Kate Parry, senior editor for special projects. “Near as we can tell, no one has ever done exactly what we did here. We actually found out what it was like to be a new immigrant in Minnesota.”

The paper hired the Wilder Research Center in St. Paul to survey 1,119 adults representing the four newest immigrant groups: Somali (which ended up including some Ethiopians and other new African immigrants), Hmong (which also included Vietnamese and people from a few other Southeast Asian countries), Hispanic and Russian.

“Because it was a random-sample telephone poll, we had to find ZIP codes with high concentrations of immigrants,” explained Leslie Brooks Suzukamo, one of the reporters on the “New Face” team. The team used school-enrollment data for St. Paul and Minneapolis for the 1999-2000 year to find blocks with highly concentrated immigrant populations. Then Wilder called more than 12,000 households in those blocks to generate a statistically valid, random sample.

Interviews were conducted in English for respondents who were fluent but also, when necessary, in Russian, Spanish, Hmong and Somali.

“We believe it’s groundbreaking,” said Suzukamo, who now covers Internet trends and issues for the *Pioneer Press*. The poll found statistical confirmation of Minnesotans’ reputation for being nice: 92 percent of new immigrants found Twin Cities’ residents friendly and 75 percent said they had never been treated unkindly. However, two-thirds of respondents felt Minnesotans did not understand what life was like in their native country.

TELLING NEW STORIES

The *Pioneer Press* stories addressed this concern with extensive reporting about the reasons various groups had emigrated, including descriptions of conditions in their native countries — religious oppression of Russian Jews, for instance, and the brutal, intractable war in Somalia. Parry tells of one Somali reader who called to thank the paper. “When you show your tragedy, you feel a sense of relief,” he told her, “because now you feel, ‘They know!’ ”

The poll also found the language barrier by far the biggest problem facing immigrants. Eighteen percent of those polled spoke no English; another 30 percent spoke only a little. Ninety-two percent said they hoped their children would learn English in addition to their native language. The series included a few words — usually “hello” and “thank you” — in the native language of each immigrant group, along with the phonetic pronunciation, in hopes of encouraging communication with non-English speakers.

But even polls make mistakes: The poll found most of the new immigrants in the Somali, Hmong and Latino categories were between the ages of 18 and 39. However, in the Russian category, the average age of respondents was over 49. Russians also had the lowest percentage both of fluent English speakers and employed people, according to the poll.

Suzukamo does not believe those statistics paint an accurate picture of the Russian community but represent a glitch caused by the poll’s method of sampling in highly concentrated ethnic neighborhoods. He said the paper found most of its Russian households in apartment complexes in the Highland Park neighborhood and he theorized that was a first landing point for Russian immigrants in the ’80s and ’90s.

As immigrants do well, Suzukamo explained, “they move out and scatter. They don’t all move to one place; they get lost in the demographic ocean and are harder to find. People who don’t do as well, don’t learn the language, don’t get jobs, they congregated in that neighborhood and they’re more of the older people.”

Suzukamo said he thinks the poll gathered a more accurate picture of the other ethnic groups because they are newer arrivals, still living in more concentrated communities.

“That’s one of the problems with this kind of polling,” he said. “You find quirks like that and you have to be alert or you may not realize you’re not getting the whole picture.”



“The New Face of Minnesota’s” groundbreaking poll, conducted in five languages, found limited understanding of immigrants’ native countries.

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette: Finding the Facts

The caller, like so many others, didn't give his name but Madelyn Ross could not ignore his startling accusation: "Why are you people keeping western Pennsylvania's dirty little secret?" the caller asked the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* managing editor. "This is the most segregated, the most racist area in America."

Ross didn't believe him but she figured it was time for the *Post-Gazette* to do a major takeout on the issue. It was late 1995 and there had been a series of wrenching, race-related stories, including the death of a black businessman in police custody after he was stopped while driving through an all-white neighborhood.

To get beyond the emotions such stories were dredging up, the paper wanted to uncover the facts and decided on a poll as a key tool for digging them out.

That poll turned out to be the most expensive thing the paper has ever done. More than that, Ross said in a recent interview, it was also the most disturbing.

"What we were hoping we would find was that the caller was all wet," she said. "Far from it, the poll actually supported what he said."

Some polls confirm what reporters and editors suspect but lack hard data to quantify. Some contain surprises or interesting new information. At the *Post-Gazette*, the poll on race relations was a revelation.

REVEALING SURPRISES

Ross said the paper got its first hint of just how highly segregated western Pennsylvania was when its pollster, Campos Market Research of Pittsburgh, explained what it would take to get the kind of random sample the paper wanted.

The paper wanted the respondents evenly divided between blacks and whites, 300 of each, to be statistically meaningful. Campos said that to reach 300



© PITTSBURGH POST-GAZETTE.

The *Post-Gazette* kicked off a five-part race series with detailed findings from its poll.



The Post-Gazette reported what worked and what didn't for integrating housing.

black families randomly, it would have to call 25,000 homes.

“I knew the black population was very small outside of Pittsburgh, but I had no sense of how separate we are in how we live and work,” said Ross. “Seventy percent of whites said they never have contact with African-Americans. Their only contact is through the media, which is scary as hell when you think about it.”

Not surprisingly, the poll found some deep divisions in the way black and white western Pennsylvanians view the world. For instance, three out of four black respondents felt the American justice system is biased against them, but only one in four whites thought it was biased against blacks.

The poll also found striking similarities between black and white cultural views. An overwhelming majority — 97 percent of both groups — said they think blacks have a right to live wherever they can afford to. About 60 percent of both groups say they would be uneasy if someone told a racial joke in their presence. Nearly half of both groups said they were more accepting than their parents of people of other races. Nearly all of both groups said they would have no objection if a person of the opposite race moved next door.

However, a University of Pittsburgh professor — a member of a panel the *Post-Gazette* asked to analyze the poll — said it merely reflected a national trend away from people expressing overt racism but toward a more subtle form that she called ‘aversive racism.’ As the paper reported, 94 percent of whites said they had no problem with a black next-door neighbor. The figure dropped to 76 percent, however, when asked if they would mind living in a neighborhood where half their neighbors were black and down to 64 percent when asked if they would object to living in a neighborhood where more than half their neighbors were black. The number of black respondents who had no objection remained above 80 percent through the series of questions.

The paper conducted extensive interviews to give voices to what the survey found, Ross said, and editors and reporters tried to report solutions to the divisions they were seeing. In the area of

© PITTSBURGH POST-GAZETTE.



The Post-Gazette found that 92 percent of the region's black families lived in just 15 of its 130 municipalities, limiting interaction between blacks and whites.

human relations, for example, the paper quoted community leaders advocating more dialogue and discussion. In the area of housing, the paper used information from the University of Pittsburgh's Center for Social and Urban Research to outline reforms that would advance integration both in private homes and public housing.

With each part of the series, it provided a way to get information about agencies working to improve race relations. Reporter Cindi Lash wrote a story about the economic benefits of inclusiveness. Quoting University of Pittsburgh professor Audrey Murrell, Lash wrote:

“Blacks who don’t have access to quality education or health care draw from, rather than enrich, the economy and vitality of the region ... But when those obstacles are removed, more

blacks will be able to make more meaningful contributions to their communities. The entire region will prosper as a result.”

Ross said the *Post-Gazette’s* main contribution was just bringing the facts to light. “It started a dialogue in the community that continues to this day,” Ross said. “Groups like the Urban League started meeting and holding discussions; new groups sprang up. They invited the *Post-Gazette* in because we had the information but we liked the fact that the community took charge in a spontaneous way.”

Ross said western Pennsylvania is still largely segregated but there is an awareness of the consequences of this isolation and an acceptance of the fact that the community needs to work harder to come together.

She recalls one meeting she attended shortly after the series ran.

“An elderly black woman stood up and said, ‘I want to thank the *Post-Gazette*. You said what we always knew, but you put it on the table for everyone else for the first time.’ She said she put the series in her cedar chest for her grandchildren so they could see when Pittsburgh came to grips with its race relations.”

Akron Beacon Journal and *The Charlotte Observer*: Tracking Long-term Change

As Cliff Harrington recalled it, 1997 was a tough year for the city of Charlotte. Harrington was an editor on *The Charlotte Observer's* “Beyond 2000” team and it became clear that race relations was an issue that needed attention.

“We don’t talk honestly about that issue in this region,” Harrington said in an interview from the Mecklenburg bureau, which he now oversees. “Everybody politely agrees that things should be a certain way.”



The Observer's Cliff Harrington found fascinating results when the paper compared polls taken 10 years apart.

But in late 1996 and early 1997, events suggested things weren’t that way, Harrington said. “We had a couple of cases where black suspects had been shot by white police officers, and there was some intense debate over whether they used excessive force and what degree of force is excessive, and tensions were really high,” he said. “At that point, we decided it was a good time to do some sort of package on race relations.”

Harrington was putting together a poll for the project, which included an eight-page special section and a series for the daily paper under the logo “Side by Side,” when he realized his questions were similar to ones from a poll the paper conducted in 1987.

“We wanted to find out how people felt about the continuing discussion on race and how people perceived schools related to their children,” he said, “and we realized we had a point of comparison from 10 years ago. So we drew some key questions that we thought were still applicable and used them to compare answers 10 years later. And it really did make for some fascinating results.”

TRACKING PROGRESS

Given the tension at that time, it surprised Harrington and others at the paper that the poll showed some progress in race relations in Charlotte. It was less of a surprise to find that little had changed in a few areas.

A comparison of the two polls showed Charlotte residents, in general — and white residents, in particular — were much less averse to interracial dating and marriage and to having neighbors of a different race than they were 10 years earlier.

However, the number of black respondents who felt they had been discriminated against

© THE CHARLOTTE OBSERVER.



The Charlotte Observer found much greater acceptance of other races by whites and blacks alike in its 1997 series “Side by Side.”

nearly doubled. The number of white respondents reporting that they had been discriminated against tripled.

Such results — similar to the good news-bad news findings at other papers that had the luxury of comparing polls conducted years apart — should give heart to news organizations reporting on race. Although the issue remains a serious problem for journalists to explore, communities can make gains in this area and local media can help demonstrate progress.

The experience of *The Observer* and others also shows that polls, while a major investment, can pay dividends over time.

The *Akron Beacon Journal* conducted a poll for its 1993 series “A Question of Color,” which won the Pulitzer Prize Gold Medal for Distinguished Public Service. Bob Paynter said the poll was part of the paper’s effort to keep the series as grounded in data as possible.

“This is a very volatile subject and when you get people yammering on about their emotions without an anchor, it can get really out of hand,” said Paynter. “We wanted to set some sort of anchors by using all the data we could find — census data, the poll, focus groups.”

One payoff came in 1997 when, largely as a result of community projects that followed “A Question of Color,” President Bill Clinton held a national town meeting in Akron on the issue of race relations.

The paper decided to conduct another poll in advance of the visit. “It was a natural,” Paynter said. “We all knew it was optimistic to think we could measure whether there had been any change in racial attitudes in four years but, on the other hand, it was the obvious question journalistically to ask: ‘Has anything changed? Is it different?’ ”

As it turned out, a lot had changed. By 1997, a lower percentage of blacks in Akron saw race as a barrier to advancement than in the original 1992 poll. A total of 58 percent of African-Americans polled in 1992 said race had been an obstacle to getting a good education while in 1997, only half that many — 29 percent — felt that way.

In 1992, 68 percent of those polled said race was a barrier to getting ahead in their jobs. In 1997, just 38 percent gave that response.

The numbers were similar for fair housing. In 1992, 53 percent said race was a problem in getting housing, while in 1997 the number was 31 percent.

Along with the good news, the poll also showed that black and white Akron residents were as divergent as ever on some key issues. For example, whites were still more likely to rate their schools, neighborhoods and general quality of life as better and safer than blacks did. This was not a shock, said Paynter.

The surprise was the degree of progress that was being made.

Paynter attributed the progress to Akron’s dramatically improved economy, which had lowered unemployment by 43 percent. As for the impact of “A Question of Color,” he said, “We were in there someplace but, measured against the social currents we were reporting on, the impact would not be dramatically measurable. The improvements in the economy had far more to do with the change in people’s attitudes.”

“WE WANTED TO FIND OUT HOW PEOPLE FELT ABOUT THE CONTINUING DISCUSSION ON RACE AND HOW PEOPLE PERCEIVED SCHOOLS RELATED TO THEIR CHILDREN...”

— CLIFF HARRINGTON, *THE CHARLOTTE OBSERVER*

Chapter Tips: *Conducting a Poll*

- Polling is one way to pinpoint issues about race and to deal with them quantitatively rather than subjectively.
- The scientific data gives readers a framework for discussing difficult issues in a nonemotional context.
- If you can compare polls over time, you can highlight progress, regression and change in your community.
- Polls can be expensive, especially if you have to reach minority respondents. Sometimes polls in the public domain can substitute for your own polling, if you can flesh out the findings through local interviews.
- Try to find new angles or new groups to poll. It can give a whole new dimension to race reporting.
- Beware of anomalies in polling that may not show the whole story.