

*Optimize
research results
with an honest
assessment of
methodology*

By James M. Donovan

BACK AWAY FROM THE SURVEY MONKEY



Barely a week goes by that my e-mail does not include one or two pleas to complete someone's survey. Whether surveying other librarians about local practices or career tracks, or library users about satisfaction levels and new services, librarians have adopted the survey as a popular method to collect information. Too popular, perhaps. Technologies like SurveyMonkey and Zoomerang have transformed a powerful and sophisticated research technique into a tool seemingly simple enough for everyone. But while anyone can ask questions, it takes real expertise to get meaningful answers. Social scientists typically spend a year or two learning the basic skills of questionnaire writing and data collection and analysis. Ruinous pitfalls can await the uninitiated librarian behind every choice.

It is not just the surveyor who has an interest in seeing that projects are successfully executed. The costs of inept surveying range from the intellectually serious—the risk that misleading conclusions will be incorporated into published reports and committee deliberations that influence our professional policies—to the unintended consequences of survey overkill. Even good surveys consume the time and patience of respondents. Later projects may experience difficulty eliciting sufficient data from a weary, oversampled pool, especially if it has also grown frustrated with vague and inefficient questions serving no discernible purpose.

In an environment of too many—and too many ill-designed—surveys, our twin aims should be to reduce the number of surveys overall and to improve the quality of those that do circulate. This burden falls on both those who distribute questionnaires—to make them as efficient as possible—and those answering—to decline to participate in any project that shows signs of unthoughtful design, thereby forcing surveyors to “up their game.” Good surveying, a difficult task in the best of circumstances, becomes even more complicated when pushed through the favored medium of the online discussion list (commonly called a listserv), a choice that can nullify the results of an otherwise well-designed project. Rising to these challenges requires a strong grounding in the basics of survey design, some of which I review below. Executed correctly, the worst errors can be avoided, allowing surveys to offer solid insights on a variety of interesting questions of law librarianship.

Who Should Survey?

Begin by assuming you shouldn't do the survey, then try to justify why in this case you should. The 2008 AALL Annual Meeting included a valuable workshop on conducting empirical research. The faculty for this well-attended session were Lee Epstein and Andrew Martin, political scientists who lead a well-regarded training course for law professors. Among their helpful “rules of thumb” (e.g., never use a pie chart to summarize data; while people are very good at interpreting heights on a barred histogram, they are notoriously bad at comparing two angled pie pieces), the moderators counseled a firm response that librarians should convey when asked for advice about conducting surveys: “Don't.” While it is easy to do a survey poorly and fail to get the desired information, running a survey correctly is both time-consuming and expensive—even seasoned experts in research methods routinely bring in outside consultants for their own projects.

Every effort should be exerted to avoid the need for a new survey by first asking whether the intended questions can be answered by other, more convenient methods, including looking at previous surveys. A new resource in this vein is the newsletter of the Academic Law Libraries Special Interest Section (ALL-SIS), “Survey Roundup,” which “compiles the results reported from informal surveys circulated via the ALL-SIS listserv.”

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Consider whether a survey wouldn't be overkill. Sometimes we don't need statistically meaningful insights on a sampled population. What we really want are simply some helpful ideas and possible practice models to emulate in our own libraries. If that's the case, asking a simple question or two would suffice to find the information you need. “Has anyone had any experiences with institutional repositories you could share?” “How are people handling their paper subscriptions to law reviews in light of HeinOnline?” Don't overcomplicate a problem with a survey if your needs can be met through intelligent conversation with your peers.

Surveys should be rare tools. The convenience of electronically disseminated surveys does not transform superfluous number counting into contexts where it is appropriate or helpful. The rebuttable presumption should be that a survey is unnecessary; anyone proposing one must shoulder the burden to argue that it is worth the time and expense to construct and distribute, and the responder's time and effort to reply. These are both high thresholds.

Writing the Questions

You have successfully satisfied the criterion to undertake a survey project. The information you need has not already been collected, so you must gather the raw data yourself. Your efforts may still fall short unless you take the required steps to ensure that any data collected are actually meaningful. The purpose of a survey is to compile generalizable data, and, as the saying goes, “data” is not the plural of “anecdote.” Unless well-defined procedures are closely followed, the project will result in a pile of unrelated individualized responses that serve few useful purposes. It is not uncommon for

construction of a legitimate survey to take several months.

Begin by listing what you hope to learn from the survey. Absence of this touchstone can result in a string of ambiguous, vague inquiries that leaves the readers befuddled. Worse, skimping on this step increases the likelihood that after a survey has been completed, you realize that the question you really had in mind has not been adequately addressed. Make this list as detailed as possible.

Every question on the final survey instrument should point directly to one or more items on this list. Avoid cluttering the survey with unrelated but “interesting” additional questions that may or may not shed light on the immediate problem. This is a case where less is more. Every added question eliminates some share of potential respondents who will become discouraged by an overly long survey asking what they perceive to be irrelevant and annoying questions.

Choose your words carefully. Avoid jargon and framing items in a way that channels responses toward a predetermined outcome, especially when eliciting emotional or evaluative responses. Neutral terms are best. Asking respondents whether they endorse the odious practices of a given database vendor, for example, will evoke different replies than would inquiring whether, on the whole, they have found that vendor to be a good value. Surveys sent by campaigning politicians are usually good examples of how *not* to frame a question. Always remember that you are interested in the opinions of the respondents; the survey is not an opportunity to communicate your own to them.

While working to avoid divulging any particular conclusions the survey might expect to reach, you should not err in the opposite direction by keeping the respondents too much in the dark. In order to give informed consent, potential respondents need to know the general topic and intended purposes of the survey. Charting this middle course increases the likelihood that responders will answer questions honestly and relevantly without trying to influence results in any specific direction.

Do not reinvent the wheel. If a successful survey exists that touches on your issues, consider reusing some of its

items. Asking the same questions helps to assure that the data are productive and meaningful, and offers the benefit of allowing analysis of responses to that question over time. While it may be helpful to know that X percent of respondents hold a certain position, it can be even more valuable to know whether this is a rise or decline from previous times.

“**While anyone can ask questions, it takes real expertise to get meaningful answers.**”

Pretest. Once your survey instrument is complete, take it on a trial run to learn how it reads among your target audience. Questions that may have been the model of clarity in your mind may be unfathomably obscure to someone lacking your background on the issues. Even when the question is clear, perhaps you haven't offered all the response options survey takers might need to express their true opinions. Note also how much time it takes to complete the survey. Attention spans are short, and the individual is doing you a favor by participating. A tired or frustrated respondent may cease to pay attention to the questions in a rush to get to the end, or worse, fail to get to the end at all (in technical terms, these are “abandoners”). Do not include pretest data in any final tallies, but this would be an excellent opportunity to see if the survey data will answer the questions you identified in the initial steps.

Distributing through a Listserv

The benefits of a well-written instrument can be undone by poor choices about the people you find to answer your questions. Special care must be given when resorting to distribution over an online discussion list, or listserv.

Understand how your sample relates to the target population. As a general rule, we are rarely interested in the responses of the survey group. Their primary value comes when we can use those responses to extrapolate to the opinions of the population they represent. Every surveyor needs to know in detail how these groups are related in order to choose the most appropriate method. The goal is to avoid a common error of beginning surveyors: the drawing of conclusions about broader groups from a poorly constructed survey sample.

These issues can be horrifically complex, but the general concerns are easy to grasp. Consider three populations relevant for a project to be undertaken

by ALL-SIS: (1) the total membership, (2) the part of that membership subscribed to the ALL-SIS listserv, and (3) the part of that subset who respond to a distributed survey. The goal of doing a survey is to be able to treat the responses from the final sample as the opinions of the total membership, writ small. The intervention of the listserv sample adds new levels of complications to that challenge.

Ideally, total membership and listserv subscription are equivalent, but this must be verified, not assumed, and is unlikely to be true. Even if that is the case originally, an unknown number of individuals can be bumped due to over-quota inboxes, for example. Knowing the formal rules for subscription to a listserv is not the same as knowing who is actually subscribed at the time your survey is sent out, and, unless everyone in ALL-SIS is available to receive the survey, the final outcome cannot be read to reflect the position of ALL-SIS as a whole. Without proper precautions, you must describe your conclusions not as a sample of ALL-SIS opinion, but of ALL-SIS listserv opinion, which is much less interesting.

The gist of this argument is known intuitively to everyone. Would people be satisfied if the outcome of the U.S. census were based upon a sample drawn by sending the questionnaire out over AOL? Of course not, and for reasons they can easily articulate. Yet what librarians are doing through their reliance upon listservs to gather survey data is often only marginally better, and for the same reasons.

Never use a proxy when the real thing is available. Many of these problems can be eliminated by avoiding use of the listserv. In this example, it makes poor sense to use the ALL-SIS listserv as a stand-in for ALL-SIS members when the roster of ALL-SIS members is known and accessible. It may be less expensive to distribute using a listserv rather than a direct mailing (either electronic or traditional), but the results are also more difficult to interpret. These are trade-offs that must be kept in mind throughout the survey process.

Complicated stuff, but the upshot is easy enough: Don't use listservs unless your design allows for the known weaknesses of that distribution method. One way to do this is to prefer present/absent over more/less designs. In the first case you are interested in identifying the existence of certain features, while in the latter you also want to learn how frequently that trait appears, to compare that result with some other, and to assert to what extent it is characteristic of the whole population and not just the sample. Listserv strategies favor the first, but not the second. So if the intent is to conclude that “X percent of ALL-SIS support the

proposition that...,” then the flaws of listserv distribution are fatal. If, however, all you want is to be able to claim that “Within ALL-SIS the opinion exists that...,” then the weaknesses are tolerable.

A second context that minimizes problems associated with listserv surveys would be those in which the target of the survey is not the individual, but the institution. If all that is needed, for example, is a response from at least one person from libraries at each law school accredited by the American Bar Association, blanketing a listserv might be defensible. Not only would it be reasonable to assume that at least one person from a given institution is subscribed to the appropriate listserv, but it would also be possible to identify any gaps in the data that could then be filled by specialized cajoling. This approach requires an a priori method for combining multiple responses from a given law library, which would in turn require constructing questions that are not rendered nonsensical by such aggregation.

Maximize your level of control over who is returning the survey. While you know to whom you sent the survey, you also need as much information as possible about who actually returns it. This problem of control can be illustrated through the following thought experiment: Imagine that a librarian sends a survey out on the listserv, from which it is learned that everyone who answered it believes that law librarians should empty their shelves of West reporters and replace them with copies of Harry Potter books. Is this the result of a prank by one person who answered the survey many times, several people who worked to bring about a patently ridiculous outcome (what American Idol fans will recognize as the “Sanjaya Effect”), a real but minor sentiment that got inflated due to self-selection among survey respondents (e.g., only pro-Potter people felt strongly enough about the topic to complete the survey), or a genuine conclusion reached by academic law librarians?

Unless we can choose among these alternatives, we must toss the results. This action is not based upon the absurdity of the subject matter, but upon the uninterpretability of the outcome. Data can be equally uninterpretable even when they appear sensible—X percent favor electronic journals over paper subscriptions or believe 1L legal research training would be improved if it were taught by librarians instead of a distinct legal research and writing faculty. The soundness of such conclusions is only superficial if the lack of controls prevents us from choosing between possible alternative interpretations of the results. Different services offer varying degrees of control, so consider this feature when choosing a survey method.

Respect Your Respondents

Comply with all IRB requirements. As if the methodological hurdles were not daunting enough, no investigator should overlook the procedural. Librarians at academic institutions must inquire whether their survey plans need prior approval by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB), which oversees the use of humans as research subjects (see 45 C.F.R. §46). These measures prevent the exploitation of subjects by those who use them as sources of data. Universities typically consider no research so trivial that it should not first be submitted to the IRB, although simple survey projects are often given expedited review. Failure to comply with this requirement can have a devastating impact on the project, since most universities limit what can be done with non-IRB compliant data, such as prohibiting their use in any analysis. Most journals will refuse to publish articles with noncompliant data.

Compliance is not only formal and ethical, but practical as well. Adhering to proper process shows the outside world that librarians are serious enough about their profession to conform to all the mandates required of other researchers. Anyone sending out a survey should plainly state that it has satisfied applicable IRB requirements;

respondents should decline to participate in requests that lack that assurance.

Distribute the survey results. Your respondents are entitled to learn the results of the survey project. Intentions to keep results “secret” are explicitly forbidden by other professions with a strong research tradition (e.g., the American Anthropological Association). Even were it not an ethical responsibility, there are pragmatic reasons to make the results public. People who never see tangible benefits from their participation will be less inclined to respond to future solicitations. Since we deal with limited pools that will be dipped into repeatedly, it follows that respondents should be treated respectfully, with the courtesy of feedback in some form. Availability of results should be announced in the same venues from which survey takers were solicited. If compelling reasons arise that require results not be disclosed, respondents must be told before they participate, as part of their informed consent, that they will not have access to the report.

Conclusions

Survey research is difficult, complicated, and typically expensive work—and that is before even touching on the number-crunching side of the project. That certain technologies have made some

aspects of that task easier should not be taken as a sign that those hurdles have been eliminated. If anything, control of the technical details of surveying becomes even more important because of the new ways in which confounding errors can be hidden by automated services.

Those without a formal background in survey methods should be open to alternative approaches, including finding a co-author to work on the project who possesses skills in research and statistical techniques. Another possibility for those without the necessary background in surveying is to perform a detailed case study on an issue, which may actually be of more long-term usefulness than a survey that skims the surface of a complex issue.

Should a listserv survey be deemed the necessary route, however, thoughtful care can minimize the weakness of this technique and produce a useful contribution to the research on law libraries. ■

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