commentary

from other pens...

Pollsters face growing obstacles to accuracy

The rapid growth of cell phones, caller-ID technology and answering machines, combined with the public's growing resistance to opinion surveys, are making it more difficult for pollsters to do their jobs.

Most agree those forces have not crippled telephone polls. And the industry is unlikely to abandon phone surveys without something more reliable to take their place.

"I think polls face increasing obstacles and barriers," said Andrew Kohut, director of the Pew Research Center for the People & The Press.

The Pew Research Center has conducted research in the past that tested whether polls conducted over several days would get results similar to exhaustive surveys taken over several months. The study found no significant differences in the results.

Increasing obstacles to polling are less likely to affect national polls done by top polling firms that follow accepted practices of selecting a random sample and doing a thorough follow-up to reach everyone possible.

The immediate effect is on state polls done with smaller samples on a smaller budget, sometimes by polling companies not familiar with state demographics and voting patterns.

Some polls taken just before this year's midterm election picked up a voter surge toward Republicans in several Senate races following President Bush's barnstorming campaign tour, while others missed that surge. Pollsters and analysts faced the additional challenge of a combination

of anxieties about terrorism, the economy and a possible war with Iraq. Those in the polling business are constantly researching what's happening to their industry, which plays a critical role in both the political debate and marketing strategies.

Georgia State researcher Charlotte Steeh is working to gauge the growing impact of cell phones, which pollsters find are more difficult to contact and are becoming the main phone some people use.

"I think we're missing identifiable demographic groups like young people in urban areas who just don't have landlines anymore," Steeh said. "My research is designed to determine the extent of people we're missing altogether."

Researchers believe less than 5 percent of households use only a cell phone, although the number is higher among certain groups like young urban adults. The number using only cell phones is likely to grow, so researchers are looking for ways to cope with the changes.

People are growing reluctant to participate in polls, something the industry has been noticing for more than a decade. Michael Traugott, a public opinion researcher at the University of Michigan, says that reluctance can be traced to people being too busy and a lack of interest in politics.

He says increasing activity by telemarketers, who occasionally disguise their sales calls as legitimate polling, could increase public resistance. Dozens of states are looking at laws that would allow people to shield themselves from telemarketing, but it's unclear what impact that would have on legitimate public opinion research.

"The biggest issue is not the law as it is, but the public blurring the difference between (legitimate polling) and telemarketing," said Linda Piekarski, an executive at Survey Sampling Inc., a Connecticut company that provides phone samples to polling companies.

People underestimate the influence they gain through polls and the surveys are "increasingly being viewed as nuisances or invasions of privacy," said Peter Tuckel, a researcher at Hunter College in New York.

"Americans are losing sight of the critical role that polls can play in a democratic, consumer-oriented society such as ours," he said.

The public opinion industry is likely to look for new methods, possibly used in tandem, such as Web-based surveys along with telephone

Pollsters are trying to figure out whether telephone surveys, currently the most reliable and affordable method, will eventually become obsolete. That," said Tuckel, "is the million dollar question.

EDITOR'S NOTE — Will Lester covers politics and polling for The Associated Press.

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Reading those wonderful e-mails

I don't know about you, but I get some wonderful things by e-mail.

Of course, they have to be weeded out from the ones that aren't so wonderful.

Here's one I like by an unknown author.

"Does anyone under the age of 50 know the lyrics to the Star Spangled Banner?

Just look at the seniors with tears in their eyes and pride in their hearts as they stand at attention with their hand over their hearts!

Remember...inside every older person is a younger person wondering, what happened?" Isn't that the truth?

Why don't people want to claim authorship? Here's another one:

"Yes, I am a Senior Citizen! I'm the life of the party...even if it lasts until 8 not as cute as mine.

I'm very good at opening childproof caps with

a hammer.

I'm usually interested in going home before I get crowds, politicians.



to where I am going.

I'm awake many hours before my body allows me to get up.

I'm smiling all the time because I can't hear a thing you're saying.

I'm very good at telling stories; over and over and

I'm aware that other people's grandchildren are

I'm so cared for-long-term care, eye care, private care, and dental care.

I'm not grouchy. I just don't like traffic, waiting,

I'm sure everything I can't find is in a secure

I'm wrinkled, saggy, lumpy, and that's just my left

I'm having trouble remembering simple words

I'm realizing that aging is not for wimps.

I'm sure they are making adults much younger these days. I'm wondering, if you're only as old as you feel,

how could I be alive at 150? I'm a walking storeroom of facts...I've just lost

the storeroom. Yes, I'm a Senior Citizen and I think I am having

the time of my life!" As much as I still hate to admit it, I'm a Senior

I feel great most of the time, but I often look back

with a pair of forceps. They did not come back, but

His teeth needed cleaning. He needed to be medi-

The vet, however, didn't give me any gas to slow

cated for a week prior to the procedure, which was

the vet said that Tigger had to.

I can understand that.

to be performed under anesthesia.

and wonder how so much could be behind me. Time, I mean!

Those vet trips make cats nervous

cynthia

haynes

open season

I'm starting to get on the cats' nerves.

It all started out when Tigger, the office cat, got a notice that he was due at the vet for his one-year or 50,000-nap checkup.

At the same time Kubla Khan, our part-Siamese, received his notice from Uncle Vet. He was to report for shots and worming at 0800 hours any day of the week.

It seemed reasonable to me to take the two in about 12 pounds.

It would save time, save gas and save trouble. Well, two out of three wasn't bad

The trouble is — I only have one cat carrier.

fast enemies. Our cat carrier is actually an airline puppy carrier we've had for more than 20 years. It's really

The cats had never met. However, they are now

roomy for most cats. As anyone who has seen Tigger will tell you, though, that he is not a normal cat. The carrier holds

him, but it isn't roomy. Khan is a well proportioned neutered male or

Tigger is a fat cat of about 18.

Put them together in one case, and you're drag-creep up behind them. Fill your dropper. Then you ging around a 30-pound cat fight.

Actually they were so stuffed together they couldn't do much damage. They sort of reminded me of the scene in Dumbo when the elephants make the pyramid and complain because they're stepping on each other.

The doc gave each cat the once over and popped some pills down their throats.

Khan took his with good grace and Tigger spit them back at the vet — twice.

On the third time, the pills were pushed down

him down while I medicated him — one dropperful of antibiotic twice a day. Actually, I'm fairly good at drugging my cats. You

grab and open their mouth and squirt the medicine down their throats in one swift move. This usually works, and when it doesn't, you

clean up the floor, your clothes and all surrounding areas and try again. This has been going on for a week. Is it any won-

der that Tigger is starting to slink away when he sees I'm sure Tigger will be glad when this is all over.

I think I'm starting to get on his nerves.

The first Thanksgiving family feud

Historians all agree that the Pilgrims really did celebrate a first Thanksgiving, but they also agree that it was a one-time event. It wasn't turned into a yearly celebration until Abraham Lincoln made it official during the middle of the Civil War, some 250 years later. New documents have come to light that may explain why.

found in a newly discovered cache of papers composed by the original passengers of the Mayflower.

"Six long hours we have spent looking at the hind end of a horse on the overly crowded road to the house of my parents and lo, for what? To see my brother with whom I barely speak and his harpy wyfe who so disrespecteth me and mine in a backhanded way? He starteth acting like a wee childe immediately, from the time we stepped from the carriage until the time we have departed. He bringeth up small jealousies and grievances from our youth long ago. His unhappiness is like a contagion, a pustule that never heals. 'Letteth it go and getteth a life,' he has made me wish to scream, and more times than one. We should be spending less time together, not more, me thinks.

"One unpleasantry follows another as I suffer my uncles and aunts to runneth on and on about my cousins—how well they are doing, how much money they are sending to their parents, what comely grandchildren they have produced. Yet I knoweth these same cousins. They are base and low and would soil themselves if they were ever made to do a day's work. They wish their parents dead and spend their days making plans to squander their inheritance in a warmer clime. Their chilits meaning. They runneth around and screameth spawn of Satan himself would make more pleas-

ant company. "And my handsome wyfe cares not for the way years to pass. For that we gave thanks."



mullen

• the village idiot

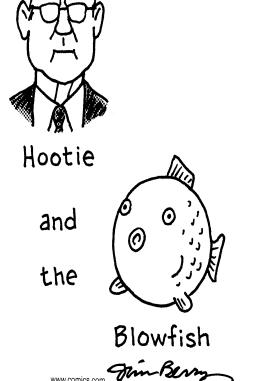
"Never again," writes John Aldin in a letter my mother prepareth the meal. 'She useth not oysters in the fowl's stuffing,' she rails at me. 'She putteth not the bird in a paper bag in the hearth.' It maketh me fatigued to hear such words. Yet Priscilla's own stuffing would not winneth any praise even in the land of my birth where they can taste not the difference between condiment and composte. She knoweth not, but secretly I giveth my portions of her bounty to the hound beneath the table. It teacheth him not to beg.

"My wyfe speaks ill of none, yet I can tell from the bearing of her body that she would rather be ducking witches on a cold day in December than be in the company of my family and their offspring. As if her family be a barrel of salted fish. Her sisters make it well known that their spouses buy them more kitchen tools than I do and that the corn from their labor is bigger and better than that of my own. They maketh my head hurt. Were they not aboard, the journey of the Mayflower could have been as a fun ship cruise. With them, it was the Hate Boat. Had the voyage lasted but one week more, 'twas they who were going over the side or 'twas I.

'It occurred to me suddenly that we may have left the wood stove on at home. Priscilla volunteered that it may be true as she had often noticed my forgetful habits. Happily, we fled the festividren know not the word 'no' and understandeth not ties. On the road home we spoke not to each other for many hours. 'Let us hope we can do this again all day when peace and quiet is called for. The next year,' at last I spoke. It got a hearty laugh as Priscilla knew I was in perfect jest. In truth, you could not make us do that again were four hundred

Jim Mullen is the author of "It Takes A Village Idiot: A Memoir of Life After the City" (Simon and Schuster, 2001). He also contributes regularly to Entertainment Weekly, where he can be reached as jim_mullen@ew.com

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