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Web-based expert surveys

The opportunities for conducting web-based elite expert surveys

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Abstract

Web-surveys are today commonly used in a wide range of areas. The interest in web-based surveys is not surprising as they offer a number of advantages compared to traditional mail or telephone interviews. Among the most distinctive positive features are the reductions both in terms of time and costs compared to more traditional surveys. However, even though most parts of the traditional mail- or telephone surveys easily can be translated directly into web-surveys, other methodological and practical obstacles are raised by the use of the internet. This paper sets out to further explore the pros and cons of web-surveys as a tool for conducting web-based elite/expert surveys. The results show that it is important to identify the experts and establish a personal contact, possibly by mail, e-mail or by telephone. Paper-and-pencil surveys do sometimes yield higher response rates compared to web-surveys and should therefore be offered as an alternative. Mixed designs using both paper-and-pencil surveys together with web surveys, do also yield highly similar results. Attrition rates seem to be closely connected with the perceptions of the effort required to complete the survey. Clean and neutral graphics do also seem to produce higher response rates. Language barriers may sometimes be a problem, why the survey should be prepared for the most commonly spoken languages. Reminders should be made cautiously and with a combination of e-mail and post-cards. To build sufficient trust, the project requires some levels of transparency and recognized credibility of the researchers.

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Introduction

Over the last ten years the use of internet has expanded into nearly every aspect of society and survey research is no exception. Web-surveys are today commonly used in a wide range of areas, both within science and within public and private enterprise. The interest in web-based surveys is not surprising as they offer a number of advantages compared to traditional mail or telephone interviews. Among the most distinctive positive features are the reductions both in terms of time and costs compared to more traditional surveys. Tedious and time consuming data entries and errors related to the coding procedures are something that web-surveys are dismissed from. However, even though most parts of the traditional mail- or telephone surveys easily can be translated directly into web-surveys, other methodological and practical obstacles are raised by the use of the internet. This paper sets out to further explore the pros and cons of web-surveys as a tool for conducting web-based expert surveys.

Survey design

Generally there are three different options to choose between when carrying out a survey by internet. A traditional method is to include the survey questionnaire in an e-mail. This method is highly similar to traditional mail surveys since it demands that the answers are coded and entered into a data matrix. Another method is to send the survey form attached in the e-mail where the respondents can reach the survey by downloading it to their private computers. The third and today most commonly used method is to use special softwares designed for web-surveys where the respondents reach the survey on-line by following a link or entering a password on a webpage. The major drawback with the first method is that it, as mentioned, demands that the data are coded and entered into a data matrix, something that is expensive and time-consuming. The second method demands that the respondents have a relatively fast internet connection since the surveys sometimes can be relatively heavy to download. Another risk with this method is that the surveys tend to remain unanswered since the survey is stored on the hard drive together with other files that might be of higher priority for the respondent. From this perspective, the on-line surveys have their distinctive advantages since the answers can be directly downloaded into the data matrix. Consequently, no coding procedures or data entering is needed. It has also been empirically proven that the response rates tend to be higher for on-line methods (Crawford 2001).

Sampling

A common experience in the field is that when it comes to web-surveys in general and elite surveys in particular, it is important to in a relatively early stage of the process identify the experts and establish a personal contact, possibly by mail, e-mail or sometimes even by telephone. Studies have shown that invitation letters by e-mail with the survey or a link to the survey included in the letter tend to lower the response rates compared to if an invitation is sent out before the actual survey is carried out (Andrews 2003; Cook 2000).

A similar experience was made by the collaborators of the project *Virtues of Voter Turnout*, a project carried out at the department of political science at Göteborg University in the spring of 2007. What they found was that the invitation letter should be personally addressed so that the respondents feel that they are specifically selected for the survey due to his/her personal knowledge or experience, and that it not is just another mass-invitation (Martinsson 2007). A problem with mass-invitations is the SPAM-filters used by most organizations or companies. If a mass-invitation is to be sent out, the invitation letter need to be 'clean' from certain wordings that are commonly used in regular SPAM-mails. Most people are also used to receive an enormous bulk of e-mails from unknown senders why the e-mails often tend to 'disappear' among other e-mails in the inbox (Porter 2003). However, by locating the respondent and then make a personal invitation specifically for him/her, this problem can be overcome. By establishing a personal contact the researchers also have the opportunity to explain more in detail the purpose of the study. This in turn may increase the respondents will to participate (Martinsson 2007).

Another important aspect of the sampling procedure, according to the collaborators of the *Virtues of Voter Turnout* -project, is to verify the e-mail addresses, since presumptive respondents in 'elite' positions do sometimes not use their official e-mail very often. The recruitment for this specific project was made through the web-pages of different news papers (Martinsson 2007). The problem with getting in contact with people posed by a number of alternative e-mail addresses has also been observed by other researchers (Porter 2003). A personal invitation should therefore be sent by both e-mail and as a post-card. Alternatively, it might even be made by calling a potential respondent by phone.

Moreover, the response rates are also likely to increase if the respondents get something in return for their participation. In regular samples of internet users drawn from different communities etc. money may work but it seems to be more common that they want to take part of the results of the research (Andrews 2003). This may also especially be the case with an expert survey.

Response rates

It has been proven that paper-and-pencil surveys sometimes yield higher response rates compared to web-surveys (Cook 2000; Couper 2000; Kaplowitz 2004). It is therefore important to offer the respondents the opportunity to choose between these instruments. However, there is evidence that the use of different survey instruments might bring different answers. This, however, seems to be a minor problem when it comes to mixed designs using both paper-and-pencil surveys together with web surveys, since there are studies that have compared these instruments in a wide range of different application with the result that they yield highly similar results (Cronk 2002; Kaplowitz 2004; Yun 2000).

Attrition (drop out) rates may also increase if many open-ended questions are incorporated into the survey (Crawford 2001). This effect may, however, interact with the method of recruitment in situations in which self-recruited respondents are less affected by open-ended questions; at least is this our experience with our work with E-p@nelen; a panel study based on self recruited respondents conducted each election since 2002 and onwards by political scientists at Göteborg University. Attrition rates are, however, not necessarily lower in shorter surveys. Instead it seems as it is the perceptions of the effort required to complete the survey that may be decisive in terms of whether a respondent choose to participate or not (Andrews 2003; Crawford 2001). These problems can thus to a large extent be dealt with by the design and the layout of the survey. Our experience from the work with E-p@nelen is that surveys should be carried out in blocks. The survey should then be built on approximately one to five questions and then build each survey on ten to fifteen blocks. The alternative and less preferable method is to launch the survey as one single survey where the respondents are answering the questions by scrolling down the webpage from the beginning to the end. Another experience from our work with these surveys is that the colours and the layout play an important role. The survey blocks should be kept as 'clean' as possible with a lot of space between the questions and the background colours should be few and neutral. This is an experience that also is shared by other researchers in the field. For example it has been shown that a clean and neutral graphics by itself tend to produce higher response rates. This might be a result of that neutral graphics gives a more serious impression and at the same time it also reduces the time for downloading the survey, which in turn has proven to be important for the response rates (Andrews 2003; Couper 2001; Crawford 2001).

Languages

Another experience with web-based elite expert surveys made by the *Virtues of Voter Turnout*-project is that language barriers sometimes may be a problem. In this project the survey was only carried out in English, something which worked well as long as the respondents not were native French speakers

(this survey was carried out to experts in France, Great Britain, USA, Norway the Czech Republic, Ireland, the Netherlands and Italy). One solution to this problem could be to prepare the survey in the most commonly spoken languages such as French and Spanish as a backup for those respondents who may prefer another language than English (Martinsson 2007). The software for making on-line web-surveys used by political scientist at Göteborg University, simply called 'Websurvey', provided by the Swedish company Textalk supports up to eleven different languages. It is important though, that if the survey is carried out in different languages one must be careful in terms of the sentences and wordings used since different words does not easily travel between different languages.

Reminders

Reminders should according to some studies be made cautiously and with a combination of e-mail and post-cards. Sending too many reminders by e-mail tend to improve the response *per se* but it will not necessarily make the respondents to fill in the survey. Too many reminders are also more likely to make the respondents irritated, which for obvious reasons tend to lower the respondents' incentives to participate. To obtain the best results it seems as a follow-up card sent by mail or a phone call is the proper way to make the 'hard-to-get' respondents to answer the questionnaire (Couper 2001).

Confidentiality

To build sufficient trust in order to get people to participate in a survey, the project requires some levels of transparency and recognized credibility of the researchers. The trust and the credibility of the project and the researchers could be obtained by constructing a special web-page where the participants in the study can follow the process and monitor the progress of the research and also read more about the aims of the study. The respondents should also have the opportunity to take part of the data and the research when the study is finished.

A lack of anonymity can also affect the response rates and the internet does also allow false identities which can make the results unreliable. Personal invitations can, however, overcome the latter problem (Andrews 2003; Cho 1999). When it comes to the respondents' privacy it is, as always, important to be able to guarantee the anonymity of the respondents. This is especially essential with regard to on-line surveys since the e-mail addresses are often used as identification keys in the final data-sets. It is therefore important to carefully build an address register where e-mail addresses are replaced by identification numbers, available only to a few researchers. However, using the e-mail addresses as an identification key is a method that mostly is used when the respondents' are self-recruited from various web-pages or internet communities. If the target population instead is experts or persons in elite positions, it is possible to connect them with the survey by sending them a usernames and a passwords instead of using their e-mail addresses. Thereby the respondents' anonymity is further ensured.

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