MEMORANDUM

TO: Social Science Researchers at Princeton University
FROM: Edward Freeland, Associate Director, Survey Research Center
DATE: April 8, 2019
RE: Using Online Panels for Survey Research

A few weeks ago, I attended a one-day conference in Washington DC on the use of online panels for survey research and public opinion polling. As you probably know, web-based interviewing with online panels has many advantages over more traditional methods of survey research, the most important of which are speed and lower costs. The news on telephone surveys seems to get more dismal by the day. In a presentation by Courtney Kennedy from the Pew Research Center, we learned that Pew’s average response rate for random-digit-dial (RDD) telephone surveys has now dropped to six percent. At the same time, costs have gone up considerably as pollsters have increased the proportion of wireless phone numbers in RDD surveys. Some RDD surveys have even stopped calling landlines altogether.

But while they might seem like a good alternative, online panels have their own shortcomings, beginning with a bewildering array of vendors and lots of uncertainty about representativeness and response quality. Although web-based panels are considerably cheaper than other modes of interviewing, the vast majority are “opt-in” panels where members join voluntarily, typically with the understanding that they will receive some form of credit, points, or money for responding. And while these panels are quite large and diverse, there’s an obvious problem with potential self-selection bias that is neither ignorable nor fixable by using larger sample sizes or adding population adjustment weights. We’re also finding that “bot” programmers are getting more sophisticated and harder to detect. It’s not uncommon now to find duplicate responses (right down to the letters typed in for text responses) all coming from different IP addresses and landing in your dataset with perfectly contiguous start and end times.

The good news from the conference is that the number of web panels built through random sampling has increased significantly in the past five years. These probability-based panels are much more meticulous and transparent about their methods for recruiting, monitoring and managing panel members. The average cost-per-interview (CPI) has also started to come down to a point where the average CPI is now below what it was for the cheapest RDD telephone surveys 25 years ago. Even the opt-in panels have taken steps to be more transparent, although some have begun using “routers” based on propensity matching and quotas so that samples match census parameters on key demographics. These rigged match rates are then put forward as evidence that the panels are “representative.” The bottom line is that opt-in panels are fine for most undergraduate research or for running randomized experiments.
However, if what you need is a good, representative sample that will be respected by academic journals, then you need to go with a recruited panel.

The attached table on the next page lists a number of recruited and opt-in panels. There are many more opt-in panels that I could have listed, but the ones in the table are the most popular among academic researchers. I’ve included a column for “Hits on Google Scholar,” but it’s less an indicator of quality and more an index of academic popularity. All of the names listed for contacts are people I have known for years or met recently as colleagues, so I am happy to approach any of them on your behalf with questions, ideas, or requests for cost estimates.

Note that some panels prefer to program and host the online survey instrument themselves; others require or will allow you to use your own application (e.g., Qualtrics) for which they will furnish the respondents. Some panels have an omnibus option, for cases where you want responses for just two or three questions (with demographic variables and weights appended afterward); others will only run surveys as stand-alone projects. Some panels also include recruited members who will not or cannot respond on the web, despite, in many cases, being offered a tablet and free Internet service. AmeriSpeak, SSRS and Gallup all have the ability to supplement web interviews with telephone or mail responses from non-Internet households. Most of the opt-in panels and a few of the recruited panels have published their responses to ESOMAR 28, a set of 28 questions intended to render their sampling, recruiting, data collection and weighting methods more transparent. Finally, some panels (such as RAND’s ALP, Gallup and USC’s UAS) allow linkage through a common unique ID number from your survey to data from past surveys that are available from their online archive. If you use these organizations for your survey, your data will then become part of their archive after an embargo period.

Another issue I will try to gather more information on is panel tenure. If the vendors are willing to release information such as length of time on the panel, total surveys answered, average number of surveys completed per month, this will help researchers assess whether panel conditioning is a factor in biasing survey response. Some panels may be willing to share this information or use it as a basis for sampling; others may not.

If you have any questions or concerns about panels or using Qualtrics for your next online survey or experiment, please contact me or Naila Rahman by phone (8-5660) or by email (efreelan@princeton.edu; nrahman@princeton.edu).
### Recruited Panels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Size</th>
<th>Managed by</th>
<th>Contact</th>
<th>Year started</th>
<th>Allow interviews via external questionnaire platforms?</th>
<th>Omnibus?</th>
<th>Phone-Mail option for non-internet panel members</th>
<th>Recruitment method</th>
<th>Hits on Google Scholar since 2015</th>
<th>ESOMAR 28 questions available online</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AmeriSpeak</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>NORC at the University of Chicago</td>
<td>Dan Costanzo (312-357-3780)</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Mail using address-based sampling (ABS)</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding America Study</td>
<td>7,000</td>
<td>USC Dornsife Center for Economic &amp; Social Research</td>
<td>Jill Darling (213-821-8901)</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Mail using ABS</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KnowledgePanel</td>
<td>55,000</td>
<td>IPSOS (previously GfK)</td>
<td>Frances Barlas (202-203-0379)</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Mail using ABS</td>
<td>1,110</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Life Panel</td>
<td>6,000</td>
<td>RAND Corporation</td>
<td>Karen Edwards (310-393-0411 x6508)</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Mail using ABS and RDD telephone</td>
<td>634</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSRS Probability Panel</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>SSRS, Inc</td>
<td>Chintan Turakhia (484-840-4407)</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes, but phone only</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Weekly national RDD telephone omnibus</td>
<td>RDD telephone and mail using ABS</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Gallup Panel</td>
<td>100,000</td>
<td>Gallup</td>
<td>Stephanie Marken (508-246-5741)</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td>107</td>
<td>No</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Opt-In Panels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Size</th>
<th>Managed by</th>
<th>Contact</th>
<th>Year started</th>
<th>Allow interviews via external questionnaire platforms?</th>
<th>Omnibus?</th>
<th>Phone-Mail option for non-internet panel members</th>
<th>Recruitment method</th>
<th>Hits on Google Scholar since 2015</th>
<th>ESOMAR 28 questions available online</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Qualtrics</td>
<td>6 million in the US</td>
<td>Qualtrics</td>
<td>Brandon Jameson (801-623-6572)</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Open opt-in</td>
<td>742</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSI/Research Now</td>
<td>60 million worldwide</td>
<td>Dynata</td>
<td>Kevin McLaughlin (203-567-7267)</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Open opt-in</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CINT</td>
<td>19 million worldwide</td>
<td>CINT</td>
<td>Sean Kelly (951-775-3506)</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Open opt-in</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YouGov</td>
<td>1.2 million in the US</td>
<td>YouGov</td>
<td>Samantha Luks (650-462-8009)</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Open opt-in</td>
<td>1,700</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanical Turk</td>
<td>&gt;500K worldwide</td>
<td>Amazon</td>
<td></td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Open opt-in</td>
<td>18,600</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucid</td>
<td>&gt;100 million worldwide</td>
<td>Lucid</td>
<td>Mikayla Sonneborn (504-475-9675)</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Open opt-in</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Papers and Reports on Online Surveys with Recruited and Opt-In Panels


Hillygus, D.S., Jackson, N. and Young, M., 2014. Professional respondents in non-probability online panels. Online panel research: A data quality perspective, 1, pp.219-237.


