

The Value of Self-Selected Samples in New Media Research

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Remarks presented to a refereed panel at the annual meeting of the Broadcast Education Association,

Las Vegas

April 2005

[As transcribed from handwritten remarks]

When I proposed the topic regarding the value of self-selected online samples, I assumed there was one. In preparing another paper for this panel, however, I learned that the value is waning. In 2001 and 2002 Betsy Perse and I analyzed large self-selected samples, leading to refereed publication in the *Journal of Interactive Advertising*. The size of a subsequent sample was about half, when conducted in 2003. A survey in March 2005 again yielded half of the 2003 respondents, leading me to wonder how soon the N will reach zero.

My larger topic today is the utility of early benchmarking of new technologies. Proprietary market research is not shy about recruited panels. High-priced summaries of these convenience samples are widely reported as fact in the consumer and trade press.

Looking back to VCR research, it's easy to find refereed journal articles in the likes of *Journal of Broadcast & Electronic Media (JOBEM)* about early adopters, based on convenience samples. Also, having collected data from huge *random* samples of remote control device owners and comparing the same to smaller purposive samples, it is difficult to see a difference. When reporting mundane attitudes and behaviors, it's hard to imagine much difference between random and convenience data sets.

In the mid-1990s a lively debate played out in the pages of *JOBEM* (Potter et al. versus Sparks) and the acceptability of early adopter studies has nearly dried up. Bob Abelman and John Courtright wrote a couple of compelling essays, as did Michael Basil and Annie Lang. I would argue that the demise of early adopter studies is not a good thing.

In fairness, there are still many convenience samples slipping through, particularly in *Mass Communication & Society*, e.g., Matthews, 2003 and Kim & Lee, 2003. Mind you, I'm not faulting *MC&S*

for this because an earlier article in that journal by Bryant Paul, Michael Salwen, and Michel Dupagne stood firmly against nonrandom samples. It's also true that some research in the 1980s found random data sets, e.g., Harvey & Rothe, 1986.

But I encourage you to consider the difference between the use of available student samples in experiments and the use of available adult samples in exploratory surveys. If one compares selected samples of TiVo users with random samples, the findings are very similar. For example, in both, 98 percent reported that they "couldn't live without" their DVR. And 40 percent said they "would rather give up their cell phone."

Now that I'm a journal editor myself, I am first-hand witness to the debate. This morning at this same BEA conference, I listened to a satellite radio study that used an online convenience sample. It was sponsored by an NAB grant, but perhaps now it is unpublishable?

[open for panel discussion]

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