

THE LOST-LETTER TECHNIQUE: A TOOL OF SOCIAL RESEARCH

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This note describes briefly an experimental technique for assessing community orientations toward political groups and other institutions. The technique consists of dispersing in city streets (and other locations) a large number of unmailed letters. The letters are enclosed in envelopes that have addresses and stamps on them but that have not yet been posted. When a person comes across one of these letters on the street, it appears to have been lost. Thus he has a choice of mailing, disregarding, or actively destroying the letter. By varying the name of the organization to which the letter is addressed and distributing such "lost letters" in sufficient quantity, it is possible to obtain a return rate specific to the organization. The focus of the technique is not on the individual reaction to the lost letters but, rather, on the rate of response for a particular organization relative to other organizations that serve as controls.

In a first study, 400 stamped, addressed envelopes were distributed in the city of New Haven, Connecticut. One hundred letters were assigned to each of the following addresses:

Friends of the Communist Party
P.O. Box 7147
304 Columbus Avenue
New Haven 11, Connecticut

Medical Research Associates
P.O. Box 7147
304 Columbus Avenue
New Haven 11, Connecticut

Friends of the Nazi Party
P.O. Box 7147
304 Columbus Avenue
New Haven 11, Connecticut

Mr. Walter Carnap
P.O. Box 7147
304 Columbus Avenue
New Haven 11, Connecticut

The letters were systematically distributed in ten districts of the city and in four types of placement: street pavements, shops, telephone booths, and under automobile windshield wipers. (In this last case, the inscription "found near car" was written in pencil on each envelope.) Twenty-five envelopes with each address were distributed in each placement.

The following table shows the number of letters returned for each

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cell of 25. The last column gives the over-all percentage of letters returned for each address:

<i>Address</i>	<i>Placement</i>				<i>Per Cent Return</i>
	<i>Shops</i>	<i>Cars</i>	<i>Streets</i>	<i>Phone Booths</i>	
Medical Research Associates	23	19	18	12	72
Personal letter	21	21	16	13	71
Friends of the Communist Party	6	9	6	4	25
Friends of the Nazi Party	7	6	6	6	25
Total	57	55	46	35	48

The return rate for all 400 letters was 48 per cent, but this is of less interest than the relative return rates for the several organizations. Seventy-two per cent of the Medical Research letters and 71 per cent of the Personal letters were received in our post office box, but the Communist and Nazi Party return rates were each 25 per cent.

The substantive results do not tell us anything new or spectacular: it is no surprise that extremist political organizations should be less favored than a medical research group. But the experience does show the general feasibility of using the technique as a means of assessing community orientations toward social groups or organizations. Moreover, it now becomes possible to extend the technique to domains and issues where the answers are not so clearly known, or where it is desirable to conduct a study without directly questioning subjects.

Several new studies using the lost-letter technique have been completed, or are now underway. In a second study, a demographic variable was introduced; letters relevant to the racial integration question were distributed in North Carolina using neighborhoods of different racial composition. A third study is being conducted in Hong Kong to measure the orientation of overseas Chinese toward the Peking and Taiwan Governments, and a fourth study is planned in which the response rates will be assessed against a criterion measure, namely the 1964 presidential election returns.

The lost-letter technique has many limitations, among them, a relative lack of control over the precise processes that mediate the return of the letters: one knows only the rate of response for any particular letter series. However, there are compensatory advantages: (1) the person who comes across the letter rarely if ever realizes he is a participant in a sociological survey, (2) an ordinary action is used as the basis of measurement, and (3) the responses can be gathered up conveniently in a post office box. With proper controls the technique can prove a useful and unobtrusive means of gathering information on selected social issues.

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH

PROCEEDINGS OF THE TWENTIETH ANNUAL CONFERENCE

The 1965 AAPOR Conference was held from May 13 to 16 at the Hotel Griswold in Groton, Connecticut.

Because this was the Twentieth Annual Conference, a collection of AAPOR memorabilia was displayed and a special session was devoted to a review of changes in public opinion and attitudes between the generations. (This session is presented in full on pages 357-376.)

The Conference was organized into ten formal sessions and three round-table meetings. Herbert E. Krugman delivered his presidential address at the traditional annual banquet. At that time, also, the AAPOR Award, bestowed upon the late Harry Field, was presented to his daughter. (A description of the award and the citation are reported at the beginning of these Proceedings.)

The abstracts published here were prepared by the authors of papers presented at the formal sessions. Summaries of the discussions that took place at round-table meetings were written by their chairmen. Included also are reports of two executive council committees, presented at a special session, and of the Annual Business Meeting.

The editor wishes to thank all those who participated in the preparation of this report.

BABETTE KASS
Editor

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