Online Surveys in Sociology: Opportunities, Drawbacks and Limitations

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ABSTRACT

The article is devoted to the description of one of the most popular methods in sociology – Internet-surveys. The possibilities of online surveys and their advantages and disadvantages will be presented. This analysis will be carried out based on the results of online surveys conducted by the Centre for Sociological Research of the Sevastopol State University.

Keywords

Internet-surveys, online surveys.

Recently, in sociology there has been an increased interest in using the method of online surveys to collect information. Using this method, you can get data on the quantitative and qualitative composition of the audience, in particular, socio-demographic and property characteristics, the frequency of using network resources, the purpose of visiting the Internet. On-line polls are usually of two types - an e-mail survey and a web poll. E-mail poll - this, in fact, is sending out e-mail invitations to participate in the survey. Such emails may contain a link to the site where the questionnaire is located, or directly the form of the questionnaire.

When conducting an e-mail survey, respondents are assigned a personal number that allows you to track the speed and level of its response. This type of survey is similar in technique to the traditional mail survey. Web-survey - this is what we often see on the Internet, - a questionnaire placed directly on the Internet page. Whatever types of online surveys are not used by researchers, one can be stated exactly: as a method of data collection, it is one of the most promising. However, for the collected data to be as reliable as possible, it is necessary to understand and take into account all its advantages and limitations related to the shortcomings of the methodology [1].

First of all, I would like to note that on-line surveys have merits concerning their sample. First, it is an opportunity to achieve large samples, which reduces the magnitude of the random error. Secondly, the possibility of the breadth of the sample coverage: Internet-research makes it possible to study social groups, despite the boundaries and geography of the respondents' location. Thirdly, the speed of the survey. On-line survey of several thousand people around the world can be conducted within one to three days. Fourthly, the attainability of respondents: the network can be interviewed by those who in real life will not go to contact. For example, problematic and marginalized groups of the population or highly-secured and highly socialized people.

There is a group of communicative merits of on-line surveys, in particular, a decrease in the interviewer's influence on the respondent. The lack of direct contact of the interviewer with the respondent creates a different communicative situation, reducing the psychological discomfort and increasing the sincerity of the answers. This is especially important in surveys on acute or sensitive topics. The modern person does not welcome the "invasion" of his private life, so studying these problems requires anonymity of respondents, which cannot always provide surveys by traditional methods. All this makes it possible to receive sincere, detailed answers, which means that an on-line survey provides complete, reliable and informative information. The achieved "openness" of respondents in online surveys allows to obtain undistorted data: a person does not seek to give socially desirable answers, which is often observed in a traditional survey. Secondly, the ability to respond to a questionnaire without direct contact with the interviewer helps to achieve a higher level of trust from the respondent.

The organizational merits of on-line surveys are the possibility of a broad scope of research topics; organizational flexibility, allowing the respondent to choose the time and place of filling out the questionnaire, while being in the familiar environment. A significant point is the strict logic of the survey: the accuracy of the transitions from question to question is observed, the subsequent question is asked only after answering the previous one. The software allows to exclude the traditional mistakes typical for interviewers. There is the possibility of automatically collecting additional information about respondents and prompt response. Internet surveys allow you to quickly and without additional costs change the toolkit.

Organizational advantages of the on-line survey include resource saving, which often acts as a decisive factor in the preparation of estimates of sociological research. However, it is believed that the only resources that the Internet can actually save are the costs of a traditional field survey. At the same time, the loss of quality of information obtained through online research does not cover the saved resources [2].

The enumerated advantages, to some extent unique and not inherent in other sociological methods, should have made the online survey one of the most common methods for studying public opinion. However, it has a number of significant shortcomings that prevent them from replacing traditional surveys. The main shortcomings of on-line surveys include a low level of representativeness of the sample, the inability to question large surveys, the limited research of some regions due to the lack of Internet distribution. These shortcomings are so significant that they can lead to the collection of unreliable data and, as a result, to the meaninglessness of the study itself.

In carrying out online surveys of the Center for Sociological Research of the Sevastopol State University conducted, the author of this publication also encountered the described problem. This problem can have several solutions. In particular, when carrying out e-mail surveys, respondents receive messages from unknown authors by mail and

identify them as "spam", and often the letter is deleted. This problem can be solved by placing an invitation to take part in the survey on the sites of leading providers in the region under investigation, or when entering the mail system for those respondents who live in the regions necessary for the study. The world practice of conducting Internet surveys has developed an algorithm for ensuring the representativeness of data: posting an announcement about the survey, registering those who wish to participate in it, collecting information about them, creating a database that experts call the Internet panel, then sending out invitations to participate in the survey and actually Stage of results collection. But it is complicated and not always achievable by the research team.

The problem of representativeness of the sample of on-line surveys leads to a number of difficult problems, in particular, to sample bias. The sample from Internet users will not be representative of the general population - the inhabitants of the researching region. The second problem that arises is the spontaneity of the sample. As a rule, on-line questionnaires are answered only by those who want to answer themselves, and not those in whom the researcher is interested. And in this case, it is necessary to understand that the sample of on-line research consists mainly of active Internet users who cannot reflect all the characteristics of the general population. Such a sample is effective only if it is necessary to study the active part of the population of the region, or when it is necessary to understand in a short time the existing trends in public opinion.

The Center for Sociological Research of Sevastopol State University, conducting online surveys, receives information about the prevailing tendencies of social consciousness. In particular, studying the readiness of Sevastopol residents to participate in the development of their city through online survey and traditional interviewing, we obtained almost identical results. So, based on the results of online surveys, the overwhelming number of respondents (71%) are ready to personally participate in the development projects of Sevastopol. A third (31%) of those who are ready to develop Sevastopol are ready to share their knowledge, skills and achievements, a quarter (24.5%) - with all the available resources, a fifth (21%) with their time, 13% - physical labor and efforts and even 1.2% of financial resources [3].

According to the results of research of the Sevastopol youth (conducted by the Center for Sociological Research of Sevastopol State University in December 2016), almost 40% of the young people surveyed are ready to personally participate in urban development projects. Of those who are ready to participate in urban development projects, 42% are ready to share their time, third (32%) - knowledge and skills, 29% - physical labor, 11.5% - all available resources and 2.7% - financial resources.

The answers to the question about what Sevastopol is for you, received as during an online survey and as a result of the field's research, showed general tendencies of social consciousness. According to the data of an online survey (conducted in February-March 2017), for a third of respondents (29%) Sevastopol is a city which you want to develop, and for a quarter of respondents (25%) Sevastopol is a city of life [1]. The trend of development of the city is also significant for Sevastopol youth: for 62% of the young interview's people, this is a city that you want to develop. The fifth part of young respondents (21%) answered that for them Sevastopol is the city where they were born and are going to live their whole life.

The reach of the target audience is another significant drawback of on-line surveys. It is difficult to get the right audience for Internet research even if the general population is the Internet audience: even in this case it is possible to get a sample consisting of the audience of a particular site on which the questionnaire is posted.

Low-quality online data is intensified by the fact that respondents can repeatedly take part in the same poll, influencing the final distribution of answers. To avoid this, the IP address of the computer from which the respondent comes is used. However, this solution is also not universal to eliminate the problem. Of course, it is necessary to take into account the factor of possible hacker attacks on sites in the process of Internet polls.

In this regard, we can state that, unfortunately, the real number of tasks that can be solved with the help of online surveys is still rather limited. There is an opinion that it is easier to interview a thousand people on-line than a hundred people in the traditional way. But, in our opinion, in the first place this is actual in case of finding respondents far apart.

It is impossible not to mention yet another significant limitation of the online survey method - the limited length of the questionnaire. The online questionnaire is usually short, because, firstly, the respondent does not want to answer a large questionnaire and spends no more than 15 minutes filling in, and, secondly, an increase in the size of the questionnaire leads to the fact that the transitions of the questionnaire pages become larger, which increases the likelihood of technical failures in filling it.

Another group of restrictions of on-line surveys is communication problems, which consist in the wrong interpretation by respondents of certain questions, errors in transitions and filling in tables, distortion of information, inadequate response to questions.

The technical problems of on-line surveys are related to the parameters of the computer system established by the respondent. The user's perception of the text of the questionnaire is influenced by the type of software installed on the computer: different Internet browsers can display the same web page in different ways.

Analyzing the merits and demerits of the method of on-line surveys, and also testing this method in practice, we can note that this method is effective in studying the active part of the population, for understanding the main messages that are broadcast by the "activists" or "passionarians" of the region of the rest of the population. You can also consider the possibility of using on-line measurements in the pilot phase of the research, when it is necessary to refute or confirm certain research theses. But using on-line poll as the only one for collecting qualitative, reliable and representative sociological data is strictly not recommended.

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