Despite allure of Internet surveys, old-fashioned, face-to-face interview still best, expert says

BY SARA BALL

The quality and accuracy of survey work over the past decade has declined as the Internet has become an increasingly seductive tool for quick, cheap data collection, said a methodology expert speaking at Cornell, March 1.

Jon A. Krosnick, director of the Stanford University Methods of Analysis Program and professor of communication, political science and psychology, gave the Cornell Survey Research Institute’s first annual lecture, “The Brave New World of Survey Research: The Surprisetor After Another,” in Cornell’s Industrial and Labor Relations Conference Center.

Survey data can have a vast influence on informing policy and other important decisions—which is why people should take the time to participate, he said. However, the accuracy of information surveys can vary greatly, depending on how data are collected, he said.

When it comes to Internet surveys, for example, “It seems we have unlearned a lesson that was good to have learned a hundred years ago,” Krosnick said. And that is, the lesson of using a representative sample of the population of interest.

Why, asked Krosnick, should the Internet make this any different? Because, he said, few Internet survey companies strive to attain a representative sample, even though studies show that doing so reaps significantly more accurate results. Another issue with Internet survey work, he said, is the potential for low response rates. For example, big media outlets often provide attitude poll results almost instantly after national events such as the State of the Union Address, but they never report their response rates because it would devalue the data, Krosnick said.

Struggling to attain the highest response rates, however, might not be as critical as researchers previously assumed, he said. A University of Michigan study, for example, found no relationship between response rates and accuracy; in fact, the study found that lower response rates actually increased the balance of respondents of different gender, age, income and education level.

Nevertheless, to mitigate low response rates and representative sample problems, some companies pay respondents for each survey they complete and for their monthly Internet access and provide a Web TV setup if a household does not own a computer. In a pilot study aimed at obtaining high participation rates, Krosnick combined this method with personal requests from surveyors to participants and 67 percent of households that were approached signed up. In the future, Krosnick said, “I see free laptops in an effort to increase participation by a further 10 percent.”

The panel data collection method, Krosnick said, is the face-to-face interview, though it can be very expensive. For example, a one-hour survey in the home of a representative sample member costs $1,000. For important federal surveys where stakes are high, the government will pay this, he said, because this method is significantly more accurate than any other.

The next best method, Krosnick said, is computer and phone surveying, which is better than phone alone; the least accurate method is pencil-and-paper mailed surveys, which cost about the same as phone surveys but are less accurate. In other words, he said, when it comes to data collection, you tend to get what you pay for.

Graduate student Sara Ball is a writer intern at the Cornell Chronicle.

Violinist Charlene Kluegel ’10 won the third annual Cornell Concerto Competition, held Jan. 27 in Barnes Hall. She performed her competition piece, the first movement of Jean Sibelius’ Violin Concerto in D Minor, with the Cornell Symphony Orchestra, March 4 in Bailey Hall.

The 2007 concerto competition involved 16 participants in preliminary rounds, followed by evening performances by five finalists. The other finalists were Emily Looney ’07, saxophone; Jun Bin Lee ’09, piano; and violinists Andrew Yeo, grad. M.A. ’05 and Jian Liu ’09. A panel of five judges selected the finalists and the winner.

Kluegel has performed in China, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and began studying violin at age 6, receiving extensive training from the University of the Arts in Bern, Germany; the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing and the Shanghai Conservatory of Music; and the Mozarteum in Austria. She has performed in Germany, China and Switzerland, and was the youngest student to approach signed up. In the future, Krosnick said, when it comes to data collection, you tend to get what you pay for.

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University Lectures series brings to campus anthropologist Marshall Sahlins and historian François Hartog

BY STEVE ROKITKA

Anthropologist Marshall Sahlins and historian François Hartog will deliver free public lectures at Cornell this month as part of the University Lectures series.

Sahlins, a renowned authority on the study of culture and society throughout the world, is known internationally for his work as a historian and a scholar of historiography, the study of the interpretation and representation of historical events. His 1972 book, “Tahiti and the First Universal History,” has been described as a source of inspiration for many historians.

Hartog, on the other hand, is known for his work on the relationship between the emergence of the modern state and the development of modernity. His most recent book, “Modernes: Du Parallèle à la Comparaison,” was published in 2007.

Both Sahlins and Hartog will deliver the lectures on March 14 at 4:30 p.m. in 165 McGraw Hall. The lectures are open to the public and will be followed by a reception.

Details about the lectures and events can be found on the Cornell Lectures website, www.cornelllectures.org.