

Standards in Online Surveys. Sources for Professional Codes of Conduct, Ethical Guidelines and Quality of Online Surveys*

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This paper presents an overview of several sources for codes of conduct and quality assurance in online surveys. The first section introduces general codes of conducts, as these also apply in online surveys. The second section outlines guides focusing on ethical issues. Ethical standards are especially important in online surveys, due to new (often technical) issues concerning privacy, data security and sampling. The third section gives a general idea of quality assurance in online surveys. In that special field, some branches developed rapidly. This caused the formation of specialized guides: online survey software, access panels, and employee surveys.

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1 Codes of conduct

The codes' objective is the quality assurance in market and social research as well as in public opinion research. Therefore they give a more or less exposed canon of principles. European codes tend to have a normative character, whereas American tend to focus on pragmatic principles. In a second step these codes of conduct give a detailed description of that principles and submit advices and proposals. These standards are some kind of self-control, addressed to the members of the organization. Alternatively they can be seen as a service for practitioners.

The mentioned guidelines are applicable in a broad scope, giving guidance in the research process for different topics and stages.

ADM, Arbeitskreis deutscher Markt- und Sozialforschungsinstitute e.V. (1999). *Standards for Quality Assurance in Market and Social Research*. Available at http://www.adm-ev.de/ENGLISH/quali_e.html

AAPOR, American Association for public opinion research (2002). *Standards and best practices*. Available at http://www.aapor.org/default.asp?page=survey_methods/standards_and_best_practices

2 Ethical guidelines

Ethical guidelines deal explicitly with the ethical aspects of market and social research. On one end of the spectrum they are concerning the contact and interaction with respondents (e.g. informed consent). On the other end they recommend aspects of data

protection and the research process itself. They are addressed to the members of the different organizations which published the guides, but apply likewise to other researchers.

Whereas ISA and CASRO deal with ethical guidelines of survey research, AoIR gives an ethical code of practice for internet researchers.

AoIR, Association of Internet Researchers (2002, Nov.). *Ethical decision-making and Internet research. Recommendations from the AoIR ethics working committee*. Available at <http://aoir.org/reports/ethics.pdf>

CASRO, Council of American Survey Research Organization (1997). *Code of Standards and Ethics for Survey Research*. Available at <http://www.casro.org/codeofstandards.cfm>

ISA, International Sociological Association (2001). *Codes of Ethics*. Available at http://www.ucm.es/info/isa/about/isa_code_of_ethics.htm

Lozar Manfreda, K. (2005). *Ethical Issues in Implementing Internet Surveys*. Presentation at the ESF workshop on Web surveys, Dubrovnik, September 2005 in Dubrovnik.

NESH, Den Nasjonale Forskningsetiske Komité for Samfunnsvitenskap og Humaniora. (2004). *Forskningsetiske Retningslinjer for Internettforskning [Ethical Guidelines for Internet Research]*. Available at <http://www.etikkom.no/retningslinjer/internett>

3 Quality in online surveys

To compensate for the high variability in online surveys, several associations developed useful guidelines for good practice. The more general codes of conduct also apply in online surveys. The following papers specify the general codes and include topics which gain importance or pose new questions to online survey research (privacy issues, informed consent, data security, sampling, etc.).

ADM, Arbeitskreis deutscher Markt- und Sozialforschungsinstitute e.V. (2001). *Standards for Quality Assurance for Online Surveys*. Available at http://www.adm-ev.de/ENGLISH/quali_online_e.html

ADM, Arbeitskreis deutscher Markt- und Sozialforschungsinstitute e.V. (2001). *Checklist for Clients Commissioning Online Surveys*. Available at <http://www.adm-ev.de/>

ENGLISH/checkliste_e.html

NEON, Arbeitsgruppe im BVM Berufsverband Deutscher Markt- und Sozialforscher e.V. (2001). *Standards zur Qualitätssicherung für Online-Befragungen [standards for quality assurance in online surveys]*. Available at <http://www.bvm.org/user/dokumente/kodex-Q02D.pdf>

NEON, Arbeitsgruppe im BVM Berufsverband Deutscher Markt- und Sozialforscher e.V. (2004). *Leitfaden zur Qualitätssicherung für qualitative Online Marktforschung [Guideline for quality assurance in qualitative online market research]*. Available at <http://www.bvm.org/user/neon/Leitfaden-qualitativ-online.pdf>

ESOMAR (2005). *Guideline on Conducting Market and Opinion Research Using the Internet*. Available at <http://www.esomar.org/web/show/id=49859>

3.1 Quality of Online Survey Software

The Web Survey Methodology Site (<http://websm.org/>) lists more than 350 solutions and software programs for conducting online surveys. The market is diverse, there are scripts which need adaptation, small budget offers with minimum features and enterprise solutions serving every need. NEON (Network Online Research, a working group within the professional association for German market and social research) provides a list of demands, criteria and features in online survey software. It differentiates between must have, should have and could have features (“Muss-, Soll-, Kann-Anforderungen”). Kaczmirek (2004) compiled some questions to be answered for a project and describes basic, intermediate and additional features. Vehovar et al. (2005) provide an overview of sample survey software.

NEON, Arbeitsgruppe im BVM Berufsverband Deutscher Markt- und Sozialforscher e.V. (2003). *Anforderungen an Online-Umfrage-Software [Demands to online survey software]*. Available at <http://www.bvm.org/user/dokumente/kodex-NEON-1.pdf>

Kaczmirek, L. (2004). *Choosing survey software: How to decide and what to consider* (WebSM Guide No. 1). Web Survey Methodology Site. <http://websm.org/guides/>

Vehovar, V., Koren, G., Lozar Manfreda, K., & Berzelak, J. (2005). *What is Important When Choosing Web Survey Software*. Presentation at the ESF workshop on Web surveys, Dubrovnik, September 2005 in Dubrovnik.

3.2 Quality of Access Panels

Online access panels consist of a group of registered people, who are willing to participate in online surveys. They promise to reduce the workload and problems associated with sampling.

Guides discussing online access panels are concerned with various methodological issues like recruitment, maintenance, structure, use and management of such panels. Data quality is the main issue (e.g. online surveys vs. paper-and-pencil, professionalism of panel members). The use of socio-demographic variables is one measure to ensure data quality. For practitioners ESOMAR provides “25 questions to help research buyers”.

EFAMRO, European Federation of Associations of Market Research Organisation, Author: Dr. A.J. Oliver (2004, 2005). *The relevance of new quality standards for international access panels*. Available at <http://www.efamro.com/olivier1.pdf>

3.3 Quality of Employee Surveys

The German guide about employee surveys is derived from the more general guideline of the ADM (Arbeitskreis deutscher Markt- und Sozialforschungsinstitute e.V., Germany) It explicates necessary steps to ensure quality (general aspects, preparation, conduction, documentation, data protection).

NEON, Arbeitsgruppe im BVM Berufsverband Deutscher Markt- und Sozialforscher e.V. (2004) *Leitfaden für Online-Mitarbeiterbefragungen [Guideline for online employee surveys]*. Available at <http://www.bvm.org/user/neon/Leitfaden-Online-MAB.pdf>