The Intersection of Political Science and Media: Research at a Faster Pace

Natalie M. Jackson, *The Huffington Post*

My advice to graduate students interested in a nonacademic career is simple: learn as much as you can about survey research methods. My request of the political science community is equally simple: do not ignore those who pursue nonacademic careers. We're part of the discipline too. My path from political science PhD to senior editor at *The Huffington Post* running the Pollster site wasn't so simple.

I'll start with that last part, since my journalist colleagues tell me that human interest makes a story better. I basically tripped and fell into a career in survey research, and now specifically in political polling and election forecasting.

Ten years ago, I was a 21-year-old who had graduated from college in three years and had no clue what to do. So I decided to go get a PhD. I was assigned as a research assistant to the Public Opinion Learning Laboratory when I started in the University of Oklahoma's doctoral program. Throughout my time in the program I kept trying to leave for a teaching position or to do a different type of research assistantship, but my mentors kept encouraging me to stay where I was and keep learning the process of survey research. That's the best thing that ever happened to me career-wise, because that experience got me a second break.

That second break was getting a postdoctoral position at Duke's Social Science Research Institute before I finished my dissertation. I almost didn't apply because I didn't have the degree yet. Again, though, my mentors encouraged me, and by some stroke of fantastic luck I was hired. I spent the first semester finishing my dissertation. I spent the second semester thinking long and hard about what I wanted to do—and ended up looking for jobs in survey research and polling. I never even went on the academic job market.

I came to two conclusions that drove my decision. The first was that I love data collection. Admittedly, that sounds a little crazy, but a few weeks into my postdoc I really missed doing the hands-on data collection I had done in the survey research lab. The other deciding factor was my somewhat impatient and easily bored personality. I realized that I hated the idea of having a "research agenda." I wanted to work on what I found interesting without having to worry about whether I could turn it into a journal publication. Plus, it's very difficult for me to get things done when being "done" means sending it to a journal and waiting several months for feedback. I needed a faster-paced work life with structure, deadlines, and clear expectations for my work and for others' work that affects mine. It was clear that an academic job wouldn't be the best environment for me.

Within a few months of this realization, I accepted a position as a senior analyst with the Marist College Institute for Public Opinion (Marist Poll) and spent 2012 doing battleground state polling for *NBC News* and *The Wall Street Journal*. My wish for faster-paced work was granted; we would poll for 3-4 days, and then crunch the data overnight as soon as the polling was finished so that it could be released to the media as quickly as possible. Sometimes our polls were up on television within 12 hours of data collection. If a major event occurred to shift the race, we could be in the field polling within a few hours.

Then, in 2014, I got another break: an opportunity opened up to expand my skills and take on the challenge of election forecasting with the Pollster team within *The Huffington Post*. I had been reading Pollster since graduate school and jumped at the prospect of working on the team. I designed the 2014 Senate and gubernatorial forecasting models from Pollster's existing models, and was in the thick of working on the 2016 model when Pollster's founder left the company. I now have responsibility for the Pollster site and am considered "management" within a large media organization. It's a great fit for my personality—media cycles are very fast.

Despite working in media, I don't feel like I've "left the field" because I never really tried to enter the field in the traditional sense. What I do now is in part very academic, and I certainly consider it political science. I rely on academic work to inform the methods we use at Pollster and to add context to election events and trends. I spend a lot of time immersed in journal articles and R code. My end goal is different—I need to produce information for the general public, not for journal articles—but my work and my process rely heavily on academia. I need to remain active in academic political science.

Sometimes it's awkward to be a nonacademic among academic political scientists. People are either intrigued by my career path, or seem to deem me irrelevant and not worth their time. If academics think I'm a reporter, some become extremely condescending. When I explain what I actually do, some are still dismissive, but others want to know more. I engage those who are interested and ignore those who are not. But as a whole, I think the discipline is far too quick to assume that non-academics are not real political scientists and don't contribute to the field.

SOME ADVICE FOR THE FIELD, DEPARTMENTS, AND STUDENTS

There are a few things associations and conferences could do to be more open to non-academics, and some of them are

© American Political Science Association, 2016

doi:10.1017/S1049096516000871

very simple. For example, some association memberships and conferences only have some variation of these three options for professional status: tenure-track professor, non-tenure track or postdoc appointment, or student. The subtle implication is that if you don't fit those categories, you shouldn't be in the organization or attending the conference. It would

know how many applicants they have for the jobs, anecdotally I feel certain that I've had a more successful experience with job markets in survey research than I ever would have in academia.

You don't necessarily need a PhD to go into survey research. If you look at the jobs on the American Association

What I do now is in part very academic, and I certainly consider it political science. I rely on academic work to inform the methods we use at Pollster and to add context to election events and trends. I spend a lot of time immersed in journal articles and R code. My end goal is different—I need to produce information for the general public, not for journal articles—but my work and my process rely heavily on academia.

also be helpful to have nonacademic political scientists as the majority of participants in panels or roundtables that address nonacademic issues, as I've seen the opposite many times.

I also hope that departments will get more open to their students pursuing non- academic paths. I'm very fortunate that my mentors were (and are) extremely supportive of my career choices, but I've talked to people who have had the opposite experience. That needs to stop. For those who think they might want a non-academic career, find someone supportive who can help you. That might be outside of your department.

As far as skills that are useful outside of academia, my best advice is to learn data management and survey research. The skills are incredibly transferrable across research endeavors and industries, including market research, evaluation research, political polling, public health, and just about every academic field.

Never underestimate the value of practical data collection experience. The combination of advanced statistics and survey research is even more valuable. I see a lot job opportunities for survey researchers at all levels of education, and while I don't

for Public Opinion Research website, you'll see openings with all levels of education listed. But there are jobs that want PhD-level researchers. Survey research is getting more complex as technology makes sampling simultaneously easier but less representative (web-based sampling), and more difficult and expensive (telephone sampling, particularly with mobile phones). Creating and testing innovative methods of dealing with these issues, as well as testing the effects on data quality, requires advanced statistics and research techniques – exactly what PhD students are trained to use. The puzzles seem impossible at times, which is exactly what keeps me engaged in the field.

Most of the friends I made in graduate school are busily preparing to go up for tenure in the next couple of years. I'm planning coverage of and building polling models for the 2016 presidential election. I wouldn't trade places with them for the world – and they probably wouldn't trade with me either. Some PhDs are cut out for academia, but some of us are not. That doesn't mean we're not as tough or as smart, or that we were a waste of time in our graduate program; it simply means we found a different way to be happy and successful. ∎