



Surveillance & Society

Artistic
Presentation

Random Digit Darling: The Telephone Turn in
the American Social and Behavioral
Sciences

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Abstract

This experimental essay traces the rise of phone-based data collection within the American social and behavioral sciences over the last third of the twentieth century. Exploring aural cultures of surveillance and the eroticization of abstract data, the essay aims to disrupt the privileged status granted to optics within the field of Surveillance Studies-- particularly when it comes to questions of sex and sexualization. Written in the style of the scripts commonly used when conducting phone-based research, the essay positions you (the reader) as a staff interviewer collecting data for a fictional present-day study regarding modern sex practices. Today, the focus of your study is the curious case of 'databaters': a term used for the male masturbators who, as a means to elicit intimate information from unsuspecting call recipients, *pretend* to be social and behavioral scientists conducting exactly this sort of phone-based research. By the mid-1970s, databaters became one of the most common types of problem calls reported by American women. While the background information provided within your script might also reveal a persistent tradition of intimate transgressions within 'real' phone-based social and behavioral science, any such effect is entirely inadvertent.

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STAFF INTERVIEWER SCRIPT FOR TELEPHONE STUDY ON DATABATERS**[INTRODUCTION]**

Good [morning; afternoon; evening]. This is _____ calling from University of _____. Is this the _____ residence? **[IF WRONG NUMBER: TERMINATE THE CALL WITH SOMETHING LIKE 'sorry to have bothered you'. IF CORRECT NUMBER: PROCEED WITH REMAINDER OF INTRODUCTION]:**

I'm calling today about a popular American practice where male masturbators pretend to be data collectors working for an academic call center (henceforth called 'databaters' for clarity purposes).

[IF RESPONDENT IS UNFAMILIAR WITH 'ACADEMIC' CALL CENTERS]:

Did you know that a recently published list compiled by the Survey Research Laboratory at the University of Illinois (Chicago) documents more than one hundred academic call centers currently operating in the United States? An extension of the social and behavioral sciences, they conduct telephone-based data collection on the health and habits of local populations.

[IF RESPONDENT ASKS FOR EXAMPLES OF PHONE-BASED STUDIES]:

Oh certainly. I mean the sort of call where someone might ask the following: *Have you ever tried or experimented with cigarette smoking, even a few puffs? Have you ever written a bad check in order to pay for your gambling? Have you ever been told by a doctor that you have high blood pressure? Does avoiding the sun take the fun out of being outdoors? Yes? No? Don't know? Decline?*

[REPEAT INTRODUCTION IF NECESSARY]:

I'm calling today about a popular American practice where male masturbators pretend to be data collectors working for an academic call center (henceforth called 'databaters' for clarity purposes). By the mid-1970s, databaters became one of the most common types of problem calls reported by American women (Mead, 1975).

The earliest known references to the databater phenomenon appear in 1960s congressional debates concerning telephone harassment more generally-- all those heavy breathers, etc (see unpublished Gallagher papers); additional references can be found in feminist studies of gender and communication (Warner, 1988), in cultural studies of profanity (Jay, 1992), and in clinical literature on fetishes and paraphilias (Murray, 1967; Matek, 1988; Price et al, 2001). So far-- we know quite little: only that databaters 'generally choose numbers at random from the phone book, or by chance dialing...with the respondent's data to be kept confidential as they ask increasingly personal and private information' (Matek: 115-16). Of course, women are the real targets of these allegedly 'random' calls. We also speculate that databaters 'literally make hundreds of calls over a short period of time' (Gallagher: March 23, 1966)-- something about which we hope to learn more, over the course of this study.

[IF RESPONDENT ASKS FOR AN EXAMPLE OF A DATABATER CALL]:

Unlike a photograph-- with its obvious indexical properties-- a telephone call generates no direct physical record. But I can read you the recollections of an actual call recipient. Okay?

[SAY 'Quote']:

He said he was calling from the University of ---. They were doing a survey of sexual practices in the Northeast corridor. He gave his name...it wasn't sexy.

It was like a real survey. He asked things like age, the number of people in the residence, but he asked if I was alone...The first weird question was, 'Did I ever engage in sex with multiple sex partners at the same time?' And then he went into a part about emotional responses- like a survey is organized into related questions- but they were real strange mixed up with normal questions, like, he asked did I live with someone, how frequently during the week I had intercourse with my husband...but he asked, when I had sex, did my nipples harden? I was thinking, 'this is a real strange call'...The questions were, he asked me to answer, like a survey, a question with categories. [One was] How long was my husband's penis: one to six inches, six to twelve, more than twelve? I asked him to repeat it again. He did. I said that I didn't carry a tape measure, but I put him in the right category (Warner: 307, elipses original).

[SAY 'End Quote']

[IF RESPONDENT ASKS FOR THE PURPOSE OF THIS RESEARCH]:

This research is part of an on-going academic conversation on sex and surveillance, a thread of analysis more often concerned with the 'sexualized looking and being-looked-at' (Bell 2009: 210;) enabled by camera-based surveillance technologies (closed circuit television; webcams; etc). Positing that non-ocular surveillance practices are equally open to sexualization, this study starts from the premise that sex-as-seeing has become such a well-liked unit of analysis within the field of Surveillance Studies that it risks obscuring a potentially far broader range of surveillance-linked sexual practices.

Of particular importance to our research today is a distinction recently made by Torin Monahan (2009) between 'people watching people' and the abstraction of 'people and social practices' into data. Monahan suggests conceptualizing the period after abstraction ('bodies as data') as a distinct site of study (one in which the seemingly innocuous and disembodied work of collecting and managing 'mere data' mystifies the embodied subject effects and power inequities previously behind or subsequently produced by that data). Employing Monahan's distinction, this study proposes that 'people watching people' (broadly construed) is only a partial (and perhaps even minor) dynamic within databater practice (the caller anonymity; working from a distance; etc) and that acts of abstraction are a potentially equal (if not greater) source of their arousal (the random numbers; 'talking data' on the telephone).

By attending to this sociotechnical specificity, a primary motive behind our research into the databater phenomenon is to flirt with the idea that sexualization need not be limited to systems (or stages) of surveillance where bodies are simply bodies; the curious case of the databaters suggests that 'bodies as data' (or the very act of making them so) can also be a site of sexualization. Moreover: as non-ocular (non-camera) technologies become a greater and greater focus within Surveillance Studies, studying figures more like databaters (and less like peeping toms) seems critical to sustaining the conversation about sex happening right now in the field. In other words: the current emphasis on sex-as-seeing not only risks obscuring a potentially far broader range of surveillance-linked sexual practices, it also risks isolating (over time) sex as an object of study (with the larger field fast diversifying beyond optics). [SAY SOMETHING LIKE 'Does that make sense?' OR 'Are you following?']

[IF RESPONDENT ASKS ABOUT LENGTH OF INTERVIEW]:

The following questionnaire concerns any databater calls you personally received. The interview will take only a few moments. Your responses will be

kept strictly confidential. Feel free to ask questions at any time. Okay?

[IF RESPONDENT SEEMS HESITANT]:

If you like, I can have my project supervisor call to provide more information about the study.

[POLITELY TERMINATE CALL or PROCEED WITH QUESTIONNAIRE]:

First, I will need to explain the rise of 'legitimate' phone-based data collection within the 'real' social and behavioral sciences. This brief history is offered as background for discussing your own personal databater experiences. Because our study concerns only databaters and not 'real' social and behavioral scientists, I'm providing the following information as a means to help you differentiate between the types of calls you might receive.

[SAY SOMETHING LIKE 'May I continue?']:

As recently as the 1960s, the idea of using a telephone to conduct a scientifically valid study of any sort was generally out of question. Like the nineteenth century social surveys of the industrial working class, the twentieth century sample surveys produced by academic social scientists were strictly door-to-door labor. And though, epistemologically, this type of research changed considerably over the first half of the twentieth century-- shifting from its older concern with social 'reform' to its present concern with the beliefs, behaviors and buying patterns of the 'typical' or 'average' American (Igo 2007)-- the physicality of social scientific data collection -- its dependency on local knowledge, long days and sensible shoes-- remained largely unchanged.

Meaning: much of the power and authority of data collectors (like myself) once stemmed almost entirely from what Thomas Gieryn (2006: 6) calls the 'distinctive epistemic virtue' of being there. Did you know that interviews were often paired with direct participant observation? Oh really-- The questionnaire was just one component of a multi-sensorial investigatory apparatus bound up in staff interviewers acting part confidante and part automaton: roaming sidewalks and stairwells; scanning hallways and kitchens; smelling for liquor, for lies, for lovers, for laundry.

[SAY SOMETHING LIKE]:

And you know what's funny? Most predicted the future of data collection would demand more (not less) in-person fieldwork, greater (not less) proximity between the interviewer and the informant. Yet today, my work takes place in an office building!-- just off the main university campus-- conducting studies for 5 or more hours per shift-- just sittin' in a cubicle-- talkin' on the telephone-- isn't that neat?!

[IF RESPONDENT ASKS WHY THE MOVE TO PHONE-BASED RESEARCH]:

By most accounts, the move to phone-based research within the social and behavioral sciences was a direct effect of increased telephone saturation: the percentage of Americans with regular telephone service increased substantially over the course of the 1960s, with ninety percent obtaining regular service by the end the decade (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1976). This degree of saturation meant the 'total telephone universe' statistically mirrored the national population for the very first time. The unprecedented potential of 'anyone' to pick up the other end of the line (doctors and drifters, bankers and babysitters) made data derived by telephone newly generalizable.

For instance: say I was doing a study on the number of porkchops consumed by Americans on a daily basis. To collect data by telephone before 1970 would mean reaching only certain types of people (like the wealthy; city-dwellers;

those more likely to have a telephone; etc). But that's not what you call a 'representative' sample. Remember: I want to know about the number of porkchops consumed much more generally.

Only with increased telephone saturation-- what might be called the condition of total coverage materializing sometime between 1965 and 1970-- could the telephone be used to reach the 'typical' or 'average' American so central to twentieth-century social research. And it was this degree of saturation (according to most 'real' working data collectors) that spurred the telephone turn in the social and behavioral sciences.

[IF RESPONDENT SEEMS SUSPICIOUS OF SUCH A TELEOLOGICAL ACCOUNT]:

Oh certainly there were other factors! By the mid-1960s, the cost of door-to-door data collection was on the rise just as research funding sharply declined.

On the cost front: postwar suburban sprawl put significant pressures on the door-to-door methods of social investigation in which efficient data collection once demanded little more than a good map of city bus and streetcar routes (Parten 1950: 342). Suburbanization (life spread out) increased travel time between interviews as well as increased the ancillary costs incurred by data collectors-- like mileage, parking, tolls, and personal expenses (Hochstim, 1967: 982). Some even cite the rising price of gas as a key factor behind the shift to phone-based research (Massey 1986: 95). **[SAY SOMETHING LIKE: Isn't that funny? That gasoline prices could impact scientific methods!]**

Studies of strictly downtown populations also faced rapidly mounting costs. Reports of escalating urban crime made data collectors 'fear for their personal safety' (Sudman 1967: 112); Others skipped 'dangerous looking' households or rushed through questionnaires (Tuchfarber and Klecka 1976: 16). To curb such fears, studies began partnering data collectors assigned to work in city centers (or even hired companion staff). Of course, safety precautions of that sort doubled labor costs as well as any miscellaneous expenses. **[AVOID MENTIONING THE OBVIOUS RACIAL DIMENSIONS OF DOWNTOWN DATA COLLECTOR ANXIETIES; IT WAS WELL KNOWN THAT SOCIAL AND BEHAVIORAL SCIENTISTS (PREDOMINANTLY WHITE) SIMPLY BECAME FEARFUL OF WORKING IN BLACK NEIGHBORHOODS (see Jackson 1974: 277)]; THIS SAME NERVOUSNESS ABOUT WORKING DOOR-TO-DOOR IN CITY CENTERS DIDN'T EXIST IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY BECAUSE MANY URBAN NEIGHBORHOODS BECAME PREDOMINANTLY BLACK ONLY AFTER WHITE FAMILIES (WITH THE HELP OF FAVORABLE LENDING PRACTICES AND A FEDERALLY-SUBSIDIZED HIGHWAY INFRASTRUCTURE) FLED CITIES IN THE 1950s AND 1960s; AND CERTAINLY DON'T GIVE CONCRETE EXAMPLES OF THOSE WHITE DATA COLLECTORS WHO QUIT (OR WITHDREW THEIR EMPLOYMENT APPLICATIONS) EXPRESSLY TO AVOID WORKING IN ALL-BLACK URBAN AREAS (see: Sternlieb 1968; Wolfe 1971); INSTEAD: JUMP TO THE TOPIC OF RESEARCH FUNDING]**

...And just as research costs were on the rise, funding for the social sciences quickly declined. For instance: between the early 1970s and the mid-1980s, universities cut in half the percentage of their operating budgets allocated to social science research and development (Oba quoted in Langenhove, 2000: 23). And to cover all the cuts to government funding would take the whole [morning; afternoon; evening; night]! For example: Did you know about the 24% decrease in National Science Foundation support for social research that occurred in the latter half of the 1970s? That particular cut came about because federal funding simply failed to keep pace with inflation (Zuiches, 1984: 195). But others were much more direct and purposeful; For instance: viewing social research as the intellectual foundation of liberalism and big government (Goslin quoted in Rhoades, 1987: 327), the Reagan administration

caused all sorts of 'panic' and 'paranoia' with the drastic cuts they made in the early 1980s (Holden, 1981: 1397).

[PROVIDE SUMMARY]:

So you might say, beginning in the mid-1960s, a set of social and spatial pressures increased research costs in a period of decreased research funding, as well as produced fear and anxiety among data collectors over where and how they worked. With the telephone, social and behavioral scientists never sought to meet the challenges of an increasingly 'techno-mediated' world but instead a research mode with the 'distinctive epistemic virtue' of not being there.

[SAY SOMETHING LIKE]:

Of course, you can't just re-work your entire research practice overnight. Social and behavioral scientists would need new, phone-specific research methods; They would also need to provide evidence of the telephone's benefits over the older, door-to-door process.

[IF RESPONDENT ASKS ABOUT THE NEW, PHONE-SPECIFIC METHODS]

Let's go back to our make-believe porkchop study (the one concerned with the number of porkchops consumed on a daily basis; Remember?). To make claims about the 'average' American (or the 'typical' Californian; Tennessean; etc-- whoever your study concerns that particular day) we agreed that you had to survey a 'representative' sample (meaning: you can't just ask certain types of people about their porkchop consumption and simply generalize from those findings-- that's not scientific at all!).

To get a 'representative' sample by telephone, the first precondition is that 'everyone' (statistically speaking) actually have a phone. We already know that happened sometime between 1965 and 1970 (the condition of total coverage that I mentioned just a few moments ago). **[EMPHASIZE]:** But you also need a method of calling everyone with absolutely equal probability. **[SAY** 'Do you follow?'] If something about how you made your calls led you to reach one type of person more than another-- you'd be right back in the same jam as before there was total telephone coverage (inherently skewed data).

It was this methodological problem (of who and how to call) that became the real barrier to adopting phone-based research. I mean-- You can't just cull numbers from a telephone book! People move all the time. And what about unlisted numbers? Unlisted numbers in all urban areas (nationwide) increased seventy percent between 1964 and 1977 (Rich 1977). Fortunately, social and behavioral scientists soon devised a solution called Random Digit Dialing (RDD). A sampling technique popularized in the 1970s (and still in widespread use), RDD is the simple practice of combining the prefix issued by the telephone company (for example, let's say: 555) with random digits drawn from a table or generated by a computer (for instance: 7698). The two sets of digits (when put together) form the telephone number (in this case: 555-7698) of a potential research subject living in the geographic area of concern to whatever study you're conducting.

[SAY SOMETHING LIKE 'Do you see how it works?']

RDD generates a telephone number regardless of whether that number appears in the phone book, ensuring data collectors the exact same chance (statistically) of reaching 'anyone' (which, of course, is the only way to generate generalizable data). Isn't that smart?! Let's pretend our porkchop study demands one hundred interviews. To reach potential research subjects, we simply generate one hundred four-digit number combinations coupled to the prefix issued by the telephone company for the specific area(s) we want to survey that particular day (555-8407; 555-2569; 555-1002; 555-6045...). In

fact, by overcoming the 'barrier to high external validity caused by unlisted numbers' (Lavrakas 1987: 34), most social and behavioral scientists say it was actually Random Digit Dialing that made phone-based data collection 'legitimate' and 'scientific'. **[AVOID MENTIONING THAT SOCIAL AND BEHAVIORAL SCIENTISTS KNEW THAT CERTAIN 'SUBPOPULATIONS' WERE MUCH MORE LIKELY TO HAVE UNLISTED NUMBERS; IN OTHER WORDS: THEY KNEW THAT WOMEN 'DISPROPORTIONATELY SUBSCRIB[ED] TO THE SERVICE' (KATZ 1996: 408). YOU MIGHT SAY THE 'BARRIER TO HIGH EXTERNAL VALIDITY CAUSED BY UNLISTED NUMBERS' WAS SOMETHING OF A EUPHEMISM FOR THE GROWING POPULARITY OF (SINGLE) WOMEN ALLOCATING THEIR (SCARCE) DISPOSABLE INCOME TO BE LEFT UNCALLED BY UNKNOWN STRANGERS. THOUGH WHAT BAD TIMING! REMEMBER: DOOR-TO-DOOR DATA COLLECTION WAS GETTING PRETTY SCARY (FOR DATA COLLECTORS) AND PRETTY COSTLY (FOR STUDY COORDINATORS). ALSO, AVOID SPECULATING AS TO WHETHER, FOR SOCIAL AND BEHAVIORAL SCIENTISTS, SUCH PRESSURES MADE BYPASSING THE (RATHER STRAIGHTFORWARD) PRIVACY REQUESTS OF (MOSTLY) WOMEN SEEM ENTIRELY JUSTIFIABLE. AND CERTAINLY DON'T REFLECT ON THE CONVIENANCE OF THEN CALLING THE METHOD 'RANDOM' (OBFUSCATING ITS LESS THAN-RANDOM LOGIC). BESIDES: IT WAS SAID THAT MOST WOMEN GOT UNLISTED NUMBERS TO AVOID 'CRANKS, CREEPS AND CROOKS' (Wright 1971)-- CERTAINLY NOT TO REMOVE THEMSELVES FROM SCIENCE].**

[IF RESPONDENT ASKS ABOUT THE BENEFITS OF PHONE-BASED RESEARCH]:

Before phone-based research could become a standard practice, social and behavioral scientists also needed to evidence the telephone's benefits over the older, door-to-door process. Have you ever noticed how so many of the studies published between the mid 1960s and the mid 1980s contain a section about 'trying out' the telephone as a data collection device? These 'tests' allowed social and behavioral scientists to document the telephone's many advantages (which then, over time, legitimated the shift to phone-based research). **[SAY SOMETHING LIKE 'Do you know what I mean?']**

[IF NECESSARY, PROVIDE EXAMPLES]:

Let's talk cost. All sorts of studies began to 'experiment' with the telephone as a cost-savings strategy; that's how the telephone's cost benefits became so widely known. For instance: a 1967 study on cervical health conducted by California's Human Population Laboratory (the one where data collectors asked call recipients about the details of their last pelvic exam) found using the telephone cost the agency fifty percent less than traditional door-to-door methods (Hochstim 1967: 982). And some later experiments found even greater savings! For example: an early 1980s study on female contraception coordinated by the University of Georgia (the one where data collectors asked call recipients if they preferred condoms, foam, or a diaphragm) found using the telephone to cost ninety-five percent less than 'expensive and time consuming' in-person research (Spitz et al 1985: 323-328).

Of course, social and behavioral scientists showed the telephone had all sorts of benefits beyond cost. For instance: the speed of phone-based research became a second popular theme. A 1973-74 study on menstrual health in Washington State (the one where data collectors asked call recipients when their periods stopped) significantly expedited the research process by conducting hundreds of interviews over the phone (Stadel and Weiss, 1975: 210). And who could forget the 1978 cancer prevention study in Western New York (the one where data collectors asked call recipients if they felt comfortable touching their own breasts). That study called ten percent of the research subjects a second time to verify their original answers (Howe 1981: 251), showing the telephone to be-- not just fast-- but also a means to create new forms of quality control.

[SAY SOMETHING LIKE]:

There's just tons of other examples. But our study, today, concerns only databaters: those male masturbators who, as a means to elicit intimate information from unsuspecting call recipients, pretend to be conducting university-affiliated research from a 'legitimate' academic call center. By learning more about your own personal databater experiences, we hope to determine whether acts of abstraction are the real source of databater arousal (the random numbers; 'talking data' on the telephone; etc)-- which would mean studies of sexualization need not be limited to systems (or stages) of surveillance where bodies are simply bodies ('people watching people').

Providing this history of phone-based data collection within the 'real' social and behavioral sciences was to simply help you differentiate between the types of calls you might receive. It was also a way to explain the particular 'conditions of possibility' from which the databaters emerged; You might say: a rather mundane methodological shift in the 'real' social and behavioral sciences-- a telephone turn provoked by increased research costs, decreased research funding, and a set of historically specific anxieties felt by 'real' data collectors over where and how they worked-- rendered social and behavioral research (once exclusively door-to-door labor) an open-source communicative trope free to be used by any seemingly scientific stranger.

Of course, let's hope all forms of non-ocular surveillance-linked sexual practice won't demand such lengthy backstories. Which reminds me: Did I thank you for your time this [morning; afternoon; evening]?

[PROCEED TO QUESTIONNAIRE]

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