

Who are we? There are plenty of marketers and pollsters out there who want to tell us

# THE SURVEYED SOCIETY

By Cassandra West | Tribune staff reporter

Like it or not, you are a member of the surveyed society. If you use a credit card, are a registered voter or shop online, rest assured, a pollster, surveyor or marketer has your number — and will be contacting you sooner or later, if not today.

Did you see parallels between the lives and deaths of Marilyn Monroe and Anna Nicole Smith? A poll wants your opinion. What do you think of the U.S. health-care system? A recent survey asked that question. And on the Barack Obama presidential candidacy, polls went into overdrive on the question of whether Americans might be ready to put an African-American in the White House.

Marketers, researchers, the media and now countless Web sites scramble every day to find out what

you think, buy and desire. Add to that their inquiries into your habits, beliefs, proclivities and prejudices. Pile on more snooping into your political leanings, sexual preferences and on down to the type of toothpaste you prefer — and what emerges is an elastic, sometimes contradictory but constantly developing portrait of the “average American.”

In her recently published book, “The Averaged American: Surveys, Citizens, and the Making of a Mass Public” (Harvard University Press, \$35), Sarah Igo, a University of Pennsylvania historian, tells how survey and polling data have transformed and shaped Americans’ sense of who they are.

To illustrate her argument, she points to a recent

PLEASE SEE **SURVEY**, PAGE 8

## A CENTURY OF POLLS, INTERVIEWS AND STUDIES THAT HAVE HELPED QUANTIFY AND CHARACTERIZE THE AMERICAN PUBLIC

U.S. Census reveals a major population shift from rural to urban areas. **1920**

**1919** Army intelligence tests indicate that the average U.S. “mental age” is that of a 13-year-old child.

New polls using scientific sampling correctly predict that Franklin D. Roosevelt will be re-elected. **1936**

**1929** Robert and Helen Lynd’s “Middletown” survey finds that the U.S. has become a consumer society.

Alfred Kinsey’s “Sexual Behavior in the Human Male” finds that 37% of American men had engaged in “homosexual contacts.” **1948**

**1939** The Gallup Poll reports that 88% of Americans believe they belong to the middle class.

The Kerner Commission Report on urban civil disorders argues that the United States is “moving toward two societies, one black, one white — separate and unequal.” **1968**

**1962** Michael Harrington’s “The Other America” describes one in four Americans as caught in a “culture of poverty.”

The Pew Research Center reports, in the wake of Watergate, that 61% of Americans respond that they can “trust the government in Washington to do what is right” “some of the time.” **1974**

**1972** The General Social Survey (of the National Opinion Research Center) reports that 70.1% of Americans are willing to vote for a woman for president.

Edward Laumann’s survey, The Social Organization of Sexuality, finds that 2.8% of men identify themselves as gay or bisexual and 1.4% of women identify themselves as lesbian or bisexual. **1994**

**1981** The Harris Poll indicates that 81% of Americans support a bilateral “nuclear freeze,” prompting commentators to argue that a “great change” had “transformed the outlook of the American electorate toward nuclear arms.”

A Newsweek survey reports that 51% of Americans in the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks support issuing national ID cards for all citizens and legal immigrants. **2001**

**2000** On the first U.S. Census form that permits citizens to check off multiple boxes, nearly 7 million Americans identified themselves as members of two or more races.

**2004** According to a CBS poll, 55% of Americans believe that “God created humans in present form” and only 13% claim to believe in evolution.

**2007** Pew Research Center’s first weekly “News Interest Index” reports that 61% of Americans believe the press went overboard in covering Anna Nicole Smith’s death.

— Sarah E. Igo, author of “The Averaged American: Surveys, Citizens, and the Making of a Mass Public” (Harvard University Press)

Tribune illustration by Dimitry Tetin

## A PICTURE IS WORTH 200 WORDS ...



Archeological Society SAP photo

## Bones: Love stories

Last week, we asked readers to write a story (200 words or less) based on the news photo (above), which shows a skeletal embrace recently unearthed by archeologists in Italy. We received scores of entries. Here are a few of the best:

Their meeting was forbidden, this a hidden escape.

The peak of the mountain quietly exhaled a translucent plume, which curled about the setting moon like an erotic dance.

The man and woman walked the shores and gazed at the singing sky. Though from the different metal of two warring tribes, their love was an alloy — tempered, fused and singular.

They stopped to bathe in the vision’s beauty.

The first whisper from the lake went unnoticed. The following eruptions were louder, and the mountain’s lethal breath arose from deep within underground arteries connected to the water. Their eyes lowered to the now-living lake, which threw back glistening diamonds of moonlight.

The elders often spoke of invisible death coming from the water when the mountain sang in such a way. Just stories, they thought, from a forgotten time.

Then a pungent smell, like old broken bird eggs, crept low over the ground. A sudden fading of consciousness surprised them. Unstoppable. No air. No focus. No time. Falling to the ground, they reached for the familiar.

Eight generations passed, long after the earth had pulled her soft quilt over their embrace, before others finally dared venture into the forbidden land.

— Jeff Pinkham, Gurnee

♥ FOR MORE STORIES, SEE PAGE 2.

## ‘Office’ boy



‘I’ve seen other [spoofs]’



and this one stood out. ...



Josh is very ambitious.’



— Lee Eisenberg, writer for NBC’s “The Office.”

SEE STORY, PAGE 9

## WEIGHT GAME

You’re concerned about your 15-year-old daughter’s weight gain.

ASK AMY, PAGE 2



## ISLAMIC ART

Smart Museum exhibit gives priority to aesthetics.

PAGE 3

## THE WATCHER

Fox saying, ‘See ya later’ to teen soap ‘The O.C.’

TV PAGE





Historian Sarah Igo's recent book suggests surveys have transformed Americans' sense of who they are.

## SURVEY: What is an average American?

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

survey showing that more Americans say they would vote for an African-American for president than they would a woman and either one of those before a Mormon. Those kinds of results, she says, "certainly shape how Americans think about how 'tolerant' or 'liberal' they are, and who can actually represent the entire nation."

For her book, Igo examined three important surveys: The Middletown studies of 1929 and 1937, George Gallup and Elmo Roper's opinion polls begun in 1935 and Alfred Kinsey's 1948 and 1953 sexual behavior reports. Those surveys were among "the most successful purveyors of quantitative facts about 'average' Americans," she writes.

What those surveys did, Igo says, resulted in new ways of quantifying "ordinary Americans." Each questioned people about their daily habits, their political and social attitudes, and their sexual behaviors, respectively. And each used the mass media (advertising, newspaper syndication, radio shows) to disseminate their results to a



In 1941, Dr. George Gallup (left photo, seated), was director of the American Institute for Public Opinion. He is seen with statistician Edward G. Benson. Biologist Alfred Kinsey (right photo) authored the earthshaking 1948 and 1953 sexual behavior reports.

wide public audience.

Before polls and surveys became commonplace in the mid-20th Century, people relied on literature, movies, photographs and non-fiction books as the primary sources for peering into the consciousness of others. By 1940, Gallup was reaching 8 million people through his triweekly America Speaks! syndicated newspaper column.

"Surveys tap into something that's very, very old, the desire [of people] to know more about themselves and other people" says Richard Morin, former director of polling for The Washington Post and now senior editor at Pew Research Center in Washington.

"Surveys are a tool, a telescope," says Morin, who spent 19 years reporting on polling trends. "You can peer into the numbers and see things you wouldn't otherwise see."

### More narrow approach

These days, on the Pew Web site (typology.people-press.org), visitors can take an online poll titled "Where Do You Fit?" to find out which of nine groups best describes them. Are you an Enterpriser; an Upbeat or a Disaffected? Answer 25 survey questions, and come away with a picture of who you are and how you compare with other Americans.

Such instant polling, in effect,

leaves no one out. But modern-period surveys, introduced in the late 19th Century, took a narrower approach, Igo says. They often were led by reformers such as Jane Addams, bureaucratic agencies and "amateurs" who focused on "problem populations, marginal people." But a shift happened in the 20th Century: "Surveyors of all kinds started looking at average or typical or normal Americans ... and turned their survey techniques on to white, middle-class Americans," Igo says.

What was different about early surveys was people *knew* they were being surveyed. "A pollster would come to their door or telephone them. A sex surveyor would sit them down for a two-hour interview. But these days, information is being collected about citizens without their even knowing it," she writes.

Search engines such as Google and Yahoo are collecting information about your purchases or the kinds of images you look at online. Political researchers have turned to "brain imaging, looking at how people respond to products or political candidates," Igo says during a phone interview to discuss her book. And rather than just asking people their opinions, researchers are trying to get at "some deeper level of people's interest" by tapping "right into their brains."

Similarly, she says, marketers track what people buy. Huge databases are collected on TV viewing habits. Internet retailers such as Amazon and iTunes have records of every book you

buy and song you download, using that information to anticipate your future purchases and to suggest titles you don't even know you want.

Americans didn't always like being polled, Igo writes in the epilogue of her book, but "they did believe their own responses were critical to the project of a representative public."

Is all this surveying and polling good? Not always, says Igo, who sees "some dangers in our reliance on survey information."

### Lumping into categories

Political polls get debunked every election cycle, she observes. "New ways of picturing the population leave much out and congeal dynamic social processes," she writes. The flattening tendencies of survey formats can lump people into what sound like marketing categories—"welfare queens," "angry white males," "soccer moms," "red-state/blue-state voters."

Jared Heyman, president of Atlanta-based Infosur Inc., an online market research firm, believes the "public would always be wise to see who conducted a survey ... because anyone in the business of collecting opinions or conducting research has the power to intentionally or unintentionally bias the results."

Surveyors who belong to the Council of American Survey Research Organizations must adhere to a "certain code of professional conduct," he says.

Since the mid-1970s, polling has increased exponentially, according to The Roper Center, at

the University of Connecticut. Polling data can sometimes lead to a distortion of the public's voice, the center notes, with loaded wording or faulty sampling limiting the capacity to capture a true public opinion.

Igo believes that Americans do have an interest in knowing — and perhaps sharing — details about their lives, though she's not sure whether the demand would have existed had not "very entrepreneurial and media savvy surveyors" been able to "circulate information and drum up demand."

Scientific methods and capitalist ambitions have combined to make surveying a powerful social and economic force. Consider the millions of tax dollars and the Herculean effort behind the decennial census or the money corporate marketers shell out to collect information about consumer habits.

George Gallup's little enterprise might have started with the simple question, "What is the common man thinking?" but it is now The Gallup Organization, operating in 27 countries and one of the most widely quoted sources of opinions about the issues affecting people's lives.

We have come to be, Igo says, a "culture obsessed with facts" about ourselves.

Does that mean we all want to be average? It probably will take a poll to get at that answer. But one fact is indisputable, Igo says. We live in a world shaped by, and seen through, survey data.

The genie's out of the bottle, and there's no going back. [cwest@tribune.com](mailto:cwest@tribune.com)

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NIGHT AT THE MUSEUM (PG) 2:30 7:45

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BECAUSE I SAID SO (PG-13) 10:10  
THE MESSENGERS (PG-13) 2:50 5:20 7:50 10:05  
EPIC MOVIE (PG-13) 2:40 5:15 8:00  
NIGHT AT THE MUSEUM (PG) WITH SPANISH SUBTITLES  
2:30 5:10 7:45 10:30

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THE PURSUIT OF HAPPYNES (PG-13) 2:20 5:00 7:45

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BREACH (PG-13) 1:30 4:20 7:20 10:00  
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MUSIC & LYRICS (PG-13) 1:40 4:30 7:15 9:50  
HANNIBAL RISING (R) 1:20 4:10 7:00 9:55  
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BECAUSE I SAID SO (PG-13) 2:30 \*5:10 \*7:50 10:20  
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NIGHT AT THE MUSEUM (PG) (4:15) 7:15 10:00  
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★ THE QUEEN (PG-13) (1:50, 4:30) 7:10, 9:40  
★ VOLVER (R) (1:35, 4:15) 7:05, 10:00  
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MOVIES FOR MOMS WEDNESDAYS 11 AM  
R - RATING REQUIRES PHOTO ID

**GLEN ILYN**  
1850 TOWER RD. (OFF TOWN CENTER, SO. OF WILLOW RD.)  
GLEN PATRIOT, SO. OF WILLOW RD.  
STADIUM SEATING • DIGITAL SOUND  
GLENVIEW • 847-729-9600

FACTORY GIRL (R) 1:00, 3:20, (5:40), 8:00, 10:15  
BREACH (PG13) 1:00, (4:30), 7:00, 9:45  
BRIDGE TO TERABITHIA (PG) 1:10, (4:30), 7:15, 9:45  
GHOST RIDER (PG13) 1:10, (4:10), 7:25, 10:10  
MUSIC & LYRICS (PG13) 1:40, (4:50), 7:30, 10:00  
NORBIT (PG13) 2:00, (4:40), 7:40, 10:15  
BECAUSE I SAID SO (PG13) 1:10, (3:40), 6:30, 9:30  
THE LAST KING OF SCOTLAND (R) 1:20, (4:10), 7:10, 9:55  
THE PAINTED VEIL (PG13) 1:00, (3:50), 6:50, 9:55  
BLOOD DIAMOND (R) 1:30, (5:00), 8:30

**VILLAGE 18**  
700 CARPENTER RD.  
VILLAGE CROSSING SHOPPING CTR 847-673-8486  
STADIUM SEATING • DIGITAL SOUND

BREACH (PG13) 11:35, 1:10, 2:10, 4:00, (5:00), 6:50, 7:50, 9:45, 10:45  
BRIDGE TO TERABITHIA (PG) 11:50, 1:30, 2:30, 4:20, (5:20), 7:00, 8:00, 9:35, 10:35  
GHOST RIDER (PG13) 12:00, 12:50, 1:50, 2:50, 3:40, 4:40, (5:40), 6:30, 7:30, 8:30, 9:20, 10:20  
MUSIC AND LYRICS (PG13) 1:10, 2:00, (4:30), 7:10, 9:55  
TYLER PERRY'S DADDY'S LITTLE GIRLS (PG13) 11:40, 12:30, 1:20, 2:20, 3:00, 3:55, 4:50, (5:30), 6:40, 7:20, 8:10, 9:10, 10:00  
HANNIBAL RISING (R) 12:55, (3:50), 7:15, 10:05  
NORBIT (PG13) 12:05, 1:40, 2:40, 4:25, (5:25), 6:55, 7:55, 9:30, 10:30  
BECAUSE I SAID SO (PG13) 11:40, 2:15, (4:45), 7:25, 9:50  
THE MESSENGERS (PG13) 12:40, 3:10, (5:35), 8:15, 10:40  
EPIC MOVIE (PG13) (12:15 PM)  
SMOKIN' ACES (R) 2:25, (5:10), 7:40, 10:10  
PAN'S LABYRINTH (R) 1:00, (3:45), 6:45, 9:25

Times for Thursday, February 22, 2007

**WILMETTE** 1122 Century Ave. Ph. 847-251-7471  
[WWW.WILMETTETHEATRE.COM](http://WWW.WILMETTETHEATRE.COM)

1. The King of Scotland (R) 2:00 4:30 7:00  
2. The Painted Veil (PG13) 2:15 5:00 7:30

**SUBURBS NORTHWEST**

**PARK RIDGE**

**PICKWICK \$4.00 before 5, \$6 after 5**  
Touhy & Northwest HWY. 847-604-2234  
BRIDGE TO TERABITHIA (PG) 4:00 6:30 9:45  
BABEL (R) 4:30 7:30  
THE QUEEN (PG13) 4:30 7:00 9:15  
MUSIC & LYRICS (PG13) 4:45 7:00 9:15

**MOVIE RATING GUIDE**

G-Suggested for GENERAL audiences  
PG-Parental Guidance Suggested  
some material may not be suitable for children  
PG-13 Parents Strongly Cautioned  
Some material may be inappropriate for children under 13  
R-Restricted Persons under 17 not admitted  
unless accompanied by parent or adult guardian  
NC-17 No children under 17 admitted

**SUBURBS WEST**

**GLEN ELYN**  
[www.glenelystheatre.com](http://www.glenelystheatre.com) \$6.00  
630 415-1926 \$4.50 before 6 PM  
BLOOD DIAMOND 4:30 7:30 / BABEL 4:15 7:15  
DEPARTED 4:45 7:30 / THE QUEEN 4:15 7:15

**LA GRANGE** 708-354-0460 \$2.00  
THE DEPARTED (R) 6:50 9:30  
CASINO ROYALE (PG13) 6:40 9:20  
ERAGON (PG) 7:05  
THE HOLIDAY (PG13) 9:05  
EARLY SHOWS (PRE-5pm) Sat, Sun & Mon this week!

**OAK PARK**

**LAKE 444-FILM** Bargain Matinees  
\$5.00 Before 6pm

GHOST RIDER\* PG-13 11:55 2:20 4:50 7:15 9:45  
BREACH\* PG-13 11:55 2:20 4:50 7:15 9:45  
MUSIC & LYRICS\* PG-13 12:15 2:30 4:50 7:15 9:45  
DADDY'S LITTLE GIRLS\* PG-13 1:00 3:15 5:30 7:45 10:00  
LAST KING OF SCOTLAND PG-13 1:10 3:30 6:30 9:10  
BECAUSE I SAID SO PG-13 11:50 2:10 4:35 7:00 9:25  
THE MESSENGERS PG-13 12:50 3:00 5:10 7:20 9:45  
NOTES ON SCANDAL PG-13 12:50 3:00 5:10 7:20 9:45  
No passes or coupons • ALL DIGITAL SOUND • Daily showtimes

**ELMHURST**

**YORK 444-FILM** \$5.50  
6pm

BRIDGE TO TERABITHIA\* PG-13 12:15 2:30 4:50 7:15 9:45  
GHOST RIDER\* PG-13 12:15 2:30 4:50 7:15 9:45  
BABEL PG-13 12:25 2:40 4:55 7:10 9:25  
MUSIC & LYRICS\* PG-13 12:25 2:40 4:55 7:10 9:25  
NORBIT PG-13 12:20 2:40 4:55 7:10 9:25  
HANNIBAL RISING PG-13 1:35 4:15 6:55 9: