

# Fabrication in Survey Data: A Sustainable Ecosystem

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## Some Building Blocks for Fabricated Data



Workers removing cladding blocks similar to the ones used in Grenfell Towers

# 1. Code of Silence



Talking about fabricated data in public is taken as a sign of ill breeding that disqualifies one for survey club membership.

Nobody blames club members, such as [D3 Systems](#), for making legal threats to stifle public discussion of fabrication in their data.

Re: D3 Systems, Inc. v Michael Spagat and Steve Koczela

Mr. Spagat and Mr. Koczela:

This firm represents D3 Systems, Inc. (“Our Client” or “D3”). Our client has retained us to **commence litigation against you** and any entity with which you are affiliated (including without limitation MassINC Polling Group, The Massachusetts Institute for the New Commonwealth and Royal Holloway College) seeking compensation for, and equitable relief to terminate, your distribution and publication of false and defamatory statements about D3 to its clients and others.

Have a little taste of the D3 data collected in Iraq.



The background is that the US State Department commissioned many public opinion surveys in Iraq during the war.

The State Department used a variety of fielding companies, including D3 Systems, for this work.

In at least one case two separate fielding companies administered the same questionnaire at exactly the same time - so we can do a head-to-head comparison of D3 against a different fielding operation.

Slides 8-18 tabulate responses to a battery of questions asked by the two surveys.

The “focals” column gives the results of interviews covered by a group of supervisors in D3’s fielding operation that, I contend, fabricated responses over a series of surveys.

The “ICRSS Survey” column gives responses to the same questions in the other survey in the same regions that were covered by the focal supervisors in the D3 survey.

## Water Supply

	Focals	ICRSS Survey
Very Good	0	189
Good	0	977
Poor	245	466
Very Poor	198	128
Not Available	0	3
Don't Know	0	0
NA	0	8



## Electricity Supply

	Focals	ICRSS Survey
Very Good	0	11
Good	0	224
Poor	245	626
Very Poor	198	822
Not Available	0	80
Don't Know	0	0
NA	0	8

## Telephone Service (land line)

	ICRSS Focals Survey	
Very Good	0	71
Good	0	608
Poor	245	433
Very Poor	198	571
Not Available	0	36
Don't Know	0	40
NA	0	12

## Telephone Service (mobile)

	Focals ICRSS Survey	
Very Good	0	266
Good	0	1105
Poor	245	185
Very Poor	198	142
Not Available	0	40
Don't Know	0	21
NA	0	12

# Garbage Collection

	Focals	ICRSS Survey
Very Good	0	57
Good	0	608
Poor	245	667
Very Poor	198	373
Not Available	0	53
Don't Know	0	0
NA	0	13

## Sewage Disposal

	Focals	ICRSS Survey
Very Good	0	64
Good	0	574
Poor	91	662
Very Poor	352	370
Not Available	0	87
Don't Know	0	0
NA	0	14

## Conditions of Roads

	Focals	ICRSS Survey
Very Good	0	26
Good	0	532
Poor	148	769
Very Poor	295	388
Not Available	0	39
Don't Know	0	5
NA	0	12

## Traffic Management

	Focals	Nonfocals
Very Good	0	111
Good	0	834
Poor	245	505
Very Poor	198	207
Not Available	0	58
Don't Know	0	35
NA	0	21

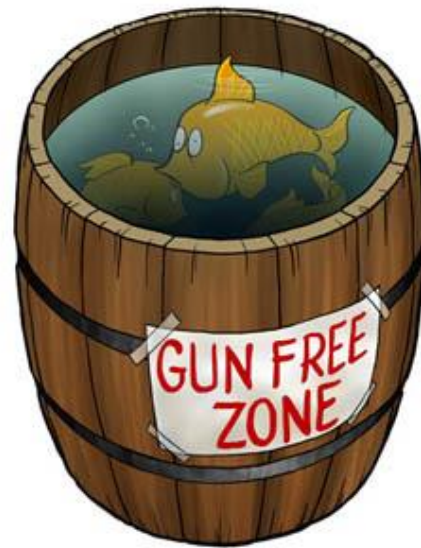
## Police Presence

	Focals	ICRSS Survey
Very Good	0	255
Good	217	948
Poor	24	390
Very Poor	202	124
Not Available	0	23
Don't Know	0	10
NA	0	16



## Army Presence

	Focals	ICRSS Survey
Very Good	0	250
Good	217	834
Poor	24	371
Very Poor	202	171
Not Available	0	109
Don't Know	0	19
NA	0	17



It's that easy.

It's like shooting fish in a barrel except that a surprisingly effective defence mechanism protects the fish - the taboo on discussing the fabrication issue, also known as the **Code of Silence**.

Mind you, these are not minor surveys to figure out which breakfast cereals are the most popular:



These surveys affected how the US conducted the war in Iraq.



D3 Systems fielded Iraq surveys that contributed to ABC News winning an **Emmy Award AND a Policy Impact Award** from the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR).



# 2. Cost-Cutting Mentality



"IT'S THE CUT BACK IN FUNDING. THEY SAY HE'S CHEAP AND VERSATILE."

Improving data quality costs money and does not yield *more* data so **budget conscious managers must often be tempted to cut back on fabrication prevention.**

## The Code of Silence accentuates cost-cutting pressures

1. You will probably not be criticized having fabricated data in one of your surveys so why worry?
2. Occasionally survey companies extoll their fabrication prevention efforts but it is generally considered out of bounds to draw attention to a lack of such efforts in other surveys.



### **3. Market Rewards for Dangerous Field Work**

We love to have data from war zones but the people hired to collect the data may not want to die to inform us.

The BBC marketed one of their recent polls based on the risks ~~the BBC~~ the people hired by the BBC took to gather the data.

## Too dangerous to poll?

But how do you set about conducting field research in an IS-controlled area?

**"In the IS-controlled areas of Raqqa for each survey we visit the head of the town and ask him for permission to randomly interview people,"** Mr Heald says.

"His response is 'so long as you are not an international media station and pull out video cameras, I don't mind you doing this'."

"Why is this his reaction? Because, as the data verifies, **many of those living in Raqqa now are happier since IS took over.**

**"They welcome the security, they see IS trying to help the people with electricity, with food, with petrol. In many respects it is a story they are keen to tell."**

## 4. Long Data Custody Chains

I've referred to "D3 fieldwork" but D3 subcontracted to [KA Research Limited](#), a Turkish company, which has workers in Iraq.

So we have a chain from the State Department to D3 to KA to Iraq and back (or from ABC News to D3 to KA to Iraq and back).

If KA notices fabrication problems will they tell D3?

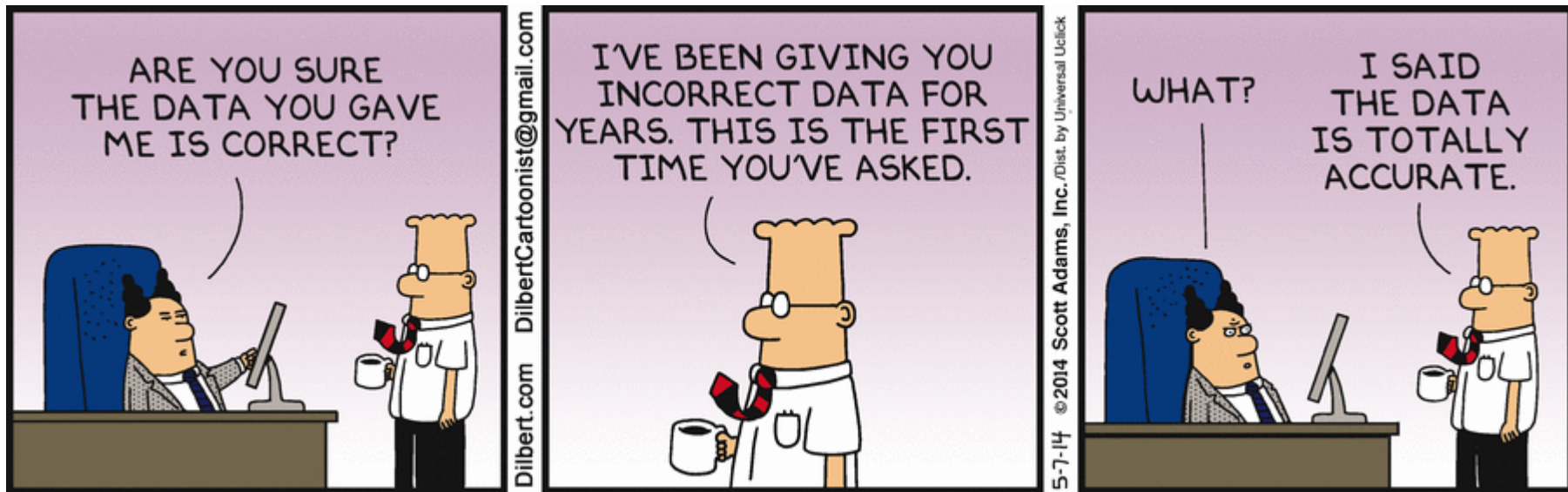
Does D3 want know about fabrication?

Will D3 tell the State Department about fabrication if they find it?

Will a State Department polling analyst tell his/her bosses if he detects fabricated data and, if so, will the bosses be interested?

Do State Department policymakers want to know that they've been basing their decisions on fabricated data?

With the ABC News and State Department Iraq polls there were breakdowns.



## Time to Wrap Up



My four building blocks of data fabrication in surveys are:

1. Code of silence
2. Cost-cutting mentality
3. Market rewards for dangerous field work
4. Long data custody chains

There must be more, some possibly more important than my four.

There also must be plenty of *situations where all four building blocks are present and nobody fabricates data.*

Many things hold together because people want to do a good, honest job, unlike the economic agents I am familiar with from my economics training.

Similarly, there must be buildings less safe than Grenfell Towers that never go up in flames.



But there is an important data fabrication problem out there that is not presently getting adequately addressed.

We need to acknowledge the problem and address it.