

L'Affaire Burnham: Ten Years Later

Michael Spagat

Department of Economics

Royal Holloway University of London

M.Spagat@rhul.ac.uk

Presentation given at the annual meeting of the American Association for Public Opinion Research, Toronto, May, 2019

February 4, 2009 - The American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) [officially censures Gilbert Burnham](#), a researcher at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, saying that he “repeatedly refused to make public essential facts about his research on civilian deaths in Iraq.”



Burnham's survey-based estimate of violent deaths in the Iraq war, March 2003 through June 2006, was 601,027 with a 95% confidence interval of 426,369 to 793,663.

$$\text{speed} = \frac{10.21 \text{ m}}{1.07 \text{ s}} = 9.542056075 \frac{\text{m}}{\text{s}}$$



Physicists take data (measurements) and use equations to make predictions.

Too many significant digits!

We need rules for doing math with significant digits.

Mr. Gabrielse

(Burnham apparently missed Mr. Gabrielse's class on significant digits....)



Let's pause briefly to be clear.

There have been a huge number of violent deaths in Iraq - but Burnham overestimated them by a factor of roughly 4 -6.

[This survey](#) estimates 151,000 (104,000 – 223,000) for the period covered by the Burnham et al. survey: the data in [this other survey](#) implies similar, but slightly lower, numbers (my unpublished estimates with Stijn van Weezel).

Survey Researcher – “I just did a survey that shows 88% of the American population is virulently opposed to abortion under all circumstances.”

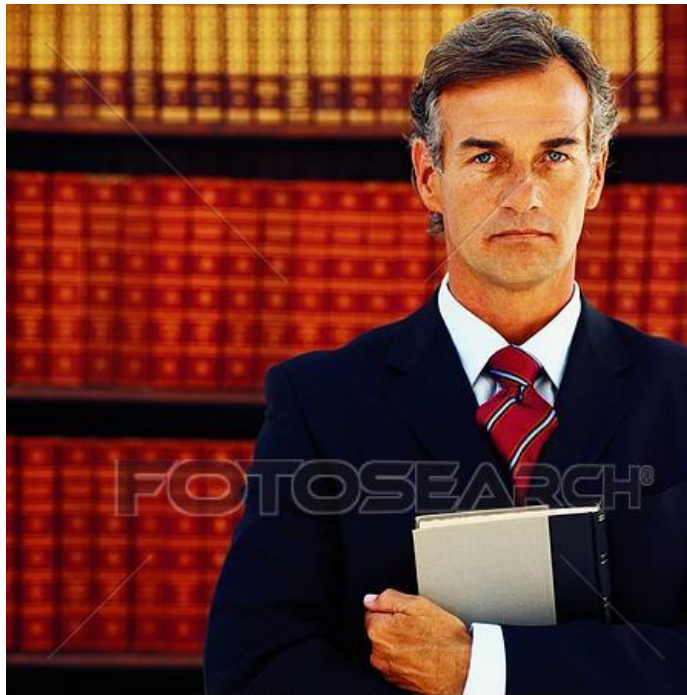
John Q. Public – “Interesting! Can I see your question wordings and sampling design?”

Survey Researcher – “No. Let’s just ban abortion.”



John Q. Public - “OK”

Disclaimer – the above conversation dramatizes something that may or may not have actually happened.



x10356755 www.fotosearch.com

The highlighted snippet (below) from a BBC story about the AAPOR censure is typical of much contemporaneous commentary.

Iraqi death researcher censured

An academic whose estimates of civilian deaths during the Iraq war sparked controversy has been criticised for not fully co-operating with an inquiry.

Gilbert Burnham said in the Lancet medical journal in 2006 that 650,000 civilians had died since 2003 - a figure far higher than other estimates.

A polling association in the US said Dr Burnham had refused to supply "basic facts" for its inquiry into his work.

It did not comment on the accuracy of his conclusion.



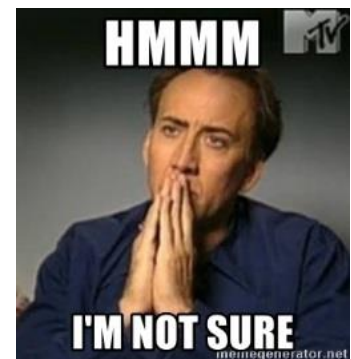
Estimates vary on the number of Iraqi civilians killed since 2003

That is, saying that Burnham refused to supply “basic facts” about his methodology was not seen as a comment on the accuracy of his conclusions.

Nevertheless, AAPOR’s President, Richard Kulka, did say that Burnham’s behaviour:

“undermines the credibility of all survey and public opinion research”

Question - if Burnham undermined the credibility of all survey research then didn’t he undermine the credibility of his own survey research?



Burnham's home institution, Johns Hopkins University (JHU), actually advised Burnham not to cooperate with AAPOR – acting in contradiction to open science principles.



Of course, simply placing the basics of Burnham's survey methodology into the public domain would have avoided the censure.

Nevertheless, JHU conducted its own separate investigation which led to [Burnham's suspension](#) from human subjects research:

“A review of the original data collection forms revealed that researchers in the field used data collection forms that were different from the form included in the original protocol. The forms included space for the names of respondents or householders, which were recorded on many of the records. Use of the form and collection of names violated the study protocol submitted to the IRB and on which the IRB determined the study was exempt from full human subjects review.”

Burnham [later said](#) that his interview teams lied to him about collecting names (but were, presumably honest about all other aspects of data collection....).



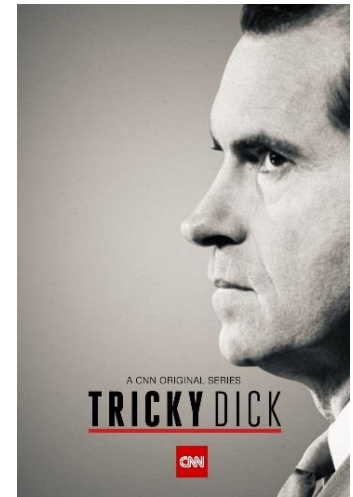
Unfortunately, JHU's investigation was narrow – it excluded methodology and ignored [evidence](#) that much of Burnham's data was fabricated:



“The review did not evaluate aspects of the sampling methodology or statistical approach of the study. It is expected that **the scientific community will continue to debate the best methods** for estimating excess mortality in conflict situations in appropriate academic forums.”

George F. Bishop and David W. Moore forensically [pinpointed](#) JHU's hypocrisy on Burnham and AAPOR:

“Let's see: The Bloomberg School will not attempt to evaluate what experts believe is almost certainly a faulty methodology, saying the scientific community should make the evaluation. **But then the school advises Burnham *not* to release details about his methods, so the scientific community can't have the information it needs for a definitive assessment.**”



The Burnham censure caused an outpouring of discussion and debate on AAPORnet (the listserve for AAPOR)

Richard Kulka devoted his entire scintillating [Presidential Address](#) to “L’Affaire Burnham”, - **mandatory reading** for anyone who’s made it this far in my presentation.



Here I'll just pull a single interesting quote from Kulka's piece:

Why not write a letter to the editor of *Lancet* and other publications that have published this work (derivatively) explaining that in the opinion of AAPOR the survey results presented in their publication did not comport with the basic canons of scientific investigation and should be retracted by the editor immediately with an explanation of why this is necessary. Rather than having a mechanism that many of us would agree is capable of political manipulation and extremely dangerous (i.e., censure), wouldn't it be better to destroy the credibility of the research and punish the editor for failing to properly vet the proposed research report? (Michael Sullivan, AAPORnet, March 18, 2009)



But the immediate reaction of the *Lancet* was:

1. [Decline to comment](#) on the AAPOR censure.

2. Publish a [2009 article](#) entitled “Interference, Intimidation and Measuring Mortality in War”.



“Interference, Intimidation,…” does not mention the AAPOR censure but it does protest vociferously against Gilbert Burnham’s **suspension by Johns Hopkins** which, it is feared, will

“risk reducing the licence for future investigative work on contentious issues.”

Footnote – The “licence” in jeopardy is to promise to your IRB that you won’t risk the lives of your war-zone respondents by recording their names and to go ahead and record these names anyway.



“Interference, Intimidation and Go Away you Pooh Pooh Heads” continued:

“The debate about mortality data in the Iraq war is one of the saddest periods for field epidemiology. External efforts to discredit researchers and estimates, and misunderstanding in the mass media, resulted in large underestimates of death, with a focus on violence specific mortality.”

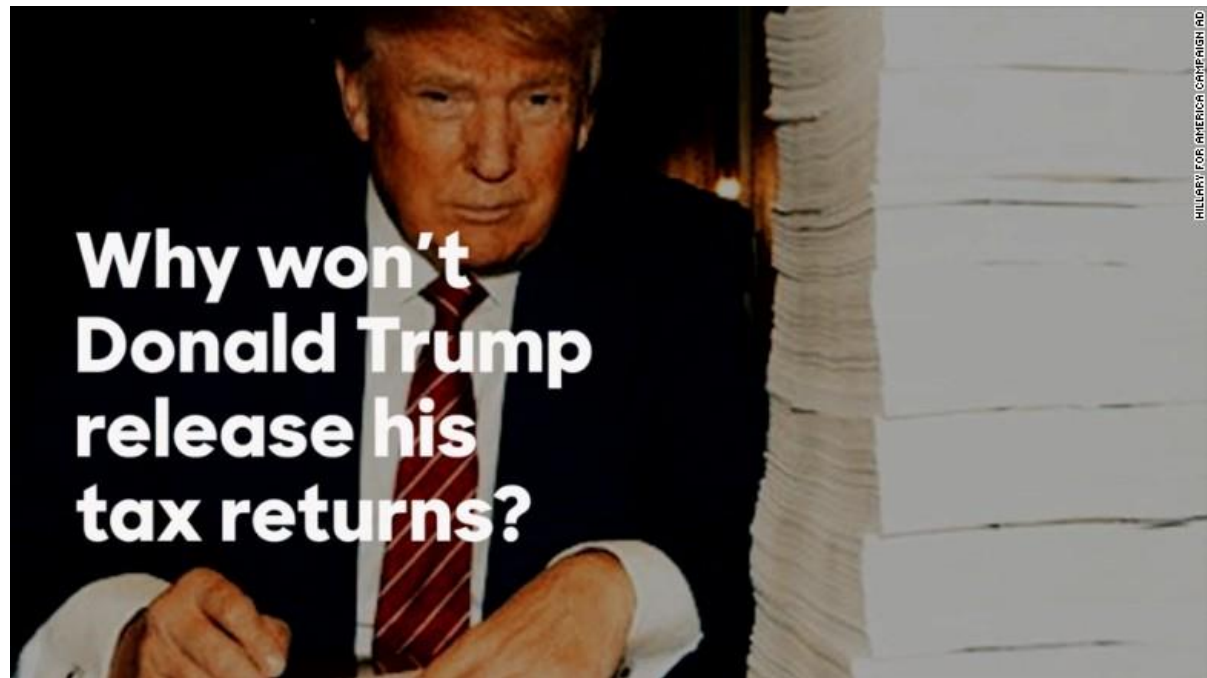
“With the involvement of so many individuals and organisations in interpreting the Iraq data, there is suspicious evidence of outside interference, a rising trend in public health research... When and how do we know that public health data and interpretation are being tampered with, and by whom?”

So it's not obvious that the *Lancet* would have welcomed AAPOR's helping hand.

A
GREAT
BIG
THANK YOU
SO MUCH

Later in 2009 AAPOR [censured](#) putative polling firm Strategic Vision for.... well....refusing to disclose the basics of its methodology.

Our sample of 2 censures from 2009 proves a universal theory – **when you're hiding something you've got something to hide.**



Burnham hid his ethical violations.

Moreover, there's extensive evidence of data fabrication and evidence falsification in the Burham survey itself and in its defence. (See [here](#) and [here](#))

Strategic Vision fabricated lots of data. (See [this](#) and [this](#))



What does it all mean?

The Burnham censure did have an impact on the discussion of war deaths in Iraq (see [this](#) and [this](#).)

Nevertheless, epidemiologists still regularly cite the Burnham et al. survey without mentioning the AAPOR censure, e.g., [here](#) and [here](#).

The censure gets [mentioned](#) outside Burnham's home turf but usually as just one piece of a large Iraq war death puzzle.

Burnham's estimate is still alive and kicking, e.g, it's cited at the end of "Vice".



It has [333 scholarly citations](#), according to Scopus – I suspect that most of these are positive and don't mention AAPOR - but I need to check this.

Still, AAPOR did itself proud back in 2009.

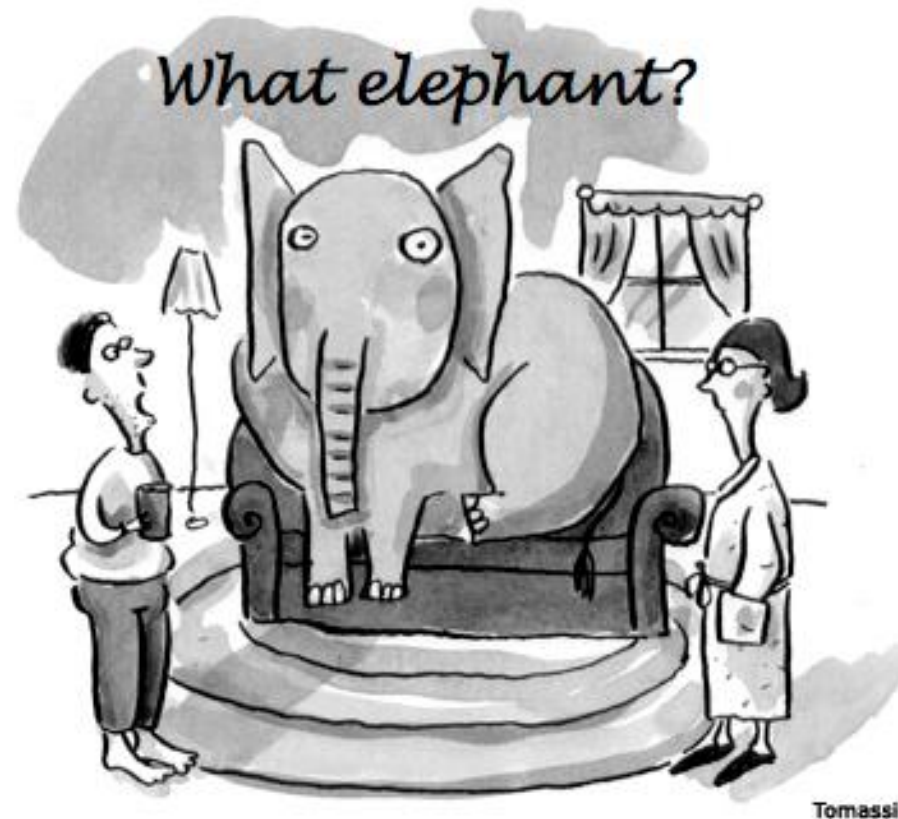


Back then AAPOR was on the cutting edge of open science.

AAPOR even built on this success with its [Transparency Initiative](#) which provides positive incentives for methodological openness that [complement](#) the negative incentive of the censure mechanism.



Unfortunately, AAPOR is now behind the curve on **open data** – the feature most closely associated with open science.



When I describe the TI to someone she will invariably respond along the lines of:

“You mean open data, right?”

To which the response is:

“No, in practice the TI means openness about everything except data.”



It's actually worse than that because the TI educational materials and [Code of Ethics](#) appear to require data transparency....sort of....:

“Finally, reflecting the fundamental goals of transparency and replicability we share the expectation that access to datasets and related documentation will be provided to allow for independent review and verification of research claims upon request. Datasets may be held without release for a period of up to one year after findings are publicly released to allow full opportunity for primary analysis.... Those who commission publicly disseminated research have an obligation to disclose a rationale for why eventual public release or access to the datasets is not possible if that is the case.” ([Informational Module 5](#))

These requirements aren't ideal - TI members are still allowed to give *excuses* for not practicing open science rather than simply *practicing* open science – but still this is better than nothing.

Key points on data disclosure.

1. The language of the TI's own educational materials mandates either data disclosure or an explanation for data concealment.
2. Even just forcing organizations to publicize lame excuses for concealing their data would be a step forward for the TI.
3. The Transparency Initiative Coordinating Committee (TICC) considers data disclosure to be outside its purview (personal correspondence with TICC, April 2017) - in effect the TICC has unilaterally rewritten the TI's educational materials.

The TI's retreat from open data allows member organizations to conceal their data while masquerading as transparent organizations.

For example, ABC News and Langer Associates [ignored](#) and [refused](#), respectively, my data request for work that forms an important part of the historical record for the US invasion of Iraq and for which AAPOR gave its 2010 [impact award](#).

There is, in fact, extensive evidence that the fielding companies for these surveys, D3 Systems and KA Research Limited, extensively fabricated data in Iraq during the period when ABC did its surveys. (See [this](#) and [this](#))

But D3 Systems and Langer Research Associates tried to suppress this story with a [legal threat](#). (See also [this](#).)

Choices for AAPOR

1. Muddle forward with language on data transparency that is in both the AAPOR Code of Ethics and the TI but which is routinely ignored – this is hypocrisy.
2. Drop the official language on data transparency in AAPOR documents and carry on with the TI in present form – this is, at least, a consistent position but it would place the TI in opposition to the main principle of open science.
3. Switch to enforcing the data transparency language that AAPOR already has – this would be a step forward but would still leave AAPOR behind the open science curve through tolerance for excuses rather than simple disclosure.
4. Fully embrace open science for publicly disclosed findings.

**THANK
YOU!**



FOR

YOUR

PRESENCE

Addendum

I'll post this when I return home and there will be a paper soon.

Email me if you have trouble finding the presentation or want to be alerted when the paper is finished.

m.spagat@rhul.ac.uk