

The level of Datafolha's quality of work is high. There is no question about its competence; it already has produced 3,445 opinion surveys about voter intentions published by the newspaper.

Three examples of the best work published by this newspaper in 2008 owe their quality in large part to Datafolha, which commemorates its silver jubilee.

The intensive opinion surveys about São Paulo residents and the special sections on youth and racism are examples of the profound debate about topics of public interest starting from empirical data that are relevant and reliable.

When it was created in 1983, the type of methodology used by Datafolha (called a survey, a quantitative poll based on closed questionnaires) was the object of a huge debate in this nation's academic community.

In those times, democracy was still nascent, and a critical spirit was advancing strongly. Pierre Bordieu's phrase ("public opinion does not exist") to condemn this was in vogue.

In fact, the quantitative survey does not manage to recognize the most complex social problems. It is true that Datafolha itself develops many projects in which it utilizes qualitative methods when necessary.

Exaggeration in the use of opinion polls provides ammunition for enemies. And Folha helped. The newsroom, impressed by the material Datafolha provided, extrapolated its utilization.

Caio Túlio Costa, managing editor at the time and the first ombudsman at this newspaper, said that he turned into "a sort of hostage of the polls." Costa's blog says that if the world ended, Folha's headline would be: "World ends; 50 Oisagreee."

But the level of quality of Datafolha's work is so high that there is no way to argue with its competence. It already produced 3,445 polls of opinion and voter intentions published by the newspaper, and the margin of error is minimal.

Thanks to the work of sociologists such as Vilmar Faria, Reginaldo Prandi, Antônio Flávio Pierucci, Mara Kotscho, Antônio Manuel Teixeira Mendes, Gustavo Venturi and Mauro Paulino, the current director, the institute developed its own model which has shown to be very efficient.

Besides having accurately measured voter intentions in almost every election since the military regime left power, it revolutionized statistical analysis of soccer games, created an objective way to evaluate movie attendance, measure crowds and take surveys of markets highly coveted by big companies. At peak times, it counts on the work of 1,300 people. Only a big, strong company is capable of supporting this.

In Brazil, no other news organization has its own polling institute. Around the world, they are rare. The first precursor was a weekly American magazine, "Literary Digest," which circulated between 1890 and 1938.

Its experience with polling was shipwrecked in the 1936 election, when it forecast that the Republican candidate, Alfred Landon, would easily defeat President Franklin Roosevelt, who was reelected with 60.80% of the votes. With Datafolha, that would be impossible.

From blue hair to piercing

It is difficult to interpret opinions, desires, taste and attitudes of a population so big and diversified as people who are Folha readers.

Through last Sunday, when I wrote critiques of the electronic edition of this newspaper, I received only messages against it.

This week, several others came, considerably favorable toward the version which appears on the Internet. Only one was against.

No group is statistically significant: there were nearly a dozen of each. In other words: the overwhelming majority which did not express an opinion could think one way or the other.

The conclusion: there are at least two types of readers of the electronic edition. One accesses it as a primary source; the other reads the print version and uses it to "clip" stories or give them some utilization on the Internet.

In the former, the tendency is to not like the current electronic version; in the latter, the opposite.

Among supporters, I highlight the very critical reader, Darlan Zurc: "The Internet version is well polished, the language visualizes every browser, and it is pleasing to read."

Zurc notices another difference between these two types: age. Referring to readers for whom Folha staff will have to paint their hair blue because they are so old, he said: "I bet that such a reader is twelve and a half, only wears Prada and has 35 piercings in the right eye."

The consensus: readers of the electronic version miss out on artwork, graphics and press photos.

To read

"Methodology of Polling Activity," by Michel Thiollent, Cortez Publishing, 2005 (starting at 17.10 reals, or US \$7.30) contains a well-based critique of the methodology of opinion polling conducted through questionnaires

"Precision Journalism," by Philip Meyer, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002 (US \$30.95, on the amazon.com

website) the best and most complete book about how journalism could benefit from quantitative polling methods

To see

"Wag the Dog," by Barry Levinson, with Dustin Hoffman and Robert De Niro, 1997 (starting at 19.90 reais) intelligent satire about a government guided by public opinion polls

What Folha did right...

"Americans evicted"

Seven weeks after a reader asked, a story responded with the total number of evictions in the U.S. crisis

Prostate cancer

The topic followed from beginning to end the controversy about the digital exam

Folha Guide

The guide for books, recorded music and movies is a great product; it is too bad that not all subscribers and readers get it

...And where it was wrong

Half price

The topic about requiring half-price admission for students and senior citizens only began to get attention after the decision in a congressional commission

Numbers of the crisis

On Wednesday, the front page used one total amount of U.S. government expenditures on the crisis and an editorial used another

Retirees

The newspaper gave little coverage to the projected law on retirees which is going through Congress

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-- Translation by John Wright

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