

On the Way to the Year 2020

Memories of Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann

by Wilhelm Haumann

"Waiting for the Year 2020"—this was the title that the survey researcher Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann chose for one of her essays. Of course, she was born in 1916 and did not really expect to see the year 2020 herself. As confident as she was, not even she believed she would live to be 104. Nevertheless, she sometimes declared mischievously that she personally was waiting for the year 2020. In such instances, she would tilt her head to the side, cast an ironic glance at whomever she was conversing with at the moment, and let out an extended "Yeessss?" She was curious what they would make of the idea: Would they sheepishly try to change the subject, would they ask for another appointment in the year 2020 to discuss the matter—provided they were in a position to meet with her by then—or would they ask what was so special about the year 2020? Noelle-Neumann herself would have always asked right away. The courage to ask questions was one of her distinguishing traits. Even at high-level conferences, she did not hesitate to ask the speaker even the simplest questions in order to get a better understanding of the issue at hand. This usually earned her the appreciation of the others in the audience, although she was occasionally the target of disparaging glances. She did not care one way or the other.

Those who asked her about the year 2020 were informed that it was her hope that survey research would have established itself by then. Contentious issues about what people actually want, what they believe is true and what is false, should be resolved by surveys. Of course, not by means of simple "water level readings"—one percent more for party A, one percent less for party B—and certainly not by means of echo-chamber surveys, which reflect nothing more than sudden surges in the wake of current events, which are subsequently

reinforced when the findings are taken as the subject of further reporting. In her view, survey research needed to focus on both opinions and people, sensitively registering the pressure from the "climate of opinion" in which we live.

In February 1995, I heard about this hope for the first time. I had applied for a job at the Allensbach Institute and, after a tour of the premises, was to meet with the founder herself. The institute's manager of operations drove me to Noelle-Neumann's simple cottage on the shores of Lake Constance and asked me to take a seat in the library. "The professor" would be with me shortly. With its tiled stove and wraparound bookshelves that extended all the way up to the ceiling, the room reminded me of a scholar's chamber from the 19th century. Without giving it any thought, I took a seat in the low-slung armchair by the window and, as she entered the room, knocked over both the chair and the ceiling lamp next to it. No, she didn't mind that I had been sitting in her chair, she could sit on the sofa for a change. Very well, if I insisted.

The interview proceeded conventionally at first, until she asked about my late father. "And do you miss your father?" Should I refuse to answer the question, which was much too personal, or should I give a superficial non-response? "Yes, I miss him very much." — "You know, I miss my father too..." Of course, this question did not reflect any longing for her childhood in her old age, but was instead one of her indicators: namely, she had observed a connection between performance orientation and paternal bonds. However, I did not hear about that until later. On that particular evening, our conversation focused on surveys' important role as the voice of the population and an educational tool. She discussed my ideas at length, without any trace of condescension. The only thing she did not want to hear about was the prospect of future progress in survey research thanks to advances in computer technology. New technologies, she believed, did not necessarily go hand in hand with new ideas. Rather, they tended to increase the risk that researchers would lose sight of respondents as human beings and would instead perceive them as nothing more than data

suppliers. Regarding my career as an opinion researcher, she made me two promises: "You will be able to ask everyone anything you want" and "You will never get bored."

Never getting bored—was that perhaps the key to Noelle-Neumann's unflagging zeal for working? Or was this occasionally expressed wish essentially a contrived attitude that she used to explain the enormous energy she expended on her work—for which she needed no special occasion and no particular reason—to herself? Or was this woman, who had suffered from numerous serious illnesses in her youth and during the post-war era, perhaps driven by the sense that she did not have enough time to do everything that she still wanted to do?

When I first met her, she was 78 years old and had just completed her last series of university lectures on public opinion. She had founded two institutes: the commercially operated Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach—known simply as the Allensbach Institute—and the Institut für Publizistik ('Institute for Journalism') at the University of Mainz, both of which she had directed for decades. At the same time, she had served as a consultant to politicians and business people, had published books and articles, edited an academic journal, rejuvenated the World Association for Public Opinion Research and had been active in numerous other areas. Finally, with her thoughts on the spiral of silence, she had crafted one of the few truly compelling theories regarding the development of public opinion.

In the meantime, she had retired from her duties as a professor in Mainz. In Allensbach, she had long been aided by her successor, Renate Köcher, who took on the more unpleasant duties involved with directing the institute. Noelle-Neumann could actually have reduced her workload at this point. But that was not her style. She continued to employ two secretaries and two assistants at the Allensbach Institute, all of whom generally found that the days were not long enough to keep up with the flood of requests and ideas that she churned out continuously. Even if she had relinquished many of her duties, she remained active as a sought-after advisor, speaker and author of numerous journalistic

and scientific articles. She also kept in contact with important clients, while working on devising new questionnaire experiments and completing her own survey projects, where she was involved in everything from drafting the questionnaires to compiling the final reports on the findings. In addition, she began revising her books, some of which had been published decades earlier. The Allensbach Archives house more than 400 publications—some major, some minor—written by Noelle-Neumann in the years from 1995 until her death in 2010, including three books. She was planning to write at least three more. She kept the materials for these writings in a room adjacent to her home library, stored in a number of satchels and tote bags that practically covered the entire floor.

She was proud of her work, like parents who are proud of their children. She took pride in the fact that that she was always doing, reading, writing or contemplating something from morning to night. Vacation in the actual sense of the word was foreign to her. Work, she declared, is like a wedding feast. After the appetizer and lavish main course, everyone may feel like they cannot eat another bite, but then dessert arrives and suddenly they are hungry again. That's the way you ought to approach working: When you have struggled with all of the difficult tasks and feel you cannot do anything more, you have to take on a more pleasant and manageable task.

Aside from that, she didn't give much thought to food. Left to her own devices, she probably would have starved. It was not uncommon for her to get through long working days with nothing more than a few shortbread biscuits, which she nibbled on the side—while assuming that her staff would prefer to do the same. She appreciated eating primarily as a chance to have stimulating conversations and exchange thoughts with visitors, and it also gave her an opportunity to admire and praise the tremendous meals prepared by her cherished husband, Heinz Maier-Leibniz, whose success as a cook almost rivalled his achievements as a physicist and science manager. In fact, it was in his honor that she

rediscovered her sense of taste, which she had lost towards the end of World War II.

It goes without saying that this fixation on work stemmed from various thoughts and observations: Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann was firmly convinced that happiness could be found in and through work. In her view, the prerequisite for finding happiness in work was either being free to choose your task or at least being free to decide how to complete it. If need be, you could even make unpleasant tasks your own by means of freedom of choice. She was adept at bending her own will in this way. Thus, she was able to discover interesting aspects about even the driest subjects of research and to convince herself that she really enjoyed working with difficult clients.

The predominance of work in her life also resulted in her sensitivity for value change, which she detected as one of the first researchers in Europe in the late 1970s based on empirical evidence concerning parents' changing educational goals. She observed this trend for many years with great concern. In particular, she believed that the dwindling regard for values such as diligence and discipline, which were now viewed as "secondary values," would in all likelihood prevent people from developing their own powers by means of work.

After a few months in the Allensbach Institute's questionnaire department, where I learned the basic concepts of public opinion research, I was given the opportunity to observe these attitudes at close range, after Noelle-Neumann made me her assistant. I was now responsible for sifting through survey results in advance, perusing publications, drafting proposed responses to inquiries, along with compiling the survey reports for a few projects. Essentially, my job was to supply her with supplementary analyses, based on counts of both new and old questions. From this point onwards, I was Noelle-Neumann's "data hound."

Her primary assistant was Thomas Petersen. Although a good bit younger than I, he was already both a scientist and a journalist. He had such a natural grasp of Noelle-Neumann's way of thinking that they often only needed half sentences

to communicate. He provided more and more support in drafting her texts. He was also the co-author of many of her later publications. In terms of appearance, the two could hardly have been more different: here, an elegant older lady, there, a tall young man dressed in jeans and a lumberjack shirt, to whom she entrusted so many tasks.

I began my workdays by checking my mailbox, which was regularly filled with three or four instructions for work and requests from "the boss," as she was referred to at the institute. Often, these instructions were written on the A5-sized notepapers which Noelle-Neumann used for her speeches. She had deposited stacks of them in many places around the institute so that she could jot down new ideas immediately. The paper seemed yellowed and full of wood fiber. In any event, it was an exceedingly smooth, special kind of paper that offered hardly any material resistance to her ink pen. In more than a few instances, I had to consult with one of her secretaries or some other handwriting expert in order to decipher the notes. The only one who saved any time was the notes' author. The instructions she dictated while working through the daily mail—which were then typed by her secretaries late in the evening or on weekends—were easier to read.

Although I strictly prioritized from that point onwards and often worked into the night, I still had no choice but to put the less urgent instructions onto a constantly growing pile. When Noelle-Neumann eventually asked about the missing research, as she inevitably did, she liked to declare that she did not think much of the "first things first" principle: it is precisely the unimportant things that must be done quickly, since they would otherwise be left undone forever.

During the time when she was lecturing and holding seminars in Mainz, while simultaneously supervising her projects at the Allensbach Institute, she had gotten used to writing her articles and reports on weekends. She wrote them by hand and then dictated the completed passages by telephone to a secretary who was actually retired but still worked for her. As her data supplier, it was not

uncommon for me to spend Sundays sitting in my office, drafting charts and piling up one background analysis after another. Every few hours, I brought the results down to her house on the lake. Subsequently, however, only few of my figures actually found their way into Noelle-Neumann's writings. It seems she was primarily interested in having the chance to access supplementary data from the surveys if necessary. Of course, there was no compensation for this kind of weekend work and she was also no great fan of vacation days. Once, when my mother was celebrating a round-number birthday, Noelle-Neumann recommended that I shift the celebration to a date that was more convenient for the Institute.

At the same time, however, her closest staff members were practically a part of her family. Noelle-Neumann loved giving us birthday and Christmas presents and she was also pleased when we gave her presents on her birthday. She praised our bouquets or CDs at length, even though her gifts were much more original. Thus, for example, I received a stuffed animal for Christmas two years in a row, years before I had even thought of starting a family. Later, these two stuffed animals—a tiger and a lion—would accompany our two boys to bed at night.

Of course, this friendliness could also quickly turn into rejection if you failed to meet her expectations. Then, it was possible for her to stay angry for quite some time. One clear signal of her displeasure was the complete absence of work instructions. It was only during phases like these, which I had to endure several times, that I got around to reducing my pile of outstanding assignments somewhat, which generally got the mechanism of daily inquiries and instructions going again before too long.

This kind of brusqueness, her insistence on having things her own way, was probably related to Noelle-Neumann's conviction that if you really want to achieve something, you must free yourself from public opinion and, if need be, from conventions as well. This attitude had become second nature to her, or perhaps it was part of her inborn disposition. She never hesitated to speak her

mind, which made her seem a bit strange wherever she went. Although she had many friends, she never felt the urge to agree with their ideas and attitudes if at all possible.

Inevitably, she also made enemies. In the final years of her life, she was primarily confronted with accusations about her activities as a journalist during the Third Reich. Her adversaries, however, were obviously less concerned about historical justice and more intent on discrediting Noelle-Neumann. A few particularly egregious attacks imputed that her later scientific work was infused with National Socialist themes and conceptions. Her attackers alleged that her theory of the spiral of silence, in particular, was not meant to clarify how opinions are suppressed in the public debate but, on the contrary, served as a recipe for how this could be done.

Nothing could have been further from the truth. Even just the publication of the theory—the book was translated into eleven languages—showed that Noelle-Neumann was not interested in how to exploit these kinds of mechanisms, but rather in making them more well known and exploring how they could be overcome. She felt a keen urge to enlighten others, which I already found astonishing during my job interview. This urge was closely tied to her unwavering faith in science. It explains why she was much less hesitant than many other opinion researchers about disclosing her question wordings and survey methods. She wanted her surveys to be replicable and the findings to be verifiable. It was no coincidence that her hopes for the year 2020 were tied to the optimism of the Enlightenment, the conviction that it would someday be possible to solve even the most difficult aspects of human co-existence by scientific means.

She parted ways with the Enlightenment, however, when it came to the notion that understanding and reason naturally take precedence over irrational impulses, such as the fear of isolation or unfounded hope. The assumption that people essentially make rational choices seemed absurd to her. From her survey findings, she knew how much influence public opinion had on people's

thinking, on decisions made by the individual. In appealing to reason, therefore, she did not envision reason as some genius pressing forward with the torch of truth, but rather as the resident of the "social building of drives and emotions," whom she wanted to encourage to take greater charge of his home.

Noelle-Neumann considered herself to be an explorer. Over the course of many decades, she had retained her ability to be amazed by survey findings. She was scornful of those researchers who never attempted to go beyond confirming their own preconceptions; her focus was on new things, on the potential for discovery offered by the survey method. When she spoke about this, her eyes would glow. Ironic comments, which she certainly appreciated otherwise, were not welcome at such moments.

Where did her enthusiasm for science come from? That is a question you could rack your brain over. Did it perhaps stem from the child's wish to surpass her parents and grandparents, who had considerable success in both business and the arts, in a different field? Did it derive from the young woman's experience with the reign of lies during the Nazi era? Or was it perhaps due to the fact that she took up her scientific work at a relatively late point in her career—and with relatively little experience when it comes to the all too human aspects that inevitably predominate in science as well? Whatever it was: her completely undisguised enthusiasm infected me and so many others whom she encountered. She passed away in Allensbach in March 2010, only one decade before the year 2020.