Britain | Questionable value

Question 1: why are questionnaires in trouble?

A literary genre that changed the world is struggling

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Can you spare 45 minutes? PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY IMAGES

THE QUESTIONNAIRE began simply. What, asked Q1, "is her name"? It was followed by Q2: "When was she born?" Then, because witches can be tricky, the questions on this 17th-century form took a tougher turn. When, asked Q28, did she first keep "the company of the evil enemy"? There were queries on whether she "did help exhume children" (Q71) or (Q75) shape-shifted. Questionnaires have always been a trial: in early-modern Europe, more literally so than later.

Questionnaires have changed the world. Interest-rate decisions are in part based on them; GDP is calculated using them; sexual revolutions have been spurred on by them. Their insistent inquiries—are you M or F? White, black, Asian or other? 35-44, 45-54?—form a background hum to modern life. It is hard to buy a product, or run a country, without one. Britain questions its citizens on everything from their religious habits to their drugs ones ("Thinking only about the LAST TIME you took drugs", asks one national survey, "WHICH drug did you take?").

Or tries to. Britain is suffering from a "crisis" in survey-response rates. Responses to Britain's labour-force survey, which helps central bankers set interest rates, have fallen from 70% in the late 1990s to 20% now. Those to surveys on the cost of living, crime and health have also declined precipitously. The cause of this crisis is not clear: a fall in civic-mindedness is one possibility; a fall in attention spans (some surveys take 45 minutes) is another. What is clear is that the questionnaire is in trouble.

The witch trials died out; the format did not. By the 18th and 19th centuries, English enlightenment ideals were spreading across the world. With them went lists of questions that quizzed everyone from farmers ("59. What quantity of Cyder is generally made yearly?" asked one clergyman of his parishioners in the 1750s) to foreigners. "May a man have several wives?" asked an explorer's survey in 1889. And, nervously: "72. Is cannibalism practised?"

Quite when such lists of questions gained that *-aire* and their scientific air is debated. Most credit the one sent in 1874 by Francis Galton, a polymath and eugenicist who would later survey where the prettiest women in Britain were (London, he thought) and the most hideous (Aberdeen). But first he surveyed the "English Men of Science" on their "Nature and Nurture", asking them about everything from their education to the size of the "inside of rim of [their] hat". Those men of science were distressed; Charles Darwin found answering such questions "impossible".

Such distaste did not matter: the prospect of studying mankind en masse was too tempting for intellectuals to ignore. Though respondents remained reticent: in 1880 Karl Marx sent 25,000 copies of a questionnaire to workers, asking them about their "capitalist owners". The workers of the world—who were presumably too busy working—did not respond. For decades the questionnaire was less a scientific tool than, as the writer Evan Kindley puts it, "a utopian literary genre".

Yet it became a ubiquitous one. Response rates improved; by the 1940s in America Gallup used the questionnaire to ask "What is the common man thinking?" (thus laying the foundations of modern opinion polling); Alfred Kinsey, a biologist, asked the American male about "premarital petting" (laying the foundations of modern notions of sexuality); Isabel Briggs Myers, a novelist, asked people whether they "(a) eat to live, or (b) live to eat" (laying the foundations for a lot of nonsense). Questionnaires, says Daniel Midena, an academic, have "changed how we view ourselves".

Not always, many felt, for the better. Humanity, having put itself into boxes, promptly felt boxed in by them. In 1945 the British poet W.H. Auden was sent to Germany with the United States Strategic Bombing Survey to, as another surveyor put it, "go round and ask the Germans how they felt about being bombed" ("not good", in short). Auden was repelled by the process of sifting and organising humanity: "Thou shalt not answer questionnaires," he later wrote in a poem. Britons, it seems, are now listening to Auden. ■