



SSRS management team, from left, Susan A. Sherr (ASC '01), Eran N. Ben-Porath (ASC '08), David Dutwin (ASC '02), and Melissa J. Herrmann (ASC '96).

Alumni PROFILE

The old adage about looking for a needle in a haystack is intended to convey the image of a fruitless endeavor – one that is guaranteed to chew up lots of time and yield very few results.

Yet finding the proverbial needle in a haystack is precisely what goes on every day at **Social Science Research Solutions (SSRS)** of Media, Pa., a public opinion and policy research firm run by four Annenberg alumni. At SSRS, finding highly targeted respondents for the purpose of conducting public policy research is their version of finding the needle.

Need a cross-sampling of opinions of military spouses, a target audience that moves around a lot? SSRS has that covered (they did such a survey in 2004). Or how about surveying teenagers about their sex lives for a study on teen pregnancy? They did that in 2007. SSRS was also able to reach New Orleans evacuees shortly after Hurricane Katrina to glean their opinions about relief efforts and their personal life plans.

Considering this proficiency with developing complex research designs, it's no surprise that SSRS is run by four Annenberg alumni. President **Melissa J. Herrmann (ASC '96)**; **David Dutwin, Ph.D. (ASC '02)**; **Eran N. Ben-Porath, Ph.D. (ASC '08)**; and **Susan A. Sherr, Ph.D. (ASC '01)** apply the methodological and analytical skills they honed at Annenberg to their work every day.

"The needle in a haystack analogy came from our client at The Washington Post after we did the survey of military spouses," said Herrmann, President of SSRS. "It really was an example of finding a hard-to-reach audience."

SSRS recently became a division of International Communications Research (ICR) and AUS, Inc, which is helmed by another Penn alumni, Jack Ringwood (Wharton, '87). The four members of SSRS' senior staff have no qualms about working so independently, especially since the work is so closely related to what they were doing while studying for their graduate degrees.

Herrmann cut her teeth doing research as an intern at Chilton, a now-defunct company that helped run Election Day and Nightline surveys for ABC News. Once she was in the trenches doing public opinion and policy research, there was no turning back.

Dr. Dutwin, for his part, assumed he would become a college professor. "During my graduate studies I had to take classes in statistics, and I found I was good at it." It was studying at Annenberg with Vincent Price, Ph.D., the Stephen A. Chaffee Professor of Communication, whom Dr. Dutwin describes as a "pre-eminent public opinion researcher," that finally got him hooked on a career in survey research.

Dr. Ben-Porath came to the fray by way of a career in journalism in his native Israel. A family move brought him to the U.S. and graduate studies at Annenberg, and an immediate post-graduation research job at the Annenberg Public Policy Center. Dr. Sherr began her career at the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University and then worked in market research before joining colleagues at SSRS.

All four alumni cite the pace of work and variety of projects as reasons they stay hooked on professional research. "We could be doing one long-term project, that may take months to complete, and at the same time we would be doing quick (one week or less) turnaround projects," said Herrmann. SSRS counts among its clients, Harvard University, The Kaiser Family Foundation, The Urban Institute, and ABC News, to name a few.

"We have used Melissa's group for about 170, or most of the surveys we have done," said John Benson, Managing Director of the Harvard Opinion Research Program at the Harvard University School of Public Health, which uses SSRS in most of its social science research. "They have come through for us for studies when we need high-quality, detailed, responses for medical journals, and when we need fast turnaround projects."

More information on SSRS is available via their website, www.ssrs.com. •••