

# WHAT WAS WRONG WITH THE CBS NEWS 800 NUMBER CALL-IN?

**Editor's Note:** Following President Bush's State of the Union address and the Democratic response on January 28, CBS News aired a program during which viewers were invited to call an 800 number and register their responses to a short series of questions. The results, in which 315,000 out of 24.5 million attempted calls were tallied, were compared on the air to a separate post-speech survey in which 1,241 adults originally interviewed January 14-19 were reinterviewed.

Many in the survey research community have been concerned for some time about call-ins—in the past typically

of the 900-number variety—being seen by the public as bonafide opinion surveys. Television plays a crucial role in modern politics as the medium through which most citizens receive information about public affairs and election campaigns. The controversy is all the more important because at least one well-informed observer believes that the January 28 version of the call-in may very well catch on as a network means of generating viewer participation.

In the following pages, *The Public Perspective* looks at issues raised by the CBS call-in. We open with a series of

excerpts from the program itself. The director of surveys at CBS News, Kathleen Frankovic (who conducted the reinterview survey which was done in conjunction with the call-in), discusses the rationale for CBS News' decision to use a call-in and the precautions taken to avoid anticipated problems. Warren Mitofsky, considered by many to be the founder of network polling during his years at CBS, assesses the implications of the call-in method. Finally, we present a critique by Albert H. Cantril, a trustee of the National Council on Public Polls, who has talked extensively about problems associated with 800- and 900-number call-ins.

## PROGRAM EXCERPTS

**RATHER:** Well, folks, we're trying one. We're going to try to do something new and different tonight with your help—and I underscore YOU. This is your chance to tell us what you think about what's happening to this country and what you're willing to do about it. We've got a series of questions for you and the means to get your answers—tens of thousands of them—right on to the air within seconds. We've never been able to do that before. Nobody else has ever tried it. And we'll let you know up to the minute what it is that you are telling us.

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Well, we're also going to find out what you think of the president's speech tonight. No one has ever attempted to poll a national representative sample of Americans this quickly before. With a built-in system of checks and balances, we're doing this sort of on two tracks tonight; one of which includes your call-ins to us.

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**CHUNG:** And, Dan, as this night goes on, I expect we'll hear from many people who lives have been touched by this recession in one way or another. Last month, we read a remarkable letter that appeared in the Los Angeles Times. It was written anonymously. We thought it might strike a chord with you, too. So with the Times' help, we found the woman who wrote it. She agreed to share her story with us. She asked only that her name be withheld.

**WOMAN** (Shown on TV reading her letter etc): After battling bill collec-

tors all day, I sat down one—one night after my kids were asleep and I worked until about 3 in the morning just summarizing what the year had been like. This was the year my children did not go to the circus or the museum or the movies or McDonald's. The year their only new clothes came from charity. The year my toddler cried from hunger all day because he was tired of the only food I could offer: oatmeal. The year I asked my church on four occasions to give meals to my children. This was the year I lost 25 pounds without even trying.

I was born and brought up in the middle class here in Southern California. In 1989, I went on long-term disability leave from my job as an in-house business writer. In 1990, my husband's business failed. For three years, we have lived below, way below the poverty line. We've been luckier than many people. It's taken us awhile to hit bottom. We had savings, credit possessions to sell, relatives and friends to borrow from. But here we are, an inch away from foreclosure; no insurance, browbeaten by collection agents.

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I thought I was well-informed, but I was not at all prepared for the vio-

lent demoralizing effect of poverty. I had no idea how it would feel to have no food in the house, no gas to drive to buy food, no money to buy gas and no prospect of money.

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**RATHER:** Right now, let's look at how the calls are coming in so far. In answer to our first question—yes, with this instant tallying, we can do that for you. The question, are you better off now than four years ago? In the left-hand column, you see the number of calls we've received. Twenty-nine percent of Americans say yes, they are better off than they were four years ago, 52 percent say they are worse off, and those who say the same riding along at 19 percent....

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**KURALT:** All right. Thank you, Miss Foster. What about this question of—of whether people are worried about their jobs. When we asked about that, as we are doing so tonight, a—a whopping 63 percent of Americans say indeed, they are worried about losing their jobs this year. We may all hope that those are unfounded fears because a 63 percent job loss in a single year would be the deepest of depressions, of course. Connie?

**CHUNG:** Thank you, Charles. Let's take another look at the question we'll be tracking throughout the evening. Are you better off now than you were four years ago? Once

[Continued after the Center Section.]

again, are you better off now than you were four years ago? Better off, 29 percent; worse off, 53 percent; the same, 18 percent. It's important to note here that this is quite dramatic. It's very different from just about a month ago. CBS News conducted a poll, and it showed dramatically different results. Worse off was about 30 percent. Dan, it's gone up to 53 percent. Perhaps the group that's calling us now—these across the country are—are quite upset and quite angry. This does not bode well for President Bush on the night of his State of the Union.

**RATHER:** Well, there's a ways to go and, of course, this is just one measure. I think we need to point out right now that to help guard against possible manipulation, we do have a system of checks and balances of sorts in place this evening. It lets us know how your calls from all over the nation compare with, as Connie pointed out, this scientifically selected cross-section of Americans chosen by our regular CBS News polling unit. And that's—ours is the oldest and most experienced network polling unit in broadcast news. And the Americans in the scientifically selected sample also are on the line with us tonight. They've been calling in. And we'll see how our CBS News poll compares with what you at home are telling us. Now on the question, are you better off than you were four years ago, the scientifically selected sample gives us the following

reading. It says better off, 24 percent; worse off 32 percent; about the same, 44 percent.

So, note that what those who are telephoning us tonight, calling in on the 800 number seem to be angrier and more concerned about where the economy is and where it may be headed than those in the scientifically selected sample that constitute our regular CBS News poll.

Now, when you really listen to people out there, it's clear—whether you're talking about a telephone poll or a scientifically selected sample—that health care remains at the top of the list of concerns people have during this recession....

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**RATHER:** Now for those who got through—and we recognize a lot of you've been trying to get through and couldn't make it—to our question about whether President Bush understands the problems of middle class—the calls coming in from all of those places. Do you think the President understands the problems of the middle class: 32 percent, yes, he does; 68 percent, no. Nobody's seen figures like that, I don't think, Connie, since the time of the Carter presidency.

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**CHUNG:** Dan, we have all the answers to the questions that we've been asking, so let's go through them now. Today, are you better off than you were four years ago? Those who say

they're better off in calling in to us, 29 percent; worse off, 54 percent; the same, 17 percent. That is a change from recent scientific polls.

**RATHER:** Are you worried you or someone in your immediate family will lose his job this year: yes, 64 percent; no, 36 percent.

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**CHUNG:** Which of these three do you blame most for US economic problems: the government in Washington, 64 percent; business mismanagement, 26 percent; Japan, 10 percent.

**RATHER:** Would you be willing to pay an additional \$100 a year in taxes if the money were to be used to pay for improving education in your community: yes, 74 percent—I think that's the highest percentage we've had for anything—no, 26 percent....

**CHUNG:** And finally—there is one more—what about the future for the next generation of Americans: will it be better, 21 percent; will it be worse, 57 percent; will it be about the same, 22 percent.

I think, Dan, as we look back here tonight, it's clear that—that the people are not very optimistic about the future. They're willing to pay more in terms of health care, in terms of education to get the programs that they want.

**RATHER:** That's true. We want to keep in mind that polls of all kinds have a short shelf life, so who knows how long it'll last.

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## THE CBS NEWS CALL-IN: "SLIPUPS IN THE BROADCAST" *Interview with Kathleen Frankovic*

**Public Perspective:** Some of the criticism of CBS's January 28 efforts which we have heard in the survey research community centers on the way Dan Rather, Connie Chung, and Charles Kuralt handled the results on air. What's your judgment about the on-air performance?

**Kathleen Frankovic:** I think that there were occasions when more was made of the call-in responses than should have been. The intent was always that they would be referred to as "the callers," and that the call-in results would not be generalized to the entire population. But this was handled with varying degrees of success.

**PP:** What you wanted, whenever the call-in tabulations were being referred to, was that they should be labeled simply "the callers," versus "the poll."

**KF:** That's right. And I think that for the most part that distinction was retained in the language that was used on air. We never wanted to say the "poll" in referring to the callers. There were slipups in the course of the live broadcast, where the conclusion was drawn that the call-ins represented change. In addition there were instances when the call-in results were characterized as "Americans think" or "the public says." Everybody agreed after the program was over that there

should have been more direct comparisons made between the two sources of information—the poll, and the call-ins. Our intent in doing the call-ins was to engage the viewer, not to draw conclusions about what Americans at large think.

**PP:** From your perspective, was the idea of having the mass call-in a good one or a bad one?

**KF:** Well, again, I think it's important to understand that the call-ins were seen at CBS News as a way of engaging an audience, in much the same way a call-in show, where viewers get on the air to ask a question, or a national environment or

driver test engages the audience. And, in this case, it was seen as a way of getting an audience to react to things that were going on in the course of the hour of television. We never thought of asking the people calling in off the street or from their homes to respond to politically touchy questions or to evaluate the President's State of the Union address. The call-in project certainly didn't start off as an attempt to gauge public reaction to the speech by having people call us. We need to think about this as an audience participation device, and we've had lots of audience participation devices in the past. Everybody involved in the broadcast knew that the callers were unrepresentative of the country: They were callers. As I've said, there were slipups in the broadcast.

**PP:** About 24.6 million calls were attempted to your 800 number, but just 315,000 or so got through and were tabulated. That is, just one in 78 got through. Is that something you see as a problem?

**KF:** Something went on here that intrigued me after the fact. No one envisioned so heavy a response. It was amazing. I don't know if it's a function of people having rapid dials on their telephone, or redial buttons, but certainly the level of participation which we got was totally unexpected. Now, relatively few of those attempts made it into the system.

What struck me afterward is that people would try so hard. It suggests that there's some relationship that at least some members of the public have with their television sets—which involves wanting to express themselves to their sets. This continued through the next day. For example, people sent me letters and called me saying, in effect: "You're the director of surveys. I want to tell you my answers to those questions. I couldn't get through last night." We don't know what kind of motivation to ascribe to this. That it occurred may be troubling. But it may be something worth investigating. Are we—that is, television—to some people in this country an agency to which they express their concerns?

**PP:** What about another possible hypothesis, that there are various individuals and

groups who see television as a very powerful agency, and hence that they made determined efforts to shape the call-in results?

**KF:** Are you referring essentially to organized efforts?

**PP:** Those ranging all the way from an activist of any persuasion acting on his or her own, all the way to systematic group efforts.

**KF:** That was a concern here prior to the broadcast, and it led us to do several things. First, we did not give out the 800 number until the broadcast. Second, we decided to have a representative measure of opinion on the same questions the call-ins were answering—the poll my office conducted. Then, too, we decided not to ask about reactions to the President's speech.

**PP:** Will this whole thing take off...this use of call-ins following major political events?

**KF:** I don't know. I certainly don't expect anything in the immediate future. But audience participation is something television organizations would like to encourage. When one engages a viewer, it may go beyond that one event and become a deeper bond.

**PP:** What if it should take off? Would you speculate for a moment? What if a competition develops among networks in the use of call-ins on political topics? Does this pose dangers?

**KF:** No. Call-ins don't show "what people really think." They show only "what people have called in to tell us."

**PP:** I know that you are clear and firm on this. But, in the press of on-air competition, might there not be frequent slippage—with call-ins more and more becoming "polls"?

**KF:** Such slippage comes with newness, with unfamiliarity. I think that if this ever does catch on, network personnel would be clearer as to the true nature of call-ins. Let me tack on something else here as a

survey research professional, something that I've found rather encouraging. After the January 28 broadcast, I received a call from someone at Call Interactive [the AT&T group that handled the calls], asking about the RIC (Research Industries Coalition) Initiative. What is it, he wanted to know. I read the disclaimer to the person at Call Interactive. "This represents the opinions only of those who have called in and not the general public...." His reaction was, "Well, that makes sense. That's what we will tell people who ask about our 800 number call-in service." I faxed some material to him. Here is a recognition among the people who do this for a living and market it for a living that may have some positive long-term impact.

**PP:** Let's turn now to the poll you conducted in conjunction with the call-in.

**KF:** At the very first discussion of the call-ins, the president of CBS News said that we couldn't do them unless we also have a real poll. We needed to have the other measure. Of course, we faced a terrible time problem doing the January 28 survey. We weren't going to be reporting on it the next day—but rather within 15 minutes or so from the end of the event, the President's speech. But despite the extreme demands of this time constraint, we didn't get the go-ahead on the poll until the Thursday before Christmas. Everything had to be put together in five weeks. It was a challenge. Could we do a quick reaction poll, that would be a representative sample—and do it in the few minutes immediately following the speech?

We talked to Call Interactive about a possible "call-out" from them to people who were part of our sample; but there just wasn't enough time to develop it. We decided, then, that an 800 number would be provided for the people in this sample—different, of course, from that used in the call-ins.

In very early January, in a regular CBS News poll, we asked some questions that had to do with telephone ownership. Who had touch tone service, who didn't? Did people have telephones in the same

room as their television sets? Would people be interested in participating in a post-speech poll? We found that those not having touch tone phones were as a group older, that they were more likely to live in rural areas. Education and income had much less of an effect. There was no racial difference. When we asked people whether or not they would participate if asked to, there was again some age difference—the older respondents being less likely to agree—but no political difference. We subsequently made the commitment to buy touch tone devices to send to the rotary participants, so that we could compensate for any bias in terms of rotary phones.

In our next regular poll (January 14-19), questions were included which were held for the State of the Union broadcast. This poll is the source of such findings as the extent of the public's anger over the state of the economy, that became part of the scripted segment of the January 28 broadcast. The January 14-19 poll also contained items in which respondents were expressly asked if they would participate in the night of the speech survey. Then, the weekend before the State of the Union speech, we made reminder calls to those who had agreed to participate. We also told them at that time the 800 number that they would dial on speech night and took them through what they should expect. We trained those whom we had supplied with touch tone devices on how to use them. A number of people who had said they would participate at this time changed their minds and said they wouldn't do it.

The night of the State of the Union message, our respondents called the 800 number. They were asked to enter their telephone number so that they could be matched with their prior demographic answers; they were also asked to enter one more identifying piece of information so

that we could make sure they really were members of our sample. We used the original weights for these individuals which compensated for original probabilities of selection and distributions by demographic characteristics, and then we put on top of that a non-response adjustment which was essentially a combination of several political variables—the latter because we thought there might be some relationship between participation and political preference.

Subsequently, we have called back half the people who told us they would participate, but didn't get through, to find out what happened to them. This review isn't finished.

It's clear that the implementation of touch tone devices for respondents with rotary service didn't work terribly well. What we were doing, really, was handing the least technologically sophisticated respondents, older people in particular, a piece of technology. The percentage of them who successfully negotiated the maze was smaller than the percentage of others in the sample.

**PP:** You started off with the 2800 plus respondents to your January 14-19 poll and wound up with 1241 of them participating in the January 28 survey. So, along the way, 57% "dropped out." Does that rate of attrition bother you?

**KF:** I think we compensated as well as we could have. Ideally we would have ended up with something closer to 1500 of the total initial sample. We would certainly lose a third no matter what. Even in debate reaction surveys, you're lucky if you get 75% of the original sample.

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Viewing the project overall, everybody involved learned something. Some

issues come out of it that are food for thought of all kinds at the network level, and at the survey research level. It seems to me that the major criticisms come from an assumption that much of the public can't distinguish between call-in results, which can't be generalized to the populace at large, and those from polls which can be so generalized. I'm confident that we can educate the public better on this distinction, even in the context of this audience participation device. I'm not saying that some people won't, even then, sometimes misinterpret things, because they obviously will. But one shouldn't automatically assume that people can't see call-in responses for what they really are.

**PP:** So, if one went on the air and said, in effect: "Now look folks, we don't have any idea who those calling in are, and we don't have any idea how much their views represent the country as a whole, but these are the answers of the callers who got through. Look at them as such and don't go beyond that," ordinary people can understand that.

**KF:** Yes. And that certainly is the purpose of the RIC disclaimer that's out there. It's in ordinary language. Let's not make assumptions about the public at large. There has been discussion about how you could take the self-selected people who call in, collect demographic information about them, and then weight them to represent the public. That's a terrible idea. At one point in this project, since we would know the region each call came from, someone from Call Interactive asked if we wanted to weight the callers so that their regional representation matches the country. I said no emphatically. I didn't want to do anything that implied the call-in results were "representative" of anything more than the calls which got through. No one here at CBS objected.

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*Kathleen Frankovic is director of surveys, CBS News*

# THE CBS NEWS CALL-IN: "FIRST AND FOREMOST... BAD INFORMATION"

## *Interview with Warren J. Mitofsky*

**PP:** Would you assess for us each piece of CBS's post-speech program of January 28: The on-air handling of the data; the decision to have the call-ins and how they were handled; and the poll conducted in conjunction with the call-ins.

**Warren Mitofsky:** If you evaluate the three reporters who were on the air—Dan Rather, Connie Chung, and Charles Kuralt—it was obvious that the training each of them had was quite different. Rather appeared to have been briefed quite carefully about not generalizing from the call-in portion. It seemed like this had been mentioned to Chung and she got it right some of the time, but not enough of the time. And it seemed that nobody had spoken to Kuralt about it. I even made a few inquiries as to why people didn't tell him how to handle discussion of the call-in results. The answer I got was that he was in Omaha. I replied that 25 million people knew how to call him, why couldn't somebody from CBS News. I think the fact that they didn't train all the correspondents on not generalizing from the call-ins was a serious mistake; I wish they had handled it much differently.

**PP:** Kathy Frankovic tells us that the president of CBS News stated months ago, right at the start of planning for the call-in program, that the network needed a regular poll in tandem with the call-in results, because the latter couldn't and shouldn't be generalized. So the matter had considerable salience. Yet after three months of that kind of salience, one reporter goes on without any briefing or discussion of how to handle the call-in results?

**WM:** Again, it seems obvious that no one spent the time with Kuralt. They knew they had to talk to Rather, and Chung must have gotten some by osmosis, because she was here in New York. It was just a failing. They should have followed through on this and they didn't.

**PP:** What else might have been done to reduce viewers' confusion as reporting jumped back and forth from actual poll results to call-in results?

**WM:** One thing they could have done is never percentagize the call-in responses. They could put the numbers up, show how they're running, but not percentagize them. This would convey a real difference from poll results. I don't think the names they gave the call-ins and poll were different enough to keep from confusing the viewer. If CBS wanted to show how many thousands of people called them, let them put the numbers up. Actual numbers, without percentages, will keep anyone from generalizing. Once you facilitate generalizing by turning the call-in results into percentages, people will do it by accident even when you tell them not to. CBS just didn't make enough of a distinction between call-ins and the poll.

**PP:** What about the whole idea of having this call-in. We understand the commercial side of it, but was it a bad idea from the standpoint of CBS News, and the standpoint of survey research?

**WM:** I have to wear two hats when I answer a question like that. If you talk about the call-in as an idea of survey research, it's a horrible idea and I wish they'd never do it. It's an embarrassment, and I'm really sorry to see them engage in that when they have such a fine poll available to them—as good as any I know of, academic or commercial. It doesn't serve any information purpose as a survey research vehicle and it sure as hell is distorting. But as far as television goes, it's interesting television. I can't imagine another format that they could think of where they could involve 25 million people. Actually they didn't involve 25 million people. I called about 300 times myself. They're confusing that with people, I'll bet.

**PP:** It would be interesting to know just what the orchestration and organization of multiple calls were.

**WM:** Yea, but who besides survey researchers did that?

**PP:** Interest groups, activists, partisans?

**WM:** Well, I guess the Bush people didn't dial as much as the Democrats.

**PP:** Does it bother you that call-ins are potentially an invitation to all kinds of groups to jump in and play.

**WM:** If the networks don't generalize, if they're really careful not to, I don't see who is going to gain politically. I don't think it matters. I think it's a non-issue.

I do have one other serious complaint about what CBS did. It involves the context in which they asked the questions. In any good poll, you try not to have context effects. This show was a model of what should be avoided when you ask questions. They had those short canned pieces on the travail of the public with the health care system, unemployment, and other issues that they were asking about in the call-in. They were leading people, and then asking them questions. This was certainly not a neutral atmosphere. That goes to invalidate the process in yet another way.

**PP:** Is this kind of thing likely to take off? Is there likely to be network competition to engage viewers in this fashion?

**WM:** Sure, the Today Show did it February 10.

**PP:** There was a call-in back in 1980, after one of the Reagan-Carter debates.

**WM:** Of course. ABC did it. ABC had this huge call-in on the debate. CBS and

NBC did surveys. The most famous instance, which I entirely approve of, was a 900 call-in by Saturday Night Live on whether or not Larry the Lobster should be cooked. I thought that was perfect.

**PP:** If it's done for humor, that's wonderful, and maybe if it's done on sports that's O.K., but what if it becomes a norm in political coverage?

**WM:** The implication first and foremost is bad information. Once you get past the fun and games idea, you get a lot of bad information. It's a trend that I think is going to continue. The network people love it. They love engaging this many people in an activity.

**PP:** What about the poll that accompanied the call-in? What do you think about putting the two side by side?

**WM:** I like the idea that CBS was responsible enough to put a scientific poll in there. I think it's to their credit, and I'm glad there are some vestiges of the legacy Frank Stanton left, that they would do a

thing like that. So I applaud them for it, and I hope that if they insist on doing a political call-in again, that they will also continue the scientific poll.

On the poll itself, there was one artificial element in it that makes it hard for me to accept it completely. You've asked a bunch of people, some of whom would not have viewed the speech at all, to view it. And then to call you. Now, that in itself is artificial even if you had no nonresponse. So that's the first problem. A second problem is this: When you start to get a nonresponse as big as this poll got, I don't know whether its nonresponse, or nonviewing of the event, O.K., I'm satisfied with it and maybe they shouldn't be weighting these respondents back to the initial sample. I don't think that CBS knows enough at the moment about what to do with the weighting.

**PP:** What about getting people a couple of weeks in advance of an event and telling them, in effect, you're a special person. You're part of this special jury.

Doesn't that transform people to some extent?

**WM:** It's obviously not the best circumstances for doing a poll, but it's a lot better, I would think, than having a reporter give his or her opinion of what the public's thinking. If you listen to news reports or read them in the newspapers, you get over and over again value judgments about how the public is being affected. I would rather have a biased sample.

**PP:** Back to the call-in. When you were director of surveys at CBS, were there instances when you were under pressure or asked about doing a call-in?

**WM:** It came up years ago. It was suggested to CBS News by the telephone company. The 900 people, not an 800 number call-in. The president of CBS News at the time sent the people to me, and I talked with them and told them I'd advise CBS against it. I never heard another word about it. It was something new, CBS had some interest, but that was as far as it went.

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*Warren Mitofsky, now executive director of VRS, was formerly director of the Election and Survey Unit, CBS News*

## THE CBS NEWS CALL-IN: A SETBACK FOR ALL PUBLIC POLLS

*By Albert H. Cantril*

The credibility of all public polls was set back when CBS News conducted its call-in "poll" after the State of the Union Address and the Democratic response January 28. The broadcast was especially hazardous to polling credibility because of the stature of CBS as a source of news.

First, on methodological grounds, the "poll" had all of the problems of self-selection and unrepresentativeness that attend to call-ins. Moreover, we don't even know that the calls that were counted reflected the views of those wishing to register an opinion. The 314,786 calls that were counted constituted less than

two percent of the 24.5 million who tried to call.

Second, in terms of the broadcast, on-air commentary continually blurred the distinction between the call-in and results from a simultaneous "scientific" poll. For example, after presenting call-in results on the question of whether people felt better or worse off than four years ago, Connie Chung noted "that's a change from recent scientific polls," offered no explanation, and left the clear implication that the call-in and the scientific poll were comparable.

Dan Rather added to the confusion by lumping together the call-in and scientific polls with misleading throw-away lines such as "polls of all kinds have a short shelf life," again suggesting comparability. Even the venerable Charles Kuralt confounded the distinction when toward the end of the broadcast he speculated about a "sea change" in attitudes. As he spoke, he stood in front of a large electronic map of the United States glowing with lighted dots. "Each dot represents 1,000 calls," we were told. The distribution of dots from coast-to-coast conveyed the impression of representativeness and scale.

No caveats were given about the call-in and why it was not scientific. Dan Rather referred to “checks and balances” that had been built in but gave no further explanation. Viewers were not even given the diverting disclaimer that usually precedes such call-ins: “This is not a scientific poll, but....”

Third, in terms of what was being “measured,” participants in the call-in were not responding just to the State of the Union. As the CBS News program unfolded, segments took viewers to pockets of despair across the country. In one segment, for example, a five-year old boy tugged at one’s heart with his poignant account of the stress visited on his family when his father was laid off. We have no idea how much these vignettes contributed to the pattern of calls.

In its own defense, CBS News calls our attention to the fact that its executives would not give the go-ahead for the call-in unless it was accompanied by a scientific poll. The speciousness of this rationale is that inclusion of the scientific poll in the broadcast did nothing to legitimize the call-in.

CBS News also acknowledges that more attention should have been given to the scientific poll and the differences between it and the call-in. But, for purposes of the CBS News argument, let’s grant the premise that a distinction between the two sets of numbers had been made clearly throughout the program. What news purpose would the call-in then have served?

Conceivably the show could have been built around the idea that people who were moved to call in had a different story to tell than the American public as a whole. However, given a cap on the number of calls that could be registered, there was no way to know whether the calls that were counted represented the views of those who made the effort to call.

Again, for purposes of the CBS argument, grant that the call-ins were somehow representative of those who wanted to register an opinion. The question remains, what news purpose would the call-in have served?

CBS News is apparently delighted with the participation the program stimulated. Executives were reportedly impressed by the magnitude of the public response. There is nothing wrong with audience participation, so long as it is not built at the expense of a news organization’s obligation to contribute to, not muddle, public understanding of the issues of the day. The problem with news organizations using the call-in to increase viewer involvement is that they are reaching out to their audience with content that is misleading.

Even with all possible caveats, the side-by-side display of poll and non-poll percentages does little to advance the public’s understanding of the national mood. We know that public confusion is rampant as to the distinction between call-ins and scientific polling.

Executives at CBS News are presumably aware of the unhappy outcome of the Literary Digest’s experience with audience participation in 1936. Would they now argue that the Literary Digest would have retained its credibility as a news source had its write-in poll been accompanied by a scientific poll?

That the State of the Union call-in was conducted by CBS is puzzling. CBS News has long been associated with the intelligent use of survey research. Attention to quality in research has been manifest from the front office on down. CBS News was in the forefront of developments in the methodology of exit polls, and its approach to sampling for telephone polls has been widely adopted. It was the first news organization to project an election; its polling partnership with

the New York Times was the first of a kind; and CBS was the first television network to adopt poll-reporting standards for its reporters.

Thus, it was somewhat disingenuous of Dan Rather, when introducing the call-in, to invoke this distinguished tradition of “taking the public pulse.”

CBS News can’t have it both ways. It cannot expect the viewing audience to take its scientific polls seriously if it grafts on to those polls activities that are antithetical to the very reasons polling is able to lend credibility to CBS as a news source. In the end, as is true of any news organization, what is more vital to CBS News than its credibility?

P.S. Little more than a week after the CBS broadcast, Today Show viewers were treated to a call-in on the question of “who shot JFK?” Again, researchers and viewers alike must have been bewildered as Bryant Gumbel explained that NBC was conducting “a totally random survey—it is totally unscientific.”

What is one to do? Turn to MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour for an informed discussion of the pernicious effects of call-ins? Sadly not, for last month it was MacNeil/Lehrer Productions that brought us the PBS three-part series, “America on Trial.” In a courtroom setting, advocates for contending agendas for the nation’s schools made their case. As the program concluded, viewers were told that “as jurors” the verdict on the question of the evening was theirs and were instructed to call one 800 number for “yes” and another for “no.”

What is the polling community to do? Is there a number it can call?

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*Albert Cantril, a trustee of the National Council on Public Polls, is the author of The Opinion Connection: Polling, Politics, and The Press*