

ASSURING QUALITY IN THE PUBLIC RELEASE OF SURVEY DATA

By Frank Newport

Concerns over responsibility in polling are usually accentuated during an election year such as this one, when trial heat polls proliferate and dominate polling news coverage. Problems with polls, as was evident this year with exit polling in New Hampshire and pre-election surveying in Britain, become more obvious when results are held accountable to the empirical test of actual voting behavior. More general concerns over the use and abuse of the marvelous tool of random probability sampling as a way of summarizing public opinion, however, have been with us since the 1930s—and are little more resolved now than they were then.

Polling, and the release of polling results back to the public, can be an extremely valuable part of democracy. The nature of our system is the rule of the people. It is difficult to successfully defend arguments that we are better off if we don't avail ourselves of the best means for understanding the views and will of its citizens than if we do.

But the polling process is subject to several conditions which continue to create the potential for significant deficiencies when research results are fed back to the public from whom they have been extracted:

- 1) The whole process of interpreting and summarizing the meaning of public opinion measures on key issues is almost always difficult, while often appearing simple. Perhaps as a result, there has been an abysmal track record—in the public media—in terms of the general quality of interpretation and analysis of the significance of poll data. Like much work in science and the humanities, the meaning and implications of discrete research findings are often derivable only when systematically

integrated into the context of existing (and often conflicting) data. The marginal results of single polls—even granting that details of methodology meet acceptable standards—have inherent interpretation problems. Yet it is this kind of isolated polling result which most often makes its way into the public domain. A great number of polls arrive at the doorstep of the average American essentially unedited—fed through the reporting system directly from those who sponsor the studies, with essentially no controls, reviews, or methods by which the reader/viewer can determine the *quality* of the resulting information.

It is the interpretation of survey research results in context—rather than the mere disclosure of sampling and sponsorship details—which provides the greatest challenge facing public opinion polling today.

- 2) There are, in many instances, strong vested interests in the reported outcome, interpretation, or “spin” of polling results which can hold sway over what trickles down to the public. These interests can be a factor not only for the organizations that sponsor the polls, but also for the firms which conduct the research.
- 3) In contrast to what prevails in other sectors of scientific research, barriers to entrance into the “profession” of public opinion polling by those who want to become players are minimal, even increasingly so.

The American public, then, is confronted with summaries of its supposed views subject to two types of misinformation. There is *random misinformation*—

caused by methodological errors, incorrect decisions, poor judgment, and most importantly, lack of interpretative context—the same type of problems which can confront any scientific data gathering without proper controls. Second, there is *systematic misinformation*, caused by more deliberate attempts to push specific agendas.

In both instances, the result is a misinformed public, misled as to their own collective opinions. In many instances, the implications of this misinformation are trivial. In others—particularly when significant public policy issues are involved—the implications can be substantial.

A Model for Achieving Quality

The procedures and norms which govern the scholarly and scientific approach to knowledge point to the way that the level of quality in the public release of polling data can be improved. Ideally, the scientific approach involves an initial assumption of doubt, an insistence on replication, a strong requirement of peer review, an extraordinary emphasis on placing new results in the context of existing knowledge, and a healthy environment of criticism, revision and continuing challenge.

Public opinion research is subject to these controls when it functions as part of the social scientific disciplines—primarily sociology and political science. If the release of public opinion data derived just from academic and scholarly studies, only the most hard-core of cynics would argue that the overall level of quality of these reported results would not, on average, go up.

The substantial part of public opinion information released to the public today,

however, operates outside of the traditional scholarly, scientific and academic realm. Nonetheless, the norms which govern the scientific approaches to knowledge can well be applied to the opinion measurement process by the commercial organizations which conduct polling and the media which report it.

Attempts at Setting Standards

There has been no shortage of suggestions over the past half century concerning ways by which survey researchers themselves can police and improve what they do. Albert H. Cantril's excellent chapter, "Polls and the Public Trust," in *The Opinion Connection: Polling, Politics and the Press* [CQ Books, 1991], reviews many of these efforts in detail. They have encompassed associations and councils, disclosure standards, certification, complaint review, and calls for "post hoc peer review". As far back as 1947, Stuart Dodd advanced the idea of a code of standards used to certify survey research organizations, a suggestion which apparently was never acted on. At various times in recent decades, sometimes at the initiative of disgruntled politicians who felt it had affected their own reelection chances, legislation has been introduced to control polling. George Gallup devoted a chapter in his *The Sophisticated Poll Watcher's Guide*¹ to the proposed Nedzi Truth in Polling Act, based on hearings held in 1972 on the release of polls dealing with federal elections or political issues. None of these legislative efforts have become law.

Best known are the codes promulgated by the AAPOR, NCPP and others. It's difficult to measure the real impact of these standards on the quality of public opinion data which reaches the public. Studies which have reviewed public reports of poll data suggest that a majority do disclose the more specifiable standards relating to sponsorship, timing, and sampling. The number of reports which include question wording is much lower. And, the codes do not, and realistically cannot, regulate what may be the most important part of the whole process—the analysis and interpretation of polling data. *Almost all of the specific components of*

both AAPOR and NCPP codes involve disclosure steps relating to execution and sponsorship. The codes, in other words, encourage the provision of more details and specificity about the origin of polling numbers, but cannot do much about ensuring that the meaning of those numbers is adequately interpreted for the public. In fact, the NCPP Code explicitly says that "It shall be our sole purpose to ensure that pertinent information is disclosed concerning methods that were used so that consumers of surveys may assess studies for themselves."

Dilemmas in Enforcing Standards

Another problem confronting those who suggest that research organizations accept the main responsibility for the quality of public release of survey data involves the financial relationships of polling firms with their clients. Quality requirements can often conflict with the objectives of those who are paying the bills. A research organizations' insistence on professional standards, adherence to scholarly principles, and allowing time to properly analyze research data can be hazardous to its financial health.

The Gallup Organization, for example, has an explicit "Policy Concerning Publicly Released Surveys" to which Gallup clients are expected to agree before the research begins. But this type of agreement can be anathema to many clients, who may persist in wanting to view the research organization only as a vendor which conducts research and provides data back to the client for it to interpret and present in any fashion it sees fit. This lessens the professional status of the research organization, and opens the door to abuses of the research process. Insistence by the researcher on a leading role in interpretation can (and does, in the case of Gallup) result in lost revenue. This is particularly true today when various advances in technology and the availability of surveying "capabilities" make it increasingly easy for new companies to hang out their shingles and become survey researchers overnight. Low-end, less capable, or potentially less professional firms can increasingly vie for polling business.

What can be done? Having disclosure standards is a necessary, but clearly not sufficient start. More effective ways to increase actual researcher responsibility for the full integrity of reported findings may result from increasing approximations to the scholarly method: more positive reinforcement, accolades and rewards to those researchers who exemplify high quality standards in public release of survey data, more competitive criticism, more refereed studies, more reviews. The professional organizations themselves may have to become more aggressive—taking on more of the risks and responsibilities of certifying and censoring research organizations.

Media

The news media essentially represent the American public and function as their eyes and ears. Often, however, these gatekeepers—reporters, producers and editors at media outlets—fall short of the ideal of providing high quality reporting and analysis of public opinion results.

The deficiencies go far beyond simple failure to report the details of the survey process. For example, a book released last year, *The Day America Told the Truth*, purported to use "state-of-the-art research techniques that go way beyond superficial five-minute polls" to "unearth and quantify the personal ethics, values and beliefs of our time," resulting in an analysis of "what people really believe about everything that really matters."² The book received considerable positive publicity, its authors appeared on network TV shows, and summaries of its contents appeared in papers. The book even enjoyed a brief stay on the New York Times Best Seller list. Yet many of its reported results were strangely and substantially at odds with the existing literature (the authors considered this a virtue), and the authors ignored many of the minimal standards of AAPOR or NCPP rules of disclosure. (There was no disclosure of the dates or locations of interviewing, sample selection procedures, the name of the organization conducting the research, the methods of interviewing, or the exact wording of many of the questions.) None of these

issues apparently made their way into the mainstream media's reporting on the book.

The news media can disclaim responsibility for such situations, claiming it's enough to report the results with correct attribution of the sponsoring organization and perhaps of the research organization itself. This process—like the NCPP code—leaves the ultimate poll consumer, the public, having to pass judgment on complex polling issues. What the public may do, of course, is to throw up its collective hands and ignore all polling results.

The real effort, then, should be to move more journalists to the point where they not only meet disclosure standards, but are more likely to take on the responsibility for adding the intelligence, time, and depth necessary to explore polling results fully.

To this end, the NCPP last year prepared and released an excellent pamphlet for journalists, "Twenty Questions a Journalist Should Ask About Poll Results," which nudges them (if they read it) in the right direction. Public Perspective itself, Public Opinion Quarterly, and other journals—to the extent that they find their way into the in-baskets of gatekeeping journalists—provide excellent examples of the type of reviews of survey data which are needed to truly understand their meaning. The American Enterprise "Public Opinion and Demographic Report" helps its readers put findings in the con-

text of historical and related data. Columns such as Richard Morin's "What Americans Think" in the Washington Post Weekly Magazine have included excellent round-ups and evaluations of polling information, going beyond the reporting of single-shot, ad hoc studies.

Here are other possibilities: (1) The media can attempt to emphasize public opinion results which meet some refereed, professional standard or scrutiny. (2) The media can use more experts who provide context and interpretation of poll results. (3) They can put more emphasis on summarizing the results of a variety of studies, rather than relying on any one individual study. (4) They can rely less on attribution, and do more of their own evaluation and critical review. (5) They can evaluate the client and organizations performing the research. And (6) the media can report more of the meaning and implications of survey research rather than just the numbers in isolation.

Concluding Thoughts

Our responsibility is to provide the American public with as high a level as possible of information about what they, the public, think about the course of public life. The assumption here is that truth emerges not only by strict adherence to experimental methods, but also by replication, contrast, accretion of knowledge, and context. The scientific and scholarly model approximates this process. The manner in which most polling results are

in fact reported to the American public doesn't conform to these requirements or objectives.

How can this situation be improved? There are two levels of responsibility: the survey research organizations and the media. The goal is to bring both closer to norms developed in the scholarly and scientific enterprise. I oppose official mandates or censorship of polling and its reporting. The tools for change will have to include persuasion, argument, voluntary agreement, and example. The track record of the efficacy of this process isn't encouraging. But the payoff from a better public understanding of public opinion can be immense. As George Gallup stated more than 50 years ago, "Measuring public opinion is only one aspect of the whole problem—the other important aspect lies in the use of critical principles of interpretation on the part of members of the public...Having chosen a way of life which consults the mass of the people in the formulation of policy, we must listen to what the people themselves have to say, for public opinion can only be of service to democracy if it can be heard."³

Endnotes

¹ George Gallup, *The Sophisticated Poll Watcher's Guide* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972).

² James Patterson and Peter Kim, *The Day America Told the Truth* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1991).

³ George Gallup and Saul Forbes Rae, *The Pulse of Democracy: The Public Opinion Poll and How It Works* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1940).

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