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# HOW THE NETWORKS REPORTED POLL DATA IN THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION OF 1988

A Thesis

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## ABSTRACT

The American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) developed eight standards which represent eight methodological concerns of survey data. These standards also reflect the standards of several other associations. This thesis looks at how often the three broadcast networks reported the AAPOR standards and examines other variables such as where the networks placed presidential poll stories in their newscasts, if the anchors or reporters offered an interpretation of results, and if the anchors or reporters made comparisons of one poll to another.

This thesis is a content analysis of all poll stories that aired on the networks from January 1, 1988 to November 6, 1988 (the day before election day).

The results showed that the networks did not report the standards a majority of the time. They also showed that the networks reported more standards for their own in-house polls than for outside poll data.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

The ideal political function of the press is to provide the public all the necessary information about candidates in a presidential election. Theodore Peterson, originator of the social responsibility theory of the press, stated:

> Freedom carries concomitant obligations; and the press, which enjoys a privileged position under our government, is obligated to be responsible to society for carrying out certain essential functions of mass communication in contemporary society. . . . Social responsibility theory accepts the role of the press in servicing the political system, in enlightening the public, in safeguarding the liberties of the individual; but it represents the opinion that the press has been deficient in performing those tasks.[1]

This study will examine the performance of network television news in reporting what has become an extremely important part of American politics and political news in recent years: the poll. Many Americans depend on the network news for election information. Public opinion polls are used as instruments by the networks to report the progress of the campaign. The public uses these polls as well to assess the candidates and to understand the

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[1]Theodore Peterson, "The Social Responsibility Theory of the Press," in Four Theories of the Press by Fred S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson, and Wilbur Schramm (University of Illinois Press, Urbana, IL, 1956), p. 74.

election. It is necessary to examine how well the networks are informing the public.

Many professional associations have set up standards for poll data disclosure. These standards were created so that the news services and broadcast stations would receive a certain amount of the minimal information disclosed to them by the polling organizations. In addition, these standards also apply to the newspapers and broadcast stations in how they report poll results to the public.

The National Council on Public Polls (NCPP) was established in 1969 to (1) work for greater understanding about polls and polling on the part of the print and broadcast media, and through them, the general public; and, (2) to encourage higher standards in the conduct and interpretation of public opinion polls.[2] Their Principles of Disclosure include reporting: (1) sponsorship of the survey, (2) dates of interviewing, (3) method of obtaining the interviews (in-person, telephone or mail), (4) population that was sampled, (5) size of the sample, (6) size and description of sub-sample, if the survey report relies primarily on less than the total sample, (7) complete wording of questions upon which the release is based, and (8) the percentages upon which conclusions are based.[3] All members of the NCPP accept the Principles of Disclosure. The NCPP goes on to specify that the principles specify that survey organizations reporting results will endeavor to have print and broadcast media

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[2] National Council on Public Polls, Association brochure, p. 1.

[3] Ibid., p. 2.

include the information contained in the eight standards in their news stories and make a report containing these items available to the public upon request.[4]

The National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) also recommended standards for broadcasters to follow in reporting poll results. A 1984 research memo refers broadcasters to the Newsroom Guide to Polls and Surveys. The memo reprinted the standards put forth by the American Newspaper Publisher's Association (ANPA): (1) Who sponsors (pays for) the poll and who conducts it?, (2) What are the actual questions asked, including the response choices offered the persons answering? (The ANPS strongly urges that the actual wording of the key questions be included in the news story.), (3) What is the population (or universe) which is sampled?, (4) Is a probability (random) sample used? (If not, do not generalize to a larger group of people.), (5) What is the size of the total sample? Of subsamples or specific groups (such as registered voters) analyzed in the poll results?, (6) (If a probability sample is drawn) What is the estimated sampling error for the total sample? For any subsamples or specific groups?, (7) What is the completion rate (response rate)? How many persons are interviewed from the total sample?, (8) What results (if any) are based only on part of the total sample?, (9) Are any weighting technique used to make the sample more representative of the population? (Note: This is a fairly common practice among survey researchers and does not imply anything "wrong" with the data.), (10) Is there

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[4]Ibid., p. 2.

any data available on population characteristics (such as percentages of blacks, males, females, registered Democrats, etc.)? Was such a comparison done?, (11) How are interviews done? (Face -to-face in the respondent's home, by telephone from a central location, by mail, etc.), (12) When are the interviews done? What is happening at the time of the interviewing which might influence people's answers?, (13) Could you as a journalist answer the questions in the survey? Are the questions clear and unambiguous?, (14) What do other polls on the same subject say?, (15) What is the purpose of the survey or poll? Who is going to use the results for what purpose?, (16) What else is found? Is the poll sponsor releasing data selectively, avoiding disclosure of less flattering results from other questions?[5] The memo states that answers to these questions should be contained in the actual on-air news story, to the extent possible.[6]

The Council of American Survey Research Organizations (CASRO), organized in 1975, is the national trade association of commercial survey research firms in the United States.[7] Its membership includes approximately 85 percent of the total of commercial survey research done in the United States. CASRO's Code of Standards For Survey Research are followed by every member organization. In this code, Part 3: Responsibilities in Reporting

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[5]Richard V. Ducey, "Public Opinion as a Newsroom Resource," National Association of Broadcasters Research Memo, Washington, D.C., 1984, p. 3.

[6]Ibid.

[7]The Council of American Survey Research Organizations Brochure, p. 1.

to Clients and the Public specifies CASRO's minimum standards for any general public release of survey findings. These standards include: (1) the sponsorship of the study, (2) a description of the purpose, (3) the sample description and size, (4) the dates of fieldwork, (5) the names of the research agency conducting the study, (6) the exact wording of the questions, and (7) any other information that an ordinary person would need to make a reasonable assessment of the reported findings.[8]

The final organization that will be examined is the American Association of Public Opinion Research (AAPOR). Its standards will be used in this thesis as standards of the quality of reporting poll results because AAPOR standards have been used in many academic studies and AAPOR's standards are similar to the standards of many organizations. From its founding in 1947, AAPOR strove to create standards for disclosure of results "so that their findings could be objectively evaluated."[9]

It took AAPOR twenty-two years to finally come up with a code of standards, but in 1969 AAPOR's Public Relations Committee distributed the standards to AAPOR members, selected editors of major newspapers, magazines and TV stations, U.S. Senators and state governors.[10] The AAPOR Standards for Disclosure include: (1) sample size, (2) sponsor, (3)

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[8]The Council of American Survey Research Organizations Code of Standards for Survey Research, p. 9.

[9]Stanley Hollander, Unpublished chapter of Survey Standards, Chapter One: The Central Issue: Standards as Authority," 1990, p. 6.

[10] Ibid., p. 16.

exact wording, (4) sampling error, (5) definition of population, (6) method of interviewing, (7) timing, and (8) response rate or partial results.

It is now appropriate to define each of the AAPOR standards and to discuss why each is important to report in a poll story. Sample size is the number of people in the sample selected for the survey. Sample size is important information to include because the larger the sample, the better the chance that the opinions of people in the sample really does reflect what the general public thinks.

Many people in the sample may not choose to respond to the survey. For example, if a sample contains 1,000 people, and only 750 people end up completing the survey, then the results only reflect 75 percent of the opinions of the original sample. This is an example of a partial response, and it standard is important to include in a poll report.

Sampling error or margin of error is a plus or minus percentage that allows for error in the selection of the sample. For example, if a poll says that Bush has 65 percent popularity among the sample, and Dukakis has 63 percent popularity, and the sampling error is plus or minus 3 percent then the percentage for Bush can be anywhere between 68 and 62 percent, whereas the percentage for Dukakis can be from 66 percent to 60 percent. In this example, the results can be a dead heat. This percentage is determined by the size of the sample. For instance, the larger the sample size, the lower the margin of error. It is crucial for poll stories to include sampling error so the

public can determine exactly how close the candidates are to one another in the poll.

The exact wording of a poll question refers to wording the question in the poll report exactly the same as it is worded when the people participate in the original survey. Reporting of this standard is crucial because any variance of wording or paraphrasing can change the original meaning of the question. For example, if a question reads, "Who do you think is the worst candidate for the job?" and the result is that 80 percent of the sample responded that Dukakis was the worst candidate for the job versus the 20 percent of the sample that responded that Bush was the worst. If in a poll report, a reporter says, "An overwhelming majority of the people thought that Bush was the best candidate for the job" this would be misleading. That example is exaggerated but even when the wording is slightly changed, the original meaning may be changed.

The time that the interview was conducted means that the media should report when the actual survey interviews were conducted. This does not mean the time when the poll results were published or released. This should be reported so that people can judge the timeliness of the poll because events in a campaign do have an impact on an ever-changing public opinion.

The description of the population means a description of the places that the people in the sample are from and any other demographic information available. For example, a national survey of registered voters from all 50 states is quite different than a survey of Iowa voters. This information has an

impact on how public the public opinion reflected in the poll result is. This is also information that people need to know in order to judge how much importance to give to that poll result.

The method of interview means the way in which the survey is conducted. A survey can be conducted over the phone, in person, or through the mail. Most of the media polls are conducted by phone with the exception of exit polls which are conducted in person. Mail polls are not used because it takes too much time to receive the results and the poll would not be timely then. This standard is important to include because it can imply the state of mind of the participants when they answer the survey questions, i.e., it can be in the comfort of their own home or it can be on the street when they are rushing to get to work.

Finally, the conductor of the poll is the person or people who actually design the survey, ask the participants the questions, and tabulate the results. The sponsor of the poll is the person or people who paid for the poll to be conducted. Usually, the conductor and sponsor are one in the same. If they are not, however, both should be identified in a poll report. This is important because the public could view a poll conducted by Gallup and sponsored by the National Democratic Committee differently than a Gallup poll sponsored by Gallup. Even if the conductor and sponsor are the same, the organization responsible should be identified in a poll story. A poll conducted by the Bush camp is bound to be very different than a poll conducted by the Dukakis camp.

# CHAPTER 2

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Larry Sabato, political consultant, said of polls:

> I'm a great poll disbeliever. I don't put much stock in them, mainly because I've done a number of them myself and know how inaccurate they are and how easy it is to tilt them in one direction or another, even when you don't intend to do so.[11]

If the networks do not report enough information in their poll reports, then there are bound to be inaccuracies in how the public interpret the data.

There are several studies that examine how polls have been used in presidential elections. Tom W. Smith found that polls were used by newspapers as early as 1824. There is evidence that a newspaper in North Carolina, the Star and North Carolina Gazette conducted at least one of the preelection polls in the presidential election of 1824. These polls emerged because the people needed a tool to measure how the election was progressing. This was because the election of 1824 was the first one where all the candidates ran in the same party, the Democratic-Republicans. The congressional caucus system had collapsed during that election. The election of 1824 also was the first to be decided largely by popular vote. These factors

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[11] Larry Sabato, Covering the Candidates (American Press Institute, Reston, Virginia, 1987), pp. 54-55.

contributed to the citizens' desires to voice their opinions. Many polls were conducted at public meetings and meetings of the militia. Of the first election polls Smith said:

> From a modern technical standpoint, the straw polls of 1824 were seriously flawed and unscientific. Samples were haphazard, the match between the sample respondents and the target universe was imperfect, data collection was often intentionally or unintentionally biased, and the analysis was frequently simplistic.[12]

This next section of the review will concentrate on the content of media poll reports. In 1982, Miller and Hurd did a study titled, "Conformity to AAPOR Standards in Newspaper Reporting of Public Opinion Polls." This study examined 116 poll stories published between the years 1972 and 1979 in three newspapers, The Chicago Tribune, The Los Angeles Times, and The Atlanta Constitution. Miller and Hurd looked at these newspapers' conformity of the eight minimal reporting standards put forth in 1969 by AAPOR. Miller and Hurd used these AAPOR standards as a measure of how well the three newspapers reported the poll results.

A content analysis was conducted for a sample of stories published over the years studied. In these stories, the researchers found that the standards for reporting sample size and sponsorship were followed in 89 percent and 80 percent, respectively, of the election poll stories sampled. Wording of the poll

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[12] Tom W. Smith, "The First Straw," Public Opinion Quarterly, Vol. 54, 1990, p. 29.

question was reported in 71 percent of the election poll stories with sampling error in 31 percent, population in 91 percent, method of interview in 62 percent, and timing in 76 percent.[13] They concluded, "Newspaper editors obviously do not see the methodological information required for conformity to the AAPOR standards as automatically being worthy of the necessary and highly valued news space."[14]

Miller and Hurd's research led to a series of studies that examined how the mass media conform to AAPOR standards and other similar standards. Ted J. Smith and Derek O. Verrall conducted a study called, "A Critical Analysis of Australian Television Coverage of Election Opinion Polls." This study looked at Australian Press Council standards, which are very similar to AAPOR standards. The content analysis examined the television poll reports in the 1980 national election in Australia. Four television stations were looked at in Melbourne. Smith and Verrall found that in only 16 percent of the poll stories included in the sample included quantified data.[15] They found that out of 70 news items that reported poll results: the sponsor was identified in 2 percent, population in 3 percent, and timing in 15 percent. The categories of partial results, question wording, sample size, and interview method were

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[13] Mark M. Miller and Robert E. Hurd, "Conformity to AAPOR Standards," Public Opinion Quarterly, Vol. 46, 1982, p. 246.

[14] Ibid., p. 248.

[15] Ted J. Smith and Derek O. Verrall, "A Critical Analysis of Australian Television" (Unpublished paper presented to the International Communication Association, 1984), p. 13.

reported in none of the stories.[16] They also found that a great deal of factual and inferential errors had been made in the reports. They concluded that the complex nature of public opinion research and the temporal and spatial restraints of television news are incompatible and that television might not be adequate as a primary source of public opinion poll results.

Smith, in another paper, suggested modification of the standards for reporting poll results. Of existing guidelines for the television networks he stated:

> In the United States, spokesmen for all three commercial networks confirm the existence and use of similar guidelines. For example, CBS required brief stories (one or two sentences) to include pollster, timing of interviewing, and sponsor (but only if the sponsor is a special interest group); longer stories should also include a definition of the population and an estimate of sampling error.[17]

Smith stated that the reporting of sponsor, sample size, sampling error, and method of interviewing can be omitted from reports of poll results without making the stories inaccurate. The standards that he said are essential to all poll results are exact wording of the survey question, definition of population, identification of partial results, and timing of interviewing. The most important

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[16] Ibid., Table 3.

[17] Ted J. Smith, "Standards for Reporting Public Opinion Research" (Unpublished paper presented to the American Association for Public Opinion Research-AAPOR, 1984), p. 13.

standard, according to Smith, is exact wording of a question because a journalist may change the meaning of a question when paraphrasing.

A recent study was conducted by Sanders, Rollberg, and Buffalo called, "Down to the Wire: How Six Newspapers Reported Public Opinion Polls During the 1988 Presidential Campaign." This study was a content analysis of six newspapers: USA Today, The Arkansas Gazette, The Atlanta Constitution, Chicago Tribune, Los Angeles Times, and The Washington Post. The researchers, looking for conformity to the AAPOR guidelines, studied poll stories appearing in these papers during the last 65 days of the election. They pointed out that the Newspaper Research Council in 1989 adopted a Code of Professional Ethics and Practice that includes minimal disclosure standards similar to those of the AAPOR.[18] They found that the total conformity percentages for all six newspapers to AAPOR standards were as follows: sample size in 57 percent; sponsor in 81 percent; wording in 4 percent; sampling error in 10 percent; population in 54.5 percent; method of interviewing in 29 percent; timing in 45 percent; and partial response in 6 percent.[19] When the data was broken down into the categories: election polls and non-election polls, the percentages were almost identical in each category during the studied time period. They basically concluded that the newspapers were doing a poor job in properly reporting poll data.

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[18] Luther W. "Sonny" Sanders, Jeanne Norton Rollberg, and M. D. Buffalo, "Down to the Wire," Newspaper Research Journal, Vol. 11, No. 4, Fall 1990, p. 81.

[19] Ibid., p. 88.

Another poll content study, "Polls in the Media: Content, Credibility, and Consequences," looked at the formator newspapers and newscasts regarding the treatment of poll stories. Paletz, et al., compared poll stories aired on television news poll stories to poll stories published in a national newspaper during the three nonelection years of 1973, 1975, and 1977. The sample included every poll story from the CBS and NBC networks and from the New York Times. They hypothesized: (1) there would be more polls in the Times than on television, (2) a wider range of topics would be covered in polls published in the Times than on television, (3) polls were more timely and more often tied to newspegs on television than in the Times, (4) polls on television were treated more dramatically than in the Times, and (5) there would be more frequent and detailed explanations of polls' technical complexities and defects in the Times than on television.[20] They found that NBC offered more than twice as many poll stories as CBS and that poll stories were placed in prominent positions in both newspapers and newscasts and were given a lot of time and space:

> Half of the poll stories on television appeared during the first 10 minutes. And 43 percent of the television stories ran longer than 30 seconds. The Times initiated 11 percent of its poll items on the front page . . . and 42 percent were longer than 100 lines.[21]

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[20] David L. Paletz, Jonathan Y. Short, Helen Baker, Barbara Cookman Campbell, Richard J. Cooper, and Rockelle M. Oeslander, "Polls in the Media: Content, Credibility, and Consequences," Public Opinion Quarterly, Vol. 44, 1980, p. 497.

[21] Ibid., p. 498

They divided the poll stories into 15 subject areas and the presidential election polls made up 10 percent of television poll stories and 8 percent of the poll stories in the Times. They found that 70 percent of the television polls were tied to newspegs while 36 percent of the Times stories were tied to newspegs. They stated, "Television journalists even deliberately forced connections. In reporting results from the CBS/New York Times poll, the anchorman would introduce the reporter who would link an item from the poll to the previous story, then continue with unrelated data from the poll."[22] There was evidence that supported all of their hypotheses except the last one, that polls are treated more dramatically on television. The conductors of the polls were identified in 97 percent of the television stories and in 90 percent of the newspaper stories. Sample size was reported more regularly in the newspaper than on the networks by almost three times. Exact wording of the question was included in only 5 percent of the television stories and in 30 percent of the newspaper stories.

They looked at four ways journalists can deal with the interpretation of poll results. Journalists can: (1) provide the raw data and leave it at that, (2) use pollsters' interpretations, (3) integrate poll data into news stories, usually to support or amplify a reporter's main theme, or (4) expound on and expand the data before them.[23] The study closed with the researchers' comments about polls:

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[22] Ibid., p. 502.

[23] Ibid., pp. 507-508.

> They are treated seriously, as if their data were reliable and important. Their defects are discounted or ignored. They are often used in support of news stories with clear themes. They are accompanied by graphics 62 percent of the time they appear on CBS and NBC evening news. These graphics can be quite compelling. . . .[24]

They concluded by stating:

> . . . the flawed public opinion polls presently purveyed by the media are inappropriate guides for public policy. . . . It has been asserted that the mass media do no tell Americans what to think, they tell them what to think about. Now, the pollsters and the mass media influence politics and public policy by purporting to tell Americans and their leaders what Americans are thinking about and thinking.[25]

Broh conducted a study which looked at the content of poll reports and how they were used by reporters in the "horse race" metaphor. The study, "Horse-Race Journalism; Reporting the Polls in the 1976 Presidential Election" listed reasons why this metaphor can be good and bad for the public. Broh stated that the horse race metaphor can be good because it generates interest in the voters and makes an exciting context in which to report the election results. The bad part is that these horse race elements may exclude more substantive issues. He did a content analysis of 65 articles in the New York Times, 57 network television news stories about polls, and 8 stories from Time and Newsweek between Labor Day and Election Day 1976. Most of the

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[24] Ibid., p. 508.

[25] Ibid., p. 511.

stories dealt with the "who's ahead" theme. The percentages of the 57 television poll stories are of particular interest to this study. In 16 percent of the television stories about polls, reporters used the results to forecast; 25 percent reported figures of presidential trial-heats; 56 percent included subcategories of the population; 14 percent focused on shifts in polls; 14 percent reported on spectacles of the campaign (debates, gaffes); 2 percent reported on distortion of poll results; and 3 percent of the stories ignored the results (stressing the importance of one poll result over another or not reporting other polls that show different results).[26]

Atwater looked at news format as a way of studying the similarities among networks. His work serves as a good starting point for looking at the second part of this study, which concentrates on the poll news story as part of the news format. In his study Atwater stated:

> The objective was to compare the application of news format among the three commercial networks during evening news coverage of the event. The extent of similarity in news formats might suggest a consonance in the news values and routines of newsgathering and news presentation.[27]

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[26] C. Anthony Broh, "Horse-Race Journalism," Public Opinion Quarterly, Vol. 44, 1980, p. 517, Table 1.

[27] Tony Atwater, "News Format in Network Evening News," Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media, Vol. 33, No. 3, Summer 1989, p. 293.

The point is that news format is important to study and network consonance is important to monitor as well. Past studies suggest that this network consonance exists in the practice of reporting poll results.

Several studies have looked at the placement, amount of coverage, and frequency of poll stories in both newspapers and television. These are major format concerns. Stovall and Solomon in a content analysis of 50 newspapers' campaign coverage, studied poll stories. They pointed out the possible problems of news organizations commissioning polls. They stated, "Critics point out that news organizations are laying themselves open to the charge of creating news, overplaying their own poll results while underplaying others, and unduly intruding into the political process."[28] Stovall and Solomon found that polls made up 14.7 percent of all the campaign coverage in the newspapers. They divided the poll stories into content categories. These included horse race polls (subdivided into general public opinion and electoral vote emphasis) and other (subdivided into several categories like issues, debates, perceptions of candidates, etc.) Horse race polls were most frequent. The authors concluded that poll stories do not dominate coverage and do not receive better placement and headline treatment than other stories.

Broh in "Presidential Preference Polls and Network News" performed a content analysis of 131 poll stories from the television news from a seven-month period in 1980. He found that the networks used predictions from poll

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[28] James Glen Stovall and Jacqueline H. Solomon, "The Poll as a News Event," Public Opinion Quarterly, Vol. 48, 1984, p. 616.

results 19 times in 131 stories. Broh stated that the networks used polls to eliminate candidates with little chance of winning a primary. Polls are also used by reporters to make comparisons among poll results and to measure the candidates' popularity over time. Only 5 of the 131 stories reported results from four or more questions. Reporters use poll data to decide a candidate's success or defeat in specific events, like debates. In 12 percent of the stories, reporters questioned the validity of poll results.

Another area discussed in the Broh study was the history of the in-house polling operations of the media. About this he stated:

> After a one-year experiment with an in-house poll operation in 1969-70, CBS joined forces with the New York Times to conduct public opinion polls. NBC and the Associated Press began their cooperative venture into polling at about the same time. For the 1976 election, both ABC and the Public Broadcasting Service commissioned commercial polling houses to conduct their opinion surveys, but both networks insisted on involvement in the planning and analysis of the data. Shortly after the 1980 election, ABC announced the establishment of its in-house operation to be cosponsored by the Washington Post. While these polling operations at the networks did not develop solely because the presidential preference primaries gained prominence in the nominating process, they clearly provided journalists with a key tool for analyzing the process.[29]

Broh, in another study of polls on the networks in the election of 1980, did a content analysis of the poll stories from the Vanderbilt Television News Index over the three election years of 1972, 1976, and 1980. He found the

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[29] C. Anthony Broh, "Presidential Preference Polls," in Television Coverage of the 1980 Presidential Campaign, ed. by William C. Adams (ABLEX Publishing Corporation, New Jersey, 1983), pp. 30-31.

reforms which resulted from the McGovern-Frazier commission in 1968 to be partially responsible for the increase in the number of poll stories used by the networks. This was because the reforms encouraged more state primaries. Television used polls as the main way to report these primaries. ABC had the smallest increase in poll stories between the elections of 1972-1980. CBS had the largest increase. In all three years, the number of poll stories were similar among the three networks. Also, poll stories have been placed increasingly in the lead spot on the newscasts. Broh concluded that the 1982 Hunt Commission, which adopted rules that shortened the primary/caucus season, will decrease the role that mass media has in interpreting the outcomes of primaries.

Keenan continued Broh's research for the election of 1984. Keenan looked only at the weekday newscasts because Vanderbilt only started indexing the weekend evening news in 1978. Keenan found that the total number of newscasts decreased in 1984 from 1980 and each network aired fewer poll stories than it did in 1980. More poll stories, however, appeared in the lead spot on the newscast as the percentage of poll stories in the lead increased from 1980 and the previous two elections. He attributed the lower number of poll stories to the changes resulting from the recommendations of the Hunt Commission. As a result to these recommendations, there were two less primaries in 1984 (29) than in 1980 (31). He also suggested that the decreased number of poll stories might be due to "some redefinition by

network gatekeepers as to the proper forum of reporting poll data."[30] Keenan also stated, "The fact that more than half the poll stories in 1984 were either the first or second stories aired in a newscast indicates their importance and suggests that they are considered a major method of reporting on presidential campaigns."[31]

These studies have shown that the reporting of public opinion poll data, especially presidential poll data, is an important concern to many researchers. The studies have also shown that the mass media do not report the methodological information contained in standards for minimal disclosure much of the time. This study will continue on these traditions of research. The 1988 presidential election was truly a media election and the networks' use of presidential polls is essential to study for that election year.

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[30] Kevin Keenan, "Polls in Network Newscasts," Journalism Quarterly, Vol. 63, No. 3, 1986, p. 617.

[31] Ibid., p. 618.

# CHAPTER 3

## METHODS AND PROCEDURES

### Statement of the Problem

Network newscasts have utilized the reporting of public opinion polls as a tool in presidential campaigns. Polling is part of a trend toward direct representation. People want to know what "the public" thinks. Pollsters can skew the results of a poll with various techniques such as the order of questions on a survey. Networks can skew the results in the way they report the data such as omitting crucial information. Along the way, the meaning of the results of the original survey can change. Because of these factors, the public needs to be protected against misleading poll data reports. Also, people who can understand the information contained in the AAPOR standards can judge the results as to how significant they are. People who do not understand the methodological information still need to be safeguarded against skewed poll reports. It is the networks' responsibility to try to educate those who do not understand.

These election polls are influential on the public as Atkin found in his study, "The Impact of Political Poll Reports on Candidate and Issue Preferences." He stated that polls create a relative majority that is favorable to

one candidate or issue position.[32] His hypothesis was that knowledge of a relative majority would cause a favorable change in a person's of a candidate. His experiment showed that this knowledge of a reference public may be an important factor in the decision-making process of some voters.[33] The relative majority can cause some people to conform to be in the mainstream.

Over the years, the television networks have been giving more importance to their reporting of election poll results. This is evident as every year more of these stories appear as the first or second story on evening newscasts. As a headline on the front page of a newspaper signifies relative importance, so does the lead story on a newscast. Therefore, the networks give importance to the stories that air first on a newscast and the public is led to believe that the lead story is more important than the stories following it.

This thesis will examine how ABC, CBS, and NBC reported poll results during the presidential election of 1988. The results will be divided into two parts. First, the study will examine the quality of the networks' reporting of poll results according to standards put forth by the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR). Second, the study will examine how the networks incorporate the poll stories into the format of the evening newscast and if there are any similarities or differences among the three networks in the formats.

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[32] Charles K. Atkin, "The Impact of Political Poll Reports on Candidate and Issue Preferences," Journalism Quarterly, Vol. 46, No. 3, Autumn, 1969, p. 516.

[33] Ibid., p. 519.

Researchers can use the results of this study to examine a trend in the reporting of polls by the media over past years.

## Research Questions

For the first part of the study the research questions are as follows: (1) How do the three television networks conform to the eight standards put forth by the AAPOR? (2) Are the three networks similar in their conformity percentages to AAPOR standards? (3) Do the networks have a higher conformity percentage in their own in-house polls versus outside polls? (4) Are issue or horse race polls aired more often? (5) Do the reporters use the polls as part of other coverage to support a theme? (6) Do the reporters offer any interpretation on the meaning or implications of the poll results? (7) Are the poll results reported visually, orally, or both?

The research questions that follow are for the second part of the study: (8) What is the modal length (indicating most widely used length) of a poll story appearing on the evening news? (9) Where are poll stories placed in the newscast? (10) Do the networks place poll stories similarly in their newscasts? (11) What is the number of poll stories each network aired? (12) Are the three networks similar in the number of poll stories aired?

## Methodology

This study used content analyzed poll stories on network newscasts. Data consisted of the entire population of poll stories that aired on the three

networks ABC, CBS, and NBC from January 1, 1988, through November 6, 1988, from a seven-day week. The data were obtained from the Television News Index Vanderbilt University 1988. All stories in the time period in the index under "Presidential Election-Polls" were included. There were 185 stories included under that category. The actual videotapes of the newscasts of ABC, CBS, and NBC from the Vanderbilt University Television News Archive in Nashville, Tennessee. These were then viewed and coded.

A coding sheet was utilized for each news item under the index heading of: Presidential Election-Polls in the archive index. The items coded examined each of the variables in the research questions. The list of variables is:

1) Date of newscast
2) Network story aired on
3) Length of story in minutes and seconds
4) Position of story in newscast
5) Topic of poll question
6) Reporting of sample size
7) Reporting of sponsor of poll
8) Sponsor of poll
9) Reporting of exact wording of question
10) Format presentation of story (oral, visual, or both)
11) Reporting of sampling error
12) Reporting of definition of population sampled
13) Reporting of method of interviewing

14) Reporting of time survey conducted

15) Reporting of partial results or response rate

16) Use of report to lead in to or support theme of another story (newspeg)

17) Reporter interpretation (reporter's or pollster's interpretation)

18) Comparison of the three networks on all other variables

The coding sheet was put to a pretest for reliability check and changes were made accordingly (see Appendix A). A code book lists instructions for code sheet and lists possible answers to complex questions (see Appendix B). The category "general description" exists on the code sheet when referring to inclusion of the standards because even if a story did not include an exact fact, it did include a vague description of the standard. For the analysis of the data, the "general description" category should be considered a "no".

The data was run on SPSSX and the results were tabulated and crosstabulated in percentages.

The overall intercoder reliability was 81 percent. The reliability of individual questions ranged from 100 percent to less than 8 percent (see Table 1).

The reliability check was done as a second coder coded 26 total stories that the first coder already coded. The code sheets were compared and tallies were drawn after each question indicating an agreement or disagreement. Percentages were calculated based on the number of code sheets completed for each item (the second coder skipped over some of the data) and the number of disagreements.

Table 1

Intercoder Reliability

| Question on code sheet | Agreement % | #of disagreements/# of sheets |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Date of poll story | 100 | 0/26 |
| 2. Network | 100 | 0/26 |
| 3. Length of time | 52 | 11/23 |
| 4. Position in newscast | 83 | 4/24 |
| 5. More than 1 question | 73 | 7/26 |
| 5a. How many questions | 56 | 11/25 |
| 5b. From the same poll | 72 | 7/25 |
| 5c. What other source | 84 | 4/25 |
| 6. Topic of poll | 85 | 4/26 |
| 7. Result in % | 96 | 1/26 |
| 7a. If no, how described | 96 | 1/26 |
| 8. Report sample size | 84 | 4/25 |
| 8a. How sample size reported | 92 | 2/24 |
| 9. Report who conducted poll | 96 | 1/24 |
| 9a. Who conducted poll | 96 | 1/26 |
| 9b. How conductor reported | 84 | 4/25 |
| 10. Report exact wording | 67 | 8/24 |
| 10a. How wording reported | 58 | 10/24 |
| 11. Report sampling error | 92 | 2/26 |
| 12. Report description of population | 58 | 11/2 |
| 12a. How description of population reported | 61 | 10/26 |
| 13. Report method of interview | 100 | 0/26 |
| 13a. How method reported | 100 | 0/26 |
| 14. Report time conducted | 65 | 9/26 |

Table 1 (continued)

| Question on code sheet | | Agreement % | #of disagreements/# of sheets |
|---|---|---|---|
| 14a. | How time reported | 77 | 6/26 |
| 15. | Report partial results | 96 | 1/26 |
| 15a. | How partial results reported | 96 | 1/26 |
| 16. | Used as newspeg | 96 | 1/26 |
| 17. | Anchor/reporter interpretation | 58 | 11/26 |
| 17a. | Anchor/reporter interpretation attribution | 8 | 24/26 |
| 18. | Anyone else interpretation | 92 | 2/26 |
| 18a. | Who else did | 92 | 2/26 |
| 18b. | Anyone else interpretation attribution | 96 | 1/25 |
| 19. | Compared to other polls | 61 | 10/26 |

Total intercoder reliability: 81.1%

Note: The denominator in the ratio in the third column is the number of code sheets of each particular item that the second coder completed in the reliability check.

The category of "general description" brought the agreement percentages of the questions regarding inclusion of the standards down. When one coder would indicate that a standard was included in a story, a second coder would indicate that only a general description of the same standard in the same story was reported. The timing was hard to be accurate on because the Vanderbilt Television News Archive Index is set up so a group of stories about the same subject are in one block that's timed. A poll story sometimes stood on its own and in that case, the story was timed with a stopwatch. Other times, a poll was introduced by an anchor and results from the same poll were also reported in the stories that aired after the anchor introduction. In that case, the total time of all the stories that included this poll data was calculated either by a stopwatch or the time given in the index.

## Parameters

Only the poll stories regarding the presidential election were included.

## Limitations

Cable television is an important force in the television news industry, especially the Cable News Network. However, CNN was not included in this study because the Vanderbilt Archive did not start indexing CNN Prime News until 1989.

The results of the content section of the study are not meant to be compared to the results of the studies dealing with the content of newspaper

poll reports. They are being used as a framework to study the content of television poll reports.

# CHAPTER 4

## RESULTS

This first section will deal with the networks' reporting of the AAPOR standards. The overall frequencies will be reported first, followed by two-way crosstabulation which shows how networks individually reported information contained in the AAPOR standards, followed by a two-way crosstabulation which shows which methods the networks used to report the information contained in the AAPOR standards, and finally followed by three-way crosstabulation which breaks down the results by networks, and by conductor of poll.

Table 2 shows that the networks reported sample size in 13 percent of the 185 stories. A general description was given in 5.1 percent of the stories, and sample size was not even mentioned in 81.1 percent of the stories.

The conductor of the poll was named in 83.2 percent of the stories, with a general description given in 7.6 percent, leaving 9.2 percent of the stories having polls with no conductor identified.

Of the stories that gave the conductor of the poll information (not in the table), either exactly or a general description of the conductor of the poll, 44.6 percent were conducted by the networks along with a major newspaper (ABC/Washington Post, CBS/New York Times, and NBC/Wall St. Journal), 23.2 percent were conducted by the networks alone, 15.5 percent were

Table 2

Overall Conformity to AAPOR Standards by All Networks by Percentages and (Frequencies)

| AAPOR Standard | % Yes | % No | % General Description | Total % |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Sample Size | 13.0 (24) | 81.1 (150) | 5.1 (11) | 100 (185) |
| 2. Conductor of Poll | 83.2 (154) | 9.2 (17) | 7.6 (14) | 100 (185) |
| 3. Exact Wording | 4.9 (9) | 47.6 (88) | 47.6 (88) | 100 (185) |
| 4. Sampling Error | 43.8 (81) | 55.1 (102) | 1.1 (2) | 100 (185) |
| 5. Description of Population | 5.9 (11) | 50.8 (94) | 43.2 (80) | 100 (185) |
| 6. Method of Interview | 1.6 (3) | 94.1 (174) | 4.3 (8) | 100 (185) |
| 7. Partial Response | 0.0 (0) | 97.3 (180) | 2.7 (5) | 100 (185) |
| Total N= 185 | | | | |

conducted by newspapers or news magazines, 6.5 percent were conducted by candidates, 6 percent were unspecified (example: reporters would sometimes say, "The polls show Bush with a substantial lead . . ."), and 4.2 percent were conducted by others such as universities or network affiliates.

Secondary poll sources were collected in the data (not in the table) when more than one poll source was used in a story. The networks used newspapers and news magazines most as secondary poll sources (3.8 percent). This was followed by candidate polls (2.7 percent) and network only polls (2.2 percent).

As Table 3 shows, the exact wording of poll questions was reported in 4.9 percent of the total stories. In 47.6 percent of the stories the question wording was ignored altogether, and in 47.6 percent, a general description of the question was given.

Sampling error was reported in 43.8 percent of the stories, while in 55.1 percent the sampling error was overlooked, and in 1.1 percent a general description was given. The description of the population was reported in 5.9 percent of the stories.

A general description (likely voters, etc.) 43.2 percent of the time, and in 50.8 percent of the stories, this standard was not reported.

The method of conducting the poll interview was reported 1.6 percent (3 stories out of 185) of the time, while in 94.1 percent of the total stories this standard was ignored. In 4.3 percent of the stories a general description was given.

Table 3

Conformity Percentages and (Frequencies) of the AAPOR Standards by Network

| | Yes | No | General Description | Total (N) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| ABC | | | | |
| 1. Sample Size | 4.5(3) | 90.9(60) | 4.5(3) | 100(66) |
| 2. Conductor of Poll | 87.9(58) | 3.0(2) | 9.1(6) | 100(66) |
| 3. Exact Wording | 4.5(3) | 9.1(39) | 36.4(24) | 100(66) |
| 4. Sampling Error | 59.1(39) | 40.9(27) | 0.0(0) | 100(66) |
| 5. Description of Population | 9.1(6) | 56.1(37) | 34.8(23) | 100(66) |
| 6. Method of Interview | 1.5(1) | 93.9(62) | 4.5(3) | 100(66) |
| 7. Time Poll Conducted | 25.8(17) | 28.8(19) | 45.5(30) | 100(66) |
| 8. Partial Responses | 0.0(0) | 97.0(64) | 3.0(2) | 100(66) N=66 |
| CBS | | | | |
| 1. Sample Size | 22.5(16) | 71.8(51) | 5.6(4) | 100(71) |
| 2. Conductor of Poll | 84.5(60) | 9.9(7) | 5.6(4) | 100(71) |
| 3. Exact Wording | 7.0(5) | 39.4(28) | 53.5(38) | 100(71) |
| 4. Sampling Error | 40.8(29) | 57.7(41) | 1.4(1) | 100(71) |

Table 3 (continued)

| | Yes | No | General Description | Total (N) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 5. Description of Population | 5.6(4) | 42.3(30) | 52.1(37) | 100(71) |
| 6. Method of Interview | 2.8(2) | 93.0(66) | 4.2(3) | 100(71) |
| 7. Time Poll Conducted | 31.0(22) | 42.3(30) | 26.8(19) | 100(71) |
| 8. Partial Response | 0.0(0) | 98.6(70) | 1.4(1) | 100(71) N=71 |
| NBC | | | | |
| 1. Sample Size | 10.4(5) | 81.3(39) | 8.3(4) | 100(48) |
| 2. Conductor of Poll | 75.0(36) | 16.7(8) | 8.3(4) | 100(48) |
| 3. Exact Wording | 2.1(1) | 43.8(21) | 54.2(26) | 100(48) |
| 4. Sampling Error | 27.1(13) | 70.8(34) | 2.1(1) | 100(48) |
| 5. Description of Population | 2.1(1) | 56.3(27) | 41.7(20) | 100(48) |
| 6. Method of Interview | 0.0(0) | 95.8(46) | 4.2(2) | 100(48) |
| 7. Time Poll Conducted | 16.7(8) | 43.8(21) | 39.6(19) | 100(48) |
| 8. Partial Response | 0.0(0) | 95.8(46) | 4.2(2) | 100(48) N=48 |

The time the poll was conducted was reported in 25.4 percent of the stories, with a general description (recent poll) given in 36.8 percent of the stories. In 37.8 percent of the stories this standard was not reported. The networks reported the date that the poll was published in a newspaper or magazine in some stories, but they substituted that information for the time the poll was actually conducted.

Partial results were not given in any of the 185 stories. A general description was attempted in 5 stories, leaving the information out of 97.3 percent of the stories.

The overall frequencies indicate that "conductor of poll" was the most reported AAPOR standard (83.2 percent) followed by "sampling error"(43.8 percent). The "time poll conducted" standard came in third with 25.4 percent. All the other standards: "description of population", "method of obtaining interviews", "sample size", "exact wording of question", and "partial response" were reported only a small percentage of the time.

None of the networks reported the AAPOR standard "partial response" so there are only seven standards left to analyze. CBS reported four of the remaining seven standards more than its two competitors. These were "sample size", "exact wording", "method of obtaining interviews", and "time poll conducted". ABC led in its conformity to the remaining three standards "conductor of poll", "sampling error", and "description of population". NBC only reported "conductor of poll" more than 30 percent of the time and every other standard's conformity percentage was under 30 percent.

Table 3 is a two-way crosstabulation that breaks the data down into the networks and their individual conformity percentages to the AAPOR standards. It shows that CBS reported sample size 22.5 percent of the time, while NBC reported it 10.4 percent and ABC reported it 4.5 percent of the time.

ABC reported conductor of the poll most often. However, all three networks did a respectable job of reporting conductor of poll: ABC, 87.9 percent, CBS, 84.5 percent, and NBC, 75 percent.

ABC used newspapers and magazines as secondary poll sources when there was more than one poll source in a poll story (not in table) most often (7.6 percent), while CBS used candidate polls most often (4.2 percent), and NBC used network alone polls most (4.2 percent).

CBS reported exact wording most with 7 percent compared with ABC's 4.5 percent and NBC's 2.1 percent.

ABC reported sampling error a lot better than its competitors with 59.1 percent (CBS with 40.8 percent and NBC with 27.1 percent).

The two-way crosstabulation shows that ABC reported the description of the population the most at 9.1 percent of the time, followed by CBS with 5.6 percent, then NBC with 2.1 percent.

Table 3 shows that CBS reported method of interviewing most with 2.8 percent, ABC reported it 1.5 percent of the time, and NBC did not report it at all. The two-way crosstabulation shows that CBS again leads in reporting the time poll was conducted with 31 percent. ABC was close behind with 25.8 percent and NBC was the consistent trailer with 16.7 percent.

Table 4 is another two-way crosstabulation which breaks the data down into networks and the methods of reporting the information contained in the AAPOR standards. It shows that sample size was reported orally in 91.4 percent of the stories that gave this figure or a general description of it. The remaining 8.6 percent was reported visually. The two-way crosstabulation shows that ABC and NBC reported it in in-house polls 100 percent of the time and all three networks reported sample size orally in most of their poll stories.

The two-way crosstabulation shows that the networks would most often use both visual and verbal means together to report the conductor of the poll. When the conductor of the poll was given or a general description attempted, 39.4 percent were reported orally, 57.6 percent both visually and orally, and 2.9 percent visually.

In the stories that either gave the exact wording of the question or gave a general description, 58.6 percent were reported orally, 3 percent were reported visually, and 38.4 percent were reported both orally and visually. The two-way crosstabulation shows that all three networks reported exact wording most often orally. The networks did report it both ways in a significant percentage of the stories.

Sampling error was reported visually in 84.1 percent of the stories that included the information. In 4.9 percent of these stories, the information was given orally, and in 11 percent the information was given both orally and visually. The two-way crosstabulation shows that sampling error was reported

Table 4

Methods of Reporting AAPOR Standards in Percentages and (Frequencies) by Network

| | Visually | Orally | Both | Total(n) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| ABC | | | | |
| 1. Sample Size | 0.0(0) | 100.0(6) | 0.0(0) | 100(6) |
| 2. Conductor of Poll | 6.2(4) | 35.4(23) | 58.5(38) | 100(65) |
| 3. Exact Wording | 0.0(0) | 64.3(18) | 35.7(10) | 100(28) |
| 4. Sampling Error | 92.3(36) | 0.0(0) | 7.7(3) | 100(39) |
| 5. Description of Population | 3.4(1) | 86.2(25) | 10.3(3) | 100(29) |
| 6. Method of Interview | 0.0(0) | 100.0(1) | 0.0(0) | 100(1) |
| 7. Time Poll Conducted | 21.7(10) | 76.1(35) | 2.2(1) | 100(46) |
| 8. Partial Response | 0.0(0) | 0.0(0) | 0.0(0) | 0(0) Total N=66 |
| CBS | | | | |
| 1. Sample Size | 15.0(3) | 85.0(17) | 0.0(0) | 100(20) |
| 2. Conductor of Poll | 1.5(1) | 36.9(24) | 61.5(40) | 100(65) |
| 3. Exact Wording | 6.8(3) | 50.0(22) | 43.2(19) | 100(44) |
| 4. Sampling Error | 82.8(24) | 0.0(0) | 17.2(5) | 100(29) |

Table 4 (continued)

| | Visually | Orally | Both | Total(n) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 5. Description of Population | 5.1(2) | 84.6(33) | 10.3(4) | 100(39) |
| 6. Method of Interview | 0.0(0) | 100.0(4) | 0.0(0) | 100(4) |
| 7. Time Poll Conducted | 7.5(3) | 92.5(37) | 0.0(0) | 100(40) |
| 8. Partial Response | 0.0(0) | 0.0(0) | 0.0(0) | 0(0) Total N=71 |
| NBC | | | | |
| 1. Sample Size | 0.0(0) | 100.0(9) | 0.0(0) | 100(9) |
| 2. Conductor of Poll | 0.0(0) | 50.0(20) | 50.0(20) | 100(40) |
| 3. Exact Wording | 0.0(0) | 66.7(18) | 33.3(9) | 100(27) |
| 4. Sampling Error | 64.3(9) | 28.6(4) | 7.1(1) | 100(14) |
| 5. Description of Population | 4.8(1) | 81.0(17) | 14.3(3) | 100(21) |
| 6. Method of Interview | 0.0(0) | 100.0(1) | 0.0(0) | 100(1) |
| 7. Time Poll Conducted | 3.8(1) | 88.5(23) | 7.7(2) | 100(26) |
| 8. Partial Response | 0.0(0) | 100.0(1) | 0.0(0) | 100(1) Total N=48 |

visually most by all three networks. NBC reported it orally only over 25 percent of the time.

The description of population was reported orally 84.3 percent of the time, it was reported visually 4.5 percent of the time, and both orally and visually 11.2 percent of the time. The two-way crosstabulation shows that the three networks reported this standard almost identically. They reported it orally in a majority of the stories.

All the stories reported the method of interviewing orally.

Time was reported orally in 84.8 percent of the stories that contained that information. Time was reported visually in 12.5 percent of the stories and reported both visually and orally in only 2.7 percent of the stories. The two-way crosstabulation shows that all the networks reported time orally a majority of the time. The descriptions were given orally.

Table 5 is a three-way crosstabulation and shows that the networks only reported sample size in their in-house polls (Network/Newspaper and Network alone together represent the total number of a network's in-house polls).

The table shows that the networks reported conductor of poll most often in the in-house polls.

The networks behaved differently as ABC used secondary poll sources (not shown in table) most in its network/newspaper polls (50 percent), while CBS used them most in their network alone polls (37.5 percent), and NBC used them the most in the poll stories where the primary source was unspecified (40 percent).

Table 5

How the Networks Treated In-House Polls vs. Outside Polls in Percentages and (Frequencies)

| | ABC | CBS | NBC |
|---|---|---|---|
| Sample Size-Yes | | | |
| 1. Network/Newspaper | 66.7(2) | 18.8(3) | 80.0(4) |
| 2. Network/Newspaper | 33.3(1) | 81.3(13) | 20.0(1) |
| 3. Newspaper/Mag. | 0.0(0) | 0.0(0) | 0.0(0) |
| 4. Candidate | 0.0(0) | 0.0(0) | 0.0(0) |
| 5. Unspecified | 0.0(0) | 0.0(0) | 0.0(0) |
| 6. Other | 0.0(0) | 0.0(0) | 0.0(0) |
| Total N | N=3 | N=16 | N=5 |
| Conductor of Poll-Yes | | | |
| 1. Network/Newspaper | 57.9(33) | 41.7(25) | 47.2(17) |
| 2. Network | 19.3(11) | 35.0(21) | 16.7(6) |
| 3. Newspaper/Mag. | 17.5(10) | 13.3(8) | 16.7(6) |
| 4. Candidate | 1.8(1) | 6.7(4) | 13.9(5) |
| 5. Unspecified | 0.0(0) | 0.0(0) | 0.0(0) |
| 6. Other | 3.5(2) | 3.3(2) | 5.6(2) |
| Total | N=57 | N=60 | N=36 |
| Exact Wording-Yes | | | |
| 1. Network/Newspaper | 66.7(2) | 60.0(3) | 100.0(1) |
| 2. Network | 33.3(1) | 20.0(1) | 0.0(0) |

Table 5 (continued)

| | ABC | CBS | NBC |
|---|---|---|---|
| 3. Newspaper/Mag. | 0.0(0) | 20.0(1) | 0.0(0) |
| 4. Candidate | 0.0(0) | 0.0(0) | 0.0(0) |
| 5. Unspecified | 0.0(0) | 0.0(0) | 0.0(0) |
| 6. Other | 0.0(0) | 0.0(0) | 0.0(0) |
| Total N | N=3 | N=5 | N=1 |
| Sampling Error-Yes | | | |
| 1. Network/Newspaper | 71.8(28) | 44.8(13) | 76.9(10) |
| 2. Network | 20.5(8) | 48.3(14) | 15.4(2) |
| 3. Newspaper/Mag. | 5.1(2) | 3.4(1) | 7.7(1) |
| 4. Candidate | 0.0(0) | 0.0(0) | 0.0(0) |
| 5. Unspecified | 0.0(0) | 0.0(0) | 0.0(0) |
| 6. Other | 2.6(1) | 3.4(1) | 0.0(0) |
| Total N | N=39 | N=29 | N=13 |
| Description of Population-Yes | | | |
| 1. Network/Newspaper | 50.0(3) | 25.0(1) | 0.0(0) |
| 2. Network | 16.7(1) | 75.0(3) | 100.0(1) |
| 3. Newspaper/Mag. | 16.7(1) | 0.0(0) | 0.0(0) |
| 4. Candidate | 16.7(1) | 0.0(0) | 0.0(0) |
| 5. Unspecified | 0.0(0) | 0.0(0) | 0.0(0) |
| 6. Other | 0.0(0) | 0.0(0) | 0.0(0) |
| Total N | N=6 | N=4 | N=1 |

Table 5 (continued)

| | ABC | CBS | NBC |
|---|---|---|---|
| Method of Interview-Yes | | | |
| 1. Network/Newspaper | 0.0(0) | 50.0(1) | 0.0(0) |
| 2. Network | 100.0(1) | 50.0(1) | 0.0(0) |
| 3. Newspaper/Mag. | 0.0(0) | 0.0(0) | 0.0(0) |
| 4. Candidate | 0.0(0) | 0.0(0) | 0.0(0) |
| 5. Unspecified | 0.0(0) | 0.0(0) | 0.0(0) |
| 6. Other | 0.0(0) | 0.0(0) | 0.0(0) |
| Total N | N=1 | N=2 | N=0 |
| Time Poll Conducted-Yes | | | |
| 1. Network/Newspaper | 64.7(11) | 59.1(13) | 75.0(6) |
| 2. Network | 29.4(5) | 40.9(9) | 12.5(1) |
| 3. Newspaper/Mag. | 0.0(0) | 0.0(0) | 0.0(0) |
| 4. Candidate | 0.0(0) | 0.0(0) | 12.5(1) |
| 5. Unspecified | 5.9(1) | 0.0(0) | 0.0(0) |
| 6. Other | 0.0(0) | 0.0(0) | 0.0(0) |
| Total N | N=17 | N=22 | N=8 |

Note: The standard for "partial results" was not ever reported. The general descriptions were only reported in-house polls for CBS and NBC, however ABC reported 50% in the "other" category.

The three-way crosstabulation shows that the networks reported exact wording of the poll question most often in the in-house polls. However, note that CBS did report this standard 20 percent of the time in newspaper or newsmagazine polls.

Sampling error, method of interviewing, and the time the poll was conducted were all mostly reported in in-house polls.

The three-way crosstabulation shows that, except for ABC, the networks reported description of the population in only their in-house polls. However, ABC still did report the standard a majority of the time in its in-house polls.

This next section will deal with the variables that are content variables that are not included in the AAPOR standards.

The "Topic of Poll" was tabulated as the **first question reported** in a multi-question story. Therefore, the first question of these poll stories were horse race polls, or polls that simply report which candidate is ahead in popularity, a majority of the time.

The poll topics in the "Other" category included: Iran-Contra, Ed Koch's criticism of Jesse Jackson, Dan Quayle's character, Plant Layoff Notification, Press Coverage, and Voter Turnout.

The poll stories focused on horse race polls that either looked at popularity or looked at a candidate's chances to win a primary or caucus. Seventy-eight point three percent of the stories dealt primarily with horse race issues of who's ahead. In the two-way crosstabulation, the networks were similar in the percentage of horse race topic polls (general popularity and

electoral and primary emphasis): ABC, 84.9 percent, CBS, 76 percent, and NBC, 72.9 percent. However, ABC reported electoral and primary emphasis poll stories most often (56.1 percent), CBS reported general public opinion questions and electoral and primary emphasis polls the same amount (38 percent), and NBC reported general public opinion questions most often (39.6 percent).

The results were described in percentages 69.7 percent of the time. Of the 30.3 percent of the stories that had results described in other ways: 17.3 percent were described in ratios, 61.5 percent were described in horse race metaphors (is gaining ground, is well ahead, etc.), and 21.2 percent were described in other ways. The two-way crosstabulation (not shown in a table) shows that NBC stood out in this category as it only described 56.3 percent in percentages in contrast to ABC with 80.3 percent and CBS with 69 percent. The three-way crosstabulation (not shown in a table) shows that the networks used percentages to describe results in the in-house polls most often: ABC with 75.5 percent, CBS with 77.6 percent, and NBC with 73 percent.

Anchors and reporters gave interpretations in 47.6 percent of the stories. Ninety point nine percent of the time they attributed the interpretation to the poll result. (Example: Reporter says, "Bush is gaining those undecided voter, according to the polls.) In only 11.4 percent of the stories a secondary person interpreting poll data. Of this 11.4 percent, 42.9 percent of the secondary interpreters were the candidates, 38.1 percent were news commentators (John Chancellor, etc), and the rest were pollsters and people who worked on the

candidates' campaigns. These people attributed their interpretations of the poll (60 percent), to name identification (5 percent), ads (10 percent), turnout (5 percent), press bashing (15 percent), and the selection of Dan Quayle as vice president (5 percent).

The two-way crosstabulation for anchor/reporter interpretation (not shown in a table) shows that the networks were very similar in the percentage of their stories that included anchor/reporter interpretation: ABC with 47 percent, CBS with 47.9 percent, and NBC with 47.9 percent. The three-way crosstabulation (not shown in a table) shows that ABC used anchor/reporter interpretation in its network/newspaper polls most often (64.5 percent), while CBS used it the most in its network alone polls (40.6 percent), and NBC used it the most in their network/newspaper polls (47.6 percent). The interpretation was used most with in-house polls in general. Other people gave interpretations most in the networks' in-house polls.

The poll results were compared with other poll results in 46.5 percent of the stories and were not compared in 53.5 percent. The two-way crosstabulation (not shown in a table) shows that ABC compared poll results more than its competitors (57.6 percent), whereas CBS compared results 38 percent of the time, and NBC 43.3 percent of the time. The three-way crosstabulation (not shown in a table) shows that ABC and NBC compared results most in the network/newspaper polls (ABC with 63.9 percent and NBC with 52.9 percent) but CBS compared poll results most in their network alone polls (40.7 percent).

This section will deal with all the format variables in this study. The largest number of poll stories that aired on any one day is four. That happened on October 12, 1988, the day after the second presidential debate.

CBS aired the most poll stories with 71, ABC followed with 66, and NBC aired substantially less with 48 poll stories.

The modal length of time was 2:20 and most stories fell between 2 and 3 minutes.

Most poll stories aired in either the first or second positions in the newscasts, 40 percent aired in the first position and 15.7 percent aired in the second position for a combined percentage of 55.7 percent. However, 22.2 percent of the stories aired after the fourth position.

In the two-way crosstabulations (not shown in a table) all three networks placed a majority of their stories in the first position, with the exception of NBC which placed as many stories after the fourth position as it did in the first position. (First position: ABC, 40 percent, CBS, 45.1 percent, and NBC, 31.3 percent). The only difference in the networks in this variable is that both ABC and NBC placed most of their stories either in the first position or in the "after fourth" category, while CBS placed the majority of their stories in the first or second positions and not as many later in the newscast.

Three-way crosstabulations showed that with the "position in newscast" variable (not shown in a table), ABC and CBS placed their own polls (network/newspaper, and network alone) in the first position most often while

NBC placed the network/newspaper polls first a majority of the time, it placed candidate polls first more than the NBC News Polls.

Most poll stories included more than one story in the report. Sixty-one point four percent had multiple questions. Thirty-five percent of the poll stories had two or three questions. Ten point three percent had 7 or more questions. The two-way crosstabulation (not shown in a table) showed that the networks were almost identical in the percentage of stories that had more than one question: ABC with 50.3 percent, CBS with 67.6 percent, and NBC with 66.7 percent. The three-way crosstabulation (not shown in a table) showed that the networks aired the majority percentage of these multi-question poll stories in the network/newspaper category: ABC with 61.3 percent, CBS with 41.7 percent, and NBC with 57.1 percent.

The poll stories were used as newspegs or format transitions and bridges in 94.1 percent of the stories. The two-way crosstabulation (not shown in a table) shows that ABC used the stories as newspegs most with 93.9 percent, followed by CBS with 97.2 percent, and NBC used it least with 89.6 percent. The three-way crosstabulation (not shown in a table) shows that all the networks used their network/newspaper poll stories as newspegs a majority of the time.

# CHAPTER 5

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The first research question asked the question of how well did the networks conform to AAPOR standards. The fact that the results show that the networks do not often report the methodological data contained in the AAPOR standards forces the poll organizations and other organizations that have set forth standards to contemplate the standards for minimal disclosure. This study should show the NAB that either their standards are not reasonable for the television news medium or that the networks need to be reminded that they are urged to report these standards. Another question that arises is what has the NAB done to encourage the networks to report methodological information in poll reports? The results indicate that the only polls that the networks feel responsible for reporting some of the minimal standards are the in-house polls. It is to their own polls that they have the most access. The networks might be leaving the responsibility of reporting methodological standards to the conductors of the poll. If the networks believe that the original conductor of the poll is responsible for making the methodological information public, that concept would be unjust because the public might not, in every instance, have access to the original research. The outside polls are just as crucial to the public and, therefore, need to be reported more thoroughly. Candidates'

polls should be scrutinized extremely carefully and more information should be reported to the public when presenting these results.

The networks did a poor job of conforming to the AAPOR standards. The second research question asked if the networks were similar in their conformity percentages. Atwater's idea of network consonance should also be discussed. Network consonance is the idea that if all the networks gather news in the exact same way, then there is essentially a national news service. The networks were similar in the way they used polls in their formats. Also, the methods of reporting the standards were similar across the three networks. Consonance did not occur, however, when looking at the conformity to each individual standard. The percentages were similar in conformity to the conductor of poll, exact wording, description of population, method of interview and partial response. The percentages were not similar when the networks reported sample size, sampling error, or time. Overall, the results do indicate a degree of network consonance.

NBC did the poorest job consistently. ABC and CBS did a good job in comparison to NBC, although CBS did the best job of reporting four of the seven reported standards. The networks were similar in the way that they did not report the standards consistently. The question that arises is: "Why are the networks not conforming to the standards with greater regularity?" There may be several answers to this. Lack of time in a newscast seems like the most popular excuse. Lack of time is a legitimate problem; however that does not explain why some standards are reported in some stories and not in

others. In other words, there was no consistency in the way the poll results were presented. The networks used graphics effectively to convey the information in some of the standards. The networks and polling organizations need to come up with a consistent formula for reporting these standards. Another excuse is that many of the viewers will not understand the information. Many people did not fully understand the Persian Gulf war, does that mean that the war stories should have been vague, like the poll stories? No, the point is if the public does not understand what is contained in the news, the networks should work harder to help them understand, or not report poll results anymore.

Ted J. Smith III in his paper, "Standards For Reporting Public Opinion Research: A Reappraisal" recommended that some AAPOR standards be included in public reports of poll results and some not. This article will be referred to in this discussion of the necessity of reporting AAPOR standards. Each standard will be discussed in terms of its necessity and will be followed by recommendations of the researcher of how the networks can work these standards into their reports easily, or into a formula, without spending a lot of precious time reporting them. Smith, in his article, recommended that the standards of sponsor, sample size, sampling error, and method of interviewing are not necessary to poll reports and can be omitted.

In most cases, the sponsor of the poll is the conductor of the poll. This was the case in the presidential campaign polls of 1988. Many of the stories simply said, "Polls show Bush ahead by a wide margin. . . ." If the networks

are going to be so vague, then why even include this information in a story? This might be because the networks use polls as credibility tools. They need to back up their stories with "hard facts." This can be a manipulation of news. For example, in a news package a reporter shows that Jesse Jackson is a viable candidate. He starts the report with the statement that several polls show Jackson ahead for the Illinois primary. The sponsor and/or conductor of the poll should always be reported. The networks usually reported this information both visually and orally, however, if time is a concern, the anchor can refer to the poll generically and a graphic can display the conductor of the poll.

Sample size is another crucial fact to report because many viewers think that polls include many of the people in the nation while some researchers say that you only need a sample of 435 to get a sample that can generalize to the population. Also sample sizes vary from poll to poll and many may not even have 435 participants. This standard fits well on a graphic with the results.

Sampling error is perhaps the standard that would be the hardest for some viewers to understand but it is important because a close poll result with a large sampling error virtually renders the result meaningless. The networks called this the "margin of error" and Dan Rather tried to verbally explain this standard a few times by saying, "the margin of error is up or down three percentage points." When the percentages were close and the sampling error high, the anchors in a few instances told the viewers that meant it could go either way. So there are ways to describe this standard in the English

language. The best way to report sampling error is to display it as a plus or minus percentage, as the networks currently do, and to have the anchor verbally explain it.

The method of interviewing is the only standard that the researcher thinks is not necessary to report. It does give someone insight to the conditions under which the survey was administered. However, this is one of the easiest standards to incorporate into a poll story. This standard is best reported orally only. Dan Rather did it best, "In a telephone survey . . . ."

Smith recommended that exact wording, definition of population, partial results, and timing should always be included in poll results. Exact wording of a question is crucial to report because, as many scholars point out, paraphrasing can sound different than the original question. The slightest change of word order can alter the meaning of a question. This standard should be reported both orally and visually on the result graphic.

Definition of population is also essential to report, especially because subsamples are used often. There is a difference in how Californians felt about the outcome of the Iowa caucuses and how the people of Iowa felt. There are different implications of different populations. Regional samples vary from national samples in the goals of which population to generalize to. Do the results reflect Southern values or the American population as a whole? This information would fit nicely on the same graphic. Newscasters should use some time to report it orally because otherwise the information might be on the screen too short a time for the public to comprehend it.

Partial response or results were never reported in any poll story in the population. It is relevant for a person to know that not every person in the sample responded to the survey. Most people might think that the number of people given as the sample size is the number of people that actually participated in the survey. This standard should be reported but it can be called "response rate" and given in a percentage. It can be included on the result graphic.

Timing of interviews is probably the most important standard to report because campaigns change daily in their themes and the everyday happenings. The public's opinion may be affected by the events of the campaign. Time is an important element of a campaign. There may be a difference of how people think about a candidate's performance in a debate the night of the debate and how they think three days later. Time should be reported both verbally and visually.

The methods of reporting results varied from story to story. There was no consistency in the methods of relaying the information. For example, ABC aired ABC/Washington Post tracking polls that showed poll results taken on a regular basis and displayed in graph form on the screen. Each data point represented a different date. In some tracking polls, ABC listed the dates of the polls underneath the graph at the appropriate data point. In some tracking polls, ABC did not label the data points. However, as Table 2 shows, the networks were consistent **with each other** in the way they displayed and reported the data.

The networks should come up with a formula that they can use to report every poll result. This formula should include the AAPOR standards. The formula should include the information on a graphic (see Figure 1) and the anchor should verbally include as much of the information contained in the AAPOR standards as possible.

The third research question asked if the networks conformed to the AAPOR standards more in their own in-house polls. The answer to this is definitely yes!

The results show that the networks conform more to the AAPOR standards in the in-house polls that are co-sponsored by a newspaper than in the network-alone in-house polls. There are many possible reasons for this. Maybe the newspapers have a joint contract with the networks that demands a minimal amount of information be disclosed in a poll story. Maybe the polls conducted jointly include more of the methodological data when released to the journalists than when the network does it alone.

The fourth research question asked if issue or horse race polls were used more often. The results show that horse race poll questions were most prevalent.

The fifth research question asked if reporters use poll results to support themes. The results show that a clear majority of the poll stories were used to support news themes.

The sixth research question addressed the issue of reporter interpretation. Anchors, reporters, network news commentators, candidates, pollsters, and

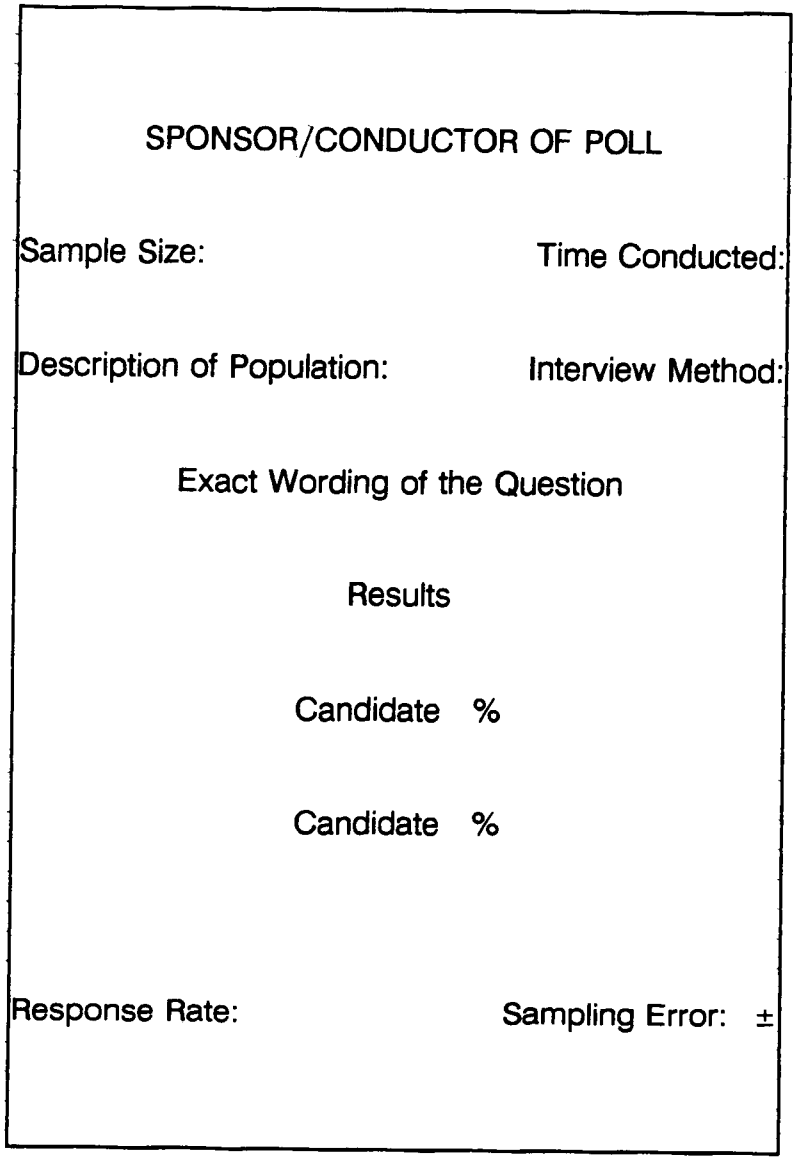


Figure 1. Sample Graphic for Networks
(includes all the AAPOR Standards)

candidate employees offered their "expert" opinions. Even though the results show that interpretation was not given a majority of the time, it was given 47.6 percent of the time, and that is a substantial amount. The data extracted from polls is powerful enough on its own, but to team that with interpretation is even more commanding.

The seventh question asked which methods were used to report the poll data. The results show that visual and verbal means were used both together and alone. Sample size, exact wording of the poll question, description of population, method of interview, and the time the poll was conducted were reported orally most often. Sampling error was reported visually most often. The conductor of the poll was reported both orally and visually most often.

The format variables were studied to give an indication of how important the networks treated poll stories in their format use, placement, and amount of time. After the degree of importance is established, the content of the poll story is next to be examined.

Here are a couple of qualitative examples taken from the videotape to give a look at how the networks used poll stories as newspegs. On August 21, 1988, Sam Donaldson of ABC started the newscast off: ". . . Bush drew some encouragement from a Newsweek poll. . . ." This statement introduced a reporter package about Dan Quayle and the National Guard. It could have given the public the impression that George Bush gave credibility to the polls. Inside the package, Bush said in a sound bite, "Even these polls that had me kicked and kicked hard, seem to be going in the right direction."

The same night on NBC Garrick Utley, after the first two packages in the newscast about the campaign trail, introduced the third package by saying, "Of course, amid all the talk about Quayle, what counts is what people think about him and Bush and how they will vote . . . a Newsweek poll shows Bush. . . ." Here is a prime example of the networks telling people what is important, agenda setting. More relevantly to this thesis, the anchor told the audience that the Newsweek poll was more important than the events of the campaign as shown by the first two packages.

The eighth research question asked what the modal length of a poll story was. The results showed that the modal length was 2:20 and the majority of the stories were between 2 and 3 minutes in length.

The ninth research question asked where the poll stories were placed in the newscasts. The poll stories were placed in the first and second positions most often.

The tenth question asked if the networks placed the poll stories similarly in their newscasts. The results show that the networks did all place the polls in the lead spots most often.

The eleventh and twelfth research questions asked about the number of poll stories each poll aired. CBS aired 71, ABC aired 66, and NBC aired 48. These numbers are not similar because there is a big difference between the number aired on CBS and the number aired on NBC.

The majority of stories contained more than one question. This is important because the more questions the networks reported, the more

standards they were responsible for reporting. This is because standards like "sampling error" and "description of population" may vary from question to question.

When the networks reported poll results from more than one poll in the same story, the results show that newspapers and news magazines are used as secondary sources most often. Again there is a danger in reporting poll results in this manner because each poll uses different people in amounts and they are conducted at different times. The comparisons that are generally drawn should not be for the above reasons.

The "Results Described in Percentages" variable is another cause for concern. In 30.3 percent of the 185 stories, results were described as "Bush is way ahead" and in similar vague terms. The networks were presenting scientific data in non-scientific ways. The only rationale the researcher can think of is that the networks do not think the public can understand percentages. Why else would they be so vague?

The results indicate that the networks found the polls a crucial tool in reporting presidential campaigns. This is because the polls were placed as the lead story in a newscast a majority of the time, networks relied on the poll data to bridge the news themes they were trying to establish in their news packages, and the most frequent length of time for a poll story was between 2:00 and 3:00. That is long in a 28 minute newscast, considering that the average story length for a story on the news is between 1:30 and 2:30 approximately. Also the fact that the majority of the poll stories were in-house

shows that the networks have a profit-motivation in airing the results of these polls, rendering them "important." If the poll stories are so important to a newscast, should not the content of the stories be as complete and objective as possible?

To summarize, the networks gave a lot of importance to poll stories in their news format. However, the minimal standards for disclosure were not reported a majority of the time indicating that the news organizations skimped on the content of these important stories. The networks cannot claim that they do not include the methodological information because of a lack of time because most of the AAPOR information can be displayed on one of the many graphics and paint machines that the networks own. They can make the font as large or small as they wish.

Future research should continue to examine how the networks report and treat these poll stories. A careful eye should be kept on how the networks report outside polls by scholars because the networks obviously do not feel responsible for reporting those results as thoroughly as the in-house polls.

Future studies should include the Cable News Network, public television news, and the Fox network, if it starts regular national newscasts by 1992 or beyond. These are or will be legitimate television sources of poll information.

A study should be attempted at sampling poll stories on the same days in both newspapers and television and comparing how the two media report the poll data. Does ABC assume that the Washington Post reports most of the AAPOR standards contained in the ABC/Washington Post polls?

Other studies should examine if the journalists understand the information contained in the AAPOR standards. Future studies should survey the poll news editors at the news organizations to see if they have any current guidelines for reporting standards. The question of why the networks team up with the newspapers for in-house polls only some of the time should be answered and the question of why the networks include more AAPOR standards in the network/newspaper polls more than the network-alone polls should be addressed.

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# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

## CODING SHEET-PERCENTAGES & (FREQUENCIES)

(1-6) 1. Date of poll story:_____

(7) 2. Network:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1) | ABC | **35.7 (66)** |
| 2) | CBS | **38.4 (71)** |
| 3) | NBC | **25.9 (48)** |

(8-11) 3. Length of time of story:____:_____

(12) 4. Position in newscast:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1) | First | **40.0 (74)** |
| 2) | Second | **15.7 (29)** |
| 3) | Third | **13.0 (24)** |
| 4) | Fourth | **9.2 (17)** |
| 5) | After 4th | **22.2 (41)** |

(13) 5. Is there more than one question reported in this story?

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1) | Yes | **61.4 (113)** |
| 2) | No | **38.4 (71), 1 missing** |

(14) 5a. If yes to #5, how many questions are in this story?

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1) | Two | **17.3 (32)** |
| 2) | Three | **15.7 (29)** |
| 3) | Four | **7.6 (14)** |
| 4) | Five | **4.3 (8)** |
| 5) | Six | **4.9 (9)** |
| 6) | More | **10.3 (19)** |

(15) 5b. If yes to #5, are all the questions from the same poll?

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1) | Yes | **47 (87)** |
| 2) | No | **14.1(26),(72-N/A)** |

(16) 5c. If no to #5b, what other poll sources are used?

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1) | Network/ Newspaper | **5.0 (1)** |
| 2) | Network | **2.2 (4)** |
| 3) | News/ Magazine | **3.8 (7)** |
| 4) | Candidate | **2.7 (5)** |
| 5) | Unspecified | **1.6 (3)** |
| 6) | Other | **0.0 (0) (165-N/A)** |

Appendix A (continued)

(17) 6. What was the topic of the poll question?
Horse race polls
1) General Public Opinion (popularity) **35.1(65)**
2) Electoral Vote Emphasis (election results: primaries) **43.2(80)**

Other polls

3) Perceptions of Candidates (ex. as tough on crime) **1.6(3)**
4) Special Interest Groups **1.1(2)**
5) Debates (who won) **4.3(8)**
6) Issues (abortion, defense, etc.) **4.9(9)**
7) Regional **0(0)**
8) State **0(0)**
9) Other___ **9.7(18)**_____

(18) 7. Was the result described in percentages?
1) Yes **1) 69.7 (129)**
2) No **2) 30.3 (56)**

(19) 7a. If no to #7, how was the result described?
1) Ratios **17.3 (9)**
2) Horse race Met. **61.5 (32)**
3) Other **21.2(11)**

(20) 8. Did the story mention sample size?
1) Yes **13.0 (24)**
2) No **81.1 (150)**
3) Gen. Des. **5.9 (11)**

(21) 8a. If yes or G.D., was this done:
1) Visually **8.6 (3)**
2) Orally **91.4 (17)**
3) Both **5.9 (11)**

(22) 9. Did the story mention who conducted the poll?
1) Yes **83.2 (154)**
2) No **9.2 (17)**
3) Gen.Des. **7.6 (14)**

Appendix A (continued)

(23) 9a. If yes to # 9, who did conduct the poll?

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1) | Network/ Newspaper | 44.6 (75) |
| 2) | Network alone | 23.2 (39) |
| 3) | Newspaper or Magazine | 15.5 (26) |
| 4) | Candidate | 6.5 (11) |
| 5) | Unspecified | 6.0 (10) |
| 6) | Other | 4.2 ( 7) |

(24) 9b. If yes to # 9, was this done :

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1) | Visually | 2.9 (5) |
| 2) | Orally | 39.4 (67) |
| 3) | Both | 57.6 (98) |

(25) 10. Was the exact wording of the question reported?

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1) | Yes | 4.9 (9) |
| 2) | No | 47.6 (88) |
| 3) | G.D. | 47.6 (88) |

(26) 10a. If yes or G.D., was this done:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1) | Visually | 3.0 (3) |
| 2) | Orally | 58.6 (58) |
| 3) | Both | 38.4 (38) |

(27) 11. Did the story give sampling error?

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1) | Yes | 43.8 (81) |
| 2) | No | 55.1 (102) |
| 3) | Gen. Des. | 1.1 (2) |

(28) 11a. If yes or G.D., was this done:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1) | Visually | 84.1 (69) |
| 2) | Orally | 4.9 (4) |
| 3) | Both | 11.0 (9) |

(29) 12. Did the story give the population sampled?

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1) | Yes | 5.9 (11) |
| 2) | No | 50.8 (94) |
| 3) | Gen. Des. | 43.2 (80) |

Appendix A (continued)

(30) 12a. If yes or G.D., was this done:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1) | Visually | **4.5 (4)** |
| 2) | Orally | **84.3 (75)** |
| 3) | Both | **11.2 (10)** |

(31) 13. Did the story disclose the method of obtaining interviews?

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1) | Yes | **1.6 (3)** |
| 2) | No | **94.1 (174)** |
| 3) | General Description | **4.3 (8)** |

(32) 13a. If yes or G.D., was this done:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1) | Visually | **0.0 (0)** |
| 2) | Orally | **100.0 (11)** |
| 3) | Both | **0.0 (0)** |

(33) 14. Did the story disclose the time that the poll was conducted?

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1) | Yes | **25.4 (47)** |
| 2) | No | **37.8 (70)** |
| 3) | Gen. Des. | **36.8 (68)** |

(34) 14a. If yes or G.D., was this done:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1) | Visually | **12.5 (14)** |
| 2) | Orally | **84.8 (95)** |
| 3) | Both | **2.7 (3)** |

(35) 15. Did the report state any partial results or response rate?

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1) | Yes | **0.0 (0)** |
| 2) | No | **97.3 (180)** |
| 3) | General Description | **2.7 (5)** |

(36) 15a. If yes or G.D., was this done:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1) | Visually | **0.0 (0)** |
| 2) | Orally | **100.0 (5)** |
| 3) | Both | **0.0 (0)** |

(37) 16. Was the story used as a newspeg or to introduce another story with the same theme?

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1) | Yes | **94.1 (174)** |
| 2) | No | **5.9 (11)** |

Appendix A (continued)

(38) 17. Did the reporter or anchor offer any interpretation (meaning or implications) of the poll results?

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1) | Yes | **47.6 (88)** |
| 2) | No | **52.4 (97)** |

(39) 17a. If yes to # 15, was it attributed to:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1) | Pollster | **90.9 (80)** |
| 2) | Reporter/Anchor | **1.1 (1)** |
| 3) | Other | **8.0 (7)** |
| 4) | No attribution | **0.0 (0)** |

(40) 18.Did anyone else give poll interpretations?

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1) | Yes | **11.4 (21)** |
| 2) | No | **88.6 (164)** |

(41) 18a.If yes, who did?

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1) | Candidate | **42.9 (9)** |
| 2) | News Commentator | **38.1 (8)** |
| 3) | Pollster | **9.5 (2)** |
| 4) | Candidate Employee | **9.5 (2)** |

42) 18b. If yes, was it attributed to:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1) | Pollster | **60.0 (12)** |
| 2) | Other_____ | **40.0 (8)** |
| 3) | No attribution | **0.0 (0)** |

(43) 19. Were the poll results compared to other poll results?

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1) | Yes | **46.5 (86)** |
| 2) | No | **53.5 (99)** |

## APPENDIX B

## INSTRUCTION CODE BOOK FOR CODING SHEET

1. Date of poll story-Write in the blank the day of the week, month, and date the story was aired.
2. Network-Circle ABC, CBS, or NBC.
3. Length of time of story-Write in the blanks the running time of the story in minutes and seconds.
4. Position in newscast-Circle the number corresponding to the position the poll story was aired in the newscast.
5. More than one question-Circle "yes" if there is more than one question from a poll story reported.

5a. If there is more than one question, circle the number corresponding with the total number of questions reported in the story.

5b. Are all the questions from the same poll-Circle "no" if more than one poll source is used in the story.

5c. If more than one poll source is used, write in the secondary poll sources.

6. What was the topic of the poll question-Circle the appropriate number under the following categories:

Appendix B (continued)

Horse race polls

General Public Opinion (popularity)
Electoral Vote Emphasis (election results: primaries)

Other polls

Perceptions of Candidates (ex. as tough on crime)
Special Interest Groups
Debates (who won)

Issues (abortion, defense, etc.)

Regional
State

7. If the result was described in percentages, circle "yes".

7a. If the result was not described in percentages, write in how it was described.

8. Did the story mention sample size-Circle "yes","no", or "Gen. Des."

8a, 9b, 10a, 11a, 12a, 13a, 14a, and 15a- If yes, was this done visually, orally, or by both-Circle "Visually" if the sample size was reported on a graphic. Circle "Orally" if the sample size was reported verbally by the reporter or anchor. Circle "Both" if the sample size was reported both by graphics and verbally.

9. Did the story mention who conducted the poll-Circle "yes","no", or "Gen.Des."

9a. If yes to # 9, who did conduct the poll-Write in the blank who conducted the poll.

Appendix B (continued)

10. Was the exact wording of the question reported-If the entire question is reported circle "yes", if not circle "no", if it was vaguely described, "Gen.Des."
11. Did the story give sampling error-Circle "yes","no", or "Gen. Des."
12. Did the story give the definition of the population sampled-If the story gave information on the population like where they lived or if they were a certain race or gender circle "yes", if not circle "no", if vaguely described, "Gen. Des."
13. Did the story disclose the method of obtaining interviews-If the story tells if the interviews were done by telephone, in-person, or otherwise circle "yes". If not, circle "no". If vaguely described, "Gen. Des."
14. Did the story disclose the time that the poll was conducted-Circle "yes" or "no" or "Gen.Des."
15. Did the report state any partial results or response rate-Circle "yes" or "no" or "Gen.Des."
16. Was the story used as a newspeg or to introduce another story with the same theme-A newspeg is using the poll information as a transition to another related story. If the story is used this way circle "yes". If the poll story stood on its own circle "no".

Appendix B (continued)

17. Did the reporter or anchor offer any interpretation (meaning or implications) of the poll results-If the reporter reported the raw data and that's it circle "no". If the reporter offered additional comments about what the results imply for the campaign circle "yes".

17a. If yes to # 17, was it attributed to-Circle "Pollster" if the reporter said that the pollster gave the interpretation. Circle "Reporter/Anchor" if the reporter or anchor said that they think these results imply something. Circle "None" if the source of the comments of interpretation is not mentioned.

18. If anyone else gave interpretation, circle "yes".

18a. If yes, write who did in the blank.

18b. Circle what person who gave interpretation attributed it to: pollster, other, no attribution.

19. Were the poll results compared to other poll results-If the reporter or anchor says that the poll results compares in any way to any other poll either in the past, in another place, or to a poll conducted by someone else circle "yes". If not, circle "no".

# VITA

Cynthia E. Zeiden was born in Chicago, Illinois on November 23, 1967. She attended elementary schools in Chicago and was graduated from Mather High School in June 1985. The following August she entered Northern Illinois University, and in 1988 she received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Communication Studies. In the fall of 1989 she entered University of Tennessee, Knoxville and began study toward a Master's degree.

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