



POLITICAL POLLING IN ASIA-PACIFIC

EDITED BY
ALASTAIR CARTHEW AND SIMON WINKELMANN



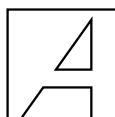
Konrad
Adenauer
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Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung
Singapore

Media Programme Asia

Political Polling in Asia-Pacific

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Alastair Carthew and Simon Winkelmann



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Publisher

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Singapore 089848
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www.kas.de/medien-asien/en/

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Layout and Design

Hotfusion
7 Kallang Place
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Singapore 339153
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Contents

Foreword _____	7
<i>By Paul Linnarz</i>	
Chapter 1	
Importance of political polls in political communication _____	9
<i>By Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Donsbach</i>	
Chapter 2	
Opinion Polls and the Political Process _____	19
<i>By Dr. Norman Abjorensen</i>	
Chapter 3	
How polls are shaping the political process _____	31
<i>By Dr. Norman Abjorensen</i>	
Chapter 4	
Focus groups: Myth or reality _____	39
<i>By Stephen Mills</i>	
Chapter 5	
Is Asia-Pacific ready for online political polling? _____	51
<i>By Rainer Faus</i>	
Chapter 6	
Media and its relationship to polling institutions: Uneasy bedfellows? _____	65
<i>By Alastair Carthew</i>	
Chapter 7	
Emerging technologies in the polling business _____	79
<i>By David Black and Arina Dafir</i>	
Chapter 8	
Do public opinion processes change through social media? _____	91
<i>By Philip Behnke</i>	
Chapter 9	
How the media and government agencies make use of polls: Insider's observation and perspective _____	101
<i>By Noppadon Kannika</i>	
Chapter 10	
Singapore maturing? Polls and politics in Singapore _____	121
<i>By Kirpal Singh</i>	
About the authors _____	127

Foreword

The use of political polling varies greatly across countries of the Asia-Pacific. From sophisticated methodologies constantly tracking political opinion in Australia and New Zealand, through to virtually non-existent polling in Singapore and some innovative methods in Malaysia and Singapore. Whatever the pace of evolution of polling as a legitimate tool in the political armoury, it is clearly now an essential component in the political sphere. It is therefore worth researching and analysing political polling and presenting the information in book format to underscore political polling's maturity within civil society in the Asia-Pacific.

This book, therefore, casts a critical, expert eye over how political polling has evolved and become an integral part of the political process in most democratic countries, since George Gallup first used scientific methods to predict the election of President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1936. These methods demonstrated how a targeted, sophisticated sampling of a relatively small group of potential voters could beat a large scale, unscientific "straw poll," which, up until then was the prevailing means of testing voter opinion.

We have employed a new method in compiling the chapters, not previously used by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's Asia Media Programme. In April, we brought together a group of pollsters from Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore and Germany, to brainstorm content for the book. We were not sure if this method of producing a book would work. Nonetheless, with an outline produced in one day, most of the attendees then volunteered to write a chapter, and, in some cases, contribute to other chapters, to bring a book together by the end of 2011.

The result is a book that garners a wide variety of analysis and opinion, that we are confident will serve as a useful academic, journalistic and general guide to, as some people say, the 'dark art' of political polling. The first chapter is a learned outline of how political polling has evolved and its importance in the political process today. The author, Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Donsbach, professor of Communication at Technische Universität Dresden in Germany, is a previous president of the World Association for Public Opinion Research and the author of many books and research papers on communication. Prof. Dr. Donsbach sets a high standard.

Stephen Mills, arguably New Zealand's pre-eminent political pollster and Dr. Norman Abjorensen, experienced journalist turned academic, respectively contribute soundly argued, cogent pieces on focus groups – long a subject of debate in the polling community – and how polls shape the political process. As a former political reporter of long standing in New Zealand, Alastair Carthew identifies some disturbing and ongoing tensions between pollsters and the media, who, in the last few decades have become dominant players in the political polling arena.

No book on media today would be complete without a chapter on the impact of new technology – particularly social media – and political polling is no exception. Rainer Faus examines the question whether Asia-Pacific is ready for online polling and David Black and Arina Dafir look at the new technologies being employed in polling. While online polling has definitely arrived, in Asia it has not emerged as a powerhouse method as quickly as anticipated. This will change as the Internet and smart phones continue their rapid rollout to general constituencies and as more sophisticated database collection, for example, becomes possible through the new technologies.

Asian-based pollsters and academics have also contributed. Noppadon Kannika, Thailand's pre-eminent pollster of the ABAC POLL Research Center, Assumption University, delivers a unique overview on the accuracy of polls, particularly exit polls, using the 2011 Thailand election as a case study and, further, an analysis of how the media makes use of the polls. Kirpal Singh, Director of the Wee Kim Wee Centre, at Singapore Management University, asks if Singapore is maturing in its approach to polls and politics.

All of these contributors bring their own special knowledge and experience to the task of creating a book that we believe will serve as a valuable reference and academic tool for many years to come. I strongly recommend the book to everyone interested in this continually evolving, influential and fascinating part of the political arena.

Paul Linnarz
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CHAPTER 1

Importance of political polls in political communication

by Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Donsbach

Introduction

Four things had to emerge and come together for modern public opinion research as we know it today: counting human beings, using humans' answers to questions as a source of scientific evidence, the principle of sampling, and thinking in variables. What is common to us today has been a long, and often rough, process. There were religious obstacles against seeing 'God's creature' as a carrier of variables, academic doubts against the laws of statistics, and, first of all, political barriers against the possibility of indicating the will of the people. It would be naive to think that all these threats to political opinion polls, belong to the past. They are still with us, although with different salience in different areas of the world. The search for patterns or 'laws' behind people's thinking and behaviours, is still often seen as a blasphemy to the individuality of man and the idiosyncrasy of his acts. Many people still doubt that we can ask a thousand to infer the opinions of millions. And, most troublesome, in some areas of the world laws still exist, or are in the making, to prohibit free public opinion research.

All this is happening more than 70 years after George Gallup's famous victory over the large scale straw poll by the *Literary Digest*. The poll predicted the wrong president on the basis of 2.3 million postcards, while Gallup was on target with just 3000 respondents, selected by a scientific method. This was the breakthrough for the survey method, although surveys had been conducted before, in Europe as well as in the United States of America. But it needed such a symbolic proof. Soon after this event George Gallup published his book, co-authored with Saul Rae, *The Pulse of Democracy*¹ and started his regular column, *America Speaks*,

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

in hundreds of American newspapers. These were the claims that came with modern public opinion polling: that it can measure the true will of the people and through the polls, they get a real voice in between elections and on all kinds of issues.

Today, we can say that two institutions have changed the political process more than anything else: the media, in particular television, and the polls. Television has popularised politics, personalised politics, created a new breed of politicians, and totally changed the rationale of political marketing. We even talk of the “mediatization of politics” and a new political system called “mediaocracy”. Public opinion polls, on the other hand, have made the most important element of democracy, i.e. public opinion, *measurable* – also they have changed political marketing, have become a major media content, and can, under certain circumstances, change the political behaviour of citizens and politicians.

Four challenges of polls in democracy

While today, a democracy is not conceivable without regularly published opinion polls in the news media, the debates about their existence as well as their performance have not ceased. The discussions circle around four main points: (1) the validity of opinion polls, (2) their accuracy, (3) their effects on the political system, and, most of all, (4) their effects on the electorate. Depending on their viewpoint of each of these dimensions, writers either see polls as a menace or a blessing for democracy. What are the arguments on each side?

The question of validity

Debates on the validity of public opinion polls go well beyond the notion of the term as used by social scientists. They are not about whether polls measure what they pretend to measure, which is the ‘empirical’ notion of validity, but whether they are measuring the right object in the first place. In representative opinion polls, every citizen has the same chance to become part of the sample, be interviewed and voice his or her opinion on all kinds of issues. As in democracy, votes are counted but not weighted by the ‘importance’, power or class of the person who casts them. This egalitarian feature of opinion polls was from the beginning, challenged by some theorists. Jürgen Habermas, the famous German sociologist and political theorist, was not the only, but probably the most influential, critic of opinion polls. In his normative view of a democracy “public opinion” is reserved for citizens who have the knowledge to make up their minds

about issues, are ready to talk about them in public situations and accept responsibility for the consequences of what they say.²

A poll, however, would ask everyone's opinion as long as the person was part of the defined population and sampled through a random procedure. The interviewer does not screen the respondents by their knowledge or their readiness to speak out in public. On the contrary, in order to convince the person at the other end of the telephone line, or at the doorstep, to grant their time for an interview, the respondent is assured that every opinion counts, that there are no right or wrong answers, and that their answers stay anonymous.

I do not want to delve too much into discussions about the "true" concept of public opinion – because there is none. Public opinion is what it is defined by the respective author. Whether it is the opinion of the well-informed, of the politically active citizen or just any majority as measured in an opinion poll, is a matter of perspective. But it is a fact that many intellectuals had, and still have, a problem with this egalitarian feature of opinion polls – particularly when the majority differs in its views from the intellectuals.

The question of accuracy

The second challenge of polls, i.e. their accuracy, makes it more often into the media and thus into public debate. However, due to journalists' general news values, it is in most cases bad news, i.e. that the polls were wrong in predicting the outcome of an election. Elections are the ultimate reality test for public opinion polls. It makes them visible and powerful, as Gallup's victory over the *Literary Digest* poll showed back in 1936, and it also makes them vulnerable. Only twelve years after Gallup's breakthrough, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* faced its most embarrassing headline when it wrongly announced "Dewey Defeats Truman", a prediction based on a sample of early results.

Election predictions are not the most valuable application of opinion polls – but they are the most visible. The media, the people and the politicians themselves want to know who will end up as the winner of an election. The problem is that polls are quite good at measuring opinions and behaviours at the time the poll is taken and of the people who respond. But to predict

2 Habermas, Jürgen (1989). *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Cambridge: MIT Press (first published in German in 1962)

future opinions and behaviours and to infer what those who have declined to participate in a poll, think and do, is a different task. This problem is currently making pollsters' lives more troublesome than ever before and the proportion of an original sample that ends up into a completed interview, i.e. the response rate, is on a steady decline. This happens for three reasons. Firstly, it becomes more difficult to technically reach a sample of the full population. In the times of face-to-face interviews this was no problem. Sample points were defined geographically and the interviewer could successfully solicit households and people within households, following a concrete random procedure. In developed countries, face-to-face interviews soon became too expensive and were replaced by the cheaper and quicker telephone interviews. Today, online interviews are gaining an everyday bigger market share and will probably become the standard interview mode very soon. Many people now have no landlines or even mobile phones, and, an online interview offers many more possibilities for stimulating the respondent. But, how do you draw a fresh representative sample of email addresses? The answer is: you can't! The consequence is that existing online polls, in most cases, either lack representativeness or are based on access panels, i.e. an already existing group of people who have given their prior consent to be interviewed – raising again questions about representativeness.

A second reason for declining response rates is people's increasing mobility. This problem is what the pollsters call "no-contact". The interviewer has a valid household number, or a front door or even an existing email address, but nobody is there. The reason for this phenomenon is changing lifestyles, to some extent caused by economically triggered mobility, more outdoor events and patchwork families.

Thirdly, the proportion of interviewees who grant an interview after being successfully contacted, is on the decline. This is what the pollsters call the "refusals. The available data from all countries show similar trends. People are just less ready to participate in a poll. And, we can see that the overall decline in the response rate has lately been more affected by the refusals than by no-contact.³ Why is this happening? Do people despise opinion polls? Not at all! All surveys show that the majority of citizens in modern democracies like the existence of polls and appreciate their democratic

3 Curtin, Richard; Presser, Stanley, and Eleanor Singer (2005). Changes in Telephone Survey Non-response Over the Past Quarter Century. *Public Opinion Quarterly*. 69: 87-98

function. For instance, eight in 10 respondents in the United States say that “the polls are a good thing for the country”⁴ and clear majorities in Germany approve the items “polls are important for science, politics and the economy” and “polls make a country more democratic”.⁵

So what is the reason for the increase in refusals? It is clearly “overfishing” and “copycatting”. “Overfishing” means that the number of polling institutes and polls conducted has also increased the likelihood that a citizen is contacted several times a year – and gets fed up with answering the phone or filling out questionnaires – however important the topic might be. “Copycatting” means that in each country marketing firms and call centres contact people by claiming they are “conducting an opinion poll” while in reality they are trying to sell something. For the citizen it becomes harder and harder to identify a serious political poll at the outset – and as a consequence they often decline the interview anyway.

Another reason for accurate election predictions becoming ever more difficult is the increasing volatility in voting behaviour. When famous election researchers such as Paul Lazarsfeld, Angus Campbell or Philip Converse conducted research in the 1940s to 1960s, a majority of citizens showed a loyalty for the same party throughout consecutive elections. Preferences for parties and their respective candidates were formed by social class, upbringing, religion or even region. This is how the concepts of the “voting predispositions” and of the “normal vote” were created: a voting behaviour explained by a few variables that, if known to the researcher, allowed a fairly accurate prediction of the person’s voting decision..

These times are gone and with the social and geographical mobility of people, and exposure to many different influences throughout their socialisation, voting behaviour has become a variable rather than a constant in their lives. One indicator of this is the timing of decision-making on whom to vote for. Today, in Germany, the majority of voters make up their minds on which party to vote for only a few months before the election – almost one in three decide a few days before the election or even on the election day

4 Hildreth, Anne (2008). Attitudes of the Public Towards Public Opinion Research and Polling. In: W. Donsbach, M.W. Traugott (eds.). *Handbook of Public Opinion Research*. London et al., Sage, pp. 441-450. see also Price, Vince and Stroud, Natalie Jomini (2005). Public Attitudes Towards Polls: Evidence From the 2000 U.S. Presidential Campaign. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*. 18,4: 393-421

5 Stocké, Volker & Langfeldt, Bettina (2003). Umfragenklima in Deutschland. Context No. 14/2003. 6-8

itself. This is a dramatic change compared to the 1970s and 1980s. And it is an ever more serious problem for the pollsters because the fieldwork of the polls on which election forecasts are based, are usually carried out days, if not weeks, before election day.

Of course, it is a truism that accurate predictions are easier when closer to the fact they predict. But with this increasing volatility of citizens' behaviours, the impact on poll accuracy is even more severe. In the absence of a well-founded party loyalty among the majority of voters, late election events can have a decisive impact on the election outcome. Take for instance, natural disasters (and their competent or incompetent handling by the incumbent), or an outstanding or catastrophic performance of a candidate in a televised debate (and its subsequent wide coverage in the media). Such campaign events have in the past led to decisive last minute changes in voting behaviour – and wrong predictions.

Taking these two developments together – the increasing problem of achieving a statistically good sample and the increasing volatility in political behaviours – it is probably fair to say that the task of political pollsters, particularly in election times, has never been more difficult than today. It is also probably safe to say that the heyday of political opinion polling took place in the late eighties and nineties when almost all households had landline telephone connections to draw the samples on. Most people then were also still excited about being interviewed and didn't change their political minds as quickly as today.

Given these developments it is amazing how accurate the polls in most countries are, after all. Between 1958 and 2004 the average deviance between the mean value of the last predictions and the election outcome in presidential races in the United States, was not more than 1.9 percent.⁶ We find similar figures for the German Allensbach Institute that over half a century shows a mean deviation between predictions and actual results, of less than one percent per party and election.

⁶ Traugott, Michael W. (2005). The Accuracy of the National Pre-election Polls in the 2004 Presidential Election. *Public Opinion Quarterly*. 69: 642-654

This continuous relative accuracy is due to ever increasing improvements in methodology, particularly in the sampling frames and even more so in data analysis. Pollsters apply the most sophisticated statistical procedures to incorporate the potential voting behaviour of those who have declined the interview, refused to say whom they would vote for, or claimed not to know at the time of the interview – in their predictions. This is part of the increasing professionalisation of political polling.

The problem of the effects of polling on the political system

In democratic systems, political figures get elected in order to lead the country for a certain time and to be re-elected (or not), if the people feel happy with their decisions. But in democracies, at least in representative systems, leaders should not always do what the majority wants if the public will is against their own convictions, or against normative or scientific evidence. Although political scientist, Lijphart (1984), defined an ideal democratic government as one whose actions are always in perfect correspondence with the preferences of all its citizens,⁷ this “correspondence” is expected to happen in the long run and in principle, rather than because of individual political issues. Political leaders who watch out, day by day, for the majority public opinion and make their decisions accordingly, are perceived to be “populists” rather than leaders, and driven by their motivation to stay in power rather than by the best policies for their country.

It is evident that several observers of the political process have argued that the existence and dissemination of political polls might have made politicians more populist. Today, in many countries politicians can learn almost on a daily basis what the public thinks and therefore, the decisions that would increase their own popularity and chances to be re-elected. And, governments and parties spend a lot of money to track public opinion. But has this made politics more “populist”?

Political scientists and communication researchers use a more neutral term to describe the phenomenon at hand: “responsiveness”.⁸ Have political leaders or political systems in general become more responsive to public opinion than in the past? It is a methodological challenge to find a well-

7 Lijphart, Arend (1984). *Democracies. Patterns of Majoritarian and Consensus Government in Twenty-One Countries*. New Haven: London

8 Eulau, Heinz & Karps, Paul D.(1978). *The Puzzle of Representation: Specifying Components of Responsiveness*. In Eulau/Wahlke (eds). *The Politics of Representation*. Beverly Hills: London. 55-71

proven empirical answer to this question. Several researchers have tried it with most sophisticated and complex research designs. For instance, Page and Shapiro have statistically compared changes of public opinion between 1935 and 1979, with subsequent political decisions on the city, state and federal level in the United States⁹ They found that, indeed, political decisions in the second half of their period under investigation, showed a greater degree of responsiveness than in the first half. However, whether this difference is due to the dissemination of opinion polls remains unproven. A German study with a similar design, compared public opinion shifts and political decisions or assertions in the German parliament between 1949 and 1990, and found no evidence for an increasing responsiveness.¹⁰

We thus have no clear evidence for the allegation that the existence of political polls has made politics more populist. And even if this evidence exists, it would not speak against the polls but against the political personnel who misuse them for short term advantage, and to stay in power. In the long run, we can assume that people in democratic countries will value political leadership more than volatile decision-making, on the basis of ever-changing majorities.

The problem of the effects of polling on the electorate

Another allegation concerning the possible effects of political polls is even more pronounced: that is, their public availability, widely spread by the media, that might affect the electorate. All kinds of hypotheses have been developed (usually voiced by politicians who have lost an election) about how political poll results might have affected an election outcome. The most popular of these is the “bandwagon-effect”. This means the assumption that a proportion of undecided voters will vote for the expected winner of the election, in order that they too will be among the winners – to be on the wagon where the music plays, i.e. the “bandwagon”.

Numerous studies have been conducted to prove whether such allegations are right or wrong. The problem is that there have always been opposite assumptions. The bandwagon effect has been juxtaposed by the hypothesis that some people might vote for the potential loser (“underdog effect”). The assumption that people might stay at home on election day because their

9 Page, Benjamin I. & Shapiro, Robert Y. (1983). Effects of Public Opinion on Policy. *American Political Science Review*. 77: 175-190

10 Brettschneider, F.(1996). Public Opinion and Parliamentary Action. The Responsiveness of the German Bundestag in Comparative Perspective. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*. 8: 292-311

party or candidate, according to the polls, is losing anyway (“defeatism effect”) has been opposed by the assumption that potential voters of the assumed winner will not go to the election polls because they think their side will win anyway (“lethargy effect”).

The scientific evidence of the effect of published opinion polls on the electorate, is less than conclusive. Most studies have shown no effect at all, and a few have showed a bandwagon effect.¹¹ Again, even if there was more evidence of effects, there would be no reason to blame the polls. People have always looked for indicators or clues for the best choice in an election. And politicians have always tried to exploit these motivations. Therefore, there is no better argument than that ruled on by the Supreme Court of the Philippines, in 2001, for a bill that had been introduced into the parliament trying to put a ban on polls prior to elections. In its decision the court said: “To sustain the ban on survey results would sanction the censorship of all speaking by candidates in an election on the ground that the usual bombast and hyperbolic claims made during the campaign can confuse the voters and thus debase the electoral process,” and went on by saying that “...the assailed law, in effect, shows a bias by preferring personal opinion to statistical results.”¹²

This was as wise a ruling as could be possible. Banning the publication of poll results is not curing the effects, but the symptoms. If people search for clues and “little helpers” on whom to vote for – and find them in opinion polls – it is not polls that are the problem but the political system itself that, obviously, does not offer enough other indicators on whom to vote for. In such situations people seem not to have enough substantial political information and arguments to base choices on, or the political contenders seem not to offer these messages. But political polls that show who is ahead or who is trailing in public opinion cannot be the problem.¹³

Why we need political polls

The already mentioned German philosopher, Jürgen Habermas, has described, and as many say romanticised, the English coffee houses of the 17th and 18th Century, as historically the first homes of public opinion

11 Hardmeier, Sibylle (2008). The Effects of Published Polls on Citizens. In: W. Donsbach, M.W. Traugott (eds.). Handbook of Public Opinion Research. 504-515

12 Excerpt from the *Manila Standard* of 6 May 2001, pages 1-2

13 See also: Donsbach, W. (2001). Who's Afraid of Election Polls? Normative and Empirical Arguments for the Freedom of Pre-Election Surveys. Amsterdam /Lincoln: ESOMAR/ WAPOR

and public discourses. I do not go so far as to say that political polls have replaced public discourse about the “topics of government”. A democracy needs the exchange of opinions and not only their measurement. As Hauser writes, “the telos of public deliberation is the emergence of informed and reasoned public opinion. If the communication theory of public spheres in general, and the political public sphere in particular, has more than theoretical significance, it lies in its capacity to model actual communicative practices that lead to considered public opinion.”¹⁴

However, the polls do have a democratic role. This is the reason authoritarian systems do not allow free political polls. They are not interested in the will of the people and they are afraid of the results. To sum up, political polls have three major functions in democracy: the representation function, the communication function and the enlightenment function.

Representation means that political polls tell us what the public thinks on current issues. Thus, they are a representation of the public will – which does not mean that governments have to follow that will precisely.

Communication means a two-fold function. The polls tell governments what the people expect and thus inform about the public will. And polls show the degree of legitimisation that a government has. Both are, also in the political systems theory of David Easton, necessary inputs into the circular system that makes politics function.

Enlightenment means that political polls supply hard empirical facts against subjective assertions of what the public really thinks and really wants, be it by politicians or the press. This is, again, the argument that the Philippines Supreme Court used. Polls are usually more objective and more evidence-based than all other assertions made about public opinion.

Therefore, free political polls are an essential part of any democratic system. Banning polls, even if it is for a certain time prior to elections, violates people’s basic rights and treats them as immature, or as unable to deal with such information and make the best of it. But as with a free press, the normative and theoretical function is not enough. The polling business in each and every country must apply best practices to justify its existence and freedoms.

¹⁴ Hauser, Gerard A. (2007). Vernacular Discourse and the Epistemic Dimension of Public Opinion. *Communication Theory*. 17: 333–339

CHAPTER 2

Opinion Polls and the Political Process

By Dr. Norman Abjorensen

Introduction

Never have governments known more about the people they govern and what they think than at the present time, thanks to the increasing use of opinion polls and other measuring tools such as focus groups and citizens' juries. But does this necessarily translate into better government and a more robust democracy? The answer is by no means a simple one. What, for example, do governments and political leaders do with the seemingly endless printout of public opinion? Do they use the information to adjust their policies accordingly, more in line with public opinion? Or do they use it to try to reshape public opinion to more closely approximate government policy? The answer is perhaps a bit of both, depending on the circumstances and the issues, but in any case, it is clear from even a cursory examination of the role of opinion polls in the political process that their increasing use is doing far more than just enabling the gauging of opinion; it is impacting on and reshaping the political process itself.

The extent of polling

Political polling is well established in the older democracies, and has also taken a foothold not just in newer democracies, but also in conflict-torn countries like Iraq and Afghanistan. Whereas once polling was largely restricted to voting intentions during an election campaign, the growth of polling now extends to a whole range of policy and social issues. The steady growth in the business of sounding out public opinion has, by and large, accompanied the growth of universal suffrage and electoral democracy.¹ Just as commercial businesses have long engaged in market

1 Tony Cowling, 2008, "The Effects of Globalisation on the Perception of Democracy", in Marita Carballo and Ulf Hjelmar, (eds.) *Public Opinion Polling in a Globalized World*, Springer-Verlag, Berlin, p. 15.

research for their products, so too have governments embraced political and social marketing to help determine public attitudes to both existing and proposed policies. In some cases, governments will even take soundings of public opinion on an issue before framing policies – an approach that enables governments to tap into pre-existing frames of reference that will often facilitate the process of change which might otherwise encounter resistance.

Public opinion polling now has a global reach. Both commercial polling organisations and research institutes operate around the world. The US-based Pew Research Center, for example, runs a Global Attitudes Project which conducts public opinion surveys around the world on a broad array of subjects ranging from people's assessments of their own lives to their views about the current state of the world and important issues of the day. More than 270,000 interviews in 57 countries have been conducted as part of the project's work, analysing attitudes on issues as diverse as immigration to views on the aftermath of the killing of Osama bin Laden in Pakistan.²

Polling is also being used to test the effectiveness of multi-national operations. In the wake of military intervention in Iraq, for example, a poll of Iraqi public opinion in 2010 released by the International Republican Institute (IRI) yielded three significant findings: a majority of Iraqis were now pessimistic about their country's future, the provision of basic services was a bigger challenge than security, and Ayad Allawi must be part of a new government.³

In Afghanistan, much effort has gone into tracking the mood of the people, especially as international opinion about the NATO-led intervention wavers. In the sixth poll in a series conducted by the Asia Institute, 47 per cent of respondents in 2010 said that the country was moving in the right direction. This figure had been increasing since 2008 (38 per cent) and 2009 (42 per cent). The proportion of respondents (27 per cent) who said

2 Pew Research Center, 2011, <http://pewglobal.org/category/survey-reports/>

3 Alexander Mayer, 2010, "Public Opinion in Iraq: Pessimism, Poor Services, and Ayad Allawi", *Current Intelligence*, 30 September, <http://www.currentintelligence.net/features/2010/9/30/public-opinion-in-iraq-pessimism-poor-services-and-ayad-alla.html>

the country was moving in the wrong direction had fallen compared to 2008 (32 per cent) and 2009 (29 per cent). The remaining 22 per cent had mixed feelings (23 per cent in 2008 and 21 per cent in 2009).⁴

In the former countries of the Soviet bloc, what opinion polling that took place under communist rule was a closely guarded secret, the findings for the eyes of senior party and state officials only, and then primarily for reasons of surveillance. Bulgaria, like most of the former communist bloc, has now embraced polling with a vengeance, and it has been said that no Bulgarian politician makes a speech without referring to “the will of the people as expressed in opinion polls”. But it may well be a case of overkill, as many Bulgarians are now reported to have grown wary of “shameless manipulation” of opinion polls and surveys by politicians, public relations people and spin doctors.⁵

The impact of polling on the political process

Nobody in politics can ignore opinion polls, no matter how much it might be denied. At one level, they provide another media platform from which to report on politics as an entertainment or game with a fluctuating score line. Critics argue that such media treatment, in seeking to popularise political contests for a mass audience, trivialises serious issues. On another level, the trend towards a politics both driven by and obsessed with the polls itself constitutes a distraction from critical areas of policy. The constant pursuit of short-term popularity and impact in the news cycle has turned politics into entertainment, or a sideshow as former Australian finance minister, Lindsay Tanner, termed it.

In turn, politicians and parties are adapting their behaviour to suit the new rules of the game – to such an extent that the contest of ideas is being supplanted by the contest for laughs.⁶

Polls matter to political leaders not much so because they purport to reflect public sentiment (which they do to an extent), but because they convey what the public is thinking *about* (and never mind the fact that this

4 The Asia Institute, 2010, <http://asiafoundation.org/news/2010/11/asia-foundation-releases-2010-afghan-public-opinion-poll/>

5 Rossen Vassilev, 2004, “Bulgaria”, in John G. Geer (ed.) *Public Opinion and Polling Around the World*, ABC-CLIO, Santa Barbara, p. 527.

6 Lindsay Tanner, 2011, *Sideshow: Dumbing Down Democracy*, Scribe Publications, Melbourne.

“thinking” may be only a knee-jerk response to an interviewer’s question). In this sense, the poll itself represents a frame into which responses are fed, and far from being merely a passive metric of public opinion, it is in fact a catalyst. The poll is not telling respondents what to think so much as what to think about. It is possible, therefore, to feed into the public mind, by way of a poll, an issue that previously had not even arisen; polls can, and do, shape discourse. One study warned of the propensity of polls to create or reframe issues, observing that “when used as a gauge of ‘public opinion’ ... polls not only miss the mark but shift the target”. Such a role was not necessarily conducive to greater public awareness of an issue, and offered “at best a naïve and narrow view of democracy”.⁷

The growing intensity and frequency of opinion polling, no longer confined to election campaigns, has had the effect of bringing about the ‘permanent campaign’, and with the media eagerly reporting every shift in the standing of the government or a leader, so, too, has media reporting moved to a ‘permanent campaign’ footing. The term is attributed to Sydney Blumenthal, a former journalist who became an influential adviser to US President

Bill Clinton. In his 1980 book, *The Permanent Campaign*, Blumenthal argued that changes in American politics from old-style patronage and party organisation to that based on the modern technology of computer driven polling and media had brought into existence a fundamentally new system in which political consultants had replaced the party bosses and brought with them a new model by which campaigning itself became the dominant form of governing.⁸ Even before Blumenthal’s book, the notion of the permanent campaign had already made its presence felt in the American political landscape with a memo written by a pollster, Patrick Caddell, to president-elect Jimmy Carter just before he assumed office in 1977, entitled “Initial Working Paper on Political Strategy,” in which he argued that “governing with public approval requires a continuing political campaign.”⁹

7 Salmon, Charles T. and Theodore L. Glasser, 1995, *The Politics of Polling and the Limits of Consent*, in Salmon and Glasser (eds.), *Public Opinion and the Communication of Consent*, Gilford Press New York, p. 449.

8 Sidney Blumenthal, 1980, *The Permanent Campaign: Inside the World of Elite Political Operatives*, Beacon Press, New York.

9 Quoted in Joe Klein, 2005, “The Perils of the Permanent Campaign”, *Time*, 5 October.

A very real danger in such an approach is that long-term vision, once regarded as a key attribute of a political leader, is replaced by a desire for short-term tactical gain – that is, making apparent headway in the polls and the ever-shortening news cycle. As long ago as 1968, *Time* magazine warned that the “greatest danger remains that polls¹⁰ tempt candidates to be popular rather than right.”

Polling has had a major impact on the ways in which political parties traditionally have functioned, and this in turn has fed into the political process in which the parties are the dominant actors. From the 1970s onwards, the nature of political communication itself underwent a series of profound changes with a realisation by parties that politics and the messages that it purveyed were essentially commodities in a marketplace of ideas. The local party branch and its legion of loyal volunteers were no longer the essential foot soldiers that they once were; the primary role had shifted to a new breed of political professionals – pollsters, marketing experts and advertising gurus who conceptualised, devised and developed market-tested themes for slickly packaged advertising campaigns, mostly geared to television. A former senior state politician in Australia, Michael Costa, wrote that the political process had been turned upside down.

It’s a kind of voodoo politics that has turned techniques such as focus groups and polling on their head. Instead of using information from these techniques to adapt the message around a well-thought-out policy, they use these techniques to develop a policy.¹¹

By providing information about voting intentions, it has been argued that opinion polls can sometimes influence the behaviour of voters. In his book *The Broken Compass*, British journalist Peter Hitchens claims that opinion polls are really a device not so much for measuring but for influencing public opinion.¹² Polls are costly things to conduct; it would be naïve to believe that money is spent merely to discover what is on the mind of citizens. The sociologist Loïc Wacquant has described polls as instruments “not of political knowledge but of political action”.¹³

10 “Do Polls Halp Democracy?”, 1968, *Time*, 31 May.

11 Michael Costa, 2010, “Rudd Will Pay for Voodoo Politics”, *The Australian*, 1 June.

12 Peter Hitchens, 2009, *The Broken Compass: How British Politics Lost its Way*, Continuum, London, p. 4.

13 Loïc Wacquant, 2004, “Pointers on Pierre Bourdieu and Democratic Politics”, *Constellations*, Volume 11, No 1, p. 7.

Some polls have a determinedly more political purpose than others. The role played by pollsters is governed by whether they are independent or privately commissioned – an important, though often overlooked, consideration. The activities of independent polling organisations are closely tied to the media whose principal concerns involve a mixture of “selling news” and a commentary on contemporary political debates.¹⁴ These polls tend to be on political questions of public interest, such as party popularity, party leadership, voting intentions or popular reactions to issues of controversy, but it needs to be remembered that the media themselves are not disinterested observers but can be, and often are, political actors in their rights with a political agenda of their own.

The commissioning of a poll is therefore almost always a part of a larger political strategy of a political actor or actors, with the aim of achieving particular political outcomes. There are no guarantees from either the client or the polling organisation about how data gathered will be used, and details of polling data and analysis generally find their way into the public domain only where there is strategic advantage seen in doing so. Independent opinion polls by reputable polling organisations, however, are far less likely to be biased, but a degree of caution should be exercised in scrutinising poll data.

Former US vice-president Al Gore took a similar line to Hitchens, noting that voters were increasingly seen as targets for easy manipulation by those seeking their support to exercise power. Gore wrote focus groups and polling were designed not so much to ascertain the view of the public, but rather to derive specific information – that is, “feedback used in fine-tuning their efforts at manipulation.”¹⁵

While sophisticated collection of data from opinion polls is associated with the established democracies, it is often assumed that its emulation in democratising or newly democratic countries attest to democratic advance. But is this necessarily the case?

One study suggests caution in mistaking the adoption of democratic practices for real democratic change. Eve-Lotta Hedman has found

14 Liz Young, 1995, “The Political Significance of Opinion Polls, *Research Note 43, 1995-96*, Parliamentary Library Research Service, Commonwealth of Australia.

15 Al Gore, 2007, “Reason usurped by blissful ignorance”, *Weekend Australian*, 2-3 June.

that “democratic deficit” is not confined to the older democracies, and in Southeast Asia, as elsewhere, it is in evidence along with instances of authoritarian relapse. She notes, in a study of public opinion in the Philippines that “the actual political dynamics and lived experiences of such ostensibly democratic developments have often remained at striking odds with the principles and promises of liberal democracy”. Opinion polling has changed the nature of political campaigns, playing a key role in candidate selection, party-switching by politicians, and the unravelling of coalitions. However, while polling and the notion of ‘public opinion’ have become established facts of political and social life in post-Marcos Philippines, and were used extensively in the 2010 presidential election, they actually served to obscure an underlying, and unchanging, reality.

[F]or all the countless quality of life surveys and political polls conducted in the past quarter-century on a pluralistic one-person, one-vote basis, it is difficult to dismiss the charge levelled by critics that the practice of polling serves to obscure profound realities of deprivation, poverty, and social inequality in the country today.¹⁶

Government responsiveness to polling

That governments govern only with the consent of the people is a cornerstone of democratic theory and practice; it goes to the very heart of the democratic ideal that sovereignty is derived from the people. There is an assumption about political democracy that the decision-makers elected by the people will take account of the expressed will of the people and respond to it. Theoretically, a well-functioning democracy is predicated on three key factors.

- First, the citizenry must have access to reliable information with which to develop intelligent and well-informed attitudes.
- Second, there has to be a mechanism through which these attitudes are articulated and transmitted to political leaders and decision makers.
- Third, the political elite must respond.¹⁷

16 Eva-Lotta E. Hedman, 2010, “The Politics of ‘Public Opinion’ in the Philippines”, *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 29, 4, pp. 97-118.

17 Dennis S. Ippolito, Thomas G. Walker, Kenneth L. Kolson, 1976, *Public Opinion and Responsible Democracy*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, p. 301.

Implicit in such a democracy is the existence of a widely accessible education system, a free independent and unfettered news media, and, most importantly, an effective means of public attitude articulation that itself is dependent on the existence of a robust and diverse civil society and the guarantee of freedom of association. By far, the most important means of interest-group articulation is the political party. Without the freedom and capacity for interest groups to organise politically, a vital cog in the machinery of public attitude articulation is missing.

Yet, with all these elements seemingly in place, such as in many advanced Western liberal democracies, significant gaps have become apparent between mainstream public opinion as measured in the polls and elite opinion – a phenomenon seen as constituting a major part of what has been described as “democratic deficit.” For example, in Australia, wide and widening gulfs have been recorded across a whole range of key economic and social issues. Most notably, the biggest discrepancy is seen in issues relating to globalization, with half of those surveyed seeing globalization as bad for job security, while 65 per cent support limiting imports to protect the economy and 42 per cent in favour of curbing the foreign ownership of property. Only 56 per cent of Australians surveyed approved of seeking closer economic ties with Asia, 74 per cent were of the view that the United States had too much power in world affairs and 75 per cent believed international corporations damaged local business.¹⁸

By and large, the structural changes in the Australian economy brought about to accommodate greater integration with global business have been introduced through an elite consensus in a similar way that has also seen the wholesale privatisation of publicly-owned assets despite strong majorities in favour of retaining public ownership of key utilities, such as water, power generation, railways and telecommunications. Such a discrepancy between what the people think and what governments do, has fed growing citizen disaffection with the political processes, public institutions and even democracy itself.¹⁹ One survey of attitudes towards legislators revealed an alarming decline in their standing, with one in three voters of the view that lawmakers used their public office for financial gain

18 S. Wilson, G. Meagher, R. Gibson, D. Denmark, (eds.) 2005, *Australian Social Attitudes: The First Report*, UNSW Press, Sydney.

19 Ian Marsh, 2006, “Policy Convergence Between the Major Parties and the Representation Gap in Australian Politics”, in Marsh (ed.), *Political Parties in Transition?*, Federation Press, Sydney, p. 134

and only one in four believed legislators had a high moral code.²⁰ Another survey found 68 per cent of voters of the view that political parties were necessary, but 76 per cent thought they did not think parties cared about the views of ordinary people.²¹

How do political actors manage to discount opinion in pursuing unpopular policy objectives and remain in office? The answer, according to a theory developed by two American political scientists, Lawrence R. Jacobs and Robert Y. Shapiro, is by adopting a strategy aimed at reducing the potential electoral costs of ignoring mainstream opinion. They carefully craft how they present their policy stances in a way that attracts favourable media coverage by which they “win” public support for what they want. Jacobs and Shapiro call this strategy *crafted* talk.

If public opinion does not change in the desired direction, politicians change their behaviour with the imminent approach of...elections by temporarily increasing their responsiveness to centrist opinion even if it requires compromising their policy objectives.²²

The use of such “crafted talk” is heavily dependent on opinion polling – pinpointing “the most alluring words, symbols and arguments” to move public opinion. The aim is not so much to respond to public opinion but to *simulate responsiveness*.²³ Public opinion research, in the words of John Zaller, is used to move voters to “hold opinions that they would not hold if aware of the best available information and analysis”.²⁴

What the polls can tell us

Arguments persist about not only what it is that polls do and how they are used, but also about what it is that they measure. Is there really something discernible and discoverable that is called public opinion? The French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, in a provocatively titled article, “Public Opinion

20 Ian McAllister, 2000, “Keeping Them Honest: Public and Elite Perceptions of Ethical Conduct Amongst Australian Legislators”, *Political Studies*, vol 18 (2), pp. 217-33

21 D. Jaensch, P. Brent, B. Bowden, 2004, *Australian Political Parties in the Spotlight*, Democratic Audit of Australia, Report No. 4.

22 Lawrence R. Jacobs and Robert Y. Shapiro, 2000, *Politicians Don't Pander: Political Manipulation and the Loss of Democratic Responsiveness*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, p. 27.

23 Jacobs & Shapiro, p. xv.

24 John Zaller, 1992, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, Cambridge University Press, New York, p. 313.

Does Not Exist,” questioned the validity of the three basic assumptions that underpin opinion polls: that everyone can and does have an opinion, that all opinions are equal, and that there exists a prior consensus on the questions being asked. To Bourdieu, “public opinion” as presented in the form of survey statistics in the news media “is a pure and simple artefact whose function is to dissimulate the fact that the state of the opinion at a given moment is a system of forces, of tensions.”²⁵

Public opinion, as measured, can of course be transient like a photograph, it is true only at the moment at which it is taken. While Bourdieu’s scepticism has certain validity, the sampling of opinion can nevertheless shed light on the often similarly elusive concept of political culture and how people perceive themselves, their governance and their political and social institutions. One ambitious survey undertaken by the Global Barometer²⁶ looked at people’s perceptions of democracy around the world and, in the example of East Asia, embracing Japan, China, South Korea, Mongolia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Thailand, found some remarkable similarities. Concerns about corruption in government ranked highest with almost half of those surveyed of the view that corruption was rampant amongst nearly all or most public officials, with the majority of the rest believing corruption was present, but confined to a few officials. About half indicated they had no interest or minimal interest in politics and trust in political institutions was modest. Interestingly, some two-thirds of those surveyed – excluding those in China – expressed satisfaction with the working of democracy in their country.

Changes that might otherwise seem both abrupt and unexpected can be both anticipated and explained in opinion polling. The first serious electoral setback for the dominant People’s Action Party (PAP) that has ruled Singapore in an uninterrupted span of more than half a century was not entirely a surprise, according to a poll taken on the eve of the 2011 election which saw the PAP share of the vote fall to a record low of just 60.1 per cent, down 6.5 per cent from the previous election. The result was pinpointed with accuracy by a UMR Research poll of more than 500 representative voters. Speculation that support was drifting away from the PAP was confirmed both in voting intentions and rising concerns,

25 Pierre Bourdieu, “Public Opinion Does Not Exist,” 1971, in A. Matelart and S. Siegelau (eds.) *Communication and Class Struggle*, International General/IMMRC, New York p. 224.

26 See www.globalbarometer.org/governanceindicators

specifically about the cost of living and government accountability and transparency.²⁷ Despite the drop in voter support, the PAP still won 81 of the 87 seats, but what the result and the poll findings tell us is that there is rising dissatisfaction with the PAP and its policies and style of government.

However, not all players in the political process welcome the intrusion of opinion polling, and indeed some countries have even imposed restrictions and outright bans. In India, for example, the Election Commission has asked the government to legislate for a ban on both opinion and exit polls. The chief commissioner, S.Y. Quraishi, has claimed that they exert “undue influence” and create “confusion in the minds of voters...”²⁸

The polls do, from time to time, reveal some unwelcome truths to governments, such as the perception in Malaysia that corruption is rampant. According to a poll in 2009 by the Merdeka Center for Opinion Research, 40 per cent of respondents said corruption was a very serious issue in Malaysia, while 41 per cent regarded it as “somewhat serious”.²⁹ Amid an embarrassed silence by the government, the watchdog agency, Transparency International, commented that the perception “may be attributed to the perception of little progress in combating corruption, and lack of political will in implementing effective anti-corruption measures.”³⁰ One commentator sees the analysis of public opinion in Malaysia and other countries in the region as a significant advance for civil society.

This is because in the past, the government sometimes steamrolled public opinion by saying things like: “This is what the rakyat (people) wants!” Or worse: “I don’t care whether the public likes it, I know this policy is good for them.”³¹

Political leadership in a democracy was always regarded as a reciprocal process: an elected leader striving to represent the will of the majority, but occasionally having to cajole and convince to get his or her way. However, the advent of opinion polling has affected the nature of political leadership.

27 UMR Research, 2011, “Singapore General Election 2011, Pre-election study”

28 “Opinion Polls Can be Twisted”, 2011, *Asian Age*, 5 April.

29 Merdeka Center for Opinion Research, 2009.

30 “Malaysians See Country as Seriously Corrupt”, 2009, Angus Reid Global Monitor, 26 November. http://www.angus-reid.com/polls/37660/malaysians_see_country_as_seriously_corrupt/

31 Reme Ahmad, 2009, “Opinion Polls Suddenly Hot in Malaysia”, *Straits Times Blogs*, 14 July <http://blogs.straitstimes.com/2009/7/14/opinion-polls-suddenly-hot-in-malaysia>

Douglas Bailey, a US Republican adviser who had helped run Gerald Ford's 1976 presidential campaign, once said: "It's no longer necessary for a political candidate to guess what an audience thinks. He can [find out] with a nightly tracking poll. So it's no longer likely that political leaders are going to lead. Instead, they're going to follow."³²

Conclusion

Just as developments in the mass media, such as newspapers, radio, television and now the Internet and social media, have impacted on the political process, so too has the growing sophistication in gathering and measuring public opinion in its many manifestations. It is first and foremost a political tool and politics is essentially about power, so we need to see opinion polls as a means of seeking, acquiring or retaining power in a political market place. Like any tools, polls can be used for good – such as identifying hitherto unknown issues of public concern – or ill – by seeking to manipulate, deceive or conceal.

As political tools, they can provide a frame of ready reference to delineate issues under discussion, but that framing process itself can be highly selective or even dishonest. In terms of how political leaders and elites respond to measured public opinion, polls are of immense significance. On the one hand, as we have seen, political leaders can seek to turn public opinion to their advantage through a range of responses or, on the other hand, can pander to shifts in opinion that might suggest populism.

In any case, opinion polling is firmly entrenched in the political landscape, and its advent and growing deployment are changing not only political communication but the political process itself.

³² Quoted in Robert G. Kaiser, 2011, "David S. Broder – the best political reporter of his time", *Washington Post*, 10 March.

CHAPTER 3

How polls are shaping the political process

by Dr. Norman Abjorensen

Introduction

The growth of the opinion polling industry, with its considerable potential to impact on the very opinion it purports to measure, continues to be of concern to some governments, and attempts and proposals to regulate aspects of the process are not uncommon. Attempts have been made to ban certain types of polls altogether, as in India, but more usual are regulatory measures directed at the timing of polls in relation to elections, or the uses of poll data. France has long had a ban on the reporting of opinion polls during election periods, but not at other times. A 2003 survey found that 30 countries – nearly half of those surveyed – have some kind of restriction on the publication of polls.¹

Why are governments worried about the publishing and dissemination of public opinion? Is there not a conflict here with the noble and bold sentiment of Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which upholds the right to freedom of opinion and expression and the right to seek, receive and impart information without interference? The fear of influence on voters, undue or otherwise, underpins what is essentially an attitude that is at once both ambivalent and ambiguous, on the part of the rulers towards the ruled. On the one hand, they like to know what is on the mind of voters, but all too often what they find out is not what they want to hear, and nor do they want others to hear it. There is quite clearly an inherent tension in the process that can, and does, interrupt and even distort the ongoing conversation between the government and governed that is the political process.

¹ Stangenberg, Fritz (2003). The Freedom to Publish Opinion Poll Results: Report on a Worldwide Update. The Foundation for Information, ESOMAR

Restrictions on opinion polling and publication of polls are by no means restricted to undemocratic regimes.

Media blackouts before elections are perhaps the most visible restriction. Legislators invent many reasons to put a burden on public opinion research, be it a (misunderstood) concern for the protection of personal data, or a preservation of the “dignity of the election process.” No one ever has questioned the “dignity” of the many interest-driven claims that politicians make about what the public thinks and wants during election times. It seems as if free public opinion research is a challenge to the monopoly of others – including the press – to define public opinion.²

Influence of political polls

To what extent, if any, do polls really influence voting behaviour? There are numerous theories about how opinion polls influence voter behaviour, the most commonly cited being the “bandwagon hypothesis”, which holds that published predictions can tend to exert pressure on undecided voters to vote for the party that is expected to win. The “underdog effect” is also frequently raised: information that one party is ahead in the polls may encourage other people to vote for the weaker party. Other issues raised are concerns about the effect on voter turnout in elections where voting is non-compulsory, and that of “tactical voting” in systems of proportional representation where decisions on whether to support a party close to the barrier for parliamentary representation, may be based on media reporting of poll data.³ There is by no means universal agreement on these claimed effects and, indeed, one international expert, Professor Wolfgang Donsbach, has emphatically dismissed the possible effects, writing: “As a whole, the effects remain first of all minimal and secondly they can be completely harmless.”⁴

The pioneer United States pollster, George Gallup, noted more than 60 years ago that the question of government regulation of opinion polling was raised in every Congress, but just what constituted a poll was itself problematic.

2 Frankovic, V. (2003). Foreword from WAPOR, in Fritz Spangenberg (2003), *The Freedom to Publish Opinion Polls Results: Report on a Worldwide Update*. The Foundation for Information, ESOMAR

3 Petersson, Olof (2003). *Regulating Opinion Polls*. Discussion Paper, Democratic Audit of Sweden, Centre for Business and Policy Studies: Stockholm

4 Donsbach, Wolfgang (2001). *Election Polls? Normative and Empirical Arguments for the Freedom of Pre-Election Surveys*. The Foundation for Information, ESOMAR.

"The mere definition of a poll is an almost impossible task. Is a newspaper which sends its political writer across the country to ask voters their views on issues or candidates making a poll? Is an educational society which sends a questionnaire to its members seeking facts regarding their attitude toward educational problems or proposed legislation before Congress making a poll? Is a market research organization taking a poll when it seeks to learn how many homes are wired in the country and how many would install electricity if it were made available? These are but a few of hundreds of similar questions that can be asked."⁵

What Gallup advocated was not government regulation but stringent self-regulation by the industry itself. An attempt to introduce a total ban on opinion polls in India in 1999, was successfully challenged by a newspaper. India's Electoral Commission, acting on an initiative from a meeting of all the country's political parties, mounted an argument that opinion and exit polls were detrimental to democracy because:

- Media-driven opinion polls and forecasts based on these are widely noted by the public at large;
- these polls therefore influence the process by which people make up their minds about who to vote for; and
- this influence is either illegitimate, for most of the forecasts are not correct, or undesirable anyway as it adversely affects the level-playing ground in politics.⁶

India still maintains a hostile attitude to opinion polls, with the country's Electoral Commissioner in 2011 reported as saying they served only to confuse voters.⁷ In an interview, the Commissioner, S.Y. Quraishi, explained his stand against opinion polls, claiming they "disturb the level playing-field".

"There is undue influence and confusion created in the minds of voters in a scenario where multi-phased polls are increasingly taking place. Besides, there are reports that such polls get manipulated in favour of or against contending parties. So, in 2009, Parliament enacted a law banning exit polls. The EC wants a ban on opinion polls too and

5 Gallup, George (1948). On the Regulation of Polling. *Public Opinion Quarterly*. 12,4: 733-735

6 www.indian-elections.com/national-issues/ban-on-opinion-and-exit-polls.html

7 "Need to Ban Opinion Polls, says SCS", *Times of India*, 13 February 2011

has asked the government to enact legislation for banning them. We feel that an opinion poll too can be manipulated, especially when we're grappling with the phenomenon of 'paid news'."⁸

The "French Model"

France has long been at odds with its European neighbours over the issue of opinion polls, but has modified its earlier rigid stance under international pressure. In 1977, France imposed a ban on publishing, circulating and commenting on opinion polls, during the week preceding an election.⁹ (See appendix). The ban was immediately put to the test between two ballots in the parliamentary elections in the same year, when the newspaper *Le Parisien* published an analysis and commentary of an opinion poll under the heading, "First round of parliamentary elections – what the French people wanted to say". In a protracted legal process, the newspaper's editor was charged and acquitted, with the court ruling that the law was in conflict with key provisions of the European Convention of Human Rights. The prosecutor subsequently appealed the decision on the grounds that although they provided citizens with information, opinion polls carried out before a ballot could also influence voting. The appeals court overturned the acquittal only to have it restored on appeal to France's highest court, the Court of Cassation, which in 2001 found that the provisions of the 1977 Act introduced a restriction on the freedom to receive and communicate information that was not necessary for the protection of the legitimate interests listed in Article 10(2) of the European Convention.¹⁰

The intended effect of the French law, which did not prohibit polling as such, was to shield the voting public from knowing the results of polling. While the immediate focus of the law was on polls during election campaigns, it also contained provisions aimed at regulating polls between elections. For example, any publication of a poll had to include details about the identity of the organisation conducting the poll, the sample size and the time of the survey. Eventually, the law was changed in 2002 with the embargo reduced from one week to two days. That is, the publication of polls was prohibited only in Election Day and the day preceding. The shift reflected a growing consensus in Europe on poll regulation.

8 "Opinion Polls Can Be Twisted", *Deccan Chronicle*, 5 April 2011

9 Law on the Publication and Dissemination of Certain Opinion Polls (Law of 19 July 1977)

10 Blocman, Amélie (2001). French Regulations on Publishing Opinion Polls Incompatible of Article 10 of the ECHR. IRIS-2001 9:15/36, <http://merlin.obs.coe.int/iris/2001/9/article36.en.html>

The 47-member Council of Europe has discussed harmonising legislation on opinion polls, but so far has taken no steps in that direction. It has, however, issued a recommendation on media coverage of election campaigns, emphasising both the independence and responsibility of media in coverage of election campaigns generally.

Regulatory or self-regulatory frameworks should ensure that the media, when disseminating the results of opinion polls, provide the public with sufficient information to make a judgement on the value of the polls. Such information could, in particular:

- Name the political party or other organisation or person which commissioned and paid for the poll;
- identify the organisation conducting the poll and the methodology employed;
- indicate the sample and margin of error of the poll;
- indicate the date and/or period when the poll was conducted.

All other matters concerning the way in which the media present the results of opinion polls should be decided by the media themselves.

Any restriction by member states forbidding the publication/broadcasting of opinion polls (on voting intentions) on voting day or a number of days before the election should comply with Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, as interpreted by the European Court of Human Rights.

Similarly, in respect of exit polls, member states may consider prohibiting reporting by the media on the results of such polls, until all polling stations in the country have closed.¹¹

Attempts to impose any form of rigid control on opinion polls and their dissemination now seem futile in the age of the Internet and social media. Information does not stop at national borders in a globalised world. The conflict between the right to information and a government's desire to regulate that right appear to be shifting in favour of the former, despite repeated desultory attempts to halt the shift.

¹¹ Petersson, Olof (2003). *Regulating Opinion Polls*. Discussion Paper, Democratic Audit of Sweden, Centre for Business and Policy Studies: Stockholm.

Appendix

France: Law on the Publication and Dissemination of Certain Opinion Polls (law of July 19, 1977)



Article 2 Establishes the indications that should be published with a poll, under the responsibility of the agency that has conducted it:

- The name of the agency that has conducted the poll.
- Name and capacity of the buyer of the poll.
- Number of people surveyed.
- The date or dates in which the questionnaire was applied.
- A mention that indicates each individual's right to consult the conditions anticipated in Article 3.

Article 3 Before the publication or dissemination of the survey results, the agency that has conducted the poll must proceed to deposit declaration with the Polling Commission, as instructed in the application of article 5 of the present law, that specifies:

- The objective of the poll.
- The method according to which the individuals questioned were chosen
- The conditions under which the interviews were conducted.
- The full text of the questions that were fielded.
- The percentage of people who did not answer each of the responses.
- The limits of interpretation of the published results.
- If applicable, the method utilized to deduce the indirect results that would be published.

The polling commission can order the publication, on the part of those who have circulated the results, of some or all of the indications that are contained in the declaration.

Everyone has the right to consult with the polling commission in relation to the declarations referred to in this article.



Article 3-1 At the moment in which any survey is to be published or disseminated, the results relating to the responses of those interviewed must be accompanied by the full text of the questions that were fielded.

Article 4 The agency that has carried out a poll must make available to the Polling Commission the documents based on which the results of the survey were published or disseminated.

Article 5 A Polling Commission has been charged with studying and proposing rules aimed at assuring, on the level of electoral forecasts, the objectivity and the quality of the surveys published or disseminated.

The proposals from the Commission that are to be applied should be the object of a decree from the Council of State.

The Commission is also authorized to define the clauses that should obligatorily be contained in the survey sale contracts and whose objective is to prohibit the publication before the first round of voting of any poll result related to second round votes.

Article 11 On the day prior to each round of voting, as well as on election day itself, it is forbidden to publish, disseminate, or comment on any poll by any means.

The prohibition is equally applicable to polls that have been published, disseminated, or commented on prior to the day before each round of voting. This prohibition is not an obstacle to continued dissemination of the publication or the results that have appeared online before said date.

CHAPTER 4

Focus groups: Myth or reality

By Stephen Mills

Introduction

Focus groups have been widely used in Australia and New Zealand throughout the political cycle, and intensively in election campaigns. There is much less publicity about the use of political focus groups in Asia outside Australasia but it is apparent there is a more mixed pattern of use and much greater primacy given to quantitative research in political decision-making. It is almost certain that more and more use will be made of focus groups in Asian politics. Regardless of the debate discussed in the chapter concerning the ethics of the use of focus group findings by politicians, the effectiveness of focus groups in understanding how election campaigns are progressing and in honing campaign messages, ensure they will be more widely used across Asia.

The political focus group is a facilitated discussion, usually amongst undecided voters, has a weak adherence to the commissioning political party or a weak adherence to another party but has some prospect of voting for the commissioning party. Typically in a campaign, a group would explore campaign impressions and views on critical issues, and test the messaging and campaign advertising.

There are many possibilities for recruitment of focus groups, which will be determined by political settings and the specific objectives of any project. If a party is riding high in the polls it is likelier to undertake focus groups amongst current weak supporters and seek direction on strategies to hold these voters. Conversely, a struggling party may undertake focus groups amongst weak adherents of opposing parties or previously loyal voters who have switched to another party. Testing of particular policies such as taxation may lead to recruitment based on income levels or if education policy, amongst parents with school age children etc.

Criticisms of perceived influence of focus groups

Criticism of the perceived influence of focus groups on the political process has been apparent in Western politics for many years, especially at the time of the Blair government in Britain, and during the 2010 election year in Australia, when a debate, or rather a one-sided assault, exploded. This continued unabated well into 2011. Political commentators were united in their ferocious condemnation of focus groups and an array of former prime ministers, state premiers, old political pollsters and advertising agencies, all piled into the fray. Hardly anybody argued back. The malignant influence of focus groups on politics was just accepted as fact.

Some big calls were made. Far from helping the government win votes, according to a retired Australian Labor Party (ALP) pollster, Rod Cameron, "the link [sic] why the [Labor] Government found itself in trouble was the dreaded focus group debacle".¹ Peter Hartcher, political and international editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, concluded that listening to focus groups on climate change, "destroyed the Rudd prime ministership and brought Labor to the threshold of destruction".² Simon Benson, chief political editor of the *Sydney Daily Telegraph* writes of "bringing down a popularly elected leader in their first term of government on the whim of a focus group, and [the attempted management of the] successor like a puppet on a string, dancing to the tune of whatever the next focus group revealed."³

There is a strong moral dimension in the criticisms of the use of focus groups. Analysing the very heavy defeat of the New South Wales State Labor Government, Bernard Keane of the online political newsletter, *Crikey*, writes of "the reliance of focus groups to make up for a lack of core party values – or to supplant core party values considered inconvenient."⁴ Commentators often presented politics as a stark, unqualified choice between politicians following focus groups, or the national interest.⁵ The language used to criticise the use of focus groups evoked almost criminal imagery - "addicted", "narcotic" "degraded", "corrupted" and "focus group hell". In contrast, ignoring focus groups was positioned as "courageous" and "principled".

1 ABC Lateline, 8 September 2010

2 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 October 2010

3 *Daily Telegraph*, 9 August 2010

4 www.crikey.com.au 2 May 2011

5 Ross Garnaut quoted Lindsay Tanner Sideshow, p9

Dennis Glover, in a column in *The Australian*, caught the mood: "Pollster, here's a revolver and a bottle of vodka – you know the rest."⁶ In these attacks focus groups were seen as all-powerful in political decision-making. Morris Iemma, former premier of New South Wales, complained of a "slavish adherence to focus groups where they become iron law ... they become the things you live and die by."⁷

The lines of attack on focus groups are comprehensive, including:

- inappropriate influence on policy,
- knifing leaders and causing an ever-faster leadership churn,
- reducing political debate to mindless slogans,
- replacing leadership,
- pandering to populist prejudice,
- usurping the role of party members,
- driving both major parties from their convictions to the same timid middle ground,
- killing off any hopes of needed bold reform agendas.

A point by point defence of all these allegations is possible but the essence of the attacks are that focus group findings are responsible for political parties adopting policies that appeal to focus group respondents, rather than being based on party philosophy or the national interest.

"Overriding electoral caution"

At best this is seen to lead to "overriding electoral caution"⁸ and a focus on the short term. Lindsay Tanner, Finance Minister in the Rudd Labor Government from 2007-2010, cites the example of focus groups identifying deep concerns for cost of living issues. That, in his account, led the Rudd Government to make short term fixes of the (eventually abandoned) prices monitoring initiatives, GroceryWatch and FuelWatch, because they gave the appearance the government was doing something. Effective measures were "difficult to explain", "too abstract and indirect" and "more marketable policy initiatives were needed".⁹ Tanner cites John Street: "political parties

6 12 October 2010

7 *The Australian*, 28 August 2010

8 Leonore Taylor, *Sydney Morning Herald* 23 August 2010

9 Sideshow pp 4, 104-5

now no longer lead, they merely follow the swerves and switches of populist opinion. As they acquire more and more data on their constituents, so their policies become ever shallower responses to the twitch of public opinion."¹⁰

At worst, focus groups are accused of leading political parties to pander to prejudice. Labor's advertising agency in the 2007 election claims, "focus groups replace policy development based on principle and leadership becomes a reflection or shadow of the findings."¹¹ Rod Cameron's version of what happens is: "I think all they do, they will go out and find a list of prejudices, usually in western Sydney, and convince the leader of the day, well this is a problem ... We must run away from it. We can't touch it."¹²

The consequence of this alleged use of groups is that no political party will tackle deep-seated problems with a necessary long term policy agenda, (which informed audiences are convinced is for the greater good) if this means any, even short term, unpopularity or arousing the opposition of powerful affected sectional interests. According to Rodney Cavalier, a former New South Wales state minister, "focus groups are based on the precept that you cannot go wrong if you give the punters what they want. The manifest decline in political courage, the absence of decisions for the long-term, is the result of a narcotic reliance on focus groups and qualitative polling. Contemporary political leaders dare not seek to persuade the electorate that [something popular] is wrong and why."¹³

The death of leadership

The flipside of the perceived malign influence on policy development, is the death of leadership. Shaun Carney, a senior columnist for the *Melbourne Age*, bemoans "an exhaustive and unyielding reliance on focus group research that eventually converts political leaders into followers and shreds credibility."¹⁴ In 2007, Paul Keating, former Australian prime minister, famously slammed politicians "who are frightened of their own shadow and won't get out of bed in the morning unless they have had a focus group report to tell them which side of the bed to get out."¹⁵

10 Quoted Sideshow p.104

11 *The Australian* 3 August 2010

12 ABC Lateline 8 September 2010

13 Power Crisis p.165

14 *Sydney Morning Herald* 28 March 2011

15 ABC Lateline, 7 June 2007

The contrast to this picture of craven leaders blindly following focus groups into mindless short term populism, is of courageous and principled leadership. The ideal of a leader is one who is prepared to take necessary but unpopular policies out to voters and win them over. Clearly sensitive to charges concerning misuse of focus groups in Britain, Ed Milliband, the Labour leader, defined his leadership style by promising “we will not be imprisoned by the focus groups. Politics has to be about leadership, or it is nothing.”¹⁶

The economic reforms of the Hawke-Keating government in Australia between 1983 and 1996 are often held up as a contrasting example of true leadership. George Megalogenis, author and commentator, in an important essay, drew as a “dividing line [as far back as 1998] between the reform and the digital eras .. the goods and services tax [GST] – the last significant piece of policy that was pursued in defiance of the opinion polls.”¹⁷ Despite the economic reforms of the Hawke-Keating government, the track record of political parties in Western democracies exhibiting bold leadership is not great. Australian politicians certainly took lessons from the 1993 election campaign in Australia where Liberal leader, John Hewson, took a radical set of right-wing policies to the electorate and ended up losing what was widely described as “the unloseable election”. Without going into the complex feuds and factions in Australian politics some of the condemnation of the use of focus groups was score settling by political opponents, with focus groups a proxy for the real target of a factional enemy.

Some attacks on focus groups are frequently made by those outside power loops and are, at heart, aimed at those inside those loops who commission the focus groups, and control and often communicate the findings. At times too there is a breathtakingly hypocritical rewriting of previous campaigns by sacked and retired consultants. The critique of focus groups is also mostly made by those who have no firsthand or recent experience of what is now being asked in focus groups, what is said by respondents in groups, how those findings are communicated and what use is made of the findings by politicians. The emphatic and dramatic conclusions of critics convey an entirely false impression of the actual knowledge of what is a much more complex process. This attack on focus groups, for a start, generally overstates their influence. While a powerful tool, anyone who really knows

16 Quoted *Sydney Morning Herald* 30 September 2010

17 *Quarterly Essay* (2010), 40: 37

how politics works would realise that focus groups and, indeed, any political research findings, are only part, and often only a small part, of the complex mix of factors that drive political decision-making.

Focus groups a lightning rod

Focus groups have become, at least to some extent, an apparent lightning rod for a growing, general dissatisfaction with the state of modern politics in Australia and other western countries.

This territory has been thoroughly canvassed in recent years.¹⁸ Briefly, the issues most commonly raised are the:

- ever-increasing effectiveness of intense negativity/scare campaigns by political oppositions,
- “celebrification” of politicians,
- increasing need for political leaders to deliver appropriate emotional responses to events,
- need to provide “announceables” and political stunts to fill an ever more demanding 24-hour news cycle,
- sustained (to the point of mindlessness) repetition of key messages and slogans,
- declining trust and respect for politicians,
- journalists increasingly becoming political players with their commentary indistinguishable from news,
- impacts of ever more frequent quantitative media political polls,
- development of a political careerist occupational group,
- increasing disengagement and/or reduced attention span of voters.

Blaming focus groups for all this is, as one defender of focus groups argued, “like blaming the chairs at a dinner party for the quality of the food.”¹⁹ The drive to ever more simplified communications and relentless repetition of messages certainly cannot be blamed on focus groups. For several years now focus group respondents have been increasingly critical, if not derisive, of politicians repeating catch phrases and slogans.

18 Tanner Sideshow and Megalogenis Quarterly Essay 40 (2010). Both provide excellent summaries

19 Chris Shields Kann (11 March 2011) www.Greenbookblog.org. Kann was defending the use of focus groups in marketing generally - not politics specifically.

More important underlying factors

Larger underlying factors are much more important than focus groups in determining the quality or otherwise of political discourse. The electoral system is certainly more critical than the use or misuse of focus groups. Australia has a preferential voting system which is essentially a first-past-the-post voting system with elections decided in key marginal electorates. These are mostly in outer suburban metropolitan and regional areas and mostly in the states of New South Wales and Queensland and that, inevitably, is where most Australian political focus groups are held. Voters in these areas tend to hold more socially conservative views and to be under cost of living pressure.

Compulsory voting in Australia is arguably another more critical influence on the political process than focus groups. Critics of focus groups would certainly be happy with the use of focus groups if they were undertaken amongst those they deem qualified, i.e. amongst sophisticated, tolerant, well-educated and well-informed voters like themselves, but that would not be much help in winning an Australian federal election.

In New Zealand, which has a proportional voting system, elections are won by gaining as high a possible share of the dominant party vote from anywhere in the country. Political focus groups, while still mostly amongst soft and undecided voters, are much more likely to be held amongst a wider range of ethnic, regional, age and income categories, as the strategy for securing a winning party vote share across the entire electorate (rather than just key marginal seats).

There is sometimes, too, a 'damned if you listen; damned if you don't listen' aspect to focus groups' and their impact on the fate of politicians. The same elite opinion that condemned British Labour Prime Minister, Tony Blair, for following focus groups probably wanted him to do just that when it came to deciding whether or not to support the American invasion of Iraq. A similar irony prevails in the standard representation of the influence of the focus group in Australia. Kevin Rudd reportedly lost his popularity because he followed focus groups and backed away from climate change action. His replacement, Julia Gillard, has lost popularity because she presumably defied the same focus groups and has pursued strong climate change policies.

Nor are focus groups the only way of acquiring information about Australian voters that enables, in the standard critical analysis, politicians to become

ever more effective in playing back populist prejudices. As my colleague, Rainer Faus, outlines online quantitative research is enabling more complex analysis to be undertaken on voter attitudes and opinions. Data mining is also increasingly being used to deepen understanding of voters in marginal electorates.

Obviously, focus groups are not alone in deciding the salient issues in any election. In most cases, these issues are already well known to politicians even remotely in touch with the electorate – you certainly do not need to hold focus groups in Australia to find out that asylum seekers and costs of living are hot issues. Focus groups will enable political parties to hone their message on these “populist” issues but do not determine their uses as election deciders. The treatment of asylum seekers is a big issue in Australian politics, not because of focus group findings, but because there is a potentially election-deciding segment of voters who would normally vote Labor but are highly vulnerable to voting Liberal, because of their support for an unashamed Liberal harder line on the issue.

Elitist tone to attacks on focus groups

There is also a pervasive and discomfoting streak of elitism in many of the criticisms of the use of focus groups. Mike Carlton, is a satirical writer, but his description of focus groups as “bogan séances” brutally captures a more general view.²⁰ Hugh MacKay, a noted Australian social researcher, argues that “political strategists have apparently been trying to use focus group data, not only to create messages for their leaders to mouth, but *even* to influence policy decisions.”²¹ My italics on “even” but surely a moment’s thought here is instructive. Is he saying the voices of focus group respondents should not be even part of the set of factors determining government policy priorities in a democracy?

There are many examples of barely disguised contempt for the views of particular voters, especially from critical marginal seats in outer suburban western Sydney. Geoff Barker charged: “dependent on pollsters and

20 *Sydney Morning Herald* (28 August 2010). Full quote is “Focus groups be damned. They might be useful if you are designing a cereal packet. As a tool for charting the nation’s future they are a reckless abandonment of responsible political leadership. Tony Abbott and Julia Gillard sounded almost identical in the campaign because focus groups were telling them what to say. Unsurprisingly both leaders got the same message, regurgitating the same meaningless pap that the marketing soothsayers threw up from their bogan séances”.

21 *Quarterly Essay* (2011). 41: 80

marketing gurus, political parties craft policies with only cosmetic differences to reflect majority attitudes.”²² So what should policies represent – minority interests? Listen too to the undisguised contempt from Rod Cameron when he was an active political pollster: “the people who decide elections in this country are the least interested and the least informed about politics. They are basically ignorant and indifferent about politics. They vote on instinct for superficial, ill-informed and generally selfish reasons.”²³

Bernard Keane provides another example deriding voters cost of living concerns - “the same mentality informs the bipartisan pandering to voters’ conviction they face outrageous cost of living pressures or ‘mortgage stress’ when the real pressures in a low-inflation, high-employment economy is self-induced pressure brought about by lifestyle choices. Still, this is what relying on focus groups gets you: two parties competing to find creative ways to reflect back at voters what voters themselves think.”²⁴

Potential for positive use

The attacks on focus groups also obscure their considerable value and potential for use in ways that most would regard as positive. Focus groups, with soft and undecided voters, are a highly effective means of bringing forward the views of voters who are mostly outside any political insider communication channel. That doesn’t mean determining policy because clearly, they do not have the full information necessary to make final decisions on complex policy areas (hardly any voters do). But why shouldn’t political parties receive full and rich accounts of the priorities of voters who decide elections, for government action?

What are the alternatives? Elitist channels such as editorials, journalists, lobbyists and people of influence who can reach politicians directly, or more random indications of public mood like talkback radio, correspondence, email campaigns, angry bloggers and random conversations with taxi drivers and chance encounters at airports? Much of the comment on focus groups is clearly from commentators who have no idea how a modern political focus group runs. Far from the supposed searching for and surrendering to prejudice, that Rod Cameron seems to imagine, focus groups can be, and often are, used to find the best ways of communicating pre-determined policies.

22 Quoted Tanner, Sideshow p.10

23 In 1987, Quoted Tanner, Sideshow p.176.

24 www.crikey.com.au 4 April 2011

As one example, focus groups are routinely blamed for what some see as a drive to the bottom on the asylum seeker issue in Australian politics. In the four federal elections in which I have undertaken qualitative research for the ALP, the search has been for messages, language and arguments, to position more humane policies, or at least to avoid electoral oblivion at the hands of an unqualified hard line from the opposition Liberal party. In the first of those elections (2001), held in the highly fraught post 9/11 atmosphere, nothing could stem the anti-asylum seeker tide. There is more hope now, although the issue certainly remains one that delivers electoral benefits to the Liberals.

Focus groups can, regardless of a policy's popularity, be used to test the comprehensibility of the policy, how well it is understood, what the best arguments are for promoting it, what vulnerabilities need to be defended, what language resonates, what the best examples are for explaining the impact of the policy, and so on. Focus groups can be used to determine which of a party's comprehensive set of policies has the most appeal to voters and would, consequently, be the most sensible to showcase during an election campaign. Focus groups can also be used to really understand the needs, hopes and dreams of voters and groups of voters with the objective of providing background to the development of policies that enable government services to better meet the needs of citizens. Focus groups do not need to be held amongst soft or undecided voters who are often relatively disengaged from politics. They can be held amongst specialist audiences, such as those with chronic illnesses, or ethnic groups or highly informed opinion leaders or parents of pre-school children or even, if a party wishes, committed voters and political party activists.

Focus groups generally provide much more depth of understanding and nuance on issues, than quantitative research. A classic example of that is climate change where for years the Australian media has been mesmerized by quantitative polls consistently showing big majorities believing that man-made climate change was happening, that voters were very concerned about it and wanted to see government taking strong action. Focus groups told a different story and, as events have proved, a more accurate story.²⁵

²⁵ There has been considerable opposition to the attempted introduction of a carbon tax in Australia in 2011.

Even in the peak year for climate change (2007) focus groups showed that belief in man-made climate change was tissue-paper thin and nowhere near strong enough to support any government response that required additional costs or seriously inconvenient behavioural change.

Conclusion

Despite the bad press, it is certain that focus groups will continue to be part of the mix of information that Australian political parties use to develop and implement political strategies.

They are particularly useful in campaigns when tactical decisions have to be made in highly pressured situations. Focus groups provide richer information than quantitative tracking, on the messages being picked up, the major campaign issues and events being perceived (often very differently from media assumptions), how the leaders are travelling and the impact of paid media. Groups also can play a critical role in the developing, testing and tuning of rapid response campaign advertising.

For Asian political parties which currently do not use focus groups as much as in the West, it is not a case of whether or not to make greater use of them. Their value in helping shape communications and campaign strategies is too great. For these countries and those already using focus groups, there is also likely to be no escape from the debate on the appropriate use of focus groups. Hopefully, that debate will be less hysterical and simplistic, and more measured and nuanced, than has been the case in Australia. But the same core question will be asked: will focus groups, and indeed, the full political research armoury be used to identify and play back what voters want to hear, even if manifestly not in the national interest? Or will they be used to win the communications battle for policies designed to be in the national interest? That is the real question, which obsession with focus groups only obscures, and that question in the end can only be answered by the leadership of political parties.

CHAPTER 5

Is Asia-Pacific ready for online political polling?

By Rainer Faus

1. Introduction

Face-to-face and CATI (Computer Assisted Telephone Interview) have been the gold standard methodologies for political polling over the last few decades. Whilst online research has been used for commercial market research since the late 90's political pollsters have been hesitant to pick up the new methodology. This is, firstly, due to the higher sample quality that pollsters require: Political polling typically targets the total population of voters and needs to be representative of the electorate in terms of all demographics including age, gender, area, education, household size, income and other variables. Commercial researchers usually focus on a specific segment, and typically restricting age groups to younger respondents is making it easier for them to get satisfactory sample quality. Secondly, political pollsters fear adopting the yet unproven methodology because they face the reality check of public scrutiny at elections: if their predictions are inaccurate this is very easy to detect after election day and will not only be known to political actors, but also to the general public where final surveys are published before the election.

2. Online research is coming

However, recent developments have shifted the rules of the game in favour of online research. Face-to-face interviewing as the most labour-intensive methodology of surveying has become close to unaffordable in most developed countries and landline telephone penetration is declining, particularly amongst the younger, leading to issues of representativity when conducting CATI surveys. At the same time Internet penetration is rising in most countries of the region which is a necessary condition for conducting political polling online.

Table 1 shows Internet penetration and its growth over the last decade for selected countries in the region.¹

Table 1: Internet penetration and growth of Internet penetration in selected countries

	Internet Penetration 2010 (% population)	User Growth (2000-2010)
New Zealand	85%	334%
South Korea	81%	107%
Australia	80%	158%
Japan	78%	111%
Singapore	78%	205%
Taiwan	70%	158%
Malaysia	65%	357%
Philippines	30%	1385%
Thailand	26%	660%
Indonesia	12%	1400%
India	7%	1520%

New Zealand now has the highest penetration in the region with 85 percent followed by South Korea (81 percent) and Australia (80 percent). On the bottom of the list we see that, despite huge growth rates, Internet penetration remains low in countries like India (7 percent), Indonesia (12 percent), Thailand (26 percent) and the Philippines (30 percent), meaning that pollsters are far away from conducting political polls online in these countries. However, there is no clear threshold in terms of Internet penetration that is required for online political polling; it depends on the specific purpose of polling² and on how well the Internet population reflects the electorate.

1 Data on Internet usage, Internet usage growth and the definition of an Internet user from IWS (<http://www.internetworldstats.com>; Retrieved on 26 July, 2011). IWS "defines an Internet user as anyone currently in capacity to use the Internet [...] There are only two requirements for a person to be considered an Internet user: (1) The person must have available access to an Internet connection point, and (2) The person must have the basic knowledge required to use web technology."

2 For instance, Australian/New Zealand polling organisation UMR Research co-conducted online polling in India assessing 'elite' views following a number of attacks on Indian students in Australia (<http://umrresearch.com.au/doc/indianstudentreportjuly2009.pdf>; Retrieved on 26 July, 2011)

A reasonably high Internet penetration is a necessary condition for conducting political polling online but it is not sufficient. Besides the standard requirements for sampling that apply to all data collection modes, there are two main conditions that need to be met in order to conduct online political polling. Firstly, the Internet population needs to be reasonably representative of the total population and secondly pollsters need to find ways to draw random samples of the Internet population.

The first point becomes clear when looking at the example of Singapore. Table 1 showed that with 78 percent of Singaporean residents having access to the Internet, Internet penetration seems to be very high in the country. A study by the *Infocomm Development Authority of Singapore (2009)*³ provides a more detailed picture though. Not only is usage of the Internet skewed heavily towards younger residents (only 13 percent of residents over 60 years used the Internet in 2009) but younger residents are also much more likely to be frequent Internet users. Hence, the Internet population in Singapore is, on average, younger and data on educational attainment by age suggests that they are likely to also enjoy higher levels of education than the total population.

Looking at Australia on the other hand Table 1 shows that 80 percent of the population are using the Internet, a similar figure to Singapore, but a recent study by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) indicates that usage amongst older residents is much higher than in Singapore (31 percent of residents over 65 years are using the Internet). Whilst the age distribution is less of an issue than in Singapore, the ABS study points to another issue: Internet usage is lower amongst residents outside metropolitan areas and in households with lower incomes⁴.

Internet penetration can be considered a good indicator for the feasibility of conducting political polling online. If Internet penetration is too low, pollsters will have to use other data collection methods such as face-to-face or CATI polling. However, even if Internet penetration is high, such as in New Zealand or Australia, pollsters need to be very careful when

3 Infocomm Development Authority of Singapore (IDA)(2010): Annual survey on infocomm usage in households and by individuals for 2009 (http://www.ida.gov.sg/doc/Publications/Publications_Level3/Survey2009/HH2009ES.pdf; Retrieved on 26 July, 2011)

4 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS)(2009): Household use of information technology, Australia2008-09; (<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/8146.02008-09?OpenDocument>; Retrieved on 26 July, 2011)

sampling and can't just assume that the Internet population represents the total population.

The issue for pollsters to draw random samples of Internet users is solved by so called Internet Access Panels which are sample databases "of potential respondents who declare that they are willing to receive invitations to participate in future Internet interviews if selected."⁵ These respondents are usually demographically profiled so that sample selection can be matched with population parameters.

Given the issues mentioned above regarding different levels of Internet access and frequency of use of the Internet, there is reason to believe that Internet Access Panels do not reflect the general population and hence Internet Access Panels have been criticised for a lack of representativity by attracting respondents with certain characteristics. However, there are high quality Internet Access Panels that differentiate themselves, mainly by how they recruit (double opt-in, invitation only, telephone recruitment), reward, manage and sample panel members⁶. As for other modes of data collection, such as face-to-face and telephone interviewing, extreme care needs to be taken when choosing an Internet Access Panel for conducting political polling online.

As long as the discrepancy between the demographic profile of the online sample drawn and the demographic profile of the population is not too big and the demographic parameters of the total population are known to the pollster and collected in the survey, the online sample can be calibrated by weighting demographic parameters back to the actual population distribution. Besides demographic weightings there are a range of other options available to pollsters, including weighting psychometric variables

5 European Society for Opinion and Marketing Research (ESOMAR)(2009): Conducting market and opinion research using the Internet (http://www.esomar.org/uploads/pdf/ESOMAR_Codes&Guideline-Conducting_research_using_Internet.pdf; Retrieved on 26 July, 2011)

6 European Society for Opinion and Marketing Research (ESOMAR) names 24 questions to ask online panel providers in order to help determine their quality (http://www.esomar.org/uploads/pdf/ESOMAR_Codes&Guideline-Conducting_research_using_Internet.pdf; Retrieved on 26 July, 2011)

and propensity weighting⁷. Unfortunately there is no “one-size-fits-all” model applicable to all countries in all circumstances so getting this right usually requires a fair bit of research and piloting.

Summing up, in order to achieve accurate and insightful results, Internet penetration and the quality of Internet Access Panels need to be sufficiently high and remaining weaknesses of the latter need to be known to the pollster in order to be adjusted for. If any of these do not apply, online polling should not be applied in this context.

3. Advantages of online political polling

If CATI is established and tested for decades why would pollsters choose to conduct political polling online? The answer is that if the preconditions are met, online polling offers a range of advantages: The ability to show respondents multimedia content, reduced social desirability effects, the use of more sophisticated question formats and scales, and cost effectiveness.

3.1. Ability to evaluate multimedia content

The most obvious advantage of online surveys is that they can include any type of multimedia content, such as images, videos, sound clips and leaflets. Advanced techniques such as video evaluation tools, known to the public as ‘worming’ can be used for testing TV ads, enabling respondents to express their attitudes towards a TV ad by using a response slider whilst watching the ad. Special tools have been developed to provide insight into how TV ads or other material such as leaflets, are perceived: which element is seen first? How long do we look at the individual elements? What draws the most attention? And perhaps, most importantly: what are we missing? This can provide crucial information for pollsters when advising on advertising and campaigning material.

3.2. Reduced social desirability effects

The lack of an interviewer present when answering survey questions leads

⁷ Propensity weighting describes weighting methods that are used to compensate for non-response in a survey, for example by adjusting sampling weights of respondents in the sample using estimates of the probabilities that they responded to the survey. (Kalton G, Flores-Cervantes I. (2003): “Weighting Methods” *Journal of Official Statistics*, 19, 81-97)

to a reduction of interviewer effects. This is particularly the case when social desirability effects are large and can also reduce the share of non-response for questions that are considered “not for public”, such as past voting behaviour or voting intention. Within political polls, the anonymity provided by online surveys is particularly highlighted as a way around the problem of the “spiral of silence” that is seen by some to be responsible for the under-recording of Conservative voting in United Kingdom political polling, particularly in the 1990s⁸.

3.3. Use of more sophisticated question formats and scales

There is a greater variety of question types and scales available which has the potential to decrease respondent fatigue and to provide more valuable insights for pollsters. Whilst questions need to be kept rather simple in telephone surveys in order to be understood by respondents, online surveys offer visual cues to respondents and hence keep them more engaged. Pollsters can use more varied and sophisticated question types such as rankings, sort games, highlighting of displayed text and the use of numeric scales also becomes more intuitive to respondents when visually displayed. Having a greater variety of question types makes answering questions more ‘fun’ for respondents reducing fatigue. Furthermore, in an online survey setting the respondent can go through the questionnaire in his own time enabling him to reread questions and to have more time to answer them. The ability to reread the answer categories also reduces primacy and recency effects⁹ that are common in CATI settings. And finally, the use of scales provides high resolution of data enabling more advanced multivariate analysis such as regression modelling.

3.4. Cost effectiveness

Last but not least, with sample sizes that are usually used for political polling online surveys are significantly less expensive than CATI surveys and the relative savings increase with sample size and questionnaire length. Without ‘human’ interviewers required, respondents are doing

8 Kellner, Peter (2003): First among equals (<http://www.research-live.com/features/first-among-equals/2000035.article>; Retrieved on 26 July, 2011)

9 Primacy and recency effects refer to the effect that people tend to remember the first few things and the last few things in a list more than those things in the middle. We also tend to assume that items at the beginning or the end of the list are of greater importance or significance. (See: Miller, N. and Campbell, D. T. (1959): “Recency and primacy in persuasion as a function of the timing of speeches and measurements” *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 59, 1-9)

most of the work themselves and in their own time. This allows the pollster to ask more questions, collect more demographic information and thus delivers richer data at a lower cost. Furthermore, if the Internet Access Panel has a sufficient size, even targeting of low incidence segments becomes economical as the pollster can focus on crucial segments such as soft and swinging voters who are likely to change their mind and vote for another party. These studies can include in-depth qualitative analysis, quantitative analysis of attitudes towards personalities and issues as well as demographic profiling.

4. Some limiting factors

However, there are also some downsides: Besides the abovementioned issues regarding representativity of the Internet population that can be adjusted for by weighting this refers mainly to the slower turnaround of online surveys and the limited size of current Internet Access Panels. The slower turnaround compared to CATI surveys is due to the nature of how respondents are contacted. Whereas with CATI, the interviewer calls the landline or mobile phone of the potential respondent, online survey respondents are usually invited by email to participate in the survey. Potential respondents will often only become aware of the survey after a certain time if they are not online 24/7. To avoid sample bias, pollsters try to prevent the survey to be completed only by heavy Internet users. Therefore fieldwork time would usually take a few days whereas urgent phone polls can be conducted within a few hours if required. There are ways around that though: Notifying respondents by SMS or pre-inviting them to a survey that is going to start at a later time. However, generally speaking, CATI interviewing delivers faster turnaround.

The current size and quality of Internet Access Panels limits online polling in most countries to large geographic entities. In most cases, polling can only be conducted on the national level and in some countries on state level but sample sizes are usually not sufficient to look at areas with a small population, as Internet usage doesn't necessarily translate into Internet Access Panel membership and only few other options exist for pollsters to randomly sample respondents from a certain area. This is a major disadvantage to CATI where pollsters are theoretically able to contact each phone number in a specified geographic area through RDD

(Random Digit Dial)¹⁰.

For pollsters this is particularly an issue in countries with majoritarian, or plurality, voting systems¹¹ based on single-member seats as they will find it hard to conduct crucial seat polling online. In these countries nationally representative surveys are conducted to get a read on what people think about certain issues and how this affects their vote but they have the potential to disguise actual majority situations for instance if a party is set to win the majority of the popular vote but fails to win a majority of seats. The more unrepresentative a voting system is in terms of how votes are translated into winning seats, the more misleading are survey results based only on nationally representative surveys.¹²

5. Online political polling: The example of Australia

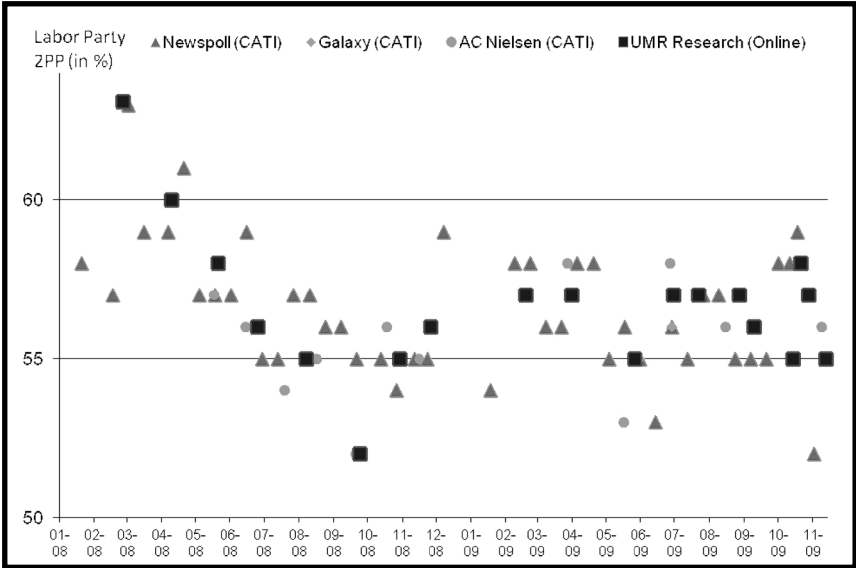
After a few trials during the Australian federal election campaign in 2007, Australian/New Zealand polling organisation UMR Research has started an extensive online political polling programme by implementing a monthly

10 However, Australian/New Zealand polling organisation UMR Research has successfully conducted surveys in areas with relatively small populations. For instance, UMR Research conducted a survey using its own SayIt panel in the New Zealand city of Christchurch prior to the Mayoral election in September 2010 accurately predicting the election result (http://umr.co.nz/Media/Christchurch_MayoralElectionResearch_Sept10.pdf; Retrieved on 26 July, 2011)

11 Majoritarian, or plurality, systems represent the oldest and simplest electoral system category, based on the principle that whichever candidate receives the most votes in a constituency is deemed elected. The following three varieties of majority systems operate on the basis of single-member constituencies: a) 'First-past-the-post' (FPTP) or simple majority. This is the most straightforward electoral system, and is found in the UK, USA, Canada and India. b) Second Ballot Majority Runoff or absolute majority. This system requires a candidate to obtain one more vote than half the votes cast in order to be elected. If no candidate gets that many votes, a second round is held. In this system, either a simple majority is sufficient in the second round, or a „run-off“ election is held between the two candidates who received the most votes in the first round, also along absolute majority lines. France and the Ukraine both use variations of this system. c) Alternative Vote. This system also seeks to ensure that a candidate is elected by an absolute majority, but does so in a single round using Preferential Voting (i.e. expressing a rank order of preferences) instead of the latter two-stage system. Constituents vote for a single candidate but indicate, in declining order, their preferences for other candidates. If none of the candidate gets an absolute majority on the first count, the candidate who polled the fewest votes is eliminated, and his preferences are distributed among the remaining candidates. This is repeated until one of the candidates has an absolute majority. This is used in Australia and for the Irish presidential elections. (See: European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Documentation (2000): Electoral systems in Europe: an overview. European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Documentation, Brussels.)

12 The representativeness of electoral systems can be measured by special indices. The Gallagher Index (or least square index) is used to measure the disproportionality of an electoral outcome: difference between percentage of votes received and percentage of seats a party gets in the resulting legislature. (Gallagher, M. (1991): "Proportionality, Disproportionality and Electoral Systems" Electoral Studies 10)

Chart 1: Australian Labor Party Two-Party-Preferred Vote 2008-2009 from UMR Research online polling and CATI polling from *Newspoll*, *Galaxy* and *AC Nielsen*



track of a set of key political metrics including voting intention. Chart 1 shows that on the crucial metric Two-Party-Preferred (TPP) vote¹³, UMR Research’s online polling results were generally in line with CATI results by *Newspoll*, *ACNielsen* and *Galaxy Research* that were published in Australian media in 2008 and 2009.

Even though the ‘hard’ test of an election had not yet been passed, the consistency of the online results with the established CATI methodology was quite encouraging so that UMR Research was commissioned in 2009 and 2010 by the Australian Labor Party to conduct nationwide benchmark studies online. But the key question remained: in a majoritarian system,

13 In the Australian Alternative Vote System, the Two-Party-Preferred (TPP) Vote is seen as the crucial vote measure. It refers to a distribution of preferences where, by convention, comparisons are made between the ALP and the leading Coalition candidates. In seats where the final two candidates are not from the ALP and the Coalition, a notional distribution of preferences is conducted to find the result of preference flows to the ALP and the Coalition candidates. (Australian Electoral Commission Glossary: <http://www.aec.gov.au/footer/Glossary.htm>; Retrieved on 26 July, 2011)

such as the Australian preferential system which is based on 150 seats, how can online polling be used in the election campaign?

In the 2010 Australian federal election campaign the newly elected Labor Prime Minister, Julia Gillard had to defend an eight seat majority against the Liberal-National Coalition. Whilst her party was polling above the 2007 result in her home-state of Victoria and in South Australia, the situation of the Labor party was dire in New South Wales, Queensland and Western Australia where it was facing the loss of a number of marginal seats. Hence, there was the need to keep an eye on the overall national situation, but also to monitor crucial marginal seats that needed to be held in order to remain in power.

UMR Research adapted a hybrid approach for the election campaign, applying online, as well phone methodologies. Online polling was used for weekly nationwide benchmark surveys as well as TV ad testing. Phone surveys (CATI) were used to track voter sentiment in a basket of 20 marginal seats in Queensland and New South Wales on a day-by-day basis as well as for an extensive Seat Monitor programme particularly for marginal seats that were not part of the daily tracking.

The online benchmark surveys focused on the big picture but also provided in depth information on issues, personalities and message development. It was firstly used to track key metrics such as voting intention, leader performance ratings and preferred prime minister on the national level. Moreover, it offered a wealth of detailed information on the election campaign and was central in determining which issues were most important to voters, how satisfied they were with how the government was handling these issues and which parties they trust to handle them. Briefly, how issues were playing out for the parties. It provided intelligence on the two leaders and their attributes in terms of strengths and weakness and was essential in developing messages that resonated most with voters. Additional TV ad tests, called "Ad Labs," helped identifying the impact of Labor and Coalition TV ads. Given the huge amount of insights gained from these online surveys the seat-specific phone polling could be kept at a reasonably short length.

The outcome of the election was interesting in a way that neither the online nor the phone component alone provided the full picture before

the election but both pieces of information were required to understand what was happening before election day. As predicted by the nationwide online polling Labor was holding on to a narrow majority of votes of just over 50 percent. However the marginal seat phone polling conducted until the day before the election predicted heavy losses for the Labor party in Queensland and New South Wales which also proved to be true on election day. Labor suffered a net loss of 11 seats, most of them in Queensland and remained four seats short of a majority government. With Labor and the Liberal-National Coalition both having won 72 seats, Australia had its first hung parliament since 1940 and Labor eventually formed Government with the help of the Greens MP and three independent MPs.

It's quite important to understand that whilst both online and phone polling proved to be accurate, they served different purposes: The national online polling provided overall direction in terms of messaging and advertising but due to the small sample size by state failed to detect the rather grim situation for the Labor in marginal seats particularly in Queensland. At the same time, whilst not designed to reflect the nationwide picture, the phone polling provided a high resolution picture of target seats in key states.

6. The way forward: Is Asia-Pacific ready for online political polling?

What are the lessons learned from this for other countries in the region? The example of Australia indicates that in parliamentary systems that apply majoritarian or plurality voting systems, online polling can provide useful insights and direction by showing what is on the political agenda and how this affects voting. But as long as individual seat polling is not feasible online it will only be used as a complementary tool and phone polling will still be necessary for individual seat polling.

Let's have a look at the countries under consideration again. Table 2 lists the countries again, ranked by Internet penetration. Of the countries with high Internet penetration, only New Zealand uses a proportional

Table 2: Internet penetration, voting systems and representative online political polling:

	Internet Penetration 2010 (% Population)	Internet Penetration Classification	Voting system (First or only chamber of parliament) ¹⁵	Representative Online Political Polling
New Zealand	85%	High	Proportional MMP	YES
South Korea	81%	High	Mainly plurality ¹⁶	COMPLEMENTARY
Australia	80%	High	Alternative vote	COMPLEMENTARY
Japan	78%	High	Mainly plurality	COMPLEMENTARY
Singapore	78%	High	Plurality	COMPLEMENTARY
Taiwan	70%	Medium	Mainly plurality	COMPLEMENTARY
Malaysia	65%	Medium	Plurality	COMPLEMENTARY
Philippines	30%	Low	Mainly plurality	NO
Thailand	26%	Low	Plurality	NO
Indonesia	12%	Low	Proportional	NO
India	7%	Low	Plurality	NO

voting system, a Mixed-Member-Proportional (MMP) system¹⁴ to be precise. National vote results are relevant for the party composition of the parliament and seat results are only of secondary importance which makes the country perfectly suitable for online political polling. All other

14 A mixed member proportional or MMP electoral system usually combines the local representation of a first past the post electoral system with the proportional representation list system to achieve results where the proportion of seats won by a political party comes close to matching the proportion of the total vote for that party. In a mixed member proportional electoral system, voters usually vote for both a local candidate and for a political party, and the members are elected from single member electoral districts and from party lists. (Shugart, S. Matthew and Martin P. Wattenberg, (2000): „Mixed-Member Electoral Systems: A Definition and Typology”, in Shugart, S. Matthew and Martin P. Wattenberg (2000). "Mixed-Member Electoral Systems: The Best of Both Worlds?" Oxford: Oxford University Press

15 The voting system might be different for the second chamber, the presidential election or any level other than the national level. The suitability of online polling methodologies might be different in this case. However, looking at this in more detail is beyond the scope of this chapter.

16 South Korea and other countries labelled as 'Mainly plurality' apply a voting system for the first or only chamber where more than half of MPs are elected in single-seat constituencies and less than half are elected by proportional representation.

countries from the list apply plurality, or mainly plurality, voting systems meaning all, or at least the majority of members of parliament are elected in single member constituencies. In these countries, online polling may provide important and interesting insights including vote shares, but will likely fail to predict the seat share of parties in Parliament. For instance, UMR Research conducted a nationwide online survey in Singapore days before the General Election in 2011¹⁷ and found that 61 percent would vote for the ruling PAP, a very close result to the 60 percent of votes for the PAP in the election. However due to the Singaporean voting system the PAP gained 92 percent of the seats which would have been impossible to predict without polling individual seats.

Due to the low Internet penetration in the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia and India, online polling is not advisable at present and despite high growth rates this is not likely to change in the near future.

The table indicates that three criteria must be met in order to use online methodologies for online polling and predictions of parties' seat shares in parliament: Firstly, a reasonably high Internet penetration which is necessary for - secondly - a sufficient quality of Internet Access Panels and thirdly a proportional voting system.

7. Conclusion

Is Asia-Pacific ready for political polling then? The only country which fully meets all three criteria is New Zealand where the advantages of online polling clearly outweighs its limitations. Although most pollsters still use CATI at this point of time, online methodologies will soon be state-of-the-art there.

In countries with mainly majoritarian or plurality voting systems online polling provides great insights into what voters think about certain issues and how this translates into the political mood and vote shares but can't predict the parties' seat shares in parliament. In Australia, Japan, Singapore, Taiwan and Malaysia the use of online methodologies as a complimentary tool is still underused but is clearly set to rise in the next few years. The low Internet penetration in the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia and India still limits the use of online methodologies for representative political polling. The huge Internet user growth rates however, give an indication that although still very far away, online political polling is on its way.

17 http://umrresearch.com.au/doc/Singapore_Pre-Election_Study_May11_Final.pdf; Retrieved on 26 July, 2011"

CHAPTER 6

Media and its relationship to polling institutions: Uneasy bedfellows?

By Alastair Carthew

Introduction

Opinion polls don't lie. Or do they? It depends on your (political) point of view. For interested members of the public this is dictated by a myriad of issues, such as personal political philosophy, gender, age and, it has to be said, cynicism. Politicians will always criticise poll results, typically a single poll result when they are losing. Harry Truman, the American president, in 1948 attacked all polls as "sleeping polls," because, he said, they were like "sleeping pills" designed to lull voters into sleeping on election day. He said an overdose of polls "can be fatal."¹ So politicians' cynicism towards polls is a taken. In this context the Fourth Estate, the media, must step into the breach and become the public's watchdog, safeguard, analyst and distributor of poll data to ensure voters are not lulled into sleeping on election day. For millions of potential voters in Asia-Pacific democracies, the media's analysis and reporting of political polls is therefore the key conduit of information. Consequently, the media's relationship with political pollsters; its editorial bias, or neutrality; its reliance on polls as editorial tools to influence the electoral process and outcome; its methodologies and the quality of its analysis and reporting of polls, are all essential ingredients in the electoral process that deserve detailed examination. This chapter will explore this symbiotic relationship between media and pollsters; the bias, or otherwise, of media organisations; the various elements of media analysis and examination of polls; whether polls encourage lazy journalism, the impact of social media on media analysis and the types of electoral systems and how they may impact on poll reporting.

¹ Canadian Journalism Project. April 2011.

How accurate is the media interpretation of polls?

With truth being an elusive commodity in politics, the media's coverage of election campaigns and its interpretation of polls, is an important question. Starting from a premise that while political opinion polls may be wrong, the results may not always be believable or credible and some are definitely biased to serve a political purpose. The simple fact is that polls are a snapshot in time that don't lie. In this regard they provide a valuable counterweight in the traditional journalist-politician relationship. Political journalists are usually privy to confidential information that politicians will often use to "capture" support, and even loyalty, to personalities or causes. These "you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours" relationships are confined to the heady environs of day to day politics. When it comes to an election cycle, all bets are off, or should be, as the media adopts the role of analyst and interpreter of facts gleaned from a totally "independent source", – the polls. So, having dispensed with the traditional journalist-politician relationship for the duration of the electoral cycle, which could last months, the media must rely on a non-traditional source of political intelligence which, in theory, has no allegiance to any political party or individual.

If you are to take the two-horse race example, journalistic interpretations of political polls follow two dimensions: "who is ahead" and "who is behind" questions; and, "who is gaining and "who is losing" questions. In analysing polls under these criteria, the accuracy of media reporting is characterised by issues such as whether the poll was a rolling cross survey or a snapshot. Who sponsored the poll? Where was the poll reported? (Newspapers, television, radio, new media). Was the poll the main focus of the media? The level of journalistic expertise employed, the emphasis given to the poll (in a headline, leader story in a broadcast bulletin, optimisation of the Internet) and whether the media report was of an entire sample or a sub-sample. All of these factors bear on whether the media interpretation of polls is accurate or not. Research in Canada suggests that conversations between journalists and pollsters are often focused on the electoral horse race much more than the technical questions about election polls. In this respect it is worth examining in more detail, the various ways media interpret polls and some of the problems encountered by the media

Some of the problems the media face

While polls are an essential part of any major news organisation's election tool kit, they are also expensive and are therefore subject to budgetary constraints. This creates problems for other media if the leading media

pollsters are television channels, which other, less well funded media feed off. The fact is that newspapers tend to follow television polls in many countries, with the exception being some of the university conducted polls that often have a smaller sample, but can still influence events because of their frequency. Financial conditions can also reduce the number of non-media aligned polls, thus compounding the problem of perceived bias by pollsters. So, almost by default, media polls are an essential adjunct to the independent pollsters. The danger is that too few polls can lead to political accusations of bias if any of these polls are perceived as favouring one party, or parties in the case of multi-party, proportional representation jurisdictions. When economic conditions dictate the number and scope of polls, e.g. whether they are countrywide or more narrowly based samples, media organisations must resist the temptation to popularise the art of polling for “entertainment,” rather than “information” value. In today’s Internet-driven world this phenomenon of the superstar pollster has given rise to a whole new debate about media bias and methodology.

Poll superstars and liberal media “bias”

A case in point is Nate Silver, who, it was announced in 2010 would host a political polling site, *FiveThirtyEight* under “the banner and auspices of *NYTimes.com*,” according to a media release from the *New York Times*. *FiveThirtyEight* was to be housed in the politics section of *NYTimes.com*. Silver won plaudits in the 2008 presidential campaign “for his timely and prescient reports on the electoral races and on public opinion,” the *New York Times* executive editor, Bill Keller said at the time. In 2008, Silver gathered a database of every poll available and election results from 1952 forward, weighted all the polls on historical accuracy and adjusted them for whether they favoured Democrats or Republicans and then built a model to simulate elections.²

Silver also said on his 2008 website that he was a President Obama supporter: “I vote for Democratic candidates the majority of the time though by no means always,” he wrote. So here we have an avowed Democrat “embedded” in the *New York Times*, a decidedly liberal- leaning (Democrat?), and major influence of political issues in America. The reaction to Silver’s appointment, in this regard, was predictable. While the blogosphere recorded much support for his appointment, others like this post from “NY NY”, questioned it: Is Mr Silver subject to editorial review or

² *The New York Times* (2010). *FiveThirtyEight*

can he print what he thinks? This bothers me more than when *Fox* (news channel) bought the *New York Post* and then the *Wall Street Journal*.³ The bloggers point being that *Fox*, the *New York Post* and the *WSJ* are all rabidly right wing, anti-Obama, anti-Democrat news outlets with enormous influence. Another post by Yeechang Lee of San Francisco said Silver “too often fails to acknowledge the message his numbers send in his accompany commentary.” However, for every negative reaction there were more positives, reflecting not only Silver’s obvious high standing as a pollster, but a benign neglect by bloggers for the notion of editorial independence by pollsters.

It seems the liberal, left-of-centre media is also not past using polls to attack their ideological opposites. A particularly glaring example of a media organisation using polls to undermine the opposition is the case of the *The Guardian newspaper* blogger “Greenslade.”⁴ In a March, 2011 post entitled, “Murdoch has too much political influence, say 60% in poll,” the article uses a Yougov⁵ poll commissioned by *Avaaz*, an international civic organisation that promotes activism on issues such as human rights, climate change and religious conflicts. The poll was used to undermine a political decision by the Conservative Party culture secretary, Jeremy Hunt, to accept News Corp’s undertaking to hive off the News Corp owned, *Sky News*, to a separate company. According to Britain’s left, of which *The Guardian* is in the editorial vanguard, Rupert Murdoch has too much power. So *The Guardian* blog was conveniently cited as proof of this influence. In this instance, *YouGov*,⁶ the pollster quoted, cannot be accused of bias. It is a respected, authoritative polling company. *Avaaz*, however, is not. Its site⁷ ran a petition to obtain 500,000 names to stop Murdoch from expanding his British media empire. *The Guardian* blog contained no counter comments from the Murdoch camp. There was no indication it was sought. Therefore, in this case, the reading public had a right to ask the question: “Was *The Guardian* blog biased, given the obvious bias of the company, *Avaaz*, that commissioned the poll?” And it highlights the issue of how polls can encourage lazy journalism.

3 <http://fivethirtyeight.blogs.nytimes.com/>

4 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/>

5 <http://labs.yougov.co.uk/>

6 <http://labs.yougov.co.uk/>

7 <http://www.avaaz.org/en/>

Lazy journalists or not?

Most journalists would be hard-pressed to quiz polling organisations on their sampling techniques and weighting of results. Of particular concern is a lack of understanding of the margin for error. Statistically, a percentage of polls will inevitably be out of kilter on the margin for error. In many countries shifts in support are reported in percentages, rather than percentage points, so polling companies, many of them media-owned these days, can publish results that, when it comes to the actual election day poll, could be considerably askew of reality. But, in the meantime, they have influenced individual voter opinion. A classic example of manipulating the media is when a politician uses an inaccurate, negative poll result to rally the troops: "Vote for us or we lose, the polls say so," syndrome.

The "lazy journalist" accusation has some foundation, particularly in two-party systems, such as Britain. However, this is less so in multi-party, mixed member proportional systems such as New Zealand, where journalists report the existence of five parties, two of which, the ACT and Maori parties support the National Party government, and the Greens, who are closer to the opposition Labour Party, has increased their workload. But the accusations of journalists having "no clue" about analysing polls, particularly in interpreting the significance of the margin for error, remain. There is also the issue of media-owned polls reporting their findings, even if they are incredulously skewed. Rather than ditching the poll it is dutifully reported because the money has already been spent and the polling organisation places pressure on the media outlet to run it. According to John Armstrong, political commentator with the *New Zealand Herald*,⁸ New Zealand's largest newspaper, this syndrome is the cause of tension that exists between the polling company's commercial objectives and the news organisation's journalistic ones. It could be interpreted as lazy, commercially driven, journalism.

Perhaps the most eloquently put word on so-called "lazy" journalism when it comes to polls, belongs to celebrated writer, intellectual, liberal and cynic, Christopher Hitchens. Writing in the *National Post*⁹ February, 2011, Hitchens railed against "the degradation of our democracy by the polling racket. Junk polling has been an enormous part of the distortion and degradation of politics this season." He was referring to how the

8 John Armstrong, *The New Zealand Herald*

9 <http://www.nationalpost.com/>

mainstream media had reported a poll by Pew Hispanic Centre, which found the principal cause of discrimination against Hispanics, was immigration. He described reporting by *The New York Times* as “subjective reporting on sketchy findings.” Instead, Hitchens proposed his own poll-based headline: “Minority, Polled by Itself on own Feelings, Reports Self-Pity on Fresh Topic?” Another contrary view was taken by an anonymous “extreme liberal” on extremeliberal blog, in response to polling questions like: “Do you think the president will win re-election in 2012?” Answered: “Who cares. What purpose does that question serve other than as a crutch for a lazy journalist to spin it the way they want just to get an easy story or sound bite? It is bad enough having to listen to paid political analysts who spout bull and are never accountable for being wrong, now we have to listen to even less informed opinions from people who are watching the Kardashians [a reality show] and American Idol [Idol! A pop singing competition] in their spare time.” Which brings us to the issue of perceived media bias and the relationship between media and pollsters.

How close are the pollsters and the media?

In June 2011, research-live.com’s Mediawatch column raised the issue of what it called the “increasingly fuzzy” relationship between pollsters and the media. The writer, James Verrinder,¹⁰ a reporter for Research Magazine and Report Live website, stated: “it used to be that pollsters polled the public and papers published the results. Politicians questioned the findings and everyone moved on to the next survey. Times were simpler when the polls were the story. Now it’s the pollsters themselves in the spotlight.” He goes on to postulate that pollsters do not welcome the increased scrutiny. A case in point is a firm called *Research 2000*,¹¹ which was accused of fabricating polls based on a statistical analysis of results, by the *Daily Kos*, an American political blog that publishes news and opinions from a “progressive” point of view. It was mainly directed toward influencing and strengthening the United States Democratic Party. *Time*¹² magazine in 2009 listed the *Daily Kos* in its “most overrated blogs” section. The website accused *Research 2000* of “outright fraud” in its poll data and filed a law suit. The charges have been dismissed as “pure lies.” Whatever, it cannot be good for the credibility of the polling business. Another case is that of veteran pollster, John Zogby, who took on the aforementioned

10 <http://brint.com> James Verrinder, May 2011

11 <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0710/39304.html>

12 <http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0>

Nate Silver of *FiveThirtyEight* fame, in response to Silver once calling Zogby “the worst pollster in the world” and that his *Zogby International* online polls were “error prone.” Whatever the merits, or otherwise, of this internecine warfare amongst the pollsters, the bottom line is that they are online pollsters providing data to large, influential media companies like *The New York Times*. But the public have no knowledge of how accurate the basic data is and whether *The New York Times* has journalists capable of analysing the information in a credible, coherent way, when the pollsters who provide it are undermining each other’s credibility in the first place.

Also wading into the credibility issue was the queen of online blogs, Arianna Huffington of *The Huffington Post*,¹³ a liberal blog with a wide reach and some influence. Around 2004, in the United States, political polls began to come under more specific scrutiny as conduits of information, as a result of a continuing trend toward lower response rates in the previous decade. At the time of President Bill Clinton’s impeachment in 1998, Huffington launched a campaign to uncover pollsters’ “dirty little secret” of non-response, and a web campaign that she called “the partnership for a poll free America.”¹⁴ She wrote: “Pollsters have replaced leaders. Alas, as long as pollsters exist, politicians are going to consult them. In order to wean our political leaders off their daily numbers habit, what we need to do is make the numbers themselves completely unreliable. That’s easy as hanging up your phone.” That was in 1998 before online polling took off. She added: “We must stop the polls at their source. We the people are the source and if enough of us stop talking to pollsters we could force our leaders to think for themselves.” Alas for Ms Huffington, “we the people” and the pollsters took no notice. Polling has increased enormously, as have accusations of media bias.

The media are not biased, but....

There’s good news and bad news on the public’s perception of bias in the media’s reporting of polls. A survey by the Australian-based website, *Crikey*¹⁵ into public perceptions of the media’s political coverage and how engaged voters are with politics, showed almost 20 percent thought the media was biased toward the conservatives (Liberal and National Parties) and 23 percent believed bias was toward Labour, but 55 percent disagreed

13 <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/>

14 <http://poq.oxfordjournals.org/content/69/5/682.full>. 2004

15 www.crikey.com.au

there was no pro-Liberal bias and 50 percent disagreed about a pro-Labour bias. Australians were more than twice as likely to believe the media over politicians as opposed to politicians over the media. The survey, in which *Crikey* did not say there was a margin of error, therefore must be a bit suspect in the current circumstances, found more people disagreed that the media does a good job explaining issues than agreed – 48 percent to 40 percent.

Another survey by *NewsBuster*,¹⁶ a conservative US blog, by the *Pew Research for the People and the Press*, found conservatives were under-represented in national journalism, while liberals were over-represented. The survey of 222 journalists and news executives at national outlets found only six percent considered themselves conservatives and only two percent said they were very conservative. This compared to 36 percent of the overall population that described itself as conservative. Most journalists, 53 percent, said they were “moderate,” 24 percent said they were “liberal” and eight percent “very liberal.”

This survey was immediately picked up by *Fox News*’ conservative pundit, Brit Hume, with a headline on screen saying “Lonely Lot,” the implication being that conservative journalists are hard to find.¹⁷ This survey was in 2008. *Fox News* is by far the most popular news channel in the United States and easily beats the so-called “liberal” channels like *CNN*. As of 8 June 2011, of the big four cable news channels, *Fox News* had 1.1 million viewers over aged two, total, per day; *CNN* 434,000, *MSNBC* 468,000 and *CNBC* 176,000.¹⁸ Therefore, despite a perceived liberal bias in the media, the actual cable viewership “polls” (the Nielsen ratings) show a decided public preference for the right-of-centre, anti-Democrat coverage of *Fox News*, which, incidentally, is owned by the same Rupert Murdoch that *The Guardian* and other liberal British establishment media were criticising earlier in this chapter. Where the media’s use of polls can become distorted, and extremely irritating to both politicians and the public, is when they are constantly referred to in questions in interviews, press conferences and reporting of politics.

16 <http://newsbusters.org/blogs/brent-baker/2008/03/19/four-times-more-journalists-identify-liberal-conservative>

17 <http://stateofthemediamedia.org/2008/>

18 <http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2011/06/09/cable-news-ratings-for-wednesday-june-8-2011/95157/>

How the media use polls in everyday reporting

As polls have proliferated and mainstream media budgets shrunk, a new media speak has arisen called: “polls say.” This term has become more common, but it is, obviously sufficiently obtuse and broad to raise the question: “how does the journalist know what the polls say, and are what they are saying accurate, timely and worthy of quoting?” Also, if there are many polls, as there often are leading up to an election, then there has been a tendency for the media to cluster the polls as a group, so no clear delineation of subject and outcome emerges. Polls are discussed, critiqued and used where necessary by politicians and journalists alike to suit their own agendas. “Polls say” and “polls show” are now common phrases in the media. Some of this increase can be traced to the 24-hour news media.

In the United States, the 2004 presidential election between George W. Bush and John Kerry was seen as a watershed for the impact of polling on an election. There was a manifest increase in the use of these polling terms by media between 2000 and 2004. A critique of the 2004 election in *Public Opinion Quarterly*¹⁹, by Kathleen A Frankovic of CBS News, found that there were more than 11,000 references to “polls say” and “polls show” by all media in 2000 and 2004. In 1992 and 1996, *CNN* used these phrases around 500 times in the course of the 1992 and 1996 campaigns. Such phrases may be acceptable if they are backed by specific examples, but this is not always the case. But the phrases do quantify information and give apparent precision to news coverage and an appearance, if not always true, of expertise by the reporter.

The reporter, in fact, invokes the authority of the poll. But it is not only the journalists who are skating over the hard data of polls. The pollsters themselves are not past what the *New Zealand Herald's* John Armstrong called “taking dubious short-cuts to produce a poll.” Polling companies offering cheaper survey options can bring the validity of the results into question. These vary from reducing the size of the sample to tacking questions onto “omnibus polls”, which offer a plethora of other questions about soap powder and mobile phones before arriving at the political question and asking for voter intentions. This is polling by exhaustion and can produce dubious results. But Armstrong says few news organisations are going to highlight such potential bias. What they do highlight, however, is the media agenda that sets the environment for polls to feed off.

¹⁹ *Public Opinion Quarterly*. 2004 Oxford Journals

How do the public interpret the polls?

The 2011 Thailand election campaign is a good example of how pollsters can serve a useful purpose in conditioning the public to not take polls at face value. For example, at a seminar in June 2011, academics and pollsters publicly warned that voters should not make political decisions based only on polls. Noppadon Kannika, Assumption University's ABAC Poll Director and a contributor to this book, said voters should pay attention to the margin of error.²⁰ Another contributor said voters should consider the sampling of each poll and how proportionate it was to the population, otherwise "the poll result was most likely to be unreliable." Yet another said she was glad more advanced surveys were being conducted in Thailand as they helped keep people aware of the election day. As it turned out, all polls in Thailand failed to accurately predict the performance of the ruling Democratic Party in its Bangkok stronghold. Prior to the election it appeared that the opposition Phue Thai Party would contradict history and sweep the capital. In the end the Democrats held their stronghold by a comfortable margin. This prompted a scathing attack by a *Bangkok Post*, English language newspaper former editor and columnist, Veera Prteepchaikul,²¹ who accused pollsters of being too quick to publish exit poll results on election day, commenting: "In their big rush to outdo each other their predictions were incredibly off the mark." He was particularly critical of a perceived inability to include an accurate margin of error in their election day preceding polls.

So, inevitably, the media in Thailand came under attack for its part in interpreting and publishing polls. For example, a website called *BAHT STOP*²² aired various opinions from people following the election. In one instance "Hedda" attacked the aforementioned Bangkok Post: "One of the best polls or tests to measure how the political parties think they are doing is to watch the editorials in the Bangkok Post. The weaker the Democrats (the largest party in the ruling coalition at the time) the more editorials you will see from these pro-government outlets, complaining about alleged vote buying and electoral fraud."

20 <http://www.nationmultimedia.com/2011/06/05/national/Surveys-useful-but-can-be-misleading-pollsters-30157043.html>

21 Veera Prteepchaikul, <http://www.bangkokpost.com/blogs/index.php?blog=63&disp=comments>.

22 <http://www.baht-stop.com/forums/index.php>

Still in Thailand, a survey by the United States-based Asia Foundation²³ on Thai political attitudes, debunked the notion that Thais are hopelessly politically divided into red and yellow camps, with the reds supporting former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra and the yellows supporting the established elite, which had been played out in all Thai media since the 2006 military coup that ousted Thaksin. The survey found that 76 percent of the population professed no colour attachment at all. This was a surprising result as the media, without exception, portray Thailand's political conflict as one of the red and yellow camps being unable to foment reconciliation when, if the poll is accurate, the vast majority of Thais support neither "ideology".

Setting the Public Agenda

It is worthwhile examining the role of the media in agenda setting, as polls fall into this category, but it is by no means the only ingredient in a pretty heady mixture. The great Walter Lippmann said in his 1922 classic book, *Public Opinion*,²⁴ the news media are a primary source of what he called "pictures in our head" about the larger world of public affairs, which is "out of reach, out of sight and out of mind" to most people. In other words, what the public know about the world is largely based on what the media tell them, whether through normal distribution channels such as free-to-air or pay television, radio, newspapers, magazines, telephony and the Internet. The word "agenda" is purely descriptive. There is no pejorative implication that news organisations have an "agenda" pursuing a premeditated role. However, some examples in this chapter such as *Fox News* (right wing conservative) and *The Guardian* newspaper (left wing, liberal) would suggest otherwise, not to mention the thousands of websites and blogs dedicated to particular ideologies and "agendas." So the public agenda is basically derived from the long standing Gallup Poll²⁵ question: "What is the most important problem facing this country today?" Pollsters ask this question every day and the media, since Walter Lippmann's time in the 1920s, have been interpreting the answers through a myriad of prisms.

In this respect, pollsters cannot live without the media setting the agenda. Invariably polls measuring public opinion are preceded by agenda setting

23 <http://asiafoundation.org/country/overview/thailand> 28 March 2011

24 <http://www.americanwriters.org/writers/lippmann.asp>.1922

25 <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1675/most-important-problem.aspx>

events in the media. Public opinion will closely reflect the pattern of news coverage during the preceding months through all media avenues. This influence has been documented since the 1968 United States presidential election. To summarise: social scientists (pollsters!) frequently calculate the correlation between ranking issues on the media agenda and the ranking accorded those same issues on the subsequent public agenda. Of significance here is that media also influence the next step in the communication process; understanding and perspective on the topics in the news. A study by Maxwell McCombs²⁶ at the University of Texas in Austin, on agenda setting, also found that the news media, alone, does not influence the agenda. A case in point is the Monica Lewinsky/Bill Clinton scandal. Despite unrelenting negative publicity, Clinton survived because the public, ignoring the media and political agendas, assessed Clinton on his success or failure in government.

To summarise, members of the public are influenced by the media's agenda, which includes polls, but they are also intuitive in their assessment rather than engaging in comprehensive analysis based on the information delivered through the media. Do polls have a greater influence than the media per se? Probably. After all they don't lie, they tell a truth frozen in time. Which brings us full circle to the individual journalist and how they analyse and interpret polls being produced in an environment where the media has already influenced, to a large degree, the public's perception of the key issues.

What to look for in assessing polls

This should be a no brainer, but, as we have seen, there are many influences bearing down on journalists in writing, broadcasting and blogging about polls. But there are a few basic precepts they should follow:

Who conducted the poll? Was the source impartial or did a political group, blogger or a 'biased' interest party create a poll to show a particular candidate in the lead? This is important as the public need to know if the poll is impartial or not. Sample size? The reporter should quote this, along with the margin for error, in any report to give the poll credibility. A sample size of 50 with no margin for error would not fly. When was the poll conducted? Events can quickly skew the results depending on when the poll was conducted. This is part of the media's own "agenda" setting, which is

26 http://www.mediatenor.com/smi_AS_approach.php. 1968

an ongoing process. What questions were asked? Obviously agenda driven polls will ask skewed questions to fit their desired outcome. Manipulation of the questions is easy, but in a busy newsroom, under-resourced and with most journalists being untrained in the intricacies of polling methodology (much less interested, as we have noted), it would be easy for such polls to influence the public. Know the margin for error. As John Armstrong of the *New Zealand Herald* has lamented, journalists' general ignorance of polling methodology means that the vital margin for error is often overlooked or not seriously factored into the analysis of the poll. These are some of the issues journalists need to be aware of. This is particularly so in this age of Internet polling.

Internet polling: how to separate the good from the bad

It is not easy to separate the good from the bad because of the sheer volume of "citizen journalists" on the Web who are purveying their own brand of "journalism" without the normal editorial checks and balances. *The Guardian* case mentioned in this chapter, where a poll that correlated with the newspaper's own "media agenda" (attacking Rupert Murdoch's media empire), was an example of a respected mainstream media outlet taking a poll commissioned by an avowedly anti-Murdoch civil society organisation and posting it on its website for all the world to see.

The arguments against online polls are that they are not scientific and are based on non-probability sampling and therefore do not have theoretical underpinnings; they are biased because the online population is not a representative cross-section of all adults, and surveys based on non-probability samples have no established track record for reliability. All of which makes the media's job harder in today's economic climate because online polls are also much cheaper than traditional telephone polls. Yet even the advocates of online polling concede that they have not yet reached a stage where they are considered reliable and accurate. Analysing such a poll to influence voter opinion therefore becomes a calculated risk for any media using them to authoritatively report the outcome.

Without careful statistical analysis and oversight, an Internet-based poll is meaningless. Examples of so-called "pseudo-polls" are widespread but the vast majority are not scientific and their results are suspect. For example, 900 number call-in polls and Internet polls. In such un-scientific polls, respondents often "volunteer" their opinion by selecting themselves for the poll, as opposed to a scientific poll where the pollster identifies and seeks

out people to be interviewed. But here is the reality: Internet polling is not going away. The problem facing pollsters — and the media who report on such polls — is finding a way to regulate the random sampling prevalent in Internet polling.

However, Internet pollsters would argue that Internet-based research is suited for certain types of public opinion research. The Internet provides a virtually limitless pool of volunteers providing quick feedback, and is a less expensive alternative to focus groups. It is a reasonable alternative to telephone polling and Internet research by email, provided the respondent can be reached, and is also effective. Despite these positives, mainstream media reporting of Internet polls remains sceptical because of doubts about the methodology.

Conclusion

The media's ability to accurately analyse and interpret political polls is, generally, not based on highly professional skills. The tendency is to religiously report polls without in-depth understanding of the methodologies. The margin for error, in particular, is an important aspect that is frequently overlooked in delivering an accurate picture. The relationship between the media and pollsters is somewhat "fuzzy," with the rise and rise of "celebrity" pollsters skewing public and media perception of polls. The media itself has, in the last two decades, increasingly commissioned and conducted its own polls which have raised questions of media bias in evaluating polls. The media sets the agenda for the environment in which, itself, conducts polls, thus creating a vicious circle whereby the media is both poacher and gamekeeper in the poll game. Internet polling is here to stay, but scepticism remains about its methodology and credibility. The "polls say" syndrome has increasingly become a feature of mainstream media in recent years, leading to issues over exactly what the media is representing with such reporting methods. Overall, the media will continue to rely on polls, as they have since the 1990s, because of economic constraints and the fact that television and the Internet will increase their leadership role over print media in this respect. The only thing that seems certain is that the polls, supposedly, don't lie. They may sometimes be wrong, they may not always be believable or credible, but they don't lie. The challenge for media is to maintain its credibility while: analysing and interpreting polls when it is a major player in the polling industry; economic constraints can lead to shortcuts; there is inadequate knowledge and training by journalists to accurately interpret the polls, and the need to embrace new technology, such as online polling, despite its acknowledged drawbacks.

CHAPTER 7

Emerging technologies in the polling business

by David Black and Arina Dafir

Introduction

The employment of new technology has always been critical to the business of polling and market research. Since the emergence of telephone polling in the 1970s, pollsters have looked at new and better ways to employ communication technologies that improve the speed and accuracy of surveys, and lower costs. With the emergence of mobile phones and the Internet over the last two decades, professional researchers have continued to adapt their methods and develop new approaches to collecting opinions.

Today, most major polling organisations around the world rely on online platforms in one form or another, to conduct surveys. Although the Internet has been slower to take off as a research methodology across much of Asia, online surveys are becoming more common, even in countries where household Internet penetration levels are still low.

Mobile smart phones and devices, which offer Internet connectivity, will aid pollsters further as millions of people, previously not online, finally enjoy round the clock access to the Internet. Over the next few years, Internet penetration levels are likely to reach a critical mass in emerging markets as a result of smart phone take-up, allowing researchers to carry out fully representative national surveys online.

These new technologies are also aiding researchers in other ways. Tablet computers are helping to breathe new life into traditional face-to-face interviewing, by offering the capability to evaluate audio and video stimulus and allowing for responses to be uploaded in real time. Popular peer-to-peer and social media platforms also provide opportunities to conduct research in new and exciting ways. The relative anonymity offered by social media often allows researchers a glimpse at unfiltered and uncensored opinion,

which is often sanitised as a result of the more direct interaction relied on by face-to-face and telephone interviewing.

Having said that, the new technologies are not without their challenges. Mobile phone directories do not exist and many respondents are reluctant to be interviewed by mobile phone because of issues ranging from incoming call costs to low battery charge. Internet surveys are so prolific on every conceivable topic that one can almost find a poll to support any view or position. This commoditisation of opinion only serves to undermine the value and perceived accuracy of properly conducted scientific polling. A further challenge to traditional polling is the emergence of data analytics software, increasingly used to trawl what people say and opine about online forums, blogs and social networking sites. The automated aggregation of information (if done effectively) can arguably be used as a substitute for opinion surveys. Large corporations increasingly rely on such data to make important product and marketing decisions.

Ultimately, these issues will be overcome, or reconciled, by pollsters with the likelihood that the gain they enjoy from new technology and analytical tools will boost polling analysis. Today, some polling organisations are experimenting with hardware and software tools in an effort to synthesise proven, traditional polling techniques, with the reservoir of opinion which now abounds freely online.

Polling national communities: the growth of online panels

Ever since the first scientific polling undertaken in the 1930s¹, pollsters have looked for better and cheaper ways to gather opinion. The primary challenges today remain the same as they were then – what is the most effective way to talk to everybody we need to talk to and how much meaningful insight can we collect?

For many years, telephone interviewing was viewed by most pollsters as the best way to conduct large-scale polling which was time sensitive. By the 1970s, household penetration of telephones in the United States had exceeded 90 percent.² At this point there was little point in prevailing with door-to-door interviewing, except for longer surveys, when such a

1 www.gallup.com/corporate/1357/corporate-history.aspx

2 Statistics of Communications Common Carriers. Federal Communications Commission, Washington, D.C.

substantial audience could be reached by phone. Through the 1980s and 1990s telephone polling evolved from the simple use of local residential telephone directories and pen and paper data collection, to a far more automated process that improved hit rates (through the use of telephone number clusters provided on commercial databases). This reduced both interview times and transcription errors (through computer-aided telephone interviews [CATI]).

However, by the 1990s, telephone surveys (and telemarketing) had become so prolific in many countries that the novelty of answering a poll and having your say had diminished considerably, resulting in falling incidence levels. Moreover, the advent of telephone answering machines at home and the mobile phone revolution meant that pollsters had new issues to contend with and lower levels of certainty with respect to the accuracy of polls. Pollsters in the late 1990s had by then already begun to look at the Internet as an alternative methodology to telephone interviewing. Still, pollsters were aware that online poll accuracy was very much dependent on Internet penetration levels – as the example of telephone polling demonstrated. Telephone polls only became commonplace 40 years after Gallup's first successful United States polls in the mid-1930s, and its growth paralleled the rate of telephone penetration in the country.

By the time of the United States presidential elections in November 2000, household Internet penetration in the country was nearing 40 percent,³ having risen from less than one percent a decade earlier. With so many people now online, research companies began to recruit web users to participate voluntarily in online survey panels, in return for monetary rewards. One company, Harris Interactive, built an online panel of several million people and successfully predicted the Bush-Gore 'dead heat' using an exclusively online polling methodology. Their online approach even managed to 'outgun' the predictions of polling heavyweights like Gallup and the Pew Research Centre.⁴ Similarly, in the 2001 United Kingdom (U.K.) general election, YouGov, a U.K. based polling company, successfully predicted party support through online polling, achieving superior results compared to more well-established offline pollsters.⁵ In political polling,

3 Statistics of Communications Common Carriers. Federal Communications Commission, Washington, D.C.

4 National Council on Public Polls, Presidential Poll Performance Report. 3 January 2001

5 YouGov's Record: Public Polling Results. Retrieved August 2010 from: www.economist.com/media/pdf/YGrecord.pdf

where credibility and accuracy are non-negotiable, Harris Interactive and YouGov proved the mettle of online political polling. For polling practitioners and political elites, the Internet had truly arrived.

Online panels are now relied on throughout the world, including most of Asia-Pacific, where nearly 40 percent of Internet users in the world now live.⁶ In Asian countries such as Singapore, Japan and South Korea, where Internet penetration is already above 70 percent,⁷ multinational companies are already heavily reliant on online surveys for a great deal of consumer research. Online consumer research is also increasingly conducted amongst affluent urban residents living in tier one cities of emerging markets such as China, India, Thailand and the Philippines.

The polling of political and social issues on the Internet, however, is still in its infancy in Asia. While this can be attributed to methodological misgivings and low Internet penetration in many countries, the slow progress of online political polling can also be attributed to a more conservative political polling culture and the limited number of public opinion polls published in mainstream Asian media. Pre-election polls remain uncommon and are often legislated against in many parts of Asia.⁸ These factors also contribute to the slow take up of online polling in Asia.

Are things changing? In Singapore's 2011 general elections, an independent, pre-election survey was conducted online (using a commercial online panel) by Australian polling firm, UMR Research. The international media reported that the survey found that 61 percent of those polled intended to vote for the ruling People's Action Party (PAP). This prediction proved remarkably close to the final result. The PAP eventually won 60.1 percent of the vote on 7 May 2011.⁹ The survey caused some debate (and a lot of online chit chat) in Singapore when it was published, including whether or not it complied with Singapore's laws regarding public opinion polling during election periods. UMR Research eventually stated that it had "neither published nor caused to be published [the] opinion poll in Singapore", as it had been released in Germany.¹⁰

6 comScore Media Metrix.

7 The Nielsen Company. (2011). Global Online Omnibus Survey

8 Plasser, F., & Plasser, G. (2002). Global Political Campaigning: A Worldwide Analysis of Campaign Professionals and Their Practices. N.p.: Praeger Publishers

9 Election Poll Raises Questions (May 2011). *TODAY*. Retrieved 11 August 2011, from www.todayonline.com/Singapore/EDC110520-0000207/Election-poll-raises-questions

10 Election Poll Raises Questions (May 2011). *TODAY*. Retrieved 11 August 2011, from www.todayonline.com/Singapore/EDC110520-0000207/Election-poll-raises-questions

More importantly, the survey, which was conducted safely out of the way of Singapore's electoral laws, proved the potential for future online political and social issues polling in Asia. At the same time it highlighted the disadvantages experienced by local polling professionals who faced the prospect of prosecution if they had published a similar poll prior to the election. In Singapore at least, the limits placed on locally-based research companies also seems to sit uncomfortably with the Singapore government's intention to set up an institute to study Asian consumer insights, including 'future casting on Asian consumer behaviour and research methodologies'.¹¹

Everyone's a pollster: the downside of technology

The credibility and success of scientific online polling in the region is also undermined by the proliferation of informal, online straw polls, conducted by everyone from major media organisations to bloggers and Facebook users. Although, so common that serious readers generally do not take them seriously, they diminish the potential value of online polling as a legitimate and accurate methodology.

The political restrictions discussed above also mean these informal polls are some of the few ways that voters get to see what others are thinking, even if those 'others' are a self-selecting group. In recent years, elections in Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines and Singapore have all been played out enthusiastically in the online sphere. So called 'grassroots polls' range from small social media polls among friends to others that are disseminated widely online and lay claim to being representative, accurate and decisive, when they rarely are.

The Singapore elections serve as an example and a point of comparison, highlighting the proliferation of informal political polls that were conducted and released on the Internet, and its implications on the polling industry. One example is a poll, only identifiable through its web link,¹² purportedly of more than 1000 people, that was heavily circulated on social media,

11 Consumer Research Institute to Be Set Up (August 2011). *The Straits Times*. Retrieved 11 August 2011, from www.straitstimes.com/BreakingNews/Singapore/Story/STIStory_697102.html

12 <http://ge2011.iblogger.org/ge.php>

popular local political websites and forums during the campaign. No individual or organisation was ever identified as having conducted the poll. The findings also showed a high level of self-selection with anti-PAP sentiment a lot higher than final polling day results would suggest existed.

Many such polls were circulated in Singapore during the 2011 election and compared to UMR's professionally executed (and largely accurate) pre-election poll, did little more than distort and obscure the real public opinion. While grassroots polls in pre-election periods are undoubtedly fun to read, too often they serve to lower public confidence in political polls in Asia, leading to a trust deficit. Furthermore, these types of polls also reflect a double standard by authorities who allow them to be circulated without restriction while at the same time placing restrictions on the publication of legitimate polling results. While informal polling may point to a desire to find out what others are saying and thinking, the democratisation of the online sphere has blurred the lines between polling as a business, and polling purely as a social tool.

Data analytics: a substitute for polling?

Increasingly, larger multinational organisations (and governments are turning to providers of automated analytics services to better understand what is going on online. At first, companies simply relied on web analytics to help them collect and better understand website usage. More recently, sentiment analysis or opinion mining has also emerged with the aim of helping organisations to better understand what people are saying about their brands and products online.

Although online sentiment analysis is still in its infancy, it is potentially a powerful tool, which offers the ability to measure millions of comments and reactions in real time and determine whether trends are positive, neutral or negative. Compared to conventional research, which requires interviews and questionnaires, sentiment analysis simply relies on software to mine Internet chatter, which is then aggregated and analysed to determine which way an audience's mood is moving. The accuracy of such software is still the subject of debate and dispute,^{13,14} but new products are being produced

13 Mining the Web for Feelings, Not Facts (24 August 2009). *The New York Times*. Retrieved 11 August 2011

14 www.sixthsenseinsights.com.au/adding-social-to-the-brand-tracking-mix

regularly and will likely continue. The market is growing steadily but is still fragmented. While some software can trawl all over the Internet (including blogs, social networks and online forums) tracking audience sentiment,¹⁵ there are also applications dedicated to tracking single services.¹⁶ A range of sentiment coverage exists, with some simply giving a positive-negative rating, while others provide more contextual information such as age and geographical demographics.

The use of sentiment measurement tools as a proxy or substitute for opinion polling during elections, has also been seen recently. Again, the Singapore general election in 2011 saw three different mood and sentiment trackers generate publicity. Global advertising company, DDB, partnered with social media intelligence company, Brandtology¹⁷; Singapore company, JamiQ, developed its own sentiment tracker¹⁸ and Thoughtbuzz, another Singapore company, produced 157sg¹⁹. All purported to measure online sentiment trends during the campaign.

This trend of developing applications and sites specifically for tracking sentiment, whether they be commercially based or centred around social/political topics of conversation, is both interesting and threatening to pollsters. Besides cost savings, the technology also appeals to decision-makers because of its ability to provide an instant snapshot of community opinion. This is especially useful during political campaigns where voter sentiment can shift daily in response to news headlines, advertising and on the ground campaigning.

Methodological shortcomings

Mood and sentiment trackers still have methodological shortcomings, however. There are questions of accuracy and representativeness. For example, the Singapore election trackers showed highly favourable views towards the smaller opposition parties that did not necessarily translate into votes on polling day. Many of those who voted for the PAP did not appear to

15 GfK Expands Comprehensive Insight Offerings With Social Media Through Strategic Alliance With NetBase. (2011, April 10.) PR Newswire. Retrieved 11 August 2011, from www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/gfk-expands-comprehensive-insight-offerings-with-social-media-through-strategic-alliance-with-netbase-120199644.html

16 <http://socialmouths.com/blog/2010/03/31/6-tools-for-twitter-sentiment-tracking>

17 <http://sgpartyti.me>

18 <http://ge.swarm.is>

19 <http://www.157sg.com>

voice their support online. Furthermore, algorithms and automated systems still have trouble in analysing more nuanced expressions of opinion, such as irony, sarcasm and the use of colloquialisms.

With the technology of sentiment tracking and opinion mining still at an early stage, the technology is unlikely to represent a genuine threat to properly conducted opinion polls any time soon. Rather than being viewed as an alternative or a substitute, however, there is undoubted value in it being used as a companion tool alongside opinion poll results. To date, few traditional research companies have looked seriously at ways in which the two approaches can be integrated for the benefit of their clients. But we believe this is likely to change over time, given the potential power such a combination offers. Collaboration and synthesis between traditional tools and emerging technologies will, we think, be critical in determining the future direction of the polling business.

Revitalising traditional methodologies: using mobile and social media technology

New technologies are also helping polling professionals to revitalise traditional ways of collecting information, whether it is face-to-face interviewing or collecting deeper insights through qualitative research methods.

Although telephone interviewing became the default quantitative method for many research companies during the 1970s and 1980s, telephone interviewing has always carried certain disadvantages both in terms of interview duration (i.e. people do not want to spend long periods of time on the phone) and when it comes to testing things such as advertising or product packaging concepts which require visual responses. As such, face-to-face interviewing has continued to be a popular quantitative method, even in countries where household phone penetration is close to universal.

The increasing popularity of lightweight computer tablets, such as the iPad and its various competitors, will further help to ensure that face-to-face interviewing maintains a level of popularity. These devices are easy to carry, can be connected to both telephone networks and the Internet and allow researchers to program interactive questionnaires which include both audio and video prompts/stimulus. Furthermore, a questionnaire can be immediately uploaded to a server once it is complete, saving considerable time and cost in transportation and data processing.

Telephone Interviewing Revolution

Telephone interviewing is also likely to undergo a revolution in the next few years. A major problem face by pollsters in mature markets in recent times has been the decline in residential telephone lines, particularly amongst young adults who simply rely on their mobile phones as the primary means of communicating with everybody. To date, polling professionals have encountered major problems in transitioning from landlines to mobile phones for interviewing purposes. There is no mobile phone equivalent of the residential phone directory in any country. Mobile phone databases are generally of poor quality and random digit dialling (RDD) of mobile phones is largely unfeasible. Even if these problems could be overcome, consumer resistance would limit response rates. Our experience (and this is no doubt shared by others) has been that when we call people on their mobiles they will often seek to avoid being interviewed by claiming their phone battery charge is low or that they have to pay for incoming calls. By and large, most people are often more comfortable using their mobiles for short calls and the rest of the time use it more for texting and messaging.

But the emergence of smart phones will help to change current telephone interviewing dynamics. In addition, to many more people in emerging markets enjoying Internet access,^{20, 21} there is also an increasing amount of survey software designed to be run exclusively on mobile phones. Surveys can be sent and accessed either through email accounts or via a direct text message to the phone which contains the live survey link.

Telecommunications 'triangulation' technology also allows surveys to be sent to people within a defined geographic area or location. For example, if a political client wants to reach people who have just attended a political rally in order to survey their views and opinions and analyse that information immediately afterward, this can all be done within a few hours relying on currently available technology. Our own company has been trialling such technology in South East Asia in the last 12 months. Although response rates are still low, we believe this will improve over time through incentivisation and education. Utilising partnerships with mobile operators

20 As Internet Base Touches 100-mn Mark, Google Draws up Strategy to Grow its Online Ad Biz in India. (19 April 2011). *The Economic Times*. Retrieved 11 August 2011, from http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2011-04-19/news/29447165_1_raj-anandan-google-india-internet-user-base

21 Survey: China's Mobile Internet Users to Exceed PC Users in 2012 (26 August 2010). *China People's Daily*. Retrieved August 11, 2011, from <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90001/90776/90882/7118824.html>

in various countries, some companies already claim to be able to reach millions of people with traditional mobile phones in emerging markets and remote locations, by offering airtime compensation as an incentive to participate in surveys.²²

Additionally, online respondent panels will also likely grow to cover less affluent segments of the population whose only mode of online access maybe a smart phone. This will likely prove to be a major game changer in emerging markets where online polling has to date had far less of an impact.

Rethinking and reshaping approaches

Technology is also helping pollsters to rethink and reshape their approaches to qualitative research. In the past, qualitative research was largely undertaken through in-depth interviews and focus groups. In more recent times, ethnography (which is essentially commercially-based anthropology) and ideation workshops (which might include a range of stakeholder representatives and not just consumers or citizens) have become more popular. But all generally involve physical face-to-face dialogue.

Social media tools and platforms, which allow for both communication and collaboration between individuals and groups, are becoming increasingly attractive to some professional researchers. Within our own company we regularly use Skype to conduct interviews with people in diverse locations, who often share common attitudes and behaviour but may speak a variety of languages. Skype also allows for test stimulus to be viewed and evaluated in real time for immediate feedback (e.g. ad. concept testing). We also rely on even more sophisticated commercial online focus group software, which allows us to invite like-minded respondents in various locations to participate and interact on particular topics. Such software also permits clients to observe as non-participants and send private messages to the group moderator should they have additional questions or require further probing on an issue being discussed.^{23, 24, 25}

22 <http://txteagle.com/about/overview>

23 www.itracks.com

24 www.webex.com

25 www.focusvision.com

We also combine traditional qualitative research techniques with usability software to record people's reaction to, and navigation of, websites and set up webcams during focus groups so clients on the other side of the world can view the sessions live from their own desktops.

Social Media Platforms: Facebook

But it is popular social media platforms such as Facebook that provide even wider scope to improve the quality and depth of qualitative research insights. The multi-natured architecture built into popular social media platforms permits researchers to carry out studies over a period of weeks and mix direct individual question and answer approaches with group interaction and sharing. Respondents can post and share thoughts, images and other media throughout the duration of the project. This form of interaction can be configured in various ways and used in different combinations to achieve a powerful depth of insight that would be hard to accomplish in a traditional focus group or interview. Some of the options that can be relied on include, daily private diaries, bulletin-board style group discussions and even live chat rooms.

Through our experience we have discovered that the use of social media-based methodologies is proving to be extremely effective for particular audiences. The style of feedback lends itself particularly well to respondents who have an expert opinion on a subject, or who are extremely passionate about a topic or issue, as it gives them full control over how to shape their response from behind the safety of a keyboard. It also allows them to express a level of depth and subtlety that they may be less willing to do in a face-to-face setting. The ability to immediately pull multi-media references and links to illustrate responses during a discussion session also adds another level of richness to the insight collection process.

Teens and young adults in all countries display similar characteristics when it comes to social media and share a common *lingua franca*. Younger respondents are often naturals when it comes to interacting online; they are more commonly engaged in dialogue that not only carries the spark of live conversation but can also be emotional and even adversarial. In a recent study, we investigated levels of local arts participation amongst young adults in Singapore using both online and traditional techniques. We were able to observe how naturally most of them responded when using online media that they were accustomed to. This proved to be a crucial foundation for our eventual research conclusions.

Conclusions

With the Internet now in its third decade, the time has clearly arrived for a full transformation of polling and research to embrace the opportunities offered by online technologies. Although online polling has been slow to evolve in Asia, access to the Internet via smart phones will allow pollsters and researchers to gain access to many more people. This development will undoubtedly be embraced by major companies searching for information on potential new customers, but there remain doubts as to whether governments in the region will be willing to allow more widespread polling of political and social issues, particularly if it casts an unfavourable light on leaders and policies. Arguably, electoral laws will first need to be relaxed in many countries before online polling becomes more widely accepted.

Smart devices will also become increasingly important in data collection, breathing new life into face-to-face interviewing with the ability to use video and audio files and upload responses in real time. By using location based technology we are also now able to conduct polls by mobile phones and complete surveys within specifically defined geographic areas.

Pollsters also need to change their thinking and learn to adapt to the potential offered by advancements in communications and information gathering technology. Greater effort needs to be made to understand and embrace data analytics, with polling experts playing a bigger role in developing better, more sensitive, sentiment tracking. Social media platforms can also serve as valuable tools for the collection of insights, particularly in the area of qualitative research.

CHAPTER 8

Do public opinion processes change through social media?

By Philip Behnke

Introduction

Asian social media usage has seen unprecedented growth in recent years. For example, with more than 180 million users, Facebook is already Asia's fourth biggest "nation." But it is not only the usual suspects, such as Facebook and Twitter that are growing. China, for example, has virtually no Facebook users, but still has more than 400 million people on social networks. The big players here are Kaixin, Renren and the Twitter-like platform, Weibo. And it is not just the most developed countries in Asia that use social media. Indonesia, for example, just overtook the United Kingdom as the second largest Facebook population in the world. In addition, Indonesia is already the third largest "nation" on Twitter. Much of the remarkable growth in social networking has taken place in the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) region. As of August 2011, four ASEAN countries were in the top 20 Facebook users. They are Indonesia, the Philippines (7), Malaysia (16) and Thailand (17). The Philippines is rightly called the world's social networking capital, with 95 percent of all 'netizens' on Facebook. Vietnam has one of the fastest growing Facebook and Twitter populations in the world.¹

Social media has become a fact of life for civil society worldwide, involving many actors – regular citizens, activists, non-governmental organisations, media and politicians. Social networking platforms have created an additional public sphere, giving the networked population greater access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speech and an enhanced ability to undertake collective action.

¹ Sources: Facebook, www.internetworldstats.com.

In the political arena, these increased freedoms can help loosely coordinated publics to set agendas, create and develop public opinions and demand change. There are a variety of public opinions covering different areas, such as fashion, the arts, literature and marketing. This article will focus on the political sphere. It has been fully recognised that the role social media played during the Arab Spring revolutions (and in the years before) in Egypt and the Middle East, has been very important. However, discussion on the political impact of social media should not focus only on the power of mass protests to topple governments. Social media plays a significant role in all areas of public opinion. Social networks are challenging the “spiral of silence,” a basic theory of public opinion, and complementing the traditional mass media in their agenda setting functions.

Social media and the “spiral of silence”

The “spiral of silence” has long been the basic theory of public opinion building. Introduced in 1974, the “spiral of silence” theory explores hypotheses to determine why some groups remain silent while others are more vocal in forums of public discourse. The theory contends that the silence displayed by certain groups is due to the unpopularity of their opinions in the public sphere. While majority groups are supported by, and consequently have, the willingness to speak out on their issues, minority groups remain silent due to a fear of isolation.²

In her book, *The Spiral of Silence*, Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann says that the way an individual views their social environment is strongly influenced by mass media. If the individual sees the more prevalent opinion (not their own), more and more in their social environment, they become less inclined to voice their own opinion publicly. As Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann puts it: “the tendency of the one to speak up and the other to be silent starts off a spiralling process which increasingly establishes one’s opinion as the prevailing one”.³ Therefore, public opinion is identified by the silent individual as the opinion that is generally accepted by the public, and can be voiced openly without fear.

In times of social media, this theory can no longer be the underlying basis for the public opinion process. Social networking allows everyone (or at

2 Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, 1974, *The Spiral of Silence. A Theory of Public Opinion*

3 Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, 1974, *The Spiral of Silence. A Theory of Public Opinion*, page 44.

least the ones who want to) to take part in public discourse and have their voices heard. Of course, in strongly censored countries with aggressive governments, fear of detention and punishment still play a role. But in general, social networks are an additional public sphere for easily sharing opinions, or commenting on existing ones. Individuals can also hide behind synonyms, and act more or less in anonymity. More importantly, staying silent due to the unpopularity of one's opinion, can no longer be a determinant. It is never easy to find like-minded people. And, even if the opinion does not make it to top of the public agenda, with a certain number of 'likes', 'followers' or 'friends', individuals seeking support for their position via social publishing tools, could find themselves in a self-edited version of reality that represents perceptions of greater support for their position.⁴

Growing number of public opinions

As a result, this new process of sharing leads to a growing number of (public) opinions. The 'opinion scene' has never been so diverse and manifold. Social media plays a pivotal role in that regard. Not because of the participatory networks, but as the catalyst that increases the speed of getting a message across and attaining the bigger picture for potential followers and participants. But can social media change the public opinion process, and also set the agenda for people not taking part in social media?

'Occupy wall street' – a social media movement

The recent 'Occupy Wall Street' movement is a good example. The movement started with a handful of demonstrators in New York protesting against "a growing disparity in wealth, and the absence of legal repercussions behind the recent global financial crisis".⁵ It soon became global with hundreds of thousands of followers all over the world, and daily protests from Berlin to Sydney. Social media has the ability to deliver the critical mass; and from then it is always a collaboration of social networks and (traditional) media that keeps a public opinion alive. The mission of the 'Occupy' movement is nothing completely new. Politicians (for example Barack Obama, to name just one) commented on the movement,⁶ and the traditional media started

4 Daniel Lemin, 2010, *Public Opinion in the Social Media Era: Toward a New Understanding of the Spiral of Silence*.

5 <https://www.facebook.com/Gilded.Age?sk=info>, and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Occupy_Wall_Street.

6 Lucy Madison, 2011, "Obama: "Occupy Wall Street" reflects „broad-based frustration", found on <http://www.cbsnews.com>

to report about it; a 'new' public opinion was being created around the world.⁷ 'Occupy' shows that a public opinion only comes alive when online and offline join together. Photos and videos of the actual protest were uploaded and tweeted, rather than just empty words. Social media is most successful as a reflection of real life.

Taking this into account, scepticism toward the idea that social media will make a difference in politics can be answered quite confidently. Clay Shirky, professor of new media at New York University and the author of *Cognitive Surplus: Creativity and Generosity in a Connected Age*, said in his essay from January 2011, *The Political Power of Social Media Technology, the Public Sphere, and Political Change*:

"There are, broadly speaking, two arguments against the idea that social media will make a difference in national politics. The first is that the tools are themselves ineffective, and the second is that they produce as much harm to democratization as good, because repressive governments are becoming better at using these tools to suppress dissent. The critique of ineffectiveness, most recently offered by Malcolm Gladwell in *The New Yorker*⁸, concentrates on examples of what has been termed 'slacktivism,' whereby casual participants seek social change through low-cost activities, such as joining Facebook's 'Save Darfur' group, that are long on bumper-sticker sentiment and short on any useful action. The critique is correct but not central to the question of social media's power; the fact that barely committed actors cannot click their way to a better world does not mean that committed actors cannot use social media effectively. Recent protest movements – including a movement against fundamentalist vigilantes in India in 2009, the beef protests in South Korea in 2008, and protests against education laws in Chile in 2006 – have used social media not as a replacement for real-world action but as a way to coordinate it. As a result, all of those protests exposed participants to the threat of violence, and in some cases its actual use. In fact, the adoption of these tools (especially cell phones) as a way to co-ordinate and document real world action is so ubiquitous that it will probably be a part of all future political movements."⁹

7 Matthew Reiss, 2011, "First the Street, now the world," found on <http://www.tehelka.com>.

8 Malcom Gladwell, 2010, "Small Change – Why the revolution will not be tweeted," *The New Yorker*, October

9 Clay Shirky, 2011, "The Political Power of Social Media", *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2011, page 28-41.

Shirky's essay was written only weeks before the revolts in Tunisia and close to the start of the revolution in Egypt. His essay led to a lively public discussion with Gladwell. In the end, Gladwell weighed in with his thoughts – at least some. In a comment on the *New Yorker* website, published on February 2011, he no longer questioned social media itself, but the way we put too much attention on how “at one point or another [the people] employed some of the tools of the new media to communicate with one another.” And he continued: “How they choose to do it is less interesting, in the end, than why they were driven to do it in the first place.”¹⁰

Gladwell is not the only sceptic. In his book, *The Net Delusion*, foreign policy writer, Evgeny Morozov, for example, argues that the views of some “cyber-utopians” are in danger of distorting political discourse to the point where some politicians think that all people require to overthrow governments, is Internet access and some followers on social media. A similar view was elaborated in a piece in *BusinessWeek*, entitled “The Fallacy of Facebook Diplomacy,” which argued that “the idea that America can use the Internet to influence global events is more dream than reality.”¹¹

However, discussion on the political impact of social media should not focus too much on the power of mass protests to topple governments. Social media's real potential lies in supporting civil society and the public sphere – which will produce change over years, not weeks or months.¹² The ‘Occupy’ example shows well that social media has become an integral part of social and political movements. We had changes and revolutions before, but for now, social media is no longer indispensable. It has changed the way we communicate, the way we bring our opinions across and the way we demand for change and even organise protests. In an article on these global protests, New York Times author, Nicholas Kulish, writes: “Increasingly, citizens of all ages, but particularly the young, are rejecting conventional structures like parties and trade unions in favour of a less hierarchical, more participatory system modelled in many ways on the culture of the Web.”¹³ Similarly, in a Reuters article: “That served as a wake-up call to those in authority. By allowing millions of citizens to coordinate

10 www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/10/04/101004fa_fact_gladwell#ixzz1bbCWgYZd.

11 www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/11_07/b4215008414536.htm

12 Clay Shirky, 2011, “The Political Power of Social Media”, *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2011, page 28-41.

13 www.nytimes.com/2011/09/28/world/as-scorn-for-vote-grows-protests-surge-around-globe.html

political action quickly and often without conventional leadership, the new technology is challenging traditional political power structures."¹⁴ It is the capabilities of the social web – instant communication, money transfer, media sharing - that are disrupting the traditional routes of communication and politics in New York City as much as in the Middle East. 'Occupy Wall Street' has occupied the Internet even as it has occupied the streets in financial districts all over the world.

How social media reshapes journalism and the new collaborative agenda setting

It was not love at first sight, but journalists and news organisations have learned to use social media. In 2004, Facebook went online and Twitter followed two years later. Today, almost all media organisations use these tools. Blogs have long been a news source for journalists. They are not only having an impact on the speed and availability of news, but also influence the tone and editorial direction of reporting. Several studies and surveys can verify this.¹⁵ In September 2010, Associated Press (AP) made the announcement that bloggers should be cited as a news source.¹⁶ This is a significant move from the AP, and given that such a large news organisation has made a point of (finally) recognising bloggers as a viable news source, it has much wider implications on how bloggers affect the news agenda and overall news industry.

On the question of how blogging is evolving on its own, and affecting journalism, Felix Salmon, a financial journalist and a blogging editor for Reuters, answered in an interview of March 2011: "Old-school blogging, where an individual puts their own work up on a dedicated website in reverse chronological order, is clearly on the decline. It's been replaced by Twitter and Facebook, on the micro-publishing end of things, and by big professional sites like *Business Insider* or *Huffington Post*, at the other end of the spectrum."¹⁷

Several major news stories in the last several years have been driven, informed and amplified by Twitter and Facebook. This includes the Iranian

14 www.reuters.com/article/2011/09/28/us-technology-risk-idUSTRE78R3CM20110928

15 For example: Messner and Distaso, 2008, "How traditional media and weblogs use each other as sources", in *Journal Journalism Studies*, Volume 9, Issue 3 June 2008, pages 447 – 463.

16 www.ap.org/pages/about/pressreleases/pr_090110a.html

17 <http://blogs.reuters.com/felix-salmon/2011/03/16/how-blogs-have-changed-journalism>

election protests and Egyptian protests in the Middle East. In addition, a neighbour of Osama bin Laden unintentionally live-blogged the SEAL assault on the compound, without realising what he was reporting. It is already more than just sharing that connects traditional media with the way social media operates. And although it might be more catchy to talk about a rivalry with only one winner in the end – that will not happen. Traditional media and social media complement each other. Journalists use social media as a source on the one hand, and as a new releasing tool on the other hand when it has to be quick.

The fourth annual Digital Journalism Study, published by the Oriella PR network in May 2011, polled 478 journalists from 15 countries and found that 47 percent of them used Twitter as a source – up from just 33 percent last year. The use of Facebook as a source went up to 35 percent this year, from 25 percent in 2010. The report also suggests an increasing number of journalists are turning to social media for verification, with a third using Twitter and a quarter using Facebook.¹⁸

Reporting has always, in some ways, been a collaborative process between journalists and their sources. But increasingly, there is a merger between the source and the content producer. As a result, more journalism will happen through collaborative reporting, where the witness of the news becomes the reporter, says David Clinch, editorial director for Storyful and a consultant for Skype. Journalists, Clinch says, must be able to pivot quickly between the idea of using the community as a source of news, and as the audience for news, because they need to be both. This requires a shift in the mindset of journalists, who are used to deciding what news is and how it is covered, produced and distributed, according to Alfred Hermida, professor of integrated journalism at the University of British Columbia. “Social media by its very definition is a participatory medium,” Hermida said. “There is a potential for greater engagement and connection with the community, but only if journalists are open to ceding a degree of editorial control to the community.”¹⁹ The British, *The Guardian*, is among news media with the most experience of combining journalism with the participatory element of social media. Under the title, “Investigate your MP’s expenses”, for example, The Guardian granted its readers insight

18 Found on www.journalism.co.uk/news/journalists-increasingly-using-social-media-as-news-source-finds-study/s2/a544193/.

19 Found on <http://mashable.com/2010/09/13/future-social-media-journalism/>.

into a 458,832 pages thick document (*smps-expenses.guardian.co.uk*). It has also recently and successfully started the World Government Data-platform, *www.guardian.co.uk/world-government-data*).

Who sets the agenda

Social media and traditional media are irrevocably intertwined. Hence, it is no longer a question of who is setting the agenda. They both do. Proposed almost 40-years-ago by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, the agenda setting theory argues that the news media have a large influence on audiences, in terms of what stories are newsworthy and how much prominence and space are given to them. The authors start from the premise that people are not indoctrinated by the media, but rather that their attention is directed at specific issues by mass communication channels, so that people usually end up choosing what media has defined as being "the issue." Specifically, people found the most important issues were those covered most often.²⁰

This theory is hard to apply to non-traditional media, or social media, since the user is now empowered to consume the content they choose. Social networks have emerged as new partial editors. Whether it is the people that a reader follows on Twitter, or a new iPad application that helps visualise news being shared in the social space, each of these personalised social news streams are helping readers decide what they need to read and what they have to talk about. However, mass media still act as a gatekeeper for public opinion. Journalists still clearly have a role as curators of content and making sense of the noise. Initiatives started in a social media environment need mass media as an accelerator to move the initiative to the top of the agenda.

Creating a new additional public sphere, is one of the main functions of social networks in the public opinion process, and in the collaboration of social media and traditional media. Traditional media is trying to move their contents to social spaces on the web where people are talking about it. Journalists cannot ignore that the most important news on the web is the news that people are searching for.

²⁰ McCombs and Shaw, 1972, The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media, *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36.

Conclusion

Do public opinion processes change through social media? Yes, they do. Social media and social networks have become an integral part of our lives, and for many they replace the more traditional forms of participation, gathering information and sharing opinions. A public opinion is created when many people talk about one issue. Today, they talk in online forums and on social networking sites – with almost unlimited access and global reach. Social networks will play a more and more crucial role, especially for opinion building and decision making at a local or regional community level. Social media will not replace any action; it is most successful when it is used for the sharing of real life events. Social media goes hand in hand with traditional media when it comes to agenda setting. Both media will continue to enhance and complement each other. The future of social media in journalism will see the death of “social media.” That is, all media as we know it today will become social, and feature a social component to one extent or another.

Social media does not create a public opinion. It is just changing the opinion building process. That is all, but that is a lot. For everyone involved and impacted by public opinion, monitoring of and listening to social networks should become a routine – for politicians as well as for the polling industry. Bans and prohibitions on the Internet and social networks will not help to keep public opinion under control.

CHAPTER 9

How the media and government agencies make use of polls: Insider's observation and perspective

By Noppadon Kannika

Introduction

News media organizations make use of polls to fulfill their agendas and support their viewpoints. Sometimes, the government's stability is threatened by polls and their reporting in the media. Regulating polls is often mentioned, but the media also raises the issue of hidden agendas, particularly about political interference in the polling business. In general, the media will make use of poll reports to furnish news stories. Polling exercises covering issues like public opinion and government's responsiveness in the news media are investigated. However, in the political upheaval that has affected Thailand it is difficult to gauge if the polls enhance the media to serve as an independent watchdog on political, social and economic phenomena. Nevertheless, sometimes governmental agencies, the news media and pollsters mutually help set agendas and use polls to mobilize the public in support of their various goals. In addition, polling is used by government officials for developing public policies and evaluating their strategies.

Polls, news media's making use, and government's stability

Polling is simply a method of seeking to measure public opinion, behaviors and other social facts by using a questionnaire and sample selection procedures. Questionnaire design requires interdisciplinary researchers such as survey methodologists, psychologists, sociologists, political scientists and marketers, who construct survey questions and apply cognitive tests for improving the questions' quality. Meanwhile sample selection procedures require the knowledge of probability theory and statistics. Much of probability theory is applied to obtaining a representative sample and estimates of demographic parameters. If it is true that reporting of polling influences agenda setting and policymaking, it is necessary that

the polling broadly reflects the public's perception of reality. News media and government agencies are now increasingly looking at opinion polls as a means of gauging public reaction to their agendas and viewpoints.

In 1992, Dusit Poll of Suan Dusit University and Matichon Polling Center of Matichon newspaper officially started conducting polls on politics. The hot issues in the news media were the government's performance. In 1996, Matichon, a leading political newspaper in Thailand, used its own polling center to conduct polls. One of the poll reports was the talk of the town. Its findings showed that the public did not want the Prime Minister, Banhan as the head of the government. The report was headlined "The Public Agreement that Banhan Should Step Down." The newspaper stated that Matichon polling center and Matichon editors conducted a nationwide poll for measuring public attitudes toward Banhan's performance. The poll methodology combined mail-in survey data and face-to-face interview survey data. The face-to-face interviews were conducted among quota-selection sampled respondents. Meanwhile, the newspaper printed the questionnaire and invited its readers to send the completed questionnaire back to the polling center by mail-in. The editorial stated that if Banhan did not step down, there would be a violent mob of protesters against the government.¹ Later, the report was criticized that it could not guarantee the representativeness of the poll to the public, because of biased sample selections. However, in 1997, the center was closed due to lack of funds.

Meanwhile the number of polling centers in Thailand had increased (Table 1). However, Dusit Poll and ABAC weekly poll were released to the news media, and therefore the public. In early 2001, the Mass Communications Organization of Thailand [MCOT] shared the survey costs with ABAC poll research center to conduct an exit poll on election day. Meanwhile, Dusit Poll conducted an exit poll for TV 3. Both polling centres predicted Thaksin Shinawatra's party would win and the poll projection matched the actual vote. Thaksin's government's popularity was very high. However, the honeymoon period was over on February 2002, when Reuters reported that the ABAC poll had upset some cabinet ministers. As a result, the police and the military went to the ABAC poll's offices and checked all the questionnaires. *The Nation* newspaper reported that an ABAC poll researcher had said that the government's Bureau of University Affairs had explicitly tried to discredit ABAC poll surveys to please some in the

1 *Matichon Daily*, August 26 1996, Bangkok, page 1.

Table 1 : Number of polling centers, 1975 - 2011

Year of Establishment	Names of Polling Center	No. of Full-time Workers	No. of Collectors	Website
1975	NIDA Poll,	closed	Closed	None
1992 – present	Dusit Poll, Suan Dusit University	27	≈500	http://dusitpoll.dusit.ac.th retrieved 5 September 2011
1992 – 1996	<i>Matichon</i> Poll, <i>Matichon</i> Newspaper	closed	Closed	None
1994 – present	Bangkok Poll, Bangkok University	n/a	n/a	http://research.bu.ac.th/new_poll/introduct/intro.html
1996	ABAC Poll, Assumption University	53	≈300	www.abacpoll.au.edu retrieved 5 September 2011
2004	Ramkhamhaeng Poll	n/a	n/a	None
2006	Rangsit Poll,	4	n/a	None
2007	NIDA Poll (re-open)	5	n/a	http://nidapoll.nida.ac.th
2007	Payap Poll, Payap University	10	≈200	http://payappoll.payap.ac.th
2008	HadYai Poll, Had Yai University	6	n/a	http://eportfolio.hu.ac.th/research/index.php?option=com_content&task=section&id=17&Itemid=65
2009	Sripatum Poll, Sripatum University	14	n/a	http://research.spu.ac.th/POLL retrieved 5 September 2011
2011	Dhurakij Pundit Poll, Khonkaen Poll, Mahasarakham Poll, Mae-Jo Poll	n/a	n/a	None

Source: Based on author's observations, interview, and search of polling centre websites. The author found that most of the polling centres in Thailand did not want to disclose their information about the number of full-time workers and data collectors. Most of them often changed their centre directors over time. However, the Dusit poll and ABAC have adequate resources of information. Their centre directors have worked in polling for more than 10 years. Retrieved September 2011.

cabinet.² The ABAC poll director was forced to leave the country to avoid a confrontation with the government. He undertook a master's degree at the University of Michigan Survey Methodology Program. However, during his studies in Michigan he still worked for ABAC and continued to track the government's popularity over time. A Daily News newspaper's editorial reported that Thaksin's public support dropped from 61.6 percent to 48.1 percent according to the ABAC and said that corruption had become the government's weakness.³ However, Thaksin let the public decide in the election, and her party won.

In 2005, Thaksin's government considered regulating polling in Thailand. The government's main point was that any polling centre needed to inform the government's National Statistics Office prior to collecting data. An editorial in *Krungthepturakij* newspaper, one of the Nation Group's newspapers, questioned the government about an alleged hidden agenda to interfere in polling.⁴ The polling centres had to explain why the polling needed to be undertaken and the centre needed to outline its proposed objectives and methodology, at least five days in advance.⁵ But, the regulation proved ineffective because of public resistance. *Matichon Weekly's* newspaper editorial, on 15 – 21 July 2005, said that the seventh anniversary of Thaksin's party would not be happily celebrated because the ABAC poll report showed that Thaksin's popularity dropped from 77.5 percent at the beginning of her administration to 45.9 percent in the late poll of July.⁶ However, in early 2006 Thais divided into groups supporting Thaksin's party partisans (i.e., the Red Shirts) and an anti-Thaksin alliance (i.e., the Yellow Shirts). On 18 September 2006, *Thairath*, the biggest newspaper in Thailand, released an ABAC poll on its front page, as the headline news, showing that there would be violent fighting between the Red Shirts and the Yellow Shirts. The pollster suggested that Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra needed to make a decision to prevent any violence.⁷ Then, the coup d'état took place on 19 September 2006, without any resistance. The coup head said that he wanted to prevent violence to solve

2 *Reuters, in The Nation* 27 February 2002.

3 *Daily News*, 25 September 2004.

4 *Krungthepturakij*, 12 October 2005.

5 *Pooying* magazine, November 2005.

6 *Matichon Weekly*, 15 – 21 July 2005.

7 *Thairath* daily newspaper, September 18 2006, Bangkok, page 1.

the government's corruption problems and that he would hold a general election very soon.⁸

News media, polling on public opinion agendas and the government's responsiveness

A Reuters report in the Bangkok Post newspaper in November 2006, said that the military leaders had selected General Surayud Chulanont to become Prime Minister of Thailand after the bloodless 19 September coup. General Surayud set his government's agenda to fight corruption, improve governance, overhaul the justice system and accelerate political reforms.⁹ However, it emerged that his policy agendas did not necessarily match those of the public's. Flooding disasters in October 2006 and higher living expenses, for example, became top-priority problems which needed urgent attention. As a result, on 13 November 2006, *The Nation*, *Bangkok Post* and other newspapers, carried poll-based stories that said General Surayud's popularity had dropped from 60 percent to 55 percent within a month due to the government's slow responses.¹⁰ *Krungthepturakij* business newspaper's editorial commented on the government's security. The article criticised General Surayud's administration and said that it could not work effectively for the overall public and its agendas did not meet the public's needs.¹¹ It seemed that the government still mainly worked against fighting the Thaksin government's alleged corruption. But recognition of these public problems or public opinion reflected through the media did not lead to an understanding of the government's attempts. (See Table 2).

By the end of 2007, General Surayud's sought to find a peaceful resolution of the conflict by dissolving Parliament and calling a new general election. However, the Thaksin-supported political party, People's Power Party (PPP) won, so the political unrest still existed. The party was dissolved by the Constitutional Court on December, 2008. Then, Abhisit Vejjajiva was elected the Prime Minister by Parliament, not through a new election. He led his Democrat Party to power after PPP was dissolved by the Court. Polls showed the government's public support was about 70 percent'

8 Author's direct discussion with the chief of the coup during a lunch in his dining room at the headquarters of the Royal Thai Army, in February 2007.

9 *Bangkok Post*, 27 November 2006.¹⁰ *The Nation*, 13 November 2006.

10 *Krungthepturakij*

11 *Krungthepturakij*, 14 November, 2006.

Table 2 : Presents public opinion agendas and the post-coup government's agendas in the news media

Public Opinion Agendas*	The Coup Government's Agendas (General Surayud Chulanont)	News Media's Reflections on the Government's Responsiveness** (September 2006 – 2007)
High living expenses	Fighting corruption Sufficiency economy Improving governance Overhauling justice system Accelerating political reforms Happiness Index, not only Gross Domestic Product (GDP)	Slow acting help
Flood disasters		Too abstract economic policy of the government
Health and better treatments		Too many anti-Thaksin protests
Secure jobs		Crisis situation in southern Thailand
Energy prices		Corruption still exists
Unsure political situation		The police head's removal from office.
Corruption		Floating the price of Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG) used for cooking
Air pollution in Thailand		Justice reform/police northern reform. Failed to successfully implement
Illegal drugs and crime		Ineffective acts to reduce air pollution
Gross Domestic Happiness (GDH)		Worse illegal drug problems

Note: *Author's Sources of Poll Reports **Author's Search of Media's Headline News

The public opinion issues at the beginning of Abhisit's government's terms were highlighted in the news media as high living expenses, air pollution in Northern Thailand and the 2009 swine flu epidemic. Unfortunately, the government faced more political unrest. Voters were informed by the media that Abhisit's government followed the regime that followed the coup, which was anti-Thaksin. The interesting question was, how much of the information in the news media and available to the public about the Abhisit government was in response to public opinion agendas.

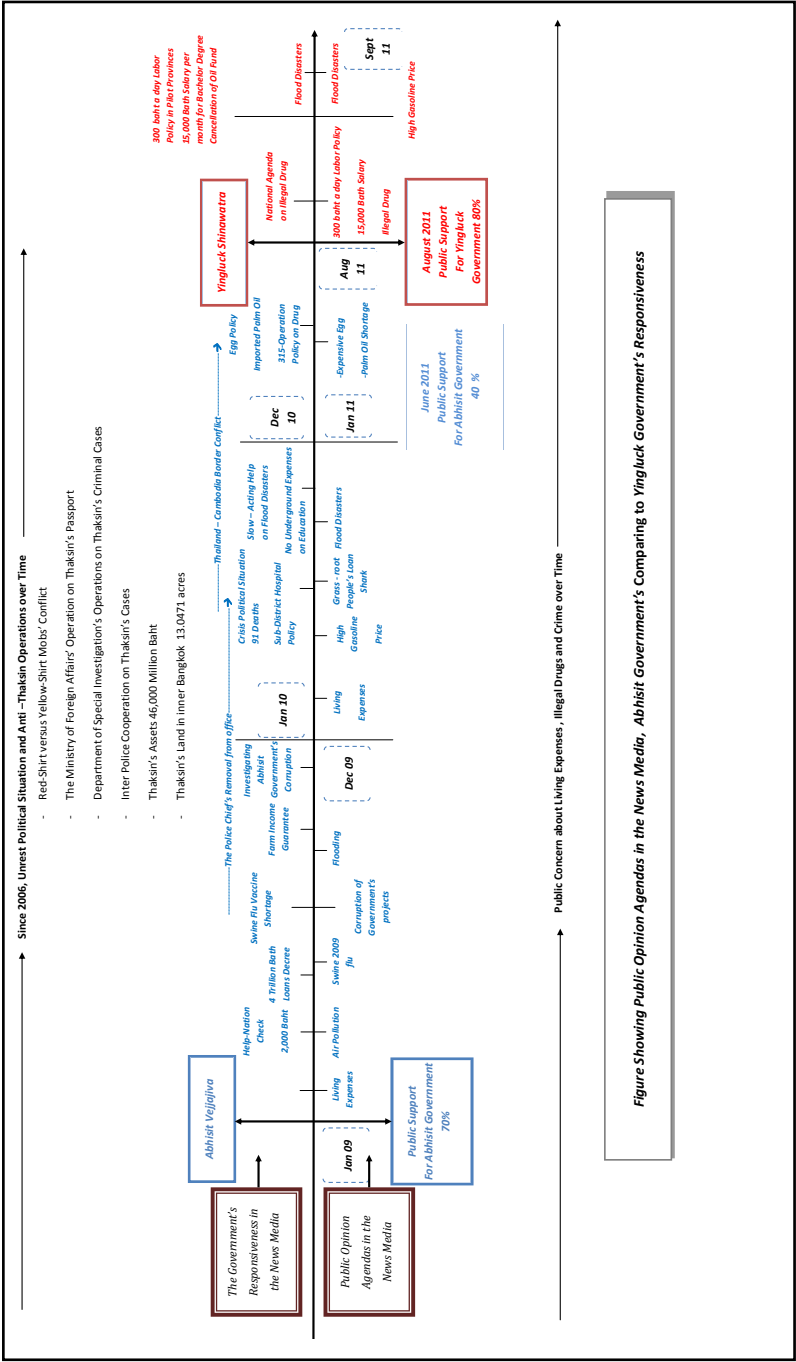


Figure Showing Public Opinion Agendas in the News Media, Abhisit Government's Comparing to Yingluck Government's Responsiveness

The Figure here shows the comparative responsiveness between the Abhisit and Yingluck Shinawatra governments towards issues raised in public by the Thai news media. The figure clearly shows that Abhisit's government started his responsiveness to high living expenses among people by launching the "help-nation check" (handout) valued 2000 baht. This was criticized as offering benefits limited to some specific groups. News media coverage at the time led to anti-Thaksin examinations of Thaksin's assets, the issuing of an Interpol warrant for his arrest, focus on the purchase by his wife of some inner city prime land, the cancellation of his passport and the Department of Special Investigation's investigations into alleged criminal cases. The information was perceived by the public as a top priority by the government. In addition, some media's programmes frequently focused on alleged corruption.

The swine flu outbreak became a top-priority issue, with the news media identifying a shortage of flu vaccine as a major issue. However, the public did pay attention to alleged corruption in some government projects, but it was not clear to the general population what action the government at the time took to respond to this concern. One such case was a farm income guarantee scheme, which was investigated for corruption. Another point of interest was the 12 months it took to remove the incumbent national police chief

In 2010, the second year of the Abhisit government, the same public opinion agendas as in the first year still existed, including high living expenses, high gasoline prices, illegal drug and crime problems and the loan sharking amongst grass roots Thais. Unfortunately, Thailand faced another crisis with eruption of the Red Shirt confrontation with the Abhisit government. Eventually, the government used force to remove protestors severely disrupting business in the middle of Bangkok by brining in the army. The ensuing showdown left 91 dead.

By the third quarter of the year, people were facing a new threat, the massive floods flowing down from the north of Thailand. This was getting considerable news media coverage. The Abhisit government's handling of the floods was severely criticized. In addition, a conflict also broke out between Thailand and Cambodia. In short, after two years in power, the Abhisit government's responsiveness to a number of major crises was not well regarded by the public. However, by the end of Abhisit's term in office, it seems the responsiveness had improved and was better received by

the public, particularly over two very basic issues, the cost of eggs and a shortage of palm oil. The imported palm oil was seen as a solution for the shortage. But there was a lack of acceptance from the public on the egg policy. During the new general election campaign, the government's public support was about 40 percent.

Yingluck Shinawatra's Phue Thai party won the July, 2011 election. Her public support for the government in a poll report was about 80 percent. Her government started to implement its election promises, such as a 300-baht per day minimum wage, a 15,000-baht salary for new bachelor-degree graduates, attacking illegal drug problems and the high price of petrol. The administration's responsiveness did match the public opinion agendas at the time. Within first two weeks of taking office, Prime Minister Yingluck and her ministers announced a national agenda on illegal drug problems. By the end of the government's first month, leading news media informed the public that her cabinet had agreed to implement the 300-baht per day minimum wage policy through pilot schemes in the provinces, the 15,000-baht salary of new bachelor-degree graduates, cancellation of the oil fund, thus reducing gasoline prices and reducing the tax on buying a first home and first car for consumers. Then the devastating floods came from the north and into Bangkok. Yingluck was seen as being proactive in trying to visit and help victims of the disaster. Fighting the floods was the government's highest priority. Consequently, opinion polls in November, 2011 showed Yingluck's public popularity was higher than Abhisit's. Yingluck got 38.6 percent, and Abhisit 12.9 percent. The pollsters suggested that Yingluck's government be aware of accountability. However, the public saw her administration as being responsive to public opinion, at least at the beginning of her taking office. However, because of the ongoing political unrest in Thailand's politics, it is imperative that the news media maintain a strong independent watchdog role. Further research and observations on this role are still required.

The accuracy of pre-election polls and exit polls in the 2011 Thailand election – A case study

By Noppadon Kannika

Many critical questions were raised about polling accuracy before and after the 2011 Thailand election. During the election campaign, the concepts of authentic and inauthentic polls were defined. Some pollsters' methodologies were presented, but some were unknown. The professionalism of pollsters was investigated. As a result, misusing poll reports to mislead the public was controversial. The pre-election poll methodology was questioned. After the election there were doubts about whether pre-election and exit polls would be necessary in future elections because of a big difference between exit polls' projections and actual vote results. However, the main sources of errors in election polls were investigated. This chapter will review the concerns about pre-election and exit poll factors affecting total errors in the polls and suggest some possible ways for better polling in the future.

Growing number of pollsters

The public learned of the growing number of pollsters during the 2011 Thailand election campaign. There were many pollsters predicting the election outcomes including: ABAC poll, Dusit poll, Bangkok poll, NIDA poll, Isan poll, Dhurakij Pundit poll and Had-Yai poll. In addition, some political parties and government organisations announced their own polling results to the public via news organisations.

News media agencies in Thailand noticed discrepancies among the pre-election polling results. Suan Dusit poll of Suan Dusit University showed on 19 June 2011, that 52.05 percent of total sampled voters in Bangkok would vote for the Pheu Thai party's list.¹ However, the Bangkok poll of Bangkok University on 23 June stated that 37.9 percent of total Bangkok voters would vote for the Pheu Thai party list.² The two polls' data collection

1 <http://www.manager.co.th/Home/ViewNews.aspx?NewsID=9540000076167>

2 http://www.khaosod.co.th/view_news.php?newsid=TUROd01ERXdNakkwTURZMU5BPT0=

periods showed that the Suan Dusit poll ended on 18 June³ and the Bangkok poll was conducted between 16 – 22 June.⁴

ABAC Poll Research Center conducted a nationwide survey of 5349 respondents in 28 out of a total 77 sampled provinces between 1 – 21 June. The centre predicted that the Pheu Thai party would get 46 – 63 seats of the political party list while the Democrat party would get 40 – 58 seats.⁵ The Suan Dusit poll interviewed 102,994 people in all provinces of Thailand and found that the Pheu Thai party would get 64 seats.⁶

The Police poll of the Royal Thai Police, in 331 constituency areas out of 375 areas across the country, found that Pheu Thai would get 274 seats. However, later, the police chief denied that the Royal Thai Police ever conducted any election polls.⁷ Meanwhile, the Pheu Thai party's key personnel announced that they had conducted their own pre-election poll and found their party would get 270 seats out of a total 500 seats in the party list and constituency areas.⁸

From these polling results, the authenticity of polls were raised in the public domain via news media investigations. There were similar aims between the two terms (authentic and inauthentic), but there were also great contrasts. The authentic polls referred to those pre-election surveys presenting details of how pollsters conducted their polls to the news media, including sampling method, sample size, margin of error, data collection period, general data of respondents, etc. But, the inauthentic polls referred to those released polling results that presented nothing about the key information of how pollsters conducted the polls. However, the same goal of releasing the polls might have been to mobilise the public mood in the direction that politicians and news media organisations wanted during the election campaign.⁹

In general, according to the principles of professional practice in the

3 <http://dusitpoll.dusit.ac.th/poll/view.php?id=1695>

4 <http://research.bu.ac.th/poll/result/poll534.php?pollID=389&Topic=คะแนนนิยมของคนกรุงเทพฯในช่วง>

5 [5http://www.matichon.co.th/daily/view_news.php?newsid=01p0102230654§ionid=0101&selday=2011-06-23](http://www.matichon.co.th/daily/view_news.php?newsid=01p0102230654§ionid=0101&selday=2011-06-23)

6 <http://www.manager.co.th/daily/ViewNews.aspx?NewsID=9540000074883>

7 <http://www.springnewstv.tv/th/news/detail.php?gid=10&id=7310>

8 <http://m.posttoday.com/articlestory.php?page=2&id=90532>

9 http://www.thaipost.net/news/140611/40169_งัดทั้งที่3ของการเลือกตั้ง_54&fileDoc=poll534.pdf

conducting of polls, all polling reports describe the methodology and findings accurately and in appropriate detail. It is important that poll results be published with sufficient information so that readers can make a judgment for themselves about how seriously to take the polls.

The Bangkok poll of Bangkok University¹⁰ and the ABAC Poll Research Center of Assumption University of Thailand,¹¹ presented their methodologies in the pre-election polls. For example, Bangkok poll stated in the latest pre-election poll that the poll was conducted between 16 – 22 June, interviewed 3338 sampled respondents who were eligible to vote for Bangkok constituency candidates, and applied the multi-stage stratified sampling method with a 95 percent confidence interval and +/- 2 percent margin of error. The poll also presented the general data of respondents, such as gender, age, education, occupation and income.¹²

However, the Dusit poll of Suan Dusit University did not publish any details of respondents' data. Moreover, the sampling method and margin of error were unknown and not stated.¹³ Dusit's polling reports can be accessed via <http://dusitpoll.dusit.ac.th/pages/home.php>. The Mahasarakham poll of Mahasarakham University interviewed 16,322 people in 126 constituency areas in the north-eastern region of Thailand. The average number of respondents in each area who returned questionnaires, was 130. They did not describe any sampling method or margin of error. They predicted that Pheu Thai would get 107 of the total north-eastern region's seats.¹⁴ Moreover, the Isan poll of Khon-Kaen University conducted a pre-election poll with a sample size of 2354 people in 20 provinces. The poll results showed that 58.9 percent of total respondents certainly decided to vote for their preferred political parties. Then, pollsters analyzed data of 1387 people classified by 20 provinces. They announced who would win in each

10 http://research.bu.ac.th/new_poll/index.php

11 http://www.abacpoll.au.edu/new_innovation/index.html

12 <http://research.bu.ac.th/poll/result/poll534.php?pollID=389&Topic=คะแนนนิยมของคนกรุงเทพฯในช่วงโค้งที่3ของร54&fileDoc=poll534.pdf>

13 <http://dusitpoll.dusit.ac.th/pages/home.php>

14 <http://www.dailynews.co.th/newstartpage/index.cfm?page=content&contentId=147193&categoryID=680>

province by using data from 69 people on average. The sampling method was a purposive selection.¹⁵

Questions about professional practices in the conduct of pre-election polls

It is useful to analyse how the polls were conducted during the 2011 Thailand election campaign. It is also important to question professional practices employed because the polls are often misused. Professionalism, with significant focus on methodology, data quality, reliability and validity, should be evident in the conduct of polls. There were some important questions raised about Thailand's pollsters during the election campaign. Did they permit tacit interpretations that were inconsistent with the data available? How did pollsters interpret their poll results? Did they inform the public about the limits of confidence in the data?

In Thailand, news media organisations are most likely to publish the poll findings from the Suan Dusit poll, Bangkok poll, and ABAC poll and rely more on these pollsters' expertise. There are two reasons why news media agencies release poll results to the public. One is that the polls match what the news media itself releases to the public. Another is that the polls are conducted by these particular pollsters. The media should seriously ask these pollsters to provide additional information on their polls in more detail so that a polling practitioner can conduct a professional evaluation of the polls. More media scrutiny of the pollsters would help reduce the possibility of distorted poll results.

In fact, presenting the pollsters' methodologies is a key factor in determining how professionally conducted the polls are. Bangkok poll researchers have announced that pollsters working in academia would have determined a sample size for a poll population of over 100,000 voters, in which 400 sampled people would be enough, with +/- 5 percent margin of error, to determine a 95 percent confidence interval.¹⁶ Bangkok poll usually applies the stratified multi-stage sampling method for polling, which starts by selecting sample districts, streets and respondents. Bangkok poll personnel claim that using this method would have a +/- 2 percent margin of error in their pre-election polls.¹⁷

15 http://www.go6tv.com/2011/05/3_05.html

16 <http://www.dailynews.co.th/newstartpage/index.cfm?page=content&categoryID=680&contentID=148496>

17 <http://research.bu.ac.th/poll/result/poll532.php?pollID=387&Topic=>

คะแนนนิยมของคนกรุงเทพฯ ในช่วงโค้งที่ 2 ของการเลือกตั้ง

However, by contrast, ABAC poll researchers have a different method of determining sample size and the margin of error in its polls. ABAC pollsters announced that they could not apply a two-stage sampling method for a nationwide pre-election poll because Thailand was not an appropriate country for this method, as it lacked a non-coverage database. If Thailand's household population was able to be approached by a fix-line phone database, the two-stage selection method would work well enough. Therefore, the ABAC poll methodology for determining sample size is to calculate a primary sample size for the simple random sampling, then, multiply by design effects and divide by a response rate. They claimed a +/- 7 percent margin of error.¹⁸

Suan Dusit pollsters still sent their poll results to the news media without any details of the methodology used in poll reports. They presented only the numbers for each polling question with no interpretation of the numbers. The pollsters allowed news media organisations to interpret the data by themselves,¹⁹ hence raising the possibility of the media distorting the findings.

Misleading the public

Here are two examples of how polls can mislead the public. Firstly, is a case where the news media apparently misused poll results to mislead the public on Pheu Thai's popularity during the election campaign. An ABAC poll showed that 43.7 percent of total respondents would vote for Pheu Thai, while 39.1 percent would vote for the Democrats. In the poll report, the margin of error for studied variables was about 7 percent due to the applied multi-stage sample selection for the poll. However, in the news media the headline claimed that Pheu Thai's popularity was higher than the Democrats, according to ABAC poll results. In fact, the news media should have said that the true population value in the poll was between 36.7 percent (43.7 - 7) and 50.7 percent (43.7 + 7). Publishing the odds would have helped prevent news media organisations from misleading some undecided voters who may have jumped "on the bandwagon". The news media should have also identified the margin of error, but did not. The public would not have been familiar with the term "margin of error" because the news media often ignore it.

18 Noppadon Kannika (2008), How to Cheating Election Polls

19 <http://dusitpoll.dusit.ac.th/polldata/2554/25541313330381.pdf>

Another example, is the alleged misuse of a Dusit poll report to mislead the public. The public was informed by the news media that Pheu Thai would certainly win, referring to the Dusit poll's results, which stated that 43.16 percent of total respondents would vote for Pheu Thai and 37.45 percent would vote for the Democrats. The one-page poll report did not tell readers about the margin of error. It mentioned that 4694 people who were eligible to vote across the country, were interviewed.²⁰ It would have been hard for a poll practitioner to evaluate the poll report because of a lack of sufficient information about how the poll was conducted. It was a case of the result being probably misused by the media to mislead the public. As a result of such news media reports, many members of the public saw the Pheu Thai party as the winner before the election, leaving the Democrats behind. If the poll had shown the 7 percent margin of error, it would not be possible to arrive at this conclusion in the way the news media did on this occasion.

Question about pre-election poll methodology

It is difficult to question the accuracy of pre-election polls if the polling methodology is unknown. In academia, even though such polls with unknown methodology may correctly predict who will win, they would be evaluated as "accidentally accurate" polls. There would not be any academic proof.

For the 2011 Thailand election, ABAC conducted nationwide pre-election polls using a multi-stage selection method. In the first stage, probability proportionate to size design (PPS) and systematic samples of provinces, were selected. However, only some representative provinces were studied, such as Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Khonkaen, Nakorn-Ratchsima and Songkla. In the second, third and fourth stages, districts, sub-districts and communities were sampled by using PPS and the systematic method. In the fifth stage, households in sampled communities were selected by systematic sampling. All people in each household were interviewed using behavioural questions relating to the election. In other words, when the correlation of election behaviour among people in a household survey was significantly low, all eligible voters in sampled households were interviewed. The sample size was calculated by population size, confident interval, error, design effect and response rate.²¹

20 <http://dusitpoll.dusit.ac.th/polldata/2554/25541309686422.pdf>

21 Kish (1995). Survey Sampling

ABAC poll researchers hired and trained all interviewers. One field-work supervisor was responsible for controlling 10 –13 interviewers' data quality. The margin of error in the polls was 7 percent. This error was very high due to the multi-stage selection. The increase in the error was measured by the design effect, which ABAC estimated would be about 13.5 percent. This design effect was multiplied by 400 of the simple random sample size. Then, the computed outcome was divided by the response rate of the previous pre-election survey, to get 6585 people as the optimum sample size, or 0.01 percent out of a total 47 million voters. In the latest pre-election poll, 5349 face-to-face interviews, or 81 percent of the total designed sample size, were collected from 28 representative provinces across the country. The poll's projection of the number of voters was accurate. It predicted 76.2 percent would vote in the election and the number of actual voters was 75 percent of total voters in the country. The poll also predicted that the Pheu Thai party would get 43.7 percent of total party-list seats. The party actually got 48.4 percent. Meanwhile, the Democrat party was predicted to get 39.1 percent – it got 35.2 percent of the total party-list election.²²

Exit polls in Thailand

Exit polls are a method of using statistical techniques that collect data from sampled voters as they exit polling places on election day. They play a vital role in the news media by providing projections of the voting results in a nationwide election. In the 2011 Thailand election, each of the broadcast networks, including Modern Nine TV (i.e., MCOT) and TV 3, had their own exit polls through working with universities. MCOT hired ABAC Poll Research Center to conduct an exit poll. Dusit Poll worked for TV3, but, TV5 and TV7 used another university to conduct an exit poll. TPBS TV provided exit poll results from NIDA Poll.

On election day, the ABAC and Dusit polls predicted 500 election winners, including 375 winners from all constituency areas across the country and 125 winners on political party lists. ABAC exit poll methodology was to use two-stage sampling to select representative precincts of each area. About 7500 precincts were sampled in the first stage. Then, approximately 750,000 voters were interviewed by systematic selection at the studied precincts. All interviewers were trained by ABAC poll researchers and supervisors. Each interviewer had two official letters. One was issued by

22 <http://www2.ect.go.th/download.php?Province=mp54&SiteMenuID=8057>

the office of the Election Commission of Thailand. Another one was written by the head of the Royal Thai Police. The interviewers would introduce themselves and present the letters to the local officials at polling places. The letters stated that ABAC poll interviewers were allowed to collect data from voters on election day. A self-administered questionnaire was used and completed by sampled voters. After filling out the questionnaire, they placed it in an envelope. However, the difference in methodology between the ABAC exit poll and the Dusit exit poll was that the Dusit poll data collectors used face-to-face interviewing.

Obstacles in conducting exit polls

The ABAC exit poll faced at least three obstacles in conducting its exit poll on election day. First, even though the Election Commission allowed ABAC poll interviewers to collect data from sampled voters, local officials in Bangkok and some provinces demanded that the interviewers stand 200 metres away from polling places. As a result, it was difficult for interviewers to collect the relevant data. Second, local police arrested ABAC poll data collectors, ignoring the letter from the Royal Thai Police. ABAC poll researchers and supervisors called the police administrators and requested discussion with the local police to allow the interviewers to collect the data from voters. The local police did follow up as a result but the move came too late. Thirdly, there were many partisan Pheu Thai and Democrat party supporters at polling places who pressured the interviewers to disclose the respondents' voting.

After the election: Sources of errors in the exit polls

Sampling error is a problem in exit polls. The magnitude of the sampling error is calculated by population size, sample size, sample selection and response rate. The ABAC exit poll designed a 3 percent sampling error in its projections because the exit poll applied the two-stage sampling method. The error in the exit poll was less than the designed error of the pre-election polls due to the pre-election polls' multi-stage selection method. However, after the election, the ABAC exit poll and the Dusit exit poll were widely criticised because the ABAC poll predicted Pheu Thai would win 299 seats while the Dusit poll predicted Pheu Thai would win 313 seats. But the actual vote showed that Pheu Thai won 265 seats. After investigating the sources of errors affecting the exit polls' accuracy, it was shown that the exit poll projection was accurate in about 93 percent of total seats. The big error in projection was in Bangkok where the exit poll predicted Pheu Thai would get 24 seats and the Democrats 9, out of

33. But, the actual voting results showed that the Democrats got 23 seats and Pheu Thai 10 seats. The major source of errors in the ABAC exit poll report in Bangkok related to both sampling and non-sampling errors. The sampling error came about because the exit pollsters did not collect data from all voters, but they still applied the two-stage selection method for selecting sampled voters at polling places. There were several reasons for non-sampling errors in the ABAC exit poll. Firstly, some voters refused to complete the questionnaire (i.e. non-response error). Secondly, non-coverage was an important source of error in the exit poll because the ABAC exit poll collected data from voters from 8am to 12pm. The poll data collectors then reported the tallied votes from respondents to the ABAC Poll Research Center, for processing data. In fact, the actual closing time of polling was 3pm. As a result, many people did not go to the polling places during the time-frame for exit poll data collection, causing a non-coverage error in the results. Moreover, the exit data collectors were forced to stand 200 metres away from the polling booths, therefore it was difficult for them to approach target voters. Thirdly, social pressure could have been another source of error in the exit poll, which was not able to be controlled by the research management team. For example, local police arrested ABAC poll data collectors, even though they had a letter of permission from the head of the Royal Thai Police. Political partisans (i.e. Red Shirts and Yellow Shirt supporters) forced the data collectors to disclose respondents' voting. The pressure from these people made it very difficult for the poll data collectors to work effectively and this affected the quality of exit poll data.

Importance of election polls to Thailand's democracy

After reviewing errors of both the pre-election and exit polls in Thailand, the question remains: why are election polls important? In the 2001 election campaign, the public saw more polls than ever being conducted. This phenomenon related directly to the growth in the number of news media organisations which were interested in polling. The increased media interest and number of polls played a number of important roles, which impacted on public sentiment and participation in the democratic process.

Firstly, the polls mobilised public attention toward the election. People became more familiar with election polls conducted to predict who would win the upcoming election. The ABAC poll and other pollsters showed that the number of undecided voters reduced from 50 percent to 20 percent of total respondents, about a week before the election. Meanwhile, the number of people who were interested in following the political news and

parties' policy campaigns increased up to 90 percent of total respondents in the polls. Secondly, during the campaign, the news media mostly interviewed elites, including political scientists, political analysts and politicians, to determine which party was leading. The polls measured public opinion and attention directly and made the people's voice more important in the political process, not just those of the elites and other specific groups. The election polls balanced information distributed before the election, throughout the country. Thirdly, the poll reports enabled the media to release information on behalf of the public and used statistics from the poll findings to support what journalists presented in their news articles.

Conclusion and suggestions

Election pollsters in Thailand are facing many challenges to improve the quality of pre-election and exit polls, including methodology, polling management, social conflict and pressure. These challenges have mobilised news media organisations and the public to criticise the importance of election polling, both before and after the election. However, pollsters can justify the important role that polling plays. If there was no election polling, the elite would have too much power through the news media, to influence public events. Election polls can make everyone's voice heard and balance information from the news media. However, even though the polls are useful they can be misleading due to undisclosed polling methodology and the limitations of polls. Sampling and non-sampling errors can be found in all steps of the polling process, which news media organisations and the public should be informed about. If they are informed, it can help reduce opportunities for distorting the poll results.

There are several suggestions for the future of election polls in Thailand. One concerns the exit poll time-frame for collecting data from voters that should be expanded to cover voters who go to polling places in the afternoon on election day. The second, is that a research team should ask for support from the head of the Royal Thai Police to issue a letter of permission for conducting both pre-election and exit polls. The police head's office should send the letter to all police stations across the country informing the local police about the permission given to conduct exit polls. Thirdly, the letter from the head of police should state that polling data collectors are to be protected by local police while they are working at polling places. Fourthly, the election commissioner should issue a letter of permission and state that the exit pollsters can work with a polling

official to determine the best place to stand. It might be 20 metres away from the polling place, rather than 200 metres. Finally, a cognitive method questionnaire should be undertaken to test voters' comprehension of question wording, retrieving relevant information from memory, the judgment process and the response process. This cognitive test could help improve the quality of election poll questionnaires.

With these types of changes introduced for future election polls, the accuracy of the polls would be increased by reducing some major sources of errors. The news media will still want to use election poll findings to inform the public which party won an election. However, it is the issue of factors influencing people's decisions to vote for one party or candidate over others, that is of more concern. The public wants to know the results of election polls. The public deserves to have tried and trusted methods in place for political polling so they can make a considered decision on election day.

CHAPTER 10

Singapore maturing: Polls and Politics in Singapore

By Kirpal Singh

Introduction

Reflecting on politics and political polls in Singapore means analysing where the majority of Singaporeans stand in relation to the more serious implications of conducting political polls, which are a relatively new phenomenon in the island state. As the treatment of the subject requires considered opinion, most Singapore citizens seem at a loss as to how best to relate to politics and polls. The connections and links between politics and polls, while quite firmly established in many of the more mature democracies around the world, are still very much “in-the-making” in Singapore. Most people have yet to understand, and therefore properly respond to, the intricate relationship/s that exist between politics and polls, and which seem to be taken for granted by many.

The general election in May 2011, and the subsequent presidential election in August 2011, definitely indicated that Singaporeans are still a long way from appreciating the links between politics and polls. Conducting exit polls, for example, and publishing the results is strictly not allowed. Of course, there are many surveys but the manner in which the results of even these “surveys” are published leaves much to be desired. There are “straw polls” conducted but these are not taken seriously and are often seen to be skewed.

The anxiety and concerns about politics and polls in Singapore occur because it is only in the last few years that the term “political maturity” has emerged. For too long “maturity” has been absent. There has been a distinct lack of real opposition, or, if there has been an opposition presence, it has been quite weak.

A personal experience

The 2011 general election, however, clearly demonstrated that now citizens are thinking more carefully about politics (and perhaps also of polls) and that the old rules of play, perhaps, no longer apply. Here is a specific example. A day before the recent presidential election, I happened to take a cab ride and while inside the cab I asked the driver about her views on the election, due the next day. She looked through the rear mirror and said, "Sir, I am not interested in politics. For me it does not matter who becomes the president so long as he is a good man. But my boss told me to vote for Dr Tony Tan and so tomorrow I shall vote for him". This is interesting because it indicates Singaporeans still vote according to the way they are told to. Another example was the action of several organisations – especially labour organisations – which exhorted their members to vote for a certain candidate. This could be due to the fact that exerting "lobby" rights will become more frequent and vocal. So it seems the general voter needs guidance, even in sophisticated, contemporary Singapore, a city-state renowned for its high capacity for economic growth and progress.

Just before the 2011 general election, I organised a forum at my university to discuss the findings of a poll done by a Malaysian firm but commissioned by caring and interested Singaporeans. The forum drew more than a hundred people and the analyses of the poll results proved intriguing. It was also instructive to note that this forum drew surprise in some quarters but, because we were in the confines of a university, the forum did not draw any negative response from anyone. Some of those who were present did question the wisdom of having such a forum in a publicly funded university but even they did not feel strongly enough to challenge it taking place. The poll was conducted by the Merdeka Centre of Malaysia (they had conducted similar polls for the Malaysian general election). It was commissioned by respected professionals in Singapore wishing to see a "sea-change" in Singapore's political landscape in the general election. The forum was attended by representatives from all walks of life, although the majority were, of course, members of the university community. The academics who discussed the findings (presented by a representative from the Merdeka Centre who had flown in specially for the event) were delighted to have participated because they genuinely felt that here was an event which sought to "educate" people on how best to understand and treat the results of polls, particularly in the complicated and often misunderstood realm of politics.

Social media's impact

On the Internet and frequently through new social media, a variety of claims are often made about how "so-and-so" conducted a "poll" and found that...result! Many are yet to be convinced about the efficacy of these claims. But the reality is that more and more Singaporeans are reading on-line discussions pertaining to politics and perhaps also to polls. One example of what thousands of Singaporeans (and others) read was a tough position taken by the well-known writer Catherine Lim (who was publicly chastised by former Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, for venturing out of her field to write about, and discuss, politics many years ago when Goh Chok Tong was prime minister). Ms Lim had written emphatically about the "paradoxes and perils of a politicised role" with specific reference to the presidential election, which generated a huge debate about what an elected president was supposed to mean and do.

Lim strenuously argued that the inherent ambiguities of the elected president's role gave rise to many difficult questions which needed answers and clarity. Given that her article was published over the Internet a day after the president-elect was announced, it is apparent that thinking and concerned citizens are beginning to stake their positions (and even "claims") in terms of the larger, broader issues confronting a new electorate landscape. Many believe that the time has now come for Singaporeans to treat more seriously – and objectively – what the media say about elections, and electoral candidates and their roles.

A case study

There have been many studies done in recent times about the impact of new media on politics in Singapore. One published study suggests a bold new awakening. The study is jointly authored by Tan Tarn How and Arun Mahizhnan of the Institute of Policy Studies. Here is a succinct analysis by Mr Mahizhnan, contributed specially for this article:

The new media is here to stay and will only grow, not shrink. It is not longer an option for the government or corporations to ignore it altogether. They have no choice but to engage the new media. But how they engage will vary significantly in terms of which voices they heed to and which ones they can afford to ignore.

It is also the case that more and more ordinary Singaporeans are connecting with each other through the new media -- blogs, Twitters, Facebook and

numerous websites. Unlike liberal democracies, the new media has also become the only alternative media in Singapore. Elsewhere, the old media also provides alternative views. Therefore, there is a tendency for the new media to be predominantly anti-establishment thus “balancing” the old media. This focuses special attraction on a lot of people.

However, in the long run, the distinction between the old media and new media will not remain so sharp. What will remain, even grow, is the diversity within the new media because anyone can become a journalist or a broadcaster, thanks to the power of the new technologies. Thus the cosy and comfortable arrangements that existed between the old media and the establishment will no longer be sustainable. Singapore is going to have to live with a multiplicity of media. (email dated 30 September 2011.)

Wise words from someone who has been following Singapore’s political scene for decades! For the moment the “polls” dealing with politics in Singapore cover a kind of ‘middle-ground’ between media and people: their results and findings are seldom communicated through the usual channels and yet there is a sense that these findings and results find their way to the public domain. Whether this happens through Twitter, FaceBook etc., is not as pertinent – it is the fact that this IS happening. The day when Singaporeans will demand more – and sustained – polls to be conducted for their own information so they “know” the political ground, is fast approaching and we should all be ready to receive it.

Excitement as well as stability

Polls are, by and large, commissioned and conducted by many diverse individuals and organisations, and for very diverse (and sometimes contrary) reasons. So, fully understanding poll results and their impact (if any) on actual, real politics, still needs to be ascertained. If the 2011 elections in Singapore are anything to go by it is apparent that what people say is not necessarily how they act when it comes to the ballot-box. People seem to want both excitement as well as stability. But given their expectations of a “good” life in Singapore, most don’t want to “upset the applecart.” Hence the real impact of polls is more residual than real.

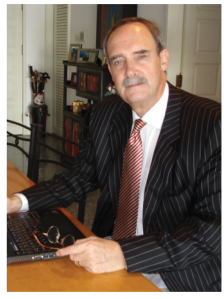
It could take at least another 10 years before the majority in Singapore is educated and mature enough to realise the importance and significance of political polls. For most Singaporeans, politics is still very much dependent on their cultural backgrounds. To ignore this would be tantamount to

dismissing, perhaps, the most important factor which determines the way an individual votes when actually putting the voting paper into the ballot-box. All else pales into insignificance because of the way Singaporeans are brought up to think about politics, and, consequently, about polls. Cultural imperatives loom large and override all other considerations. This is something scholars have not given enough attention to, with their focus being, normally, on how their learned theories play out in the real world.

Role of government

There is, nevertheless, the constant worry about the role of the government in all of this: should the government decide to put obstacles in the way, the "maturity" which is required to appreciate the real value of polls and their role in determining political scenarios, will be invariably set back. In countries like Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States, during elections, these "poll" results become effective only when their findings are followed up by extensive debate and discussion. In, and of themselves, the polls remain "cold" figures, only becoming "hot" when debated and treated by individuals and groups, many of whom have their own agendas. But in these more politically mature countries there is a developed tradition of understanding which enables poll participants and analysts to know the real implications and consequences of poll results. In a relatively young, still politically maturing nation like Singapore, this time has not yet come. It is, indeed, probable that while more polls may be run in Singapore in the future, their role as serious players in the political environment is still some way off.

About the Authors



Alastair Carthew

Alastair has more than 40 years experience as a newspaper and broadcasting journalist, public relations executive and senior manager in New Zealand, Australia, Britain, South Africa and Thailand. He was co-editor of *The Asia Media Directory* (2008), and a contributor to Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung publications, *Asia's Media Innovators Vol 2* and *Social Media and Politics*. He also updates KAS's website-based Asia Media Directory, twice yearly. Alastair is a former chief parliamentary reporter of Television New Zealand, New Zealand correspondent for *Newsweek* and *The Christian Science Monitor* and has written extensively on aviation. Alastair lives and runs his own public relations company in Phuket, Thailand. He is married with two children.



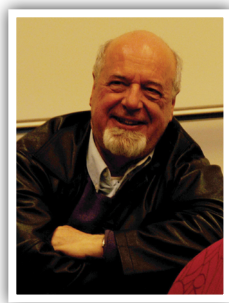
Arina Dafir

Arina Dafir is a Singapore-born researcher whose interests lie in public policy and social research. Arina has an honours degree in communications studies from the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. She majored in communications research and presented a paper on leadership and crisis communications at the International Association for Media and Communication Research Conference, held in Istanbul in July 2011. Arina currently works as a qualitative research specialist at Black Box Research in Singapore. In her free time, Arina is a voracious reader with a fondness for modern Asian literature. Her favourite writers are Kazuo Ishiguro and Arundhati Roy.



David Black

David Black has been conducting research in the Asia-Pacific region for 15 years and has lived in Singapore since 2000. As managing director and owner of Blackbox Research, David has carried out research projects throughout the world, for various multi-national corporations (MNCs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and government bodies. Prior to becoming a researcher, David had a lengthy background as a public policy specialist, having served as a political speechwriter for several Australian ministers and as a policy advisor in the Australian Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. As a polling specialist, David also worked on over 40 local, state and national election campaigns in Australia and New Zealand, from 1991 to 1999.



Dr. Norman Abjorensen

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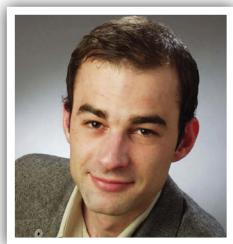
Kirpal Singh

Kirpal Singh is the director of the Wee Kim Wee Centre of the Singapore Management University where he is a professor of creative thinking and literature. Kirpal is a highly acclaimed writer and has read and performed his creative works at some of the best literary/arts festivals around the world, including Edinburgh, York, Cambridge, Toronto, Adelaide, Mexico, Hong Kong, Ubud and others. He has been invited to give keynote speeches at several major universities, including Cambridge and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Kirpal is the author of many books and his *Thinking Hats and Coloured Turbans: Creativity Across Cultures* (2004), sets new paradigms for the ways in which we look at “creativity”.



Noppadon Kannika

Noppadon is the director of ABAC Poll Research Center at Assumption University of Thailand. During two decades of polling experience, he has conducted nationwide and local polls for the news media, government and private sectors. He earned his Master of Science in Survey Methodology from the University of Michigan—Ann Arbor, and Certificates in Survey Design from JPSM at the University of Maryland. He received a PhD in Computer and Engineering Management from Assumption University, Bangkok, Thailand. His job is to know what you think.



Philip Behnke

Philip Behnke is a Germany-born communications consultant with major expertise in public relations and new media. Based in Singapore, Philip has worked since 2009 in Southeast Asia. Heading his own consulting agency, he is currently involved in a range of projects in the private sector, developing and implementing local and regional communication strategies for global companies. The former journalist is also editor of the book, *Social Media and Politics*, published in 2010 as a result of his close working relationship with the Media Programme Asia of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung.



Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Donsbach

Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Donsbach is professor of communication and the founding director (also current) of the Department of Media and Communication at Dresden University of Technology, Germany. He was president of the World Association for Public Opinion Research (WAPOR) (1995-1996) and the International Communication Association (2004-2005). Donsbach was editor of the *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* and now chairs the journal's advisory board. He is co-editor of the *Handbook of Public Opinion Research* (Sage 2008) and general editor of the 12-volume *International Encyclopaedia of Communication* (Wiley-Blackwell 2008). In 2007, he received WAPOR's Helen Dinerman Award for extraordinary achievements in public opinion research. His main research interests are in journalism, political communication, public opinion and exposure to communication. More information about Donsbach can be found on his website, www.donsbach.net.



Rainer Faus

Rainer is a one of the foremost online political polling specialists in Asia-Pacific. He has lived and worked in Singapore and Sydney in the past few years and has conducted online research in most markets of the region. As Research & Operations Director with UMR Research, Rainer has pioneered online political polling in Australia and New Zealand applying innovative online methodologies in a number of election campaigns. Rainer is currently running his own consultancy pollytix Strategic Research in Berlin. He is married with two children.



Simon Winkelmann

Simon Winkelmann is currently working as a Research Associate for the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung in Singapore. He has been working for the United Nations, European Parliament and the German Mission to the EU. After studying in the Netherlands and Mexico he graduated with a Master's Degree from the University of Edinburgh. He joined the KAS Media Programme Asia in April 2011. For this publication, Simon was involved in editing together with Alastair Carthew.



Stephen Mills

Stephen Mills is a principal of UMR research, which has undertaken the majority of research for the New Zealand Labour and Australian Labor, parties, over the last 25 years. In New Zealand, he has been the lead pollster in all general elections since 1996. He has also been heavily involved in more than 30 state and federal campaigns in Australia and was lead qualitative pollster in the 2010 Federal Election. Prior to joining UMR Stephen was an executive assistant to New Zealand Prime Minister David Lange and later, to then Deputy Prime Minister, Helen Clark.

Political polling came late to Asia compared to places like the United States where George Gallup pioneered the art of using statistical methodology of survey sampling to measure public opinion. In some Asia-Pacific countries, such as Singapore political polling remains a somewhat immature science, but one that is slowly developing. But in others, such as Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines it has developed into an integral - and often controversial - segment of the political fabric. Australia and New Zealand have taken political polling to even more sophisticated levels. In many places political systems prevent effective use of political polls.

This book examines political polling through a number of perspectives. Renowned German pollster and academic Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Donsbach sets the scene in Chapter 1 when he states: "Four things had to emerge and come together for modern public opinion research as we know it today: counting human beings, using humans' answers to questions as a source of scientific evidence, the principle of sampling, and thinking in variables." That observation sets the scene for an unfolding analysis by a number of authors, all experienced exponents in their respective fields.

We examine the impact of social media on modern political polling and the often testy and tortured relationship between pollsters and the media and how broader public opinion is influenced by both with the media, itself, becoming an essential financial and editorial - even manipulative - partner in the political contest. Case studies of political influence on pollsters at election time, in this regard in Thailand, give a revealing insight into the unique political pressures pollsters can face in some Asian countries.

Then there are the arguments for and against focus groups as an effective means of gauging public opinion; the question of how ready Asia-Pacific is to embrace online polling, with its many advantages but some drawbacks compared to traditional polling methods and the effects of polls on political opinion and the electorate. Why are governments worried about the publishing and dissemination of public opinion?

There is much here to examine, consider and analyse. Thanks to their collaborative effort, the authors of this book provide a highly articulate, useful tool for anyone interested in political polling to absorb and learn from.