

Journalists and Public Opinion Polls

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Recently, the Ontario Legislature took a first step toward banning the publication of opinion poll results during provincial election campaigns. The legislative assembly gave all-party approval to a resolution proposed by Conservative MLA George Ashe, which stated:

That in the opinion of this House, the government should give immediate consideration to legislation that would prohibit, during any provincial election, the publication or broadcasting of all public opinion polls that purport to indicate the standing of any leader, candidate or party or the status of any issue in the election.¹

All seven legislators in the debate agreed that polls adversely affect campaigns, by causing electors to make voting decisions on the basis of what they believe others think than on what the parties and candidates actually say. As Mr. Ashe put it,

*Not In Favour
Of Bandwagon*

I firmly believe people should vote on the basis of free choice...All of us in this House would like to believe the voters in our riding have made a firm choice on the basis of comparing the merits of all the candidates in the race. Anything that detracts from that free choice should not be encouraged...I am in favour of voters being influenced by parties and candidates, not by other voters' notions.²

While most criticism centered on polling per se--and the attendant arguments of bandwagon and underdog effects, effects on financial and party worker support, and the like--there was also some attack on the news media and how they handle the surveying of public opinion. Neither "straw polls" nor systematic sampling was immune. Liberal Eric Cunningham, for example, noted that in the 1974 federal election, a local radio station broadcast a five-person poll. Four of the interviewees said the Conservative incumbent would win. He did, by a margin of about 1 per cent. "Yet were someone to listen to that broadcast," complained

Mr. Cunningham, "one would be of the illusion that there was only one candidate in the area to vote for and the other fellows weren't even in the ball game."³

Turning to more scientific polls, New Democrat MLA George Samis declared flatly that a Toronto Star poll published during the 1977 Ontario election "was an excellent argument for why polls should be banned in this particular province."⁴ He complained that there is no control over how the polls are used by the media:

Says Papers
Can Twist
Poll Results

*When they are done, what control do we have on how they are being used, whether they are front page, whether they are screaming headlines while the actual results are buried in the back or whether certain questions are ignored and only one question is built up as the conclusion of a newspaper? We have no control over that. I think that's a powerful factor in how people can be influenced. If a newspaper has a very built-in bias--and most of them in this province do--it can seize upon a poll to become a part of its overall electoral campaign to build up one party or to denigrate another party and, in that sense, the people are very poorly served.*⁵

Both the Ashe resolution and the strong support it received seem a natural outgrowth of the 1977 Ontario provincial election, during which polls emerged as a major issue. Indeed, the election was called after polls showed that Conservative strength among decided voters was so great that the party could probably regain a majority.⁶ Although Premier William Davis denied that polls influenced the election call, both Liberal leader Stuart Smith and NDP leader Stephen Lewis voiced suspicions.⁷ Some three weeks into the campaign, a Toronto Star poll by Peter Regenstreif showed that the Conservatives had support from 43 per cent of decided voters. Equivalent figures for the NDP and Liberals were, respectively, 35 per cent and 20 per cent.⁸ In a comparison of preferences for party leader, Mr. Smith fared even more disastrously.⁹ The survey had been taken May 10-14, the second week of campaigning, and Mr. Smith immediately seized upon that fact, dismissing the results as "pure nonsense"¹⁰ because the field work was done before his campaign had started moving. "Half the ridings wouldn't have seen a Liberal sign or know a Liberal was alive," he declared.¹¹ Nonetheless, Mr. Smith said, the polls would damage him: voters would see the election as a race between the Conservatives and NDP and vote for one or the other; the poll would demoralize party faithful and stifle campaign contributions; and the results would distract the

media from reporting what Mr. Smith said, concentrating instead on why he was running so poorly.¹²

The Star poll was also subjected to methodological analysis by syndicated Queen's Park journalist Harold Greer, who wrote that it was "a statistical crime and a political obscenity."¹³ Specifically, he attacked Regenstreif's system of weighting regional samples, his treatment of refusals, and the small sample size which in turn created unacceptable error margins. In printing Greer's piece, the Ottawa Citizen, which had run Regenstreif's poll, added an editorial note: "Many of Greer's technical criticism of the polls...are valid and The Citizen will take greater care in the final poll this Saturday to present the raw data collected and to point out the limitations of the results."¹⁴

A second Star poll was published June 4, two weeks later, and it put the Conservatives under 40 per cent, with the resurgent Liberals narrowly behind in second place.¹⁵ A major contentious point of this poll was the finding that the Conservatives had lost their generations-old grip on eastern Ontario to the Liberals. This survey, with a sample double the size of the first, also drew heated comment. Several news reports quoted Conservative officials, including Mr. Davis, as simply not believing the figures and floating more favorable poll results of their own.¹⁶ Stephen Lewis quipped, "Pollsters should be declared aliens and deported."¹⁷ Even an editor at the Ottawa Citizen, a co-sponsor of the survey, told the Globe and Mail: "The polls are said to be right 19 times out of 20. I think we've got the 20th this time for sure."¹⁸

*Regenstreif
Within 3%
Error Margin*

Actually, Regenstreif's data was not far off the June 9 returns:

	<u>Popular Vote</u>	<u>Regenstreif Poll</u>
Conservatives	40%	37%
Liberals	32	33
New Democrats	<u>28</u>	<u>30</u>
	100%	100%

But it was an election that, as two political scientists have put it, nobody won--"the PC's failed to regain the majority status they had enjoyed between 1945 and 1975; the NDP lost its Official Opposition status; and the Liberals failed to improve upon their 1975 totals in seats

or vote."¹⁹ And so there was cause for each party to engage in post-campaign carping about the polls. For Conservatives, their continuing minority position could be blamed in part on the Regenstreif poll; the argument was that many traditional Liberal voters, who were considering voting Conservative to stop the NDP, changed their minds when they saw the Liberals were back in the fight. The Liberals could draw attention to their difficulties in fund-raising and the consequent low-budget campaign that failed to improve on their popular vote. And the New Democrats could argue that their lack-lustre showing in the polls was simply a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Criticism of poll reporting during the Ontario campaign, then, and the recent legislative resolution on the possible banning of poll publication underscore the fact that polls (and the way the media cover them) are an important subject to which both pollsters and journalists should address themselves.

POLLS AND THE NEWS

The marriage of newsmen and the sampling of public opinion is neither new nor insignificant. In 1824 the Harrisburg Pennsylvanian undertook a "straw poll" to measure sentiment in Wilmington, Delaware, over the forthcoming election between John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson. Though not scientific by today's criteria, such polls were soon to catch the eye of politicians and their methodology became refined so that by the turn of the century, such papers as the New York Herald actually trained interviewers and selected representative samples.²⁰

Nor is journalism's use of polling insignificant. It is a major factor in electoral reportage. In the United States, for instance, McCombs and Shaw found that up to 35 per cent of all coverage given some candidates in the 1968 presidential race focussed on the "chances" of the candidate and how people generally felt about him.²¹ In Canada, solid data is lacking, but a similar interest seems apparent. Of the 16 front-page stories about the 1977 Ontario election that appeared during the campaign in the Ottawa Citizen, for instance, five dealt principally or totally with public opinion about the campaign and its participants.

Election campaigns are not the only subject on which the media seek polls, of course. In addition to its monthly party preference ratings, the Gallup Poll routinely studies numerous issues; during the past few months, they have

questioned whether the public is willing to bequeath vital organs for transplants, which province is thought to have benefited most from Confederation, and whether the public believes reporters should be allowed to protect their sources of information.²² There are the weekly surveys conducted by T.R. Bird for the Weekend newspaper supplement, the quarterly surveys of business leaders undertaken for the Financial Times of Canada, and special polls conducted for the media on such critical issues as national unity.

MISREPORTING POLLS

It is a complaint not unique to the Ontario legislature that, regardless of how noble some of the previously-mentioned examples might be, media treatment of polls is sadly lacking. As journalism professor Charles Whitney says, newsmen can mine lots of data from polls, but "for the unwary, such data may be less a mine than a minefield." Much faulty poll reporting, Whitney writes, is "less a product of unscrupulous or incompetent polling organizations than a failure of reporters to ask the right questions--or provide the right answers in stories."²³

*Poor Polling
Due To Poor
Journalists*

Polling professionals level their salvos at two types of poll reporting. On the one hand, there is the unscientific "man-in-the-street" poll, sometimes published as a regular feature, as does the Toronto Sun with its daily "You Said It." On the other hand, there are news reports of systematic surveys, occasionally undertaken by the medium itself but usually conducted by professional pollsters for the media or for private or government sponsors. Each type raises specific objections:

Man-in-the-Street Interviews. Some fear that this sort of story ultimately trivializes serious polling work. Labeling as a "poll" or "survey" what is really only a haphazard canvassing of opinion makes the word "poll" a meaningless term; it blurs the distinction between the roving reporter and the scientific polling organization. The casual use of such wording is reflected in the lead paragraph of a not atypical round-up of public opinion on the resignation of former Solicitor-General Francis Fox: "Most people interviewed in a random Citizen survey Monday felt Solicitor-General Francis Fox was right to resign because of past indiscretions."²⁴ No indication was given of either the number of persons interviewed or their manner of selection, but since the story gives no raw data and is composed almost wholly of brief quotes from named individuals, it is unlikely the "survey" is "random".

This casual approach to polls only highlights the lack of expertise in polling that many reporters have. While the danger attributed to man-in-the-street stories may be overstated by overly sensitive polling professionals, the deficiency in expertise becomes more serious as the non-scientific polls become more nearly like "real" polls. For example, in late April 1977, when Ontario was teetering on the brink of its election, the *Globe and Mail* surveyed voters province-wide to determine whether they thought an election were necessary. The story began:

An Ontario election is unnecessary at this time, a province-wide sampling of public opinion by The Globe and Mail shows.

Of 80 voters polled, most in personal interviews, 68 said an election was unnecessary. Only eight said they were in favor of Premier William Davis calling an election within the next two months. Four had no opinion. Based on percentages, the figures are 85 per cent against an election and 10 per cent in favor of one.

But if an election were called at this time, the survey indicates the Tories would get back the majority they lost in the 1975 election. Thirty-eight said they would vote Conservative even though they were against having the election. Fifteen said they would vote for the New Democratic Party, 12 said they would go Liberal and 15 were undecided.²⁵

At the bottom of the 20-paragraph account, a sidebar, headed "Just what was asked," provided the exact wording of the five questions posed, and a tally of the response to each.

*Pseudo-Poll
Is Taken
Seriously*

The danger is that this story is presented as a serious poll, as a reliable sampling of Ontario opinion. The similarity of results between this poll and other recent polls is noted. It is copyrighted, which is unusual. And the word "survey" is in the headline. Yet, the internal evidence suggests this is not strictly a random survey. The sample size is extremely small (leaving an error margin of well over 10 per cent at best), the manner of respondent selection is undisclosed, the method of contacting respondents is by implication inconsistent ("Of 80 voters polled, most in personal interviews..."), and so on. In short, the survey seems little more than a man-in-the-street story gone double-digit.

It is also sometimes asserted that the man-in-the-street interview may make it increasingly difficult for professional pollsters to conduct their work. As the public comes to

see names and photos published in newspaper "surveys", it is argued, some may question the guarantees of anonymity that almost always are part of the pollsters' protocol.

Scientific Polls. When reporters turn to systematic polls, different criticisms arise. But again they stem largely from the journalist's lack of polling expertise.

First, observers often complain that reporters seldom publish the technical data necessary to establish the scientific reliability of a particular poll. They demand disclosure of the kinds of information called for by professional polling organizations like the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR), whose guidelines for disclosure ask:

*Disclosures
Data May
Be Missing*

1. Who paid for the poll?
2. When was the poll taken?
3. How were the interviews conducted?
4. How were the questions worded?
5. Who was interviewed?
6. How large was the sample?
7. What is the margin of sampling error?
8. What is the base of the data if it is based on part of a total sample?

To some extent, of course, reporters do make note of such information. Using the AAPOR guidelines, a couple of studies have assessed the quality of poll reporting in the United States. Although interpretable only with caution, the results seem to indicate that reporters in that country, at least, are improving. In the 1970 Congressional elections, Auh and Wilhoit studied 43 stories from 24 major newspapers, noting which AAPOR items had been reported in each story.²⁶ In 1976, the National Council on Public Polls conducted a similar survey of 270 newspaper stories dealing with polls during the campaign year,²⁷ and the comparative data are:

	% of Stories Disclosing Item	
	<u>Auh and Wilhoit</u>	<u>National Council on Public Polls</u>
sponsor	44%	90%
sample size	56	83
timing	33	83
population sampled	14	99

As indicated, comparability is limited, but the data seem

to indicate that reporters are taking more seriously the reporting of technical polling information in American political work.

While the information required by the AAPOR guidelines is appropriate for professionals to have, however, there is some disagreement among journalists and others as to how much needs to be published in routine news stories. Some believe all should be carried, both so that knowledgeable readers can make up their own minds on the accuracy of the survey, and also to assist educating some of the rest of the public who may come to learn the terms after repeated exposure to them. But pioneering precision journalist Philip Meyer, who once shared this view, has changed his mind:

*Newspaper Is
Not A Book*

I still believe that pollsters should be expected to reveal all this and more about the part of their work that finds its way into the news. But I do not believe that each item on the list needs to be reported in each newspaper story about a poll. A typical story from a newspaper's own poll in 1976, for example, might be based on fifty different questions probing for attitudes and issue positions that explain the structure of a candidate's support. To give the exact wording of each question would take excessive space. Moreover, the examination of the structure of support requires looking at finds based on many sub-samples of the population: blacks, Catholics, opponents of the Nixon pardon, abortion defenders, and so on. To give a sample size and margin of error for each subgroup would also require more footnoting than a newspaper can handle.²⁸

Similarly, Burns Roper argues against reporting error allowance, believing it can mislead the public into thinking that the poll is more scientific than it may be.²⁹

Whether or not such technical matter does get published, no one denies that the reporter must evaluate those technicalities himself. Much of the shoddy work on polls exists simply because the reporter failed to make that judgment--either he did not ask for such information or the pollster/sponsor refused to give it to him. One of the customary campaign-time ploys, for example, is to float private party polls that inevitably feature self-serving results. As indicated above, the Conservatives did this in the late stages of the 1977 Ontario campaign, when Regenstreif's second poll indicated the Tories were slipping back into a minority government situation. Numerous stories publicized such leaked data. A typical one, in the Ottawa Citizen,

stated:

*Party officials say results of a private Tory poll are a more accurate reflection of the province's feeling. That poll has the Conservatives in the lead with 41 percent, New Democrats second with 34 and Liberals trailing at 25 per cent.*³⁰

That is all the story has to say on the poll, so its validity must rest unknown. Even more fuzzy was a Canadian Press wire story, which said:

Ontario Premier William Davis says he does not believe a survey which shows his party's lead shrinking and the Liberals' support growing for Thursday's provincial election.

*Davis said in an interview here Saturday that his party's own polls show the Progressive Conservatives with a substantial lead over the New Democrats and the Liberals still in third spot.*³¹

Not only the Conservatives played that game, however. After the first Regenstreif poll, in which the Liberals fared badly, the Ottawa Citizen carried a story on the release of a survey in Ottawa West constituency, conducted by the Liberal association, which showed they were slightly ahead of the Conservatives, with almost half the sample undecided. Although the party campaign manager is quoted as saying that Statistics Canada confirmed the accuracy of the survey methods, the reporter has said he did not demand the technical data that would have allowed him to make an independent assessment of the poll's worth.³²

Even if a reporter competently determines that a poll is suspect, however, there remain a host of journalistic problems. Asks journalism professor Charles Whitney, "Should a poll of questionable virtue but with interesting results be ignored, or can it be qualified?...Should a candidate, without producing evidence, be quoted as saying that his or her polls don't agree with the published ones? How far can a journalist go, after following the guidelines, 'beyond the data' to compare results of two separately-conducted polls or to generalize from one poll to a different group of people not sampled?"³³ These questions have no easy answers.

WHY POLLS ARE MISREPORTED

Not all media coverage of polls is trivial and suspect, of course. But what faults do arise in polling journalism

*Self-Serving
Polls Are Part
Of The Game*

seem to stem from three principal factors.

1. Lack of commercial incentive. It would be improper to see the news media as strictly a profit-making enterprise but as newspaper critic Ben Bagdikian has written, "Profit making creates conflict between the news as an educational institution and the news as a godless corporation."³⁴ Simply put, to a large extent there is little reason for a newspaper to report polls fully and adequately. In educational terms, except for a few idiosyncratic readers (such as member of CAASR), there is little demand for complete reporting of scientific polls, or even a preference for such polls over the schlock represented by many man-in-the-street features. Where the newspaper itself has commissioned a poll, as in the Toronto Star's 1977 Regenstreif polls, there is a substantial financial commitment; in 1975, for instance, Clara Hatton of the Canadian Institute of Public Opinion estimated that a typical Gallup Poll cost about \$20,000.³⁵ But again it is calculated to have at least some economic pay-off, by attracting readers and by being sold to other newspapers.³⁶ To ensure its own reputation and that of its specific poll, the newspaper is more likely to treat the results seriously, thereby providing such information as sample size, question wording, and so on. This enhances the credibility of the poll. But note that there is a commercial incentive for doing so.

*Typical
Gallup Poll
Costs \$20,000*

2. Lack of technical expertise. As we have stated several times, journalists often lack the technical knowledge basic to polling. One result is that newsmen use words differently from pollsters. Thus, "random sample", "survey" and the like--professional jargon, in short--are converted to layman's language. Second, while many journalists may understand what polls can or cannot do--that they are static snapshots and not predictors--the idea is not so embedded within them that it becomes second nature. As a result, journalists slip unconsciously into suggesting that polls "predict" elections, an error that is not entirely dissuaded by some pollsters. And third, naive journalists can be taken in by manipulative politicians who may selectively leak poll results. Incapable of assessing the quality of the data, the good newsman will report it if the circumstances seem newsworthy.

The reporter's ignorance is hadly unique to polling. Scientists and theatre performers, to name two dissimilar groups, likewise complain about the ignorance of reporters in their fields.³⁷ Pollsters should not expect this deficiency to be entirely overcome. **Newsmen are not pollsters,**

after all. As my colleague Stuart Adam puts it in a somewhat broader context, "Journalists stand on the frontiers of public knowledge but not on the frontiers of knowledge itself. The latter is not their business."³⁸ Their business is to be professional communicators, translating the arcane language of specialized "speech communities" into the more readily understandable language of the public at large.³⁹ To expect the journalist to wholly master the technical language the pollsters uses as his own, would be to convert the journalist into a pollster.

Nonetheless, merely knowing what is important to ask--to take the AAPOR disclosure guidelines as a check-list, for example--will inevitably alert the journalist to the more disreputable surveys he is likely to confront.

3. Failure to interpret polls. California pollster Mervin Field has pointed out that poll results are simply bald facts, with no intrinsic meaning. They take on meaning only when placed in perspective. It is in their interpretation, Field states, that the interpretive skill of journalists should be applied to poll results:

*An analytical journalist is accustomed to extracting meanings and consequences from facts based upon his prior knowledge, his trained intelligence and his creative imagination. A good journalist is able to find several rival possibilities and interpretations from one set of facts; a great one will be able to search among the various alternative interpretations and identify the one most likely or promising.*⁴⁰

Journalists
Treat Polls
As End-All

Journalists routinely make interpretations of political facts; indeed, it is sometimes said they construct rather elegant interpretations from the slimmest data. Even the sparsest inverted-pyramid news story brings some perspective to bear on the factual material. But political journalists, Field concludes, seldom provide the informed interpretation that poll results, like other political facts, invite. "In fact," he says, "most journalists seem to treat poll reports as though no further interpretation were required."⁴¹

There are two sorts of interpretations that journalists need to make. The first is to analyze, when necessary, the methods used in polls. The ability to do this is limited by the individual's own expertise, of course, but it is now sometimes done, as represented by the Harold Greer columns on Regenstreif's polls.⁴² Similarly, when two surveys on national unity seemed to provide conflicting results in

September, 1977, various articles analyzed the methodological differences that led to the confusion and also underscored the agreements in key areas.⁴³

The second sort of interpretation is on the meaning of the findings themselves. Is there some reason to assume that the data do not reflect political reality? Have subsequent actions altered what might have once been public opinion? How are subgroups alike, how do they differ, why are there similarities and differences, and so what? The list goes on!

The interpretation of data by journalists is not greatly aided by commercial polling organizations, like Gallup, that are in the business of providing newsworthy snippets of information for short news stories. As reporter-turned-professor Ralph Whitehead, Jr., argues, the syndicated newspaper surveys are not conducted by serious researchers, but rather by superficial analysts constrained by newspapers' needs and space limitations. Topics are chosen for their front page tie-in and sometimes create or contribute to newspaper clichés (the polls are "grab-bag affairs intended for public amusement").⁴⁴

*Grab-Bag
Affairs For
Amusement*

When journalists do interpret polls in a meaningful way, of course, they are subject to the same variation in quality of interpretation as they are in working with non-survey facts. Thus, when the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation commissioned a poll in the 1974 federal election, it announced on its July 4 newscast that a Conservative minority government seemed "a strong possibility", amending this the following night to emphasize that a Liberal minority was equally likely.⁴⁵ The point is that the quality of interpretation is an issue that should be divorced from the right and need to interpret.

IMPROVING MEDIA COVERAGE OF POLLS

There are a number of reasons for expecting improvements in the media treatment of polling over the next several years. These include journalism's increased awareness of polls and what they can do, and changes in reporting style and method.

1. Increased awareness of polls. The value of polling the public is becoming increasingly apparent to the news media, but in part because of the proven value of surveys to the business side of journalism. Publishers and top editors are increasingly turning to market research as a tool for

*Business Men
Used Polls
To Advantage*

increasing the market penetration of their product. The success of this has frequently been substantial. The Winnipeg Tribune, for example, has utilized much of the data from a Goldfarb study to increase its circulation by tens of thousands within a few months.⁴⁶ Such polling speaks more forcefully to upper-echelon media decision-makers than, say, a striking similarity between a Gallup Poll and election returns.

In the lower ranks of journalism, reporters are also becoming increasingly familiar with polls. The technique is not yet a required subject in journalism schools, but some students take advantage of research methods courses. Two undergraduate courses at Carleton University's School of Journalism, for instance, deal with research techniques. There is frequent discussion of the uses and abuses of polls in trade magazines like the Columbia Journalism Review and Quill. New books on the subject receive wide attention; the major one is Philip Meyer's Precision Journalism,⁴⁷ and there is also a more general research manual for reporters, Handbook of Reporting Methods.⁴⁸ Even general reporting texts are beginning to give some attention to the subject of polls.⁴⁹

Fortunately, the polling industry, through such organizations as the Professional Marketing Research Society (PMRS) and the Canadian Association of Marketing Research Organizations (CAMRO), is beginning to adopt an active role in educating both practising and student journalists. In February this year, a PMRS dinner meeting was devoted to a discussion of polls and the media, and a number of actions--such as providing the media with manuals and professional contacts, and writing letters to editors when sloppy reporting occurs--were proposed by John Robertson, president of Market Facts of Canada. Mr. Robertson, who is also CAMRO's Director of Standards, is considering how the research industry might prepare talks or printed materials for journalism schools, too.

2. Increasing enterprise reporting. The notion of "objective" journalism long meant that newsmen acted only as neutral recorders of events. They did not view as proper that they should initiate events that would then be covered. This concept is changing. There are numerous instances of "investigative reporting," the pinnacle of which in recent years seems to be Watergate and the exploits of Washington Post reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein.⁵⁰ There are reporters who conduct field experiments, such as taking a television set to numerous repairmen for servicing

and comparing in print the bills rendered.⁵¹ Some reporters use participant observation to cover stories from a perspective that eludes the reporter who merely interviews officials.⁵² Such "enterprise reporting" is also manifested in the initiation of polls by the news media, such as the May 1977 series for Southam newspapers on "What does Quebec really want?"

3. Move to unofficial news. Newsmen have historically depended upon the views of official sources for the bulk of their reporting. Writes New York Times columnist Tom Wicker:

Much of what we mean by objectivity in American journalism concerns whether due credit is given to the official statement, the official explanation, the background explanation from the official source.

*We tend to give weight to the official source, as if we believe that the man wouldn't be there if he didn't know what he was talking about; the institution wouldn't be functioning if it didn't have a certain relevance to whatever area it is functioning in.*⁵³

This is confirmed by Leon Sigal's analysis of front-page stories in the New York Times and Washington Post; he found that just 16 per cent of all sources were non-governmental.⁵⁴

*Press Now
Closer To
The Public*

Newspapers are now breaking away to some extent from official sources. Part of the reason is marketing; newspapers are thought to be too remote from the lives of ordinary citizens, and so are losing circulation. This trend obviously encourages reporters to talk to the public, and has the results described by Washington columnist Rowland Evans, who frequently follows interviewers employed by pollster Oliver Quayle:

*This is not only good reading material for the column, it's extremely good reporting experience for the reporter: spending half an hour in a living room whatever it is -- a black ghetto or a lower middle-class, blue-collar area, or whatever -- and talking and being talked to and smelling, just smelling how people live. **Too many Washington correspondents sit in their big chairs in Washington and write it off the wall...You do enrich your own sense of what's going on in the country.***⁵⁵

4. Proved value to newsmen. The increased use of polls has proven to journalists that such data can enrich the

other aspects of their work. Polls can provide a better understanding of official behaviours, public attitudes, and events;⁵⁶ can provide the background by which reporters can ask different and deeper questions of policy makers;⁵⁷ and can lead to a greater diversity of journalistic comment and interpretation on affairs that have traditionally been subject to "pack journalism."⁵⁸

CONCLUSION

We have reviewed recent moves in Ontario to consider banning publication of the results of pre-election public opinion polls, and have summarized events in the 1977 Ontario election that likely gave rise to the legislators' concerns. It was suggested that there are a number of deficiencies in media handling of public opinion surveys, both those that are of the "man-in-the-street" style and those that purport to be scientific. These deficiencies arise for a number of reasons. But the principal ones are media economics, journalists' lack of expertise, and the failure of journalists to interpret polls. Finally, some reasons for believing that media handling of polls will improve were listed.

It would be unfortunate if Ontario were to join British Columbia in banning poll publications under election circumstances. Rather than making use in a competent way of polls, journalists would be forced to use only idiosyncratic, unreliable methods in determining the progress of particular election campaigns. The key phrase is "in a competent way." While much competent reporting of polls is evident, particularly in those cases in which the media have themselves launched major surveys, the ordinary journalist lacks the expertise to handle the routine day-to-day coverage of polls.

Education is required, and it would be a major contribution to this task if members of CAASR, individually or collectively, were to take an active interest in helping newsmen handle polls well.

NOTES

1. *Ontario, Legislative Assembly, Debates, 2nd session, 31st Parliament, April 27, 1978, p. 1966.*
2. *Ibid., p. 1968.*
3. *Ibid., p. 1969.*
4. *Ibid., pp. 1970-1*
5. *Ibid., p. 1972.*
6. *"Good News for Ontario Tories," Ottawa Citizen, March 15, 1977; "Davis seeking to justify an early call to the polls," Globe and Mail, April 28, 1977.*

7. "Premier takes pains to talk of mandate before majority," Ottawa Citizen, April 30, 1977.
8. "Conservatives leading in election poll," Ottawa Citizen, May 21, 1977.
9. "Personality poll: Voters prefer Tory Davis over Lewis, Smith," Ottawa Citizen, May 24, 1977.
10. "Poll results are nonsense, Smith declares," Globe and Mail, May 23, 1977.
11. "Smith predicts Liberals will sit in Opposition seats after election," Globe and Mail, May 28, 1977.
12. "Smith keeps chin up in face of poll result," Ottawa Citizen, May 21, 1977.
13. "Our provincial vote figuring called 'a political obscurity'," Ottawa Citizen, June 2, 1977.
14. Ibid.
15. "Surging Liberals challenging Tory lead," Ottawa Citizen, June 4, 1977.
16. "Tories aiming at Liberals in final days," Globe and Mail, June 4, 1977;
"Davis: 'Only poll that counts is on June 9'," Ottawa Citizen, June 4, 1977;
"Davis discounts Ontario poll showing Liberals gaining," Montreal Gazette, June 6, 1977.
17. "Lewis: 'Pollsters should be declared aliens'," Ottawa Citizen, June 4, 1977.
18. "Tories aiming at Liberals in final days," Globe and Mail, June 4, 1977.
19. Robert J. Drummond and Frederick J. Fletcher, "Preliminary Results of the 1977 Ontario Election Study," paper presented to the annual meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association, University of Western Ontario, May 1978, p. 1.
20. Frank Teer and James D. Spence, Political Opinion Polls (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1973), p. 13.
21. Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media," Public Opinion Quarterly 36 (1972), pp. 179-80.
22. See The Ottawa Citizen for, respectively, March 25, 1978, p.5; April 29, 1978, p. 9; May 10, 1978, p. 12.
23. D. Charles Whitney, "The Poll is Suspect," Quill (July-August, 1976), p. 23.
24. "They think he did the right thing to quit," Ottawa Citizen, January 31, 1978.
25. "Don't need vote, Globe survey finds," Globe and Mail, April 29, 1977.
26. Taik Sup Auh and G. Cleveland Wilhoit, "Metropolitan Daily Newspaper Treatment of Political Polls during the 1970 Elections," paper presented to the annual meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism, Colorado State University, August 1973.
27. Cited in Philip Meyer, "Learning to Live with the Numbers," Columbia Journalism Review (January-February, 1977), p.35.
28. Ibid., pp. 34-35.
29. Whitney, "The Poll Is Suspect," p. 25.
30. "Davis: 'Only poll that counts is on June 9'," Ottawa Citizen, June 4, 1977.
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