Making News Based on Public Opinion Polls: the Flemish Case


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1. Introduction

An intertwined and unique relationship can historically be observed between media and public opinion polling (Mann & Orren, 1992). Media organizations, pollsters and political actors juggle almost daily with the concept of public opinion, ‘proved’ by poll results. At the most basic level, the media play a useful role by disseminating opinion poll results in their news and thus communicating knowledge about citizen’s opinions to a more general public and to the actors of the political world. Because polling is considered as an important measurement of public thinking, it can be linked to the more general democratic processes (Ladd, 1980, p. 574).

Treating polls as news stories is nowadays an essential part of the news making process of the media. Since they do not only report on the findings of external research organizations, but are also closely involved in the polling process itself by commissioning or even conducting polls, it is said that poll coverage has become ‘a news beat of its own’ (de Vreese & Semetko, 2002, pp. 369-370). Because of this close relationship between news media and polling, the role of the media in ‘creating’ a certain image of ‘public opinion’ by disseminating information about polls and people’s opinions is considered substantial but is evaluated rather pejoratively by authors such as Barnett (2001), Herbst (1998), Suhonen (2001) and Billiet (1993; 2000). They believe that journalists can influence the opinion formation process of the people by reporting upon and interpreting opinion polls and by disclosing generalizing statements about people’s opinions (Herbst, 1998). Before such possible media-effects can be considered, it is important to study the way in which news media report upon the polls (Brettschneider, 1997). This is exactly the main purpose of this paper, namely to study the media’s presentation of public opinion polls and thus to determine the role media play in creating
a certain image of public opinion by making news based on opinion poll results.

This is studied by the Flemish (Belgian) case. Since a long time, a very active involvement of media organizations with polls can be found in the United States, but it is only since recent years that also in Belgium a growing interest of the media in public opinion polls can be observed. Yet very little empirical data about polls in the media is available for Belgium. To fill this gap, a systematic analysis of the volume and nature of publicized opinion polls covered by Flemish news media is performed. The questions addressed concern the general media attention to polls (does Flanders follow the international trend of an increase in media reports about polls?) and the formal quality of publications about public opinion polls (what is the degree of methodological quality of the Flemish news reports about polls?). The general hypothesis is that over the years media increasingly create news on the basis of public opinion polls but without paying much attention to the methodological quality of their poll’s publications. Additionally, the media’s presentation of news based on opinion polls will be evaluated by focusing on the expression of evaluative judgments about polls in the news, the degree of subjectivity shown in the poll reports and the way in which polls are compared to make conclusions about people’s opinions (to what degree do the media use these elements to ‘create’ news with polls?).

The study consists of a content analysis of print articles about public opinion polls published in the six most important Flemish newspapers in Belgium during the years 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006. All the articles referring to polls are considered, containing informative reports of the poll results, subjective analyses based on them or methodological comments on polls. Not only news stories about electoral polls, but all poll related articles publicized throughout the studied years are taken into consideration.

2. Polls as news
Polls are frequently used by the media in their news. Because media organizations regularly commission polls themselves, the poll results are quickly accessible for them to report upon extensively (Andersen, 2000, p. 285). In media reports, the opinions measured by polls are not treated as exploratory variables of underlying attitudes or behaviour but the poll results are instead primarily used because of their news value (Brettschneider, 1997, p. 250). As Crespi (1980, pp. 464-465) notes, the media’s ‘prime objective is to report aspects of public opinion for their intrinsic interest as news’.

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1 Flanders is the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium.
Public opinion polls are considered newsworthy to cover because they measure the views of the people. Knowing the opinions of the public is believed to be essential in a democracy (Paletz et al., 1980, p. 496). In this type of political system, the voice of the general public is primarily expressed through voting. Because of the direct and immediate effects people produce on politics by their votes, their initial voting intentions and their actual voting decisions at Election Day are seen as important sources of news. Consequently, the early strength of voting preferences is regularly polled and media are always looking forward to the next election which makes polling a 'continuing quasi-election'. Anticipating the possible election outcome and covering how the electoral campaigning proceeds also fulfills the reader's expectations about who is going to win the election (Crespi, 1980, pp. 465-466). In particular during these electoral periods, news media and polls are considered essential elements in the more general political system (de Vreese & Semetko, 2002, pp. 382-383). Previous research indeed found that the news coverage during elections largely consists of reports about poll results and other opinion expressions of the citizens (Andersen, 2000, p. 288; Brettschneider, 1997, pp. 252-254; Smith & Verall, 1985, p. 65).

An upcoming election thus could be an occasion for the news media to commission polls about voting preferences, but also a public debate about an issue of topical interest could provoke the reporting of polls about more general subjects. Depending on the newsworthiness of issues, certain polls can be ordered and reported upon to extend the news about the current issue. In this context, Kovach (1980) talks about a 'chain reaction' in which 'the media and the polls are feeding on each other'. On the basis of a poll, an issue could be proposed, on which politicians react, which is reported by the media, and subsequently a new poll is ordered to measure the people's responses (Kovach, 1980, pp. 570-571). The same kind of feedback loop is found with Crespi (1980) who argues that '1) definitions of what is news, 2) determine the content about polling, 3) affect the political process, 4) which becomes news' (Crespi, 1980, p. 466).

Questions about such a news making process on the basis of public opinion polls arise when a close relationship between news media and polls is established. Already in the eighties this subject was addressed in the US, but in Belgium it is only in more recent years these kinds of questions occur, both in academics and politics due to a generally observed increase in media publications about polls. This rising trend can be found worldwide (for the US, Miller and Hurd 1982; Ladd and Benson 1992; for Great Britain, Worcester 1980; for Canada, Andersen 2000; for Australia, Smith & Verall 1985; for
Israel, Weimann 1983; for Germany, Brettschneider 1997; for the Netherlands, de Boer 1995). Because for Belgium systematic empirical data about the relationship between media and polls are lacking, the general visibility of polls in the news media is studied by performing a quantitative study about the frequency of poll reports in Flemish newspapers and its increase over time during recent years. Related questions under consideration are the following: are polls merely referred to in news stories or are they treated as the central theme? Is it only during election periods that polls are published or equally throughout the year? Are pre-election polls overemphasized and general issue polls neglected in the news?

2.1 Media creating an image of public opinion polls
Polls have become an important instrument to measure people’s opinions and to give an indication of the public feeling about various topics (Kim & Weaver, 2001, p. 72). Disseminating poll results through media to a more general public is considered important because of the great opportunity of informing people about the opinions of the society they live in (Barnett, 2001). Problems however arise when journalistic statements are based on polls that do not conform to methodological standards or when a ‘biased’ image of ‘public opinion’ is disseminated to the population and policymakers. The media’s presentation of opinion poll results could give political and economic decision-makers a picture of the societal mood and give citizens a point of reference for their own opinions (Suhtonen, 2001, pp. 311-333; Barnett, 2001; Frankovic, 2005). It is therefore considered important that news media provide the public with an accurate image of people’s opinions which are regularly measured by various polls (Barnett, 2001, p. 308). A first question in this context is to what degree media disclose methodological information about the polling process in their poll publications?

Covering polls as reliable and accurate measurements of people’s opinions requires that the polling process conforms to certain methodological standards. The accuracy of the poll itself is a responsibility of pollsters, but the perceived poll accuracy by the audience is dependent on the quality of the poll coverage by the media (de Vreese & Semetko, 2002). The most important reason to include methodological information in poll news is to ‘assist the reader in drawing accurate conclusions from poll data’ (Smith & Verall, 1985, p.71). ESOMAR/WAPOR (2005) argue that in a democratic society public and government should be exposed to properly conducted survey research conforming to high standards. Therefore, transparency and accuracy is required from those conducting as well as those reporting upon opinion polls (ESOMAR, 2005). Because of these kinds of media transparency discussions, general guidelines with minimal
requirements for methodological disclosure in media reports about polls are developed by different professional opinion research organizations all over the world, such as AAPOR, NCPP, ESOMAR/WAPOR, CASRO and Febelmar (Belgium).

On the basis of previous studies it was found that the technical reporting of polls is generally of low quality and that newspapers perform somewhat better with regard to the formal quality of their poll reports compared to television (Andersen, 2000, pp. 286-294). This kind of formal quality analysis of poll coverage is most frequently performed by an evaluation of the amount of methodological aspects in poll reports such as sample size, interview method, definition of population, question wording etc (Brettschneider, 1997; Andersen, 2000; Smith & Verall, 1985; de Boer, 1995). In this paper it is examined to what degree the Flemish print media provide their readers with information about the methodological polling process. The studied elements are those most frequently mentioned in the standards of minimal disclosure of different survey research organizations (for an overview, cfr. Appendix n° 6.A).

Not only the disclosure of relevant methodological poll information in news reports, but also the way in which journalists explicitly evaluate the poll’s methodology potentially contributes to the perceived trustworthiness of the poll results and inferences based on them. Describing the polling institute that carried out the poll either as a reputable research organization or rather as a dubious pollster for example could contribute to the overall perception of the poll’s reliability and the validity of its’ results (Paletz et al., 1980, pp. 503-504). According to Andersen (2000, p. 292), poll results are often treated by journalists with certainty, truth and credibility and thus rather depicted as facts. This suggestion is based on the general lack of explicit warnings in news reports to treat poll results more cautiously. Paletz et al. (1980, p. 506) as well found that journalists have ‘the natural inclination to support rather than undermine the results they report’. Through this, the audience seems to be more reassured than alerted about the reliability of poll results.

Because of the relationship between the evaluation of poll results (rejection or acceptance) by journalists and the way in which the audience perceives the credibility of polls (Paletz et al, 1980, p. 506), the methodological judgments about polls expressed in news reports are studied. Elements under consideration are the number of articles containing one or more methodological judgments (as an indication of how critical media use the poll results in their news reports), the evaluative direction of these statements (positive, neutral or negative towards polls) and their source (journalists, politicians,
pollsters, academics) since it was found in previous research that politicians, contrary to journalists, display more negative criticisms about polls and especially when the results are not in their favour (Brettschneider, 1997, p. 249).

In addition to the use of evaluative judgments, the degree of subjectivity that is shown in news reports about polls is considered. Journalists have a great freedom in the way they publicize poll results and interpret them (Patterson, 2005, p. 721). They can simply report the raw data (often percentages) or give substantial meaning to the results and use them as the basis for a more general political analysis (Smith & Verall, 1985, p. 66). Because poll data seem to be factual, precise and quantifiable information, the poll numbers can substitute in a way for experts and give the news story a kind of authority (Frankovic, 2005, pp. 684-688; Brettschneider, 1997, p. 262). This is why polls can provide a factual basis for more interpretative news stories (Rosenstiel, 2005, p. 707). In this paper the degree of focusing on subjective interpretations and analyses of poll results in news reports is used as an indication of media who ‘make’ news more actively than when the raw poll results are merely in an informative and ‘objective’ way disseminated without further interpretations.

Another important element under consideration about the media’s presentation of polls, concerns the use of poll comparisons. Comparing the most recent poll results with other polls or with external information in news reports can possibly contribute to a certain image of ‘public opinion’. Differences in poll results occur, because of different methodological considerations or because people are polled at different time points. Broh (1980, p. 510) suggests that journalists report upon these differences as real opinion changes so that instability of opinions or volatility of votes during election periods is overemphasized. This can be reinforced if journalists choose points of comparison (other pollsters, other time points etc) that stress these constant opinion changes (Broh, 1980, p. 518). These poll comparisons can not only be used by the media to demonstrate instability of people’s opinions but also to ‘make’ trend lines. In particular polls with a continuing public interest, such as the popularity ranking of political candidates, are ‘made’ news in the same way that the indexes of unemployment or consumer prices are reported upon (Crespi, 1980, p. 470). The use of poll comparisons in news articles is studied in terms of the number of articles containing such comparisons and the determination of the most frequently used baselines to compare with.
2.2 Objectives

The main objective of this paper is to study how news media use opinion poll results in their news stories. First, a study of the quantity or visibility of polls in the news is performed in order to answer the question whether Flanders follows the internationally observed trend of a growing media-attention to polls. In addition to this general description of the poll quantity in the news, the degree of methodological quality of the Flemish news reports about polls is evaluated. To assess this formal quality, the worldwide developed guidelines for minimal requirements of methodological disclosure in media reports about polls are used.

Subsequently, the way in which polls are presented as news will be examined more closely to address the question of the role media play in ‘creating’ news based on opinion polls. Three aspects of the media presentation of public opinion polls are considered, namely the evaluative judgments about the poll’s reliability, the degree of subjectivity in poll reports and the use of poll comparisons.

Studying these research objectives will contribute to a better understanding of the complex relationship between media, polling and public opinion.

3. Data and method

These research objectives are addressed by performing a content analysis of newspaper articles about opinion polls in the six most important papers concerning news dissemination in Flanders, namely the so-called quality papers De Standaard, De Tijd, De Morgen and the more popular newspapers Gazet Van Antwerpen, Het Nieuwsblad and Het Laatste Nieuws. Through this selection, the largest paper editors as well as the different political origins of the papers are represented.

First, all the paper articles that explicitly refer to ‘polls’ in the title or text are considered, published in the entire years 2000 (local elections in October), 2002 (no elections), 2004 (European and regional elections in June) and 2006 (local elections in October) so that both electoral and electoral-free periods are represented in the selection. All types of articles, such as news reports, interviews and opinion articles about the poll results, their interpretations and methodological evaluations are taken into consideration. The used criteria for further selection of the poll articles concern the

2 The electronic press database ‘Mediargus’ is used, publicly available at the website: http://www.mediargus.be
measurement of people’s opinions and the involvement of at least Belgian respondents. During the data collection it was observed that articles about two specific polls that were very important during the elections of 2006 (‘De Stemmenkampioeri’ and ‘Het Grootste Buurtonderzoek’3) were not sufficiently selected because they do not have the word ‘poll’ in their name. This is why an additional selection of articles was performed based on the name of the polls that were very visible in the media (for an overview of the selection process and the number of articles selected cfr. Appendix, n° 6.B).

For the general description of the polls’ visibility in the news, all articles containing an explicit reference to opinion polls are considered (n=2744). To address the other questions (e.g. methodological quality) only those articles that treat polls as the dominant focus (which means that at least 60 percent of the article text refers to poll results, interpretations or methodology) are studied through content analysis (n=1359). In this way, only articles that report upon polls in a substantially way are taken into consideration.

4. Results
The presentation of the results is structured around three sections, namely the general media-attention to polls, the methodological quality of poll reports4, and the media’s presentation of polls in terms of the poll’s reliability, the overall reporting style and the use of poll comparisons.

4.1 General media-attention to polls
First, the general visibility of polls in the news media is studied since it is expected to have grown recently in Flanders (Belgium). Based on the absolute number of selected paper articles about polls (n=2744), the quantitative evolution of the publicized poll articles over time is shown in the graph below.

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3 Literally translated from Dutch: ‘the Voting Champion’ and ‘the Largest Neighbourhood Survey’
4 Some of the results regarding the general media-attention and methodological quality were presented at the Workshop Public Opinion, Polls and the Political Process of the Annual Conference of the Dutch Political Science Association, 31 May – 1 June 2007, in Antwerp/Belgium (cfr. Sonck, 2007)
An enormous increase in the absolute number of paper articles about opinion polls published in the six most important newspapers in Flanders can be observed in the time period between 2000 and 2006. During these six years, the number of articles referring to polls has grown from 227 articles in 2000, over 338 articles in 2002, to 706 articles in 2004 and 1473 articles in 2006. An increase in the article volume about polls was expected, based on trends seen in other countries such as the United States and the Netherlands. Although important growth in media-attention to polls was already observed a long time ago (e.g. for the US in 1980), it is only in more recent years that also in Flanders such a ‘boom’ in the article volume about polls can be observed.

For almost all of the six papers under consideration (with the exception of De Tijd), the number of poll articles publicized between 2000 and 2006 increased yearly. The largest average growth in the volume of poll articles is found with both the so-called quality paper De Standaard and the more popular paper Het Nieuwsblad which are edited by the same organization Corelio. This could partly be explained because of their organization of ‘The Largest Neighbourhood Survey’ in 2006 for which people of almost all the local communities in Flanders were polled (307) about their satisfaction with the local policy and the governing mayor before the communal elections. Since a large number of this kind of local polls were conducted and reported upon, the year of 2006 can be considered as fairly exceptional. Therefore it can be suggested that for 2007, there is still a lot of media-attention to polls but the rise as shown in the graph above probably falls somewhat rather than increases even more after 2006.
Although a huge rise is shown in the total amount of publicized poll articles, the textual contribution to polls in terms of the number of words spent to polls relative to the entire article text remains relatively stable over time. To study this, the news articles were classified in four categories according to their proportional text contribution to polls, namely 1) the poll as dominant focus if at least 60 percent of the article is about polls, 2) the poll as important theme if between 30 and 60 percent of the article refers to polls, 3) the poll marginally used if between 10 and 30 percent of the article text is contributed to polls, and 4) the poll as mere reference if less than 10 percent of the total amount of article words is spent to polls. The table below shows the percentage of poll related articles in each of these categories.

Graph 2: The percentage of paper articles classified according to the proportional text contribution to polls, per year (n= 2744)

From this graph it can be learned that most of the newspaper articles use polls as the dominant focus (at least 60 percent of the article text is about polls). It was found that a lot of the articles not only have polls as the central theme but are entirely contributed to polls with their results and interpretations. If polls thus are used in the news, they seem to be the dominant topic of the article and are less referred to as a mere illustration or argument in a news story about another issue. In general, the percentage of articles with polls as a dominant focus or an important theme on the one hand and the percentage of articles that marginally use or merely refer to polls on the other hand does not change much in the years between 2000 and 2006. Only in 2006, the volume of articles in the middle categories seems to be slightly larger relative to the other years.

To study whether poll articles are equally publicized throughout the year or are concentrated in times of political elections, the publication date is taken into
Although not all of the publicized polls are related to political elections, it is shown in the graph above that a substantial amount of the poll articles is publicized in the last month before an election date. In 2000 when local elections were held in Flanders/Belgium, a large number of articles are publicized by the Flemish papers in September and October, which were the pre-electoral months. However, also in the sixth month before the election date (April), an increase in the number of poll articles can be observed. In 2006, when the same kind of local elections were organized, the largest amount of poll articles is concentrated in the last month before the actual elections, compared to the rest of that year in which far less media attention to polls is observed. In 2004, the percentage of poll articles is higher during a longer period before the election date. In the year of 2002 when there were no elections held in Flanders, several months show an increase of poll articles. In general, it can be seen that in election years, the volume of paper articles about polls peaks in the pre-electoral month(s) but it drops soon after Election Day.

Elections indeed generate polls and news about them, but there are still a substantial number of poll articles related to other events. In the graph below, the articles in which
polls are used as dominant focus (n=1359) are categorized according to the poll type and subject which can be 1) electoral if voting intentions for political parties and/or the popularity of political candidates are polled, 2) general if more general topics are polled which are not electoral or 3) a combination of both.

Graph 4: The percentage of paper articles classified according to the type of poll, per year (n= 1359)

As can be seen from this graph, about 45 percent of the polls that are used as central theme in newspaper articles are categorized as the electoral type, in which voting intentions or political popularity are polled. This percentage is rather stable over time, with the exception of the year 2002 in which no elections were held in Flanders. In this year, a larger amount of general issue polls is publicized in the studied papers. Of the articles referring to a poll about a more general topic, 16 percent can be indicated as 'politically relevant' in 2000, which is 23 percent in 2002, 23 percent in 2004 and 21 percent in 2006. For these articles it means that the poll subject could be linked to politics, which is the case for polls about political trust, policy satisfaction or issues of the political debate (such as voting rights for migrants, night flights etc).

4.2 Formal quality of media-publications about polls

The methodological elements that are stated by most of the survey research organizations (ESOMAR/WAPOR, AAPOR, NCPP, CASRO, Febelmar) as minimal poll information to disclose in public articles are considered to assess the formal quality of media-publications about polls. Only the articles in which polls are used as a dominant focus (at least 60 percent of the article text is about polls) are used (n=1359). The Table below shows for each methodological element the percentage of articles in which
it is mentioned. For some aspects, a further distinction is made between disclosing the
information in a specific or less specific way.

Table 1: The percentage of paper articles (with absolute numbers) per year
mentioning methodological poll information (n=1359)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disclosure of methodological poll information</th>
<th>2000 (n=124)</th>
<th>2002 (n=192)</th>
<th>2004 (n=375)</th>
<th>2006 (n=668)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Specific information</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General poll information</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a) Name of polling institute</td>
<td>37.10 (46)</td>
<td>18.23 (35)</td>
<td>11.73 (44)</td>
<td>13.62 (91)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Name of sponsor</td>
<td>45.16 (56)</td>
<td>28.65 (55)</td>
<td>14.13 (53)</td>
<td>12.43 (83)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) Definition of target population</td>
<td>20.16 (26)</td>
<td>7.81 (15)</td>
<td>6.93 (26)</td>
<td>3.44 (23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean %</td>
<td>34.14</td>
<td>18.23</td>
<td>10.93</td>
<td>9.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample information</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d) Exact sample size</td>
<td>42.74 (53)</td>
<td>41.15 (79)</td>
<td>34.13 (128)</td>
<td>29.19 (195)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e) Description of sample procedure</td>
<td>1.61 (2)</td>
<td>2.60 (5)</td>
<td>1.07 (4)</td>
<td>2.54 (17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean %</td>
<td>22.18</td>
<td>21.88</td>
<td>17.60</td>
<td>15.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data collection information</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f) Poll method</td>
<td>17.74 (22)</td>
<td>11.98 (23)</td>
<td>13.60 (51)</td>
<td>10.93 (73)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g) Exact fieldwork dates</td>
<td>15.32 (19)</td>
<td>6.77 (13)</td>
<td>9.6 (36)</td>
<td>8.53 (57)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>h) Exact question wording</td>
<td>0.00 (0)</td>
<td>4.69 (9)</td>
<td>4.53 (17)</td>
<td>4.04 (27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean %</td>
<td>11.02</td>
<td>7.81</td>
<td>9.24</td>
<td>7.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less specific information</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a/b) Some reference to a pollster (with or without distinguishing between the sponsor and polling institute)</td>
<td>88.71 (110)</td>
<td>85.42 (164)</td>
<td>73.07 (274)</td>
<td>60.18 (402)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d) Some time indication of the poll (exact dates or in more general terms such as months or weeks)</td>
<td>34.68 (43)</td>
<td>15.63 (30)</td>
<td>20.27 (76)</td>
<td>12.72 (85)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>h) Some information about the poll’s questions (wording or less specific information)</td>
<td>11.29 (14)</td>
<td>13.02 (25)</td>
<td>15.73 (59)</td>
<td>18.56 (124)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The methodological elements that are most frequently mentioned in an explicit way in
the Flemish newspapers concern the general poll information such as some reference to
a pollster (with or without distinguishing between the sponsor and polling institute) and
the sample information such as the exact sample size. To a lesser extent, information
about the data collection is mentioned, such as the poll method or some indication of
the poll’s date (whether or not with reference to the exact fieldwork dates). To give an
illustration of the extent to which more technical poll information is mentioned in
articles: on average in 7 percent of the poll articles the exact margin of error(s) is mentioned and in only 3 percent of the articles some information is provided about the applied weighting procedures. For all the types of methodological information, a declining trend can be observed between 2000 and 2006 in the degree of mentioning poll’s information in paper articles.

This trend is shown more clearly in the following graph. Based on the explicit mentioning of methodological information in newspaper articles, an index is calculated of the number of aspects disclosed per article. A distinction is made between a strict measure based on the specific information in the previous table (a-h) and a less severe measure taking into account the less specific information for certain elements (a-b, d, h). These measures are 0 if none of the methodological elements are mentioned in the article and they obtain the maximum value of 7 if all the elements are provided in the article. The mean index value of all newspaper articles per year of publication is shown in the graph below.

Graph 5: Mean index value of the number of disclosed methodological elements per year, with a distinction between a strict and a less strict measure (n=1359)

Since the index can obtain the maximum value of 7, the mean index value of the number of disclosed methodological elements is rather low in the four studied years, namely between 0.5 and 2.5 disclosed aspects, with the strictest measure being consistently lower than the less severe measure. Moreover, it seems that the mean

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5 In the calculation of the strictest index value, both the elements a and b have to be disclosed in the article to be counted as 1 so that the maximal value of both measures is equal to 7.
index value declines over time which suggests that the methodological quality of poll publications in Flemish newspapers decreases. The following section focuses on some additional elements that possibly contribute to a certain presentation of polls by the media.

4.3 Media’s presentation of polls
Three aspects of the way in which media present polls are considered, namely the evaluative judgments about the poll’s reliability, the degree of subjectivity showed in poll reports and the use of poll comparisons.

a) Expression of methodological judgments
Subsequent to the formal quality study in terms of the amount of methodological information provided in news reports about polls, the in articles expressed evaluative judgments about the polls’ methodology are examined. The way in which the poll results are critically evaluated, depends largely on which viewpoints and/or external comments journalists choose to use in creating their news articles about polls. Whether the poll’s reliability or unreliability is stressed in the article possibly gives the public a different idea of how to perceive a certain poll and give meaning to its results.

First, to have an idea to what degree news media depict the polls they publicize in a rather critical or uncritical way, the number of poll articles containing none, one or more than one evaluative judgments about the poll’s methodology is shown in the following graph.

**Graph 6: The percentage of poll articles with their number of methodological judgments, by year (n=1359)**

A quarter (in 2006) to half (in 2000) of the dominant poll articles contains between one
and four evaluative judgments about the published poll. These are expressed in one of the following ways: a) the poll is depicted as very (un)reliable without further details, b) the poll results are communicated with reservation (e.g. the poll results are taken with a grain of salt), c) specific methodological elements are used as evidence for the (un)reliability of the poll (such as poor representativeness of the poll results, large non-response rate etc), d) some methodological deficiencies of the poll are mentioned but at the same time it is stated that trends can be derived from the results.

As can be seen in the graph above, the number of poll articles containing one or more methodological judgments seems to decline over time. In 2000, 55 percent of the poll articles contained no evaluative statement about the poll’s methodology which is 76 percent in 2006. This growing proportion of articles without any evaluation of the poll results, together with the limited number of methodological elements disclosed in paper articles (cfr. previous Section) are indications that newspapers use poll results in their news articles in a rather uncritical way.

Beside the frequency of expressing methodological judgments, their evaluative direction is considered, which is shown in the following graph.

**Graph 7: The percentage of dominant poll articles with the average evaluative direction of their methodological judgments, for the period 2000-2006 (n= 1359)**

![Graph 7](image)

When the poll’s methodology is explicitly evaluated in the article, it is on average more often expressed in a rather to very negative way, compared to the number of articles which contain neutral or positive statements about the reported poll results. This means that if news media provide a poll’s evaluation, they depict the polls more frequently as unreliable measures of people’s opinions than as reliable polling methods. Nevertheless, the large number of articles has to be stressed again that does not contain any methodological evaluation about the poll results (69%).

By classifying the mean evaluative direction of the methodological judgments according
to the reported poll’s type, it was found that the electoral and combined (electoral with another subject) polls receive the most negative evaluations in articles. The general polls on the other hand seem to be evaluated somewhat more positive. A possible explanation for electoral polls being criticized more negatively could be that only for this kind of polls an external validation test does exist, namely the actual election results with which the pre-election polls can easily be compared with to test the accuracy of the polls. For most of the opinion polls concerning more general issues, such a harsh test is not available.

To study the evaluative statements further, a distinction is made between the different sources of the expressed judgments about polls. The graph below shows the methodological judgments (n= 520) by these sources of comments.

**Graph 8: The percentage of methodological judgments by their source, for the period 2000-2006 (n= 520)**

Not only journalists evaluate polls (44%) in their articles, but also other people comment critically upon the polls. Mainly the reactions of politicians (36%) about the latest poll results are used in news articles. To a lesser extent, the explicit methodological judgments in articles come from pollsters, academics or other (e.g. spokesperson of organization). Looking at the evaluative direction of these methodological statements expressed by different sources, it is found that the academics and politicians are on average more negative about the published polls, compared to the poll evaluations given by journalists and pollsters. This last group of people depicts polls more often as reliable measurements, which is rather obvious since they defend their own polling industry.
b) **Degree of subjectivity**

In addition to the evaluation of the poll’s methodology, the overall degree of subjectivity of poll articles is taken into consideration. Reporting poll results in a very subjective way, by analyzing and interpreting the poll results instead of only disseminating them in an informative way to the public can be an indication of how actively media use polls in their news. Through subjective interpretations and analyses of the poll results media could possibly create a certain image of the public’s opinions measured by the polls.

To study this, the poll reports are classified on a five-point scale from very objective to very subjective. The articles are categorized as rather to very ‘objective’ if the main focus is disseminating the poll results as raw information. Articles are categorized as rather to very ‘subjective’ if they consist for the largest part of interpretations or subjective analyses of the poll results. When neither the objective report of the poll results, nor the subjective interpretations based on them clearly dominate the article, it is coded as neutral or balanced. In addition to the subjectivity, the way in which the poll results are presented in the poll articles is categorized as rather ‘exact’ if the results are mainly presented as concrete numbers (e.g. 70% of the Flemish) or rather ‘derived’ if there is no reference to the precise results (e.g. most of the Flemish). For some articles that do not contain any poll results, nor interpretations (e.g. the announcement of a future poll), these elements could not be registered (Not Applicable; N.A.).

**Graph 9: The percentage of poll articles with their degree of subjectivity (left) and the way in which the poll results are presented (right), for the period 2000-2006 (n= 1359)**

Most of the poll articles are comprised of an informative report of poll results (54%), which can be considered as more ‘objective’ compared to the articles dominated by subjective interpretations (26%). Moreover, most of the considered articles present the results in an exact and concrete way (60%) relative to the articles in which the results are only referred to in a derived way (24%). Similar proportions were found for the
different years under consideration, which indicates that there is no significant increase in the degree of subjectivity over time. Only for the election-free year 2002 there are slightly more articles with the focus on the objective dissemination of poll results. This is probably due to the different types of polls used in the news, because it seems that the polls related to political elections (electoral and combined polls) are on average reported in a more subjective way and they present the results more often in a derived form, compared to the general issue polls.

c) Poll comparisons
The third aspect of the media’s presentation of polls under consideration concerns the use of poll comparisons. By choosing particular points of reference to which poll results are compared with, media could create a certain image of people’s opinions and how they change. In 45.33 percent of the dominant poll articles publicized in the period between 2000 and 2006, the poll results are compared with other polls (in 30.68% of the poll articles) and/or with the election outcome (22.60%). If different polls are compared amongst each other, the used baselines are the time points (past or recent poll) and the character of the poll (identical in terms of the pollster and subject or different poll).

Graph 10: The percentage of articles with their comparisons amongst polls, in time (left) and by poll nature (right), for the period 2000-2006 (n=1359)

A large number of poll articles do not contain a comparison amongst different polls (69.32%). But if at least one comparison between polls is found, the results are most frequently compared to a past poll (previous point in time) and/or with an identical poll (same pollster and subject). Although different combinations between these baselines are possible, the most frequently used in the news articles about polls is the longitudinal comparison of identical polls.

In general, the comparisons among polls or with the election outcome are interpreted in
the newspaper articles as opinion changes over time. In some cases, the poll comparison is explicitly used as the confirmation of a trend shown in the polls. To a lesser extent, comparisons between poll results are used as evidence of the methodological (in)accuracy of the poll.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Because news media can be considered as the most important disseminators of information about polls to the general public and political actors (Ladd, 1980), the close relationship of media and polling is examined by a content analysis of Flemish newspaper articles referring to polls. As was expected, the general visibility of polls in the papers has recently increased in Flanders in terms of the number of publicized poll articles, namely from 227 poll related articles in 2000 to 1473 articles in 2006. Because of this observation it can be concluded that Flanders (Belgium) follows the rising trend in publicizing poll news, yet with a certain time delay compared to other countries (Miller & Hurd, 1982; Ladd & Benson, 1992). With regard to the proportional amount of text contributed to polls however, the centrality of polls in the articles remains rather stable over time. So, if polls are used in news articles, they are not merely cited in the margin of the news stories, but they are treated as the dominant subject. Based on the date of publication, a varying degree of newsworthiness of polls is observed throughout the year with a peak in the number of poll articles published in the last month(s) before a political election. This finding confirms different empirical studies concerning news coverage during election times in other countries (Andersen, 2000, p. 288; Brettschneider, 1997, pp. 252-254; Smith & Verall, 1985, p. 65). If the poll type is taken into consideration, not only the electoral related polls are found to be reported upon, but also more general issue polls are used as news. Based on these findings it can be concluded that polls are clearly an important source of news for the media.

Since a certain presentation of opinion polls disseminated by the media could give an indication of the public's opinions about different subjects, it is important that the public is provided with accurate poll information (Kim & Weaver, 2001; Barnett, 2001; Suhonen, 2001). It is however found that the quantitative growth in the poll news over time does not go hand in hand with a similar increase in the formal quality of these media publications about polls. In general, the amount of information about the poll's methodology disclosed in the Flemish newspaper articles is rather limited. Although in the international guidelines of various survey research organizations (e.g. ESOMAR/WAPOR) seven methodological elements are recommended as minimal information in media reports about polls, the average number of explicitly mentioned
aspects of the poll’s methodology remains rather low (between 0.5 and 2.5). Moreover, a decreasing trend over time can be observed in disclosing these methodological elements. The question however can be posed what the effect on the public would be if all relevant methodological information is provided in news articles. Disposing of this information does not necessary mean that people can interpret the more technical details such as sampling or weighting procedures. The media’s responsibility however is to correctly interpret poll results and thus inform the public about methodological deficiencies when polls are not conducted conforming methodological standards.

In the evaluation of the role media play in presenting news based on opinion polls the focus is on three elements, namely the expressed poll’s reliability, the shown subjectivity in poll reports and the use of opinion poll comparisons. With regard to the first aspect, it is suggested that the way in which media evaluate the poll’s methodology in the news contributes to the perceived trustworthiness of the poll results (Paletz et al., 1980, pp. 503-504). Based on the growing proportion of articles without any evaluative judgment of the poll’s methodology, it is concluded that poll results are used in a rather uncritical way by the Flemish newspapers. This finding is consistent with previous research in which it was observed that the public is rather reassured than alerted because of the general lack of poll criticisms in the media content (Paletz et al., 1980; Andersen, 2000). But in the cases when a poll is being methodologically judged (on average in 31% of the poll articles), it is rather depicted as an unreliable than as a reliable method. The most negative statements are found for the electoral type of polls, mainly expressed by external commentators such as academics and politicians.

Concerning the general reporting style displayed in poll related articles, it was observed that the focus is mostly on the informative or ‘objective’ dissemination of the poll results which are most frequently presented in an exact way. Subjective interpretations and analyses of the poll results are also present in the newspaper articles, but not in a dominant way. The suggestion that a growing degree of subjectivity in poll news indicates a greater role of the media in actively using polls in their news has to put into perspective since no substantial increase of subjectivity could be observed over time.

The third element under consideration concerning the media’s presentation of opinion polls is the use of poll comparisons. In 45 percent of the poll articles, poll results are compared with other polls or with the election outcome. If polls are compared amongst each other, they are most often compared with an identical poll (in terms of the same pollster and the same poll subject) at a previous point in time. The differences as a
result of the used comparisons are in the newspaper articles mainly interpreted as real opinion changes. This finding is in agreement with the expectation based on Broh’s work (1980), namely that news media rather emphasize opinion instability than stability. In this way acontinuously changing ‘public opinion’ is stressed and each new poll can made news because it contrasts or confirms previous poll results. By mainly interpreting the poll results as changes and trends, the reporting of the polls can contribute to a certain representation of ‘public opinion’.
6. **Appendix**

6.A. Overview of standards for minimal disclosure

The table below gives an overview of the different methodological elements considered to be essential to publish in media reports about polls by the ‘Code of Professional Ethics and Practices; Standards for Minimal Disclosure’ of the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR), the ‘Principles of Disclosure’ of the National Council on Public Polls (NCPP), ‘The ESOMAR International Code of Practice of the Publication of Public Opinion Results’ of the World Association for Public Opinion Research (WAPOR) and the European Society for Opinion and Marketing Research (ESOMAR), ‘The CASRO Code of Standards and Ethics for Survey Research’ of the Council of American Survey Research Organizations (CASRO) and the ‘Aanbevelingen van Febelmar; Richtlijnen inzake de Publicatie van Opiniepeilingen’ of the Belgian Federation of Market Research Bureaus (Febelmar).

**Table A: Overview of guidelines with minimal requirements of disclosing methodological information in public reports of poll results**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disclosure of Methodological Information</th>
<th>ESOMAR/WAPOR</th>
<th>CASRO</th>
<th>AAPOR</th>
<th>NCPP</th>
<th>Febelmar</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>General poll information</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Name of polling institute, conducted the poll</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Name of sponsor, commissioned the poll</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Definition of target population</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Purpose of survey</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sample information</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Sample size</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Description of sample procedure</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Geographical range of sample</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Data collection information</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Method of data collection</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Fieldwork period</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Exact question wording</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Question order</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Response rate</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Technical information</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Information about accuracy of results (e.g. margin of error)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Description of weighting or other estimation procedures</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Information about partial results (e.g. subsample size)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6.B. Selection process of newspaper articles

Table B: Number of paper articles per selection stage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step Description</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Searching for all articles that explicitly refer to a 'poll' in text or title</td>
<td>538</td>
<td>1183</td>
<td>1358</td>
<td>1319</td>
<td>4398</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Selecting the articles about opinion polls with at least Belgian respondents involved</td>
<td>227</td>
<td>338</td>
<td>678</td>
<td>826</td>
<td>2069</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Additional selection based on the poll name (in particular for 'De Stemmenkampioen' and 'Het Grootste Buurtonderzoek')</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+28</td>
<td>+647</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of registered poll articles</td>
<td>227</td>
<td>338</td>
<td>706</td>
<td>1473</td>
<td>2744</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Content analysis if ( \geq 60% ) of the article is related to polls</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>375</td>
<td>668</td>
<td>1359</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7. References