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Research Note: Making News Based on Public Opinion Polls

The Flemish Case

■ *Nathalie Sonck and Geert Loosveldt*

ABSTRACT

■ By widely disseminating news reports about opinion poll results, news media give politicians and citizens a particular indication of people's opinions. Problems arise when journalistic statements are based on opinion polls that do not conform to methodological standards or when a 'biased' image of 'public opinion' is published. In order to study the intertwined relationship between news media, opinion polling and public opinion, it has to be understood how the media present polls in the news. Using a content analysis of newspaper articles, this study addresses the question of how the media manufacture news based on opinion polls. Because to date there are few empirical studies available for Belgium, this research focuses on the Flemish (Dutch-speaking) case through an analysis of print articles about opinion polls published in six newspapers between 2000 and 2006. The results show that a recent quantitative growth in poll news does not go hand in hand with a similar increase in the quantity of methodological poll information disclosed. Predominantly, poll-related articles disclose on average between 0.5 and 2.5 methodological aspects and a large number of the articles (69 percent) do not contain any methodological evaluation of the poll results. Furthermore, more poll articles consist of an informative report of poll results (54 percent) than

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a mere subjective analysis of polls (26 percent) and if polls are compared with each other, they are mostly compared longitudinally. ■

Key Words content analysis, methodological disclosure, polling, poll news, public opinion

Introduction

Public opinion polls have become an important instrument for measuring people's opinions and giving an indication of the public's views about various topics (Kim and Weaver, 2001: 72). By disseminating polls, the news media play a useful role in informing the general public about citizens' opinions (Barnett, 2001). However, problems arise when journalistic statements are based on polls that do not conform to methodological standards or when a 'biased' image of 'public opinion' is widely disseminated. The media presentation of opinion polls can give political and economic policy-makers a picture of the societal mood, and citizens a point of reference for their own opinions (Barnett, 2001; Suhonen, 2001: 311–33). Therefore, it is deemed important that the news media present people's opinions correctly as measured by various polls (Barnett, 2001: 308). Since, for Belgium, and more specifically for the Flemish (Dutch-speaking) region, very few studies about the news media presentation of polls are available, an empirical analysis is performed based on print articles about opinion polls published between 2000 and 2006 in the six most important Flemish newspapers.

The first question to be addressed is to what extent methodological poll information is disclosed in these articles. Although the accuracy of the poll itself is the responsibility of pollsters, the *perceived* poll accuracy is dependent on the quality of the media coverage of polls (de Vreese and Semetko, 2002). Due to discussions about the transparency and accuracy of the media, different opinion research organizations have developed standards of minimal disclosure (e.g. American Association for Public Opinion Research [AAPOR], European Society for Opinion and Marketing Research [ESOMAR]/World Association for Public Opinion Research [WAPOR]). These guidelines can be used to perform an analysis of the methodological quality of poll coverage (Andersen, 2000; Brettschneider, 1997; Smith and Verall, 1985). However, it should be noted that there are two opposing arguments concerning methodological disclosure in media reports. On the one hand, it is argued that the standards miss out essential elements, such as the problem of uninformed 'opinions', while, on the other hand, it can be argued that a lot of people do not understand the

technical poll details disclosed (Miller et al., 1991: 206–11). If it is true that people cannot assess the quality of the poll themselves, the media's responsibility to properly interpret poll results and evaluate the poll's reliability becomes even greater.

This brings us to a second question: to what degree do journalists explicitly evaluate a poll's methodology? For example, describing a polling institute as either a reputable research organization or a dubious pollster could contribute to the overall perception of a poll's reliability (Paletz et al., 1980: 503–6). Andersen (2000: 292) observed a general lack of explicit warnings in news reports to treat poll results with caution. Paletz et al. (1980: 506) also found that journalists have 'the natural inclination to support rather than undermine the results they report'. Consequently, audiences seem to be more reassured than alerted about the poll's reliability.

A third, related question asks whether poll articles focus more on the informative ('objective') report of the raw data or the ('subjective') interpretations of the poll results (Smith and Verall, 1985: 66). The latter refers to a potentially more active role for the media in *manufacturing* news based on the seemingly factual, precise and quantifiable poll information (Brettschneider, 1997: 262).

Finally, the fourth question refers to the extent to which poll comparisons are used. Although differences between poll results occur because of different methodologies or because people are polled at different times, Broh (1980: 510) suggests that journalists report upon these differences as real *opinion* changes so that opinion instability or pre-electoral volatility, for example, is overemphasized. Furthermore, such poll comparisons can be used by the news media to produce trend lines, similar to the pseudo-news based on indices of unemployment or consumer prices (Crespi, 1980: 470).

Data and method

The research questions are addressed by performing a content analysis of newspaper articles about opinion polls in the six most important newspapers in Flanders, the quality newspapers *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 press houses as well as the papers' different political origins are represented. Because there is a general impression of a recent increase in poll news in Flanders, data have been collected from between 2000 and 2006, which were both years in which local elections were held. To select the years in between, an interval of two years was chosen in order to obtain both election and non-election years; 2002 was without any elections, and in 2004 another type of election

Table 1 Number of articles per selection stage

	2000	2002	2004	2006	Total
1. All articles with explicit reference to 'poll' in text or title	538	1183	1358	1319	4398
2. Articles about opinion polls that included Belgian respondents	227	338	678	826	2069
3. Additional selection by poll name	–	–	+28	+647	–
Total number of registered poll articles	227	338	706	1473	2744
4. Content analysis if $\geq 60\%$ of the articles are related to polls	124	192	375	668	1359

was held (European and regional elections). In this way, the regular and dissimilar organization of elections in Belgium is represented in the sample. An overview of the selection process and the number of selected articles are shown in Table 1.

First, all articles explicitly referring to 'polls' in the title or text are considered,¹ including news reports, interviews and opinion articles about poll results, their interpretations and methodological evaluations. Then, only articles concerning an *opinion* measurement including Belgian respondents are selected. During initial data collection, it was observed that articles about two very important polls during the 2006 elections ('The Voting Champion' and 'The Largest Neighbourhood Survey') were not sufficiently selected because they do not have the word 'poll' in their name. Therefore, an additional selection of articles was performed based on the name of those specific polls. The content analysis was performed on those articles that were predominantly reporting on polls, namely those in which at least 60 percent of the text refers to poll results, interpretations or methodology ($N = 1359$).

Table 1 shows an enormous increase in the absolute number of articles referring to opinion polls published in the six Flemish newspapers studied: from 227 articles in 2000, to 338 articles in 2002, 706 articles in 2004 and 1473 articles in 2006. From those articles, only the 1359 articles of which at least 60 percent of the text refers to polls were subjected to content analysis. Table 2 provides an overview of the coding instrument with a short description of each variable.

The coding was performed by one researcher during the time period, using a standardized categorization, which reduces the variability in interpretation of the instrument. Although this method has important limitations, both a pre-test of the instrument and several checks during coding

Table 2 Summarized coding instrument

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Coding</i>
Publication date	Publication date of article is registered
Poll type	Poll type is categorized as 1) electoral (voting intentions, popularity of candidates), 2) general (other than 1), 3) combined (both electoral and general)
Methodological information	Disclosure per methodological aspect ^a is registered with a distinction between specific information (a) name of polling institute, b) name of sponsor, c) definition of target population, d) exact sample size, e) description of sample procedure, f) poll method, g) exact fieldwork dates, h) exact question wording) and less specific information (a-b) some reference to a pollster, g) some time indication, h) some questionnaire information)
Methodological judgement	Number of explicit methodological statements per article is counted
Direction of judgement	If a methodological judgement is present, its evaluative direction is coded on a five-point scale with a neutral middle point (very negative/unreliable – very positive/reliable)
Degree of subjectivity	Main focus of poll report is coded on a 5-point scale with a neutral middle point (mainly results/very objective – mainly interpretations/very subjective). Articles without poll results or interpretations are coded as N A (not applicable)
Poll comparisons	Presence of poll comparison with 1) other polls, 2) election outcome is coded
Time of comparison	If polls are compared with each other, the time of comparison is coded as 1) recent poll (published at similar time), 2) past poll (published at previous time), 3) both recent and past polls

^a Based on the standards of disclosure stated by most of the following survey research organizations: ESOMAR/WAPOR, AAPOR, NCPP, CASRO, Febelmar (Belgium).

directly contributed to a higher degree of consistency. Furthermore, because of the nature of most of the variables, coding was quite straightforward, as it generally consisted of counting or registering the date, poll type, methodological disclosure and poll comparisons. However, regarding

Table 3 Percentage of articles (number) per year disclosing methodological poll information

<i>Disclosure of methodological poll information</i>	2000 (N = 124) % (n)	2002 (N = 192) % (n)	2004 (N = 375) % (n)	2006 (N = 668) % (n)
<i>Specific information</i>				
<i>General poll information</i>				
a. Name of polling institute	37.10 (46)	18.23 (35)	11.73 (44)	13.62 (91)
b. Name of sponsor	45.16 (56)	28.65 (55)	14.13 (53)	12.43 (83)
c. Target population	20.16 (26)	7.81 (15)	6.93 (26)	3.44 (23)
Mean %	34.14	18.23	10.93	9.83
<i>Sample information</i>				
d. Exact sample size	42.74 (53)	41.15 (79)	34.13 (128)	29.19 (195)
e. Sample procedure	1.61 (2)	2.60 (5)	1.07 (4)	2.54 (17)
Mean %	22.18	21.88	17.60	15.87
<i>Data collection information</i>				
f. Poll method	17.74 (22)	11.98 (23)	13.60 (51)	10.93 (73)
g. Exact fieldwork dates	15.32 (19)	6.77 (13)	9.60 (36)	8.53 (57)
h. Exact question wording	0.00 (0)	4.69 (9)	4.53 (17)	4.04 (27)
Mean %	11.02	7.81	9.24	7.83
<i>Less specific information</i>				
a/b. Pollster	88.71 (110)	85.42 (164)	73.07 (274)	60.18 (402)
g. Time indication	34.68 (43)	15.63 (30)	20.27 (76)	12.72 (85)
h. Questionnaire	11.29 (14)	13.02 (25)	15.73 (59)	18.56 (124)

the direction of methodological judgements and the degree of subjectivity, the limitations of the method should be kept in mind.

Main findings

First, some general information about the poll articles is provided. About 45 percent of the 1359 articles that were content analysed report upon electoral polls. This percentage remained relatively stable over time. Only in 2002, a year without elections, were slightly more general issue polls (53 percent) published. During the election years, the volume of poll articles peaked in the pre-electoral month(s) but soon dropped after Election Day.

Figure 1 Mean methodological index per year, strictly and less strictly measured (N = 1359)

Methodological poll information

With regard to the first research question about the disclosure of methodological poll information, it can be observed from Table 3 that the methodological elements most frequently disclosed in the Flemish newspapers were general poll information such as a reference to a pollster and sample information such as the exact sample size. Information about the data collection, such as the poll method or some time indication, was disclosed to a lesser extent. To illustrate the disclosure of more technical poll information: on average just 7 percent of the poll articles mentioned the exact margin of error(s) and only 3 percent provided some information on the applied weighting procedures.

Figure 1 shows the average disclosure of methodological elements per article. A distinction is made between a strict measure based on the specific information in Table 3 (a–h) and a less strict measure that takes into account the less specific information for certain elements (a–b, g, h). These measures are 0 if none of the methodological elements was mentioned in an article and they reach the maximum value of 7² if all the elements were provided in an article. The mean methodological indices were quite low in the four years studied, between 0.5 and 2.5 aspects disclosed. Moreover, both Table 3 and Figure 1 indicate a decline in methodological disclosure in Flemish newspapers between 2000 and 2006.

Table 4 Summary of results, percentage of articles (number) for period 2000–6

	2000–6 (<i>N</i> = 1359) % (<i>n</i>)
<i>Methodological judgement (direction)</i>	
Not present	69.17 (940)
Quite to very negative	17.14 (233)
Neutral or balanced	6.62 (90)
Quite to very positive	7.06 (96)
<i>Degree of subjectivity</i>	
Mainly informative results	53.72 (730)
Neutral or balanced report	11.92 (162)
Mainly subjective interpretations	26.27 (357)
N A	8.09 (110)
<i>Poll comparisons</i>	
Not present	69.32 (942)
With past poll	21.12 (287)
With recent poll	7.21 (98)
Both	2.35 (32)

Expression of methodological judgements

In addition to this limited methodological disclosure, a growing percentage of articles (from 55 percent in 2000 to 76 percent in 2006) did not contain any evaluative statement about the poll methodology. Journalists thus seem to use poll results rather uncritically in their news articles.

Table 4 shows that when the poll's methodology was explicitly evaluated in an article (31 percent), it was, on average, more often expressed in a negative way (17 percent), as an unreliable measure of people's opinions. It was found that the electoral and combined (electoral with another subject) polls in particular received the most negative evaluations in articles compared with general polls, which were evaluated somewhat more positively.

Degree of subjectivity

In addition to an evaluation of the poll's methodology, the overall degree of subjectivity of poll articles was taken into consideration. Table 2 provides information about the coding and categorization. From Table 4, it

can be observed that most poll articles consisted of an informative report of poll results (54 percent), which can be considered as more 'objective' compared with the articles dominated by subjective interpretations (26 percent). Similar proportions were found for the various years under consideration, which indicates that there was no significant increase in the degree of subjectivity over time. Only in the non-election year of 2002 were there slightly more articles focusing on the objective dissemination of poll results (61 percent). This is probably due to the different types of polls used in the news, because it seems that electoral-related polls (electoral and combined polls) were, on average, reported in a more subjective way, compared with general issue polls.

Poll comparisons

Finally, the last aspect of the media presentation of polls to be considered concerns the use of poll comparisons. Table 2 provides information concerning the coding. In 45 percent of the predominantly poll-related articles publicized in the period between 2000 and 2006, the poll results were compared with other polls (in 30.68 percent of the poll articles) and/or with the election outcome (22.60 percent). From Table 4, it can be seen that if poll results were compared with one another, they were mostly compared longitudinally, to a past poll (published on a previous occasion). In this way, opinion change might have been overemphasized and trend lines produced (Broh, 1980; Crespi, 1980). However, a large number of poll articles did not contain any comparison with different polls (69.32 percent).

Discussion and conclusion

Since a particular presentation of opinion polls by the news media could give an indication of people's opinions, it is important that correct poll information is disseminated (Barnett, 2001; Kim and Weaver, 2001; Suhonen, 2001). Although this study has some important limitations (coding by one researcher, limited time period, selection of years potentially related to particular events), a general picture can be provided based on the data collected.

It was found that a quantitative growth in poll news between 2000 and 2006 did not go hand in hand with a similar increase in the quantity of methodological poll information disclosed in the Flemish newspapers studied. On the contrary, the amount of methodological disclosure was rather limited and tended to decline in the period studied. However, the question can be asked what the effect on the public would be if all the

relevant methodological information was provided. Provision of this information would not necessarily 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 conducted that do not conform to methodological standards.

Based on the growing proportion of articles without any evaluative judgement of the poll's methodology, however, it is concluded that poll results are used in quite an uncritical way by the Flemish newspapers. This finding is consistent with previous research (Andersen, 2000; Paletz et al., 1980). Concerning the general reporting style displayed in poll articles, it was observed that the focus was mostly on the informative or 'objective' dissemination of poll results. Furthermore, if polls were compared, they were most frequently compared with a previously published poll. In this way, each new poll can become *news* because it contrasts or confirms previous poll results and a continuously changing 'public opinion' may be stressed (Broh, 1980; Crespi, 1980).

Notes

Earlier versions of this article were presented at the 60th Annual WAPOR Conference in September 2007 at the Social Science Research Centre, Berlin and at the Political Conference of the Dutch Political Science Association in May–June 2007 at the University of Antwerp. We are grateful for comments from participants at those meetings and from the anonymous referees.

1. The electronic press database 'Mediargus' was used (www.mediargus.be).
2. In the calculation of the strictest index value, both 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.

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