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The Media and Their Use of Opinion Polls: Reflecting and Shaping Public Opinion

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Introduction

The histories of mass media, public opinion and opinion polling have always been closely intertwined. Before the invention of scientific opinion polling, both political leaders and lay people used media coverage as a proxy for public opinion, while in addition and after the invention of opinion polling, the media's use of opinion polls has become an important part of their coverage of politics in general and of election campaigns in particular.

But do the media mainly reflect or shape public opinion, in particular with respect to their use of opinion polls? This question is ultimately at the heart of this volume.

While straightforward, it is, however, not an easy question to answer. There are at least six reasons for this. First, public opinion 'continues to be one of the fuzziest terms in the social sciences' (Donsbach & Traugott 2008, p. 1). As noted by Key (1964, p. 8), 'To speak with precision of public opinion is a task not unlike coming to grips with the Holy Ghost.' If the core concept of public opinion is contested and fuzzy, it is consequently complicated to measure and to disentangle the media's role in reflecting or shaping it. Second, for many 'the phenomena of public opinion and mass media are largely conflated' (Herbst 1998, p. 5), making it difficult to pull them apart and differentiate from each other. Third, while opinion polling is the best methodology yet invented to investigate public opinion, it is fraught with difficulties related to, for example, sampling and question ambiguity, wording and context (Weisberg 2008). It is also a methodology that can be used as

well as misused (Traugott 2008). Hence, it cannot be taken for granted that responses in an opinion poll represent true public opinion, if a true public opinion even exists on a particular matter (Bishop 2005; Moore 2008). Fourth, the processes of shaping media content are complex and involve influences from many sets of actors, making it difficult to determine the precise influence of the public or even the media's audiences (Shoemaker & Reese 1996). Fifth, while research on agenda setting, priming and framing has shown that the media can exert considerable influence over the public, all such processes are highly contingent upon, for example, the media, the message, audience characteristics and contextual factors (Nabi & Oliver 2009). Hence, while it can be assumed that the media, at least to some extent, take public opinion into consideration when covering politics and current affairs, and that the public, at least to some extent, are influenced by the media's coverage of politics and current affairs, this does not provide a satisfactory answer as to whether the media mainly reflect or shape public opinion. Sixth, and finally, there is not yet enough research on factors influencing the media's use of opinion polls and the effects of published opinion polls.

There is, however, no doubt that public opinion is a crucial concept in democracies, and that opinion polls are ubiquitous in the media's coverage of politics in general and of election campaigns in particular. This combination makes it highly important to further investigate the media's use of opinion polls as well as their antecedents and consequences, and is why we decided to edit this volume.

This chapter will proceed as follows. In the next section we will analyze the importance of public opinion in representative democracies, and discuss the linkage between public opinion and opinion polling. In the following section we will review research on the media's use of opinion polls. As will be detailed, research suggests that polls are ubiquitous in the media's coverage of politics and current affairs, particularly during election campaigns. Based on this review, the section thereafter will outline a framework for understanding why the media show such great interest in opinion polls. We will then summarize the main results of this review, before introducing the chapters in this volume.

Public opinion: The main currency in representative democracies

To understand the role of public opinion in representative democracies, it may be helpful to return to the origins of democracy. The term

itself was coined in Ancient Greece from the words *demos*, the people, and *kratos*, to rule. Literally speaking, democracy thus means rule by the people. In Ancient Greece, all male citizens were also entitled – and expected – to participate in the ruling of the city, with the main method for selecting people for public duties being lotteries (Dahl 1998; Manin 1997). Those who were selected carried out their duties for one year only, and they were not allowed to occupy the same position more than once. This was done to ensure that as many people as possible over a lifetime served both as governor and governed; to ensure that everyone had an equal chance of being selected for office; and to avoid political power becoming centralized with a permanent class of rulers. The procedures were intended to ensure that democracy indeed was rule by the people – although 'the people' were narrowly defined and excluded those under 30 years, women and slaves (Manin 1997).

All the early systems of democratic rule in Greece and other places were, however, confined to smaller city-states or communities. As highlighted by Dahl (1998, p. 17; original emphasis), they also lacked what is today considered 'basic political institutions: *a national parliament* composed of *elected representatives*, and *popularly chosen local governments* that were ultimately subordinate to the national government. A system combining democracy at local levels with a popularly elected parliament at the top level had yet to be invented.'

Size matters, however, and as nation-states replaced city-states and societies increased in size, direct democracy was no longer an option. The ideal of direct democracy had to face and conform to Dahl's '*law of time and numbers: The more citizens a democratic unit contains, the less that citizens can participate directly in government decisions and the more that they must delegate authority to others*' (1998, p. 109). The representative form of democracy, where the people elect representatives and transfer to them the authority and legitimacy to take binding decisions, was the answer to this democratic dilemma.

Whether representative democracy represents a necessary evil when direct democracy is not possible, or whether it represents a form of democracy that is actually superior to direct democracy, is, however, a matter of contention. There are in addition several different normative models of democracy, positioning the role of the people versus representatives of the people and the role of public opinion differently. While different theorists use different terminologies, the three most prominent models of democracy are *elite* or *competitive democracy* (Schumpeter 1975), *participatory democracy* (Pateman 1970) and *deliberative democracy* (Elster 1998). Although an exhaustive discussion about these and other

Table 1.1   Normative models of democracy and their central mechanisms for securing the common good

	Competitive democracy	**Participatory democracy**	**Deliberative democracy**
Central mechanism for securing the primacy of the common good	Competition between political elites in effective competitive elections	Citizen participation in political and civic life, both outside and within parties	Deliberative discussions among all sections of the public and their representatives

models of democracy is beyond the scope of this chapter (for overviews, see Clawson & Oxley 2008; Held 2006; Strömbäck 2005), the central mechanisms for securing the primacy of the public good according to each model are summarized in Table 1.1.

Normative differences notwithstanding, most theorists agree that direct democracy is not feasible in large-scale democracies. Modern democracies are – save for referendums – largely representative democracies. In these, Sartori (1987, p. 108) reminds us, 'elections do not enact policies; elections establish, rather, who will enact them. Elections do not decide issues; they decide, rather, who will decide issues.' The original understanding of democracy as rule by the people is, however, still present, as those who are elected are expected to represent the people and take public opinion into consideration when making decisions. Their legitimacy hinges on the perception that they are responsive to, and act as representatives of, the public and public opinion.

In other words, the importance of public opinion in representative democracy has its origins in the understanding of political leaders as representatives for the public that ideally should enact policies and decide issues for themselves. In Splichal's (2001, p. 24) words, 'Whereas premodern states legitimized their origin and development with the divine will, in modern democracies this function is largely assumed by public opinion. It is indispensable to the legitimacy of governments that claim their power is based on the consent of the governed.' From this perspective, disregarding public opinion equals disregarding the public.

The problem of representation

If political leaders in representative democracies are supposed to represent the people and public opinion, this raises two crucial questions. First, what does 'the public' refer to, and second, what does 'representation' refer to? To begin with the first question, and

broadly following Sartori (1987, p. 22), at least six conceptualizations of 'the public' in the context of democratic representation can be distinguished:

1. the public as including literally everybody;
2. the public as an undetermined large part, a great many;
3. the public as organized interests in non-governmental organizations and interest groups;
4. the public as including a qualified majority of the people;
5. the public as including a simple majority of the people;
6. the public as a party's or elected official's constituency.

The problem for political leaders with the ambition to represent public opinion, then, is not only to find out what public opinion thinks – a major challenge in itself – but also to navigate through different conceptualizations of the public and hence of public opinion. Different publics may furthermore hold opposing views. Hence, even if political leaders could have perfect information about the opinion of different publics, they would not necessarily be able to represent the opinion of all publics.

With the invention of scientific opinion polls, the predominant conceptualization of public opinion has, however, become the view held by the majority or plurality of people responding in opinion polls. If an opinion poll shows that the majority or plurality approves or disapproves of the president, or prefers policy A to policy B, or thinks that X and Y are the most important issues facing the country, then this is taken to represent public opinion, and political leaders are expected to follow or at least seriously consider public opinion in this specific sense (Geer 1996).

The problem here is not only that opinion polls do not necessarily show what the public think (Bishop 2005; Clawson & Oxley 2008; Moore 2008) but also that it is not clear what it really means to represent public opinion. This leads us to the second question, that is, what 'representation' refers to.

According to Pitkin's classic account (1967), several different views of representation can be identified. The first is the formalistic view, according to which 'a representative is someone who has been authorized to act' (p. 38). This view of representation is relevant insofar as it legitimizes the taking of authoritative decisions by popularly elected politicians. The second view of representation is descriptive representation or 'standing for', which 'depends on the representative's

characteristics, on what he *is* or is *like*, on being something rather than doing something' (p. 61). In the context of representing public opinion, this view implies that representatives should share and follow the views of public opinion. The third view of representation is symbolic representation, where different objects 'stand for' something else. Examples might be a flag, standing for a country, or a party leader, standing for a party. The fourth view is representation as 'acting for', described by Pitkin (1967, p. 113) as 'an activity in behalf of, in the interest of, as the agent of, someone else'. According to this view, what matters is not whether representatives mirror those represented, but whether the actions of representatives are taken in the interest of those who are represented.

In the context of representing public opinion, these different views of representation form a classic controversy: Should representatives always follow and be bound by public opinion, or should representatives be free to act as seems best to them in the pursuit of the public and the public's interest? Considering that public opinion is most often perceived as aggregate responses in opinion polls, should political leaders always follow opinion polls regardless of whether public opinion is informed or uninformed, consistent or inconsistent, democratically enlightened or not enlightened? Or should political leaders – while taking the results of opinion polls into account – be free to pursue other policies or activities if other information suggests that this may be a better approach to act on behalf of the public?

While there may not be a universal answer to these questions, they highlight the complexities of the relationships between the public, public opinion, opinion polls, political representation and political leadership. The premise in most public discussion following the presentation of results of opinion polls is that political leaders should follow the polls, as disregarding them explicitly or implicitly is considered as disregarding the public that political leaders are supposed to represent. 'Followership', as summarized by Geer (1996, p. 7), has become 'the order of the day'. Such views are, however, too narrow and simplified. First, there are several different notions of what the public is. Second, responses in opinion polls cannot *a priori* be assumed to accurately reflect true public opinion, if a true public opinion even exists. Third, even if there were to be no contradictions between different notions of the public, there was such a thing as a public opinion and the polls accurately reflected this public opinion, it is not self-evident that political leaders should always follow the polls. If political leaders have more knowledge and information than the public, then not

following opinion polls may in fact be a better way to act on behalf of the public interest.

This is not to say that political leaders always should, or should not, follow opinion polls. It is only to say that to presume that political leaders should *always* follow the results of opinion polls may not *necessarily* lead to better political representation.

The media's use of opinion polls

The many complexities involved in the relationships between the public, public opinion, opinion polls and political representation notwithstanding, opinion polls have become a staple of both politics and the media coverage of politics (Frankovic 1998). Focusing on the media, the history of media covering or doing polling can be traced as far back as 1820 (Atkin & Gaudino 1984; Brettschneider 2008; Gallup & Rae 1940). It was, however, not until the invention of scientific polling in the 1930s that poll coverage began to take its present shape.

Before the 1936 election, the media and others relied on straw polls. The 1936 US presidential election changed this. Before that, the magazine *Literary Digest* was the most prominent medium in terms of doing straw polls and predicting the election outcome. It sent out millions of ballots, asking people to send in their votes. In all elections between 1916 and 1932, the magazine accurately predicted the winner based on this methodology.

In the 1936 election, *Literary Digest* failed miserably, however, predicting that the Republican candidate Alfred A. Landon would get 57 per cent of the major party vote over the Democratic candidate Franklin D. Roosevelt. Instead, Roosevelt won the election with 62 per cent of the major party vote (Gallup & Rae 1940, pp. 40–43). The election result was, however, accurately predicted by a young pioneer in opinion polling, George Gallup, who was one of the first to employ scientific sampling. He showed that a sample of just a few thousand respondents, scientifically sampled to represent the overall population, was superior to a straw poll, despite the fact that about 2.3 million respondents participated in the straw poll.

Since the beginning, newspapers were among the subscribers of the opinion polls conducted by Gallup's *American Institute of Public Opinion*. When polling organizations were subsequently formed in other countries, the same pattern often followed (Petersson 2008). During the 1940s and 1950s, the news media usually subscribed to results from polling institutes, but since the 1960s it has become more common for

the media to sponsor or conduct their own polls (Brettschneider 2008). Thus, 'from the very beginning, there has been a symbiotic relationship between pollsters and journalists' (Traugott 2009, p. 4).

Reviewing research on the media's use of opinion polls, there is no doubt that polls are frequently covered in the news. The lack of longitudinal and comparative research makes it difficult to draw firm conclusions about changes over time and similarities or differences across countries, but research from a wide set of countries confirms that polls are frequently covered by the media, particularly during election campaigns. In Germany, the number of poll reports in a sample of newspapers before each federal election increased from 65 in 1980 to 651 in 1994 (Brettschneider 1997, 2008). In Sweden, the number of poll reports in the most important national TV news programs and newspapers went from 98 in 1998 to 117 in 2006 (Strömbäck 2009), while in Israel the number of poll reports in a sample of 15 newspapers increased from just 16 in 1969 to 409 in 1988 (Weimann 1990; see also Sheafer, Weimann & Tsfati 2008). In the USA, the number of publicly released trial heat polls during the general election campaign increased from 27 in 1984 to 245 in 2000 (Traugott 2005), while the number of media-sponsored election polls almost tripled between 1976 and 1988 (Ladd & Benson 1992). Research in other countries such as Canada (Ferguson & de Clercy 2005; Gidengil 2008), Australia (Tiffen 2008), South Africa (Gouws & de Beer 2008) and Italy (Roncarolo 2008) confirms that polls have become more common, or that they are common, in election news. In addition, research suggests that it has become even more common for journalists to just refer to 'polls', without actually presenting any new poll results (Frankovic 2005). Thus, in one form or another, opinion polls are ubiquitous, leading Patterson (2005, p. 722) to argue that the media's use of opinion polls 'extend beyond reason', while Weimann (1990) writes about an 'obsession to forecast'.

A matter of both quantity and quality

The question of the media's coverage of opinion polls is however a matter not only of quantity but also of quality. Since opinion polling is a method for investigating people's opinions, the quality of an opinion poll cannot be taken for granted. Neither can it be evaluated without some basic information about the poll. This is why organizations such as *World Association for Public Opinion Research* (WAPOR), *European Society for Opinion and Marketing Research* (ESOMAR) and *American Association for Public Opinion Research* (AAPOR) have guidelines pertaining to what

kind of information should be included when the media cover opinion polls. As stated in the ESOMAR/WAPOR *International Code for Practice for the Publication of Public Opinion Poll Results*:

> The validity and value of public opinion polls depend on three main considerations: (i) the nature of the research techniques used and the efficiency with which they are applied, (ii) the honesty and objectivity of the research organization carrying out the study, (iii) the way in which the findings are presented and the uses to which they are put.
> (ESOMAR/WAPOR 2010, p. 12)

Consequently, in this code for practice ESOMAR/WAPOR writes that any time public opinion polls are published in print media, 'these should always be accompanied by a clear statement of: (a) the name of the research organization carrying out the survey; (b) the universe effectively represented (i.e., who was interviewed); (c) the achieved sample size and its geographical coverage; (d) the dates of fieldwork; (e) the sampling method used [. . .]; (f) the method by which the information was collected [. . .]; and (g) the relevant questions asked' (p. 14). The requirements for broadcast media are more liberal, but they are also required to cover points (a) through (d). Similar guidelines are included in the AAPOR *Code of Professional Ethics & Practice*, with the important addition that the media should also disclose information about 'the precision of the findings, including estimates of sampling error' (p. 4).

Despite these codes of conduct, research on the extent to which the media include the necessary information shows that the media often fail at this (Brettschneider 2008; Ferguson & de Clercy 2005; Smith & Verrall 1985; Strömbäck 2009; Welch 2002). It is also common for journalists, when covering polls, to discuss changes that are within the margin of error as if they were substantial (Traugott 2008) and that they make unsupported causal attributions when they try to explain results in opinion polls (Bauman & Lavrakas 2000). What journalists or pundits in the media may present as factual explanations for changes in or for the state of public opinion, as measured by polls, are oftentimes nothing more than speculations.

Most of this research focuses on so-called trial heat or horse race polls, that is, polls about people's party preferences or voting intentions. While important, particularly during election campaigns, there are other kinds of polls as well. Among those are polls focused on issues or policies, candidate traits, and performances in debates or other mediated appearances. In many cases the media sponsor the polls, but in

other cases polls are used as tools for political actors in their attempts to manage the news.

In either case, the major media focus on opinion polls calls for an explanation. Why do the media devote so much attention to opinion polls?

Towards a framework for understanding the media's interest in opinion polls

To understand the news media's use of opinion polls – both those they have commissioned themselves and those presented by various interest groups and political actors – it is imperative to understand the impact of news values on news selection processes and the logic of news production in commercial news media. While it normatively may be true that the most important function of news journalism in democracies is to 'provide people with the information they need to be free and self-governing' (Kovach & Rosenstiel 2001, p. 12; see also McQuail 2003; Strömbäck 2005), the fact is that most news journalism is produced by journalists working for commercial media companies, and for commercial media companies the ultimate goal is not primarily the public good. It is rather to generate profits.

In order to do so, they have to be successful when competing on each of the four markets where commercial media are present. These are the *market for investors*, where investors offer capital and direction in exchange for future profits; the *market for advertisers*, where advertisers offer advertising revenue in exchange for audience attention; the *market for news*, where news sources offer information that can be transformed into news in exchange for audience attention; and the *market for audiences*, where audiences offer their attention in exchange for news and other media content (McManus 1994, p. 60).

The most important of these markets is the audience market, not because commercial media value news audiences higher than advertisers or investors, but rather because success in the battle for audience attention is a prerequisite for success in the battles for investor capital, information that can be transformed into news and for advertising revenue. Hence, to be successful, news journalism produced within commercial news media has to attract as many as possible in the audience segments that advertisers are interested in reaching. In the words of McManus (1994, p. 85), commercial and rational news departments 'should compete with each other to offer the least expensive mix of content that protects the interests of sponsors and investors while garnering

the largest audience advertisers will pay to reach' (see also Baker 2002; Hamilton 2004; Picard, 2005).

The tougher the competition between different news media, the more important it becomes for them to attract as large audiences as possible while keeping down the costs and controlling the return on investments. Hence, while the democratic logic dictates that the news media should focus on information that people need in order to be free and self-governing and making sure the information is accurate, commercial logic dictates that the news media should focus on information that attracts as many as possible within the segments that advertisers are interested in while keeping down the costs.

This tension is important both with respect to *what* news the media cover and *how* they cover it. Ultimately, all news journalism is selective, as the number of events or occurrences are too many for any media to cover. One of the most important tasks of news journalism is thus that of gatekeeping, defined as 'the process of selecting, writing, editing, positioning, scheduling, repeating and otherwise massaging information to become news' (Shoemaker, Vos & Reese 2009, p. 73). To guide in this process, there are a number of news values and news selection criteria that journalists apply. Among traditional news values and news selection criteria are, for example, drama, visual attractiveness, entertainment value, importance, proximity, negativity, recency, involvement of elites and power, unexpectedness, unambiguity, continuity, and size or the number of people affected by the news (O'Neill & Harcup 2009; see also Campbell 2004; Gans 1980). To these traditional news values, Allern (2002, p. 145) has added four 'commercial news criteria': (1) the more resources it costs to cover an event, the less likely it is that it will become a news story; (2) the more news sources subsidize the news by journalistically preparing a story for publication, the more likely it will become news; (3) the more selectively a story is distributed and the more exclusive it is to a particular news medium, the more likely it will become news; and (4) 'The more a news medium's strategy is based on arousing sensations to catch public attention, the greater the likelihood of a "media twist", where entertaining elements count more than criteria like relevance, truth and accuracy.'

On the one hand, commercial news media need news stories that deal with important events and topics such as politics and current affairs that are relevant to people in their role as citizens. This is important for their legitimacy as news providers contributing positively to democracy. On the other hand, commercial news media need news stories that are inexpensive to cover and that are filled with attention-grabbing drama

and that are interesting to people in their role as consumers. News focusing on opinion polls and the horse race may fulfill both criteria.

This is, however, only one side of the story. The other is related to the relationship between news journalism and politics.

Among the criteria of newsworthiness is that the news should focus on events that are important, relevant, affect a great number of people, and that involve individuals or institutions with power. Consequently, much news is focused on politics, where political actors offer information that can be transformed into news in exchange for visibility in the news and potential audience attention. While much research has shown that official and elite actors outnumber other news sources (Bennett 1990; Dimitrova & Strömbäck 2009; Manning 2001; Reich 2009; Shehata 2010), the relationship between journalists and their political news sources is oftentimes uneasy and filled with tension. In this relationship and 'negotiation of newsworthiness' (Cook 2005, p. 102), both sides command resources on their own, but both sides also want to control the other. Not least important, journalists oftentimes do not want to be reduced to mouthpieces for or carriers of the messages of their political sources. As much as they 'rely heavily on institutionally positioned officials for the raw materials of news' (Lawrence 2000, p. 5), journalists want to have and mark their independence (Shehata 2010; Wolfsfeld & Sheafer 2006; Zaller 2001).

The more skilled in and focused on news management and pseudo-events mainly created to attract the attention of the news media that political actors have become (Kumar, 2007; Maltese 1994; Zoch & Molleda 2006), the more problematic it has become for journalists to guard their independence from political actors. When deciding what to cover and how to cover it, journalists can follow the traditional five 'Ws' when writing their stories: Who, What, Where, When and Why. In the minds of many journalists, doing so would, however, give political actors too much influence over the news, encouraging them first to focus more on the Why than the Who, What, Where and When (Patterson 1993), second to cover politics with a critical or negative tone (Farnsworth & Lichter 2011; Zaller 2001) and third to focus on news stories where journalists have greater control over what the news is about and how it should be framed. To capture this phenomenon, Zaller (2001, p. 255) has suggested his 'rule of product substitution', according to which 'the more strenuously politicians challenge journalists for control of a news jurisdiction, the more journalists will seek to develop substitute information that the mass audience is willing to accept as news and that gives expression to journalistic voice'. In such a context, opinion

polls – particularly when done or sponsored by the news media – offer a close to perfect substitution for news provided by political actors.

The media's use of opinion polls may consequently be understood as an example of the mediatization of politics, where the media successively have increased their autonomy from political institutions and actors, and where media content – according to the theory – is increasingly shaped by media logic rather than political or partisan logic (Asp 1986; Hjarvard 2008; Mazzoleni & Schulz 1999; Strömbäck 2008; Strömbäck & Dimitrova 2011; Strömbäck & Esser 2009).

Why news media sponsor and cover opinion polls

Based on the above, several although overlapping explanations can be offered for why contemporary news media find opinion polls so attractive when covering politics and why they decide to sponsor and cover their own opinion polls.

First, sponsoring and covering their own opinion polls gives the news media access to exclusive news. This is attractive partly because polls function as a newsgathering tool (Ismach 1984) and partly because it helps in the marketing of the news organization. As noted by Rosenstiel (2005, p. 699): 'In an age when an expanding number of news outlets has put added pressure on all of them to produce audience, indeed, marketing has become a bigger part of news generally and has intensified as a motive in political polling in particular.'

Second, sponsoring and covering their own opinion polls gives the news media full control over the news. The news media commission the opinion polls, cover the results, and interpret the results and their antecedents and potential consequences (Frankovic 1998; Petersson et al. 2006). In essence, by sponsoring and covering their own opinion polls, the news media are making their own news (Hoffman 1980).

Third, the news media need stories that offer drama and that can appeal to audiences that otherwise may not be very interested in politics. In this context, opinion polls are attractive as they offer drama and change, are assumed to be attention-grabbing (Iyengar, Norpoth & Hahn 2004) and do not require that their audiences have too much knowledge about politics. Covering the polls becomes the functional equivalent to covering sports results, a genre with which many are familiar and comfortable.

Fourth, opinion polls fit perfectly with, while simultaneously driving, the framing of politics as a strategic game or a horse race rather than as substance or issues (Cappella & Jamieson 1997; Patterson

1993). Framing politics as a strategic game has become an increasingly common feature of election news coverage in a wide range of countries around the world (Strömbäck & Kaid 2008), driven not least by media commercialism and the need to attract audience attention (Strömbäck & van Aelst 2010). In this framing of politics, opinion polls are indispensable.

Fifth and related, sponsoring and covering their own opinion polls serves as a perfect substitute for news provided by and pseudo-events created by political actors. Zaller (2001, p. 155) consequently notes that 'like a detergent company that wants to get consumers to buy liquid gel instead of soap bars, journalists must offer something that is the functional equivalent of the product they replace, that is, something that provides information about the campaign'. Much of the horse race and poll coverage meets this requirement of the rule of product substitution.

Sixth, and again related, most journalists are generalists and not policy experts. They oftentimes have a hard time following, explaining and analyzing the substance of different policy problems or proposals. Covering politics through the lens of the 'game they play' (Fallows 1996) does not require as much knowledge on the part of journalists and is thus easier. It may also be the case that for many journalists, politics is a game. It is not just a frame they apply, but also the major part of their cognitive schemas of politics. If journalists believe that the game is what ultimately matters, then it is natural to frame politics as a game, and to use opinion polls to find indicators of how the game is going.

Seventh, when polls are presented by external source organizations, such as businesses, interest groups, political parties and campaigns, these polls function as close-to-perfect news subsidies (Gandy 1982). Not only are the results in the polls new, and thus qualify as news. Oftentimes the source organizations present them in a journalistic format, and even if they do not there are ready templates for how to write news stories focusing on new opinion polls. In both cases, covering opinion polls commissioned and presented by source organizations offers an efficient and economic way to gather and present news.

Eighth, covering opinion polls allows journalists a 'quasi-objective, *proactive* role in the news making process' (Lavrakas & Traugott 2000, p. 4). As the numbers produced by opinion polls appear as objective, journalists feel that they can cover opinion polls without running the risk of being accused of being biased. They can base their criticism of political parties, candidates and campaigns in the poll results. At the same time, seldom or never do the numbers speak for themselves, and

the kind of polls commissioned by the news media seldom or never include enough questions to investigate what might have caused the results of a particular opinion poll. Hence, when discussing antecedents or possible consequences of opinion poll results, journalists have to interpret or speculate. Still, these interpretations and speculations tend to appear as anchored in the opinion poll results and as being factual. Taken together, covering opinion polls thus allows journalists to be interpretive and proactive while still appearing as objective.

Ninth, by covering opinion polls, the news media are sending 'the symbolic message' (Lavrakas & Traugott 2000, p. 4) that the will and preferences of the public matters and, explicitly or implicitly, that the news media are watching out for the interests of the public. Between politicians and news journalists there is an implicit battle with respect to whether politicians or news journalists are the true guardians of the public will and the public opinion. Both sets of actors claim to be working for the common good, and both sets of actors claim to reflect and represent public opinion. While elected politicians have the upper hand according to the formalistic view of representation, by covering opinion polls and how elected officials do not follow public opinion news journalists seek to demonstrate that they too function as representatives for the public in the sense of 'acting for' public opinion. This becomes part of their role as the 'Fourth Estate'. Hence, it is a means to legitimize the news media's role as representatives of the public, and to mark independence from elected officials.

Tenth, and more generally, opinion polls fit the criteria of newsworthiness commonly applied when deciding what is news, for example drama, entertainment value, importance, proximity, negativity, recency, involvement of elites and power, and unexpectedness (O'Neill & Harcup 2009; see also Campbell 2004; Gans 1980).

There are consequently at least ten reasons for why the media find opinion polls attractive, and which may help explain why the media – and political news journalism in particular – sponsor and cover opinion polls so frequently. In short, 'News polls function as information source, as attention-getters, and as a source of journalistic power' (Frankovic 1998, p. 162). Whether it is a good or a bad thing is, however, another matter. Partly it depends on normative views related to democracy and the role of the media and political news journalism in democracies. Partly it is a matter of proportions. Most observers would agree that politics and election campaigns are about both policies and substance on the one hand, and a strategic game on the other, but the question is how much the media focus on the political substance and the game,

including the opinion polls, respectively. Partly it also depends on the quality of the poll coverage and the polls themselves. As already noted, opinion polling is the best methodology yet invented to investigate public opinion, but it is far from perfect, and polls can be both used and misused. The same holds for the media's coverage of opinion polls.

This is relevant also in the context of whether the media mainly reflect or shape public opinion through their use of opinion polls. To the extent that the media cover opinion polls that are well executed and that focus on issues where people are informed and have thought through their opinions, the media may reflect rather than shape public opinion. To the extent that the media cover opinion polls that are not well executed or that focus on issues where significant parts of the population are not well informed, have not thought through their opinions or where opinions are fluid, the media may instead shape rather than reflect public opinion. In addition, it depends on whether the media provide their audiences with enough information to assess the results of the polls that are presented in the media. Thus, it is a matter both of the polls themselves and about the media's coverage of them.

Outline of the book

This chapter has reviewed theory and research on the role of public opinion in democracies, the problem of representation in general and with respect to representing public opinion in particular, and the quantity and quality of the media's coverage of opinion polls; and it has outlined a framework for understanding the media's interest in opinion polls. In subsequent chapters, many of the same themes that have been touched upon in this chapter will be addressed in much greater depth.

The book is divided into three parts. Part I – 'Theoretical and Methodological Approaches' – includes three chapters. In Chapter 2 – 'Public Opinion and Opinion Polling: A Complex Relationship' – Slavko Splichal analyzes different conceptualizations of public opinion, how they have changed over time, enduring controversies in conceptualizations of public opinion, and how the emergence and predominance of opinion polls have changed our understanding of public opinion as a concept and phenomena.

While the freedom to conduct opinion polls and publish the results can be derived from legal provisions granting people freedom of expression, the controversies surrounding opinion polling as a methodology, and fear that the publication of opinion results may affect public opinion as much as reflect it, have created incentives for countries to regulate the execution of opinion polls and the publishing of their results.

Different countries have, however, taken different approaches to the regulation of opinion polling. In Chapter 3 – 'Regulations of Opinion Polls: A Comparative Perspective' – Thomas Petersen reviews and analyzes discourses surrounding the regulation of opinion as well as the regulations of opinion polls in a comparative, cross-national perspective.

As mentioned in this introductory chapter, opinion polling is a methodology for surveying people's opinions, and as such it has both strengths and weaknesses. For example, there are different modes through which people's responses can be collected, and numerous controversies related to the survey methodology. However, opinion polling is also evolving, partly to address the methodological problems and challenges involved. Against this background, Chapter 4 – 'Methodological Trends and Controversies in the Media's Use of Opinion Polls' – by Michael Traugott reviews and analyzes opinion polling as a methodology and methodological trends in opinion polling.

Part II of the book focuses on 'The Media's Publication of Opinion Polls' from an international perspective. Although there may be many similarities across countries, the media's publication of opinion polls is always situated in the contexts in which the media operate, and this context is in turn shaped by the political as well as the media systems in respective countries as well as by contextual factors. In essence, the media and political systems as well as the contexts matter, which makes it important to investigate the media's publication of opinion polls in different countries. Hence, for this book we selected six countries, guided by the ambition to include a diverse set of democratic countries covering all five continents. Consequently, Part II of this book includes six chapters, each focused on one particular country, and the purpose of these is to review and analyze research within each country with respect to the media's publications of opinion polls. The chapters are Chapter 5 – 'Opinion Polls and the Media in Germany: A Productive but Critical Relationship' – by Christina Holtz-Bacha, Chapter 6 – 'Opinion Polls and the Media in the United States' – by Kathleen Frankovic, Chapter 7 – 'Opinion Polls and the Media in Brazil' – by Flávia Biroli, Luis Felipe Miguel and Fernanda Ferreira Mota, Chapter 8 – 'Opinion Polls and the Media in Australia' – by Stephen Mills and Rodney Tiffen, Chapter 9 – 'Opinion Polls and the Media in South Africa' – by Robert Mattes and Chapter 10 – The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Opinion in Taiwan – by Lars Willnat, Ven-hwei Lo and Annette Aw. Taken together, the chapters in Part II provide an extensive review of how the media use and cover opinion polls worldwide.

Part III of the book is devoted to the 'Effects and Consequences of Published Opinion Polls' and includes three chapters. The first of these,

Chapter 11 – 'Attitudinal and Behavioral Consequences of Published Opinion Polls' – is written by Patricia Moy and Eike Mark Rinke. It consequently deals with the extent to which the media's use of opinion polls shapes, rather than reflects, public opinion. Briefly, the chapter shows that research suggests that people's attitudes, opinions and behaviors are affected by polls published by the media. For example, research has shown that the publication of opinion polls by the media can produce bandwagon as well as underdog effects. These are discussed in Chapter 11, along with theories such as spiral of silence and the theory of impersonal influence that deals with the effects of published opinion polls on the public.

Published opinion polls do not just have effects on the public: they may also have effects on and consequences for political parties and their leaders, who may simultaneously attempt to strategically use opinion polls in their efforts to manage the news. How published opinion polls may affect political parties and their leaders, and how political parties and leaders use opinion polls in news management processes, is the focus of Chapter 12 – 'Published Opinion Polls, Strategic Party Behavior, and News Management' – by Jesper Strömbäck.

Part III of the book concludes with Chapter 13 – 'Opinion Polls, Media and the Political System' – by Christina Holtz-Bacha. In this chapter the author discusses the issue of whether opinion polls in general – and as used by the media and political actors in particular – reflect or shape public opinion; the role of opinion polls in contemporary democracies; how they are used by and influence both the media and political actors; and the implications for the political system and democracy.

Taken together, it is hoped that the chapters in this volume will shed new light and serve as a springboard for further research on the relationships between the media, opinion polls, public opinion, politics and democracy. Do opinion polls, as covered by the media, mainly serve as *Vox Populi* – the voice of the people – or as *Vox Media* – the voice of the media? And what are the democratic consequences?

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