
Misplaced marketing

A snapshot or a painting? Metaphors, myths, misuses and misunderstandings of marketing research information by journalists and other people who should know better

Herbert Jack Rotfeld

Auburn University, Auburn, Alabama, USA

Abstract

Purpose – In US political reporting, the top story has become the public opinion polls that purport to state the voters' evaluations of potential candidates, current office holders or the impact of current events. Many politicians, in turn, often develop their campaign positions in response to the polls. This discussion aims to address how year after year, despite increasing spending by news organizations to predict election results, the polls are repeatedly unable to predict election outcomes. Excuses are made, while the misuse and misunderstanding of marketing research spreads to other types of public organizations.

Design/methodology/approach – Points out the contradictions between public opinion polling predictions of election results and actual events, with explanations of the usually unstated qualitative limitations to survey data.

Findings – Qualitative research bias could have a greater impact on outcomes than statistical margins of error, although it is only the latter that is reported or discussed by the news media.

Practical implications – This abuse and misuse of marketing research lowers the credibility of all marketing research, and the people in marketing research, should speak out. The pollsters want to keep their methods as having a mystical value as they sell their research information to the public and other data users. At worst, this is a misleading selling of marketing insight to the public and research experts should start to speak out, encouraging journalists to report more properly the reality of public opinion polls.

Originality/value – The popular metaphor of public opinion polls has been to call them a "snapshot" of public views. This offers a more realistic metaphor of survey data, an impressionistic painting that is influenced by numerous researchers or respondent biases that cannot be controlled.

Keywords Opinion polls, Politics, Marketing strategy, Research, Bias, Newspapers

Paper type Viewpoint

For many decades, tales of both real and mythical accomplishments of marketing research companies are credited in some cases with creating consumer paranoid fears of marketing power (e.g. Rogers, 1993; Rotfeld, 2001). Yet today, misleading and misunderstood reports of survey data collections have become the central themes of the news during every political campaign. While almost all modern journalists are college educated, and while in school they probably took at least one course in social sciences that discussed survey research methods, public opinion data in the news are almost always abused and twisted, reporting a certainty of findings that should not be claimed and asserting predictive power that surveys have never possessed.

With every US election, the politicians have paid opinion poll researchers on staff and changes are made in political strategy to fit the latest readings of the public mood. News events of minor import cause a shift of ratings, causing supporters to encourage a candidate to change marketing strategy. Denigrating one successful candidate of several elections ago in print and on ABC News, newspaper columnist and political pundit George Will described the man's ideological icon as being a wetted finger held to the wind.

Yet the journalists feed this misuse of political marketing as candidates are called on to explain the latest polling data more often than they are asked about a stand on important issues. Political marketing is now the center of attention in the news, with frequent headlines featuring opinion poll results that say who is "winning" or "losing" at a given point in time.

Even the most minimally informed voter must note a certain irony of all this. A party's national convention often seems to result in what reporters tend to call "the convention bounce," then numbers can shift back a short while later as if nothing had changed. As news organizations spend increasing amounts of money to call each election winner accurately at greater speed, they still make mistakes and call things wrong well beyond their noted sample errors (Plissner, 1999).

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So-called radical or fringe candidates whose support did not even register in the survey research measures get a significant number of votes or might even win some local elections. Predicted landslides turn out to be close, and close elections develop into blowouts. Furthermore, like television meteorologists who totally misunderstood the severity of the latest storm, the political poll watchers are later thanked by the television news anchors for keeping the public informed.

A few elections back, when called on to explain the failure of the polls to call the elections accurately, National Public Radio news commentator Daniel Schorr repeatedly called each poll a “snapshot” of opinions at that time. And he still does, as his personal caveat to explaining the latest numbers. The polls were not wrong, or so he explained, but they were right at the time they were conducted, ignoring that the exit polls that surveyed people who had just voted were also wrong that year. It is unknown if he was the first reporter to coin the metaphor, but it has been repeated by almost every political reporter in that organization over the years, and in 2004 had spread to become a common statement by many journalists (see also Schorr (1998) for discussion on why journalists might be prone to do this).

However, a snapshot is the wrong metaphor. Pictures do not lie, or so the saying goes, but the same as any other effort of marketing research, public opinion surveys are incapable of capturing that degree of truth. In reality, each poll is more like an impressionistic painting, carrying various qualitative biases that cannot be escaped and colored by both the people collecting the data as well as the people who must interpret what they found.

Even the most successful and cautious research-using company has had its share of product failures. Anyone with long experience in marketing knows that a majority of new product launches will probably fail even if extensive research precedes the launch (e.g. see Miller, 2004). Marketing people know the limits of their research information, and try as much as possible in taking it into account while making business recommendations. In academic journals, any discussion of research implications includes a notation to limitations beyond those from sample statistics reported in the results. Yet these same knowledgeable research people stand silent while reporters imply that, except for the lack of a larger sample, they could predict future consumer behavior with the accuracy of the clairvoyants in a science fiction movie.

As the shifting winds of the political polls headline the news reports, the reporters only give the statistical sampling error, as if that and that alone would explain any limitations to the data. This often repeated margin of error “with 95 percent confidence” is a function of sample size, a statement that nineteen of every possible 20 possible random samples conducted the same way would get close to the same answer. Left unstated in any report is that every twentieth sample would be far off from this margin, that we do not know if this is one of those samples, and even if everyone possible was contacted as in a census survey, non-statistical biases would remain.

The way in which questions are asked influences how they are answered. People are pressed to answer questions on which they have not given much thought, or they lie. Some people refuse to answer inquiries and significant proportions of some demographic groups are near impossible to contact. Increasing numbers of people are no longer easy to contact by their exclusive use of mobile phones, their use new telephone

technology for blocking or avoidance of unknown callers or by their distractions of a busy lifestyle.

Reporters state that a politician’s potential for getting votes has changed, yet other explanations could be even more valid. A post-convention bounce could be explained by the candidate’s supporters being more willing to speak to reporters after the event. Supporters of a candidate known for racist views might be unwilling to voice their intended vote support to an anonymous researcher. The polling organization reports that the sampled responses are from “likely voters,” but they do not report how many people contacted said they would not vote and no one has ever went back to discern if the opinion poll’s ratio of likely voters to non-voters matched the eventual voter turnout or even the last turnout from a similar type of election.

Of course, the above litany of research limitations should be ingrained and obvious to anyone reading a marketing journal, or so we would hope. Yet when hearing this repeated abuse of survey research data in the news (information collected by otherwise reputable companies who might sometimes be providing the data to generate publicity for their firm) rarely is heard a dissenting voice from the marketing research community. Marketing professionals should not allow this to go unchallenged; social scientists should be actively seeking to educate the public about research abuse.

In addition unfortunately, the abuses of research ignorance is spreading to other realms.

At a major state-supported research university, the president announced to the faculty that he was conducting a few focus groups with people in the state to help guide him in planning the future activities. “In case you are unfamiliar with focus groups,” he explained, “they are random samples of people whose answers tell us the most common views held about our university.” Aside from the faculty fears of letting public opinion decide the education directions for a university, this is even less valid than letting a public opinion poll that directs news information on political campaigns, with responses colored even more by sample bias of those willing to attend and response distortions from the group dynamic.

A century ago, advertising people realized that the proliferation of false advertising lowered the credibility and impact of more honest efforts. The continued abuse and misuse of marketing information by news organizations could provide more criticisms of business practices as people remain ignorant of the reality of what marketing people are able to understand or predict how people think.

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