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MASC 611 Research Report

THE PRESS AND THE POLLS:
ACCURACY IN THE REPORTING OF OPINION POLL RESULTS
IN THE RUN-UP TO THE 2012 REPUBLICAN PRIMARIES

Coders evaluated 164 stories for reporting accuracy: 39 from newspapers, 41 from television networks, 35 from wire services, and 49 from online portals (Table 1). Most of the stories (121) were obtained from news outlets' own Web sites, whereas 21 were obtained from Lexis-Nexis and 18 from Factiva. None of the wire service stories were obtained from their Web sites. All of the Associated Press (7) and Agence France-Press (13) stories were obtained solely from Lexis-Nexis, while Reuters stories (15) were obtained solely from Factiva.

Nearly three-quarters of the stories were focused on the Republican nomination race: 76% (n = 121) for the GOP nomination race versus 24% (n = 43) for the general election against a presumed President Barack Obama (Table 2). Online portals reported on general election polls more frequently than any other media category. The percentage of online portal stories addressing the general election was 35% (n = 17) versus a low of 21% (n = 8) for newspapers. The percentage of general election stories by television networks and wire services were similar to that of newspapers.

As might be expected, there was considerable variation among news outlets, with 50% (n = 6) of Salon's stories addressing the general election versus only 7% (n= 1) of CNN's. *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and Associated Press shared CNN's lack of attention to general election polls with one story apiece discussing them. MSNBC (5 stories), Huffington Post (7 stories), *Washington Post* (6 stories), and Fox News (4 stories) followed Salon's attention to general election polls with more than 30% of their stories mentioning the topic.

In order to assess the accuracy of a story's claims, the reader has to know two things about the polls: margin of error and sample size. (If margin of error is not reported, sample size offers someone knowledgeable about survey procedures to estimate the error term). In some cases—when the information in PollingReport.com was vague or missing—coders had to refer to pollster's documentation to determine

correct margin of error and sample size before answering the questions of whether or not the two statistics were reported accurately.

Disturbingly, most stories (65%, n = 107) did not report the margin of error (Table 3). Of those that did, one-fourth (15 of 57) of them either reported it inaccurately (7%, n = 12) or the coder could not determine the accuracy of the reported figure (2%, n = 3). Television networks reported the margin of error accurately 34% of the time (n = 14), whereas online portals reported it accurately only 16% of the time (n = 8). Television networks, however, topped the list of media categories reporting the margin of error inaccurately as well, with 20% of television stories (n = 8) inaccurate as opposed to no inaccurate reports for newspapers. Two of the three cases where the accuracy of the report could not be determined came from newspapers; the other came from television networks. More than four out of five online portals failed to report the margin of error (82%, n = 40). Television stations omitted the margin of error only 44% of the time (n = 18).

The *Washington Post* had the lowest percentage of accurate reports (Table 3). The margin of error was reported accurately in only one (5%) of its stories, while mention of the statistic was omitted from the rest (95%, m = 18). Salon had a similar pattern: one story (8%) reported it correctly while the rest (92%, n = 11) failed to report it at all. CNN ranked highest in both accurate and inaccurate stories, reporting the margin of error accurately 47% (n = 7) of the time and inaccurately 33% (n = 5) of the time. The most common error observed was reporting the margin of error for the entire survey, not for the subsample of interest with respect to horserace-style claims (e.g., who is leading the GOP nomination race).

A similar overall pattern was observed regarding reporting of the sample size. The statistic was omitted from most stories (71%, n = 116); When it was reported, nearly one-fourth of the stories (11 of 48) got it wrong (Table 4). Television networks ranked highest in terms of media categories reporting sample size accurately (37%, n = 15) and inaccurately (17%, n = 7). Newspapers, on the other hand, ranked at the bottom of media categories with respect to reporting sample size accurately (8%, n =3), but at the top in terms of omitting the statistic entirely (90%, n = 35).

CNN performed best among news outlets, reporting sample size accurately 60% (n = 9) of the time (Table 4). The network also performed worst, reporting the statistic inaccurately 27% (n = 4) of the time. Several news outlets, when they reported sample size, reported it accurately: Agence France-Presse (46%, n = 6), Associated Press (29%, n= 2), *The New York Times* (25%, n = 2), Politico (24%, n = 4), and Huffington Post (15%, n = 3). As with margin of error, the Washington Post only reported sample size once (5%), but reported it accurately. The *Wall Street Journal* and Salon likewise both reported the sample size in just one story (8%). But in each case they reported it inaccurately. As with margin of error, the most frequent mistake was in reporting sample size for the entire poll, not just subsample of interest.

Despite problems with reporting margin of error and sample size, 60% (n = 98) of stories referring making a horserace call in either the GOP nomination or the general election made a statistically valid call: i.e., if it said Candidate X led the race, Candidate X's lead over his nearest rival was more than twice the margin of error; otherwise the story should say the race was statistically even (Table 5). Newspapers performed best, calling a race correctly 67% (n = 26) of the time. Television stations made the fewest inaccurate calls, with only 22% (n = 9) stories inaccurate, but in 20% (n = 8) of television stories, coders could not determine the accuracy of the call. Wire services performed worst, calling a race correctly 49% (n = 17) of the time and inaccurately 46% (n = 16) of the time.

The New York Times, *Washington Post* and Associated Press topped the rankings of news outlets calling races accurately, each doing so more than 70% of the time (Table 5). The New York Times was accurate 75% (n = 6) of the time, followed by the Washington Post at 74% (n = 14), and Associated Press at 72% (n = 5). Agence France-Press had the lowest accuracy rate, with only 31% of calls (n = 4) accurate. It shared a similar inaccuracy rate (54%, n = 7 in each case) with MSNBC—the difference in accuracy rates results from the difference in the number of stories where the accuracy could not be determined.

Discussion

Based on the results, it appears that news outlets are reporting accurately on political polls more often than not, but there is a tremendous amount of inconsistency in terms of accuracy among and even within the various news outlets.

Most of the mistakes seem to stem from stories in which a poll result is mentioned incidentally—to provide color to some other narrative. For example, the results of a McClatchy-Marist poll conducted from November 8-10, 2011, were mentioned in an Agence France-Presse story with the headline, "Republicans assail Obama on Iran, Jab Pakistan" (Agence France-Presse, 2011a):

> The debate was the first since Gingrich surged in the polls, becoming one of the leading Republican candidates.
>
> A McClatchy-Marist nationwide poll, conducted between November 8 and 10, showed that while Romney led among Republicans and Republican-leaning independents with 23 percent, Gingrich was now second at 19 percent.
>
> Cain, who is battling allegations of sexual harassment, slipped to third place with 17 percent.

The poll results are buried deep in the story, beginning in the 18th paragraph of the 810-word article. Nowhere is the relevant margin of error, 5.5%, reported.

News outlets can also could make mistakes in stories that are focused on the polls. For example, in the Nov. 22 Agence France-Presse story headlined "US Presidential Hopeful Gingrich Leads Republicans" (Agence France-Presse, 2011b) begins with the following lead:

> Former House speaker Newt Gingrich has pulled ahead of rival Mitt Romney in a nationwide poll released Tuesday of Republicans, weeks ahead of their first primaries to decide a candidate for the 2012 US presidential election.
>
> Gingrich, an ex-congressman from Georgia, leads the pack of Republican hopefuls with 26 percent support, compared to 22 percent for former Massachusetts governor Romney, according to a Quinnipiac University survey of party faithful.

In this case, the wire service correctly reported the sample size and margin of error for the entire sample contacted in the Quinnipiac poll, conducted from November 14-20, 2011, as well as the relevant subsample. Given the subsample margin of error of 3%, however, the story had to be judged incorrect, as the actual difference between Gingrich and Romney was 4%. In order for the lead to be statistically accurate, Gingrich's lead would have had to have been at least 6%.

The results reconfirm the need to repeatedly remind journalists on how to report polls—and any other story that relies upon statistics—accurately. Of course, this need has been recognized for decades (Crespi,

1980; Gollin, 1980; Paletz et al., 1980), and there appears to have been some improvements in the quality of poll coverage, but it is clear there is a lot more improvement that needs to be made.

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Table 1. Number of stories by media category (bold), news outlet, and story origin.

	Totals		Story Origin		
Media category or News Outlet	ByMedia Category	By News Outlet	Website	Lexis-Nexis	Factiva
Newspapers	**39**				
Wall Street Journal		12	11		1
The New York Times		8	8		
Washington Post		19	19		
Television	**41**				
CNN		15	14	1	
Fox News		13	11	2	
MSNBC		13	12	1	
Wire Services	**35**				
Associated Press		7		7	
Reuters		15			15
Agence France-Presse		13		13	
Online Portals	**49**				
Huffington Post		20	18		2
Politico		17	17		
Salon		12	11	1	
Totals	**164**		121	25	18

Table 2. Percentage of stories by poll type versus media category (bold) and news outlet.

Media category or News Outlet	Republican nomination	General election
Newspapers	**79% (n = 31)**	**21% (n = 8)**
Wall Street Journal	92% (n = 11)	8% (n = 1)
The New York Times	88% (n = 7)	13% (n = 1)
Washington Post	68% (n = 13)	32% (n = 6)
Television	**76% (n = 31)**	**24% (n = 10)**
CNN	93% (n = 14)	7% (n = 1)
Fox News	69% (n = 9)	31% (n = 4)
MSNBC	62% (n = 8)	38% (n = 5)
Wire Services	**77% (n = 27)**	**23% (n = 8)**
Associated Press	86% (n = 6)	14% (n = 1)
Reuters	73% (n = 11)	27% (n = 4)
Agence France-Presse	77% (n = 10)	23% (n = 3)
Online Portals	**65% (n = 32)**	**35% (n = 17)**
Huffington Post	65% (n = 13)	35% (n = 7)
Politico	76% (n = 13)	24% (n = 4)
Salon	50% (n = 6)	50% (n = 6)
Total	74% (n = 121)	26% (n = 43)

Table 3. Accuracy in reporting margin of error by media category (bold) and news outlet.

Media category or News Outlet	Yes	No	Cannot tell	Not reported
Newspapers	**23% (n = 9)**	**0%**	**5% (n = 2)**	**72% (n = 28)**
Wall Street Journal	42% (n = 5)		17% (n = 2)	42% (n = 5)
The New York Times	38% (n = 3)			63% (n = 5)
Washington Post	5% (n = 1)			95% (n = 18)
Television	**34% (n = 14)**	**20% (n = 8)**	**2% (n = 1)**	**44% (n = 18)**
CNN	47% (n = 7)	33% (n = 5)	7% (n = 1)	13% (n = 2)
Fox News	31% (n = 4)	8% (n = 1		62% (n = 8)
MSNBC	23% (n = 3)	15% (n= 2)		62% (n = 8)
Wire Services	**31% (n = 11)**	**9% (n = 3)**	**0%**	**60% (n = 21)**
Associated Press	29% (n = 2)	0%		71% (n = 5)
Reuters	33% (n = 5)	13% (n = 2)		53% (n = 8)
Agence France-Presse	31% (n = 4)	8% (n = 1)		62% (n = 8)
Online Portals	**16% (n = 8)**	**2% (n = 1)**	**0%**	**82% (n = 40)**
Huffington Post	15% (n = 3)	5% (n = 1)		80% (n = 16)
Politico	24% (n = 4)			76% (n = 13)
Salon	8% (n = 1)			92% (n = 11)
Total	26% (n = 42)	7% (n = 12)	2% (n = 3)	65% (n = 107)

Table 4. Accuracy in reporting sample size by media category (bold) and news outlet.

Media category or News Outlet	Yes	No	Cannot tell	Not reported
Newspapers	**8% (n = 3)**	**3% (n = 1)**	**0%**	**90% (n = 35)**
Wall Street Journal	0%	8% (n = 1)		92% (n = 11)
The New York Times	25% (n = 2)	0%		75% (n = 6)
Washington Post	5% (n = 1)	0%		95% (n = 18)
Television	**37% (n = 15)**	**17% (n = 7)**	**0%**	**46% (n = 19)**
CNN	60% (n = 9)	27% (n = 4)		13% (n = 2)
Fox News	31% (n = 4)	8% (n = 1)		62% (n = 8)
MSNBC	15% (n = 2)	15% (n= 2)		69% (n = 9)
Wire Services	**34% (n = 12)**	**6% (n = 2)**	**0%**	**60% (n = 21)**
Associated Press	29% (n = 2)	0%		71% (n = 5)
Reuters	27% (n = 4)	13% (n = 2)		60% (n = 9)
Agence France-Presse	46% (n = 6)	**0%**		54% (n = 7)
Online Portals	**14% (n = 7)**	**2% (n = 1)**	**0%**	**84% (n = 41)**
Huffington Post	15% (n = 3)	0%		85% (n = 17)
Politico	24% (n = 4)	0%		76% (n = 13)
Salon	0%	8% (n = 1)		92% (n = 11)
Total	23% (n = 37)	7% (n = 11)	0%	71% (n = 116)

Table 5. Overall accuracy of news report by media category (bold) and news outlet.

Media category or News Outlet	Yes	No	Cannot tell
Newspapers	**67% (n = 26)**	**33% (n = 1)**	**0%**
Wall Street Journal	50% (n = 6)	50% (n = 6)	
The New York Times	75% (n = 6)	25% (n = 2)	
Washington Post	74% (n = 14)	26% (n = 5)	
Television	**59% (n = 24)**	**22% (n = 7)**	**20% (n = 8)**
CNN	67% (n = 10)	7% (n = 1)	27% (n = 4)
Fox News	62% (n = 8)	8% (n = 1)	31% (n = 4)
MSNBC	46% (n = 6)	54% (n= 7)	0%
Wire Services	**49% (n = 17)**	**46% (n = 2)**	**6% (n = 2)**
Associated Press	71% (n = 5)	29% (n = 2)	0%
Reuters	53% (n = 8)	47% (n = 7)	0%
Agence France-Presse	32% (n = 4)	54% (n = 7)	15% (n = 4)
Online Portals	**63% (n = 31)**	**33% (n = 1)**	**4% (n = 2)**
Huffington Post	65% (n = 13)	25% (n = 5)	10% (n = 4)
Politico	47% (n = 8)	53% (n = 9)	0%
Salon	83% (n = 10)	17% (n = 2)	0%
Total	60% (n = 98)	33% (n = 54)	7% (n = 12)